Abstract:

For my Honors thesis, I have chosen a topic that reflects my course of studies throughout my years of education at Ball State University. Pulling from interests in Spanish, history and women's studies, my thesis discusses the role that Indian women played in the history of the Nahua people of Mexico. In order to focus my thesis idea, I chose to study the time period of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, around the 1500s.

The focus of my studies is the responsibilities and expectations of women within Indian culture and social positions that they held both in the family and in Indian society, according to explanations of Aztec social structure. Although the bulk of my thesis focuses on Indian women, I begin my work with an overview of the Nahua Indian culture, in terms of the structure of society and the familial unit. Also included in the overview are some of the factors that shaped the conquest of the Nahua people. Specifically, I look at how different aspects of the Spanish conquest, such as language, settlement and land acquisition, and use of labor may have affected the lives and ideals of the Indians.

I intend to discuss the roles of females in the family, as mothers and wives, and even daughters, and the research that I have found about the myths surrounding housework and the rearing of children. I also found studies relating to the differences in the expectations of males and females at various stages of life, and with respect to different occupations. Within Indian society, I have found interesting information about some of the responsibilities that women had in the villages in which they lived, some of the more public roles that they held and the esteem surrounding women in such positions.

As I have studied the history and structure of the Nahua people, I found that most of the information about the people comes from studying genuine texts, stories and myths in the ancient Indian language. Although the language is not the focus of my study, the most accurate way to assess the culture is to study their writing. Many of the texts are not easily accessible; however, I have found many in-depth studies of writings that have been helpful to guide my research.
Historiography:

In historical context, the Indians that are being discussed, the Nahua, flourished in the region of central Mexico in and around the 15th and 16th centuries.1 The term Nahua, while not a specific group of indigenous people, refers to many groups of Indians united by a common language, Nahuatl. Among the Indian groups that shared this common language are the Aztecs, Texcocans, and Tlaxcaltecs, to name a few, and any number of ancient Mexican groups settled in the Valley of Mexico near what is now Mexico City.2 Often, the Indians of Mexico are collectively referred to as Aztecs, however this is not an accurate term.3 The Aztecs were not the only group of natives settled here, but they are the most well known as they were the largest and most documented settlement.

The Indians of Central Mexico had their society firmly established well before the Spanish conquest. The most important concept in the Nahua structure of society is the altepetl, or the local kingdom.4 The structure of the altepetls served as a way for the various groups of Nahuatl speaking groups to separate themselves from one another. The people of each altepetl had their own subculture, similar to different ethnic groups of today. This is what the Spanish came to refer to as the pueblo, which we now translate as being a small town or village. According to Lockhart, in *The Nahuas After the Conquest*, pueblo is the most appropriate term in Spanish to use for the altepetl. He says, "'Pueblo' means 'people' and in that sense the Spanish term was perfect, for each altepetl imagined itself a radically separate people."5

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2León-Portilla, Introduction p. xvii.
4Lockhart, p. 9-11. (Complete explanation of societal structure comes from these pages)
The existence of this village structure is referred to as "cellular" or "modular" organization because there was a sort of rotational organization of importance, size and power among the *altepetl*, as opposed to a hierarchical structure with one village continuously controlling the others. The *altepetl* was divided into smaller, equal parts, or *capolli*, which may be though of as equivalent to present-day neighborhoods within a town or settlement. Although the *capolli* were contained within the larger kingdom, they often had ethnic cultures of their own.

The *altepetls* were also distinguished from one another by the dynastic ruler of the kingdom, or the *tlatoani*. The *tlatoani* was head of the *altepetl*, and each *capolli* had its own leadership under him, which added to the idea that each *capolli* had its own separate identity within the kingdom.

When the Spaniards come to the *altepetl* upon their conquest, they found a strong, very civilized, organized system of rulership. The Spaniards made few changes as they came to dominate the land and its people. They created their own terms for the societal organization: what were *altepetls*, *capolli* and *tlatoani* became *pueblo*, *sujetos* and *cacique*, respectively. The aspect of society that underwent the most change in structure was the rule of the *tlatoani*. The *cacique* was the leading body in a larger group of leaders, the *cabecera*. While the indigenous cultures had kept rule on a smaller scale, with only one leadership position, Spaniards used more of a hierarchical formation of leadership. The result was the establishment of *alcaldes* and *regidores*, who serve as judges and councilmen. Ultimately, one *alcalde* governed each *sujeto*. *Regidores* served similar positions. There was also a town council, made up of representatives from all parts of the *pueblo*, called a *cabildo*. As the Spanish conquered the land, they initiated these changes in governmental position in the structure of society in stages, which will be

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discussed in detail later, but overall, the layout and organizations of kingdoms and clusters of people withstood Spanish domination.

As previously mentioned, the Nahuas were deeply rooted in the Valley of Mexico during the 16th century, when the Spanish began to explore and conquer Middle America in about the year 1517. The year 1519 began Cortes’ rule in central Mexico. While Cortes’ conquest of the Valley of Mexico was not easily won, the influence of the Europeans did have immediate effects in Nahua society, as noted in terms of societal structure. The movement of European ideas throughout the Nahua culture is apparent in studying some of the changes in written and spoken language. Studies showed a constant increase in the number and types of words of European origin that were used in Nahua speech and an obvious evolution in patterns of speech. Studies by Lockhart suggest that the Spanish influence took root in Indian culture by way of language, in stages. 7

The first stage of influence begins in the year of Cortes’ rule, 1519, to 1540-1550. Little change in Nahuatl language took place during this time because there was minimal amount of effective contact between Nahuas and Spaniards. Any contact that was made did not result in effective language transmission; it was more of a period of the Spaniards acquiring the land and establishing their settlements. The most important change that occurred during this time was the spreading of European nuances to the Indians. This effected language because the Indians modified their own language to incorporate these new terms and ideas. Although the Nahua did not learn the Spanish names for these new things, they adjusted their language to include these additions. An example cited by Lockhart is “wool”, which the Nahuas termed *ichcatl*. They also had to coin a term for the word “sheep.” 8 Also during this time was the adoption by the Indians of many

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European names and modifications of names. Surprisingly, many Indians chose to adopt forms of Cortes' given name.\(^9\)

Stage 2, according to Lockhart, began in 1540-1550 and included the following one hundred years. During this time is when the majority of Spanish words were copied and or modified into Nahuatl, which meant that this was the time period that the two cultures really began to blend. Words were adopted in many different categories of vocabulary, from animal names to terms that were used in weights and values for goods and services. While great changes were made in vocabulary during this stage, pronunciation and grammatical structure of the Nahua language were not affected.

Stage 3 is when Nahuatl began to develop the grammar and pronunciation that bound it more closely to the Spanish language. This time period began in the mid-seventeenth century and continues even through today in those ancient areas of the world where Nahuatl is still spoken. Also noted during this time is the transmission of specific parts of language, such as verbs, prepositions and even specific idioms. This is important because these are items that really make up a whole language, which means that the Nahuatl were, in essence, learning a new language, not just borrowing and modifying words anymore. By this time, so many words and other elements of language had been shared and borrowed by the Nahuas and the Spaniards that many Indians, as well as Spaniards may have been bilingual.

Besides studies in linguistics, this adoption of Spanish custom occurred in labor and government patterns, as well.\(^{10}\) In terms of the development of language, labor relations and government, it is important to realize that any contact between the Nahuas and Spaniards helped to establish working relationships, thus each factor contributed to the success or failure of the others. For example, had Nahua/Spaniard relationships

\(^{9}\) Lockhart, *Nahuas and Spaniards*, p. 12.

\(^{10}\) Lockhart, *Nahuas and Spaniards*, p. 18-20.
soured with development of European government within the *altepetl*, language transition may have ceased, and as a result, the civilizations would not have blended as they did. Similarly, if language acquisition had not occurred, developments in labor relations would not have been successful.

The discussion of labor relations proposed by Lockhart, follows the same time periods of each stage, which strengthens the argument that each is dependent upon the other. In Stage 1, Spaniards relied on a system called *encomienda*, which was the concept that a group of temporary Indian workers, regulated by Spanish leadership, who provided labor for a wealthy Spaniard, usually in agriculture. These groups were supervised by members within their own Indian group, and accomplished tasks according to their own methods for farming or building, or whatever task faced them.

An example, according to an article by Hanns Premm, of a town centered around the *encomienda* is the village of Puebla, located in the Atlixco Valley during the time period from 1540 to 1550. Prem’s studies in land ownership in and around the village of Puebla indicate that part of the settlement plan for that region included that a large amount of land be given to Spaniards in the form of land grants. The goal was to establish an agricultural community, as well as to increase population in the village. As farms grew, the owners were in need of Indians to be used as laborers. Also, the village solicited the Indians to build homes and public buildings for the Spaniards settling there.11

Stage 2 was marked by changes in *encomienda* to a system known as *repartamiento*. Changes in this system during stage 2 included that the leadership of the working groups moved from the Spanish *cabecera* back to the Indian *tlatoani*. Spaniards took over the role of supervision from the Indians in order to more efficiently modify the methods of work and to implement the teaching and use of more European agricultural

and building techniques. In stage 3, the changes were had a greater effect. This time period marked a more informal labor arrangement, where small Indian groups, instead of larger work forces, agreed to contract work on a seasonal basis for a set wage. The groups were no longer arranged by government leaders, nor were they closely supervised. This arrangement noted an obvious change in the relationship between Indians and Spaniards. By this time period, in the mid-1600s, the Spaniards had established a sort of naive trust for the Indian groups. Because they now shared a relatively common language and had shared various work methods, they felt that the Nahua were accepting them as the dominant group. That is not necessarily to say that the Indians had developed the same trust for the Spaniards, which is a topic that will be discussed later. As a result of the trust that the Spaniards had established, indigenous people were gradually regaining some control over their own people that the Spanish had taken initially with the conquest.

Lockhart also proposes a series of stages for the development of indigenous government, or the government within the altepetl, which again follows the same time frame. This argument is not as concise as the others in terms of being able to note major changes in society as a result of the blending of Nahua and Spanish government. Stage 1 is marked by little change in the government of the altepetl; the tlatoani maintained their rule and capolli remained intact. The Spaniards' focus during this time was their own settlement, before they began to make changes in local, established government. Stage 2 is when the alcaldes and regidores assumed their roles as judges and councilmen. The cabecera, the head government body, now assumed its leadership role. Stage 3 marks the breakup of the larger altepetls into smaller parts. Although the altepetl had been the center of the Nahua society, there is little evidence that this breaking up of the larger altepetls had a negative effect on the group as a whole. This is likely because although the changes were being made in Indian categorization and name, the Nahua culture was, in essence, maintaining its strong indigenous roots. Although the Nahua government
structure appeared to be changing because of Spanish influence, the essence of the Nahua was not.

Another reason that the Nahua did not completely relinquish their heritage goes back to a previous brief discussion of the establishment of trust between the two groups. While the Spaniards had developed a sense of trust, even respect for the Nahua after the conquest, the Nahua did not reflect the same emotion. The Hispanic community saw themselves as superior to the Nahua, referring to them as peoncitos and inditos, both belittling terms. The Indians realized that they were culturally different than the Spaniards, as the referred to them as razones (those of reason) and koyome (gentlemen). The Indians realized the social stratification; they knew that the Spanish were more wealthier and of a higher class, but they thought of them as morally inferior. According to Taggart, they “believe members of the dominant ethnic group have immoral habits: they marry their cousins... they are sexually promiscuous and polygynous... and they do not maintain a sacred covenant between god and humans...” In essence, the Nahua resented the Spaniards, but not merely because they conquered them, but because of their immorality in life practices. This is another reason that the Indians did not let the European ideology fully permeate their society.

While the Nahua did adopt and benefit from many of the changes brought on by the conquest, there was a large part of the Nahua tradition that survived through the generations of Spaniards. While the survival of the basic societal structure has already been discussed, the other aspects of Nahua life remained intact in much the same way. The survival of the Indian group undoubtedly has much to do with the strength of the Nahua familial unit and the importance of that family unit in the overall culture. While the specific members of families will be discussed more in the next section, it is important to

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12 Taggart, p. 29
13 Taggart, p. 29.
realize that blood ties were not necessarily what created the concept of family in this culture, but the family was made up of the people living in close proximity.

The Nahua language has no word for the English word family. In Spanish, the word for family is familia; however, in Nahua, the word is equivalent to the translation "being together", "one house", "those in one house" or "people who live together in a house."\textsuperscript{14} Louise Burkhart writes, "The 'family' was conceived as a group of people who shared a residential compound... 'those of a patio'... rather than as a fixed arrangement of kin."\textsuperscript{15} According to these definitions, it appears then, that it is more the physical structure of the house that is important, rather than the relationships of the people living in it. This information lends itself to two possible conclusions. The first possibility is that the Nahua people place little emphasis on family, so they do not need a word to represent the family. The second is that the Nahua so highly value the concept of family that the idea of the bond of family is inherent in the idea of the altepetl.

The physical structure of the house, or calli, was simple. Constructed of adobe, there were one or more connected rooms with a center hearth, which was the physical and spiritual focus of the home. The calli opened onto a patio area, around which were situated a number of other calli, usually inhabited by close or distant relatives, although not always.\textsuperscript{16}

According to James Taggart in \textit{Nahuat Myth and Social Structure}, the Nahuatl form households, which he defines as "the principal corporate kin groups- which function as units of food production and consumption."\textsuperscript{17} The households farm a common are and

\textsuperscript{14}Lockhart, \textit{The Nahuas After the Conquest}, p. 50.

\textsuperscript{16}Burkhart, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{17}Taggart, p. 21.
use common storage areas for crops. Taggart also says that “the head of the household manages a single purse filled by the sale of jointly owned cashcrops and domestic animals, and supplemented by some of the wages of the household members.” So as this “extended family” shares a common residential unit, they share their work and income as well. This is an important concept because one realizes the strength and prosperity of the household, which in turn strengthens the altepetl, that contains many similar households. These descriptions of the household, or family, support the second conclusion stated above. It appears that the concept of “family” as we know it, went well beyond blood ties to the people living in the area, to the surrounding altepetl.

It should be noted that the majority of Taggart’s studies, especially within Nahuat Myth and Social Structure, deal solely with two settlements of Nahua Indians in the Valley of Mexico, the Huitzilan and Yaonahuac. While Taggart does not contend that the structure of these two settlements are identical to other Nahua settlements throughout the Nahuatl-peaking community, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, his focus on the household and the familial relationships between men and women are likely relevant to other Nahua communities.

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18Taggart, p. 21.
19Taggart, p.7.
Men and women:

While the household was a key ingredient in upholding society, it is important to understand the inner household structure and what made the family household function. (The term family, as it shall be used from now on, will be used to refer to man, woman and their children.) In Taggart’s studies, we see that the family structure works because of the interdependence of men and women when it comes to farming, on which depended the family’s food and income, as Indian communities were largely agricultural. The duties, as they are separated between men and women in the household are the following: men were in charge of the milpa, or the plot of land. They prepared the fields, planted, weeded and cultivated the crop. Women and men, and even the children, helped to harvest the crop, while women held chores in the home, such as processing food, cooking and cleaning, washing, caring for the animals and raising the children. A more specific analysis of the parents’ childrearing practices follows.

While it was mentioned earlier that women and men shared the task of childrearing, it is important to realize what role each member, the mother and the father, played in raising the children. In the Huitzilan and Yaonahuac settlements about which Taggart wrote, the roles were spelled out in detail. As the father is generally the parent who is more often away from the home, the mother spends the majority of time with the children. The father’s role as a parent first comes into play when there are young children. As the mother cares for the infant, nurses him, changes, and clothes him, the father bonds with the toddlers. Often, the mother sleeps with the infant in a separate bed, while the father sleeps among the other children. While both parents seem to remain close with their children, the father’s assumes a larger role later, when teaching the children about behavior and about the world outside the home.20

20 Taggart, p. 23.
The largest part of the father's role in the lives of his children is their education. According to León-Portilla in *Aztec Thought and Culture*, the one factor is important for understanding the Nahua approach to education: "the concern of the elders for integrating the individual, from the very beginning, into the life of the group of which he would always be a significant part."21 The goal in educating the Nahua youth, then was to teach the youngsters to grow to be responsible, upstanding citizens within their Indian communities. The method of teaching in the home was to stress the ideas of strength and self-control by way of strict discipline and moral teaching, usually at the hand of the father.22

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21 León-Portilla, p. 135.
22 León-Portilla, p. 135-136.
Nahua Women:

While women in Nahua households were responsible of the household chores, cooking and cleaning, as well as helping with the harvest and childrearing, that is not to say that these were mundane, unimportant tasks. These are the tasks that upheld the family from day to day, and even from generation to generation. According to some interesting studies by Louise Burkhart, in her article “Mexica Women on the Home Front,” the daily chores were nothing to be looked down upon. Burkhart probably says it best when she states:

...discussions of women's roles too often focus on a ‘public’ domain that is presumed both to exist and to be more important than a (presumed) ‘private’ domain... Mexica women may be viewed as primarily associated with domestic duties, hence they must have been male dominated and of low social status - ‘just housewives.’

The tone at the end of her statement is clarified when she continues,

Just because Mexica women spent much of their time cooking, cleaning, sewing, and caring for children, duties assigned also to their European counterparts, it cannot be assumed a priori that these activities were considered in any way trivial for marginal in relation to the male domain.

This comment brings up two important points. First, Indian women were not the only group of women that held these types of responsibilities. For thousands of years, women have held the same roles within families. They have been regarded as the mothers and the wives, the caregivers and nurturers, regardless of race, religion or social status. Second, the women’s roles in family, culture and society have always been viewed as relative to a man’s world. If the focus were to change, globally, and the family were viewed as being the more important entity, holding more importance than social status or economic status, then women’s responsibilities would be viewed as much more significant.

As Indians have always been a religious, or at the very least a spiritual people, there were certain roles assumed by men and women that held a certain spiritual, or maybe superstitious significance that made them exceedingly important to everyday life. Men, for example, were often warriors as well as farmers. The man’s role as a warrior was surrounded by ritual, as prayers and requests for safety and victory were lifted to their gods before the men went off to war. Likewise was thanks given to the gods upon the warrior’s safe or victorious return.

The same kinds of ritual surrounded women’s endeavors in and around the home. Similar requests were asked of the gods that the woman’s house, or calli, was kept free from evil or devious spirits that may invade and have a negative effect on the family structure. According to Burkhart, demonic or evil spirits were often thought to be contained within a dirty home. Dirt and filth were thought to bring chaos and disorder to the home and to the family that lived there. The act of sweeping the home, as well as the act of sweeping the temple held a very spiritual meaning as a form of purification, and was a chore that women were relied upon to complete for the welfare of their families.

Sweeping was one of the most important tasks that a woman held in the home. This was the first task accomplished in the morning, and the last chore done at night before retiring. Children in Nahua families were taught early to perform this important household ritual. Burkhart’s description of the woman sweeping is perfectly stated. She says, “A woman with a broom in her hands stood at the intersection of chaos and order: having a certain affinity with the powers that blew dust and debris into her tiny patio...”25 The broom was regarded as a weapon to ward off dirt and evil spirits. Many sources say that dirty brooms were kept outside of the home, on the patio, to keep the dirt from infecting the home during the day or night.

25Burkhart, p. 36.
Other tasks in the home that women took charge of that held great significance were grinding maize and preparing meals, and spinning and weaving for textiles and garments. As the women in families, both wives and daughters, held the positions of grinding maize into cornmeal and cooking over the fire, the grinding wheel and the fire became symbols of the great importance of women in the Indian culture. The grinding wheel, as an instrument used by women, was important even to an infant girl at birth, as the umbilical cord of females were buried directly beneath the grinding stone near the hearth at the center of the house.\(^{26}\) This was a symbolic ritual, meant to keep females grounded in the home, "her place." Similarly, male infants were also given their rites early, as their umbilical cords were buried on battlefields.\(^{27}\) Also each male and female child was given the tools of his or her gender at the time of his or her birth. Males were given tiny bow and arrow and shields, and females were given tiny replicas of weaving equipment as well as brooms, so that they knew from a very young age what their roles would be and what activities were expected of them. Burkhart also says that both males and females at their deaths are buried with their respective, familiar objects.\(^{28}\) Similar to other cultures, the Egyptians, for example, they were buried with the objects that they would need in death, just as they needed them in life.

The fire, as a critical tool in the process of cooking, was regarded as a god, as was the maize that was used in Indian cooking. Food preparation was thought of as a ritual sacrifice to the fire god offered out of devotion.\(^{29}\) Because the women prepared the meals, they were in close contact with these two very important gods, the gods that

\(^{26}\)Burkhart, p. 42.

\(^{28}\)Burkhart, p. 44.
\(^{29}\)Burkhart, p. 40.
sustained the family with food, hence women, as cooks for the family, were in important, respectable positions. Their acts of devotion, in working in the kitchen, allowed the family to be nourished by the food and by the gods.

The weaving tools previously mentioned were important to Indian females at an early age, as they were taught from girlhood how to spin fiber into thread and thread into cloth. The weaving of textiles was an important skill for females to learn because the clothing and garments could be sold for a profit. Women could then do their part to earn an income on behalf of the household. More about textile production is in the discussion that follows.

As women were key elements in the running of the home, there is also evidence that women held various respectable positions in the progress of society, as well. Among the roles that women held are priestesses, merchants, healers, and professional weavers. They served in public places outside the home, even though it has previously been discussed that the woman’s place was in the home. Also previously mentioned were the importance of the skills of cooking, growing crops and weaving and garment making, as the women could earn money or trade textiles for goods to sustain their families. A specific outline of some of the many roles held by women appears in Hellbom’s *La Participación Cultural de las Mujeres.* Her analysis of the duties of women in certain positions includes women as priestesses (*sacerdotisas*), merchants (*mercaderes*), artesans (*artesanos*), healers or doctors (*médicas*), and while the descriptions also include women under government positions (*gobernantes*), the information given refers to women as the wives of *gobernantes* or as having the mentality of a *gobernante* with her children and the carrying out of chores within the home.31

*note: This text is written in Spanish, with many Nahua terms inserted to refer to specific roles or occupations. While I will quote in the language of the original text, I will explain the passage in the following explanations to the best of my ability.

Women as *sacerdotisas*, while they did not have all of the responsibilities of the *sacerdotes*, their male counterparts, served religious purposes. “Entre los funcionarios del sexo femenino hay que mencionar primero... la que tenía cargo de procurar todo lo necesario para la fiesta de la diosa Toci, es decir flores y cañas de humo; la que vigilaba en el cu Atenchicalcan a los que barrian y ponían fuego.” This passage discusses the primary functions of women as priestesses are to do everything necessary to celebrate *la diosa Toci*, or the goddess Toci, such as arranging flowers and *cañas de humo*, or incense. Also, to keep watch over the sweeping, that has already been discussed, and *ponían fuego*, which may be translated as lighting of candles or the burning of incense. Susan Kellogg also refers to the goddess Toci, in her article, “Tenochca Mexica Women, 1500-1700.” Toci, the goddess of the earth, had her own temple at Atenchicalan. The higher-status, older priestesses kept watch over the temple and the women who were there to sweep and to tend the fire. Kellogg notes that, according to the Florentine Codex, the *sacerdotisa*, especially at this particular temple, was a position held in very high esteem.

In the section on *mercaderes*, Hellbom’s text refers to some of Sahagun’s works and the pictures contained within the Florentine Codex. “Así, en cuanto a los vendedores de mantas, el texto habla de funcionarios masculinos... que vendían también enaguas y huipiles. Las mantas las compraban de los mercaderes mayores. Las ilustraciones, al contrario, muestran mujeres que venden estos artículos.” The description of women as merchants discusses the contradiction of Sahagun’s documents with the Florentine Codex. She says that, according to the Codex, the sellers of blankets, and specific pieces of clothing, petticoats and dresses, were women, whereas Sahagun notes them as men. She continues, “Hay que notar que la persona que vende los *ayatl* (las mantas) también sabe

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32 Hellbom, p. 129.
34 Hellbom, p. 134.
fabricarlos y domina esa técnica en todas las faces.”

Logically, she says that it is worth noting that the persons who sell the products also are the ones who have mastered the art of making them. Hellbom also briefly discusses the selling of food goods, and that as many women sold them as men and “es probable que si el labrador vendía sus propios productos en el mercado, su mujer le asistiera o trabajase como vendedora.”

She says that it is likely that if the man wants to sell his products at the market, that his woman would help him sell them. Notice that the crop is referred to as the man’s product, although we know that the women and children often helped to harvest the crop. Women may have held even more important positions in the marketplace, as well. They often served as administrators at market, regulating pricing.

Women have already been discussed as artisans, as we have already noted them as tejedoras de labores (weavers), hilanderas (spinsters) and costureras (seamstresses). Hellbom notes that “tanto las señoras como las mujeres de los grupos macehuales sabían tejer, hilar y urdir sin ser profesionales; las señoras tenían a su disposición un gran número de instrumentos y utensilios para sus oficios, y sabían labrar y teñir y decorar con plumas.”

While one does not have to be a professional to weave and spin and sew, these women had at their disposal the materials to work the cloth, to stain it in a variety of colors, and to decorate it with feathers, or possibly other materials. It seems that Indian textile, by reason of the fabulous craftsmanship, were the most beautiful, most adorned and most popular among the Europeans.

As médicas, women had a great many responsibilities, as discussed by Hellbom.

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35 Hellbom, p. 134.
36 Hellbom, p. 134.
37 Kellogg, p. 129.
38 Hellbom, p. 141-142.
La médica azteca... conocía las propiedades de las yerbas, raíces, árboles y piedras, con los cuales sabía curar a los enfermos. Sabía sangrar, purgar, untar el cuerpo del enfermo con medicina, ablandar pal pando alguna parte dura de su cuerpo, concertar huesos quebrados, curar llagas y la gota, además de sanar el mal de los ojos y cortar caranzas de ellos.39

The duties of the women healers included knowing the medicinal values of various herbs, roots, trees and rocks, to know how to bleed, purge and anoint the ill with medicine, to soothe stiffness from the body, set broken bones, to cure wounds and fever, and to treat eye problems. These duties are similar to the duties of present-day nurses.

These differ from men’s roles as médicos in quite a few surprising ways. Male doctors were considered sabios, or wise men. Hellbom's description sounds contradictory from this term though, as it seems that the médicos are described more as warlocks. “Si no conocía bien su oficio, empeoraba a los enfermos con su brebaje, pero trataba de disimular usando ‘hechicerías’.” Translated, the passage says that if the “doctor” did not know his job well, that he would make his patients worse with his potions, but then try to conceal it using other practices.* She continues, “Por otra parte el brupo era considerado como... un sabio, quien por sus conocimientos ayudaba a la gente, sin hacer daño a nadie. Sin embargo, podía ser maléfico, hechizando especialmente a las mujeres, espantando a los hombres de noche y chupando a los niños.”41 One can see the mistrust and evil undertones when the passage is translated: On the other hand, the doctor was considered a wise man, who by his knowledge would help the people without harming anyone#. Nevertheless, he could be evil, especially bewitching to women, scaring men by night, and

39Hellbom, p. 142.
*“practices” is not a literal translation for “hechicerías.” The word comes from the verb hacer, which means to do or to make. The word might be better translated as “doings.”
41Hellbom, p. 142.
#“doctor” is not a literal translation for “brupo.” The word, although I don’t know what it means, is similar to the word “brujo,” which means “witch.”
suckling (or sucking on) the children. It seems, then, that as healers, women may have been the only ones doing any actual healing.

Another important role that women held in the public arena was that of witnesses to hearings and or trials. Many times, women would be asked to serve as witnesses to any business being conducted, especially if it had to do with the buying and selling of land. Such is the case in the documentation of the sale of land from an aged Nahua widow to a Spaniard in 1645. The Indian woman has no children and cannot manage the property alone, so she has chosen to sell. Accompanying her in the proceedings are two other Indian women, while the witnesses for the Spaniard are male. His wife has not even accompanied him. The role of women as witnesses to legal proceedings is evidence that women were held in high regard, in that it was believed that they could be trusted with important, even confidential information. It was also evidence that women were respected by men, at least in some capacity.

In speaking of respect between the genders, some sources discuss the varying views held by men about Indian women. Among sources in Nahua thought, one of the most intriguing is Taggart’s *Nahuat Myth and social Structure*, which has previously been referred to in the discussion of family structure. In talking about feelings between men and women, Taggart mentions the fact that in the Mexican and Indian tradition, the family is a male-dominated institution, which is a fact that no one can dispute. As previously discussed, the society is a man’s domain, therefore all aspects of it are relative to men. Taggart states, “Men frequently have access to the most important strategic resources, they hold a superordinate position in the family, and the depict women in narratives as less competent, more sexually voracious, morally weaker, and a greater threat to the moral order of men.” In analyzing this comment, we must remember that the narratives that

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43 Lockhart, *Nahuas and Spaniards*, p. 97-104.  
44 Taggart, p. 4.  
45 Taggart, p. 4.
Taggart has collected were all relayed by men from two different settlements in Mexico
and do not likely contain any of the woman’s perspective.

Continuing, Taggart forms three interesting hypotheses: The first is that the idea
of male-dominance comes from man’s awareness of his weak position in socioeconomic
class structure. As a result of man’s feelings of inadequacy in society, he chooses to see
women as morally weaker in order to make himself feel superior or more important. The
second hypothesis comes from the same idea that men are trying to compensate for their
weak position, but this time within the family. This hypothesis suggests that the theory of
male-dominance is a myth, and men really depend on women to uphold the family
structure, instead of the reverse. The third hypothesis faces the ideology of the
male-dominant society as being reality. According to this hypothesis, men control women
and the family. While these are merely hypotheses about male-dominance in Nahua
culture, it is not my intent to establish any one of the hypotheses as fact. Essentially, all of
them may be true to some extent, however one cannot dispute the fact that
male-dominance may based on a number of factors, including the personalities of the men
and women involved, the ratio of men to women in the community, the ratio of men to
women in the household, the ages and genders of the children within the family and the
social status of the family. For example, in a family where the father is the only male a
family of strong female personalities, the father may not emerge as the leading figure.
Likewise, in a community where women are the majority, they may be more active in
decision making for the family, as well as for the community.

While we have discussed some of the positions that women were able to hold in
society, they held certain rights in society that became important in their public
relationships with men. One of the rights that is referred to often in discussions of gender

46 Taggart, p. 5.
47 Taggart, p. 5-7.
relations in Nahua culture is the right of women to own and control their own land and to inherit land from family members. Since the ownership of land is and has been important in many cultures, for reasons of citizenship and voting rights and social status, it makes sense that the ownership and control of land be used to assess the importance or social status of women in Nahua society. The right of land inheritance, like most rights in the Nahua culture, was also male-dominant because more men owned land than did women, although women were able to own and inherit land. During the time period nearing the time of the conquest, women held rights of ownership of land as heiresses of land from deceased father and husbands; however, it was not always easy for women to obtain the land that they had inherited. It was common, according to Susan Kellogg, for the oldest brother or other male relative to seize the land and hold it as a family resource.\textsuperscript{48} Kellogg goes on to mention that women were often seen as independent of their male partners or spouses, based on their rights to own property and their contributions of labor, both in and out of the home. Women were especially noted as independent if they did own property separate from their husbands and were economically stable.

The value placed on ownership of land to individuals can be related through a Nahua text from the year 1583, which records, in near story form, the land acquisition of woman by the name of Ana and her family. While the text, called “And Ana Wept,” is mainly about the acquisition of land, the instance can be used to note many key points in the role of women such as Ana, both in the society of the time and in her own family.

The text begins with Ana asking her older brother if she, her husband and their young son may stay with them for a few days until they have been given a grant of land on which they may build a house. Ana’s brother, a town councilman, invites the town elders into his house, where Ana cooks a meal for them. Then she, herself, asks the elders if they

\textsuperscript{48}Kellogg, p. 127.
may be given a plot of land on which to build a house. They agreed and Ana and her family wept with joy at acquisition of their new land.49

First, notice that Ana approached her older brother, asking that her family be allowed to stay with his for a short time. When she addresses him, she refers to him as “my dear older brother,”50 and when he agrees to house them, she responds with thanks and says, “I will never act badly in your house, but behave respectfully, and as to my husband Juan here, if he should ever lose respect... I leave it in your hands...”51 The amount of respect that Ana has for her older brother is evident in the manner in which she addresses him, and because he is older than she, and he holds a position of respect in the community. Also, it is important to realize that Ana addresses the situation, not her husband. Similarly, it is Ana who addresses the elders to ask them for a plot of land, not her husband. Perhaps since her brother had arranged the meeting, Ana felt it necessary that she do the asking, but in the male-dominant society, it would be logical that the man should address the elders. It may also refer to the idea presented earlier that women were more often witness to legal dealings, so they chose that she should handle the situation.

Another important point illustrated by the text is the order in which events took place at the meeting. Ana had prepared a meal for the elders and her older brother. When they arrived, Ana served them and left them alone to eat. She did not linger in their presence when they arrived, but offered them food and drink, returning later to discuss business. Ana did not come in to make her request until the elders had finished their meal. Immediately following the meal, the family and the elders agreed on the land grant and they went out to the site together to measure off the plot.

49Lockhart, Nahuas and Spaniards, p. 66-74.
50Lockhart, Nahuas and Spaniards, p. 70.
51Lockhart, Nahuas and Spaniards, p. 71.
Conclusions:

As I have completed my studies of the Nahua people, I have gained an understanding of the structures that governed society before and during the Spanish conquest. It was interesting to see how Spanish domination spread throughout the Nahua culture, beginning with the physical movement of the Spaniards, but simultaneously spreading changes in governmental structure and language. The research about language was particularly interesting.

In terms of the relationships between women and men in Nahua society, I believe that women were the backbone of the family and household unit, while men actually played a smaller role. In studying the material contained within this thesis, I understand that the roles that women held in society were supported by the family and community. I have realized that in many cultures, women are given “inaccurate publicity.” That is not to say that females are not given the credit that they deserve for being a strong part of the culture, although sometimes they are not given any credit. What I mean by “inaccurate publicity” is to say that many times, women are praised for upholding society and for doing things to benefit their society, but people, don’t know that women were held in high regard for their labors until they study the research and the historical information. I have come to this conclusion because I expected, upon beginning my research, to find that women were discriminated against, and regarded as inferior in both pre-conquest and post-conquest Mexico and that they were forced to remain at home raising the children and cleaning the house. What I found was that women held positions in the community, women did have a certain amount of power in a traditionally male-dominated society, and women were given credit in research for upholding their Indian culture. While there was information that held that women were treated badly, in that there were cases of discrimination, and other ills against women, overall, they were held with a certain amount of respect by the rest of their Nahua settlement. Had I not chosen to study the role of Nahua women in Mexico during the time period of the conquest, I would not have
realized that my previous notions about history, but at the same time based on history, were wrong.
Works Consulted


