Spanish Sources for Nahua Corporate Religious Practice, Post-1760s

Edward W. Osowski*

One afternoon in the spring of 1999, while reading documents on eighteenth-century Corpus Christi processions in the Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de México as part of my doctoral research, I decided to take a break. As I walked toward the Zócalo, blocked streets and a throng of thousands confronted me in front of the Cathedral. I was puzzled. Was it another pro-Zapatista encampment or a rally of Evangelical Christians? Then I saw the priest in white, with monstrance raised, standing in the back of a truck that was slowly circling the square as a large crowd of people on foot followed the Communion Host. It was the procession of the feast day of Corpus Christi. Immersed in my own internal research dialogue, I had lost track of what day it was. I had completely missed the reality of the situation, even though what I was observing related directly to the past that I had just been reading about in old papers of the archive.

Historical research takes place in the mind, and the past exists largely in the imagination, but the goal is still to represent a reality that happened outside of subjectivity. It is easy to get caught up in the internal logic of research plans and the trajectory of earlier interpretations and thus ignore what is actually facing one. During the course of archival research using Spanish documents, I found that the two best antidotes for the myopia of rigid historical preconceptions were an education in the mundane procedures of bureaucratic culture and the surprise of discovering types of documents of which I had been previously unaware.

In this essay I describe the process of how I learned to discern the meanings of the types of Spanish-language documents that directed me toward two understudied themes of Nahua Christianity in late eighteenth-century Mexico: alms collectors traveling throughout rural New Spain carrying saints’ images, and people coming to Mexico City to build triumphal arches in the streets during the feast of Corpus Christi.¹ From 1766 to 1798, three major judicial and executive organizations—the Archdiocese of Mexico’s Provisorato de Indios y Chinos, the Audiencia of New Spain’s Juzgado General de Indios, and the Spanish Ayuntamiento (city council) of Mexico City—produced a wealth of sources on these two practices.² These papers record more than just two fascinating religious practices. I have gathered from them a large body of data of ethnohistorical value. Lists of the names of indigenous men complete with town council positions and

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¹The doctoral dissertation that resulted from my research, Osowski 2002, contains preliminary treatments of these topics.

²The Provisorato de Indios y Chinos was the Archdiocese of Mexico’s special legal tribunal for indigenous people and Filipinos. From 1592 to 1820, the Audiencia of New Spain hosted an entire bureaucracy of legal aides and magistrates called the Juzgado General de Indios (General Indian Court) that provided legal services at reduced cost to indigenous clients. The court has been studied closely by Woodrow Borah; Borah 1983 was important in giving me an orientation, and many of the institutional points made here could be illustrated from that book, but I have thought it best to presume the reader’s acquaintance with it and give additional references from my own archival research.

honorific titles have enabled me to make a first step toward constructing a social portrait of the late colonial indigenous elite.

Practitioners of the philological approach to ethnohistory analyze changes in indigenous languages as shown in written records in order to gauge transformations in internal indigenous concepts and social structure which cannot be accessed through Spanish-language sources. However, after about 1770 there was a swift decline in the number of new documents in Nahuatl. Nahuatl sources that might reveal developments within the altepetl contributing to changes in religious practice are not available in large numbers from the late period, when the Nahuas were switching over to writing primarily in Spanish. Fortunately I discovered, to my surprise, that the most numerous and vividly descriptive Spanish-language sources on indigenous corporate religion in the eighteenth century appear after around 1760. Despite the absence of Nahuatl documents, which initially caused me much anxiety, I came to realize that these abundant sources on religion could be used to explore continuities in indigenous social and political structure and to explain how indigenous leaders adapted to rapidly changing times.

**The use of officials to identify sources from the Juzgado General de Indios and Provisorato de Indios**

In order to understand documents from the Juzgado General de Indios, Provisorato de Indios, and Ayuntamiento one must know something about the officials and institutions that produced them. It is not methodologically safe simply to wade right in and start mining the records for information about indigenous people. When confronted with documents from the two courts, it is not immediately apparent if one is reading the original litigation of a matter or if it is in an appeal phase in the proceedings. I was tempted to search for the cultural content immediately, but I found that I avoided false starts if I first spent some time paying attention to the procedures of the courts.

Researchers who use documents from the Juzgado General de Indios and the Provisorato de Indios will encounter difficulties locating valuable documents. Records of the Provisorato de Indios have not been catalogued as a corpus or gathered into one ramo in the AGN or other archives in Mexico. Only a few secondary sources provided background information on how the ecclesiastical...
court functioned. Provisorato de Indios documents in the AGN are collected in the ramos Clero Regular y Secular, Bienes Nacionales, and Inquisición, but the words “Provisorato de Indios” do not usually appear in file descriptions in the various catalogs.

When searching for sources from the Juzgado General de Indios, one has more advantages than when using Provisorato sources, but there are still challenges to systematic location of materials. The AGN ramo Indios is the best place to begin because the 102-volume collection is the extant record of cases from the court, which lasted from 1592 to 1820.6 Secretaries copied court orders, summons and petitions in the order that they received them, but did not create indexes of cases.

The most valuable documents of the Juzgado General de Indios, revealing the local view, are difficult to locate, because unlike the ramo Indios, they are mixed with sources of other institutions in the ramos Criminal, Clero Regular y Secular, and Tierras. The AGN has not catalogued the pertinent writings located in these sections under the heading “Juzgado General de Indios,” nor does this phrase usually appear in the text of the sources that officials of this court generated. In these ramos one will find the original petitions and complaints that the legal agents of the Indians wrote as well as the defendants’ responses, plus court orders and decisions. Legal agents employed by the court, with the titles of procurador de indios and solicitador, composed petitions on behalf of people with the legal status of indio. Indigenous people also sometimes hired an independent lawyer or convinced their parish priest to act as a legal advocate.7

The architecture of the written documents from the Juzgado General de Indios provides clues for understanding the mentality of the court and the place of indigenous people in legal culture. Petitions and court orders can be deceptively brief. The modus operandi of the court emphasized expediency and the reduction of expense for indigenous petitioners. Often the original complaint takes up only one page. Court decisions were written in the margins, and then the sheet was returned to the Indians. Initially, thinking that the marginalia were only a summary, I went looking for a longer version and was perplexed when I found nothing.

In earlier times, indigenous delegations from rural areas had had the opportunity to have personal audiences with the viceroy when bringing their concerns before the Juzgado General de Indios. But during the eighteenth century, though indigenous communities were legally obligated to present petitions personally in the capital, which they customarily addressed directly to viceroy, they were separated from their final judges by several levels of court professionals. The asesor was the viceroy’s direct legal counsel, responsible for studying the matters of the Indians, making the decision, and affixing a stamp of the viceroy’s signature. In the late eighteenth century, a fiscal de lo civil (crown prosecuting attorney in civil matters, approximately), who was a subordinate

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6 There are documents from before 1592 in AGN Indios, vols. 5 & 6 even though the Juzgado General de Indios was not officially in existence until this date.

7 AGN, Clero Regular y Secular (CRS), vol. 22, exp. 7, f. 122; vol. 151, exp. 10, f. 190.
of the asesor, made all of the final judgments and the asesor simply “rubber stamped” them with the viceroy’s signature. In the late colonial period there was usually no actual public hearing, so people did not come into personal contact with the arbiters of their cases.

In the eighteenth century a series of intermediaries in the high courts of Mexico City dispensed written justice as a form of routine administration of indigenous matters. The fact that the dossiers of Indios were not indexed suggests that crown attorneys did not expect to revisit cases. The brevity of the petitions that the legal representatives of the Indians wrote and the terse judgments of the fiscales de lo civil also illustrate the bureaucratic nature of late colonial justice.

The fact that individual officials of the Juzgado General de Indios often wielded executive and judicial powers simultaneously can make it difficult for researchers to identify the presence of the court in documents. The only reliable method of determining if documents passed through the Juzgado General de Indios is to recognize the titles of officials: fiscal de lo civil, fiscal de lo criminal (crown prosecuting attorney in criminal matters; these two also take the title of fiscal protector), procurador de indios, and asesor general. For example, through this method, I was able to determine that a matter concerned indigenous people even though the only document available did not mention them at all. The guardián (head of a convento) of San Diego Cuautla requested a license to collect alms, and because a fiscal de lo civil made the final decision I knew that the Juzgado General de Indios was involved. The written formula that cemented the judgment—“como pide el fiscal de lo civil” (“as the crown attorney in civil matters requests”)—was always employed in sources where indigenous people were clearly identified. In a case from Criminal section, I was able to determine that the Juzgado General de Indios was involved in mending the damage from a scandal in Xochimilco even though several colonial institutions were concerned with the very complicated matter, involving tribute, a religious image, and abuse of power.

Although it can be time-consuming to locate the final decisions of the court when confronted with large tomes, one can find them by locating the closing formula mentioned above, followed by the viceroy's signature stamp. The final rulings of the most important matters are written in large, clear script on separate sheets, and are very useful because they usually include a brief summary of the entire matter.

Spanish court officials created the documents of the Juzgado General de Indios, but indigenous people also enthusiastically participated. A working knowledge of how this Spanish institution operated is necessary for a reliable treatment of the indigenous people in contact with it. The best method for locating and then working with sources from the Juzgado General de Indios is first to track the

8AGN CRS, vols. 22, 116, 123, 151, 155.
9AGN CRS, vols. 22 & 151; Criminal, vol. 23, exp. 2.
10AGN CRS, vol. 22, exp. 7, f. 122v; vol. 151, exp. 10, ff. 191v, 201.
11AGN CRS, vol. 22, exp. 9, f. 195.
12AGN Criminal, vol. 23, exp. 2, f. 204; vol. 24, exp. 1, f. 2.
13AGN CRS, vol. 151, exp. 10, f. 201; exp. 4, f. 71v.
officials involved, especially the fiscal de lo civil, before advancing to the phase of interpretation.

**Sources on the regulation of itinerant alms collectors**

**by the Juzgado General de Indios and Provisorato de Indios**

Using my knowledge of how court officers operated, I was able to begin to make sense of two religious phenomena that the Juzgado General de Indios and the Provisorato de Indios attempted to regulate: the mobile collectors of alms (*limosnas*) and Corpus Christi triumphal arches. From these sources, I have compiled large amounts of data such as lists of names, the town council positions of those involved, and their localities, that should be useful to historians interested in other things besides religion. When I discovered 135 licenses in the AGN ramo Clero Regular y Secular dating from 1789 to 1799, formerly possessed by the Juzgado General de Indios, I had the opportunity to take my research in a direction that I had not originally planned. The licenses gave Nahua and Otomi *mayordomos* permission to travel outside of their communities with town holy images in order to collect alms for their localities; the documents were thus evidence of a way of financing saints’ cults that was not based on land, an aspect which had not been studied up to that time. The majority of the licenses were printed on standardized forms with blanks for the names of the saint and the mayordomo, as well as a blank for the duration of collection. On the backs of many of the forms are a series of signatures, dates, and toponyms, often abbreviated.

The Archdiocese of Mexico’s Provisorato de Indios distributed the licensing forms, but the Juzgado General de Indios confiscated the 135 forms in question when the civil court came to believe that there had been abuses. In the 1790s the Juzgado General de Indios was legally obligated to approve all of the licenses after the Provisorato de Indios issued them to indigenous *mayordomos*. The 135 forms represent only a small fraction of the number of licenses that the Provisorato de Indios was issuing in the 1790s. A list of all of the licenses issued in 1792 indicates that 73 licenses were in circulation during that single year. I have been able to locate only eight of the forms from 1792 in the AGN.

Initially, I had difficulties understanding exactly what people were doing with the images that were specified on the forms. Were they actually removing statues and paintings from churches and carrying them around to other towns during an entire year, or were they simply collecting money in a portable collection box? The language of one version of the form is somewhat ambiguous regarding these questions. In another version the phrasing more clearly indicates that *mayordomos* carried images. Other files revealed further clues. A high official of the Provisorato de Indios reported to the viceroy that the licensing process was intended to ensure that the images remained in their churches and chapels. In

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14AGN CRS, vol. 116, exp. 13, f. 182v; the *bando* of Viceroy Revillagigedo is copied in vols. 22, 123, 151, 116.
1792 Viceroy Revillagigedo’s legal adviser in the Juzgado General de Indios unambiguously complained that people were transporting images on beasts of burden.\textsuperscript{19} In some instances they most likely were not carrying the “original.” For example, in 1792 mayordomos from San Pablo Huehuetocan collected alms for the Virgin of Guadalupe.\textsuperscript{20} It is out of the question that they should have taken the original of the famous painting with them. When mayordomos did, in fact, remove images from parish churches, conflicts between communities could result. In a dispute from San Pedro Axompan, the mayordomo in charge of an image of the Immaculate Conception of Mary sued the \textit{teniente} of Santiago Tianquistenco in order to get the town’s image back.\textsuperscript{21}

My prior understanding of how the residents of New Spain treated images of saints was an impediment to a proper appreciation of these documents. At first it was difficult to believe that the local people would move the images from their chapels and parish churches for extended periods of time, and not just for brief festival processions. Scholars have convincingly demonstrated how important saints’ images were for local civic pride and land ownership.\textsuperscript{22} Through no fault of the historians, I formulated from their research the mistaken assumption that indigenous people expected the images of the saints to be essentially rooted in one spot because they were symbols of contact between the sacred and the people of a particular location.

Documentary evidence began to erode this misconception. On the backs of the forms, priests indicated where they were located when they examined the license in possession of the mayordomos. This could be interpreted to mean that the signatures belonged to the priests whom the mayordomos encountered during their peregrinations.

Discerning the meaning of the signatures hinged on the more theoretical issue of written regulation of behavior versus actual behavior. The mere fact that an official of the Provisorato de Indios claimed that the licensing process prevented removing images does not mean it was not happening anyway. Also, it is a mistaken assumption that sources from institutions like the Mexican Church and the Juzgado General de Indios represent a unified opinion on regulation and practice. One cannot even assume that the officials in any one of the institutions were of one mind.\textsuperscript{23} Undoubtedly, civil and ecclesiastical officials were sometimes working at cross-purposes. When magistrates from the Juzgado General de Indios confiscated licenses that the Provisorato de Indios had issued, the viceroys were asserting \textit{patronato real} over the church. Twenty-one of the 135 licenses that ecclesiastical magistrates issued to indigenous mayordomos never received final approval from the civil arm, which meant that parish priests were ignorant, remiss, or indifferent about their civil legal obligations.\textsuperscript{24} In the end, I settled on the interpretation that the alms collectors were actually traveling about the country.

\textsuperscript{19}AGN CRS, vol. 22, exp. 10, ff. 201–201v.
\textsuperscript{20}AGN CRS, vol. 116, exp. 13, ff. 167–177v.
\textsuperscript{21}AGN CRS, vol. 155, exp. 6, ff. 122–136v.
\textsuperscript{22}Lockhart 1992, 235–51; Chance and Taylor 1985; Wood 1991.
\textsuperscript{24}AGN CRS, vols. 22, 116, 123, 151.
One of the most convincing pieces of evidence was that the crown attorneys of the Juzgado General de Indios complained that that the mayordomos were vagabonds. A written legal opinion of the fiscal de lo civil was the key document that enabled me to draw the conclusion.\footnote{AGN CRS, vol. 22, exp. 10, f. 201.}

Alms collection petitions, which are in both the printed format and handwritten form, open up major research possibilities. By compiling tables of mayordomo collectors from licensing forms, I gathered a list of names and localities of people involved between 1789 and 1801. An analysis of naming patterns and titles gave the result that 38 percent of the mayordomos were from the upper social group of indigenous society and that 35 percent were from the middle. I do realize that assigning rank from such skeletal and uneven data is problematic, and I offer these figures as the merest approximation. But the licenses were a source of data on 67 different important indigenous men who served in municipal government in the late eighteenth century. The locations and routes of travel most likely represented cross-regional social and economic connections. From the signatures, dates, and places on the backs of the forms, as well as the mayordomos and their home towns, I was able to construct basic travel networks of that time which will provide important information for economic and social historians. Alms collectors’ licenses are valuable Spanish-language documents for those interested in indigenous cultural history because they provide evidence for a late colonial practice with extra-local dimensions that is not documented in Nahuatl sources.

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\textbf{The tables of the Corpus Christi arches as sources that record hierarchy in the streets of Mexico City}

Documents housed in the Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de México (hereafter AHCM) concerning Corpus Christi processions in late eighteenth-century Mexico City are valuable resources for the history of corporate religion. They include long lists of the names of indigenous municipal officials from many important provincial towns who paid urban indigenous officials a tax in chickens in order to secure the right to participate in the festival.\footnote{I would like to thank William Taylor for so generously calling my attention to the Corpus Christi collection and his helpful comments after reading an early draft of a chapter on the festival.} The Juzgado General de Indios also kept records regarding the legal obligations of native participants in the ritual, which are located in the ramo Indios in the AGN. Methodologically, as evidence of surviving indigenous culture, these sources needed to be approached carefully. They presented seemingly contradictory evidence of both compact and conflict between the Indian and Spanish republics, occurring in the most important center of the Hispanic presence in New Spain. The very close ties that indigenous governments in Mexico City had with the viceregal legal bureaucracy made it difficult to separate the indigenous leaders’ corporate interest in their organization of the religious festival from the Spanish officials’ vision of the meaning of the celebration. The first step in untangling the net of interests that drew participants to the festival in the city was to understand the civil institutions coordinating the religious ritual.
The two native city governments of Tenochtitlan (coinciding with Mexico City, based in the quarter of San Juan Moyotlan and at this late date often called simply San Juan) and Santiago Tlatelolco, which Spanish officials termed parcialidades,27 organized the indigenous attendees at the festival; they operated within the judicial apparatus of the Audiencia’s law courts to a much greater degree than Nahua town councils in the rural areas. The viceroy’s legal counsel, the asesor of the Juzgado General de Indios, personally supervised the elections of council members of San Juan and Santiago and audited their community expenditures. Indigenous city council officials judged civil and criminal cases within the so-called parcialidades, but defendants could appeal the decisions of the magistrates to the Audiencia’s sala de crimen. The legal bureaucracy of the capital also had a high degree of direct contact with the urban native governors because, unlike their rural counterparts, the two indigenous urban municipal councils shared power with the Spanish Ayuntamiento. The Ayuntamiento was both a benefactor and an adversary of San Juan and Santiago when the Indian and Spanish republics shared the organization of large religious festivals in Mexico City.

Starting in 1611, the Ayuntamiento sponsored indigenous people who came from surrounding rural areas to build triumphal arches over the route of a large procession with the Eucharist in celebration of Corpus Christi.28 The chief Spanish magistrates of Mexico City, the corregidores, appointed directly by the Council of the Indies and permanent members of the Ayuntamiento, kept records regarding indigenous participation which are today located in the ramo Procesiones, vol. 3712, in the AHCM. Included in this collection are some of the lists that the interpreters general compiled on the day before the largest procession of the weeklong celebration of the Eucharist. The interpreter general was an official of the Juzgado General de Indios and a key figure in organizing the indigenous people who constructed the arches.29 These men ordered rural contingents from surrounding towns to attend and measured the lengths of street where each corporation with its constituent pueblos would build triumphal arches, shades, and decorate with flowers.30

The interpreters’ lists from 1777 to 1780, which are located in the AHCM, document the participating towns, the indigenous officials who led their pilgrims, fees that they paid for materials, and an unsanctioned tax paid in chickens. On average there were 297 triumphal arches and decoration spaces; they were hierarchically arranged, with the highest-status positions closest to the front and

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27By parcialidad the Spaniards usually meant large semi-independent indigenous units within a larger entity, moieties and the like, or in other words the constituent sub-altepetl of a complex altepetl, like the three sub-altepetl of Xochimilco. Here we are dealing with two entirely separate altepetl, so the term was strictly speaking not appropriate, but it is true that both altepetl were ethnically Mexica and hence closely related within a sort of larger unity.

28Torquemada 1723, p. 224; Vetancurt 1990, p. 98.

29AHCM Procesiones (Proc.), vol. 3712, exp. 5, ff. 1–4.

30AHCM Proc., vol. 3712, exp. 3, f. 4r. Also documented in interpreters’ dispatches to Toluca region from 1756 to 1760: AGN Indios vol. 58, exp. 17, ff. 20–20v; exp. 71, ff. 101v–102; vol. 60, exp. 152, ff. 236v–238.
side doors of the cathedral of Mexico City. On the day of the construction, the official recorded the order of the arches from the side to the main door of the Cathedral and personally collected the fees and fowl. The duty of organizing the participants and the reward of collecting the fees were shared between the interpreter and the two urban indigenous councils of San Juan and Santiago.\[^{31}\] The hierarchical street order reflected several factors, including the relative legal status of ciudades, villas, and pueblos (the ciudades of Tetzcoco and Xochimilco were directly in front of the doors), customary placement, and the level of material contribution that the municipality made to the festival organizers from San Juan and Santiago.

The interpreters’ records contain much valuable information on the indigenous municipal officials who were coordinators of indigenous participants in the largest annual religious festival in New Spain. There are 97 different names of the men who led the pilgrims, with accompanying town council titles, on the lists dating from 1777 to 1780. A significant number of these have repeated second names but different first names. In addition, there are twelve names and titles from an incomplete list of participants from 1733.\[^{32}\] I was able to determine that the majority of the officials who escorted their people to Mexico City held major office in indigenous municipal government, and 40 percent bore the honorific title of “don.”\[^{33}\] Rural indigenous town council members clearly did not view the duty of shepherding contingents of people to the city merely as an onerous colonial burden, for they did not send officials of lower political status.

Ironically, it is because of the viceroy’s attempts to diminish their authority that we have such a vivid picture of the role of the native elite as coordinators of the festival. In 1776 and 1777, Viceroy Bucareli attempted to reduce the role of the interpreters general by ordering that Spanish magistrates should perform the measurement instead of the interpreters, who should now only assist in negotiations over the length of each community’s assigned street area.\[^{34}\] His actions undoubtedly forced the interpreters general from the Juzgado General de Indios to provide the Spanish city council with the lists so useful today.

The Corpus Christi records have great potential as a source for reconstructing how the arches represented status and hierarchy among indigenous towns, but they are also incomplete. How much can they tell us about change in public religious ritual? The four years of complete records are tantalizing, but so far I have not located more. The incompleteness makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the festival over the entire eighteenth century or about how the period compared to previous centuries. Two seventeenth-century authors—fray Juan de Torquemada (1615) and fray Agustín de Vetancurt (1698)—provide some clues that indigenous participation in the construction of the arches in the eighteenth century may have diminished.\[^{35}\]

Difficulties in discerning who the author or authors of documents were in

\[^{31}\]AHCM Proc., vol. 3712, exps. 9–11.
\[^{32}\]AHCM Proc., vol. 3712, exp. 3.
\[^{33}\]AHCM Proc., vol. 3712, exp. 9 & 10.
\[^{34}\]AHCM Proc., vol. 3712, exp. 7, ff. 8–16.
\[^{35}\]Vetancurt 1990 and Torquemada 1723.
terms of their government position created challenges in interpreting what interests in the coordination and regulation of the festival leaders may have had. I only began to understand the chain of authority that colonial rulers intended and the conflicts within it when I learned that the corregidor of Mexico City was a member of the Spanish Ayuntamiento of Mexico City and a direct representative of the monarchy. More importantly, a lack of secondary scholarship on the interpreters general made it difficult to discern their loyalties and motivations when they acted as important intermediaries between the indigenous participants and the colonial government. In terms of their ethnic and social profiles, who were these interpreters in the eighteenth century? Were they mestizos, Spanish clerics steeped in Nahua society, or secular Spaniards well connected in the upper group of indigenous society?

An early clue came from a document recording the Juzgado General de Indios’s appointment to the office in 1694 of a Zapotec who was described as an *indio ladino*.

Then I came across dispatches from 1756 to 1768 that called upon many rural town governments to bring participants to the capital to construct Corpus Christi arches. The letters identified the interpreter general of Mexico City as a “Cacique y Principal Vecino de esta Ciudad,” in other words as an indigenous person with recognized noble status based in the capital. Finally, from 1776 to 1777, Spanish officials complained that the interpreters were corrupt and worked closely alongside the indigenous city councilmen of San Juan and Santiago Tlatelolco. These records suggested that the interpreters were profiting from living in two cultures. However, the lack of general information on the position and the social profile of the men who filled the office made it difficult to interpret their role in the chain of authority. More exhaustive research into the interpreters general, using the AGN’s ramo Indios, is on my agenda.

The Corpus Christi tables that the interpreters general compiled will aid future research by providing the names of prominent indigenous families in the late colonial period. All of the leaders of the pilgrimages held town council titles and thus belonged to the upper group in indigenous towns. In addition, several names are repeated with different municipal titles of office over the years, suggesting that certain families dominated late eighteenth-century town councils, and their participation in the religious festival was an essential component of their local political activity. Further research and analysis may reveal that the men who led rural contingents gained status that helped them rise in municipal rank when they returned. The names of the male members of ruling families can be used to search other types of documents such as land records and cases arbitrated in the Juzgado General de Indios in order to access the perspective of local municipal politics. Eventually, the names of the men who led pilgrimages, which are located in documents pertaining to corporate religion, will contribute to a more general understanding of the indigenous upper group in the late eighteenth century.

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36 AGN Indios, vol. 32, exp. 236, ff. 207–207v.
37 AGN Indios, vol. 58, exp. 17, f. 20.
Conclusion

When I began my dissertation research project, I had not imagined that the final product would have been so institutionally focused. Originally, I had planned on writing a history that focused on miraculous saints’ images as corporate symbols of altepetl territory. Although miracles and their relationship to land do still figure in the project, I fortunately did not get what I originally thought I might. Before I started, I had no idea that documents existed capturing the importance of mobility and processions in cross-regional indigenous culture. The most rewarding results of working in the archives were unexpected, which meant that an initial suspension of interpretation along familiar lines and avoidance of an overly rigid research plan were necessary. At the beginning I also assumed that there was something called the “indigenous elite” in late eighteenth-century Mexico. In some ways this was an ungrounded assumption. I doubt that if I had originally set out to study the question of the general state of the indigenous elite I would have looked so carefully at the Spanish administrative sources on popular religion like the Corpus Christi tables and the licenses of the alms collector. Happily, Spanish-language sources on religion have turned out to have great potential for providing the documentary basis of a more thorough understanding of the survival of the indigenous upper class at the end of the colonial period.

At the end of the research process, I concluded that Bourbon officials did cause some changes in local indigenous culture, but that the transformations were not as rapid, final, or monolithic as their written legacy in the form of legislation and reports implies. This was not the assumption that I brought with me when I first began searching for traces of indigenous religion within the byzantine corridors of Spanish judicial sources. Instead of relying on a method informed by a rigid theory of cultural change, I maintained a healthy skepticism about how Spanish officials described corporate religious practice, for example when they employed terms such as “disorder.” My main prior assumption was that indigenous culture was orderly in its continuity, a notion which I formed through my encounter with the foundational work of scholars of ethnohistory, dealing mainly with the time when indigenous-language documents were produced in large quantities. Concentrating on a time after that, I faced new materials needing to be approached in a new way, but much of my new-style investigation in institutional sources was made possible by the insights of the New Philology.

The picture with ethnohistorical research on central Mexico in the last two or three decades of the eighteenth century and first couple of the nineteenth is complex. One must remain aware of the implications of indigenous-language work and at the same time seek other avenues. As we have seen, historians who are interested in learning more about the cultural changes that were taking place in indigenous society in Mexico during the last years of colonial rule can learn much by examining the sources that Spanish colonial institutions produced. In my experience, the relative lack of Nahuatl documentation for the late eighteenth century has not been a detriment to research. It has forced the discovery of rich and significant new kinds of sources. It has also forced me to work toward a synthesis that might bridge the gap between Spanish institutional records and older Nahuatl sources that were authored on the verge of the transition to a dominant
literacy in Spanish. At times, Spanish records reveal indigenous practices that Nahuatl sources have not documented at all, as in the case of the itinerant alms collectors.

In the end, however, one cannot ignore the new perspectives on indigenous society in New Spain gained by ethnohistorians relying largely on Nahuatl-language sources. Although such documents became scarcer after about 1770, the results of this work remain relevant for researchers who must rely on Spanish-language sources, and new Nahuatl sources for the late period continue to emerge. Insights from philological studies relating to earlier times provided the critical perspective allowing me to make an interpretation of my Spanish institutional documents that did not exaggerate the power of institutions to impose cultural change from on high. Licenses for itinerant alms collectors may have been universally written in Spanish, but my interpretation of the meaning of the practice for indigenous people was influenced by work with Nahuatl sources. When the viceroy’s fiscal de lo civil complained of the vagabondage and disorder of the many women involved, it appeared to be a distorted description of an indigenous gender-parallel attitude toward the funding of local saint cults.

Late colonial Spanish sources such as these also expand our ability to understand how indigenous intermediaries negotiated the system of higher justice, and most likely were exposed to increased Hispanic cultural influence during their many journeys to the law courts of Mexico City. Clues to at least one side of the process involving the diminution of writing in Nahuatl may be contained in the documents of the Juzgado General de Indios and Provisorato de Indios. In the future, scholars may find it useful to examine indigenous-language sources in relation to the context of the Hispanic institutional writing in which the portion preserved is so often embedded.

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