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## Representations of hands in the *Florentine Codex* by Bernardino de Sahagún (ca 1499–1590)

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### ABSTRACT

One of the most outstanding gatherers of information about the culture of the pre-Colombian Mexica of Nahuatl, also known as the Aztecs, was the Franciscan monk Bernardino de Sahagún, who compiled his findings in 12 books with the title General History of the Things of New Spain between 1540 and 1585. The so-called Codex is a complex document which offers a variety of information about Mexica culture in Nahuatl, Spanish, and Latin, containing also pictographical images and ornaments. This study offers iconographic interpretations of the Codex's illustrations and especially focuses on the representations of hands and gestures, preferentially in contexts related to birth, upbringing, and education. A thorough analysis of the diverse text bodies reveals certain patterns of the transculturation process which took place in Spanish-colonised America in the sixteenth century. Furthermore, the interpretation of the material contributes to the ongoing discussion about Sahagún's role in this process, highlighting that his use of early ethnographic-like methods was motivated by the objective to create a tool which made the conversion of the indigenous population to Catholicism, their submission and exploitation by the Spanish conquerors easier and arguing that his classification as an early ethnographer by some researchers is not correct.

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The *Codex* is a complex document which offers a variety of information about Mexica culture in Nahuatl, Spanish, and Latin. It also contains pictographical images and ornaments which unite elements of precolonial writing with glyphs and European paintings. The *Florentine Codex* is considered the result of a complicated transculturation process.

This paper offers iconographic interpretations of the *Codex*'s illustrations and especially focuses on the representations of hands and gestures, preferentially in contexts related to birth, upbringing, and education. A thorough analysis of the diverse text bodies assembled in the *Codex* permits detecting differences between the contents of the script-like pictograms and their explanation in the accompanying Spanish and Nahuatl texts, revealing certain patterns of the transculturation process which took place in Spanish-colonised America in the sixteenth century. Furthermore, the interpretation of the material contributes to the ongoing discussion about Sahagún's role in this process, highlighting that his use of early

ethnographic-like methods was motivated by the objective to create a tool which made the conversion of the indigenous population to Catholicism, their submission and exploitation by the Spanish conquerors easier and arguing that his classification as an early ethnographer by some researchers is not correct.

## Introduction

The *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España* [*General History of the Things of New Spain*] by the Franciscan Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, compiled between 1540 and 1585 (also known as the *Florentine Codex* because of a handwritten copy in three volumes from 1577/78 stored at the Laurentian Library of Florence, Italy), is still today considered one of the most important documents about the pre-Colombian life of the Mexica of Nahuatl, also known as the Aztecs. Since its delivery to Europe by the Franciscan Fray Rodrigo de Sequera, Sahagún's work has been the subject of an enormous number of studies with the most diverse scientific perspectives, such as theological, anthropological, ethnographic, political, and documentalist ones, among others. So, why do I think that a fresh look at this old manuscript and especially at the pictograms in it promises to find new and meaningful insights for historians of education?

In the first place, the examination of a document from the sixteenth century opens a time period to historical educational research which has thus far been quite neglected. The thesis that "history of education at present seems to turn into a rather presentistic mode of research and reflection",<sup>1</sup> based upon a study of the distribution of time periods referred to in main articles in *Paedagogica Historica* and *History of Education*, has been the object of recent academic debate. Most discussion participants agreed, with diverse individual nuances, that this critique of the field's recent development did not seem unjustified. But not only does the moment of the creation of Sahagún's work, the Early Modern Age, seem highly interesting for modern historians of education, but also its place and circumstances: recently Spanish-colonised Mexico, where two simultaneously similar and diverse cultures started a process of merging. The *Codex* is the extremely complex result of a process of transculturation, whose traces may hopefully be identified in its different text bodies. In this context, the analysis of its pictorial contents, scrutinising in particular the representations of childcare and education, as well as those of cultural facts considered important for this purpose and preferentially expressed in pictures of hands and gestures, promises to add a new dimension to historical educational research done so far. This procedure may enlighten the contribution of the European expansion to the formation of the concept of education in the Early Modern Age, thus shifting the prevailing Eurocentric understanding of the process to a more globalised view.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, a fresh look at the different text bodies of the *Codex* – the very detailed texts in Nahuatl, their sometimes shortened translation into Castilian, the rather scarce complementing comments in Latin, as well as the numerous pictograms – may reveal some patterns of the process of cultural transfer or transculturation which occurred between

<sup>1</sup>Edwin Keiner, "The Short Timelines of History of Education at Present," *Bildungsgeschichte – International Journal for the Historiography of Education* 3, no. 2 (2013): 236.

<sup>2</sup>Susanne Spieker develops this argument profoundly in her book *Die Entstehung des modernen Erziehungsdenkens aus der europäischen Expansion, (Interkulturelle Pädagogik und postkoloniale Theorie, vol. 4)*, ed. Heike Niedrik and Louis Henri Seukwa (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015).

the local Mexica and the invading Spanish culture in the first decades after the Conquest. There is no reason to suppose that this approach, which has been applied in recent historical educational research albeit for more contemporary topics,<sup>3</sup> should not turn out to be useful for the examination of this process in the time period under consideration. With this general knowledge interest in mind, I decided to use, in addition to the traditional method of hermeneutic text interpretation, a particular tool of the historian of education's toolbox and apply it to a special topic: the iconographic interpretation of the representations of hands and gestures in the *Codex's* illustrations. This methodological decision is motivated by two reasons. First, the interpretation of images has increasingly been accepted as a standard procedure in the history of education and was recently the object of scientific debate. The thesis that "images are as a matter of fact part of material culture and they can be used for gaining knowledge on education and childhood in the past" may be classified as generally accepted among representatives of the field and serves as a foundation for the present research.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, and particularly with reference to the *Codex*, it holds true that "little attention has been given to the images, to the extent that most modern editions of the *Historia general* do not contain a single copy of the illustrated drawings."<sup>5</sup> The second fundamental idea is that hands and gestures are essential elements of human communication, especially, but not exclusively, in the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, so that the analysis of their pictorial representations promises to shed light on the transculturation process which took place in post-Conquest Mexico.

This study offers at the outset short reflections on the historical context of the creation of the examined document, the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. Next, the biography of the author, compiler, and editor of the *Florentine Codex*, the Franciscan Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, is presented, followed by information about the existing different versions of his work and the edition used for the present research. Subsequently, statistical data about the pictograms in the *Codex* are offered, in order to create a framework for the detailed interpretations of images. The following paragraph presents the reproductions and interpretations of pictograms, which represent hand movements and gestures under different hermeneutically constructed categories, such as caring, educating, curing, and working hands, among others. Finally, the question of which patterns of the transculturation process between the local Mexica of Nahua and the invading Spaniards can be observed in this pictorial source will be discussed.

## The historical context: the Spanish Conquest of Mexico

The history of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico has been told many times in the past, with different approaches and views depending on the time and place of the creation of the historical narrative. Accounts justifying the colonisation of America by Europeans slowly gave way to a historiography which criticised the negative sides of the process and highlighted the phenomenon of changes caused by establishing contact between diverse cultures. Hugh Thomas' classical study from 1993, for instance, interprets the historical events as a clash

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<sup>3</sup>See, for instance, Christine Mayer, "Circulation and Internationalization of Pedagogical Concepts and Practices in the Discourse of Education: The Hamburg School Reform Experiment (1919–1933)," *Paedagogica Historica* 50, no. 5 (2014): 580–98.

<sup>4</sup>Jeroen J.H. Dekker, "Images as Representations: Visual Sources on Education and Childhood in the Past," *Paedagogica Historica* 51, no. 6 (2015): 703.

<sup>5</sup>Diana Magaloni Kerpel, "Painters of the New World: The Process of Making the Florentine Codex," in *Colors between Two Worlds*, ed. Gerhard Wolf and Joseph Connors (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 48.

between two empires which were different, but had some things in common, such as profound religious beliefs, the will to conquer others, and a love of ceremonial. The Mexica lived, just like their Spanish counterparts, in a sophisticated state with many urban centres and a very clear division between social classes.<sup>6</sup> According to modern standards, both peoples were cultivated, but cruel.

The Spanish invasion of Mexico, which is narrated largely from the Mexica's point of view in the last book of Sahagún's *Codex*, was a continuation of the conquests which began in 1492 after Columbus' first journey. Nearly 500 years after the event, it is still difficult to understand how a relatively small party of adventurers, who had all lived in the new Spanish colonies of Hispaniola and Cuba, could conquer the large Mexican Empire in a rather short time. Good, efficient, and ruthless leadership by Hernán Cortés, which was the result of a learning process in former campaigns against Arabs and indigenous peoples on the Caribbean islands, may have played its part. According to a recent study by economists,

the Spanish strategy of colonization was highly effective. First perfected by Cortés in Mexico, it was based on the observation that the best way for the Spanish to subdue opposition was to capture the indigenous leader. This strategy enabled the Spanish to claim the accumulated wealth of the leader and coerce the indigenous peoples to give tribute and food. The next step was setting themselves up as the new elite of the indigenous society and taking control of the existing methods of taxation, tribute and, particularly, forced labour.<sup>7</sup>

Sahagún's *Codex*, generously quoted by these authors, reflects (especially in the mentioned last book) this process of social transformation, whose consideration as historical background, against which this document's different text bodies (including the images) should be interpreted, seems to be useful.

### Biography of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún

Numerous studies of Sahagún's biography highlight that there is not a great deal of data available about his life before his journey to New Spain in 1529.<sup>8</sup> He was born in (probably) 1499 in the city of Sahagún in the northern Spanish province of León, then and now an agricultural region. His exact family name is unknown, but reported as having been "Ribera" or "Ribeira". According to common usage, he adopted his hometown's name as his surname when he became a Franciscan. As a young man, Sahagún studied in Salamanca, one of the cultural centres of western Europe. The intellectual discourse in Europe during his years of study was dominated by the Augustine monk Martin Luther's critique of the Catholic Church and his reform efforts. Furthermore, it is very probable that he had access to reports about the Conquest, such as Hernán Cortés' letters from Mexico. He also may have known the Dominicans' critique of the Conquest.

Students, such as Sahagún, studying at the University of Salamanca at the beginning of the sixteenth century were taught the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, who combined Augustinian thinking with classical Greek philosophy by Aristotle. It seems reasonable to assume that

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<sup>6</sup>See Hugh Thomas, *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortés and the Fall of Old Mexico* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), xi.

<sup>7</sup>Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty: Why Nations Fail* (New York: Random House, 2012), 11.

<sup>8</sup>For instance, Miguel León-Portilla, *Bernardino de Sahagún: pionero de la antropología* [Bernardino de Sahagún: A pioneer of Anthropology] (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1999), 36. Also Spieker, *Die Entstehung*, 88; and Victoria Ríos Castaño, *Translation as Conquest: Sahagún and Universal History of the Things of New Spain* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2014), 37.

Aquinas' ideas about the conversion and treatment of heretics had an important impact on the development of Sahagún's own ideas about this matter, even if there is no direct evidence. It is also very probable that Sahagún became acquainted with the grammarian Antonio de Nebrija's writings, who taught grammar and Latin at the universities of Salamanca and Alcalá de Henares at the end of the fifteenth century. Nebrija's motive to standardise the Spanish language was not merely linguistic; he had also in mind to promote the unity of the Spanish Empire by imposing a common language: he wished his grammar to be used to teach foreign peoples under Spanish rule.<sup>9</sup>

Sahagún continued his religious studies at the Friary of San Francisco where he took his vows and became an "Observant Friar of the Order of our Seraphic Father Saint Francis". This friary was one of the most prestigious in the Franciscan province of Santiago and "offered Sahagún the opportunity to attain appropriate missionary recognitions and skills".<sup>10</sup> In particular, these skills included the writing of sermons and public preaching, because these were considered the primary means of dissemination of the Christian faith by the Franciscans. Sahagún maintained a special relationship with the first 12 Franciscan missionaries who had travelled to New Spain, writing a report in 1564 on their arrival in Mexico. He registered the conversations of these missionaries with the local wise men in Nahuatl and Spanish, creating a document which reflected the first dialogues between both cultures. About three years after the arrival of the first Franciscans in Mexico, Friar Antonio de Ciudad Rodrigo came back to Spain to recruit new missionaries. He recruited approximately 20 missionaries, among them Sahagún.<sup>11</sup>

Sahagún arrived as a member of the Franciscan group in New Spain by the end of October or the beginning of November 1529, ready to wage war against the Devil and liberate the unfaithful from diabolic tyranny.<sup>12</sup> He was only the 43rd registered priest in New Spain, i.e. the Christian mission was still in its inception eight years after Cortés' occupation of Tenochtitlan. Sahagún immediately started collecting material about the local culture with the intention of producing a basic work for newcomers from Europe. One of the reasons for his efforts was that he mistrusted reports which described the mission as an enormous success, mentioning the conversion of large numbers of indigenous people. He suspected that the Nahuas had only superficially converted to Catholicism and still believed in their gods, because they had not understood the meaning of the missionaries' preaching.<sup>13</sup> He also learned quickly the local lingua franca Nahuatl, knowledge which he could apply to his missionary work. In 1536, he became teacher at the newly founded *Colegio de Santa Cruz*, an institute for the training of sons of the indigenous aristocracy. Next to the education of good believers and future priests, one of the purposes of the institute was to train assistants for the interpretation and translation of Spanish and Latin writings into the indigenous languages.<sup>14</sup> Sahagún taught classic Latin and history at this institute located in Tlatelolco. The *Colegio* also taught regional medicine with indigenous experts. The process of intercultural exchange at the institute was one of the important conditions for his collection of material for the *Historia general*. Not all Spaniards were happy with the Franciscan activities, because they feared the power of the indigenous elites trained in European sciences.

<sup>9</sup>Spieker, *Die Entstehung*, 90.

<sup>10</sup>Ríos Castaño, *Translation as Conquest*, 48.

<sup>11</sup>Spieker, *Die Entstehung*, 92.

<sup>12</sup>Ríos Castaño, *Translation as Conquest*, 63.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>14</sup>Spieker, *Die Entstehung*, 96.

After some years in the Mexican highlands, Sahagún returned to Tlatelolco in 1545. In this year, an epidemic killed many of the local population so that the institute had to be re-established; the *Colegio* was now open for all intellectually fit indigenous boys. Sahagún spent extended periods of his life after 1545 in the *Colegio de Santa Cruz*, especially his last years, when he revised his writings. In the context of the so-called Valladolid debates in 1550–1551, in which the Dominican Friar Bartolomé de las Casas argued for the indigenous people's right to sovereignty and peaceful Christianisation against the humanist Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda's view that these peoples were inept and should be subdued by the superior Spaniards,<sup>15</sup> Sahagún's argumentation always sided with the former, highlighting the high cultural level achieved by the Nahuas. Despite temporal prohibitions by the Crown, Sahagún continued studies about the pre-Conquest culture of the Mexica in the *Colegio*. He died in 1590 in the monastery of San Francisco.

### Sahagún's writings and the *Historia general*

From 1536 on, Sahagún began writing several religious texts, always with the intention to enhance the teaching of Christian religion in New Spain. Recent research has come to different conclusions as to his main motivations: whereas some interpreters of his works are inclined to classify Sahagún as a pioneer of anthropology,<sup>16</sup> others highlight his character as a Catholic missionary, whose most important objective was the eradication of the former culture of the Nahuas and its replacement with Catholicism.<sup>17</sup> His most important work, the *Codex*, contains simultaneously quite fundamentalist religious statements and large descriptions of the belief system and daily life of the Nahuas without direct derogatory judgements. Nevertheless, it seems useful to assume for an interpretation of his works that they were

targeted at churchmen to copy the language and to learn about the Nahuas' moral beliefs and culture, but they also operate as a means of deciphering what Sahagún terms as the Nahuas' "idolatrous matters"; namely, the falsities and idolatries conjured up by the Devil in the form of the gods they worshipped, their festivities, their astrology, and their omens.<sup>18</sup>

Considering these motives for compiling the *Historia*, which Sahagún repeatedly stated at the outset of book chapters, and his description of – from a present-day perspective – quite doubtful means of controlling the converted indigenous people's behaviour in the sense of Catholic doctrine (such as using his students as spies in their parents' homes), it seems difficult to classify him predominantly as an early ethnographer or anthropologist. He used ethnographic-like methods, but his principal goal was always to contribute to the conversion of the indigenous population to Catholicism, and their submission and exploitation by the Spanish conquerors; i.e. in the first place, he was always a Catholic missionary, even if some parts of his writings seduced a small number of researchers to classify him otherwise. Partially before and sometimes simultaneously while compiling material for the *Historia*, Sahagún wrote several texts with sermons in Nahuatl. He also wrote Christian songs of praise in the local language, because he had understood the importance of singing

<sup>15</sup>See Alfonso Maestre Sánchez, "Todas las gentes del mundo son hombres" – El gran debate entre Fray Bartolomé de las Casas (1474–1566) y Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1490–1573) [All peoples of the world are human beings – The great debate between Friar Bartolomé de las Casas (1474–1566) and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1490–1573)], *Anales del Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía* (2004): 91–134.

<sup>16</sup>León-Portilla, *Bernardino de Sahagún: pionero de la antropología*, 36.

<sup>17</sup>Ríos Castaño, *Translation as Conquest*, 246.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 94.

hymns and dances for the adoration of gods in the Nahua culture. A common feature of his texts is that he tried to connect the spread of the Christian faith with formerly existing cultural traditions, such as the *huehuetlatolli*, i.e. admonishing speeches, which Nahua parents belonging to the higher classes gave to their children to teach them good and modest behaviour. Another of his outstanding works is the *Coloquios y doctrina cristiana*, finished in 1564, which reproduces the conversations between the first 12 Franciscan missionaries in New Spain and indigenous leaders.

The collection of data, copying, and translating the ethnographic material compiled in Sahagún's opus magnum, the *Historia general*, started with his arrival in New Spain in 1529 and finished at the end of the 1570s. The Franciscan monk used the technique of systematic surveys for some parts of the *Codex*. Whether these were similar to modern ethnographic questioning or inspired by "inquisitorial and confessional procedures"<sup>19</sup> is a question which is still the subject of academic debate, but the circumstances of these interviews, as described by Sahagún himself, suggest that his informants did not deliver a complete description of the pre-Conquest society and that the priest and his assistants could not grasp the full meaning of some of the related traditions, especially those registered in paintings by Nahua artists. The interviewed elder and wise men must have been aware of Sahagún's proselytising intentions and his native bilingual assistants did not know the local culture to its full extent due to their education in the Franciscan *Colegio*. Furthermore, we have to take into account that Sahagún's interviewees belonged to the upper social classes, so that they delivered a partial description of the Nahua society influenced by their social status.

A first copy of the 12 books of the *Historia general* was finished in 1570. Before this, Sahagún had arranged and rearranged the compiled material, probably in order to produce a work similar to mediaeval and classic examples, such as the encyclopaedias *De proprietatis rerum* by Bartholomeus Anglicus<sup>20</sup> and *Speculum Majus* by Vincent of Beauvais,<sup>21</sup> which tried to represent the world according to the concept of a divine cosmic hierarchy.<sup>22</sup> After some difficulties, like the mentioned temporal prohibition of publishing studies about indigenous culture, another version was written from 1575 onwards, which was finally brought to Europe.

For the following study of representations of hands in the *Historia general*, I used the manuscript known as the *Florentine Codex* (1577/78), which is stored in the Laurentian Library of Florence, Italy.<sup>23</sup> The final structure of Sahagún's work followed the principles of mediaeval encyclopaedias. In the first three books we find information about the gods, which the Mexica adored, their religious celebrations, and, particularly, their human sacrifices, as well as legends about the origins of the gods. Books Four to Seven treat topics such as astrology, prophecies, rhetoric, moral philosophy and theology of the Mexica, as well as their natural philosophy. Book Eight is about kings and lords of the Mexica, their

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>20</sup>A scanned copy is available at <https://www.cmog.org/library/de-proprietatibus-rerum-bartholomeusanglicus>. (accessed August 8, 2017).

<sup>21</sup>See <https://www.vincentiusbelvacensis.eu/works/worksSM.html> (accessed August 8, 2017).

<sup>22</sup>Miguel León-Portilla, "De la oralidad y los códices a la 'Historia General': trasvase y estructuración de los textos allegados por Fray Bernardino de Sahagún [From the oral works and the codexes to the 'General History': Transfer and structure of the texts presented by Friar Bernardino de Sahagún]," *Estudios de cultura Náhuatl* 29 (1999): 65–141, offers a detailed study of the different versions of the *Historia general*.

<sup>23</sup>An excellent digitised version is available at <https://www.wdl.org/es/item/10096/view/1/1/> (accessed August 8, 2017). I also used an e-book version of the Spanish text of the *Historia general*: Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las Cosas de la Nueva España I y II* (Barcelona: Red ediciones, 2012).

election, and the government of their realms. Book Nine presents merchants, goldsmiths and artisans, who worked with the appreciated bird feathers. Book Ten deals with vices and virtues of the Mexica, body parts, diseases, and their medical treatment. The next book offers information about Mexican woods and gardens. The last book, number twelve, presents the Mexica's view of the Spanish conquest of the City of Mexico.

The 12 handwritten books are bound in three volumes and have a very particular format: at the outset of each book, we usually find a prologue in Spanish by Sahagún, which offers profound religious reflections about the purpose of each book, respectively the complete work before Book One. These prologues occupy the whole page. The texts of the actual books are presented in two columns: the text on the right-hand side is written in Nahuatl, i.e. the transcription of this language with Spanish letters. The Spanish translation or sometimes only summary of this text is to be found on the left-hand side. The Spanish text is always much shorter than the Nahuatl text, so that all images, pictograms, or ideograms, etc. are inserted on this side. All books contain appendixes, in which the Spanish text on the left-hand side is occasionally substituted by a text in Latin. Sometimes, there are different text elements in some of the books such as, for example at the end of Book One, exclamations of the compiler, in which he expresses his regret at the ignorance of the Mexica.

The dense theological argument of the prologue to the complete work shows two sides of Sahagún's character. There is on the one hand the religious fundamentalist and fanatic, who compares the missionaries' duty with that of physicians who have to heal the diseases of the sick. Missionaries have to eradicate analogically the most important vice of the Mexica, i.e. their diabolical idolatry of false gods, whose knowledge is therefore mandatory for each proselytising priest in New Spain. He considers this task to be extremely difficult, because

in what refers to the religion and culture of their gods, I do not believe that there have been idolaters in this world, who adored their gods to a higher degree and to their disadvantage, as these people in New Spain.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, there are statements which highlight the value of the Mexica and the high level of their culture. As mentioned before, Sahagún takes a clear stance as to the character of the rational human beings of the indigenous peoples: "Therefore, it is absolutely certain that all these peoples are our brothers, descending from the line of Adam like we do, they are our neighbours, who we should love as ourselves."<sup>25</sup>

### Images, pictograms, and ideograms in the *Florentine Codex*

Most mediaeval manuscripts, such as the formerly mentioned encyclopaedias, did not contain images. Illustrations were usually reserved for special books, such as an altar Bible or so-called *books of hours* made for wealthy people. In this respect, the *Florentine Codex* with its enormous number of images stands out as a very special example of book art produced in the Early Modern Age. There were some examples of books, which contained several columns in different languages, such as the polyglot Bible produced at the Complutense

<sup>24</sup>En lo que toca a la religión y cultura de sus dioses, no creo ha habido en el mundo idólatras tan reverenciadores de sus dioses, ni tan a su costa, como éstos de esta Nueva España," Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general I*, pos. 592, also at <https://www.wdl.org/es/item/10096/view/1/16/> at page 16.

<sup>25</sup>Pues es certísimo que estas gentes todas son nuestros hermanos, procedentes del tronco de Adán como nosotros, son nuestros próximos a quien somos obligados a amar como a nosotros mismos," Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general I*, pos. 608, also at <https://www.wdl.org/es/item/10096/view/1/16/> at page 16.

University in Alcalá de Henares,<sup>26</sup> but again, the *Historia*'s configuration with two columns in Nahuatl and Spanish, as well as numerous pictograms, is very special. The high number of people represented with their hands and gestures (976) invites us to regard this element of the work as an additional text body in its own right, whose interpretation promises to identify traces of the ongoing transculturation process between the Nahua and Spanish culture. The editor's choice to include so many images was probably not only due to the mentioned European examples, but also caused by his contact with pre-Columbian Mexica codices, which transmitted cultural traditions by means of pictures.

Our database of the images in the *Codex* registers the number of images on each page, the represented motives, the type of image, represented manual activities, a tag with the most important feature of each image, as well as commentaries on additional interesting observations. The digitised version of the three volumes of the *Codex* comprises 2501 pages; I observed a total of 1760 images on 947 pages.<sup>27</sup> Of these pictures, 521 are drawings in black and white, 1216 are full coloured pictures, and the rest (23) are mixed, such as black and white drawings in front of landscapes coloured in green, or people drawn in black and white in a coloured environment. Most black and white drawings are contained in the last book.

The images in the *Codex* serve different purposes. In the first place, they fill the gaps in the shorter Spanish text on the left-hand side of the pages. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to assume that the full coloured drawings in particular have above all an aesthetic meaning: they are small works of naïve art, whose contemplation provides a pleasant aesthetic experience. In most cases, the images of the *Codex* illustrate the text, in which they are embedded. And last but not least, these pictures convey obvious and sometimes hidden information to the reader.

The changes in the style of the drawings, as well as the different styles in the handwriting, evidence the collaboration of several assistants in the production of the books. Sahagún himself mentions three scribes and four further assistants.<sup>28</sup> At least the following different styles can be observed in the drawings: colourful naïve representations of pre-Conquest daily life of the Mexica, probably drawn by two different artists, which remind us of drawings contained in pre-Colombian codices; coloured drawings in a European mediaeval style; and black and white drawings in the book about the Conquest with a definite European drawing style.

A look at the frequency of different motives in the images in the *Codex*, registered with hermeneutically constructed categories in the form of tags, allows us to draw conclusions about the topics, whose transmission by means of pictorial representation the compiler considered essential. In the first two positions, we find animals and plants, probably due to the decision of the editor to illustrate his descriptions of the Mexican natural environment,

<sup>26</sup>This Bible, published in 1520, contains texts in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Aramaic. A scanned copy is available at <https://bdh-rd.bne.es/viewer.vm?id=0000013439&page=1&search=brocar&lang=es&view=main>.

<sup>27</sup>A study mentions: "The count varies between 1855 and 2686, depending on whether smaller *sigla* in the text are counted as images." Joseph Connors, "Colors between Two Worlds: The Florentine Codex of Bernardino de Sahagún," in Wolf and Connors, *Colors between Two Worlds*, xi. Eloise Quiñones Kleber, "Reading Images: The Making and Meaning of the Sahaguntine Illustrations," in *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Aztec Mexico*, ed. J. Jorge Klor de Alva et al. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988) mentions 1855. Our count includes only images with clearly identified motives. Some images with many different motives, such as representations of calendars, were counted as one.

<sup>28</sup>Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general I*, pos. 1459. Art historical research believes they have identified larger numbers: Diana Magaloni identifies 22 different artists (see Diana Kerpel, "Painters of the New World," 52) and Marina Garone speaks of seven scribes, see Marina Garone Gravier, "Sahagún's Codex and Book Design in the Indigenous Context," in Wolf and Connors, *Colors between Two Worlds*, 196.

1	Animals	322	14	Calendar	27	26	Legends	4
2	Plants	316	15	Commerce	27	27	War	4
3	Work	228	16	Stones	25	28	Games	3
4	Daily Life	172	17	Celebration	24	29	Execution	2
5	Conquest	145	18	Superstition	15	30	Rhetoric	2
6	Lords	57	19	Astrology	13	31	Spaniards	2
7	Education	52	20	Music	12	32	Arts	1
8	Medicine	48	21	Government	11	33	Catholic propaganda	1
9	Sacrifice	46	22	Multiple motives	11	34	Drunkenness	1
10	Worship	43	23	Caves	10	35	Fighting	1
11	Gods	41	24	Hunting	9	36	Magic	1
12	Landscape	41	25	Ornament	5	37	Philosophy	1
13	Houses	37						

**Figure 1.** Images in the *Florentine Codex* according to the frequency of motives.



**Figure 2.** Two Mexica peasants planting Indian corn; a peasant relaxing (Volume 3, Book 10, page 72); A cocoa saleswoman with her customer (Volume 3, Book 10, page 152); Artisans working with feathers (Volume 2, Book 9, page 734). All images from the *Florentine Codex* are from Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence. Reproduced with permission of MiBACT. Further reproduction by any means is prohibited.

unknown to European readers, with the corresponding pictures. Next, there are representations of working Mexica and their daily life, which possibly are the result of Sahagún's high esteem for the complexity of the indigenous society. Drawings relating to the Conquest occupy the next rank, due to many drawings with this motive in the last book. That the



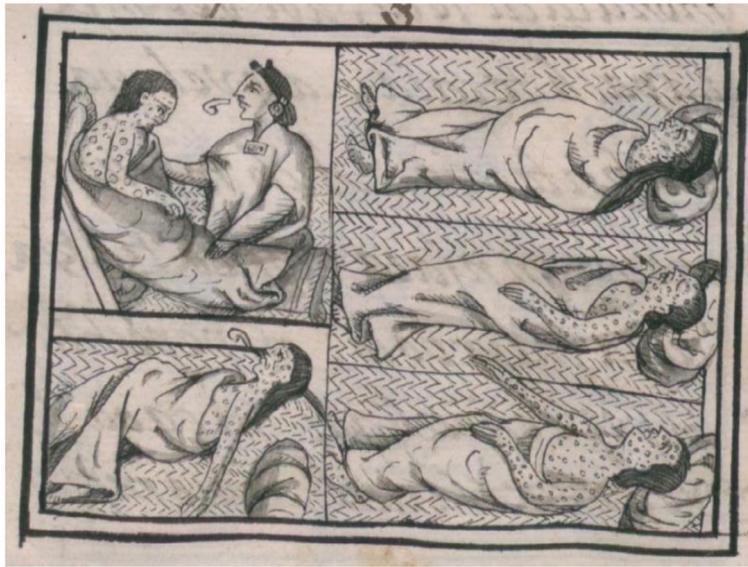
**Figure 3.** Two women baptising a child under the symbol of the serpent (indicating probably the fifth day of the first month in the seventh year of the cycle of the ritual calendar) (Volume 1, Book 4, page 562); a Nahua woman washing her child in a bathtub (Volume 1, Book 4, page 546); a Nahua woman holding and caressing her child in her arm (Volume 1, Book 4, page 514).



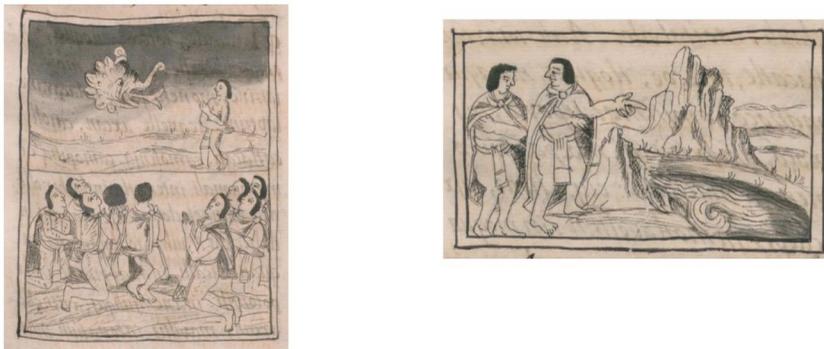
**Figure 4.** A father bringing his sons to a *telpuchcalli*, i.e. religious school, and conversing with a priest (Volume 1, Book 3, Appendix, page 476); parents showing their son the symbol of the rabbit, the tenth day of the first and seventh month of the ritual calendar, in a book (Volume 1, Book 4, page 566).



**Figure 5.** An indigenous male physician curing a patient's backache with an ointment (Volume 3, Book 10, page 227); an indigenous female physician massaging a patient's back; another female physician giving a medicine to a patient (Volume 3, Book 10, page 228).



**Figure 6.** Several Mexica infected with smallpox, one with a physician talking to him (Volume 3, Book 12, page 932).



**Figure 7.** A Mexica praying to the god Tezcatlipoca, one of the important gods, to end the plague; a group of Mexica praying to the same god in Castilian style (Volume 2, Book 6, page 27); A sinner is confessing before his lord; the lord shows the gorge, into which the sins will fall after their confession (Volume 2, Book 6, page 58).

government of the Mexican society and the election of their lords has been an important topic for Sahagún – and his Spanish countrymen, who were interested in replacing the indigenous elite with themselves – becomes evident with the considerable number of drawings with this kind of motive. Further important themes in the *Codex's* drawings are the education of indigenous children and the natives' medical knowledge. We may assume that Sahagún's interest in the pre-Conquest education of the higher classes' children is due to the missionaries' strategy to spiritually conquer Mexican society by indoctrinating the

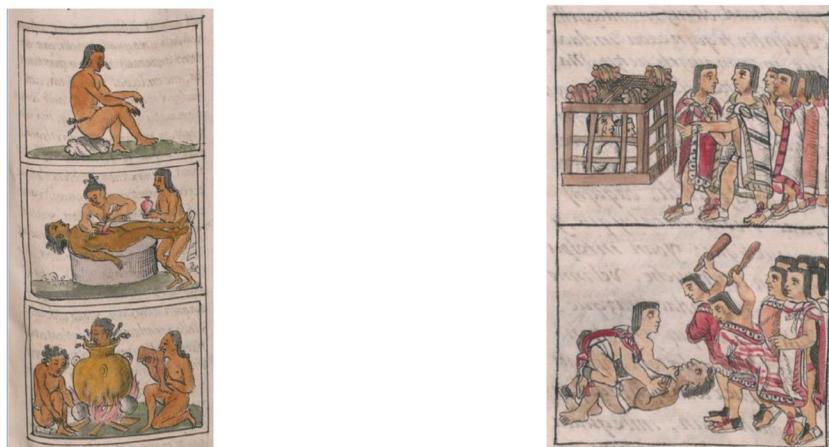


**Figure 8.** Celebration for the *tlaloques*, typical festive dinner (Volume 1, Book 1, page 80); boys chasing girls during the celebration of the month Tititl; the boys throw small bags and the girls try to defend themselves (Volume 1, Book 2, page 310).



**Figure 9.** Representations of the Nahua gods Huitzilipochtli, Tezcatlipoca, Paynal and Tlaloc, with comparisons to Greek mythology (Volume 1, Book 1, page 32); representation of the goddess Huixtocihuatl and a human sacrifice to please her (Volume 1, Book 1, page 47).

offspring of the privileged classes. The legitimation of the spiritual and earthly submission of the Mexica by the Spaniards is probably the most powerful motive for the high number of images of gods worshipping and celebrating Mexica, as well as human sacrifices.



**Figure 10.** Representation of a human sacrifice and ritual anthropophagy (Volume 1, Book 4, page 547); execution of a prisoner condemned to the death penalty because of having drunk the forbidden alcoholic pulque (Volume 1, Book 2, page 236).

### Representations of hands in the *Florentine Codex*

As already mentioned, the *Codex* contains 976 pictures with representations of people and their hands. Most of these images show manual activities and gestures in contexts of communication. In the following sections I will reproduce and interpret a small sample of images which directly refer to topics such as birth, upbringing, and education, as well as pictures which represent cultural contents whose intergenerational transmission is considered important. In particular, I will try to identify phenomena of transculturation between the colonising Spanish and the submitting Nahua culture. The categories used in this process are the result of hermeneutic reflection.

#### *Working hands*

After plants and animals, the representation of working Mexica is the most frequent motive in the *Codex's* illustrations. The texts and images present many different occupations of the Mexica, starting with activities, which may be well-known to European readers, such as agricultural work or hunting and fishing.

The Nahua artists also represented professions in their drawings which were typical for the Nahua society, but rather unknown among Europeans, such as cocoa saleswomen or feather artisans. Manual activities in these drawings are easy for observers to understand: peasants hold their tools, plough the earth, and plant seeds, even though of crops not yet well-known to Europeans; saleswomen fill a plate with cocoa beans; and artisans work with precious material, at least according to the Nahua, not necessarily the Spanish understanding. There are differences in style in the pictures of the sample. The representation of the peasants' bodies, including their hands, correspond to European depictions, whereas the pictures of the saleswomen and the artisans are more like pre-Colombian examples. It also seems reasonable to assume that the purpose of these images is not only to convey information about the Nahuas' culture in a neutral way and highlight its complexity, but

also to inform spiritual and earthly conquistadors about the skills of the indigenous people which they might exploit to their advantage.

### *Caring and educating hands*

A relatively important topic in Sahagún's *Codex* is childcare and education. The texts, as well as many images, reveal the interest of the compiler in knowing how the Nahua society cared about their children and how they were educated, especially the children of the higher social classes. We may assume that this interest is motivated by the Franciscans' strategy to spiritually conquer the Nahua society by indoctrinating the children of aristocrats and other privileged social classes.

The same interest, i.e. the redefinition of formerly existing social rituals by giving them a Catholic meaning, is probably the motive for the texts and images which refer to the baptism of young children. The first of the reproduced drawings in this section combines the more or less realistic representation of female bodies, their hands, and a child with symbols pertaining to pre-Conquest Nahua culture. We find the symbol of the sun and the serpent as references to the ritual calendar, which indicates the date of birth of the child baptised in the second drawing. Sahagún's text, which explains the ritual of baptism in the indigenous society, reproduces a grandfather's speech usually given during this ceremony:

My grandson, you have come to this world to suffer from much work and pain, because these things exist in the world. If you are lucky, you will live for a long time and we will succeed in educating you and we will enjoy you, because you are the image of your father and mother.<sup>29</sup>

The next two pictures show scenes of a mother's daily life. The reproduced drawing of a mother holding and caressing a child in her arms shows, at least according to our opinion, traces of transcultural exchange: whereas the mother is clearly a Nahua woman, the representation of the motive, especially the position of her and the child's hands, reminds us of paintings of the Virgin Mary and the Infant Jesus in mediaeval churches.

The texts and images of the appendix of Book Four reveal Sahagún's interest in the religious education of boys. He explains that the male offspring of the lower classes was offered to schools called *telpuchcalli*, whereas the higher classes brought their sons to so-called *calmécac*. The objective of both institutions was to train future priests who carried out the Nahuas' religious rituals, thus serving their "idols". His description of the customs and the teaching in these schools reminds us of the education of Spanish boys in convent schools; the text highlights the good customs, doctrines, and exercises, as well as the humble and rough life in these institutions.<sup>30</sup> This part of the book may partially be understood as an instruction for future clergymen to substitute existing customs of the Nahua society with Christian content.

The drawings with educational content, such as those reproduced above, frequently surprise with the representation of outspoken tender attitudes of parents towards their children. A father of two holds his sons by the hand before delivering them to school and maintains at the same time a conversation with a priest. Except for the clothing, the picture may be well known to European readers, who would recognise the scenario from their own experience.

<sup>29</sup>Nieto mío, has venido al mundo donde has de padecer muchos trabajos y fatigas, porque estas cosas hay en el mundo. Por ventura, vivirás mucho tiempo, y te lograremos y te gozaremos, porque eres imagen de tu padre y de tu madre," Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general I*, pos. 5018.

<sup>30</sup>Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general I*, pos. 4238.

The artist shows two good-looking and well-built male adults who care about the training of their sons. The second reproduced drawing again combines the representation of symbols from the ritual calendar with a realistic image of parents who teach their son how to read the symbol painted on parchment paper. Both drawings highlight the similarity of Nahua and Spanish culture in what refers to the education of children; contemporary churchmen, who contemplated these pictures, may have felt inspired to exploit these pre-Conquest social customs to their favour by maintaining them, substituting the content of the teaching with Catholic doctrine.

### **Curing hands**

Positive aspects of the process of transculturation between the Spaniards and Nahua become evident in Book Ten about “vices and virtues of these Indian people ... and diseases and medicines”. Sahagún showed much interest in the medical knowledge of indigenous physicians and offered large summaries in his work.

Furthermore, it is astonishing that some chapters offer reflections on topics not related to the corresponding title. Chapter XXVII with the title “On all body parts, external and internal ones, of men and women”, for instance, starts with a long text by Sahagún on the aptitude of Indians to learn anything and the careful education of their sons and daughters, not without insisting, simultaneously, on the need to destroy their idolatry. He complains about the risks of drunkenness and expresses his opinion that the Indian elders knew better how to control the vices of the population through hard punishment. Sahagún mentions that the Franciscans used the students in their *colegios* as spies, who informed them about the celebration of former rituals. Those Mexica who were caught participating in these celebrations were detained and physically punished in the monasteries to transform them into good Christians who would give up their old customs. He mentions that the Spaniards had found many indigenous books with images which they had nearly entirely burnt.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Sahagún narrates that the Franciscans were criticised by many Spaniards because of their efforts to teach the Indians writing and reading, as well as Castilian and Latin. Nevertheless, he states that the Franciscan succeeded greatly with their teaching.

In addition to the summarised reflections by Sahagún, Book Ten offers detailed descriptions of medicines applied by indigenous physicians. Many drawings show the treatment of patients, frequently by female physicians. Most of these pictures include the representation of manual activities, such as dressing wounds, administering medication, or massaging. One of Sahagún’s arguments for the inclusion of information on indigenous medicine in his work is quite curious: he narrates that many Mexicans died of the plague after the arrival of the Spaniards and that one of the reasons was that the medical knowledge of the Indian elders had not been applied and that the Spaniards did not know how to treat this disease.

### **Worshipping and celebrating hands**

Different forms of worship and celebration in pre-Conquest Nahua society were of great interest to Sahagún because he was searching for possible points of connection between

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<sup>31</sup>Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general II*, pos. 3207–349.

the Spanish Catholic culture, which he and his fellow Franciscan tried to impose, and the indigenous culture. Texts and images in the *Codex* related to this topic show signs of the merging process of these two cultures, even though it is difficult to define which element in the different images and text bodies is due to which factors in the transculturation process.

Book Two about celebrations, sacrifices, and gods contains images and text which illustrate this process. Sahagún's declared intention was to deliver a true image of the Nahua pre-Conquest society by means of correctly reflecting the information obtained by indigenous elders through interviews with him and his assistants.

Nevertheless, some texts and images in this part reveal the fusion of cultural traditions belonging to both cultures, Nahua and Spanish Catholic. For instance, the drawing with Mexica praying to the god Tezcatlipoca and begging for the end of the plague shows a crowd of men with indigenous clothes but European features and praying hands according to the Spanish style. The most plausible interpretation for this kind of representation of praying hands is, in my opinion, that the indigenous artist reproduced his own experience of praying in the Franciscans' *colegio*, where he was raised, when asked to illustrate the Nahua elders' report on their religious customs before the Conquest.

Sahagún, for his part, was probably delighted with this kind of narration and illustration, because they made his task of Christianising the indigenous society easier: he just had to substitute the contents of the Nahuas' beliefs with Catholic doctrines, but could maintain the formal customs of prayer. The same is valid for the second reproduced drawing: the lord shows with an oversized hand the gorge into which the sins of his subject will disappear after the confession. The accompanying text reproduces a long sermon by the lord, which very much resembles the admonitions of a Catholic confessor.<sup>32</sup>

Next to images of worshipping Nahua, the *Codex* contains many drawings of indigenous celebrations which only partially resemble Spanish traditions. Drawings of this type show Mexica celebrating several feasts, which are described without derogatory remarks; nevertheless, the reference to Mexica gods or rituals has the intention to remind the religious reader that his task is to eradicate the pagan traditions shown. The oversized representation of manual gestures in some drawings is interesting: the artist probably intended to emphasise the importance of the communicative content of the gesture, such as the decent girls' rejection of the daring boys' intent to get closer.

### ***Divine, sacrificing, and killing hands***

The frequent description of the Mexica of Nahua's gods and the human sacrifices in their honour by Sahagún has different purposes. In the first place, he wished his Franciscan brothers to acquire a profound knowledge of the indigenous belief system before the Conquest in order to enable them to recognise former pagan rituals and eradicate them. Second, the detailed description of cruel rituals of human sacrifices helped to legitimate the Franciscans' Christianising efforts. Texts and images, particularly in the second book, contain abundant references to this topic:

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<sup>32</sup>Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general I*, pos. 6065.

There is no need in this second book to reject the narrated ceremonies of idolatry, because they are by themselves so cruel and inhuman so that they will cause horror and awe in anyone who reads about them.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, sometimes the representations of Nahua gods in the *Codex's* drawings do not seem to express the same distaste for the indigenous belief that Sahagún states in his texts, where he claims that “those, whom they had for gods, were not gods, but lying and cheating devils”.<sup>34</sup> Quite in contrast to this, many drawings of gods are aesthetically pleasing and clearly contain traces of cultural fusion.

Many representations of gods contain explanations in the accompanying text, which compare them to Greek gods known to the expected religious readers. Huitzilipochtli, for instance, sees himself compared to Hercules, Tezcatlipoca to Jupiter, Paynal is presented as Huitzilipochtli's vicar and Tlaloc as the god of rain. But Sahagún's intention is probably not only to establish a familiar framework of interpretation for his readers: at the same time, he implies that the indigenous peoples of New Spain are comparable to ancient Greeks.

The positions of hands and manual gestures are similar in all drawings of Nahua gods: with one hand, mostly the left, they hold a small shield, which indicates their human origin as warriors with special, sometimes magic abilities, as explained later in Book Three about the origins of indigenous gods. The other hand is upraised and holds symbols of the gods' powers. Some combined drawings, such as those reproduced above, link the adoration of a god, or a goddess in this case, with the mentioned inhuman and cruel practice of human sacrifices.<sup>35</sup> As before, manual activities are important in these pictures: the faithful play music, chant, and pray to honour the goddess of fertility, Huixtocihuatl, and in the next picture, a group of four priests of this goddess sacrifices a victim.

The representations of manual activities related to human sacrifices and, very occasionally, ritual anthropophagy can be found in several of the *Codex's* drawings; sometimes, as in the case of a series of three drawings which show a human victim being dissected and cooked, the content of the drawings is not related to the text, in which it is embedded. It seems reasonable to suppose that the purpose of representing hands which cut open the body of a victim and extract its heart or hands, which hold a cooked human leg, is to highlight the cruelty of the indigenous peoples as compared to the civilised Spaniards. The image of a prisoner's execution with clubs probably has the same intention, even though it is not limited to this: Sahagún admired in other parts of the *Codex* the Nahuas' strict control of vices, such as drunkenness, by means of cruel punishment.

## Conclusions

Given the high number of representations of hands in the *Codex*, the sixteenth-century work with the largest number of illustrations of the Mexica of Nahuas' pre-Conquest culture, many

<sup>33</sup>No hay necesidad en este Segundo Libro de poner confutación de las ceremonias idolátricas que en él se cuentan, porque ellas de suyo son tan crueles y tan inhumanas que a cualquiera que las leyere le pondrán horror y espanto,” Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general I*, pos. 1885.

<sup>34</sup>[Q]ue aquellos que ellos tenían por dioses no eran dioses sino diablos mentirosos y engañadores,” Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general I*, pos. 3756.

<sup>35</sup>The extent to which the Mexica practiced human sacrifices before the Conquest is still the object of academic debate. Most current researchers admit that there were these type of sacrifices, but doubt the high numbers given by Spanish contemporary historians. See, for instance, Muriel Paulinyi Horta, “El sacrificio de imágenes en la Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España de Fray Bernardino de Sahagún [The sacrifice of images in the General History of Things of New Spain by Friar Bernardino de Sahagún],” *Historia* 396, no. 2 (2013): 269–97.

more images could be reproduced and interpreted in the previous paragraphs, as well as additional paragraphs with new categories, such as creative, trading, or warring hands, for instance. Nevertheless, the small selection of images presented here and their interpretation enables us, in my opinion, to offer some preliminary conclusions about the characteristics of this motive's inclusion among the pictorial material in the *Historia general*. In the first place, it is necessary to highlight the importance of the images in Sahagún's work, which frequently has been neglected in earlier reprints of the *Historia* that were limited to the reproduction of its Spanish text. The pictorial material has different purposes, among other things: it fills the gaps in the Spanish text, it embellishes the work, it illustrates some content, and sometimes conveys information not directly related or even contradictory to the texts.

The representation of people, their bodies, hands, and gestures plays an important part in the totality of Sahagún's work, as they appear in more than 50% of the *Codex's* drawings. Manual gestures as a means of communication are present in nearly all of the *Historia's* themes, among other things, the representations of birth, upbringing, and education, which are especially interesting for a historical educational interpretation of this source. Furthermore, the motive is also abundant in content related to cultural knowledge considered indispensable for the intergenerational transmission of traditions.

Sahagún designed the structure of the *Codex* according to the model of mediaeval encyclopaedias and with the intention to deliver a handbook for Spanish spiritual and earthly conquistadors of the Nahua society. Texts and images often search for points of connection between the colonising Spanish and the submitting Nahua culture with the intention to fill existing cultural traditions, such as baptisms or the education of boys in religious institutions, with Catholic contents. Sometimes there are longer descriptive parts without derogatory remarks on the indigenous culture, which led some researchers to erroneously qualify Sahagún as an early ethnographer.

Traces of the transculturation process between Spaniards and the Mexica of Nahua (which had started shortly before Sahagún's arrival in New Spain and was ongoing during the 50 years the Franciscan fray dedicated to collecting material about the indigenous pre-Conquest culture) are present in many texts and images, particularly in some of the reproduced representations of hands and manual gestures. Drawings of Nahua women according to the model of paintings of the Virgin Mary or the Castilian-style praying hands of Mexica who beg their ancient gods to end the plague are only some examples to illustrate this thesis.

Hands and manual activities are not only represented in cultural contexts which allow the positive appropriation by Franciscan missionaries, such as praying customs or the religious education of boys, but also in the description of traditions seen as cruel and inhuman: the human sacrifices for Nahua gods and ritual anthropophagy, which serve as legitimation for the submission of the indigenous society by the Spaniards. Despite some positive remarks by Sahagún on the complexity of the Mexica society and the outstanding abilities of the indigenous peoples, he was also the agent of an aggressive power which colonised and exploited the indigenous population of the conquered territories in America.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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