From Court Yard to the Seat of Government: The Career of Antonio Valeriano, Nahua Colleague of Bernardino de Sahagún

Frances KARTTUNEN

Linguistics Research Center - University of Texas, Austin, USA

Born a decade after the final fall of the Aztec Triple Alliance, Antonio Valeriano was taken as a young child into a Franciscan school and educated by missionary friars. Unlike most of the Indian boys who received such training, it seems he was not the son of a noble family. Yet capitalizing on outstanding intelligence and loyalty to the Franciscans, he built a secure civil career for himself.

He was born in Azcapotzalco at the beginning of the 1530s. Even before the Spanish conquest of Mexico, the glory days of his native city were but a memory, its rulers having capitulated to the Aztecs long before Montezuma's city of Tenochtitlan fell to Hernán Cortés in 1521. Subsequently, in the Spanish colonial period that has been described as a world turned upside down, Valeriano -with no claim to special lineage- became Indian governor of what had been Montezuma's capital. He worked as missionary assistant and as civil servant nearly to the end of his long life, and then, despite humble beginnings, he became the object of posthumous myth-making.

The Franciscans, invited to Mexico on the very heels of the Conquest by Cortés himself, had by the late 1520s founded boarding schools for children of the Indian nobility of the Valley of Mexico. "There," wrote fray Bernardino de Sahagún, who had arrived in Mexico in 1529, "we taught them to read and write and sing. And we taught Christian doctrine to the sons of commoners in the courtyard." They also organized the schoolboys into mobs that sallied forth at night in the company of pairs of friars to demolish pyramid-temples and disrupt observances of the indigenous religion. In Tlaxcala the schoolboys' actions got out of hand when they acted without their friars and stoned to death a priest of the old religion. The boys' roles as spies and disrupters estranged them even from their parents.

Within their schools the Franciscans emphasized to the students that the ceremonies they were striving to suppress had claimed the lives of little children, especially in the annual rites to insure return of the spring rains, and that parents had unprotestingly given over their boys and girls for sacrifice. Thus, the old religion and its practitioners -their own parents- were a

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1 Alvarado TEZOZOMOC 1975:171, 176.
2 ANDERSON and DIBBLE, eds. 1982:79.
3 GIBSON 1952:33.
menace to the lives of children. Then something happened that proved the point but also showed that the friars could not be relied on as protectors.

Before the coming of the Spaniards the rearing of Nahua children had been marked by extreme rigor. At the onset of adolescence boys and girls in their separate educational institutions were subjected to a regimen of underfeeding, sleep deprivation, icy baths, and physical labor\textsuperscript{4}. In the new Franciscan boarding schools the children were required to wake for the canonical hours, and they were expected to flagellate themselves as the friars did\textsuperscript{5}, but they also enjoyed a more sustaining diet and a less exhausting regimen. As a result, to the friars' dismay, the adolescent sexual behavior common in most boarding schools emerged. In reaction the friars closed their dormitories and sent the children back to the supervision of their parents.

Once returned to their families, the children were treated roughly. Their activities as snitches for the friars had cost their parents dearly, and now they were made to pay, even with their lives. The children appealed to the friars for help, but the friars did nothing. Sahagún wrote sympathetically of their dilemma, but concluded that the unfortunate matter had to be left to God for resolution\textsuperscript{6}.

A select group of boys were spared, however. When the Franciscans closed their large boarding schools, they kept seventy of the most promising children for training in a new institution, the Royal College of Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco. Eating and sleeping there, the "collegians" seldom left the premises where they enjoyed a safe haven from the wrath of adults. The fortunate few were chosen for ability rather than their family connections. Antonio Valeriano, "courtyard child" though he might once have been, was given refuge\textsuperscript{7}.

Antonio Valeriano's fellow collegians included boys from Nahuatl-speaking cities throughout central Mexico: Texcoco, Huejotzingo, Xochimilco, Cuauhtitlan, and Tlatelolco as well as his own city of Azcapotzalco. Immured together in their school the boys were drilled in Latin until, according to Sahagún, within two to three years they were able to read, write, and speak it fluently and to compose Latin verse\textsuperscript{8}. They were also trained to assist the Franciscans in their study of Nahuatl and to labor tirelessly in the evangelization of the world from which they had been taken.

To begin with, Sahagún wrote, the Franciscans had expected to prepare the boys for ordination as priests, but they had been disappointed. "From experience," he wrote in retrospect, "we learned that, at the time, they were not capable of such perfection... Nor do we see even now indications that this can be brought about"\textsuperscript{9}. By the time Antonio Valeriano was a young man, it had been decided that the collegians should not be ordained or even admitted to religious orders as lay brothers. The College ceased to function as a seminary and became a

\begin{footnotes}
\item[4] KARTTUNEN and LOCKHART 1987:149-155; Juan Bautista de POMAR 1941:26-31; \textit{Codex Mendoza} ff.59r,60r. For a summary of educational practices among the Mexica, see also CLENDINNEN 1991:112-114, 128-132, 153-156, 192
\item[7] Valeriano was about five years old when the College was founded and may not have been among the first primary students to be taken in, but he soon took his place among a distinguished group of students who became in time the teachers and administrators of the College.
\item[8] ANDERSON and DIBBLE, eds. 1982:82-83.
\item[9] ANDERSON and DIBBLE, eds. 1982:78.
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social experiment by which the friars sought to demonstrate that Indians could meet the highest standards of European scholarship even though they had shown no aptitude for vocational celibacy. Unfortunately, the more brilliant they showed themselves to be, the more resentment they inspired in society outside, Spanish as well as Indian. And so it was that the best and the brightest of a generation of Nahua youths were cut off from the friendship and support of anyone but the Franciscans, a life of service and dedication to the friars their only hope and bulwark in a chaotic and dangerous world.

Although Sahagún wrote that after testing them to the limits of their capabilities, the Franciscans planned to do with the alumni "what would seem just, as nearly as possible"\textsuperscript{10}, it was difficult to return them to the outside world. Instead, the College was made self-perpetuating; ten years after its founding, the Franciscans turned over its operation to its first alumni. By the time Antonio Valeriano was 24, he and many of his companions were teachers at the College, and one of his fellow alumni was its director.

Three years later Bernardino de Sahagún entered upon his great life work, the compilation of an encyclopedia on every aspect of central Mexico before the coming of the Spaniards: the birds, animals, and natural resources; the peoples, their languages, history, and religion; the ancient gods and how they had been worshipped. A great deal was already lost beyond recovery - the painted books burned, the priests attacked and even murdered as in Tlaxcala, temples and one whole city leveled and built over with Spanish houses and churches. But Sahagún was convinced that the evangelization had gone wrong and that the only hope of getting it back on track was to salvage what was left of the original culture in order to understand it better. To do this, he would need to talk with survivors from before the conquest and record their answers. He called upon the best of the collegians to assist him in a monumental project; in all the years of work that lay before him he took on no Spanish collaborators.

To begin with, Sahagún and four of the collegians moved to Tepepulco, a place near the Indian city of Texcoco. There the collegians worked with a dozen elderly informants, collecting information from them about the old days with the help of indigenous-style paintings and writing down all their answers in Nahuatl. After a couple of years Sahagún moved the operation back to Tlatelolco and had his assistants go through the process again with a different group of old men. Conflicting information was clarified in what Sahagún called "siftings," and of his assistants throughout the process, first in Tepepulco and then in Tlatelolco, Sahagún wrote, "the best and wisest one was Antonio Valeriano"\textsuperscript{11}.

Once the great mass of information was collected, Sahagún's assistants were joined by other collegians who, like them, were trilingual in Nahuatl, Latin, and Spanish and moreover had beautiful penmanship. Together the team wrote up their findings, and by 1569, a decade after they began, they had produced twelve books written in Nahuatl. Eventually the books would be redone in paired columns of Nahuatl and Spanish with lavish illustrations, and a Spanish version without the Nahuatl would also be prepared. But by this time Antonio Valeriano had made a splendid marriage to a noblewoman of Azcapotzalco and embarked on a political career. In 1565, when he was in his mid-30s, he became governor of Azcapotzalco,

\textsuperscript{10} ANDERSON and DIBBLE, eds. 1982:83.
\textsuperscript{11} ANDERSON and DIBBLE, eds. 1982:55.
and after a tenure of eight years, he moved on to become governor of the Indian community of Mexico City, a position he held for twenty-three years.

When he became governor of his hometown, Valeriano had more than half a dozen years of experience collecting old songs and ceremonial speeches from the days of the Aztecs. He and his Nahua colleagues valued them and sought to preserve them, adapting them to the new circumstances of post-conquest Mexico. A great event during his first year in office was the Spanish king’s gift of a coat of arms to Azcatlatozcalco, and in honor of the event Don Francisco Plácido, governor of the city of Xiquipilco, composed a song in the old style\(^\text{12}\). Previously Don Francisco had played the drum for another song performed in the house of Antonio Valeriano’s predecessor, and he had also composed a Christmas song in the old style\(^\text{13}\). In their civic life Don Francisco Plácido the drummer-poet and Antonio Valeriano, who was said to be “a great Latinist who could speak extemporaneously (even in the last years of his life) with such mastery and elegance that he brought to mind Cicero or Quintilian”\(^\text{14}\), were maintaining the tradition of Nezahualcoyotl, the legendary poet-king and patron of the arts in pre-conquest Texcoco.

In the meantime, things were not going well for Bernardino de Sahagún. Shortly after all twelve books of his encyclopedia were written to the end in Nahuatl, they -together with all his papers and drafts- were impounded by his superior and scattered to Franciscan monasteries far and wide. The all-consuming project which had been conducted entirely in Nahuatl without Spanish oversight had become the object of suspicion. Sahagún said that it was necessary to know the enemy in order to defeat him, but his meticulous recording of remembered rites and practices could as well be seen as encouraging the heathen in their ways.

The irony of the situation was that Sahagún himself had become more and more obsessed with seeing idolatry everywhere. He and his fellow Franciscans perceived it in devotions paid to the Virgin of Guadalupe at a hill north of Mexico City, warning that it was not the Virgin Mary whom Indians venerated there, but the Indians’ own ancient mother-goddess. Identifying Mary with *Tonantzin* “Our reverend mother”, Sahagún warned, “appears to be a Satanic invention”\(^\text{15}\). This did not endear Sahagún and his fellow friars to the current archbishop of Mexico City, who was promoting the pilgrimages to Tepeyacac, and it was five years before work continued on a Spanish translation of Sahagún's books.

By then Antonio Valeriano had moved on from Azcapotzalco to governing the Indians of Mexico City. Another of Sahagún's original assistants had become governor of Xochimilco where yet another one of his masters of beautiful penmanship had set himself up as a public notary\(^\text{16}\). As Sahagún’s fortunes declined, the civilian careers of the collegians soared. Yet they did not turn their backs on the Franciscans but continued to do translations for them and assist them in their projects. Of their assistance, Sahagún wrote that they “being knowledgeable of the Latin language, inform us to the properties of words, the properties of their manner of speech. And they correct for us the incongruities we express in sermons or

\(^{12}\) *Cantares mexicanos* f.41r. See Bierhorst edition, 1985.
\(^{13}\) *Cantares mexicanos* f.37r, f.37v.
\(^{15}\) DIBBLE and ANDERSON, eds. 1982:90.
\(^{16}\) For an example of the notarial work of Mateo Severino, see KARTTUNEN and LOCKHART 1976:93-97.
write in the catechisms. And whatever is to be rendered in their language, if it is not examined by them, if it is not written congruently in the Latin language, in Spanish, and in their language, cannot be free of defect"\(^{17}\). Ever ready to give credit to the collegians, he mentioned them by name in his prologues to the books of his encyclopedia and praised their individual talents.

Forty years after its founding, the graduates of the College were still providing invaluable services to the friars, but the College itself had, like Sahagún's encyclopedia project, fallen upon hard times. Under the management of its alumni but lacking support from the church hierarchy, it had suffered financially and materially. Buildings were not maintained, and the children living there slept in ramshackle dormitories. The epidemic of 1576 that decimated the Indian population of Mexico brought terrible mortality to the student body. Sahagún was devastated but gathered up his manuscripts and set more assistants to work on them. He himself was prevented from writing by his advanced age and trembling hand, but his assistants managed to get two bilingual Nahuatl-Spanish copies of the twelve volumes done. Both were taken away to Spain, and Sahagún died without knowing their fate. For the last five years of his long life he lived under excommunication. Born at the beginning of the century, he died in 1590.

A successful politician, a father and grandfather, Antonio Valeriano outlived his Franciscan master by fifteen years. He was still Indian governor in Mexico City when Sahagún died. Later, after he gave up the post because of ill-health, he continued to assist the Franciscans in linguistic analysis and translation, apologizing because his hand, like Sahagún's, had grown shaky with age\(^{18}\). The Franciscan friar Juan Bautista, with whom he carried on a correspondence in Latin to the very end of his life, wrote of Valeriano, "He aided me greatly, especially in matters of etymology and in many constructions where the meaning was problematic... Because these days there are few Indians with whom one can discuss points of their language, for they are scarce and many of them use ungrammatical constructions like those the Spaniards use"\(^{19}\). In the prologue to his book of Nahuatl sermons published in 1606, the year after Valeriano's death, Juan Bautista eulogized him as a man who had devoted more than thirty years of his life to governing with "prudence and rectitude" as well as being "one of the best linguists and rhetoricians" the College of Santa Cruz ever produced\(^{20}\).

Like Bernardino de Sahagún, Antonio Valeriano died without knowing what had become of the encyclopedia he had helped to compile. It was not until the nineteenth century that one of the two illustrated bilingual copies was found in a library in Florence, Italy, and recognized for what it was. Now the work of Sahagún and the collegians is available in color facsimile for all the world to admire, and the Nahuatl text of all twelve books has been translated into English under the title of the *Florentine Codex*.

Today Antonio Valeriano is not well known for the many accomplishments of his rags-to-riches career, but curiously enough he is credited with things he probably did not do. In library catalogues the *Florentine Codex* appears under Sahagún's name; under Antonio

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\(^{17}\) DIBBLE and ANDERSON, eds. 1982:83-84.
\(^{18}\) For the text of Valeriano's last letter to Juan Bautista, apologizing for his infirmities, see RICARD 1966:223.
\(^{19}\) JUAN BAUTISTA 1606, unnumbered page in prologue.
\(^{20}\) JUAN BAUTISTA 1606, unnumbered page in prologue.
Valeriano's appears something else, a Nahuatl title Nican mopohua ("Here is related"), the first words of a text in Nahuatl relating the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe at Tepeyacac. Yet there is no evidence that he wrote the account. It was first published more than forty years after Valeriano's death by the curate of the Guadalupe parish, who claimed that he himself had written it in Nahuatl. Considering its masterful rhetoric, it is unlikely that the priest actually composed it, but unlike Sahagún, he gave no credit to Indian assistants21. More than sixty years after Valeriano's death, a witness at a hearing claimed to have heard the Guadalupe story from a man who had in turn heard it from Valeriano, the great linguist and Indian governor. Onward through the centuries the story took shape that Valeriano had written the account on Indian paper made from maguey leaves which then crumbled to dust, but not before someone who was familiar with Valeriano's handwriting had recognized it in the original22.

It is unlikely that the Guadalupe text is Valeriano's work. The story makes an antagonist of Bishop Juan de Zumárraga, a revered Franciscan personally known to Valeriano and his fellow collegians. Moreover, Valeriano's mentor, Sahagún, was near choleric in his denunciation of the association of the Virgin Mary with the place called Tepeyacac. For Valeriano to have perpetuated the story of how the humble Indian Juan Diego tried to report the apparition of the Virgin to a heedless Franciscan bishop who could only be made to pay attention by a divine miracle would have been treasonous. Yet we can see from Juan Bautista's eulogy that Valeriano enjoyed the confidence of the Franciscans to the end of his life. Nonetheless, by the twentieth century Valeriano came to be accepted as the author of Nican mopohua23.

In the twentieth century he has been associated with another major piece of Nahuatl literature. The Cantares mexicanos is a collection of Nahuatl poems to be sung to drum accompaniment. Some of them are attributed to individuals, including Nezahualcoyotl, ruler of Texcoco, but nowhere is there any indication of who brought them together in one manuscript. Among them are some verses labeled "Otomí songs". Angel María Garibay took this to mean that the poems were translated from Otomí, a language unrelated to Nahuatl, and suggested that Valeriano and Don Francisco Plácido were their translators and annotators. But Garibay goes on to say that his suggestion is both circumstantial and speculative24. Enlarging on Garibay's speculation, John Bierhorst, who translated the Cantares into English, credits Valeriano with a major role in the collection of the poems. His line of reasoning is similar to that of people who associate Valeriano with the Guadalupe story, namely that he was literate and lived in the right time and place25.

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21 For a discussion of the author's skillful manipulation of point of view in Nican Mopohua, see the article by Andrews in Texas Linguistic Forum 18.
22 In the New York Public Library lies an incomplete manuscript version of the Guadalupe story in Nahuatl that is similar, but not identical to the one published by the curate back in 1649, written in ink on conventional paper, protected from disintegration. No one seems to associate this one with Antonio Valeriano.
23 For a full treatment of the origins and history of devotions to the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico, see Burkhart forthcoming.
25 Bierhorst 1985:9, 12.
It is rather sad that Antonio Valeriano's claim to fame four centuries after his death should derive from such tenuous associations when the story of how he survived a vulnerable childhood to become a reknowned scholar and a wielder of political power are so vivid.

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