INCREASINGLY HISTORIANS of the Mexican North have come to grips with the lack of Native-language documents, records which elsewhere, when they have been available, have allowed for complex understandings of central and southern Indigenous cultures. At one time, scholars dealing with the central regions of Mexico accepted the propaganda materials of civil and ecclesiastic officials who, writing in Spanish, did not do justice to Native categories of thought and privileged Spanish initiative over the Native as a determinant. The discovery of Native-language records for much of postcontact Mesoamerica inspired the academic world to re-examine the social, political and cultural developments in the center within the context of Native precedents. In several ways the literature on Native peoples of the North has suffered from the lack of a parallel source rediscovery (for the most part because of the actual lack of existence of a parallel source). However, our understanding of northern Native peoples, in the past severely constrained, recently has achieved more multifaceted characterizations of cultural change, largely through a more rigorous examination of Spanish documents of types already known. Critical examination of categories in the original sources and of past historiographical frameworks has encouraged more nuanced reflections of northern peoples. Much more remains to be done to further our understanding of the North, especially in drawing cross-cultural comparisons that might shed further light on Native social political organization. Indeed, a multi-pronged approach is necessitated by a lack of dense documentation for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which has limited the scope and depth of our understanding of cultural change.

This essay underscores the importance of documents produced or initiated by Natives, as well as Inquisition cases, which provide information on cultural practices and traditions rooted in the period of first contact and earlier. In ecclesiastic records, scholars can find references to Native practices particularly in the cartas anuas (formal annual reports of the Jesuits), Native petitions, and Inquisition records. Without the wealth of local information preserved for central Mexico in pre- and postcontact codices, annals, and mundane documents focused on specific ethnic corporate units, historians of the colonial North must increasingly rely on broader documentation and spatial frameworks. The lack of extensive Native-produced cabildo records presents another methodological challenge. Yet, today’s scholars of the North have advanced our understanding of the “Borderlands” regions since the long stretch of the twentieth century when Herbert Eugene Bolton and his students dominated the field.1

Bolton’s school had an inordinate influence on the ways the North has been imagined and re-imagined. Succeeding cohorts of researchers hardly stopped to

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engage the terms and concepts laid out by the Boltonians. Many scholars accepted the general framework of the North that the Spanish civil and ecclesiastic officials had the determining influence in shaping Native settlements and transculturative patterns. Much of the Bolton-inspired historiography attempted to treat the North as a monolithic area in which Spanish colonization and (secondarily) Native responses had unique characteristics. Although some scholars such as Edward Spicer, Cynthia Radding and Susan Deeds have in fact pointed out the tremendous diversity of Native settlements and their responses to Spanish colonization, many of the notions and terms of scholarly inquiry of the Boltonians have remained. Therefore a much more careful, analytical textual rereading of the Spanish chronicles and priest’s reports is in order.

Greater attention is needed to the terminology applied to Native cultural patterns, taking into account the differences, but also neglected similarities between the central and northern areas of Mexico. The profound disappointment evident in the early chronicles and cartas anuas regarding Native social political development stemmed from the lack of obvious sources of negotiable wealth as tribute or potential to distribute encomiendas. Contradictory reporting by Spanish officials indicated a variety of imprecisely described sociopolitical units and vague leadership arrangements, yet some reports also revealed levels of authority and types of settlements that reflected more complex developments. Iberians, although familiar with dispersed, rural communities, hoped to find dense territorial units of the kind they encountered in central and southern Mexico. In the documentation of the North the obvious bias and disappointment of Spanish colonial officials is one essential aspect of a critical rereading of the early sources. Another relevant consideration is taking into account the degenerative demographic impact that Spanish colonization had on the North before larger numbers of Spaniards and mixed-race peoples migrated northward. Daniel Reff has argued that some of the largest sedentary societies of northern Mexico experienced significant population decline and fragmentation during the sixteenth century.

Another aspect of our rereading of the North involves delineating terms and concepts applied to Native institutions. Many of these terms reflect carryovers from the Spanish experience in the Caribbean and central Mexico. Although central Mexico loomed large in the minds of Spanish explorers and colonizers, the Caribbean may have provided a more comparable model for understanding Native societies of the North. Greater definitional scrutiny has to be applied to words such as ranchería, encomienda, pueblo, doctrina, reducción as opposed to the long rare misión, and correlations and contrasts drawn between references to pre- and postcontact settlement. One byproduct of the Boltonian legacy has been the notion, originating in Spanish reports, that the Spaniards arbitrarily introduced settlement patterns in the North, as opposed to building on indigenous patterns in other areas of Mexico. A thorough analysis of early Spanish accounts combined with an examination of encomienda grants, mapped mission districts and Native land titles may reveal, and is already beginning to reveal, a greater role played by the distribution of indigenous communities and the acts of their leaders in determining the Spanish colonial geopolitical landscape.

Some scholars have now sought to do more to determine the extent of
northern indigenous corporate communities and identities in the North. In central Mexico the local sociopolitical unit proved resilient in the Spanish colonial context, surviving largely intact, as in a way has always been known and has been understood in detail since the work of Charles Gibson. For the North, historians had often assumed that the Native local unit was disrupted and usually removed from its historical land base, thus reducing the chances of cultural continuity. Works by William Griffen and Cynthia Radding have shown that Native peoples selected aspects of traditional and European culture in meaningful and purposeful ways. Some Native pueblos carried an ethnic designation through the eighteenth century, such as the Tepehuan and Tarahumara. An important understanding of Native ethnic identity involves establishing when and if indigenous communities lost a designated home base and corporate name. Certainly this was not a uniform process in the North.

In regards to Native leadership patterns, further analysis of the terms used to describe Native leadership, including cacique, principal, and gobernador, is needed. Spanish officials identified leaders with whom they negotiated during the colonization process. Historians like Susan Deeds, have suggested that Spanish innovations led to more complex leadership mechanisms than were available before contact. Others, like Daniel Reff, have suggested that more centralized leadership forms antedated European intervention. Spanish chroniclers and cartas anuas insinuate that Native leaders shaped social and political negotiations during the colonial period in significant ways. More focus needs to be directed at establishing the requirements for leadership and how they did or did not reflect precontact traditions. Did congregación facilitate leadership over wider areas? Importantly, how did Spanish intervention affect the process for determining Native authority? And to what extent did Native peoples attempt to influence the processes that determined Native leadership? Direct answers to such questions are rarely found, and answering them becomes more difficult because of the lack of certain knowledge about the precontact situation, but compilation of many examples and subtle analysis of the implications of existing texts can accomplish much.

Petitions by indigenous people of the North exist and, like those known from central and southern Mexico, represent an expression of a Native corporate voice, albeit within a Spanish legal system. Underutilized in northern histories in the past, Native petitions as a source are now allowing historians some insight into Native perspectives of the North. Although these texts, like all documents cast in Spanish, reflect Spanish conventions and influences, they do outline the nature and content of protest on the part of indigenous peoples. Moreover, they underscore that here as in many other regions, Native people understood Spanish legal processes and used them to redress their grievances and gain advantages. Native peoples used petition writing to present complaints, request services or justify actions taken against priests to religious officials, so that from these documents we can begin to understand how Native peoples viewed and judged priests’ actions.

The petitions identify Native pueblos and “missions” as well as Native and Spanish officials. Combined with other sources of data, through compilation they
make possible an analysis of jurisdictional boundaries and distinctions, as well as a greater understanding of what distinguishes ecclesiastical establishments from pueblos and how corporate identity was reflected in both. Spanish officials drew distinctions between different types of settlements in their writings. One document specifically states that Guazamota was a doctrina, and not a mission.\(^2\) Additionally, Spaniards applied the word doctrinero to Native peoples residing in pueblos. One question that should be addressed is whether Native peoples related differently to doctrinas, pueblos and missions? Deeds has contributed a preliminary understanding of the differences between missions and doctrinas based on Native sedentarism, isolation from Spanish settlements, and church financial support.\(^3\) Ultimately, a distinction in religious services may not dramatically differentiate missions, doctrinas, and parishes, but our recognition of even subtle contrasts goes a long way toward revising our notions of the North.

Through the petitions we can gain valuable insight into Native leadership mechanisms that sanctioned patriarchal practices. Among various petitions that I have analyzed, some were not only dictated but actually written by Native officials. One might ask whether literacy was a requirement of Native leadership or how it might have enhanced it. Ultimately the church hierarchy enforced the definitive formal power of the priest over his charges and confirmed the authority of Native male officials over women. Although Native women may have held influential informal roles within their family and church institutions, their inability to serve in the Native cabildo limited their economic privileges and ability to express themselves through petition writing. In this they were like indigenous women everywhere.

The outcome of Native petitions varied. When Native officials complained about priests, they often initiated investigative processes including audits and inventories, although the actions did not always produce the intended effect. Nevertheless, the petition writing was a form of self-protection which Native peoples became adept at and wielded when they found it necessary.

In listing abuses, native people provide enlightening bits of information about labor and economic practices in Native pueblos and missions. These include accusations against priests who abused their Native wards, hoarded community resources, and disobeyed colonial laws. In several cases priests obliged Native women to work for free in priests’ stations, in effect subsidizing the church role. When confronted by civil officials, priests usually denied this charge or stated that they had paid wages comparable with those offered by Spanish settlers. In effect, Native women cleaned the parish and priests’ quarters for very little compensation. They were also required to gather wood and make tortillas for the clergy.\(^4\) Moreover, Native petitions confirm tensions between civil and religious officials and demonstrate how Native peoples used their complaints as wedge issues to secure protection.

Native people argued for benefits or secured protection by using petitions and allying with civil officials. In some instances they asked for the protection of

\(^2\) Archivos Históricos del Arzobispado de Durango (AHAD) 188, f. 354.
\(^3\) Deeds 2003, p. 4.
\(^4\) AHAD 188, ff. 327, 337.
Spanish civil servants, such as a teniente general for themselves. In one case, in the pueblo of Guazamota in 1795, the Native people sought the appointment of a protector de indios while also calling for titles to their lands. In this example the Native people hoped to use their status as a separate corporate entity to gain protection. They also sought an end to personal service, i.e. uncompensated labor, particularly that involving Native female laborers. They attempted quite bluntly to renegotiate their obligations to support their priest, in effect the church. Native peoples wanted to be paid fairly for their services and used legal action as an important recourse.

Petitions also inform us about Native social customs, particularly those involving marriage and divorce practices. Priests attempted to enforced permanent Christian marriages and observances of the sacraments; petitions revealed that priests are not always successful. Permanent marriage, a feature that already characterized Native social practices before Spanish contact, became a more rigidly applied institution after European contact. Native people, as recorded in petitions, resented the priest’s interference in their marriage customs. This helps to explain why after rebellions Native people often engaged in symbolic divorces and marriage ceremonies. Moreover, priests expected indigenous people to know the prayers recited during marriage ceremonies, but it becomes clear that they did not. Also priests sought to end the practice of divorce, an innovation which Native peoples resisted. In one case in 1780, several Native people of Pueblo Nuevo engaged in a divorce ceremony, which the resident priests declared was specifically prohibited by church tenets. In San Francisco del Mesquital in 1797, a priest accused the inhabitants of engaging in illicit relations, and he interceded to prevent the marriage of several couples. These cases show Native people continuing to follow traditional cultural practices regardless of whether the church sanctioned them.

In response to Native complaints, priests justified their actions, listing their grievances against allegedly recalcitrant Indians. Indigenous people allegedly refused to learn Spanish, attend masses and fiestas, and send their children to catechism. In 1795 a priest complained that he could not communicate with the Native people because he did not speak the “Mexican” language. He also said that they refused to speak Spanish, as though it were a mere matter of choice. He seemed astonished that the local people did not understand his language, and he attributed the dissatisfaction they described in their petition to an “unbridgeable distance.” The priest also defended himself against accusations that he frequently left his parish. Arguably, petitions against priests did not often yield immediate or favorable results for Native people. They do show, however, that Natives saw legal proceedings as an important avenue for self-preservation and empowerment.

I have argued elsewhere that for Native peoples, accusing resident priests of

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5AHAD 188, f. 359.
6AHAD 141, f. 640.
7AHAD 195, f. 385.
8This is a puzzling statement because mexicano usually meant Nahuatl, and Nahuatl was not a native language in the North, though migrants from the center spoke it and it was a lingua franca to a certain extent.
9AHAD 188, f. 359.
moral improprieties provided them a means of reversing the social order.\textsuperscript{10} When analyzed in sufficient numbers, Native petitions can demonstrate the extent to which Native people adopted and rejected Spanish customs, including language and religion. However, if petitions suggest a common corporate identity, then was this phenomenon new in the eighteenth century, a period when petitions became more prevalent? As counterintuitive as such an idea may seem, it must not be lightly dismissed. Did the rise of Spanish and mestizo populations in the North facilitate consolidation of an ethnic indigenous identity, distinct from the mestizo population? Or is it simply that not until that time had indigenous people of the North had access to the mechanisms and mastered them?

When used in combination with Native petitions, Inquisition cases also reveal the tenacity of Native customs, including healing practices, in Native pueblos and missions in the North. Revealing in particular are records focused on alleged “witchcraft activities” on the part of one or more individuals and often capturing the actions of women, as described by Spanish priests.

Inquisition records and Native petitions that I have analyzed offer evidence of the important roles played by women in community affairs. One outstanding example of a Native woman investigated by the Inquisition took place in the 1750s in the Guarisamey region of Durango. Tomasa, a 74-year-old woman, was investigated for alleged witchcraft activities along with two male companions, and she does indeed appear to have been a practitioner of ritual in the precontact style. Inquisition cases I have examined often confirm patterns demonstrated for central and southern Mexico. Women attempted to rectify perceived injustices in various ways, and attempted to chastise Spanish and Native males and officials. With regards to women in the North, a scholarship that entails larger spatial and temporal frameworks will allow for a greater understanding of women and the ways in which they maneuvered Spanish colonial systems that favored men.

\textsuperscript{10}Vasquez 2003.

\section*{Bibliography}


