

Culture, knowledge, and evangelization: the work of Friar Bernardino de Sahagún

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Abstract

The present article aimed at analyzing chapters IV, V and VII from *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, by Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, written in the 16th century in New Spain. We tried to relate its narrative to historical and epistemological contexts from such period, emphasizing its connections with the European knowledge on Natural Philosophy and with needs imposed by the political and spiritual colonizations of New Spain.

Keywords: Friar Bernardino de Sahagún; judiciary astrology; natural philosophy.

Cultura, conhecimento e evangelização: a obra de Frei Bernardino de Sahagún

Resumo

Foram analisados, neste artigo, os capítulos IV, V e VII da obra *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, do frei Bernardino de Sahagún, elaborada no século XVI novo-hispano. Buscou-se relacionar sua narrativa aos contextos histórico e epistemológico de tal período, enfatizando seus liames com o conhecimento europeu da Filosofia Natural e com as necessidades impostas pelas colonizações política e espiritual da Nova Espanha.

Palavras-chave: Frei Bernardino de Sahagún; astrologia judiciária; filosofia natural.

Cultura, conocimiento y evangelización: la obra de Fray Bernardino de Sahagún

Resumen

En este artículo analizamos los capítulos IV, V y VII de la obra *Historia General de las cosas de la Nueva España*, de Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, elaborada en el siglo XVI nuevo-hispano. En este estudio buscamos relacionar su narrativa al contexto histórico y epistemológico del siglo XVI nuevo-hispano, enfatizando sus conexiones con el conocimiento europeo de la Filosofía Natural y con las necesidades impuestas por la colonización política y espiritual de la Nueva España.

Palabras claves: Fray Bernardino de Sahagún; astrología judicial; filosofía natural.

Culture, savoir et de l'évangélisation: l'ouvrage de Fray Bernardino de Sahagún

Résumé

Cette article analyse la *Historia General de las cosas de la Nueva España*, de Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, faite au seizième siècle nouveau-hispanique. Cette étude vise à mettre en rapport son histoire avec le contexte historique et épistémologique du XVI^e siècle nouveau-hispanique, en soulignant leurs liens avec les connaissances européennes de la philosophie naturelle et les nécessités imposées par la colonisation politique et spirituelle de la Nouvelle-Espagne.

Mots-clés: Fray Bernardino de Sahagún; astrologie judiciaire; philosophie naturelle.

In the 16th century, the European arrival in America and the recognition of the existence of different religiosity, language, culture and knowledge led to the search for information. Spanish reports elaborated in the region of Valley of Mexico, inhabited by various communities and led by the Nahua people, are characterized by the description of habits and features related to the ancient religion. In the early years of colonization and euphoric Christianization, indigenous communities were expected to convert in terms of politics and religion. However, the Spanish religious people observed that the Christianization of the Nahua communities had not been completed, since they practiced ceremonies and shared beliefs from both the Christian and the indigenous religions. This situation was not ideal for the Christian church, and led to new proposals and evangelization policies. Among the Franciscans, order to which belonged Bernardino de Sahagún, an evangelization project was established and guided by information on the pre-Hispanic cultural, natural and religious universes, which aimed to identify the permanence of religious and cultural elements from the Nahua people in the colonial period, in order to define a better strategy to fight them and improve the evangelization.

Concerning the reports on nature and American knowledge, it is not possible to restrict them to the features and objectives related to the attempts of an effective evangelization. The epistemological scenario of these narrations is inserted in an abundant European time, of humanistic reforms that were diffused at different intensities all over Europe. Missionaries and thinkers who were dedicated to describing the natural world and the American communities were brought up in this context, and inserted many characteristics from this European view of the world into their work.

In the same period, a new scientific mentality was being formed; however, it did not present as a homogeneous attitude to the thinkers and the general population. On the contrary, only in the century to come significant ruptures would be found in the European thinking, and, during the 16th, a juxtaposition of concepts and practices related to the medieval cultural and intellectual environments, as well as the new parameters and considerations of modern science, was observed.

Therefore, Natural Philosophy constituted the knowledge regarding nature and cosmos in the European 16th century. The magic and divination practices guided many studies on the possible ways to know and control nature, and Astrology was dedicated to understanding the skies, its phenomena and terrestrial influences. These subjects were approached by Sahagún, since they integrated the knowledge concerning the natural world. In relation to the practices and knowledge of the Nahua, their mapping would be an essential instrument to make the spiritual and political achievement of the newly-conquered indigenous people effective.¹

An analysis of knowledge was conducted with the work by Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*,² with the objective to *know* (indigenous religion and culture) in order to better *control* (politically and religiously). This article aimed to understand the indigenous religious and cultural universes, however, its construction, by means of hybrid language and conceptions,³ offers a valuable instrument to understand the delicate moment of conquer and colonization of America by the Europeans, and perhaps it can collaborate for the reflection on the formative structures of Latin America.

¹Raquel Alvarez Peláez, *La conquista de la naturaleza americana*, Madrid, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1993.

²Bernardino Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, Madrid, Alianza, 1995.

³Federico Navarrete, "Vida cotidiana y moral indígena en la Historia General", *Arqueología Mexicana: Fray Bernardino de Sahagún*, vol. 6, n. 36, México, 1999, p. 32-37.

Judicial Astrology and Natural Philosophy in the Work by the Friar Bernardino de Sahagún

Bernardino de Sahagún, in *Historia general de las cosas de La Nueva España*,⁴ described in books IV [*De la astrología judiciaria o arte de adivinar que estos mexicanos usaban para saber cuáles días eran bien afortunados y cuáles mal afortunados, y que condiciones tendrían los que ponen, y parece cosa de nigromancia, que no de astrología*] (about judicial astrology or the art to guess that these Mexicans used to know which days would bring good luck and which would not, and which conditions would there be for those who guess, and it seemed like necromancy instead of astrology), V [*Que trata de los agüeros y pronósticos que estos naturales tomaban de algunas aves, animales y sabandijas para adivinar las cosas futuras*] (about the omen and predictions that these people made based on some birds and animals to guess future things) and VII [*Que trata de la astrología y filosofía natural que alcanzaron estos naturales de esta Nueva España*] (about astrology and natural philosophy accomplished by those from New Spain), the magic and divination practices from the Nahua people, and in IV and VII, their calendar system.

By proposing the division into books, Sahagún designed a thematic delimitation from issues that cross the interests of his own evangelization project and his conceptions concerning the natural world. Therefore, the fourth and fifth books were dedicated to the report of practices and knowledge that were considered as illicit by the Christian church, and the seventh refers to the knowledge embraced by it, since they were in accordance with the epistemological proposals of the European Natural Philosophy.

In this sense, by reporting the ritual calendar, the researcher considered it as necromancy, or divination art, dominated by the devil. From the title, the missionary distinguishes judicial astrology, condemned by the Church⁵ and related to the demonic influences, from natural astrology, licit knowledge approached in the seventh book. By analyzing the report by Sahagún about the Mexica calendar system, presented in book IV, it is possible to infer that the author understood the mechanisms indigenous used to calculate time, formed by two cycles, a ritual — the *Tonalpohualli* — and a seasonal one — the *Xiuhpohualli*. So, Sahagún distinguished and classified them from the European reference, and the *Tonalpohualli* was characterized as illicit, filled with superstitions, thus classified as judicial astrology, and the other was considered as the “true calendar”, associated with Natural Philosophy.⁶

⁴The Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún started gathering information on the indigenous cultural universe at the late 1540s, corresponding to the book VI in his great work. In 1555, he developed the one concerning the Spanish conquer and, in 1558, he received superior orders requesting the search for information that would lead to the creation of the mentioned work. Thus, he spent 20 years researching and writing *Historia General*, which was concluded in 1579 and sent to Spain. It is bilingual, written in Spanish and in nahuatl, and presents a column with pictographic images produced by informers and indigenous students of the missionary. In total, there were 12 books divided by themes that date back to the traditional medieval hierarchic division, and the first texts were dedicated to gods, followed by things of men, animals, vegetables and minerals, ending up with the narrative on the Spanish military victory. See José Luis Martínez, José Luis, *Bernardino de Sahagún: el México antiguo*, Caracas, Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1981.

⁵The Christian church condemned magic and divination practices, among them, the judicial astrology. Among the reasons for such condemnation were: competition for devotees, conceptual differences in relation to the natural world and the identification of this knowledge with the devil (See Paolo Rossi, *Francis Bacon: da magia à ciência*, Londrina, Eduel, 2006, p. 111; Keith Thomas, *Religião e declínio da magia: crenças populares na Inglaterra, séculos XVI e XVII*, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 1991, p. 207).

⁶The separation between the ritual and the seasonal calendar, and also the distinction between the calendar system and Nahua cosmogomy and cosmography, do not consider the cultural foundation of Mesoamerican peoples, who did not understand them separately, but as a homogeneous set that was complementary and completely connected.

The correlation between *Tonalpohualli* and judicial astrology was a constant resort in his narrative. Thus, the latter was defined by the missionary as: “[...] no es calendario, sino arte adivinatoria, donde se contienen muchas cosas de idolatría y muchas supersticiones y muchas invocaciones de los demonios” (“[...] it is no calendar, but divination art, in which there are many things of idolatry and many superstitions and invocation of the devils”).⁷ Its use aimed at: “[...] adivinar la fortuna o ventura que tendrían los que nacían, hombres y mujeres” (“[...] telling the fortune of those who were born, men and women”).⁸ However, the conceptual basis of these two practices diverged in their essential aspects, since the delimitation of future events by the *Tonalpohualli* was related to the “load” or energy of the *tonalli* corresponding to each day of the year.⁹ On the other hand, the European judicial astrology was based on the knowledge of the movement and the position of stars at specific periods, and such information was used to produce the natal chart, which was the base to predict the future.¹⁰ Thus, Sahagún related both types of knowledge due to their divination feature. The missionary hierarchized the European and indigenous practices, both condemnable for being related to divination, but considered the European knowledge as being superior to that of the indigenous people, because it was based on the elements of Natural Philosophy:

Es cuenta delicada y muy mentirosa y sin ningún fundamento de astrología natural; porque el arte de la astrología judiciaria que entre nosotros se usa, tiene fundamento en la astrología natural, que es en los signos y planetas del cielo y en los cursos y aspectos de ellos. Pero esta arte adivinatoria síguese o fúndase en unos caracteres y números en que ningún fundamento natural hay, sino solamente artificios fabricados por el mismo Diablo, porque no tiene fundamento en ninguna ciencia [...] mas parece cosa de embuste y embaimiento que no cosa razonable.¹¹

However, the Nahua knowledge related to time calculation was not parallel to the western astrology of that period, since divination was not based on natal charts. Sahagún observed this difference in comparison to the European knowledge, but he did not consider this cultural difference:

[...] Estos naturales de toda Nueva España tuvieron y tienen gran solicitud en saber el día y hora del nacimiento de cada persona, para adivinar las condiciones, vida y muerte de los que nacían. Los que tenían este oficio se llamaban *tonalpouhque* a los cuales acudían como a profetas, cualquiera que le nacía hijo o hija, para informarse de sus condiciones, vida y muerte. Estos adivinos no se regían por los signos ni planetas

⁷Bernardino Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, Madrid, Alianza, 1995, p. 278.

⁸Ibidem, p. 276.

⁹Joyce Marcus, “Los calendarios prehispánicos”, *Arqueología Mexicana: Calendarios Prehispánicos*, vol. 7, no. 41, México, 2000.

¹⁰Keith Thomas, *Religião e declínio da magia: crenças populares na Inglaterra, séculos XVI e XVII*, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 1991.

¹¹Bernardino Sahagún, op. cit., p. 283. It is something very delicate and a lie, without any basis from natural astrology; because the art of judicial astrology that is used among us is based on natural astrology, that is, on the signs and planets from the sky, and on their behavior and aspects. However, this divination art is based on characters and numbers without any base, but only subterfuges produced by the Devil himself, because it is not based on any science [...] but it seems like a lie, and not something reasonable (SAHAGÚN, 1995, p. 283).

del cielo, sino por una instrucción que según ellos dicen se la dejó *Quetzalcoatl* la cual contiene 20 caracteres multiplicados trece veces, por el modo que en el presente libro se contiene [...] (SAHAGÚN, 1995, p. 231).¹²

In book V, the missionary presented the functioning of *Tonalpohualli*, that is, the set of 13 days — *trecenas*, initially called ‘weeks’ — and its relation with the corresponding sign — *tonally*. They represented the ‘load’ or the influence of each day for the daily life of the Mexicas: “Aquí comienzan los caracteres de cada día, que contaban por trecenas. Eran 13 días en cada semana, y hacían un círculo de 260 días, y después tornaban al principio” (“here is the beginning of the characters of each day, which lasted for *trecenas*. There were 13 days in each week, which resulted in a circle of 260 days, and then returned to the beginning”).¹³

In the appendix of the book, Sahagún contradicts the relation presented between the *trecenas* and the European week, emphasizing the idea that this period corresponded only to a divination practice, which estranged *Tonalpohualli* from its condition in the calendar: “Algunos dicen que estos 13 días son semanas del mes, y no es así, sino número de días en que reina el signo o carácter” (“some say that

It is also described that those who were born under the sign of ce quiáhuitl would be witches, warlocks, prone to black magic, and the children who were born under ce cóatl would be dedicated to commerce

these 13 days are weeks in a month, but it is not true. They are the number of days in which the sign or character dominated”).¹⁴ And also: “Los 13 días que falsamente llama semanas no son sino el número de días que reinaba cada uno de los 20 caracteres de esta arte adivinatoria” (“the 13 days which are mistakenly called weeks represent the number of days that reigned each of the 20 characters from this divination art”).¹⁵

The author also reports the 20 signs or characters that reigned for 13 days, accounting for 260 days of *Tonalpohualli*. For instance, the *ce ucélotl* was characterized as: “Decían que era signo mal afortunado en todos los 13 días que gobernaba” (“some said it was the bad luck sign for all the 13 days it governed”).¹⁶ This influence approached different sides of the personal life, because besides presenting the main characteristics each person would have, it could also interfere in their job, marital choice and other predictions over the future. It is also described that those

¹² Bernardino Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, Madrid, Alianza, 1995, p. 231. [...] These natives from New Spain had and have great need to know the day and time of each person's birth, to guess the conditions, life and death of those who were born. Those who had that occupation were called tonalpouhque, and they were searched as prophets by those who had a son or a daughter in order to know about their conditions, life and death. These fortune-tellers were not guided by signs or planets in the sky, but by the instructions that, according to them, were left by Quetzalcoatl, which has 20 caracteres multiplied three times, by the way it is presented in this book [...] (SAHAGÚN, 1995, p. 213).

¹³Ibidem, p. 233.

¹⁴Ibidem, p. 276.

¹⁵Ibidem, p. 279.

¹⁶Ibidem, p. 235.

who were born under the sign of *ce quidáhuítl* would be witches, warlocks, prone to black magic, and the children who were born under *ce cóatl* would be dedicated to commerce for having characteristics such as good fortune and being predisposed to prosperity.

The signs could also, as exposed in chapter XXVI, contribute with the political decision-making, such as the determination of which date would be the best to start a war, or even measures that aimed at social control, such as the resolution and promulgation of prisoner and criminal sentences. When describing the 20 Nahuatl characters, the missionary presents them in a very similar way to the European conception of the zodiac, and each *tonalli* guided a period similar to the European way. Another proof of this approximation between the zodiac and the *Tonalpohualli* in the narrative by Sahagún was the subdivision of the latter into 'houses,' according to the days governed by each sign, that is, the *trecenas* would have 13 houses.

As to the report of the *ce ucélotl* sign: "La cuarta casa deste signo se llama olín [...], la séptima casa de este signo se llama *xuchitl*" ("the fourth house in this sign is called olín [...], the seventh house of this sign is called *xuchitl*").¹⁷ In this quote, we can notice certain apprehension of the indigenous cognitive universe when indicating the various characters — and influences — that acted in different days; however, the general configuration of the time calculation offered by the Franciscan

At times, Sahagún brings up Indian cultural elements. However, when he organized these elements, he superimposed them over European and (or) Christian conceptions

is close to the European mentality concerning the zodiac and judicial astrology. At some moments, Sahagún brings to light indigenous cultural elements, but then he superimposes them over the European and (or) Christian conceptions.

The objective to delimit the daily influences of the ritual calendar was in accordance with his evangelization ideal and with the need to Christianize the indigenous people, aiming at better political control.¹⁸ Therefore, understanding the calendar system and other indigenous cultural elements would serve as an instrument to check for the permanence of the ancient religion, and it could consequently collaborate with the extinction of the native idolatry practices.¹⁹ Facing the constant idolatry occurrences and the maintenance of ancient rituals, this Franciscan was dedicated to mapping and accusing these actions. In this sense, it is possible to confirm that the post-conquer survival of the calendar system, and also the different knowledge and cultural traditions related

¹⁷Bernardino Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, Madrid, Alianza, 1995, p. 236.

¹⁸Raquel Álvarez Peláez, *La conquista de la naturaleza americana*, Madrid, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1993.

¹⁹See Eduardo Natalino dos Santos, *Calendário, cosmografia e cosmogonia nos códices e textos nahuas do século XVI*, Tese (Doutorado em História) - Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2005.

to it, promoted the interest of missionaries due to their understanding and future persecution. According to Gruzinski:²⁰

[...] La conservación del uso del nombre indígena, escogido en función del día de nacimiento, la habilidad con la que los indios adelantaban o atrasaban las fiestas de los nuevos santos patronos, para hacerlas coincidir con las fiestas prohibidas, la observación de calendarios agrícolas fijados en secreto por los ancianos, corroboran, durante las últimas décadas del siglo XVI, el mantenimiento de una transmisión oral y pictográfica condenada por la Iglesia.

Therefore, the diagnostics of festive days in the indigenous ancient religion encouraged the interest of Sahagún to describe and understand the indigenous calendar. The relation between both of them is present in many passages of the text on the *ce ácatl* sign: “Decían ser este el signo de *Quetzalcóatl*, donde la gente nobleza hacía muchos sacrificios y ofrendas a honra deste Dios” (“they said this was the *Quetzalcóatl* sign, and the noble people made many sacrifices and offers on behalf of this God”).²¹

Other passages approach this relation between the days of *Tonalpohualli* and the religious ceremonies and indigenous gods:

Understanding the calendar system and other indigenous cultural elements would collaborate with the extinction of the native idolatry practices

Decían que este signo (*ce miquiztli*) era de *Tezcatlipuca*. Los señores y principales eran muy devotos de este signo. Hacían ofrendas por su honra y derramaban sangre de codornices, y hacían otras ceremonias, cada uno en el oratorio de su casa, y en los oratorios de los calpules esto hacían, por ser este signo de *Tezcatlipuca*, al cual tenían por criador universal.²²

El décimo signo se llamaba *ce técpatl*. El primero día de este signo le atribuían a *Huitzilopuchtli*, dios de la guerra, y a *Camaxtle*, que era dios de los *Huexotzinco*. [...] y ofrecíanle delante comidas preciosas de muchas maneras, así los principales como la gente común. [...] y el rey o señor ofrecía muchas y diversas maneras de flores delante la imagen de *Huitzilopuchtli* [...] también ofrecían cañas de humo [...].²³

Here, the main interest of Sahagún to map the days of *Tonalpohualli* from its relation with the gods and indigenous ceremonies was evident. When reporting the pre-Hispanic rituals and their possible festive dates, the missionary produces an

²⁰Serge Gruzinski, *La colonización de lo imaginario: sociedades indígenas y occidentalización en el México español. Siglos XVI - XVIII*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1991.

²¹Bernardino Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, Madrid, Alianza, 1995, p. 244.

²²Ibidem, p. 245. They said this sign (*ce miquiztli*) was from *Tezcatlipuca*. The lords and principals were devoted to this sign. They made offers for their honor and spilled blood from quails, and made other ceremonies, each in their own houses, and in other oratories, because this sign was of *Tezcatlipuca*, who was considered to be the universal creator (p. 245).

²³Ibidem, p. 258. The tenth sign was called *ce técpatl*. The first day of this sign was attributed to *Huitzilopuchtli*, the god of war, and to *Camaxtle*, who was the god of *Huexotzinco*. [...] and they offered them food in different ways, both the principals and the common people. [...] and the king or the lord offered many different flowers for the image of *Huitzilopuchtli*. [...] He was also offered tobacco [...]. (p.258).

efficient manual to identify their continuity in the colonial period, since it provides information about which gods were honored, the main rituals and sacrifices and also the offerings. According to Bustamante García,²⁴ by knowing about the behaviors connected to ancient practices, the religious people could preach themselves and assess their permanence.

The temporal correlation between the indigenous and the European calendars is one of the main objectives that guided the missionary reports on the calendar system. According to the correspondence also established between the Franciscan Pedro San Buenaventura and Bernardino de Sahagún, in relation to the solar Mexican calendar, probably elaborated between 1565 and 1572, the concern with the subject is notorious. The two Franciscans discussed the lack of homogeneity regarding the beginning of the indigenous calendar between the different Nahuatl populations. In the texts by Sahagún, according to Díaz Rubio,²⁵ there was no agreement between the initial dates of the *vintenas*, and this information about the calendar suggested it began on February 1st, 2nd or 27th. Such dispersion of data in the indigenous calendar encouraged the interest of missionaries to understand it, aiming to adapt it to the Christian calendar and to identify pagan parties, thus becoming a powerful instrument of political and religious control.

At some points, the personal inclinations offered by the ritual could serve the colonization interest. The social convulsions that shook the historical moment lived by the Franciscan, specially alcoholism, were mapped from the possible influence that birth, on specific days, would cause the indigenous people to: “[...] la segunda casa deste signo (*ce mázatl*) que se llama *ume tochtli*, en la cual nacían los borrachos” (“the second house of this sign – *ce mázatl* –, called *ume tochtli*, where the drunk people are born”).²⁶ Also by the concern with the propagation of numberless diseases:

Y decían que en él (signo *ce ozumatli* e signo *ce cuauhtli*) descendían las diosas que se llamaban *Cihuateteu*, que empecen a los niños. Y todos los que tenían niños o niñas, los encerraban en casa porque no se encontrasen con estas diosas, porque no los hiriesen con perlesía. Y si alguno caía en enfermedad en este signo, los médicos y médicas luego le desahuciaban. Decían que no escaparía porque las diosas le habían herido.²⁷

In the appendix of book IV, the indigenous practice that included one more day to each four-year period in the solar calendar was presented, and according to Broda,²⁸ it would be relevant to the missionary, since it approximated the indigenous and European knowledge due to the similarity between this method and the

²⁴See Jesús Bustamante García, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún: una revisión crítica de los manuscritos y de su proceso de composición, México, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1990 y “Retórica, traducción y responsabilidad histórica: claves humanísticas en la obra de Bernardino de Sahagún”. Berta Ares et al., Humanismo y visión del otro en la España moderna: cuatro estudios, Madrid, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1992.

²⁵Elena Díaz Rubio, Jesús Bustamante García, “Carta de Pedro San Buenaventura a fray Bernardino de Sahagún acerca del calendario solar mexicano”, Revista Española de Antropología Americana, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, vol. 13, 1983, p. 109-120.

²⁶Bernardino Sahagún, Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España, Madrid, Alianza, 1995, p. 238.

²⁷Ibidem, p. 259. And they said that in these (*ce ozumatli* and *ce cuauhtli* signs) came down the goddesses called *Cihuateteu*, that look for the children. And all of those who had boys or girls kept them at home so they would not meet these goddesses and so they would not be hurt by paralysis. And if someone became sick in this sign, the doctors soon gave up. They said they would not make it, because the goddesses had hurt them (SAHAGÚN, 1995, p. 259).

²⁸See Johanna Broda, “Ciclos de fiestas y calendario solar mexicana”, Arqueología Mexicana: Calendarios Prehispánicos, vol. 7, n. 41, México, 2000.

leap years. Thus, the missionary report was not only guided by the condemnation of these practices, but also by the attempt to map characteristics of the Nahua society and culture, which should be persecuted, and others that could be used by the colonizers.²⁹

In the report on the agricultural calendar, *Xiuhpohualli*, Sahagún was still guided by the ideal to identify, by understanding its behavior, the parties and sacrifices concerning the 20 days of this calendar cycle. Even considering this time calculation as being fair, its religious features were doomed. Thus, the time calculation would be licit and true, but its use was filled with idolatries:

Es el caso que ellos repartían el año en 18 partes, y a cada parte le daban 20 días. Estos se pueden llamar meses, de manera que su año tenía 18 meses, los cuales contienen 370 días, y los cinco que sobran para ser año cumplido no entran en cuenta, sino llamábamos “días baldíos” y “aciagos”, porque a ningún dios eran dedicados. El fin a que enderezaban esta división es que cada mes o cada veinte días los dedicaban a un dios, y en ellos se hacían fiestas y sacrificios [...].³⁰

Transforming the natural world, which is a divine and sublime creation (therefore, perfect), into a scenery and an instrument for the magical and divination arts, was a highly condemnable attitude by the church

The second Nahua costume referred to the *cuenta de los años* (counting the years). Sahagún described the use of four characters (*tochtli*, *ácatl*, *técpatl* and *calli*), regents of the 13-year periods. So, each sign reigned a period of 13 years, and when these four had completed their cycles, there was the *atadura de los años* (tying of the years). So, the concordance between the beginning of both cycles, *Tonalpohualli* and *Xiuhpohualli*, and the *Fuego Nuevo* party, represented the continuity of life and the pact between men and gods, and also had direct references to the Nahua religion, cosmogony and cosmography:

El fin o intención desta cuenta es renovar cada 52 años el pacto o concierto o juramento de servir a los ídolos, porque en el fin de los 52 años hacían una muy solemne fiesta y sacaban fuego nuevo, y apagaban todo lo viejo, y tomaban todas las provincias desta Nueva España. [...] Entonces renovaban todas las estatuas de los ídolos y todas sus alhajas, y el propósito de servir los otros

²⁹Bustamante García, Jesús. Retórica, traducción y responsabilidad histórica: claves humanísticas en la obra de Bernardino de Sahagún. In: Berta Ares et al, Humanismo y vision del otro en la España moderna: cuatro estudios. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1992.

³⁰Bernardino Sahagún, Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España, Madrid, Alianza, 1995, p. 275. In this case they divided the year into 18 parts, and to each part they gave 20 days. These could be called months, and so in their year there would be 18 months, which had 370 days, and the remaining five are not accounted for, being called “vacant days” and “ominous”, since they were not dedicated to anyone. With this division, each month, or every twenty days, was dedicated to a god, and there were parties and sacrifices [...](SAHAGÚN, 1995, p. 275).

52 años, y también tenían profecía o oráculo del Demonio, que en uno destes periodos se había de acabar el mundo.³¹

For the missionary, the calendars should be destroyed and forgotten, representing a danger that should be eliminated in order for the Christian faith to be disseminated with success:

[...] Estas abusiones empecen a la fe, y por eso conviene saberlas y predicar contra ellas. [...] Los diligentes predicadores y confesores búsqenlas para entenderlas en las confesiones, y para predicar contra ellas, porque son como una sarna que enferma a la fe [...].³²

The same work presented the calendar system separately from the other Nahua cultural traditions, especially cosmography³³ and cosmogony.³⁴ Such elements were approached by the Franciscan without mentioning the interconnection between them in the native conception.

In the report by Sahagún, the absence of essential themes to the Nahua cultural universe could be understood from different angles, since his lack of understanding, which is an argument we partially reject, to the persecution to the texts concerning the indigenous world during the hispanization of Felipe II. This was a real experience lived by the missionary, but it is not enough of an explanation. There was even the attempt to emphasize only the aspects that could be instrument for the real conversion of the populations in Central Mexico,³⁵ and this situation is closer to the analyses proposed by this study. Therefore, the exhaustive interest to de-

³¹Ibidem, p. 276. The objective or intention of this initiative is to renew, every 52 years, the pact or oath to serve the idols, because at the end of 52 years there was a solemn party and new fire, and the old one was put out, and all the provinces from this New Spain were taken. [...] So, all the statues of the idols were renewed, as well as their jewels, and the purpose to serve for another 52 years, and there was also the prophecy or the oracle of the Demon that in one of these periods the world would end (SAHAGÚN, 1995, p. 276).

³²Ibidem, p. 304. [...] These superstitions hurt faith, and that is why it is convenient to know them and to preach against them. [...] The diligent preachers and confessors search and understand them in the confessions, and in order to preach against them, because they are like a mange that hurts faith [...] (SAHAGÚN, 1995, p. 304).

³³According to the cosmography of the Nahua people, the vertical space was divided in the terrestrial surface, into superior - nine to 13 skies - and inferior levels - approximately nine intraworlds. Such quantities could range according to the analyzed source, the circumstances of production or the culture to which they belonged. Also concerning the cosmographic conceptions, the horizontal was formed by four directions: east, west, north and south, and by a center considered as the initial point. This would be the place of balance and order resulting from the battle of forces between the four directions. The five regions were inhabited and governed by gods or their peers: the east belonged to *Tonatiuh* and *Itzli*; in the west, we found *Chalchiuhtlicue* and *Tlazolteotl*; in the north, there would be *Tlaloc* and *Tepeyollotl*; in the south, there would be *Mictlantecutli* and *Cinteotl*, and, finally, the center was dominated by *Xiuhtecutli*. See Eduardo Natalino dos Santos, *Calendário, cosmografia e cosmogonia nos códices e textos nahuas do século XVI*, Thesis (PhD in History) - Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2005.

³⁴The reports on the origin of the world and the humanities, that is, the cosmology of the Nahua people, indicated the existence of four or five previous eras. Each moment of destruction and reconstruction was called age or sun, and at the time of the Spanish arrival, there had been four ages, because the fifth Sun was being lived (called "Sun of the movement). The ages prior to the current one were not completely absent, and some of their elements remained afterwards, which connected them to the present. Among the elements that connected them, we can mention the territorial or military conquests, or the elements of the natural world. It is worth to mention that ages and the duration of eras, as well as their elements and constituting events, are different in the Nahua narratives, as it happens with cosmography and the calendar system. The differences between the texts are not restricted to dates, but we also deal with a great variety in its main events, humanities that come after and elements from the natural world. These narratives, as cultural products related to history and to the vision of world by each people, reflect the ethnical and cultural pluralities of the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica. See Eduardo Natalino dos Santos, *Calendário, cosmografia e cosmogonia nos códices e textos nahuas do século XVI*, Tese (Doutorado em História) - Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2005.

³⁵Idem, *Deuses do México Indígena. Estudo comparativo entre narrativas espanholas e nativas*, São Paulo, Palas Athena, 2002, p. 268.

scribe the calendar and themes concerning the native religion was originated in the effort to successfully Christianize the discovered populations.³⁶ We believe that the permanence of beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, concomitantly with the acceptance of the Christian religion, was the major problem faced by the missionaries at the end of the 16th century, which led them to produce speeches that served the evangelization purpose.

As to the fifth book, *Que trata de los agüeros y prenosticos que estos naturales tomaban de algunas aves, animales y sabandixas para adivinar las cosas futuras* (“which approaches the pressages and predictions that these natives took from some birds and animals to guess future things”), Sahagún described the main indigenous practices related to predicting the future, jinxes and superstitions about the natural world. So, the objective of the book was to map the prognostics and jinxes used in the pre-Hispanic time, letting the Spanish people know if they were still practiced. These practices were confronted with the European and Christian conceptions over nature. Transforming the natural world, which is a divine and sublime creation (therefore, perfect), into a scenery and an instrument for the magical and divination arts, was a highly condemnable attitude by the church and their members.³⁷ Therefore, the providential and utilitarian view over nature, since the latter had been created to serve men and, consequently, they should understand it as a way to celebrate piety and divine powers, incremented the censorship to these practices because, besides being idolaters and superstitious, they represented the disrespect towards the divine creation.

In the prologue of book VII, *Que trata de la astrologia y filosofia natural que alcanzaron estos naturales de esta Nueva España* (“which is about astrology and natural philosophy that reached these natives from New Spain”), the missionary proposed to report the conceptions of the stars and celestial phenomena by the ancient Mexicans, and also to describe the counting of years — the 52-year cycle — and the ceremonies dedicated to the end of this period. The analogy between the indigenous and European knowledge is constant in the book, and such relation is characterized by the inferiority of indigenous knowledge. According to Nieto Olarte,³⁸ the analogy presented itself as an important resource to make the Spanish, who had started the colonization of America, understand the natural and human differences of the new lands.

When reporting the knowledge about the celestial phenomena, especially about eclipses and comets, the missionary presents them as being inferior to the European knowledge. The comprehension of “the other” NIETO OLARTE, 2004.³⁹

³⁶Robert Ricard, *La conquista espiritual de México*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986.

³⁷Keith Thomas, *Religião e declínio da magia: crenças populares na Inglaterra, séculos XVI e XVII*, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 1991.

³⁸Cf. Mauricio Nieto Olarte, “La comprensión del Nuevo Mundo: geografía e historia natural en el siglo XVI”, In: Diana Bonnett; Felipe Castañeda (ed), *El nuevo mundo: problemas y debates*, Bogotá, Universidad de los Andes, 2004, p. 1-21.

³⁹Ibidem.

passes by the analogy and the characterization of the latter as being inferior to the standard model. According to Sahagún 1995, p. 478 e 479:⁴⁰

Cuando se eclipsa el Sol paráse colorado; parece que se desasosiega o se turba el Sol; o se remece o revuelve, y amarillécese mucho. Cuando esto ve la gente, luego se alborota y tómales gran temor. Y luego las mujeres lloran a voces, y los hombres dan grita, hiriendo las bocas con la mano. Y en todas partes se daban grandes voces y gritos y alaridos. Y luego buscaban hombres de cabellos blancos y caras blancas y los sacrificaban al Sol. Y también sacrificaban cautivos y se untaban con la sangre de las orejas [...]. Cuando la Luna se eclipsa, párase casi oscura; ennegrece; párase hosca; luego se escurece la tierra. Cuando esto acontece, las preñadas temían de abortar. Tomábales gran temor que lo que tenían en el cuerpo se había de volver ratón. Y para remedio desto tomaban un pedazo de *itzli* en la boca, o poníanle en la cintura, sobre el vientre.

The solar and lunar cycles were known by the Mesoamericans, who consequently could calculate the period of the eclipses. Therefore, the ceremonies conducted during such phenomena could not be translated into the ignorance of the indigenous over the fact, as Sahagún wanted us to believe; they represented their own way to understand and act in relation to them. When trying to accommodate the indigenous attitudes and conceptions over the celestial phenomena, the Franciscan connected them to his own cultural universe, since in the 16th century the occurrence of comets and eclipses in Europe led people to act in a very similar way to that proposed by Sahagún's report.⁴¹

The relation between the movement of the stars and the propagation of diseases, which was an important concern for the cinquecentists,⁴² was also presented by Sahagún as an indigenous practice, when Venus appeared in the sky: "En la primera arremetida teníanla de mal agüero, diciendo que traía enfermedad consigo, y por esto cerraban las puertas y ventanas, porque no entrase su luz. Y a las veces la tomaban por buen agüero, al principio del tiempo que comenzaba a aparecer el oriente" ("at first, it was considered bad luck, some said it brought diseases, and so people closed doors and windows so the light would not get in. And sometimes they considered it brought good luck, in the beginning of time when the east started to show").⁴³

Therefore, it is possible to observe that Sahagún inserted the indigenous practices and knowledge related to the stars and time calculation in the set of European conceptions that composed the Natural Philosophy in the religious scenario of the

⁴⁰Bernardino Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, Madrid, Alianza, 1995, p. 478-479. With the Solar eclipse, the sun looks colored; it seems to be uneasy or disturbed; it either shakes or twists, and becomes too yellow. When it sees the people, it gets irritated and afraid. And soon enough the women start crying, and the men scream, hurting their mouths with their hands. And everywhere you could listen to voices and screams. And soon they searched for men with white hair and skin and sacrificed them to the sun. And they also sacrificed the bad people and bathed on the blood of their ears [...] With the Lunar eclipse, it seems dark; it becomes black; it seems blurry; and soon the land becomes dark. When this happens, pregnant women are afraid to abort. They are afraid that what they have inside their bodies will become a rat. And as a medicine they took a piece of *itzli*, or put it on their waist, on their belly.

⁴¹Luís Miguel Carolino, *Ciência, astrologia e sociedade: a teoria da influência celeste em Portugal (1593-1755)*, Porto, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2003.

⁴²Ibidem.

⁴³Bernardino Sahagún, *op. cit.*, p. 483.

16th century. So, the existence of a permitted astrology, which was related both to the movement of the stars and to its use concerning issues that were not connected to free will, and of another condemned astrology due to its divination feature, the judicial one, was the epistemological context to understand the elements of the calendar system and the Nahua cosmogony and cosmography.

Besides the influence of this epistemological context, the narrative by Sahagún was guided by the historical and political context of the early colonization and Christianization of America. Therefore, the interest to report elements that would be useful to make his evangelization project effective is an essential characteristic of the text. This proposition assumes that the Franciscan took for granted possible information on the Nahua cosmogonic and cosmographic conceptions and their calendar system, including the close relation between these cultural scopes, valuing only aspects that would serve as tools to effectively convert the indigenous people, such as mapping the festive days of the ancient religion.

In this sense, the stipulation of the beginning of the indigenous seasonal year and the understanding of how their calendar worked would be useful to develop a correlation with the Christian calendar, and, consequently, with the mapping of native festive days. Their permanence in the colonial period was a major obstacle faced by the missionaries, and that is why especially the Franciscans had the intention to perform the effective Christianization starting from the understanding of the Nahua cultural universe, which was an essential tool to identify the coexistence (or not) of both religions: indigenous and Christian.

Another important characteristic was the analysis of the indigenous knowledge as being inferior to that of the Europeans, since their structures were different. If on one hand the analogy with the European cultural universe has labeled the indigenous knowledge as inferior and connected them with the devil, on the other hand it provided the Spanish people with their adaptation as a cultural element marked by alterity. So, the categorization of the indigenous culture and knowledge favored the understanding and, afterwards, the narration of the Spanish, who used their own culture and thought during the search for information on the Nahua communities, and to organize the report of the missionary histories.

Finally, this study aimed to approach new questions in relation to the analyzed sources. The focus on History of Sciences puts the analyses of these missionary narrations into the intellectual scope from the 16th century, which was marked by the variety of concepts on nature, the men and their cultural practices. The valorization of narratives concerning the knowledge in relation to nature provide the understanding of the relations between these men and the issues that had to be solved, such as the effective evangelization of these populations or the cultural and political domain. Inserting the missionary narratives in the intellectual environment of the 16th century was the great intention of this work, which also aimed for this insertion to promote new debates and views about the reports related to America in that period.

