CHAPTER TWO

FROM PICTURES TO LETTERS:
THE EARLY STEPS IN THE MEXICAN TLAHCUILÓ'S ALPHABETISATION
PROCESS DURING THE 16TH CENTURY

Patrick Johansson

Introduction

The alphabet was probably one of the most important weapons used by the Spanish in their enterprise of colonisation after the Conquest of Mexico (1519–21). If horses, cannons and muskets showed the military power of the Spaniards, the alphabet was apparently proof of their cultural ‘superiority’.

The fact that paper could ‘speak’ literally astonished indigenous political and religious authorities, used to conserving and transmitting their knowledge through memorial orality and pictography. Among other things, this western technology helped to enable Christianity, the religion of the Book, to become dominant, and also to integrate Mexican natives into a new social order. The alphabetical texts from the oral pictorial tradition, considered as idolatrous, to be transcribed and read by friars, and some of their contents refuted and then forbidden. Other texts considered as ‘good’, often interpolated, were conserved in the ‘golden jail of alphabet’ and eventually used by friars in different colonial contexts.

Many pictographic documents were destroyed. But some were re-created after the Conquest, by native painters, when Spanish friars, realising they had to know the Other to evangelise him or her better, asked the native tlalhcuilos (indigenous scribes or painters) to paint again some of the pictographic documents that had been destroyed. However, by then the indigenous artists had become acquainted with the alphabet, and consequently no longer painted in the old style.

The transcription process and the re-creation of native texts can be schematised as follows:
The transition from pictograms to letters implicated a gradual ideological change for those who were in charge of transmitting tradition. In pre-Hispanic times, oral texts and pictography could — in semiological terms — be independent or complementary. A ‘virtual’ text could be forged in either a linguistic or a pictorial crucible without a direct semiological correspondence between pictures and words. The pictorial text was thus to be seen rather than to be read. It could also be articulated in both oral and pictorial languages, the second being, in this case, a visual feedback structure for orality.¹

During the first part of the colonial period, as they were getting acquainted with the alphabet, Nahua painters of pictorial books (tlahcuilo) were modifying their ways of constructing meaning through pictures. The nature of the modifications often depended on the topics but the general trends of transformation show the influence of the alphabet on the pictorial expression.

On the other hand, pre-Columbian pictorial documents were ‘read’ after the Conquest for Spanish friars or people interested in the native culture. The result was a verbal text transcribed in alphabetical manuscripts ‘illustrated’ with pictograms. It is interesting to observe the semiological mixture in such documents as well as to compare the alphabetic and pictographic versions.

After examining briefly the semiological relation between words and pictures in a pre-Columbian Nahuatl context, we will consider the gradual transformation of indigenous writing during the 16th century.