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The Evils of Cochineal, Tlaxcala, Mexico

(1553)

This record of the city of Tlaxcala's municipal council (*cabildo*) three decades after Tlaxcalan lords allied with Cortés to destroy the Aztec state reveals some striking changes in life there under Spanish rule. Composed in Nahuatl (the language of much of central Mexico at the time of the Conquest) with Roman script and translated into English by James Lockhart, the writing itself is evidence of both change and continuity. The document reveals a traditional hereditary elite making the transition to the Spanish colonial regime as elected officeholders in a municipal council system linked to the Spanish district governor appointed by the Crown (here the *corregidor* is Alonso de Galdós) and a central administration in Mexico City.

In some ways, Tlaxcalan leaders and communities enjoyed a privileged place in the colonial order as the most important native allies of Cortés. Their political and property rights were confirmed early; their native capital received the unusual status of "city" by 1535; they succeeded, as colonial law provided, in keeping civilian Spaniards from living among them during the sixteenth century; they lobbied, with less success, for relief from the tribute and labor demands that weighed heavily as the population declined in early waves of epidemic diseases; and groups of Tlaxcalans were invited to join Spanish colonizing expeditions on the frontiers of New Spain. In this document, one of the Tlaxcalan leaders is away serving as a kind of circuit judge in the Valley of Mexico district of Coyoacan.

The Indians of early colonial Tlaxcala enjoyed considerable prosperity, easing some of the adjustments to a new state system and religion and to changes in diet, language, dress, labor service, and production. Much of the initial Spanish influence in the province of Tlaxcala filtered in through the top—through the provincial Indian nobles who received coats of arms from the Spanish Crown, learned to read and write Spanish and sometimes Latin, and were among the first to accept Christian baptism and instruction. After the 1560s the hardships of epidemic disease, state demands for tax payments and labor, the mixed blessings of European livestock, and migration out of the province for residence and work in Puebla or in the new colonial settlements far to the north were more apparent at all levels of Tlaxcalan society. Still, Tlaxcalans continued to survive and adapt to new conditions.

In this record of their *cabildo* deliberations of March 3, 1553—during that early period of prosperity—the lords of Tlaxcala express concern about the increasing production of cochineal, a small insect that thrives on the native nopal cactus of central and southern Mexico. The females of this cactus mite were collected, dried, and crushed into a deep red dyestuff that was coveted in Europe, as well as in Indian America, before chemical dyes. The elected leaders' concerns suggest a new level of commercialization of cochineal, grown in many new places, absorbing the energies of people and land previously devoted to food crops; new patterns of local consumption (cacao, or chocolate, which was not grown locally, and the fermented beverage, *pulque*, get special attention here); a knowledge of Christian teachings; and challenges to the customary powers, habits of consumption, and social standing of these lords. But notice that, in spite of the rulers' laments about disorder and moral decay, the changes were not simply in the direction of destruction, dissipation, and demoralization. Remember that great changes are described in this document from the vantage point of a hereditary elite working to protect its position under new colonial circumstances.

In the loyal city of Tlaxcala on Friday, the third day of the month of March of the year 1553, there assembled in the cabildo the magnificent lord Alonso de Galdós, corregidor in the province of Tlaxcala for His Majesty,

with Miguel Cardenel, Spaniard, as interpreter; and it was in the presence of the very honorable lords Don Domingo de Angulo, governor; and the *alcaldes ordinarios* [members of the *cabildo* exercising judicial authority] Don Diego de Paredes, Félix Mejía, Alonso Gómez, and Don Diego de Guzmán; and of the four rulers, Don Juan Maxixcatzin, Don Julián Motolinía—Don Juan Xicotencatl is sick—; it was in the presence of Don Francisco de Mendoza; and the *regidores* [secondary members of the *cabildo*] Don Julián de la Rosa, Buenaventura Oñate, Antonio del Pedroso, Antonio Téllez, Hernando Tecepotzin, Don Juan de Paz, Baltasar Cortés, Pablo de Galicia, Pedro Díaz, and Tadeo de Niza; not (done) before Don Domingo de Silva, who is sick, and Lucas García, acting as judge in Coyoacán; it was done before us, Fabián Rodríguez, Diego de Soto, and Sancho de Rozas, notaries of the *cabildo* of Tlaxcala. They deliberated about how the cochineal cactus, from which cochineal comes, is being planted all over Tlaxcala. Everyone does nothing but take care of cochineal cactus; no longer is care taken that maize and other edibles are planted. For food—maize, chilis, and beans—and other things that people need were once not expensive in Tlaxcala. It is because of this (neglect), the *cabildo* members considered, that all the foods are becoming expensive. The owners of cochineal cactus merely buy maize, chilis, etc., and are very occupied only with their cochineal, by which their money, cacao beans, and cloth are acquired. They no longer want to cultivate their fields, but idly neglect them. Because of this, now many fields are going to grass, and famine truly impends. Things are no longer as they were long ago, for the cochineal cactus is making people lazy. And it is excessive how sins are committed against Our Lord God: These cochineal owners devote themselves to their cochineal on Sundays and holy days; no longer do they go to church

to hear Mass as the Holy Church commands us, but look only to getting their sustenance and their cacao, which makes them proud. And then later they buy pulque and then get drunk; all of the cochineal owners gather together. If they buy a turkey, they give it away for less than its price, and pulque, too; they lightly give away their money and cacao. Not remembering how Our Lord God mercifully granted them whatever wealth is theirs, they vainly squander it. And he who belonged to someone no longer respects whoever was his lord and master, because he is seen to have gold and cacao. That makes them proud and swells them up, whereby it is fully evident that they esteem themselves only through wealth. And also the cochineal dealers, some of them noblemen, some commoners, and some women, line up here in the Tlaxcala marketplace and there await the cochineal. When they are not collecting cochineal quickly, then they go to the various homes of the cochineal owners, entering the houses. And there many things happen; they make the women drunk there, and there some commit sins. They go entering the homes of anyone who has cochineal plants; they already know those from whom they customarily buy dye, and sometimes they also go on Sundays and holy days, whereby they miss attending Mass and hearing the sermon, but go only wanting to get drunk. And these cochineal dealers act as if the women who gather dye have been made their relatives. Some of the men hire themselves out to Spaniards to gather dye for them, and they give them money and cacao. And later they distribute the women to them, making them like their relatives; to some they assign seven or eight (women), or thereabouts, to gather dye for them. Because of this, many improper things are done. And of those who hire themselves out, many are likewise ruined, because some act as slaves in the hands of the Spaniards. If it were not for cochineal, they would not become such.

And both the cactus owners and the cochineal dealers so act that for little reason they begin to pair with each other, or take one another as co-godparents, or just feed one another, gathering and collecting together with their wives. They feed one another, however many of them there are; they give one another a great deal of food, and the chocolate they drink is very thick, with plenty of cacao in it. When they find the chocolate just a little watery, then it is not to their liking and they do not want to drink it. Some pour it on the ground, whereby whoever has given his very good cacao to someone is affronted, but they imagine themselves very grand because of it. And so then they buy pulque or Castilian wine; even though it is very expensive, they pay no heed, but give (the price) to the person selling it. And then they become entirely inebriated and senseless, together with their wives; they fall down one at a time where they are congregated, entirely drunk. Many sins are committed there, and it all comes from cochineal. Also these cochineal dealers no longer want to cultivate the soil; though some of them own fields, they no longer want to cultivate; they do nothing but look for cochineal. And both the cactus owners and the cochineal dealers, some of them, sleep on cotton mats, and their wives wear great skirts, and they have much money, cacao, and clothing. The wealth they have only makes them proud and swaggering. For before cochineal was known and everyone planted cochineal cactus, it was not this way. There were some people of whom it was clearly evident that they lived in knowledge of their humility, but just because of the cochineal now there is much drunkenness and swaggering; it is very clear that cochineal has been making people idle in the last eight or nine years. But in the old days there was a time of much care in cultivation and planting; everyone cultivated the soil and planted. Because of this, the cabildo members said

it is necessary that the cochineal cactus decrease and not so much be planted, since it causes idleness. It is greatly urged that everyone cultivate and plant; let much maize, chilis, beans, and all edible plants be grown, because if Our Lord God should wish that famine come, and if there were in people's possession much money, cacao, and cloth, will those things be eaten? Will there be salvation through them? It cannot be. Money, cacao, and cloth do not fill up one. But if people have much food, through it they will save themselves, since no one will (starve); no one will die being wealthy. Therefore two or three times the lord viceroy who presides in Mexico City, Don Luis de Velasco, has been told and it has been brought to his attention how the dye brings affliction, and he has been informed of all the harm done. And after that the lord viceroy gave orders in reply, ordering the lord corregidor that in his presence there be consultation here in the cabildo to approve how many plantings of cochineal cactus are to be kept by each person; it is to be a definite number, and no longer will there be planting at whim. And in consulting, some of the cabildo members said that five plantings of cochineal cactus should be kept (by each person), and others said that fifteen should be kept. But when the discussion was complete, everyone approved keeping ten plantings of cactus, and the lord corregidor also approved it. No one is to exceed (the number). And the women who gather dye in the marketplace are to gather dye no more. Nevertheless, it is first to be put before the lord viceroy; what he should order in reply will then be made public. Then in the cabildo were appointed those who will go to Mexico City to set before the lord viceroy what was discussed as said above. Those who will go are Alonso Gómez, alcalde, and the regidores Antonio del Pedroso, Pablo de Galicia, and Pedro Diaz, with the notary of the cabildo Fabián Rodríguez. It is by order of the cabildo that they

will go to Mexico City. The most illustrious lord viceroy will decide how to reply; then it will be announced all over Tlaxcala in what manner cochineal cactus is to be kept.

[There follow eighteen of the names found at the beginning of the document, with other rubrics.]

Done before us, notaries of the cabildo. Fabián Rodríguez, notary. Diego de Soto. Sancho de Rozas.