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The Visions of a Guachichil Witch in 1599: A Window on the Subjugation of Mexico's Hunter-Gatherers

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Abstract. On a single day in 1599 an old Guachichil woman was tried and hanged for witchcraft in San Luis Potosí, the newly pacified northern frontier of New Spain. Using the Spanish encounter with the hunter-gatherer Guachichiles as background, this paper provides a cultural analysis of the old woman's visions and prophecies of a new world in which there would be no Spaniards and the Indians would have eternal life. Since Guachichil culture, like that of virtually all the Chichimec groups, was destroyed by Spanish colonial expansion, this analysis provides a rare glimpse into the Guachichil experience of conquest and one woman's aborted effort to inspire a politico-religious revitalization.

At the time of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, the Indians known as Chichimecas were the hunter-gatherers and warriors who occupied the immense, semi-arid terrain of the northern altiplano in large, dispersed groups.¹ One of the largest of these groups were the Guachichiles. South of this desertlike region lay the settlements of the sedentary agricultural peoples of Mesoamerica, another vast culture area, with their great temples, politico-religious hierarchies, trade, and cities. In a mere two years Cortés conquered virtually all of central Mexico, bringing under the control of the Spanish Crown such varied sedentary groups as the Tlaxcalans, the Mexica, and the Tarascans. With the death of Cortés in 1547 this "first conquest of Mexico," as Philip Wayne Powell fittingly calls it, came to an end. Afterwards, a much more difficult, costly, and bloody conquest ensued as Spaniards moved north, in their perennial search for riches, to the areas occupied by various Chichimec groups (Powell 1974: ix). Unlike their sedentary neighbors to the south, the Chichimecas proved difficult to conquer, resisting for nearly a half century—from 1548 to 1590—the advance of Spanish colonization. This resistance, as viewed from the Spanish perspective, which assumed an eminent right to the northern lands, came to be known as the War of the Chichimecas (see Powell 1974, 1977).

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The discovery of silver in Zacatecas in 1546 and the subsequent northward expansion of commerce and trade routes brought Spaniards into direct contact with the Zacatecos and Guachichiles and later with other Chichimec groups (Bakewell 1971: 4–40). By 1550, 34 companies at Zacatecas owned and operated mines employing black slaves and Indians from the already conquered regions of central Mexico (Powell 1974: 14). As the bustling traffic of settlers, entrepreneurs, and laborers made headway on the Mexico-Zacatecas highway, and as ranches began to multiply to provide food and supplies for the miners, the Guachichiles and Zacatecos did not sit idly observing the busy antwork of colonization on their lands. Formed into small groups or leagues joining several tribes, they raided the caravans of the Spaniards from their stronghold in the valleys of the Tunel Grande, stealing horses, looting supply posts, and killing many travelers on the Zacatecas road. In the decades that followed, they destroyed houses and towns, sacked and burned churches, and made martyrs out of the friars who came to convert them (*ibid.*: 42, 53).

Reports and chronicles by Spanish writers, not surprisingly, emphasize the wildness, brutality, and thieving character of the Chichimecas. Writing in 1562, the Zacatecan miner Pedro de Ahumada noted that the Indians of Zacatecas and San Martin “who live in the unsettled areas [*despoblados*] go around naked like savages. They have neither laws nor houses nor commerce nor do they till the land nor work except at hunting; and they sustain themselves from that and wild fruits and roots” (Ahumada 1943 [1562]: 57). These fruits and roots included *tunas* (prickly pears) and mezquite seed (from which a form of bread was made). Elsewhere Ahumada adds, speaking now of the Guachichiles of Salinas, that “they run around that region like wild beasts just stopping in any one place long enough to finish the meal of tunas or mezquite that there is in it” (*ibid.*: 59).

Another observer, Alonso de la Mota, writing of the Guachichiles of Nuevo León, similarly calls attention to their savage nature:

The people of these lands are naked and very poor and extremely barbarous. . . . They all live bent over and inclined towards the ground just like brutes without ever raising their eyes from it and thus their only occupation is to look for food with bow and arrow, to procreate, and to make war with each other. (Quoted in Percheron 1982: 5)

Torquemada goes so far as to compare the Chichimecas to deer (quoted in *ibid.*). Or as Capitan Alonso de León, referring to the Chichimecas of northern Mexico, Texas, and New Mexico, puts it, “there are no bucks like them in the bush” (quoted in Percheron 1982: 26).

If they were beasts and savages in the state of nature, the Chichimecas were also expert archers, brave warriors, and cruel victors, who had a reputation for scalping, dismembering, and eating many of their victims (Powell

1974: 44–51; Percheron 1982: 23–31). The Chichimecas—and especially the Guachichiles of the Tunal Grande, today the central region of San Luis Potosí—were greatly feared both by Spaniards and by the sedentary Indians who came north with them to work in the newly founded mines and ranches. The Guachichiles, who got their name from the red feather headdresses they wore, painted animal figures on their bodies when they went to war and were “so frightening, thus adorned, that they even scare mules” (quoted in Powell 1974: 53).

Yet, though these warriors inspired fright, Spanish miners and ranchers increasingly began to express annoyance in their petitions to the authorities. In the last decades of the sixteenth century, as it became clear that the mines were rich and the land well-suited for herding, the Chichimecas were no longer seen merely as cruel savages: they became obstacles in the landscape, like trees that had to be cut to clear a path, standing in the way of Spanish political and economic expansion. A petition sent to the viceroy of New Spain in 1582 by a group of cattle ranchers and settlers living on the Chichimec frontier gave unabashed voice to this view of the Chichimecas as a bothersome presence. One witness complained that “said Indians have taken and occupied much land and the very best of New Spain, where he knows and has news that there are many mines, from which no benefit is drawn because of fear of said Indians.” Another spoke of how “the lands said Indian raiders possess and have are many and of great importance, mines as well as fertile lands for fields and ranches with much water for irrigating and of very good climate for populating pueblos of Spaniards” (quoted in Powell 1971: 236, 242). The annoyance of the settlers, then, stemmed from their perception that such a barbaric people as the Chichimecas were occupying land that was “the very best of New Spain,” land that should properly have served for “pueblos of Spaniards.” It was the “audacity” (*atrevimiento*) of these Indians that was appalling, the way they carried on “without shame” (*con desverguenza*), in the words of yet another witness (*ibid.*: 256).

Given the desire to weed the Chichimecas out of the landscape once and for all, most Spanish settlers frankly proposed genocide as a solution. This was the basis for the policy of “war by fire and blood” (*guerra a fuego y sangre*), which was pursued vigorously from the 1560s until the 1580s. Pedro de Ahumada, the Zacatecan miner who we earlier heard describing the Zácatecos and Guachichiles as “wild beasts,” had personally meted out brutal punishment to the Indians he had captured during a military raid in the early 1560s. A fellow soldier later testified that Ahumada had himself carried out a surprise attack “and cut off the feet of some and the hands of more than 300 Indians” after finding a friar “shot with arrows” and a few Indians in possession of church ornaments (*ibid.*: 255). Other punishments commonly used by Spaniards against the Chichimecas included hanging, burning, and beheading victims (Powell 1974: 109).

Those who advocated the policy of “war by fire and blood” had few qualms about enslaving captured Chichimecas. Underpaid Spanish soldiers often made expeditions into Chichimec territories expressly to provoke native resistance and thereby win legal Indian slaves for themselves (Bakewell 1971: 32). Slavery, whether legal or not, was in fact widespread from the earliest contact with the Chichimecas. In 1569, two female Chichimec slaves, aged twelve and twenty-five respectively, were auctioned off to the highest bidder (Powell 1971: 168). A document from 1575 provides a list of nineteen Chichimec slaves, both men and women, ranging in ages from seven to forty, who belonged to a single soldier (*ibid.*: 185–92). The Franciscan friar, Fray Geronimo de Mendieta, observed that since the Chichimecas possessed little more than bow and arrow, those Spaniards who were not missionaries “stood to gain little from them . . . except to hunt the Indians themselves and sell them as captives.” This treatment of the Indians, Mendieta noted, caused them to be “agitated and ready to fight” (1971 [1596]: 402). Another chronicler, Gonzalo de Las Casas, whose account of the Chichimecas was intended to justify Spanish warfare against them, could not help but note the instances of Spanish treachery: the surprise attacks and the promises of peace that ended with the Spaniards capturing the Indians and turning them into slaves (1936 [1581]: 178).

Powell has called the Spanish encounter with the Chichimecas “a cruel confrontation of Savagery and Civilization” (1977: ix). But with all the documentation he himself brings to bear on the encounter one must wonder: who, indeed, were the savages? Spanish perceptions of the Chichimecas as “wild” and “savage” were, in part, a reaction to encountering a people who were very different from them, a people who hunted and gathered rather than farmed and raised animals, a people whose independence and mobility was a dangerous threat to a colonizing society. However, these perceptions were also structured by what Renato Rosaldo (1978) has called a “rhetoric of control.” Using symbolic inversion and generalizing from certain violent acts, Spanish accounts of the Chichimecas, like later accounts of the Ilongots of the Philippines, succeeded in portraying the other as “natural bandits and wild Indians,” thereby legitimating the introduction of Spanish law, religion, and civilization (Rosaldo 1978: 254). Such inversion was likewise used in the jungles of the Putumayo during the early part of this century by rubber entrepreneurs, who cultivated the image of the wild Indian to legitimate their own cannibalistic economic exploitation of native people (Taussig 1984). Or, closer to home, the English dwelled on the idea that the North American Indian, like a distorting mirror, represented what civilized Englishmen “were not and must not be” (Pearce 1965: 5), an idea that helped to justify the destruction of indigenous life, even as it was being mythologized (see Slotkin 1973; Axtell 1981; Simmons 1981).

With the Chichimecas, the mirror is turned in only one direction. Unlike

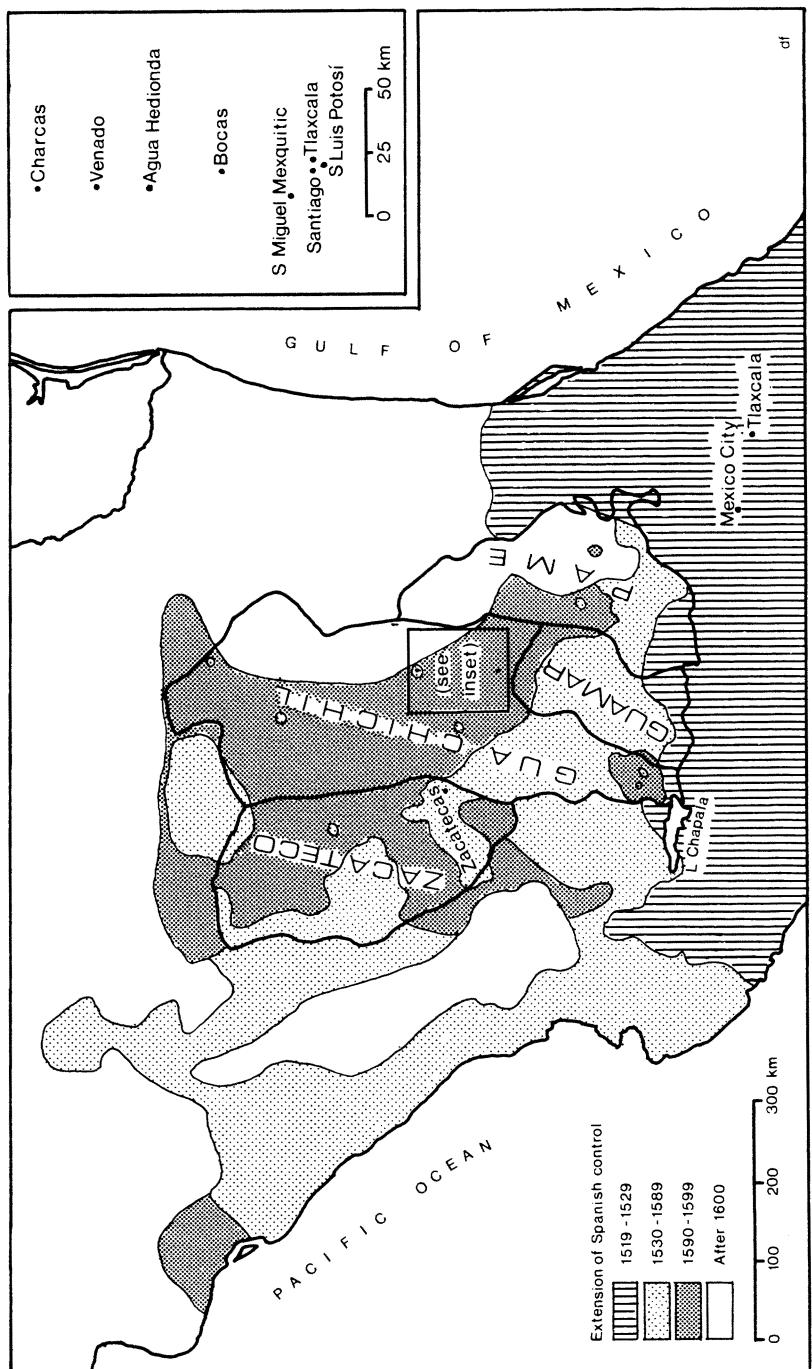


Figure 1. Spanish Expansion into Chichimec Territory, 1519-1599, and (inset map) the Tunal Grande Region in 1599.
[Source: maps and information in Gerhard 1972 and 1982.]

the sedentary peoples, who left texts of various kinds—from temples to codices—to speak for the depth of their cultures, the Chichimecas left little more than arrowheads to speak for theirs. Of course this is only true in a certain sense; it is well known that several Chichimec groups invaded the central highlands of Mexico in the centuries before the conquest, and there is evidence that cultivation had extended very far north during the period of Toltec domination (Wolf 1959: 114–29). Yet in spite of this interaction and complex meshing of sedentary and nomadic cultures, the ethnohistorian is still left with the problem of reconstructing the thought and culture of the hunting and gathering peoples that Spaniards encountered as they moved north.

This is a difficult, almost impossible task. The available documentation on the Chichimecas was produced by Spanish observers, and though one can extract materials of ethnological value from their chronicles and reports, they do not furnish an interior view of the worldview and way of life of the people such as an anthropologist seeks to provide. Since the reports we have about the Chichimecas were mainly war chronicles that sought to justify Spanish aggression by emphasizing the barbarity of the natives, we learn little about religious beliefs among the Chichimecas. At best, what we have is the observation that the Chichimecas had no idols, hence no gods, hence no religion (Rodriguez 1981: 27); in that sense, the Aztecs were at least more comprehensible. Antonio de Ciudad Real wrote of them in 1588 that “they have no idols nor any worship that has been known of up to now; rather, in this, as in so many things, they differ little from brute animals” (1976 [1588]: 160). Finally, these chronicles do not provide us with a vision of how the Chichimecas experienced and perceived the conquest, such as is available for other indigenous peoples in León-Portilla (1961, 1964) and Brotherston (1979).

The documented case I will describe and analyze in the pages that follow can only fill this lacuna in small part. Still, it is of interest for the politico-religious vision of revitalization and the shamanistic challenge to conquest that its main protagonist, an old Guachichil woman, provides, and for which she ultimately dies. Although this is only one case, indeed one document, I suggest that by using an interpretive approach we can get at some of the deeper realities which have thus far remained obscure behind the pacification of the Chichimecas. My larger aim is to demonstrate how archival materials can be used creatively to give voice to the ideological worlds of people whose cultures were destroyed in the period of European colonial expansion.

Sociohistorical Background to the Text

The text we will be focusing on here is a criminal case (*causa criminal*) that was handled in a single day—19 July 1599. With lightning speed it moves

from a report of the crime, the accounts of six witnesses, and the confession of the accused woman, to the verdict, the unsuccessful appeal of her lawyer, and the final public hanging of the witch. The events of the case take place in the community of Tlaxcala—today one of the seven traditional *barrios* of San Luis Potosí—which earlier in the sixteenth century had been the heartland of the Chichimec group of Guachichiles who inhabited the Tunal Grande. To better understand the case, let us consider briefly the sociohistorical background behind the events of that remarkable day in 1599.

After four decades of futile battle with Chichimec warriors, Spanish officials convinced the crown of the need for a change in strategy: rather than continuing the “war by fire and blood,” they would pacify the Chichimecas by means of gift-giving. Beginning in 1589 the Chichimecas were offered steady gifts of corn, meat, cloth, and blankets. This was a “mechanism of subordination,” to borrow a term from Greg Urban (1985: 237), which proved successful in establishing peace with a once independent people. A people who before conquest had no need of clothing or cultivated foodstuffs, the Chichimecas were brought into what was, at the end of the sixteenth century, a world political economy through the enticement of the conquerors’ gifts. Urban’s description of how the Brazilian nation-state employed gifts early in this century to pacify the isolated Shokleng, accustoming them to goods they could not produce themselves and using “these gifts in carrot-and-stick fashion to assert its dominance” (*ibid.*), also applies to the sixteenth-century Spanish pacification of the Chichimecas.

The nakedness that the Spanish found so striking about the Chichimecas—“they go around naked in puris naturalibus, the women girdled with some deerskin, the rest naked, among them they have no shame of being naked and do not allow clothing, but when they deal with us they manifest it [shame], and look for something to conceal their shameful parts with, even with rags or leaves” (Las Casas 1936 [1581]: 162)—was soon covered with “Castilian blankets . . . woven petticoats or skirts . . . shirts of Chinese cloth and Chinese brown holland . . . shirts with collars and cuffs of fine Indian muslin . . . cordovan and dressed sheepskin boots . . . complete men’s wear from London . . . Rouen collars” (Powell 1974: 218–19). That the Chichimecas were already attempting to conceal their nakedness in the presence of Spaniards, even before the final purchase of peace, indicates how quickly and drastically their society was changing merely from the fact of contact. The same was true with respect to food and its acquisition. The “looting and raiding” of cattle carts and mule trains for which they were notorious was, in a sense, another, more convenient, form of hunting, an idea that is borne out by the way Chichimecas referred to cattle as “big deer” (Ahumada 1943 [1562]: 60). Their well-known love for beef, to which the chroniclers often alluded, was an acquired taste that developed rapidly as Spanish settlements swelled on the horizon of the Zacatecan silver mines. With the final purchase of peace, the irreparable changes in Chichimec society that had been set

in motion since contact hardened into more permanent forms; hunting and gathering fell away as the seductively free “gifts” of maize, beef, and clothing began to pour in from Spanish royal coffers.

Having won peace, the next goal of the Spanish colonizers was to turn a warring, hunting and gathering people into pacific, sedentary agriculturalists; it was necessary not just to convert the Chichimecas but to change their very mode of existence if they were to be brought under state control. A plan to organize, under viceroyal Spanish auspices, the formal emigration of 400 Tlaxcalan families to the Chichimec frontier to help consolidate the peace was quickly approved (Powell 1977: 147–59; Velázquez 1897–99: I, 177–203; Gibson 1952: 183–87). What better way to tame “wild Indians” than to settle in their midst civilized Christian Indians who might serve as an example to them? A document from the era speaks of the “great service that will be done to God Our Lord . . . and the Kingdom of New Spain” by the Tlaxcalans in “guiding the Chichimecas and quieting them, teaching them by farming and making houses” (Velázquez 1897–99: I, 179). The Tlaxcalans, lured by various privileges promised them by the Spaniards, arrived by 1591 in the Tunal Grande, settling in San Miguel Mexquitic, Charcas, Venado, Agua Hedionda, as well as in other communities further north, and in 1592 in what was later to be the Indian barrio of Tlaxcala in the city of San Luis.

These Tlaxcalans were not the only sedentary people from central Mexico to settle among the Chichimecas. During the decades of war with the Chichimecas, groups of Cholultecas, Mexicas, Tarascans, and Otomíes had come north, in the disorganization, death, and disorder following the conquest, to work in the mines, to peddle, to participate in the war, and to farm new lands. Thus in the city of San Luis the barrio of Santiago was settled by Tarascans.

One of the rationales behind the Spanish plan of organizing Tlaxcalan emigration to the Chichimec areas was that the Tlaxcalans, besides setting the example of sedentary life to the nomadic Chichimecas, would intermarry with them; such miscegenation would gradually do away with the warrior qualities of the race and make them peaceable and tractable. A document from 1636 gives conscious voice to the aim of the policy: that the Tlaxcalans, once settled among the Guachichiles, “can become family and marry each other and in this way domesticate them and instruct them in the ways of political and Christian life” (AGI/S México, 1043).

In fact, intermarriage, though not unknown, appears to have been rare. The Tlaxcalans had their own internal divisions, keeping apart according to the organization of their original barrios. In any case, it seems unlikely that they would have intermarried with a people for so long despised as barbarians. The Chichimecas, on the other hand, seem to have maintained enough of a sense of a distinct cultural identity to remain separate; or, what seems more

likely, many of them retreated to the unsettled areas further north or to the less accessible hills to the east, as did the Pames, the last surviving Chichimec group in San Luis Potosí (see Chemin Bassler 1977).

Clearly some of the Chichimecas stayed behind, going to work in Spanish mines and haciendas, and becoming converted to Christianity. The mission system, employing Jesuits and Franciscans, had accompanied the attainment of pacification by gift-giving to such an extent that during the early distribution of gifts to the Chichimecas, friars were often present so the Indians would “acquire affection for the cleric” (Powell 1977: 146; cf. Powell 1974: 208–12). As a chronicle from the period from 1602 to 1605 states, “The old ones who were warriors are dying and now those who are born are raised with doctrine and kindly and Christian manners” (quoted in Percheron 1982: 70). But many more seem to have fled or died out (Gerhard 1972: 236). By 1650 the Guachichiles had virtually disappeared as a people from the entire jurisdiction of San Luis Potosí, which comprised a large area of towns and communities surrounding the city. A census-taker notes:

None of the Indians are Chichimecas, because today it is very rare to find or to see this nation conserved in these settlements, rather they are from other provinces of this New Spain, who having come to work in the mines have stayed with their families in these pueblos and most of them are Otomies and other Mexicans from Michoacan and the Huasteca. (Quoted in Percheron 1982: 70–71)

In Mexquitic, located within what was once the “center and heart” of the Guachichil territory, there were 98 Guachichiles living next to 312 Tlaxcalans in 1622 (BN/M, 58: 1160), while in 1636 there were 41 Guachichiles and 291 Tlaxcalans (AGI/S México, 1043). By 1674 there were 105 Tlaxcalan families and just 2 “old Indian women of the Guachichil nation” (AHESLP, Alcaldía Mayor). As the decade drew to a close, not even one Guachichil was left in Mexquitic.

Given that the Guachichiles were destined to disappear from the San Luis area, the document we are about to look at in detail is especially valuable. It is perhaps the only document that has survived of the era following the peace with the Chichimecas that gives us any idea of the conflicts and tensions that arose during the early period of colonization. In that document we hear an especially poignant cry of resistance from an old Guachichil woman, a cry that was silenced virtually as soon as it was uttered.

The Accusation of Witchcraft

The document has a clear structure. It begins with the *cabeza de proceso*, an introduction to the case, and is followed by the testimony of six witnesses, the confession of the accused woman, the ratification of their testimony by the

witnesses, the defense made by the lawyer of the accused, the sentence, the lawyer's appeal, and the execution of the witch by hanging.²

From the *cabeza de proceso* we learn that on the previous day, a Sunday, an old Guachichil woman living in the barrio of Tlaxcala entered the churches of the Tlaxcalans and of the Tarascans and "broke the crosses and removed all the images in them, stirring up all the Indians." Several Indians —we are not told which—went to the *justicia mayor*, Capitan Gabriel Ortiz de Fuenmayor, to report the news. The political importance of this old woman's aggression was immediately apparent to Fuenmayor, while the Indians who brought him the news clearly seemed more concerned about her powers as a witch. We are told that the old Guachichil woman

with the great strength of her sorcery has attracted many of the Indians of that nation, the Chichimecas as much as those who are settled in said pueblo of Tlaxcala . . . the said Indian woman threatening them, insisting that they rise up and follow her in her idolatries, and that if they do not rise up that she will destroy them because she has the ability to do so, and that they should help her go to the pueblo of San Luis where the Spaniards have settled and kill them all and that if they do not go she will kill them. (113)

A last detail is added about the death of a Tarascan Indian (the *cabeza de proceso* states incorrectly that he was a Tlaxcalan), who we later learn was rumored to have been killed by the old woman through her sorcery.

The witnesses were called forth on the very day that Fuenmayor received the news, and each, while providing the same basic story, added new details. A Tarascan witness was asked to give testimony; the other five witnesses were Guachichiles, all but one of them Christian. The Indian woman remains nameless throughout the text, "for she is not Christian nor has she been baptized."

Mateo, the first witness, a Guachichil living in the barrio of Tlaxcala, stated that he knew the old woman—but not by name, "she is not Christian"—and the man, called Andrés, "who they say is her husband and a Christian" and who accompanied her on her mission; they too lived in Tlaxcala. Mateo saw the old woman removing the crosses and images from the Tlaxcalan church and later from the Tarascan church, "exciting all the Guachichiles and the Tarascan and Tlaxcalan Indians." Then the woman yelled out "in her tongue that now many people would die, and that even if they saw her dead they should not believe she had died, because many Indians and Christians would have to die before she died" (114). As we will see again and again, death—and rebirth—are major themes in the old woman's discourse.

This witness went on to say that he knew this woman used sorcery (*anda con hechizos*) and that on the same day she removed the crosses and images from the churches she killed a Tarascan Indian named Agustín by

"grazing his ear with a little stick." He also heard that the day before, Sunday, the woman had told people not to go to mass and that no one had gone. Afterwards she had called for Chichimecas from Agua del Venado, Charcas, Bocas, and San Miguel (Mexquitic) to come to Tlaxcala, and more than 150 of them had heeded her call. She spoke to the Chichimecas congregated around her, telling them to bring their sons "and that no Spaniard was to be left alive, because all would be killed, because the Indians would kill them, and that they should rise up, and that the earth would open with the sorcery that she was going to work."

The second witness, a Tarascan by the name of Juan, also knew the old woman and her companion Andrés. In his version of the story, Juan emphasized the old woman's contact with the Tarascan Indian Agustín who died later that day. After removing the crosses and images from the Tarascan church and bringing them outside, the woman, "speaking loudly in her tongue, which this witness could not understand," began to talk to the Tarascan, "asking him if he wanted to go to La Laguna [an unidentified place]." Agustín told her that he did not understand, and the woman "told him that he would understand and she put her hand on his ear and afterwards the said Indian went home and fell ill, throwing up foam from his mouth and nose, and that night he died."

Juan reported that the Chichimecas had declared publicly that the woman was a witch (*hechicera*) and that with her sorcery she killed Agustín and another Indian—but that no one had dared report the latter homicide. He too stated that she had called the Indians of her nation from San Miguel, Agua del Venado, and Charcas to come to Tlaxcala, and that she had told them to "go live in La Laguna because if not the earth will open and she will kill them all, saying this in shouts and persuading them with her sorcery" (116).

From the third witness, a Guachichil named Juan, we learn something more about the old woman's witchcraft: the Indian natives had told him that she was a witch "and that she turns herself into a coyote and other abominable things." Having seen the Tarascan who died "spewing blood and foam from the mouth and nose," this witness said "that he now understands that what the Indians say about said Indian woman is true." This witness went to San Miguel (Mexquitic) to tell Pedro de Torres, cacique and captain of the Chichimecas living there, that the old woman wanted to see him. Upon their return, they too found groups of people from the other Chichimec settlements who had responded to the call of the old woman.

The fourth witness, Gaspar, a Guachichil who was not a baptized Christian, provided more information on the old woman's witchcraft with animals. He claimed to have known her for many years and to have heard her once say that she turned an Indian into a deer and her companion, Andrés, into a coyote and that afterwards she raised her arms and turned them back

into men. He had also heard her say that she had taken all the Indians who had died there to La Laguna “and that she had made of them a pueblo of Indians.” She had announced that she was waiting for Pedro de Torres to arrive so that he would go with her to San Luis—a purely Spanish pueblo at the time—and that “arriving he should go and make the old become young and resurrect the dead and heal the sick, and that by doing this they would become immortal and never grow old.” This witness also recalled her threat: that if the Chichimecas did not help her to kill the Spaniards “that she would make the earth open and swallow them all.”

Andrés, the old woman’s companion, was the fifth witness. He claimed to have known the old woman for three years, declaring that she was not a Christian and that they were friends, not husband and wife. Asked how long it had been since the woman used sorcery, he responded that she had done so for ten days, as did the witness before him. Asked if it was true that the old woman turned him into a coyote, he responded that it was, that with an act of sorcery she turned him into a coyote and that he even saw his coyote tail! In the same way, the woman turned a son of hers into a deer and later turned them both back into men. He confirmed that she had called Pedro de Torres and other Indians to join her in going to San Luis “to resurrect the dead Indians and turn the old into young and that if they didn’t want to go she would make the earth open and swallow them all.”

The last witness was Pedro de Torres, the captain of the Guachichiles in San Miguel (Mexquitic). He claimed to know Andrés but not the accused woman, though he had heard from other Indians that she was a witch. He recounted how he was told by messenger that an old Indian woman wanted to see him in Tlaxcala and how upon arriving he was told by many people that she had removed crosses and images from the churches and killed a Tarascan. The old woman, as soon as he arrived, asked why he had taken so long, saying “that now he would see and he would die,” and he had responded that, “if God is served by my death, then it is well and good, and that she was not going to kill him.” At his words, the old woman became quiet “and began to pound on the ground with her hands.” Here Pedro de Torres provided the key rationale for doing away with the old woman: “he and the other Chichimec Indians and Tlaxcalans were quiet, peaceful, and calm and because of the said Indian woman they have become stirred up and restless” (120).

The Visions of the Witch

Following the testimony of the six witnesses, the accused woman was called in to provide her testimony. We learn that she had been living in Tlaxcala for about ten years—in other words, since the establishment of peace with the Chichimecas—and that for the last three years she had been away from the

pueblo "in other parts" to the east of San Luis, where she claimed to have "made the earth open with her sorcery." The interrogators set her age at over sixty years old. When asked if it was true that she had been dealing in sorcery for a long time, she simply answered no. But when asked if she turned Andrés into a coyote and her son into a kid (*sic*), she went into detail about a vision she had when she was drunk. That day she saw coming toward her two figures in the form

of deer and they said to her not to turn away and that they were looking for her and that they did not want to appear to anyone else but her, because she was ill and they wanted to see her, and she said that she was very old the time she saw the figures and now she is young and healthy and they have taken away some cataracts that she had, and then these two figures went into a cave with her and they gave her a horse, which she has in said pueblo of Tlaxcala, and that one of the two figures was a deer that rode atop of a horse and the other deer had the horse bridled, and on that occasion she was crippled and after seeing the two figures she is well. (121)

Similarly, when asked if it was true that she had entered the churches of the Tlaxcalans and of the Tarascans and removed the crosses and images, she recalled another vision. She told of how, when she entered the church of the Tlaxcalans, she saw her daughter who was buried there rise from her grave. She ran after her daughter, who had "gotten under the altar of the church, and not being able to catch her she took the images and crosses and threw them on the floor and left and went to the church of the Tarascans and did the same thing there, because being enraged and angry at not being able to catch her daughter, she took vengeance on the churches."

She denied having killed the Tarascan, saying that the two deer figures called her attention to the dying man, and that the day before he had come to her and told her he was ill and she told him that when she was ill she was the same way. She did admit that she had settled the dead of Tlaxcala near her house, "having returned them to life." Again she told her interrogators that she was not a witch, adding that she had sent the heart of the dead Tarascan to the place of the resurrected. Her responses seemed so bizarre to her interrogators that she was asked if she was "crazy or drunk or deaf," to which she responded, "she is not one or the other, nor does she take peyote [as the Chichimecas were reputed to do] nor has she ever taken it in her life."

Spanish Interpretations of the Case

The defense of the accused Chichimec woman was presented by Juan López Panyagua. He sought to prove her innocence by arguing that the old woman was a harmless drunk and not to be taken seriously by the Spaniards. First,

he stated that she could not have possibly killed the Tarascan man because "she had no weapons nor an occasion on which to murder him." Then he pointed out that she should be allowed to go free because she was crazy "and lacking in judgement." When she committed the actions for which she had been charged, "she was drunk and with the drunkenness and fury of the alcohol she says that she saw visions, and being drunk she entered the churches and without knowing what she was doing, she pulled down the images because of that vision she claims to have seen." Therefore, it was her lack of sense caused by drunkenness that caused her to do what she did, this drunkenness being "among them [i.e., the Indians] something usual and frequent." Panyagua thus asked that she be freed, or that he at least be given a three-day extension to verify the accusations further.

But Fuenmayor, who had fought against the Chichimecas years before and had been involved in the proceedings that finally established peace, was not about to offer the old Chichimec woman clemency. He denied Panyagua his request for a three-day extension. For Fuenmayor, as magistrate of the recently pacified Chichimec frontier, it was clear that if the woman were let free

great harm and disservice to God Our Lord and His Majesty would result, because with the information that has been obtained that said Indian woman is a witch, she has all the Guachichiles stirred up and as the proceedings show she has brought together many of her people and has made them come from different parts to the pueblo of Tlaxcala . . . and being let out of the jail where she now is, all the people who are now at peace would be stirred up. (125)

Sensing that this woman posed a real political danger, though perhaps a little too precipitately (Powell 1977: 256), Fuenmayor quickly drafted the sentence: "that she be let out of jail and taken on horseback, with the trumpets blaring and a town crier announcing her crime, to the gallows situated on the road from San Luis to Tlaxcala, and there that her feet be raised from the floor with a rope and that she die naturally by hanging." The old woman was seen hanging at the site for a few hours until she finally expired.

Towards a Cultural Interpretation

To interpret this case, let us consider certain of its historical, cultural, and symbolic features. This text, in some ways, is reminiscent of the idolatry cases that were tried in central Mexico during the 1530s by the early tribunal of the Inquisition headed by Zumárraga, the first bishop of Mexico.

These cases involved several Indian caciques and nobles who were tried for offenses involving sorcery, idolatry, polygamy, and seditious plots against both state and gospel (see Greenleaf 1962; Gibson 1964: 100–101; Padden 1970: 240–74; Lafaye 1976: 19–24).³ The guilty were punished in various

ways. In 1537 the rainmakers and sorcerers Mixcoatl and Papalatl, who had preached against the friars, were forced to ride on burros while being flogged, have their hair sheared, and abjure their sins in all the towns and villages where they had made anti-Christian statements (Padden 1970: 249). The “seer, prophet, and inciter of rebellion,” Don Martin Ucelo (*Ocelotl*), was condemned in 1537 to life imprisonment in Spain (*ibid.*: 248–49). Don Carlos Chichimecatecuhtli, the cacique of Texcoco who was educated in the Franciscan College of Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco, was tried in 1539 for crimes of idolatry, incest, apostasy, and seditious claims made against church and state; he was burned at the stake (*ibid.*: 259–69).⁴

These, among many other similar cases, pointed to the church’s failure to convert fully the natives to Christianity. And, in a self-reinforcing manner, they served to convince many Church fathers, for a time anyway, that the Indians required harsh discipline and punishment to learn where the true path to the salvation of their souls lay (see Gibson 1964: 117; Clendinnen 1982). Clearly, in the years following the conquest, many of the conquered, especially former community leaders, still harbored the hope of resisting the intertwined religious and political rule of the Spanish conquerors. The disciplinary methods of the early period of evangelization were soon condemned as being too harsh and excessive with those so new to the faith, and the Inquisition, when reinstated in 1570, was not permitted to bring suits against Indians (Lafaye 1976: 19)—yet the hope of resistance was gradually quashed.

The case of the old Chichimec woman from 1599 fits within this corpus. Although it took place later and in a region far removed from the original idolatry cases and involved an unbaptized Indian, it was tried not by the Inquisition but by the secular criminal court. With this case as with its earlier precedents for central Mexico, the accused was at once a religious and a political criminal, which is not surprising, given the inextricability of religion and politics in the early colony. As was true of the central Mexican cases, the old Guachichil woman expressed political resistance in religious terms; yet she was not powerless, for her resistance was taken seriously by the many Guachichiles who heeded her call as well as by Fuenmayor, the key Spanish official who passed sentence on her case. The central Mexican cases occurred soon after the conquest of that area, and in the same way the Chichimec case took place following the conquest of the northern frontier. These cases give us a glimpse of aborted efforts at social and religious revitalization, visions of the vanquished for bringing down the rule of the conquerors and creating a new synthesis of the beliefs of the indigenous past and the colonial present (see Wallace 1956; Lanternari 1963, 1974).

The Chichimec woman’s defense counsel, Panyagua, dismissed her visions as the drunken ravings of a crazy woman. He was simply echoing the widespread Hispanic attitude toward the alcoholism of the Indians: that it was “a barbarous vice of a barbarous people” (Taylor 1979: 43). Closer

examination of the visions, however, reveals their clear symbolic structure and their cultural meaning.

The two main visions that the old woman recounted portrayed death and resurrection—which was, in fact, the major theme of her entire discourse, both as presented in her words and in the words of the witnesses. In her first vision she saw two figures in the form of deer approach her; she credited the deer with having made her, an old and sick woman, young and healthy again. Significantly, one of the deer was mounted on a horse and the other deer had its horse bridled. She herself was given a horse by the deer. The image of the deer on horseback lends itself to several interpretations.

Deer were hunted by the Chichimecas and, as one source notes, the heads of deer were used in certain rituals (Kirchoff 1947: 141). Horses were brought to Mexico by the Spaniards, and only Spaniards, during the early period of colonization, were allowed to ride them. They were thus a sign of power and privilege, of being on top. By joining these two animals into one symbol, the old woman made a powerful statement, whose meaning, to her rational-minded interrogators, was unfathomable. On one level, deer atop horses represented the reversal of things as the Chichimecas had always known them: deer, the hunted, had become the hunters, while the Chichimecas, once the hunters, had become the hunted. Among present-day Tarahumaras the reversal of the hunted and the hunter signifies the coming of the end of the world; that certainly seems to be one of the meanings expressed in the Guachichil woman's vision.⁵ On another level, the deer, who are credited with making the old woman healthy and young again, are also symbols of her own and her people's subjugation: they ride horses like Spaniards. But most clearly perhaps, the symbol can be seen as playing a potent role within the old woman's utopian vision: that just as the deer—possible *naguales* or totemic kin to the Chichimecas—are riding horses, so will the Chichimecas one day ride horses and be in control. The deer in the vision almost seem to represent the Chichimecas themselves and the possibility of their redemption from death, sickness, and eternal subordination to Spanish rule. She is given a horse to begin that crusade.

The Guachichil woman's second vision concerns her actions in the churches of the Tlaxcalans and Tarascans. She spoke of having seen her daughter, who was buried in the Tlaxcalan church, resurrected from the dead and of having removed crosses and images because of her anger at not being able to catch her. She claimed to have taken vengeance on the churches, an action that was not without logic: if Christianity promises an afterlife, why then did her daughter flee from her? Even more to the point, the fact that her daughter's grave was in the church meant that she was a baptized Christian, otherwise the Spanish missionaries would not have permitted her to be buried there. Unlike her mother, the daughter must have accepted conversion; succumbing to the power of the Christian world, her body and spirit had

been taken into the fold of the Church, from which the old Guachichil woman could not free it. By tearing down the central symbols of the Tlaxcalan and Tarascan churches, she seemed to be making a statement about the loss of her daughter to the Christian world. What better way to reintegrate her daughter into the new Indian world of her visions than to destroy the crosses and images that had stolen her daughter's body and spirit away from her?

Yet the old woman's violent acts in the Tlaxcalan and Tarascan churches were not merely reactions to the vision of her daughter fleeing from her grasp and virtually taking refuge under the Christian altar. She had also told people not to go to Sunday mass and, as one of the witnesses testified, no one had attended the mass the day before the court proceedings. Clearly this visionary had a far-reaching revolt in mind: to turn the Indians against the Spanish authority structures of both church and state.

The vision of her daughter returned to life forms part of the Guachichil woman's utopian vision of death for the Spaniards and resurrection for the Indians, a vision of a new beginning for the vanquished. This new world would be populated only by Indians, but it would include all three categories of Indians involved in the case: 1) Tlaxcalans, Tarascans, and other Christian Indians from central Mexico; 2) Christianized Guachichiles; and 3) non-Christian Guachichiles. Thus she spoke of having settled dead Indians—Tlaxcalan and Tarascan as well as Guachichil—near her house, where she had resurrected them. She even took the heart of the dead Tarascan, who she was accused of having killed with sorcery, to the "pueblo" of "La Laguna" that she had formed of all the Indian dead.

It is interesting that she called her new world "La Laguna," which carries the Christian association of water with rebirth. This reinforces the image of a new life for the Indians who will be resurrected into her visionary world. And it seems to point to the influence of Christian notions upon her cosmology. It is significant, too, that she uses the term "pueblo" to describe La Laguna, for indigenous settlement forms were made up of loose, scattered communities, while pueblos were centralized settlements introduced into the Guachichil area by the Spanish. Her vision of a new pan-Indian world joined into a "pueblo" was vastly different from the social world of San Luis in 1599, in which Guachichiles, Tlaxcalans, and Tarascans maintained separate identities, and in the case of the latter two peoples, even separate churches. That she could imagine a world made up of Indians of various origins and statuses all reborn together into a new life was the result, it seems, of her strong desire to see the Spanish eliminated; perhaps she realized too in some sense that all Indians were at the bottom of the social order and that they had to struggle together to bring a new world into existence.

The witnesses, who recounted the old woman's calls for action and her prophecies, added further details to the vision of death and resurrection she had created out of a combination of Christian elements and the tradition of

resistance of the Chichimecas. They spoke of the plea she made to the Guachichiles that they help her go to San Luis to kill the Spaniards so that the dead Indians would be resurrected, the old become young, and the sick well. The Indians would gain the immortality promised by Christian doctrine in her vision of a new beginning, a future without Spaniards. Hers was more than a plea; it was a demand, supported by her threat to make the earth open and swallow them all with her sorcery if they did not listen.

It was the Guachichiles, whether non-Christian or Christian, whose help she called for in carrying out her revolt against the Spaniards; by simply imposing death on the conquerors, their own immortality would be assured. As for the Tlaxcalans and Tarascans, they seemed to have to die—she said, “now many people would die, and that even if they saw her dead they should not believe she had died, because many Indians and Christians would have to die before she died”—but, unlike the Spanish, they would be reborn into the new Indian world. In this three-tiered schema of total elimination for the Spanish, rebirth through death for the Tarascans and Tlaxcalans, and immediate immortality for the Guachichiles who carried out the revolt against the conquerors, we see reflected the social structure of San Luis as the sixteenth century drew to a close: the Guachichiles and the Spanish at either extreme and mediating between them the emigrant Indians from central Mexico. It was up to the Guachichiles, by rebelling, to undo this structure; otherwise they would perish.

All the witnesses agreed that the woman was generally known to be a witch. They seemed, for the most part, to have feared and respected her power. Andrés, her companion, was convinced that she had turned him into a coyote. And the witnesses did seem convinced that she had killed the Tarascan Indian with her sorcery. Yet there are contradictions, because two witnesses said that she had been using sorcery for only ten days before the case began, and she herself claimed not to be a witch. She also stated that she never used peyote, suggesting perhaps that her visions were real rather than plant-induced. We unfortunately do not know enough about Guachichil beliefs to say exactly just what kind of figure she was. I have translated the term *hechicera* here as “witch,” but “shaman” or “sorceress” are possible alternatives, and from the case itself one would certainly be inclined to call her a “visionary.”

Clearly, however, for the Guachichiles she was neither a crazy person nor a powerless female—otherwise over a hundred of them would not have come to Tlaxcala in obedience to her call. The old Guachichil witch was rather like the shamans who appeared to be at the margins of society in late-colonial Ecuador, but whose magical powers invested them with political force both in the local society and in the central Spanish bureaucracy (Salomon 1983). She was also, to an extent, one “of those petty native messiahs who sporadically appeared in the course of the colonial centuries and even later . . . a

mixture of skillful impostor and savior inspired by an impoverished religious heritage, that assimilated elements borrowed from the victorious faith of the Europeans" (Lafaye 1976: 21).

But the power of her magic, or her messianism, came too late to upset the politico-religious order. Pedro de Torres, the captain of the Guachichiles in Mexquitic and one of the more ardent defenders of the peace with the Spaniards, heeded her call, but clearly he no longer believed in her powers. When the old woman asked him why he had arrived late and threatened to kill him, he answered that, "if God is served by my death, then it is well and good . . . [but] she was not going to kill him." At his words she pounded the ground, for he had made it clear that he thought the Christian God had more power than she with all her sorcery. Pedro de Torres was almost certainly one of the "caciques ladinos" benefiting from the Spanish purchase of peace from the Chichimecas; as a chief he would have received a larger share of the "gifts" in return for keeping his people quiet. It is not surprising that he dismissed the old woman's powers. The rest of the Guachichiles, however, seemed more convinced of her power than he, as one can infer from his statement about the people having been stirred up and made restless by the old woman's actions.

A striking feature of the case, of course, is that the main protagonist was a woman, an old woman. This forms an interesting contrast with the central Mexican idolatry cases, all of which involved male religious and political leaders. The available sources tell us almost nothing about the political power or religious roles of women among the Guachichiles. The chronicler Gonzalo de Las Casas, writing in 1581, noted the existence of marriage, the pattern of uxorilocal residence, and the way women were virtually slaves to their husbands, serving them prickly pears all peeled, giving birth as they traveled from one site to another, and bringing back any deer they hunted (Las Casas 1936: 160–61). He added that when the men got drunk the women would move away from them and hide their husbands' bows and arrows (*ibid.*: 162). This is not much to go on, especially because Gonzalo de Las Casas probably emphasized the low, even brutal, position of women in order to add color to the portrait of the Chichimecas as wild and savage Indians. Yet the case of the old Guachichil witch clearly indicates that a woman could have supernatural and even political powers attributed to her. Part of this woman's power may have stemmed from the fact that she had not been converted to Christianity (thus her ability to perform human to animal transformations) or from her advanced age (which tied her power, perhaps, to the warrior spirit of the ancestors). With the male Guachichil chiefs all bought off by the Spaniards, perhaps only an old woman, apparently powerless, was left to rise up against the Indian subjugation that, amidst the enticement of the conquerors' "gifts," she so clearly saw. There was irony in all this: though her resistance centered on the Christian symbolism of eternal life, borrowed for her own purposes

from the “victorious faith of the Europeans,” what she got—and what the Guachichiles eventually got—was death.

We will never know whether the Guachichiles would have been stirred to rebel against the Spaniards had the old woman lived, but one doubts it. The Guachichil woman’s appeals and prophecies lit a spark of resistance, but that spark probably would have gone out of its own accord even without her speedy and dramatic execution. The Guachichiles had given up the fighting spirit. They were still receiving the gifts of food and cloth promised them by the Spaniards. They had settled in villages among sedentary Indians from the south or fled to less accessible regions, where they continued their way of life and their resistance for a little longer, raiding Spanish settlements into the eighteenth century (Gerhard 1972: 234). But, as the Spanish strategists had predicted, the Guachichiles, like the Chichimecas generally, were eventually effaced completely from the frontier that they had defended so well for so long.⁶ And as the settlers and ranchers of the Chichimec frontier had seen, once the Guachichiles were weeded out of the landscape, “the best of New Spain” was left to be properly enjoyed by the Spanish; it was just after the pacification, in 1592, that such rich silver mines were discovered in San Luis that the term “Potosí,” after the great mines of Peru, was added to its name. The old Guachichil woman had indeed spoken prophetically when she said that the earth would open and swallow them all if they didn’t join her in rebelling against the Spaniards.

Notes

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¹ “Chichimeca” is a generic term for the various hunting and gathering groups that inhabited northern Mexico. In this paper I have adopted a convention of using “Chichimeca” as the noun form and “Chichimec” as the adjectival form. The term “chichimeca” was used in a derogatory way by the sedentary peoples of central Mexico to refer to the “barbarians” of the north, but there is apparently no foundation for the idea, so often perpetuated in histories of Mexico, that it derives from the Nahuatl for “sons of the dogs” (Wolf 1959: 9) or even “dirty, uncivilized dog” (Powell 1952: 33). I use it here in the loose fashion it was used

in the documents of sixteenth-century New Spain, but the reader should be aware that it is a very inexact term as there were many different Chichimec groups and little unity of culture among them. There were four main groups of Chichimec Indians: the Zacatecos, who lived east of what is now San Luis Potosí; the Pames, who occupied a broad region from what is now Rioverde and Ciudad del Maíz southward; the Guamares, who lived in the Valle de San Francisco and further south in the Bajío region; and the Guachichiles, who inhabited the altiplano of San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, and Jalisco. This discussion is concerned with the Guachichiles.

- 2 The main manuscript source for this article is AHESLP, Alcaldía Mayor, 1599, folios 113–27. There is a summary of this case in Velázquez (1982 [1946–48]: II, 25–26). A shorter Spanish version of this article is forthcoming in *Archivos de historia potosina*, so I will not provide the original Spanish of the portions I translate here. Folio numbers from the original document are provided at intervals throughout the article.
- 3 The records of the original trials against Indian “idolators” can be found in the Ramo Inquisición of the Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City, some of which have been published by the archive.
- 4 A transcription of the entire case can be found in *Proceso inquisitorial del cacique de Tetzcoco* (1910).
- 5 Personal communication, William Merrill.
- 6 Interestingly, though the Guachichiles were eventually effaced from the San Luis area, people in Mexquitic have the idea that they descend from the bellicose Guachichiles rather than from the sedentary Tlaxcalans who resettled the town in 1591. Historical records indicate that they more likely descend from the Tlaxcalans; yet this aspect of their past has been set aside, and instead they think that their ancestors were the “wild” and “savage” Chichimecas, who are honored at the fiestas with dances considered to be “autochthonous.” I leave these present-day conceptions of the past and of historical identity in Mexquitic for another article.

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