MY PROJECT BEGAN with an interest in native corporate adjustments to Christian evangelization. It has been seen repeatedly in historical investigation that many basic insights can be gained about almost any topic by investigating it in records at the most local level attainable, with the least mediated information. Much the same has proved true, in a somewhat different medium, in the branch of scholarship to which I was previously dedicated, archaeology. It was thus natural that I should turn not to bishops’ reports but to parish records. I was initially seeking primarily confraternal records, because of their obvious corporate nature, and because we still know little about the actual functioning of cofradías (lay religious fellowships, sodalities) in the centuries immediately following the Spanish conquest. In the end, my interest extended to other types of archival documents as well.

In 1997 I visited over fifty parishes in widely spread areas of central Mexico, looking primarily for confraternal records. At this time I had in mind a comparative approach embracing many locations simultaneously. I also envisioned investigating a wide variety of topics including local geography, the comparison of indigenous populations, and even religious architecture, not yet realizing on the one hand the magnitude of the documentation involved and on the other its severely restricted nature. Several communities, each boasting a unique heritage, appealed to me or had impressive holdings, but problems soon emerged. I planned at one point to work with two architectural historians on a particular settlement, only to learn that the town had torched most of its parish archive in a 1900 fireworks extravaganza. In other towns under my consideration, access to what was considered an exclusive cultural patrimony was strongly contested. In my quest I requested access to many parish archives and was regularly denied. As a young woman traveling alone, I soon learned that some “gate-keepers” were more interested in securing my entrance fee or in highly personal favors.

Concluding that working alone with a single collection was the most viable option, I turned my attention to Tecamachalco, in central-eastern Puebla, which appeared to be suitably remote from the Spanish cities where cofradías had mainly been studied and a good location to examine indigenous reactions. The area was first indoctrinated by the Franciscans within the framework of the diocese of Tlaxcala, later Puebla, and the people are reputed to have been Popolucas.

I arrived in Tecamachalco by bus, one of many such trips. Making my way across the Puebla-Veracruz highway and up the gridiron streets that led to a gray belltower, I soon reached the mammoth formerly Franciscan church. Its beauty was undeniable, despite the plain facade and poor state of preservation. I inquired with the elderly female sacristan, who had been sweeping, about books and priests in the town, and was directed to the newer parish church, a few blocks over. I would soon be spending more than a year within this seventeenth-century struc-
ture, supplementing my ethnohistorical research with masses, processions, fiestas, teaching English to the young vicar and children, even becoming a *comadre*.

As could be expected, I gained access to the parish archive and personnel only several visits later. Arriving anew in Tecamachalco in 1999, I was granted an audience with the head priest, a portly man who was quick both to admonish and to smile. Unimpressed by my presence, he took me to the archive, located in the Casa Parroquial, the priestly residence behind the parish church. After opening the lock to the naturally cool and largely empty room, Padre showed me three bookcases and a series of dusty cardboard boxes. Much of the material was recent, but some care had been invested in the older books. Although still un-studied, they had been reorganized and inventoried a decade earlier by a team of historians from UAM (Autonomous University of Mexico) in neighboring Tepeaca.

Padre pledged reasonable access in exchange for my satisfaction of two conditions, a letter and adequate supervision. I soon learned that my “piety,” expressed as regular attendance at masses and generally exemplary behavior be-fitting a *joven* (young person), was the unspoken third. He requested a letter explaining my intentions, but thankfully no official documentation. We were just leaving the archive when he stated that I would need to pay someone (he did not know who) to monitor me. In a futile attempt to mask my irritation and sway his opinion, I inquired whether anyone could have greater investment in the preservation of the collection than I did. Insisting, he cited past thefts and illicit photocopying: “It’s not about not trusting you . . . we have to protect ourselves . . . surely you understand.” I did not, but when I asked about working where his staff could oversee my comings and goings, he was thrilled. We had reached a compromise. Relieved, I waited to be placed in one of the ceremonial precinct’s underutilized rooms. Instead, I was imposed upon two sisters who ran the already cramped and over-extended parish office.

From this point on, I obliged them to navigate through the church’s construction rubble with me in order to borrow books from the archive. Initially, my presence must have been intrusive and distracting. Townspeople flocked daily to the office to deal with their sacred and everyday business. Children were particularly fascinated by the books and my laptop; they would touch its mouse, teaching me to save my work and take breaks. A common question, from children and adults alike, concerned whether I actually understood the books’ contents. My answer was always the same: “Of course I do, and so will you. Look . . .” I spent three months with the confraternal records at that time. Returning for ten months in 2000–2001 to work with seventeenth-century baptismal records, I was promoted to a larger space behind the secretaries.

Archaeology values the context of an artifact and its relation to the entire assemblage, and the same principle holds in historical research. Although the partial sacramental records of many communities are now available through a microfilm repository in Salt Lake City, it can be preferable to examine the originals on site. In my experience, working in a parish archive and living in a parish greatly illuminate the purpose and utility of ecclesiastical records. I became a witness to the many contemporary proceedings documented in parish archives. In
time, I was invited to events and given small tokens, thanks to the *bola* custom required of *padrinos* (ritual sponsors). I also attended patron festival meetings and observed processions, weddings, baptisms, funerals, as well as requests for the priest to bless ill or dying people, animals, cars, houses, businesses, crosses, pledges of abstention, saints’ images and their clothes.

Although I was entertained and enlightened by the weekly matrimonial examinations, I often felt sympathy for the couples, parents, padrinos and witnesses undergoing interrogation. An unrelenting series of inquiries was directed at the bride and groom’s identity, origin, and romantic history (many already had children together). Arranging, financing, and recording baptismal ceremonies were similarly daunting. Parents and padrinos were required to produce paperwork, complete a course, and extend generosity and humility to the priest, sacristan, and other church personnel.

The situations with archaeological and historical investigation are not identical, of course. With history a gap of years, in the present case centuries, separates observed local practices from the documents produced in the same place. Much of what I saw may well have persisted little changed from the seventeenth century; much of it must be new or greatly transformed. It is not always easy or even possible to say which is which. Experiences such as mine at a minimum bring home the lesson that the documents were produced within a broader human setting which must not be forgotten.

The present condition of the parish archive of Tecamachalco is generally favorable. Intact books are organized in a rough chronological scheme, in series, and alternatively grouped in protective boxes (*asociaciones* [confraternal records]; *padrones* [lists of people]) or tied together in bundles (sacramental records). The collection is relatively large, varied, well preserved and contiguous. It is, of course, incomplete.

Secular clergy replaced Franciscans in the Tecamachalco jurisdiction in the mid-seventeenth century, resulting in relocation of the ceremonial focus of the community from the Franciscan establishment to the new parish church. The Franciscan period is not well represented. The earliest records date to 1575, documenting the founding of the Spanish-dominated Archicofradía de la Santa Vera Cruz, the first cofradía in town. The date seems rather late, but work with local records is showing that cofradías are generally a somewhat later phenomenon than once thought. The earliest sacramental records, pertaining to baptism, confirmation, matrimony and matrimonial information, and extreme unction, date to 1641 and were generated by secular priests. The earliest pronouncements and correspondence from high-level ecclesiastical officials are even later, dating to the latter half of the eighteenth century.

If one’s primary interest is indigenous people, either in themselves or in their relation with others, one naturally hopes to find records in a given collection that are in indigenous languages. Ethnohistorical scholarship in recent decades has abundantly shown the advantages of indigenous-language sources, produced by the people of interest in their own language and revealing their own conceptual vocabulary. Some central Mexican parish archives have proved to contain a substantial Nahuatl documentation, including the sacramental series. Although
Tecamachalco was within the general area of dominance of the Nahuatl language, not a great amount of Nahuatl is found among the parish records that have been preserved. This state of things might have something to do with the local people having originally mainly spoken Popoluca (which lacked an alphabetic writing tradition), or more likely with the strength or weakness of the local tradition of alphabetic literacy and the size of the corps of writers, for it is hard to imagine that at least the upper group of indigenous society was not competent in spoken Nahuatl in the postconquest centuries.

The sacramental series are entirely in Spanish in the Tecamachalco collection, usually written by the priests themselves. Since the records were intended primarily for the purposes of a Spanish-led parish and diocese in addition to being prepared by clerics, the use of Spanish was most natural; yet in some parishes many of these records are in Nahuatl, especially into the early seventeenth century. The small portion of the Tecamachalco collection that is in Nahuatl tends to have to do with cofradías. Out of ten confraternal constitutions that have been preserved, four are in Nahuatl, along with the statements of foundation that preceded them. These cases include the second and third cofradías commissioned locally, in the wake of the first archicofradía, so clearly intended for Spaniards. A century later, another two constitutions use Nahuatl, part of an apparent general increase in ethnic and barrio solidarity that led me to focus on that period in my research. In addition, the two late seventeenth-century cofradías with constitutions in Nahuatl also maintained extensive membership lists in Nahuatl. In most of the confraternal records, regardless of the time period, receipts for services rendered by the maestro de capilla (choirmaster) for confraternal gatherings or events are written in Nahuatl.

While I was grateful for whatever Nahuatl materials fate accorded me, and was inclined to take full advantage of them, it was soon clear that they were not sufficient for a larger approach to the corporate evolution of the indigenous community. The simple fact is that the holdings of the Tecamachalco parish archive in the stretch of time of my interest are above all sacramental records written in Spanish. When on my second research trip I consulted all of the baptismal records falling between 1641 and 1740, my data collection produced 23,706 separate cases. My duty was clearly to assess the nature of this bounty and use it in an appropriate fashion to produce knowledge about indigenous people.

The situation, then, is that the documentation available (referring now primarily to the sacramental series) is massive, dealing with a vast assortment of individuals over a long period of time in a continuous fashion, and it is, if not literally complete, so nearly so that trends detected in it could hardly fail to be valid for the whole community. If we compare the characteristics of such a set of documents with the premier asset in indigenous-language documentation, wills, we will find some things in common, some aspects in which the wills are much richer and more direct, and some large advantages of the sacramental documentation which it would be counterproductive not to exploit.

Sacramental documents share with indigenous-language testaments the vital characteristic of being prepared locally and contemporaneously, mentioning actual individuals who are either present or close at hand. Neither type has the
nature of being directed to an outside official or audience, nor do they synthesize and generalize a large number of cases, nor do they make recommendations, in all of which attributes they are precisely the kind of original raw material that is indispensable in social and cultural research.

Of the two, sacramental documents are far, far more skeletal and formulaic, providing information on only a certain number of topics predetermined by the genre. Wills too are full of formula, but they also allow for the spontaneous flow of ideas and words across a broad range of topics. Sacramental documents were prepared under direct Spanish supervision, whereas a priest would see a testament only later if at all. When the sacramental documents are in Spanish as in the present case, the whole world of indigenous conceptual terminology for relationships, practices, and objects is lost. Close study of a set of testaments from a given locality and time can go far toward a reconstruction of the local indigenous society and economy. But though testaments are quite common and ever more are being found, it would be amazing to locate more than two or three hundred for a community of the type of Tecamachalco, and they would be scattered across time, a mere remnant of those once written. Even if all extant Nahuatl wills are ever discovered and studied, it is highly unlikely that there will be 23,000 of them.

Thus what seems to be called for with such a collection as that of Tecamachalco is a type of research that will be more limited in thematic scope but can cover far more cases more systematically and pinpoint stages of evolution with more chronological precision, so that work of the two types can be mutually complementary.

Spanish baptismal records cannot give us the contemporary indigenous kin terms, nor are they written from an indigenous point of view in any sense, but there is much left that they can do. Names crossed the language barrier virtually intact; we can make studies of the distribution of names by gender, ethnicity, and to an extent by social status, and we can extend them over many years. The records give relationships precisely even if in Spanish vocabulary, and we can follow many kinds of human connections perfectly even when we are not apprised of the exact indigenous way of conceiving of such relationships.

The skeletal nature of the records makes it highly desirable that they should be used in conjunction with records of other kinds, capable of capturing additional congruent dimensions. From the beginning I was aware of the desirability of thickening the archival web. But again, one is in the hands of fate. Most of the papers relating to Tecamachalco that I found in the AGN dealt with the late sixteenth century, well before my series begin. Local testaments of indigenous people in any language would have been a godsend, but so far none have been located. The high-level ecclesiastical correspondence which I mentioned before not only originates outside the community and often does not even deal with it specifically, but is from a later time than the documents I collected. And in any case, when dealing with a collection of this magnitude, the researcher has enough to do with the materials already at hand.

Documents in series like the baptismal records deal in the first instance with an individual case, but since they are relatively skeletal and without context, the natural thing for scholars to do, and what they mainly have done, is to treat the
material quantitatively, so that it yields primarily macro-information, about the

group or corporation. I too am working within a quantitative framework, but I put

much emphasis on the recognition, retention, and analysis of the categories

contained in the original, which are as important as the numbers produced. All

differentiation of names and titles, all group affiliations, and all relationships

given in the originals are recorded and compiled, and changes in categories are

given a significance equal to changes in numbers. I am also careful not to let the

individual case disappear into anonymous quantities. So much information of a
certain type is given about an individual’s status and connections in baptismal and
other sacramental records that it can approximate a biography, and when connec-
tions between individuals in various records are recognized, whole families

and cliques can emerge. Thus the often mentioned contrast between quantitative

and “qualitative” (most often meaning analytical) is hardly relevant here. Here as

in work with wills and litigation, an actual human individual is kept in sight.

The confraternal records in the Tecamachalco parish archive are quite a
different matter. Like the sacramental records, they were produced locally and are
strictly contemporaneous. Except for some membership lists, however, they are
not in series concerning individuals. Rather they are institutional in nature, and
like other such documents they tend to be restricted to certain standard operations
of the institution, described in formulaic terms. From them, treating them as a
whole, we can gain information about the officers and members of cofradías, what
constituencies the organizations served, when they arose and expired, to what
extent they were independent and to what extent supervised by the clergy, and in
general how well they correspond to the picture that scholarship has built up
about cofradías.

Having noted some of the defining characteristics of the two main genres of
documents in the Tecamachalco archives, let us now examine each of them in
more detail.

**Baptismal records**

In Mexico a baptismal certificate, safeguarded by the family or reproduced by the
parish, is and long has been the basic form of personal identification. Hence the
parish is invested in defending its archive, not only against outsiders like me, but
against community members who may be tempted to alter their own or someone
else’s sacramental history. At Tecamachalco the baptismal collection, initiated in
1640, is maintained to the present day. The records are complete and contiguous,
but there have been some adjustments.

Actually, the baptismal records are but one of several parallel sets. Each
sacrament was assigned its own chronologically ordered series of books, and each
person who received that sacrament represented an individual entry or case. A
priest wrote the description from his point of view and signed his name. The
existence of separate sets for baptism, confirmation, matrimony, matrimonial
information, and extreme unction holds out the possibility of tracing the life cycle
of a given individual, although identification is made difficult because of the
number of cases and the small repertory of names used.

Distinct sacraments were memorialized differently, producing variation in the
information recorded. Confirmation and extreme unction cases did not generate the same quantity and quality of data as baptisms, and much of what there is is duplicated elsewhere. An individual matrimonial record from Tecamachalco occupies a full page, mostly because the scribe employed a more elaborate formula and a larger hand. Little meaningful information beyond what is available in baptismal records is provided, however. Matrimonial cases are naturally less numerous than baptisms. In the end, I worked with the most complete and informative set, the baptismal records.

The standard formula of baptismal registration adopted throughout the Spanish American territories from the beginning persists even into the modern period in Tecamachalco. Although some words are obscured by the ravages of time, the formulaic nature of the texts allows substantial reconstruction. Between five and fifteen cases are found on a single page. They are presented in chronological order, sometimes with omissions and modifications. Priests, and not scribes, completed and signed the records of the baptisms at which they officiated. This leaves the reader with various hands and degrees of detail to decipher and juxtapose, but over time, the writing styles and phraseology become familiar.

In the left margin, the child’s name is written beside the entry. If an orphan (huérfano/a) or twin (mellizo/a or coate/a), this attribute is usually listed under the name. The names given are Spanish Christian, corresponding to saints’ days in the Christian calendar. The ideal was to baptize a baby a week after birth. In many cases, the exact age of the baby in days is also written under his or her name. The patron saint for the birth or baptismal day would suffice, but parents also passed on family names and often memorialized their compadres. A few individuals adopting Christian names at baptism were adult, most often slaves from Africa being sponsored by their owners. The multitude of authentic names not only of the persons baptized but of their parents and sponsors of course represents a vast resource for understanding the structure and evolution of society and kinship.

Entries take the form of a single sentence of brief narration. They begin with an identification of the date and the town; at times they mention a particular barrio or church, but since this detail is uncommon, it cannot be used in straightforward quantitative analysis. The name of the individual receiving the sacrament is mentioned, followed by any information about that person that the priest deems relevant. This may include the child’s birth status (hijo legítimo, hijo de la iglesia, huérfano, niño expósito, mellizo/coate) and ethnic classification (español, indio, negro, castizo, mestizo, mulato, lobo, pardo).

The names of the parents are noted next, with the father generally listed first. In many cases, one (usually the father) or both parents are listed as unknown (padre(s) no conocido(s)). The mother may then be listed as a widow (viuda) or single (madre soltera), even if she was known to have a long-time partner. The ethnic classification of both parents may be inferred if not made explicit, simply because a record is written in the book of indios or of gente de razón. Perhaps half of the entries reveal something about the residence of the parents, in a barrio or hacienda, and their social status or occupational history. The most commonly used markers are the general status indicators don/doña and señor/señora, as well as gobernador/a, capitán, cacique (indigenous leader or prominent person),
principal (indigenous noble or prominent person), labrador (agriculturalist), mayordomo (steward), gañan/a (permanent laborer), sacristán, esclavo/a (slave) or libre (free person).

The padrinos, the godparents, are mentioned last in baptismal entries, but in most cases they are described as carefully as, or even more carefully than, the child’s parents. Information on their ethnicity, social status, and residence is often available. However, we seldom know whether the priest intended to attribute these descriptions to one or to both of the sponsors. If the padrinos are a male and a female, the name of the padrino is generally given before that of the madrina. A notable exception is when all are related and the madrina is older, whether she is the mother, aunt, or older sister of the padrino. Twins were sometimes granted two sets of padrinos, and on occasion, two women served as madrinas for one baby girl.

Any mention of the relationship between the two padrinos, such as neighbors, siblings, or spouses, is useful to my research. Linking parents to their compadres is something for which baptismal records are especially well suited. Presented with a set of characteristics of both the parents and padrinos, by analyzing each case in detail and comparing many cases, we can explore how these two groups may have come to know one another and agree to enter into the commitment. I have found that baptismal records used in this way go beyond simply facilitating number crunching to illuminate how factors shaping the negotiation of social boundaries were constituted and may have differed over time and for distinct ethnic groups. Baptismal records are thus a prime source for investigating the criteria for the formation of compadrazgo ties; they do not, however, tell us much about the actual content of the relationship.

In the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, baptismal records grouped indios separately from gente de razón—Spaniards, people of African descent, and people of mixed descent, in other words, everyone not classified as an Indian. Priests recording baptismal cases had to rely on the statements of those in attendance and on their own judgment when designating ethnic identity. It is clear that one’s category was not invariably unequivocal or unchanging. For example, the same individual could inspire the diverse appellations of negro, mulato, and lobo in separate entries in the course of his life. In the last quarter of the seventeenth century, casta children undergoing baptism were listed in their own book for the first and only time in the community’s history.

Baptismal records also reveal a great deal about the treatment of illegitimacy. Hijos de la iglesia (wards of the church), niños expósitos, left at the doorsteps of affluent neighbors, churches, or perhaps even the estranged fathers, and other huérfanos (orphans) were indiscriminately included in the earlier records. At times, it appears that they were momentarily overlooked, for we find them squeezed together at the bottom of a page to which they do not correspond chronologically. While many of these children lost their parents to diseases or accidents, it is unlikely that priests, family, and community members were telling the whole truth when they stated that the child’s parents were unknown—padres no conocidos. The standard procedure for babies being presented by relatives or neighbors seemed to be to state little about the parents’ identity and wait to see if
someone would reclaim the child, which did happen on occasion.

Illegitimate birth was by no means associated only those labeled as indios and mestizos. Baptismal records from both early and late colonial Mexico attest to the fact that Spanish men and women often engaged in relationships that were not recognized by the church. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the condition of one’s birth came to outweigh ethnic or social category. A new categorization of hijos legítimos and ilegítimos now placed records in two series. For a child to be of legitimate birth, the parents needed to be married by the church at the time of his or her birth. This distinction too, however, was eventually replaced. For the last few generations, all baptismal cases can be found in the same series of books. Many modern-day Mexicans are unpleasantly surprised when they are told of the former classification schemes.

Confraternal records
Confraternal records account for only a small portion of Tecamachalco’s parish archive, yet they constitute a relatively large and contiguous collection, consisting of 40 books filed under Asociaciones. At first the priest in charge denied the existence of colonial and contemporary cofradías because he did not recognize the term. Grupo and asociación are used today, and the latter term marks the four boxes of confraternal records.

The collection documents 14 organizations that operated between 1575 and 1823. Only about half of the cofradías maintained continuous records. With the later material, recordkeeping becomes somewhat sporadic. Many cofradías were dissolved by bishops’ orders in the early nineteenth century, even if initiated only in the previous generation. Some groups had already disbanded, while others ignored the orders altogether.

Only three major organizations were founded in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. The first was a self-proclaimed archicofradía of Spaniards that limited the privileges of indios. The second and third, which produced constitutions in Nahuatl, may represent indigenous people’s initial response. Another four cofradías from the latter seventeenth century can be designated as minor, mixed-ethnicity and barrio-oriented. At this time, we find another two constitutions and membership lists in Nahuatl, as well as the formation of the only organization for castas (specified here as “mestizos, mulatos y negros”). The final five, from the second quarter of the eighteenth century, reveal the rise of female hermandades, continued ethnic differentiation, and leadership monopolies.

Information in confraternal records is grouped under a few major documentary types not exclusive to Tecamachalco. Some acts of foundation of particular cofradías exist, though they are never explicitly heralded as such. Despite being written with great care and a large script, they are very short; they end with the date of foundation and signatures of the scribe, bishop, and the founding members, who were often illiterate and signed with a cross. Through size of letters and placement on the page the settlement, parish or barrio, and the cofradía generally receive the greatest attention, for cofradías were primarily corporate entities, but the organization is announced as dedicated to one of the standard objects of cofradía devotion, the cult of Jesus, Mary, particular saints, or the
Eucharist. These statements in their brevity often leave some very basic matters unclear. For example, in the act of foundation the scribe of one organization emphasizes that it is a cofradía de españoles, but the following constitution states that native peoples could join, although with limited dues and benefits. Founding members are sometimes described as naturales of Tecamachalco or of a barrio, which one is inclined to interpret as indigenous people, but in a multiethnic setting it might mean anyone born there. Founding statements are most useful when looked at subtly as attempts to express an ideal history and identity and seen in conjunction with the books in their entirety.

Following the act of foundation, we find a list of ordinances written down around the same time, seldom arranged in any clear order of importance or topic. These constitutions in Nahuatl and Spanish are quite formulaic, with many commonplaces found again and again. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that constitutions are carbon copies of one another. Some represent nearly exhaustive attempts at outlining the cofradía’s intended workings. Others are abbreviated, apparent afterthoughts or half-hearted fulfillsments of a requirement that the scribe and/or cofrades considered to be meaningless. In any case, comparisons of such documents not only within Tecamachalco but across time and space more broadly should help us understand the extent to which regulations were imposed or drawn from a common source as opposed to forged with local conditions in mind.

Membership qualifications and dues, given in reales (tomines), are detailed early on. They are distinct for those of different ethnic and social categories, in which Spanish and Indian, rich and poor, single and married, widowed or orphaned are contrasted. The benefits that a cofrade was led to expect were support in times of poor health or finances, prayer for one’s soul, masses for oneself and loved ones, a Christian funeral and burial, and settling of one’s accounts through a will, all thought to guarantee an individual’s passage into paradise. More concretely, the associated fees ensured the future operation of the cofradía. Failure to attend the bimonthly masses meant expulsions unless some wax candles were donated to the major domo or the priest. Members were also encouraged to visit the sick, whether at home or in their hospital, and care for widows and orphans, particularly by collecting and giving alms.

Participation in churchyard, barrio, community-wide, or other saint’s day processions was emphasized in the ordinances, along with the ritual garb and insignia to be used. Processions were choreographed in order to minimize contact and role reversal between the sexes and ethnic groups. Indeed, in my investigation of Tecamachalco’s confraternal constitutions, gender and ethnic management within processions, elections and membership surfaced as a promising area of research.

These constitutions articulate an ideal. Procedures are stated for electing officials, maintaining inventories, and balancing accounts. Constitutions often admonish new officials to humbly resolve conflict within the confines of the

---

1Cofradía constitutions receive attention in Lockhart 1992; Schwaller 1989; Sell 2002; Sullivan n.d.
cofradía and especially its cabildo. In order to analyze the interpersonal dynamics and limitations of cofradías, it is necessary to find some documentation of actual practices as well, comparing the ideal with actual practices, but that sort of resource is quite scarce.

Amended constitutions attest to the evolving concerns of confraternal leadership and increasingly multiethnic communities. In 1605, Tecamachalco’s Spanish-dominated archicofradía replaced its 35 ordinances of 1590 with 40 new ones. The chief innovation was the native cofrades’ differential position: exclusion from office, voting, bearing insignias and dominating processions. The revisions were the impetus for further change, as I learned by consulting the archive’s collection of edicts. Some members may have left to form their own organization, despite the intervention of the vicario.

In theory, every cofradía maintained at least three books. The constitution and membership lists were placed in a book separate from election results, while a third book was reserved for inventories and accounts. In practice, membership lists are interspersed throughout and rarely grouped by any ethnic, gender, geographical, or even temporal principle. Wherever placed, they reveal the name, sex, residential location, and date of one’s entrance into the cofradía. The newcomer’s age, ethnic and social classification, and relationship to others are also recorded with enough regularity to allow for analysis of the membership over time and among organizations in terms of percentages in certain categories. One must, however, do much extrapolation because of the incompleteness of the lists. Widows and married women joined cofradías more frequently than their male counterparts, but entire families were also common. The wealthy and influential often belonged to various organizations, even if the patron church was distant and one could not attend the yearly round of activities.

Annual elections were supposed to be held following the cofradía’s patron day procession. Election records, signed by the scribe and the supervising priest, are found here and there, separated by contemporaneous accounts and receipts, as well as occasional inventories and autos de vista from the bishop or his emissary. Some give the names, desired position, and even number of votes of the candidates, but most only identify the victors. Few could run for office. All women and single men were summarily excluded, but more subtle distinctions seem to have come into play, such as one’s ethnic and social status, wealth, generosity, and ability to network. In Tecamachalco, ethnicity is mentioned consistently only after the mid-eighteenth century, after which we can contrast electoral data with ethnic ideals projected in founding statements and constitutions.

Cofradía officers (a set was called a cabildo, not to be confused with the same name designating the members of the municipal government of an entire altepetl) usually consisted of a single mayordomo and a pair of deputies (diputados). The mayordomo’s duties were supposed to include overseeing the treasury, ritual paraphernalia and solares (lots of land), resolving disputes, as well as supplying alms to widows and orphans and visiting the sick. He was accompanied and assisted by the diputados, who could also be removed from office should they falter in their duties. Following individuals in the records allows us to establish that leadership monopolies were common, particularly in later periods, with some
individuals serving over two decades. Due to a growing population and small repertory of names, we often cannot determine whether some officials represented family dynasties or were associated with a specific social or ethnic category.

Female organizations were identified in their records as hermandades rather than cofradías. Women became mayordomas and diputadas with such statements as “with the blessing of her husband she accepted the office.” Their husbands often led other cofradías; to what extent they served on the municipal cabildo remains to be seen. We do not know if women took on the same duties as their male counterparts because female hermandades, which appear in Tecamachalco in the early eighteenth century, were sporadic recordkeepers. In a few mixed-ethnicity cofradías, two sets of officers operated, with Spaniards and Indians officiating simultaneously and somewhat independently; the system is sparsely recorded, however.

Lastly, financial information was considered vital to the success of cofradías. Throughout confraternal records, receipts written and signed by priests and native maestros de capilla detail the level of their personal involvement with cofradías. Priests were paid generously in funds and meals for bimonthly masses celebrated on behalf of the cofrades. A high mass (misα cantada) was indicated by a few lines in Nahuatl from the maestro. Other financial proceedings entail the planning and construction of chapels, the (mis)management of solares and the production of insignias. The latter two activities attest to the ambiguous position of native people, who were frequently entrusted with substantial projects, then blamed for oversights in recordkeeping and bad fortune in general.

Itemized balances were presented under the column headings of cargo and descargo (earnings and expenditures). The mayordomo/a signed the annual results, expending greater care than with the membership lists, as he or she was ultimately responsible for the balance. Many scribes, however, appear not to have comprehended the procedure fully, as the headings’ contents are often reversed. Most earnings were from collecting alms and renting lots and chapels. Traditional payments were for masses, wax candles, and new acquisitions aimed at the maintenance of the cofradía’s cult.

Inventarios were rarely executed in Tecamachalco, but a few examples can help us to contrast the economic power of organizations in relation to one another and over time. Financially viable cofradías purchased saints’ images, clothing, and crowns, cloth, precious vessels for oil and transporting the Eucharist, and processional costumes, insignias, and banners. Less ambitious organizations had few items, occasionally borrowed from local churches or other cofradías, and even sold items, particularly as they entered the nineteenth century.

The confraternal records from Tecamachalco end between the 1790s and 1820s. At times, the scribe recorded the bishop’s orders to close the cofradía, which were not always followed in a timely fashion. The edict is noticeably absent from other books, but recordkeeping had become too erratic to help explain the reasons behind this variation.

**Conclusion**

Many of my colleagues in both anthropology and history were surprised to learn
that, out of an interest in power and interethnic relations, I selected a parish archive for the focus of my dissertation research. Today, further consultation of parish and other notarial documents arouses little excitement because much has already been accomplished.

Some new trends, however, are shaping work with ecclesiastical records, including the discovery and publication of native-language texts, correlation with other documentary genres, as well as greater reliance on qualitative analyses and interdisciplinary interpretive frameworks. I found that my ethnographic training led me to invest in the community as well as the archive of Tecamachalco, which in turn greatly informed my ethnohistorical project. Observing modern-day practices documented in the archive helped me to refine and even formulate some of the research questions that I applied to confraternal and baptismal records.

Confraternal records from Tecamachalco provide us with a view into 250 years of the lives of many of its inhabitants. Composed of lists of rules, names of members and leaders, dates of masses and processions, payments, expenses, and possessions, they are so much more when approached as a whole. Confraternal constitutions in Spanish and Nahuatl are particularly promising when contrasted with the practices described in the less official portions of the records. When I first consulted Tecamachalco’s parish archive, I anticipated finding a substantial body of material in Nahuatl. My disappointment in finding relatively little was short-lived, however, and I have since learned the benefits of employing both Spanish and Nahuatl sources. The comparison of multiple Spanish and Nahuatl versions of the same or a similar text, particularly in cases of literature and confraternal constitutions, holds out perhaps the greatest potential in studies of native corporate adjustments to and appropriations of Christianity.

Confraternal records also allow us to identify the proponents of certain cultural ideals and evaluate their assumptions and degrees of success. Confraternal members and leaders were socially integrated into a system that operated on both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic processes. Native, Spanish, African and mixed men and women from several barrios and towns formed their own organizations, choosing with whom they would share their fellowship, membership, and leadership. Hence cofradías are opportune arenas in which to study the issue of human agency, particularly within the scope of their rise and fall, church politics, social mobility, interethnic and gender relations, and community development or cultural geography.

The ubiquitous and formulaic nature of baptismal records is well suited to quantitative analysis. Faced with an overwhelming number of cases, a given scholar’s research at a given time may sample only a portion of a collection. For example, although I inputted all of the baptismal cases recorded between 1641 and 1740, I found that I could make best progress by focusing initially on the actions of people from specific ethnic groups, neighborhoods or towns, and time periods.

In the course of one’s research preparation and data exploration, certain topics surface more or less naturally. In terms of gender roles, baptismal records allow us to explore the position and prospects of men and women as children of legitimate or illegitimate birth, fathers and mothers, whether married, widowed or
single, and as padrinos and madrinas. These records can also be used in examinations of the factors behind the dynamics of baptismal compadrazgo choice. For example, an individual’s family, ethnicity, place of residence, social status, and occupation would all have contributed to his or her attractiveness as a potential sponsor, at least as perceived by the child’s parents.

My approach has been to explore the extent to which I can interpret these diverse alliances as expressions of social mobility, selective solidarity, or something else altogether. I also adopted and adapted what I learned from my work with Tecamachalco’s confraternal records and applied it to baptismal records in an attempt to put them to the best use within the context of my research interests.

Based on my largely positive experience, I urge those who are actively seeking a new source to give localized parish archives another look. Approached with some methodological sophistication, they facilitate a wide range of projects that are bounded only by the scholar’s imagination and access to a well preserved collection. I believe that much can still be accomplished with these types of collections. Tecamachalco has provided me with enough material to analyze, interpret and publish for the next decade or more!

Bibliography


