

DISCOVERING THE CHICHIMECAS

The European practice of conceptualizing their enemies so that they could dispose of them in ways that were not in accord with their own Christian principles is well documented. In the Americas, this began with Columbus's designation of certain Indians as man-eaters and was continued by those Spanish who also wished to enslave the natives or eliminate them altogether. The word "cannibal" was invented to describe such people, and the Spanish were legally free to treat cannibals in ways that were forbidden to them in their relations with other people.¹ By the late fifteenth century the word cannibal had assumed a place in the languages of Europe as the latest concept by which Europeans sought to categorize the "other." As David Gordon White has shown, by the time the Spanish discovered America, barbarians were an established component of European mythology, history and theology as well as popular thought, and the categories Europeans employed to describe outsiders date as far back as the Greeks and the Egyptians before them.² Therefore, it is not surprising that when they reached Mexico the Spanish easily adopted a word from Nahuatl to describe the Indian peoples of the north whom they believed to be barbarians. This word, *chichimeca*, which both designated and defined in a very particular way the native peoples of the north Mexican frontier, assumed in Spanish the credibility of longstanding native use, although as we shall see, this was not entirely justified.

¹ This essay is an expanded version of a paper presented at the VIII Conference of Mexican and American Historians, San Diego, CA, October 18-21, 1990. I thank Hugh M. Hamill, Jr., Lawrence Mastroni and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this article. Recent studies on European ideas of the American savage are, for the Caribbean, Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters, Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797* (London: Methuen and Co., 1986); for the French colonies, Olive Patricia Dickason, *The Myth of the Savage and the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1984); and for Virginia, Bernard W. Sheehan, *Savagism and Civility, Indians and Englishmen in Colonial Virginia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

² David Gordon White, *Myths of the Dog-Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

The purpose of this essay is to examine both the Nahuatl and Spanish uses of the word *chichimeca* to uncover the variety of connotations it carried and to show how, with an understanding of the meanings the word had for each, we can not only determine more accurately the reliability of historical descriptions of Chichimec life, but can also learn how these meanings facilitated or obstructed for both the Aztecs and the Spanish the process of empire-building.

The origin of the word *chichimeca* (s. *chichimecatl*) is part of the lost history of the evolution of Nahuatl. The term was used by Nahuatl-speaking inhabitants of the central valley of Mexico to designate the peoples who lived north and west of the Valley of Mexico and has been variously translated to mean “sons of dogs,” “rope suckers” or “eagles.”³ With the *Letters* of Hernán Cortés, *chichimeca* passed into the Spanish language. For the Spanish the Chichimecas were a wild, nomadic people who lived north of the Valley of Mexico. They had no fixed dwelling places, lived by hunting, wore no clothes and fiercely resisted foreign intrusion into their territory, which happened to contain silver mines the Spanish wished to exploit.⁴

However, ethnologically, there was no one Chichimec people. The term was used by both Spanish and Nahuatl speakers to refer collectively to many different people who exhibited a wide range of cultural development from hunter-gatherers to sedentary agriculturalists with sophisticated political organizations. It is only by examining closely how the word was used by both

³ Rudolph van Zantwijk, *The Aztec Arrangement, The Social History of Pre-Spanish Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), p. 308, n. 22. Frances Karttunen gives the following definition in *An Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), p. 48:

“a person from one of the indigenous groups of northern Mexico considered barbarians by Nahuatl-speakers. . . This has both a negative ‘barbarous’ sense and a positive ‘noble savage’ sense. By its vowel length pattern it is clearly not derived from the words for ‘dog’, ‘rags’, ‘patches’, or ‘bitter’. It is possibly derivationally related to *chichi*, ‘to suckle’.”

On Nahuatl as a living language see James Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest, A Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992) and “Some Nahua Concepts in Post-conquest Guise,” *History of European Ideas*, vol. 6 (1985), pp. 465-482.

⁴ Since my purpose is not to define who the prehistoric Chichimecas were but to show how the word was used by the Spanish and Aztecs and for what purposes, I refer the reader to the works of Pedro Carrasco, Paul Kirchoff, Jiménez Wigberto Moreno, Nigel Davies, Rudolph van Zantwijk and Jesús Dávila Aguirre for information on the prehistoric Chichimecas. See for example, Jesús Dávila Aguirre, *Chichimetcatl! Origen, Cultura, Lucha y Extinción de los Gallardos Bárbaros del Norte* (Saltillo, Coah.: Imprenta del Norte, 1967); Pedro Carrasco Pizana, *Los Otomíes: Cultura y Historia prehispánica de los pueblos de habla otomíca* (Mexico: Biblioteca enciclopédica del Estado de México, 1979); Nigel Davies, *The Toltecs Until the Fall of Tula* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977); and Davies, *The Toltec Heritage* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980); van Zantwijk, *The Aztec Arrangement*.

Spanish and Nahuatl speakers that we can begin to understand the complexity of meaning associated with this word in both the Nahuatl and Spanish documents of the early colonial period.

These meanings were closely tied to the Aztec and Spanish conceptions of rulership. For the Aztecs, Chichimec descent provided one source of political legitimacy for their newly established empire in the central valley of Mexico. The Spanish, on the other hand, emphasized the Chichimecas's barbarian aspects and made this part of their discourse over the treatment of the Indians.

The Spanish definition of Chichimeca diverged from the Nahuatl meaning by discarding many of the symbolic meanings the Aztecs attached to the word and replacing these meanings with others derived from the rich medieval European tradition of wild people. During the course of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the meaning of the word in Spanish changed from a broad ethnological category to a legal expression and then back again to a more narrowly defined cultural definition.

In his 1526 letter to Charles V, Hernán Cortés makes one of the earliest Spanish references to the Chichimecas in which he gives a brief description of their way of life and of what the Spanish policy toward them should be. Cortés described the Chichimecas as "a very barbarous people and not so intelligent as those of the other provinces." He doubted their capacity to become Christians, but recommended that they be enslaved and used as mine workers.⁵ Cortés's remarks were probably based on what he had learned from the Nahuatl-speaking Indians he had already conquered, and his ideas about the Chichimecas and what Spanish policy toward them should be are consistent with those of the Spaniards who made actual contact with them.

A later sixteenth-century source of information about the Chichimecas is the "Report on the Chichimecas and the justness of the war against them" written sometime between 1571 and 1585 by Gonzalo de las Casas, an encomendero and Indian fighter in the Chichimeca War, during which the Spanish unsuccessfully attempted to subdue the northern Indians of Nueva Galicia and Nueva Vizcaya (including Sinaloa) between 1555 and 1591.⁶ In

⁵ Hernán Cortés, *Cartas de relación*, Mario Hernández, ed. (Madrid: Historia 16, 1985), p. 426. For a recent English translation see Anthony Pagden, trans. and ed., *Hernán Cortés: Letters from Mexico* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

⁶ Gonzalo de las Casas, "Noticia de los Chichimecas y justicia de la guerra que se les ha hecho por los españoles," in *Quellen zur Kulturgeschichte des prakolumbischen Amerika*, Hermann Trimbom, ed. (Stuttgart: Strecker und Schroeder, 1936, reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint Corp. 1968), pp. 123-183.

his "Report on the Chichimecas" Gonzalo de las Casas gave a detailed and presumably eyewitness account of Chichimec life as it was lived in the Gran Chichimeca, an arid region lying north of the Valley of Mexico, east of the Sierra Madre Occidental, and south of the Bolsón de Mapimí. His account acknowledges the Nahuatl origins of the word which he traced to the Nahuatl "chichi" meaning dog and "mecatl" which means rope or cord. Las Casas explained this etymology by noting that Chichimecas hunted with stringed bows and that they lived by means of the hunt, like dogs.⁷

Las Casas named four Chichimec nations, the Pames, which he described as the least warlike, the Guamaris, the most bellicose, and the Guachachiles, which he stated means "colored head," a name derived from these Indians's custom of wearing highly decorated headdresses, and the Zacatecos, whose name he said came from the Nahuatl word for grass. He did not distinguish any cultural differences among these groups except for language, but found the culture of all uniformly low: "Their food is wild fruits and roots, they do not sow or reap any type of vegetable, nor do they have cultivated. . . trees." From las Casas's account we learn that the Chichimecs ate *tuñas*, the fruit of the prickly pear cactus, sugar-rich pods from the mesquite tree and the leaves and roots of the maguey plant. They hunted rabbits, deer, birds and even fish with the bow and arrow.⁸

For Las Casas a telling sign of the Chichimecas's lack of civility was the fact that the women, after having given birth on the trail "as if they were an ewe" continued their journey without stopping to recover. Las Casas believed that the Chichimec women led particularly hard lives and that the men let "all the work fall on the women, from preparing food to carrying belongings on their backs when they go from one place to another . . . the men occupying themselves only with their bows and arrows to fight and hunt and the women serve them as if they were slaves."⁹

Las Casas was not the first European observer of Indian life to misjudge the equality of the sexual division of labor in societies that depended on hunting for much of their food. Hunting was not only a necessary activity among the Chichimecas it was a strenuous one, for which the hunters must keep their hands free to use their bows and arrows when the opportunity presented itself. Chichimec males understood themselves to be first and foremost hunters and warriors as some Zacatecos warriors explained to Fray Bernardino de Sahagún when he questioned them about the division of labor

⁷ Ibid., p. 152.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 153-156.

⁹ Ibid., p. 160.

in the Zacatecos household. They informed him that Zacatecos males never cooked because “the men were obliged to protect their eyesight for hunting and the smoke [from cooking fires] would cause them to loose [sic] it.”¹⁰

Other aspects of Chichimec barbarity that las Casas noted were their custom of cremating their dead, carrying the ashes and bones with them in a small pouch, and their diversions, among which he included a ball game and gambling with sticks, and dances at which the Indians drank tesguino, an alcoholic drink they concocted from the maguey plant, tuñas, or mesquite.¹¹

Chichimec religion he considered to be equally barbaric, as the religious practices of the peoples of the central valley were considered by the Spanish of this period to be the civilized norm. Gonzalo de las Casas stated that the Chichimecas had no religion because they had no idols or altars and did not perform sacrifices, fast or draw blood from the ears or tongue like the civilized Indians to the south.¹² The Franciscan missionary Alonso Ponce likewise reported in 1590 that the Chichimecas had no religion because “they have no idols” and therefore “are little different from brutish animals.”¹³ Las Casas also used this standard, and likewise did not discern any form of religion practiced by the Chichimecas other than “exclamations to the sky while looking at certain stars.” He rejected the idea expressed by some that ritual torture of prisoners was a type of religious sacrifice, and dismissed it as “a form of cruelty that the devil . . . has shown them.”¹⁴

For all Spanish observers, it was the Chichimecas’s lack of clothing that was the most salient indication of their barbarity. Las Casas stated that the Chichimec men went completely naked, although they might wear rags or grass to cover their private parts when they met with Spaniards. Chichimec women wore apron-like skirts of leather. In spite of their lack of clothing, Chichimec males did not leave their bodies undecorated. Las Casas stated that they habitually painted themselves with a variety of colored paints derived from ocher and other local minerals.¹⁵ The use of minerals to make body paint was widespread throughout the Gran Chichimeca, and, according to the Jesuit historian, Andrés Pérez de Ribas, the Spanish became adept at

¹⁰ Sahagún, *Historia*, pp. 118-119.

¹¹ Las Casas, “Noticia de los Chichimecas,” *passim*.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 156-157.

¹³ “Relación de Fray Alonso Ponce” in *Colección de documentos para la historia de España*, 112 vols. (Madrid: Impr. de viuda de Calero, 1842-1895, reprint, Vaduz: Kraus Reprint, 1964-1966), vol. 58, p. 135.

¹⁴ Las Casas, “Noticia de los Chichimecas,” pp. 156-157.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

identifying the minerals of a locality from the body paint worn by the local Indians and could even tell from this if the area contained deposits of precious metals.¹⁶

For las Casas and other Spanish observers, the essence of Chichimec savagery lay in the Chichimecas's apparent lack of community spirit reflected in their custom of fighting not only the Spanish but other Indians as well. Both las Casas and Fray Alonso de Ponce reflected the widespread Spanish belief that the Chichimecas were essentially nomadic warriors, whose primary activity was fighting. "All Chichimecas, men, women and children, are warriors [gente de guerra]" Fray Alonso stated. "They find it better, las Casas agreed, "to live each man for himself like animals or birds of prey that never cooperate with each other to sustain themselves better or to find food. Only the necessity of war (against others) will compel them to unite."¹⁷

Historians have used these eyewitness accounts of Chichimec life as a source of information about the Chichimec Indians and customarily define Chichimeca as the word used by the Spanish to describe northern Indians who were nomadic and who lived by hunting and gathering.¹⁸ Problems arise when a comparison of these documents reveals that not only do they contradict each other in important ways, but that they contradict what we know from other sources about the culture of indigenous peoples of northern Mexico in the sixteenth century. These contradictions raise questions about the reliability of these descriptions and the accuracy of the characterization of Chichimecas as nomadic hunters and gatherers.

Although the word Chichimeca seems to imply an ethnological description of a particular group of people sharing common culture traits and religious beliefs and practices, an analysis of the way this term was used by Spanish and Nahuatl speakers reveals that neither the Spanish nor the Aztecs used this word in a truly ethnological sense. Use of the term Chichimeca as an ethnological category by modern historians has also obscured the historical meaning of the word as it was used by both Spanish and Nahuatl speakers.

¹⁶ Andrés Pérez de Ribas, *Historia de los triunfos de nuestra Santa Fée entre gentes las mas bárbaras y fieras*, 3 vols. (Mexico: Editorial Layac, 1944), vol. 3, p. 152.

¹⁷ Ponce, "Relación," p. 136; Las Casas, "Noticia de los Chichimecas," p. 153.

¹⁸ Philip Powell's article "The Chichimecs: Scourge of the Silver Frontier in Sixteenth-Century Mexico," *HAHR*, 25 (1945), pp. 315-338 was an early attempt to define who the Chichimecas were and was based almost exclusively on las Casas's "Noticia." It is the most extensive treatment of this definition of the word Chichimeca.

In Mesoamerican iconography, Chichimec Indians are often associated with bows and arrows (symbols of the hunt), rough clothing and dogs.¹⁹ Rudolph van Zantwijk isolates four major criteria that the Aztecs used to define Chichimecas. These were a northern origin, descent from semi-nomads (hunters and primitive farmers), the worship of sky deities (the sun and moon being particularly important) and methods of sacrifice that were markedly different from those of the Mesoamericans. Chichimecas did not make mass sacrifices of human hearts, but sacrificed deer to their deities and killed their human victims with arrows, instead of extracting hearts with knives.²⁰

It is important to note that the Aztecs considered descent from hunter-gatherers, not nomadism itself, to be a defining criterion for a Chichimec Indian. In fact the Aztecs considered themselves Chichimecas, as did other people of the central valley of Mexico, and made no attempt to deny their origins as wanderers from the north who had followed their god Huitzilopochtli to a new life on the shores of Lake Texcoco. Why would a people who at the same time were representing themselves as the inheritors of the Toltec civilization, willingly associate themselves in their written histories with a term that implied people of lower cultural development and which connected them to an unprestigious past they had left behind for a career as empire-builders? This apparent contradiction gives further insight into the Nahuatl meaning and the Aztec use of the word Chichimeca.

Its resolution lies in the myth with which Aztec history begins. This myth tells of a people who came to the central valley of Mexico from a place in northern Mexico called Aztatlan or Aztlan guided southward by the hummingbird god, Huitzilopochtli.²¹ Recent study has shown that this story has little, if any, basis in fact. Historically, the Aztecs were not one people, but a consolidation of different ethnic groups that had moved into the Valley of Mexico at different times. These groups may have included Chinampnecs,

¹⁹ For example the Chichimec hunters in the Codex Telleriano-Remensis reproduced in Nigel Davies, *The Toltec Heritage from the Fall of Tula to the Rise of Tenochtitlan* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), pp. 104, 105, 217. There is at least one codex, the Codex Aubin, that represents the word Chichimeca with the head of a dog, but this is post-conquest. Charles E. Dibble, ed., *Historia de la Nación Mexicana Reproducción a todo color de Codice de 1576* (Madrid: Editorial Porrúa, 1963), p. 99. The *Codex Azcatitlan* (Paris: Société des Americanistes, 1949), planche XVII, shows an Aztec king with a doghead symbol. This is also post-conquest.

²⁰ Van Zantwijk, *The Aztec Arrangement*, p. 37.

²¹ Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Nigel Davies, *The Aztecs: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973); George C. Vaillant, *Aztecs of Mexico: Origin, Rise and Fall of the Aztec Nation* (New York: Doubleday, 1941); Rudolph van Zantwijk, *The Aztec Arrangement*.

Otomis and Chichimecas as well as other smaller groups, including one called Mexitin. Through marriage, political alliance and warfare with these other groups, the Mexitin or Mexica managed to expand their political influence in the central valley, ultimately creating a state that claimed to be the legitimate heir of the old Toltec empire.²²

The rapid development of the Aztec empire in the space of about thirty-two years between the end of the thirteenth century and 1432, during which the imperial Aztec nobility successfully imposed its power over the central valley calpolli leaders, created the need for a history that would legitimize Aztec rule by showing the dynastic connection of the new rulers to the Toltecs and which would at the same time create a common history for the diverse peoples who were now known as the Aztecs.²³ In the process of creating this unified history, the Aztecs simultaneously destroyed previous histories of the central valley peoples.

By emphasizing a northern migration as a fundamental part of their origins, the Aztecs defined themselves as Chichimecas. Thus the idea of being Chichimeca contributed to the Aztecs's conceptualization of themselves as a single people, but also represented the past they had transcended.

But the legend of the journey from Aztlan solved only part of the Aztec problem of establishing the legitimacy of their rule in the central valley. The Mexica rulers also had to forge mythico-historical links with the Toltec civilization, the last civilization before the Aztecs to establish hegemonic rule in central Mexico. This civilization had collapsed at the end of the eleventh century but was considered by Mesoamericans to represent culture, civilization and legitimate authority.

Therefore, a second function of Aztec history was to demonstrate their

²² Van Zantwijk, *The Aztec Arrangement*, p. 14. On the Toltecs see C. Nigel Davies, *The Toltecs Until the Fall of Tula*, especially pp. 52-55, *The Aztec Empire: The Toltec Resurgence* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987) and "The Aztec Concept of History: Teotihuacan and Tula," in *The Native Sources and the History of the Valley of Mexico, Proceedings of the 44th International Congress of Americanists*, J. de Durand-Forest, ed., B.A.R. International Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 207-214; Michel Graulich, "Aspects mythiques des pègrinations Mexicas," in *The Native Sources and the History of the Valley of Mexico*, pp. 25-70; Donald V. Kurtz, "The Legitimation of the Aztec State," in *The Early State*, Henri J. M. Claessen and Peter Skalnik, eds. (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), pp. 169-189; Doris Heyden, *The Eagle, the Cactus, the Rock: The Roots of Mexico-Tenochtitlan's Foundation Myth and Symbol*, B.A.R. International Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

²³ Van Zantwijk, *The Aztec Arrangement*, p. 15; Frances Berdan, *The Aztecs of Central Mexico: An Imperial Society* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982); Geoffrey W. Conrad and Arthur A. Demarest, *Religion and Empire: The Dynamics of Aztec and Inca Expansionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

connections to the Toltecs. This was accomplished through the invention of a creation myth in which the Aztec royal lineage was said to be a result of the marriage of a Chichimec man, Acamapichtli, and a Culhuacan princess of Toltec origin, Ilanceuitl. The Aztec rulers, as they emerged through the union of Ilanceuitl and Acamapichtli, thus acquired an essentially dual nature, consistent with much of Mesoamerican thought, that was both savage and civilized. The civilized component, contributed by Ilanceuitl and which was the source of the Aztec king's political legitimacy, had periodically to be renewed by continued unions with females who carried in their lineage this connection to the Toltecs.²⁴

The Toltecs themselves were originally a Chichimec people who had moved south, became civilized and built an empire. By identifying with them, the Aztec nobility was proclaiming its intentions of doing the same. Thus, for the Aztecs, the word Chichimeca represented both the self and the other. Its meaning contained for them the ideas of savagery and barbarism, but also the positive attributes of manliness, virility and an ancient past. The word Toltec, as its opposite, represented civilization, advanced agriculture, legitimate rule, as well as an ancient past. By themselves, each was sterile. The Toltec civilization was dead, and the Chichimecas did not possess the right to rule. It was only through the union of the opposing values represented by each that the Aztec rulers and the Aztec empire could be created.

It was for these reasons that the Aztecs never denied their Chichimec past, but instead used it and the myth of a long migration from Aztlan to unify the various ethnic groups that lived together in the swampland of Lake Texcoco. They combined this with the myth of a Toltec dynastic connection to create the foundation of their claims to be the inheritors of that empire.

The Aztecs transformed the Chichimecas into the protagonists of a migration myth, and this myth helped them accomplish their goals of ethnic consolidation and the legitimization of their rule. With the Spanish, the term also underwent a transformation of meaning; but because the Spanish sought to expand their control into what was in fact Chichimec territory, this alteration of meaning served to obscure Spanish understanding of the people of northern Mexico and contributed to dissension among the conquerors over how best to subdue these Indians. Ultimately, this misunderstanding and the controversy it created delayed the Spanish conquest of the north.

In addition to Gonzalo de las Casas's "Report," another important source

²⁴ Susan Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings: The Construction of Rulership in Mexica History* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989).

of information about the Chichimec Indians from the sixteenth century is the *Relación of Pedro de Ahumada*. In the 1560s the encomendero Pedro de Ahumada was commissioned by the Audiencia of Nueva Galicia to suppress Indian rebellions in that province.²⁵ He drew his description of Chichimec life from observations made during a military campaign in which he pacified the country from Guadiana (today Durango, capital city of the state of Durango) and the San Juan Valley north to the mining towns of Avino, Peñol Blanco and San Lucas. Ahumada gives in his *Relación* a classic description of Chichimec life as the Spanish perceived it to be:

The warlike Indians of the area around Zacatecas and San Martin who inhabit the desert region and go about naked, are savages. They have neither law nor houses, nor trade. Neither do they cultivate the earth nor do any work except hunting; and from wild fruit and roots do they sustain themselves.²⁶

These Indians were Zacatecos who, along with another group called the Guachachiles, inhabited the northern central desert plateau the Spanish called the Gran Chichimeca.

Another important source is Fray Bernardino Sahagún's *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España* which described the Chichimecas living south of Zacatecas, including the Otomies and the Zacatecos.²⁷ Sahagún's account presented a more complex picture of the Chichimecas. According to his *Historia*, some Chichimecas were hunters and cave dwellers, but others practiced agriculture and cultivated small fields of corn.²⁸ The Otomies were the most advanced of all the Chichimecas, according to Sahagún because they lived "en policía (civil communities) and have their towns, lords, caciques and leaders, inhabiting houses, having abundant food and clothing. . ."²⁹ The contradictions among these sources raise questions about the Spanish use of the word Chichimeca.

²⁵ "Relación de Pedro de Ahumada" in R.H. Barlow and George T. Smisor, *Nombre de Dios, Durango: Two Documents in Nahuatl Concerning its Foundation: Memorial of the Indians Concerning their Service, c. 1563; Agreement of the Mexicans and the Michoacanos, 1585* (Sacramento: House of Tlaloc, 1943), pp. 53-63.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

²⁷ Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España*, 5 vols. (Mexico: P. Robredo, 1938), vol. 3, p. 117. See also Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson and Eloise Quiñones Keber, eds., *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún, pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth Century Aztec Mexico*, Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, State University of New York at Albany (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1988); and Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, Arthur J.O. Anderson and Charles Dibble, trans. (Salt Lake City and Santa Fe: University of Utah Press and School of American Research Press, 1950-1982).

²⁸ Sahagún, *História*, p. 116.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

For example Pedro de Ahumada's account that "in former times" the Zacatecos women killed their children at birth so as not to have an impediment to their wanderings and raised instead children captured from civilized peoples at the age of eight or nine years is contradicted by Gonzalo de las Casas's account which describes the difficult conditions under which the Chichimec women gave birth but does not say that the Chichimecas killed their children.³⁰

The Spanish sources also contradict one another over the issue of whether or not the Chichimecas wore clothes, a crucial point for them in determining if a people were civilized. Clothing in European culture denoted rank and authority. The more voluminous and ostentatious the dress, the more status an individual was perceived to enjoy. Lack of clothing was considered to indicate a state of nature. Therefore, Europeans were careful to note the dress of the American natives they met to help determine whether or not they were civilized.³¹ While las Casas stated that the only clothing the Zacatecos wore were the rags or grasses they used when they met with Spaniards, Sahagún described in detail Zacatecos clothing. The men wore a blanket made of deerskin, he stated, while their leaders wore blankets made of the skin of mountain lions, tigers or sometimes squirrel pelts. An Indian leader might wear a cap made of squirrel with the tail hanging down the back or feathers pinned together in the shape of a fan. In his account the women wore skirts and blouses made of animal skins.³²

Their custom of going into battle naked may have been the source of the Spanish idea that these Indians never wore clothing. Gonzalo de las Casas himself stated that the Chichimecas doffed their clothing before going into battle "for the effect."³³ Indian nakedness as it was perceived by the Spanish also may have had less to do with the absence of clothing per se than with the amount or type of clothing the Indians wore. The fact that some Indians wore fewer body coverings than the Spanish were accustomed to, or clothing of different or unusual materials, or the fact that they did not cover parts of the body customarily covered by the Spaniards, exaggerated their perception of Indian nakedness. Even body paint, which the northern Indians used in liberal amounts according to Spanish accounts, can possibly have the same symbolic significance as clothing, a significance of which the Spanish were only dimly aware and about which they say very little.

³⁰ "Relación de Pedro de Ahumada," p. 58; las Casas, "Noticia de los Chichimecas," p. 160.

³¹ Dickason, *The Myth of the Savage*, pp. 50-51.

³² Sahagún, *Historia*, pp. 117-118.

³³ Las Casas, "Noticia de los Chichimecas," p. 157.

Some of the northern Indians, particularly those who inhabited the central desert region between the Sierra Madre Occidental and Oriental, the Zacatecos and the Guachachiles, for example, were for the most part nomadic.³⁴ But the Spanish also called sedentary Indians Chichimecas, further clouding the picture of exactly who or what they thought a Chichimeca was. The Otomies of Sahagún's *Historia* who lived on the outskirts of the civilizations of the central valley of Mexico were highly acculturated to these civilizations, and their agricultural and religious practices reveal the influences of contact with the central valley peoples. Interestingly, Sahagún does not characterize these Chichimecas as being warlike.³⁵

The Tepehuan Indians, whose small settlements or *rancherías* were situated further north in the hills and valleys of the eastern slopes of the Sierra Madre Occidental, were another group of sedentary Indians also called Chichimecas. Fray Alonso Ponce included the Tepehuanes in his list of Chichimec Indian nations that he compiled for his superior in 1590.³⁶ The Tepehuanes are described in the Jesuit annual letters of 1593 and 1595, as a "nation of warlike Indians who live in high mountains and on the shores of . . . rivers," "entirely savage" and "cannibals."³⁷ As the first Jesuit mission to the Tepehuanes was begun in 1596, these observations were necessarily second hand.

The Tepehuanes shared certain cultural traits with the Guachichiles and Zacatecos, which by the latter half of the sixteenth century, the Spanish had identified as "Chichimec." In his *Descripción Geográfica* written in 1604 after a tour of inspection through Tepehuan country, Bishop Mota y Escobar described the Tepehuanes as a "robust and valient [sic] people" who were extremely "dexterous with the bow and arrow" which they used for hunting and as weapons.³⁸ Fray Francisco del Barrio noted in 1604 that the Tepehuanes lacked a complex system of political organization because they had "neither lord nor *tlatoani* to which, like a king, they are vassals," rein-

³⁴ Ralph Beals, *The Comparative Ethnology of Northern Mexico Before 1750*, Ibero Americana: 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1932), p. 146.

³⁵ Sahagún, *Historia*, pp. 116-120.

³⁶ Ponce, "Relacion," p. 153.

³⁷ Jesuit Annual Letter of 1593, *Monumenta Mexicana*, Félix Zubillaga, S.J. and Ernest J. Burrus, S.J., eds., 7 vols. (Rome: Institutum Historicum, 1956-1981), vol. 5, pp. 86-87; Jesuit Annual Letter of 1595, *Diccionario bio-bibliográfico de la Compañía de Jesús en México*, Francisco Zambrano, S.J., ed., 15 vols. (México: Editorial Jus, 1962), vol. 1, p. 629.

³⁸ Alonso Mota y Escobar, *Descripción geográfica de los reinos de Nueva Galicia, Nueva Vizcaya, y Nueva León por d. Alonso de la Mota y Escobar* (reprint, México: P. Robredo, 1940), p. 202.

forcing the Spanish belief that Chichimecas did not live *en policia*, that is, have civil communities.³⁹

These descriptions differ from earlier accounts of Tepehuan life and culture, which present these Indians as agriculturalists who depended on hunting and gathering to supplement their diets. One of the first eyewitness accounts of the Tepehuanes was written in 1562 by Francisco de Ibarra, first governor of Nueva Vizcaya, who encountered some of these Indians in the Rio Nazas area: “. . .the land is very populous,” he wrote, “with clothed people who have much food and live in adobe and stone houses. [They are] as skillful in the cultivation of their fields and in the irrigation of them as one can find in the world.” The governor was particularly enthusiastic about the Indians’s great stores of corn, which he hoped to requisition to support future Spanish settlers and miners in the area.⁴⁰

Tepehuan culture as described by these early observers also differed in other important ways from the standard Spanish conception of Chichimecas as unclothed nomads who lacked religion. Tepehuan rituals exhibited aspects of the religious practices of the central valley Indians, probably acquired through cultural influences from the south at an earlier period.⁴¹ Instead of the sky gods and the arrow sacrifice typical of the hunter-gatherers of the Gran Chichimeca, the Tepehuanes worshipped stone idols and practiced other forms of human sacrifice. Jesuit missionaries reported that the Tepehuanes worshipped carved stone idols and that their shamans consulted stone fetishes which spoke to them about important matters. The Jesuits described a principal Tepehuan idol, called Ubamari, which stood on a hill above the Tepehuan town of the same name. This idol was said to be five *palmas* high and consisted of a stone carved human head resting on a stone pillar. The Tepehuanes made offerings of arrows, clay pots, animal bones and fruits and flowers to this idol.⁴²

Ritual cannibalism of an enemy’s heart by Tepehuan warriors was described by Bishop Mota y Escobar and Fray Francisco del Barrio. The latter also reported that the Tepehuanes customarily practiced child sacrifice in the

³⁹ “Relación de Fray Francisco del Barrio,” *Archivo Ibero-Americano*, series 1 (1931), p. 359.

⁴⁰ Quoted in J. Lloyd Mecham, *Francisco de Ibarra and Nueva Vizcaya* (reprint, New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 81.

⁴¹ Basil C. Hedrick, J. Charles Kelley and Carroll L. Riley, eds., *The North Mexican Frontier* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), *passim*.

⁴² Francisco Javier Alegre, S.J., *Historia de la Provincia de la Compañía de Jesús de Nueva España*, Ernest J. Burrus, S.J. and Félix Zubillaga, S.J., eds., 4 vols. (reprint, Rome: Institutum Historicum, 1956-1960), vol. 2, p. 153.

belief that this would cure a sick adult.⁴³ Ritual cannibalism by a select group and extraction of hearts are aspects of Tepehuan ritual that seem particularly close to Mesoamerican practices and different from Chichimec religious ritual in which the deities were sky rather than earth gods.

Tepehuan political organization seems to have culminated at the village level and consisted of a number of extended families who lived together under the leadership of shamans and a council of elders. There were also military leaders or "caciques," but there is little evidence to suggest that any Tepehuan group had achieved the status of chiefdom.⁴⁴ An exception to this is the Spanish discovery during the Tepehuan Revolt of 1616 that the Tepehuanes's carefully laid and concealed war plans included the division of their territory among six chiefs (the Spanish called them "kings") once all non-Tepehuanes had been expelled. The emergence of what seem to be chiefs at this time is most likely a post-contact period development.⁴⁵ Even the Jesuits changed their minds about the Tepehuanes once they made actual contact with them. The annual letter of 1596 describes a distinctly non-Chichimeca-like people:

The Tepehuanes. . . have some signs of *policia*. They go about dressed in wool and cotton; they have harvests of corn, they live permanently in their little houses or huts. . .⁴⁶

The contradictions in the Spanish use of the word Chichimeca must be explained in order for us to understand Spanish beliefs about the northern Indians and how these ideas influenced the history of Spanish-Indian relations on the northern frontier in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

The conquest of the Aztec empire had whetted the Spanish appetite for more wealthy civilizations to exploit. It soon became clear, however, that the peoples of northern Mexico had neither enormous wealth nor large populations which could offer the Spanish the prospects of easy profits and readily exploitable labor on which the Spanish way of life in America had

⁴³ Mota y Escobar, *Descripción geográfica*, p. 35; "Relación de Fray Francisco del Barrio," pp. 351-352.

⁴⁴ Jesuit Annual Letter of 1593, *Monumenta Mexicana*, vol. 5, p. 87; Edward Spicer, *Cycles of Conquest* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1962), pp. 378-379.

⁴⁵ "A brief and succinct account of events of the war with the Tepehuanes," in Charles Wilson Hackett, ed., *Historical Documents Relating to New Mexico, Nueva Vizcaya and Approaches Thereto, to 1773*, Collected by Adolph F.A. Bandelier and Fanny R. Bandelier, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C.: The Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1923-1937), vol. 2, p. 103.

⁴⁶ Jesuit Annual Letter of 1596, *Monumenta Mexicana*, vol. 6, p. 232.

come to depend, and this made it all the more difficult to promote Spanish settlement there beyond transient mining camps.

In a 1576 letter to Philip II concerning the sparse Spanish settlement of the north, the Viceroy of New Spain, Martín Enríquez de Almansa, went to the heart of the problem: “. . . I will do everything possible [to bring in Spanish settlers] but without Indians it is impossible to found Spanish settlements because only with great difficulty can the Spanish live without them.”⁴⁷

In their remarks about the northern Indians can be heard the echoes of Spanish disappointment that here was not another opportunity for the conquest and exploitation of a wealthy civilization on the scale of that of central Mexico. Diego de Ibarra, second governor of Nueva Vizcaya, summed up this attitude in a 1582 letter to the King. It is quite different from the optimism his nephew had shown twenty years earlier: “The truth . . . is that all the natives of that country [Nueva Vizcaya] are so wretchedly poor that they have almost no recognizable property with which they can pay tribute. . . .”⁴⁸

The Chichimeca War also did much to contribute to the Spanish perception that all the northern Indians were nomadic and “savage.” The Spanish lack of understanding of the variety and complexity of the native cultures that existed in the North was conditioned by the fact that the most extensive contact the Spanish had with these Indians during the first four decades after contact was through fighting them. This necessarily contributed to a distorted view of what traditional Indian life was like and gave rise to certain exaggerated beliefs.

The Chichimeca War was fought on Indian territory and was extremely disruptive to native life in ways the wars the Indians fought among themselves were not. Warfare among the northern Indians were not wars of extermination, but seem to have been fought to settle boundaries and feuds as well as providing the warriors with the opportunity to acquire military prestige and wives. Indian warfare of this type took the form of periodic raids rather than extended campaigns.⁴⁹ When the northern Indians went to war with the Spanish, even the sedentary tribes were forced to move the

⁴⁷ Carta del virey de la Nueva España don Martín Enríquez al Rey Don Felipe II, México, 31 de octubre de 1576 in *Biblioteca de autores españoles*, CCLXIV, *Cartas de Indias* (Madrid: Impr. de M.G. Hernandez, 1877, reprint, Madrid: Ediciones Atlas, 1974), p. 325.

⁴⁸ Diego de Ibarra to His Sacred Catholic Royal Majesty, May 1582 in Hackett, *Historical Documents*, vol. 1, p. 111.

⁴⁹ Elman R. Service, *Primitive Social Organization: An Evolutionary Perspective* (New York: Random House, 1971); Pérez de Ribas, *Triunfos de Nuestra Santa Fé*, vol. 3, p. 137.

women and children out of their *rancherías* to safer locations in the desert or the sierras where they could live off the land and where soldiers on horseback could not pursue them. Crops would be destroyed or not planted at all in such circumstances, and the Indians would then be forced to subsist on hunting and gathering, making it appear to outside observers that normally sedentary Indians were, in fact, nomadic.

Gonzalo de las Casas implied that the Indians reverted to a nomadic life as a result of Spanish incursion when he stated in his *Report on the Chichimecas* that the Guamares left their *rancherías* in the plains and took up residence in the sierras after the Spanish moved into their territory in what is today the southeastern part of the state of Guadalajara: "They [Guamares] lived together in *rancherías*, in the plains, not going into the sierras where they are now."⁵⁰

The disruptions of war over a thirty-five-year period resulted in changes to Indian life that we can only glimpse through the writings of Spanish observers. The Spanish marvelled at the ability of the Indians to survive in the wilderness on available wild foods such as roots, *tuñas*, grasses, wild maguery and mesquite, but those Indians who were accustomed to a sedentary existence and who depended on agriculture for even part of their food supply suffered from famine when their fields were destroyed and they were forced to abandon their settlements.

A rare insight into what life was like for Indians who resisted Spanish domination by fleeing to the sierras is provided by the statement of some Tepehuan Indians recorded in the Jesuit Annual Letter of 1597 from the mission at Santiago Papasquiario. These Tepehuanes, who had been forced by famine to seek Jesuit protection, stated that in the mission

We no longer go about as before in fear of the Spanish soldiers, keeping a lookout from the peaks without daring to go down to the plains, or to make a fire at night; now we all eat securely and sleep without fear; now our children go for water and we remain seated, and the women go alone for firewood. . . .⁵¹

There is an undeniably self-serving aspect to the Jesuits's selection of this particular statement to preserve in their annual letter. The Jesuits were not in favor of the war against the Indians and often tried to discredit the Spanish military's ability to control the natives. This statement also is a positive

⁵⁰ Las Casas, "Noticia de los Chichimecas," p. 168.

⁵¹ Jesuit Annual Letter of 1597, *Monumenta Mexicana*, vol. 6, p. 428. See also Robert C. Padden, "Cultural Change and Military Resistance in Araucanian Chile, 1550-1730," *Southwest Journal of Anthropology*, 13 (1957), 103-121 for a similar analysis of Araucanian response to the Spanish.

commentary on Jesuit missions to the northern Indians, and for that reason alone would merit inclusion in an annual letter to the missionaries's superiors in Mexico City and Rome. However, the words themselves ring true enough to indicate that this is an unusual native description of what life was like for them during the Chichimeca War.

The Chichimeca War became an agent for change in Indian life in other ways as well. They learned to ride horses which made raiding Spanish *estancias* and wagon trains easier, and the Indians came to depend on the items acquired in this way. Former hunters became raiders for food, clothing, horses and weapons. Hunting for game lost ground to the easier task of poaching cattle, for which the Spanish soon learned the Indians were "very greedy."⁵² By 1596, according to the Jesuits, the Tepehuanes near Guanaqueví lived by "planting corn and making assaults, killing and robbing those who came near."⁵³ In effect, the Chichimeca War created the very barbarians the Spanish believed they were fighting to subdue.

While the Chichimeca War helped create nomadic Chichimecas from sedentary populations, the Spanish also invented new meanings for the word used to denote these Indians that had little correspondence to the Nahuatl definition of the word *chichimec*. What the Spanish meant by *chichimeca* was only partly acquired from their frontier experience. The word soon acquired mythological and legal definitions that were derived from Spanish culture.

For Europeans of the late Middle Ages, the traditional symbol of barbarism was the mythological wild man, who possessed traits which are similar in many respects to the Spanish ideas about Chichimecas. The wild man, as depicted in the literary and artistic tradition of late medieval and early modern Europe, was a hairy creature who inhabited remote areas such as mountains or forests and lived in huts or caves. Wild people went naked or wore animal skins and survived by hunting, although sometimes they were shown engaged in agriculture. Some wild men were thought to be cannibals and were believed to steal human children, leaving their own in exchange. Their way of life was in all respects incompatible with European ideas of civilization and Christianity.⁵⁴ The European wild man was quite a different

⁵² Jesuit Annual Letter of 1598, *Monumenta Mexicana*, vol. 6, p. 634.

⁵³ "Relación del H. Juan Carrera," *Ibid.*, p. 337.

⁵⁴ On the wild man in European thought see David Gordon White, *Myths of the Dogman*, Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952); John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Timothy Husband, *The Wild Man, Medieval Myth and Symbolism* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980); W. R. Jones, "The Image of the Barbarian in Medieval Europe," *Comparative*

creature from the Nahuatl Chichimeca, but was very close to Spanish ideas about “wild” Indians.

The association of Chichimecas with wild men becomes more apparent when we consider the connection of wild men to dogs or dog headed men (cynocephali). Cynocephali appear in the works of Isidore of Seville, the medieval Spanish theologian and encyclopedist, and in the travel books of Sir John Mandeville and Marco Polo. Unlike the wild people who lived in Europe itself, although removed from society, the dogheads were believed to live in regions north or east of Europe and symbolized, among other things, those who rejected Christianity. Dogheads were a form of wild man or barbarian because, like wild people they rejected Christianity and were also prone to such uncivilized activities as cannibalism.⁵⁵ The connection between wild men, dogheads and the Chichimecas, therefore, was more than an etymological one because the Chichimecas, like the dogheads, spurned Spanish civilization and religion and, like wild people, inhabited remote and mountainous regions.

The wild man appears in Spanish literature of the seventeenth century, notably in Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, and the architecture of both Spain and Spanish America. For example, the facade of the Casa del Montejo in Merida, Yucatan contains an image of a wild man. The concept of the wild man was a familiar category of thought which the Spanish could employ to give their own meaning to the word Chichimeca.⁵⁶ That they did so is borne out by the fact that the Chichimecas, as the Spanish thought of them, shared many similar characteristics with European wild people and explains why some of the connotations the word had in Nahuatl do not appear in the Spanish use of the term. Borrowing this ready-made category made it easy for those Spaniards who wished to see these Indians in a negative way to dispense with empirical observations of Indian life, but it also raises the question of why some Spaniards insisted on promoting a negative image of the Chichimecas when empirical evidence often suggested otherwise.

As the Chichimeca War endured and its theater of operations expanded as the Spanish moved north in search of silver, the word Chichimeca came to

Studies in Society and History, 13:4 (1971), pp. 376-407; Edward Dudley and Maximilian E. Novak, eds., *The Wild Man Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburg Press, 1973); David A. Wells, *The Wild Man from the Epic of Gilgamesh to Hartman von Aues Iwein: Reflections on the Development of a Theme in World Literature* (Belfast: Queen’s University of Belfast, 1975).

⁵⁵ Friedman, *The Monstrous Races*, pp. 61-85 and White, *Myths of the Dogman*, passim.

⁵⁶ See Michael T. Ryan, “Assimilating New Worlds in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 23:4 (October 1981), 519-538.

be applied to more Indian nations, and the meaning of the term in Spanish became less ethnological and more legalistic. Instead of describing a people and their culture, the word Chichimeca became the means by which some Spaniards attempted to place Indians in a legal category that would allow them to treat the Indians in certain ways. These Spaniards wanted to exterminate Indian autonomy and culture in the north through their enslavement and destruction by means of total war, but in order to do this, they had to show that these natives were legally deserving of such treatment. The conditions for enslavement were few. Only if it could be shown that Indians were cannibals or that they had rebelled against the crown could such actions against them be considered just and legal.⁵⁷

This change in the use of the word Chichimeca becomes more apparent when the text by Gonzalo de las Casas, *Noticias de los Chichimecas*, written during the time the war reached its climax, is compared with Sahagún's *Historia*.⁵⁸ Where Sahagún mentions neither cannibalism nor bellicosity as Chichimeca traits, las Casas makes them defining characteristics of the Chichimeca enemy.

Gonzalo de las Casas was typical of the Mexican encomendero class in both his life and his attitudes toward the Indians. He owned the encomienda of Yanhuítlán, which he had inherited from his father, and property in Mexico City. True to the military ideals of his class, he had fought for the viceroy in Honduras against the uprising of Cristóbal de Olid as well as in the Chichimeca War. He was a firm believer in the legality of Spanish domination in the Americas which he justified in an earlier work entitled "Defense of the Conquest and the Conquistadors of the West Indies."⁵⁹

His "Report on the Chichimecas" was written to argue the encomendero point of view concerning the treatment of the Indians. Although he included in his report numerous ethnographic details on the Chichimecas to show that they were barbaric, nomadic and generally uncivilized, unlike Bernardino de Sahagún, ethnography per se did not interest las Casas. Las Casas's

⁵⁷ The idea that Indians could be enslaved under certain circumstances is present very early in legislation concerning the treatment of the Indians. See, for example, "R. provisión para poder cautivar a los canibales rebeldes," Segovia, 30 Octubre 1503 and "R. provisión que los indios caribes se puedan tomar por esclavos," Burgos, 23 dic. 1511, in Robert Konetzke, *Colección de documentos para la historia de la formación social de Hispanoamérica, 1493-1810*, 2 vols. (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1953), vol. 2, pp. 14 and 31. See also Silvio Zavalo, *Los esclavos indios en Nueva España* (Mexico: Colegio Nacional, 1968), pp. 1-66.

⁵⁸ Philip W. Powell, *Soldiers, Indians and Silver: The Northwest Advance of New Spain, 1550-1600* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952) remains the classic study of the Chichimeca War.

⁵⁹ las Casas, "Noticia de los Chichimecas," pp. 144-146 and Robert Himmerich y Valencia, *The Encomenderos of New Spain, 1521-1555* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), p. 137.

purpose in describing Chichimec life, as he states in his first paragraph, was “to make better understood the justness of the war against them.”⁶⁰

Las Casas recognized that the word Chichimeca was a generic term and stated that “they are divided into many nations and groups and in diverse languages,” but in his view, all the northern Indians were Chichimecas not because of their possession or lack of any particular cultural traits, but because they had violated the legal conditions by which the Spanish could enslave and conduct all-out war against them. These conditions included self-defense (the Chichimecas robbed and killed Spaniards with no provocation); the punishment of apostates (the Chichimecas swore allegiance to the Holy Faith and used Christian names, yet they destroyed churches and holy objects and killed missionaries); the punishment of rebels against the Spanish monarch; and the defense of one’s right to travel freely and peaceably (the Chichimecas attacked wagon trains and blocked roads leading into their territory). Las Casas and others believed that Indians who committed these crimes were Chichimecas, no matter what their level of cultural development might be, and that they should be dealt with according to Spanish law which allowed for a just war against them and for their enslavement if captured. Showing that these Indians were barbarians merely helped explain why they rejected Spanish civilization and Christianity.⁶¹

These arguments were not original with las Casas. The controversy over the treatment of the Indians, of which las Casas’s *Report* was a rather late addition, had already been the subject of a longstanding debate by 1571. By 1556 the debate had been largely resolved in favor of the idea that the Spanish right of conquest rested on Spain’s duty to evangelize the Indians, that all else was immaterial and that the fulfillment of this duty depended on the good treatment of the Indians. About the time las Casas was writing his treatise, a consensus between the crown and the church on this issue resulted in the promulgation of an ordinance in 1573 which ordered that henceforth the American natives were not to be conquered but pacified through good treatment. That this policy was not immediately applied to the pacification of the northern frontier is largely the result of the success of men like las Casas in arguing that the Chichimecas were no better than savage beasts and that all-out war and enslavement were the only ways to subdue them. Faced with these arguments, it was difficult for Spanish officials in Mexico City to

⁶⁰ Las Casas, “Noticia de los Chichimecas,” p. 152.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-173; Robert A. Williams, Jr., *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought: The Discourses of Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) provides an overview of the legal issues surrounding the Spanish conquest.

come to an easy conclusion about how the war should be conducted. Viceroy Villamanrique explained the dilemma to the king in this way:

Even though I knew from the time of my arrival here that the Spaniards participating in this war were also the cause of it, I received so many contrary opinions that I was obliged to ignore my own. Thus this war had to be continued as under my predecessors.⁶²

The approach of the 1573 ordinance was finally implemented by Viceroy Villamanrique in 1590 when, after thirty-five years of the Chichimeca War, it became apparent that the kind of violence the frontier settlers were calling for would not bring the hostilities to an end. In Villamanrique's peace-by-purchase plan the Indians were offered clothing and food in return for peace, and the military was withdrawn from the frontier and replaced by missionaries.⁶³ The speed with which this plan worked, the frontier was at peace within a few years of its implementation in 1590, is another indication of how the Chichimeca War created its own Chichimec enemy.⁶⁴

With the end of the war in 1590, the use of the word Chichimeca gradually declined and was replaced by the names of individual native peoples. The Jesuit historian Andrés Pérez de Ribas illustrated this change in attitude toward the Indians in his *Historia de los triunfos de Nuestra Santa Fée* published in 1645. Pérez de Ribas carefully distinguished the Tepehuan Indians from the Chichimecas, noting that although the Tepehuanes had rebelled against the Spanish and "although it is true that this name [Chichimeca] used to be given to all the barbarous nations in New Spain, the fact is that the Chichimecs are a distinct and different nation from the Tepehuanes."⁶⁵ With Pérez de Ribas the word began to shed its legal connotation and to regain its capacity as an ethnographic expression, although a vague and still essentially a reductionist one.

Spanish and Aztec descriptions of the Chichimecas merge with each other through the definition of these Indians as warlike hunters and gatherers, gaining their livelihood by means of their bows and arrows, as opposed to civilized Indians who raised corn, beans, squash and chili peppers.⁶⁶ Neither

⁶² Powell, *Soldiers, Indians and Silver*, pp. 105-119. Quote from Powell, p. 189.

⁶³ On the peace-by-purchase plan see Philip W. Powell, "Peacemaking on North America's First Frontier," *The Americas*, 16:3 (January 1960), 221-250 and *Soldiers, Indians and Silver*, chapters 11 and 12.

⁶⁴ For an analysis of this process in the Caribbean, see Hulme, *Colonial Encounters, Europe and the Native Caribbean*. A broader treatment is W. Arens, *The Man-eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁶⁵ Pérez de Ribas, *Historia*, p. 201.

⁶⁶ Susan Schroeder, *Chimalpahin and the Kingdoms of Chalco* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press,

Spanish nor Aztec sources give a satisfactory answer to who the Chichimecas really were, and the depictions of Chichimec life they offer are both vague and contradictory. This is because ultimately neither group was interested in this question. The Aztec histories were not concerned with real Chichimecas but in the Chichimecas's function as ancestors and as the "other" who, because they were uncivilized gave meaning to the Aztecs's own civility.

The Spanish on the other hand met real Indians on the northern frontier where the Chichimecas were supposed to live. They were interested in conquering these Indians in order to exploit the silver deposits known to be in this area. But the Indians resisted. They would not consent easily to the Spanish presence in their territory nor to Spanish attempts to make mine workers and tribute payers of them as they had the Indians of the more civilized peoples of the south. The Spanish definition of what a Chichimeca was and who could be called a Chichimeca was conditioned by their long fought, often frustrating effort to conquer the north and subdue its people. In this they drew on their own folklore, including the idea of wild folk and, later, they attempted to rationalize total war against the northern Indians by converting the word Chichimeca into a quasilegal term and classifying as such all northern Indians who resisted their rule.

The result has been confusion between the scientific, or ethnological, and symbolic interpretations of the term. By understanding the different meanings the Aztecs and the Spanish attached to the word Chichimeca, modern historians can be more precise in their own use of the word and will be able to judge more accurately the extent to which Nahuatl and Spanish accounts of Chichimecas can contribute to our knowledge of the Indians of northern Mexico in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

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1991), p. 91, shows how the Nahuatl historian, Chimalpahin, makes the distinction between the Chichimecas and his own people a cultural one. A post-conquest (probably late sixteenth-century) example of the colloquial use of the word chichimeca is found in the so-called *Bancroft Dialogues* in which an Indian mother describes her mischievous son: "he runs howling and shouting as though he were a Chichimec." The connotation of the word Chichimec here clearly denotes a lack of control and respect for authority, i.e. "uncivilized." See Frances Karttunen and James Lockhart, *The Art of Nahuatl Speech, The Bancroft Dialogues*, UCLA Latin American Studies, vol. 65 (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), p. 159. I thank Susan Schroeder for bringing this quote to my attention.