The Indigenous Nobility and the Reinscription of Mesoamerican Codices

Research Year: 2000
Culture: Mixtec
Chronology: Late Colonial
Location: Oaxaca, México
Sites: Acatlán, Puebla, Suchitepec and Tequistepec

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Project Goal and Rationale

The aim of this project is to examine the Villagómez family, descendants of the ancient Mixtec nobility of southern México. The Villagómez were the owners of a collection of pre-conquest and post-conquest pictorials written in the Mixtec style, which they accumulated as heirs of the rulers of the Mixteca. They were also among the largest landowners in México in the second half of the colonial period through the late 1800s. Branches of the family owned sugar haciendas, ranches, an inn and other commercial enterprises, and they have the longest documented genealogy of any family in the New World.

The project is also of interest to Mesoamericanists because the Villagómez complicate our ideas about ethnicity and class in the colonial and national periods. On the one hand the Villagómez based their claims to wealth and power on their indigenous roots, and many family members spoke Mixtec, even in the nineteenth century, so even though they became part of the regional elite, they maintained an identity distinct from other members of this elite. On the other hand they do not at all fit the stereotype of indigenous people as peasant farmers who occupied positions of extreme subordination and whose only capacity for historical action was in terms of resistance or some kind of other subaltern strategy. Villagómez family members played a pivotal role in shaping the socio-political and economic landscape of a large region of southern México. Among

other things, individual Villagómez family members served as a jefe politico during the Porfiriato, as a revolutionary leader in the period of the Mexican Revolution, as a federal deputy in the 1930s who helped to build the modern Mexican state, and as Treasurer of the City of Puebla. Villagómez were also schoolteachers, clergy, and army officers (including one general in the Mexican army).

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Research

The project involved archival and ethnographic research.

Archival Research

1. México City

- Registro Agrario Nacional consulted for the collection on Guerrero.
- The Fondo Reservado de la Biblioteca Nacional.
- Archivo General de la Nacion.

2. Puebla City

- Registro Agrario del Estado for communities in southern Puebla.

3. Oaxaca City

- Archivo del Estado de Oaxaca.
- Registro Agrario del Estado for communities in Oaxaca.

4. United States

- Family History Library, Salt Lake City.

After carrying out the archival research, it became clear to me that I also need to consult the notary archives for Oaxaca and Puebla, as well as the judicial archives for the two states.

Ethnographic Research

1. I carried out a reconnaissance of lands once owned by the Villagómez family along the Río Tizac or Acateco.

2. I interviewed Villagómez family descendants in Acatlán, Puebla.

3. I interviewed former tenants and townspeople associated with the Villagómez family in Puebla and Oaxaca.

In the future, I plan to continue these interviews and survey properties owned by the Villagómez family in Silacayoapan and Huajuapan, Oaxaca.

Preliminary Findings

Preliminary findings based on the research funded by FAMSI can be divided into four sections:

- The Villagómez genealogy.

- The identification of Villagómez family properties, including the dates when landholdings were alienated and the name of the seller.

- Manuscripts possessed by the Villagómez family, with notes about their provenience and the forms they assumed.

- The historical impact of the Villagómez family on Southern México.

The Villagómez Genealogy

Information on Villagómez family genealogy has been published by Caso (1962; 1966) and Smith and Parmenter (1991). I also have in my possession a manuscript Villagómez genealogy produced by Mary Elizabeth Smith, who kindly sent it to me in response to a query (Smith, n.d.) A copy of a Villagómez family tree made by a member of the family was in the possession of the late Barbro Dahlgren (Caso, 1962). By using sources that have not been consulted by previous researchers, namely the baptismal, marriage and death records from the Mixteca microfilmed by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and deposited in the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, I have been able to build on this earlier work.

Preliminary analysis of this data reveals two areas of confusion surrounding the Villagómez family tree. First, by the late colonial period there were several different branches of the Villagómez living in the Mixteca region. The problem is that sometimes distinct branches are mixed together (as in Caso's 1962 and 1966 genealogy) and

sometimes family continuity is not recognized since a branch may be identified with surnames other than Villagómez (although family members would sometimes attach a grandparents or great-grandparents' Villagómez surname to their own).

My preliminary findings indicate that by the 1700s, two distinct cacicazgo lines developed, each using the Villagómez surname. One was based in Acatlán, Puebla, while the other was based in Suchitepec and Tequistepec, Oaxaca. By the eighteenth century, the Acatlán line split again, with one branch, later known by the Aja surname, based in Acatlán and Puebla City, with the other, using the Villagómez surname, based in the district of Silacayoapan, Oaxaca. In the nineteenth century, the Suchitepec Villagómez also divided, with one branch remaining centered in Suchitepec, and the other on holdings in Petlalcingo, Puebla area. In the late colonial period, the Acatlán Villagómez accumulated a wide array of properties, partly through direct inheritance and partly by asserting their genealogical connections to the heirs of cacicazgos who had not left direct descendants. This often involved drawn out court battles. The nature of the relationships between these various branches of the family await further investigation.

A second area of confusion in the Villagómez family tree has been created by the fact that a number of Villagómez men were named Martín Carlos or Martín José, and were related as father-son, or grandfather-grandson, or uncle-nephew. Since they may have been alive at the same time, and since they hold many of the same properties and share residence, it is not always clear whom a given document is referring to. Moreover, since the second given name is sometimes not used in the documents, even more confusion is created. This is a crucial point and demands close examination, since the eighteenth century was the apogee of Villagómez power and influence, and it appears that discussions of the Villagómez have conflated the actions of distinct individuals.

The fact that we can trace Villagómez family connections from the present day back to the ancestors who lived hundreds of years before the conquest raises the question of whether or not the Villagómez were aware of their long and distinguished pedigree. Evidence suggests that they were. In the 1860s, one of the Ajas (either Sabino or Leonardo, members of the Acatlán Villagómez branch of the family), was able to assert he was related to an early ruler named Carlos de Austria, whose Precolumbian name was probably Ya cua (Monaghan, n.d.). Also, one Villagómez family member, a priest named Uriel Villagómez Amador, of the Suchitepec Villagómez, created his own genealogy, that was apparently quite deep (Caso, 1962).

The memory of ancient ancestry is related to the strategic use of genealogical information in the colonial period. The institution of the cacicazgo, which, in Spanish jurisprudence, was a type of entailment (or mayorazgo), specified that property and titles were to be handed down in a single line of descent, and these properties could not be alienated from the family. This was designed to preserve family lines by making unbroken pedigrees necessary to access wealth. Members of the indigenous nobility would go through the legal proceedings to acquire entailments, and some even designed their own coats of arms. The close association of wealth with descent in the entail was such that the direct family connections asserted by individuals in probate and

other records seeking to establish their rights to property sometimes do not match the information recorded for them in their earlier, baptismal records, which show instead that their connections were less direct. But even though the institution of the entailed estate provided an underpinning for a developed ideology of descent, the fact that Villagómez family members could assert connections to specific individuals separated from them four hundred years who can tentatively be independently identified from other sources, indicates that they had access to a corpus of documents dating from the early colonial and Precolumbian periods, and moreover, they were aware of, and even proud of their indigenous heritage, since many of these assertions came after the entailed estate was abolished by Mexican law.

Villagómez Family Properties in the Nineteenth Century.

The following is a list of Villagómez properties, including the dates these properties were alienated, and the name of the seller or the last Villagómez to hold title. This information is important since it aids in tracking the origin of pictorial manuscripts (see the discussion of the Colombino-Becker below). Properties are listed as towns and hamlets, whose inhabitants paid the Villagómez rents. The Villagómez would also rent lands to ranchers and would sometimes exploit favored agricultural areas directly, such as the sugar hacienda of Tianguistengo and Rancho de Ramales, Puebla. Although many Villagómez properties were sold in the Nineteenth century, the family also sold properties during the colonial period. For example, in 1632 Gregorio de Villagómez sold cattle ranches in Puebla. However the vast majority of sales took place in the Nineteenth century, after the entail was abolished by the Mexican state (see below). The last of the large Villagómez holdings were expropriated in the late 1930s and 1940s.

Aja Villagómez (Acatlán):

– Hacienda Yetla, Tonalá (1838) Sold by Petra Aja.

– San Francisco el Grande (1850s) Lost by Petra Aja in a legal judgement.

– Rancho Yerba Santa (before 1856) Sold by the Aja family.

– Santiago del Río (1864) Sold by Petra Aja.

– San Andrés Dinicuiti (1865) Sold by Petra Aja.

– San Pedro Yodoyuxi (1865) Sold by Petra Aja.

– Santa María Tutla (1865) Sold by Petra Aja.

– Tindu (1865) Sold by Leonardo Aja.

– Santo Domingo Yodohino (1866) Sold by Petra Aja.

– San Jerónimo Montana/Progreso (1866) Sold by Petra Aja and Carlos Lara.

– Rancho San Pedro Mártir (probably Saltrillo) (1868) Sold by heirs of Sabino Aja.

– Silacayoapan (1868) Sold by Petra Aja.

– San Mateo del Río (1868) Sold by Petra Aja and Mariano Lara.

– Copala (1869) Sold by Petra Aja.

– Chicahuaxtla (1869) Sold by Petra Aja.

– Tianguistengo, Puebla (circa 1900) Sold by Leonardo Aja.

Silacayoapan Villagómez

– Michapa, Tecomaxtlahuaca (expropriated?).

– Lands west of Ixpantepec Nieves.

Suchitepec Villagómez

– Miltepec (1820s?).

– Cuyotepeji (1861) sold by the estate of Mariano Villagómez.

– Suchitepec (part sold in 1897 and part expropriated 1938).

– Santiago Patlanala (1860) sold by Mariano Villagómez.

– Francisco Ibarra Ramos (1875) sold by Andrés and Manuel Villagómez.

– Hacienda San Pedro Mártir Tepejillo (1871) sold by María de Jesús Villagómez.

Petlalcingo Villagómez

– San José Chapultepec, Petlalcingo.

– Rancho del Saltrillo (1902, 1907) sold by Juan Germán Villagómez et al.

– Rancho de Tlacotepec (1917-1922).

These properties roughly total 60,000 hectares.

The Villagómez Collection of Mixtec Manuscripts.

One of the most interesting aspects of Villagómez family history is their collection of illuminated manuscripts. Moreover, while some of these manuscripts were in their possession, they were annotated and altered in important ways. Villagómez family members were also key players in the transfer of these manuscripts to European collectors, to national museums and to farming communities in the Mixteca. We thus have a unique opportunity to understand the processes by which manuscripts written in the native style were conserved and changed during the colonial and early national periods.

The following manuscripts can be historically documented as belonging to Villagómez family members, in several cases as late as the second half of the nineteenth century:

Codex Colombino-Becker (Becker portion).

Evidence indicates the manuscript belonged to the Aja Villagómez family of Acatlán. According to Saussure (1891) the manuscript was presented in 1852 in a property dispute involving the Mixtec community of Tindu by a cacique who went to Puebla to reclaim his hereditary rights. His lawyer, Pascual Almazon, supposedly convinced the cacique to allow Almazon to keep the manuscript. It was then sold to the German collector Philip Becker. Tindu was a property of the Aja Villagómez, and that time the "cacique of the Mixteca" would have been either Sabino Martín Aja, or his son, Leonardo Aja.

Codex Tulane.

According to Smith (Smith and Parmenter, 1991:65-68) this belonged at one time to Josefa de Villagómez, who died in 1717. The genealogy on the manuscript is of the Precolumbian rulers of Acatlán.

Mapa de Xochitepec.

This belonged to the Suchitepec Villagómez. The last cacique mentioned on the document is Mariano Francisco Villagómez (Oudijk, personal communication, 2002). Mariano Francisco Villagómez was born in 1788, and died about 1860. He and his son, Andres Villagómez, sold many of the Suchitepec properties (see above). The

manuscript contains a genealogy which lists both Precolumbian and early colonial rulers of the region.

The following manuscripts may have been owned by Villagómez family members. Each of them appeared in Puebla City in the mid-Nineteenth century, just like the Becker portion of the Colombino Becker and the Mapa de Xochitepec, and several are associated with Villagómez properties.

Codex Dehesa.

Was in the possession of the Puebla City lawyer, Manuel Cardoso, who "found" it in an old judicial document around 1863 (Glass, 1964:96). The Dehesa deals with territory to the east of Suchitepec, a Villagómez property.

Colombino portion of the Colombino-Becker.

Manuel Cardoso also ended up with the Colombino portion of the Codex Colombino-Becker in the 1860s. This document was extensively annotated and is closely associated with the cacicazgo of Tututepec, which was claimed by the Acatlán Villagómez in the late colonial period.

Codex of Yanhuitlán.

The Villagómez had a claim on Yanhuitlán, and this manuscript appears in Puebla in the possession of José Manso, another attorney, in 1848 (Glass, 1964:147). Again, this is the period when the Villagómez are selling lands, and it is about the same time other Villagómez manuscripts come on the market in Puebla.

Codex Becker II, Vienna portion.

This was owned by Joseph Dorenberg, a German merchant and diplomat in Puebla, who also owned the Codex Colombino. This was later purchased by Phillip Becker (Smith and Parmenter, 1991:91), the same collector who ended up with the Codex Becker I of the Ajas.

Why would the Villagómez have given up these rare manuscripts? In the first half of the nineteenth century Codices such as the Colombino-Becker had not yet become art objects. Rather they were viewed as ancient supports for land claims. With this in mind there appears to have been three ways that these documents left the hands of the Villagómez. First, even though most of the Mixteca is in Oaxaca, the region straddles

Puebla and Guerrero, and people in general had stronger ties to the large and dynamic city of Puebla than to the smaller and less developed City of Oaxaca. Many of the regional elites maintained houses in Puebla City, they sent their children to school there, and some even made Puebla their principal residence. The Villagómez were no exception. Petra Aja, for example, rarely if ever left Puebla City to visit the Mixteca, and her mother, Alejandra Villagómez, was wed in Puebla City. All the manuscripts listed above appeared in Puebla in the nineteenth century. Moreover, many of these end up in the hands of Puebla City lawyers, who often sold them to collectors. The first path these documents traveled thus appears to be from the Villagómez, to Puebla City lawyers, to collectors. Lawyers would have had access to these documents since they were the ones who represented the Villagómez in land disputes and in the sale of properties. Records indicate that the Villagómez deposited documents with their attorneys, and that the family (as is true of farming communities and others) often had trouble recovering documents once litigation ended. It may be that the lawyers knew there was a market for these documents among European collectors and later museums, and either with the permission of the family, or on their own, sold the manuscripts, perhaps even as a way of recovering legal fees. It is doubtful that a family such as the Aja Villagómez would have simply "given" the documents to their lawyers, or would have been unaware of their significance, especially a man such as Leonardo Aja (who probably owned the Becker portion of the Colombino-Becker). Leonardo Aja was an urbane, sophisticated individual who occupied a very important position in the Puebla State government.

A second path these documents may have traveled could have been a more direct sale by cacique families to collectors, with lawyers possibly serving as intermediaries. Many cacique families fell on hard times in the nineteenth century. Although social unrest, war, economic downturns, the high cost of litigation and mismanagement all played a role, a key factor in this distress was the abolishment of the entail in the 1830s. When this occurred, cacique families such as the Suchitepec Villagómez began to divide family assets evenly among heirs, instead of transferring the entailed assets to one individual. The Suchitepec Villagómez were prolific in the late colonial to the twentieth century, averaging six adult children per generation. As the considerable assets controlled by this branch of the family were divided and subdivided with the passing generations, by the early twentieth century the Villagómez descendants held very small plots of land, almost indistinguishable from the amounts held by the descendants of their cacicazgo’s tenants. There was thus a strong economic motivation to sell anything of value, and documents such as the Mapa of Suchitepec could have fetched a good sum for a family member farming a small plot of land or working as a tailor in Huajuapan de León.

The third way these documents appear to have left the control of the Villagómez has to do with their steady sale of lands in the nineteenth century. In the colonial period and the nineteenth century the transfer of land was accompanied by a transfer of documents that support a title. Even in the case of the sale of relatively small ranches, the seller might turn over to the buyer a land-grant document that is hundreds of years old. Pictorials and maps, which were legal documents supporting title, were also turned over. This is one of the principal reasons why so many farming communities end up with pictorial documents that were originally made for the nobility. By buying cacique land,

they also acquired the cacique titles. Private individuals, such as Spanish immigrants to the Mixteca in the nineteenth century who bought up many cacicazgo properties, could also have ended up with manuscripts, which they either kept or transferred.

The Historical Impact of the Villagómez Family in Southern México.

Beginning as early as the late eighteenth century cacique families sold properties to investors and communities of tenant farmers. Although the whole idea behind entailed estates was that they would preserve a noble line by prohibiting their alienation, caciques were able to petition the colonial government to alienate it in the case of need, usually to pay off debts. Also colonial officials simply looked the other way when such sales took place (Taylor, 1972). Finally caciques often had some property that was not covered by an entail which could be sold or left to others besides direct descendants. After Mexican Independence and the coming to power of the first Liberal governments, the entail was legally abolished. From this point on the sale of cacique property steadily increased, and the actual transactions are well documented. In the 1830s there were three in the Mixteca, in the 1840s there were six, in the 1850s there were nine, in the 1860s there were twenty-five. All told, by 1954, there were sixty-two documented sales of land by cacique families to farmers in the Mixteca. The Villagómez accounted for many of these sales. The Aja Villagómez are responsible for the largest number of transactions, since they held the most land. Between 1838 and 1868 they made at least thirteen sales, nine to farming towns and four to individuals.

One consequence of this was that by the 1930s, when the agrarian reform was implemented and all large properties in the region were expropriated and redistributed, the Aja Villagómez no longer had significant holdings in Acatlán, the Suchitepec Villagómez owned around 5000 hectares in Suchitepec, and the Petlalcingo Villagómez owned a few thousand hectares around Saltrillo, Puebla. At this point it is not clear to me how much land the Silacayoapn Villagómez managed to conserve.

Taken together, the sales of properties by the Villagómez, along with sales by other cacique families, represents a massive transfer of land, and if we add all them together we reach a figure somewhere in the neighborhood of 500,000 hectares. To put this into some perspective, during the first twenty-three years of the Agrarian reform, including the regime of Lázaro Cárdenas, 725,000 hectares were redistributed in the ejido program for the entire state of Oaxaca (Arellanes Meixueiro, 1999). So a substantial land redistribution had been going on in the Mixteca long before the Revolution, and it had been taking place through the mechanism of the market.

Caciques sold to two social groups. On the one hand they sold to a new class of entrepreneur, often immigrants from Spain, who aimed to establish large scale agro-industrial enterprises on their new estates (such as sugar haciendas and massive goat-herding operations), but who often continued the same rental arrangements as previous cacique owners. On the other hand, caciques sold their properties to former tenants, who joined together in what has been characterized as a kind of joint-stock company, or

sociedad agrícola, to make the purchase. Each member of the sociedad would contribute to the enterprise, and then receive shares in proportion to the amount they contributed. Since they were often not able to come up with the entire purchase price, they would mortgage the property, often to the cacique. This process thus turned thousands of landless tenants into property owners. The consequences of this cannot be underestimated. Not only did it relieve the agrarian pressures that caused so much havoc in México in the first half of the twentieth century, and create new forms of peasant social organization, but it also created a large group of small property owners, who were among the first to mount a successful electoral challenge to the Institutional Revolutionary Party in southern México. This began in the late 1930s and early 1940s when the Agrarian reform Secretariat attempted to collectivize small holder properties. To this day the Mixteca, particularly the Mixteca Baja, is one of the few rural regions in México that consistently supports the conservative National Action Party (PAN).

Publications and Presentations by John Monaghan, Based on FAMSI-sponsored Research

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