



THE ART OF BEING IN-BETWEEN

YANNA YANNAKAKIS

*Native
Intermediaries,
Indian Identity,
and Local Rule
in Colonial
Oaxaca*

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NATIVE INTERMEDIARIES, INDIAN IDENTITY, AND LOCAL RULE IN COLONIAL OAXACA

YANNA YANNAKAKIS

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For Aiden

and Marianna,

my fellow travelers

and storytellers

Contents

ix	Preface
xix	Acknowledgments
1	Introduction
PART 1. CONFLICT AND CRISIS, 1660–1700	
33	Chapter 1. “Loyal Vassal,” “Seditious Subject,” and Other Performances
65	Chapter 2. “Idolaters and Rebels,” “Good and Faithful Indians”: The Cajonos Rebellion and After
PART 2. THE RENEGOTIATION OF LOCAL RULE: STRATEGIES AND TACTICS, 1700–1770	
99	Chapter 3. Reform, Resistance, and Rhetoric
131	Chapter 4. The Pact: Cacique and Cabildo
PART 3. THE POLITICAL SPACE CLOSES, 1770–1810	
161	Chapter 5. Bourbon Officials
192	Chapter 6. From “Indian Conquerors” to Local “Indians”
221	Conclusion
229	Notes
261	Bibliography
275	Index

Preface

The adage “many Mexicos,”¹ which recognizes the nation’s wide-ranging regional differences, could be modified to apply to the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. Oaxaca’s indigenous groups speak fifteen languages,² the most of any state in Mexico. The “many Oaxacas” of one of Mexico’s poorest states typify the puzzle of Mexican nationhood and its colonial antecedent: How can a state—colonial or modern—govern a territory characterized by such a plurality of ethnic groups?

The Sierra Norte of Oaxaca encompasses the region from the top of the Sierra Madre north of Oaxaca City to the coastal plains of the Gulf of Mexico, an area far removed from the bustling commercial activity of the Valley of Oaxaca. From the top of the first range of mountains to the Zapotec Rincón (corner), seemingly unending chains of lush slopes and valleys unfold toward the horizon and Veracruz. The dwellings, churches, and municipal plazas of the region’s indigenous communities cluster in pockets and saddles two-thirds of the way up the mountains. The cultivated land, where Serranos grow coffee, corn, beans, bananas, and mangoes, stretches across the mountains’ shoulders, and intermittently down toward gorges and valleys whose steep grades obscure the view of the rushing water that cuts through them.

Here, at first glance, one finds a fabled “land that time forgot.” Indeed, the people of Oaxaca’s central valleys consider the people of the Sierra Norte to be traditional to a fault in their lifeways and

worldview. The sierra is a repository of “tradition” and “Indian custom” in the imagination of the valley citizenry, much the way that the state of Oaxaca stands in for an authentic and nostalgic “Indian” Mexico in the eyes of the thousands of visitors who stream into Oaxaca City from Mexico City and other “modern” urban centers to purchase handicrafts in colorful regional markets and experience the Day of the Dead or Holy Week in their most folkloric guises. This problematic juxtaposition between a “modern” Mexico and a “traditional,” “Indian” Mexico is a central tension in Mexican national identity, a tension that has become more pronounced in the last two decades and has situated “Indian” regions like Chiapas and Oaxaca at the heart of contentious national debates and conflictive cultural processes.

The flawed nature of the “modern” versus “traditional” construct, based on a discredited model of cultural evolution, should not discourage us, however, from noting historical continuities in Oaxaca’s indigenous communities. As a whole, in the face of pressures imposed by colonialism and nation building, Oaxaca’s indigenous communities have protected their territory from Spanish and mestizo incursion, and preserved their religious practices and political autonomy to a degree largely unparalleled by other indigenous groups in Mexico, with the exception perhaps of the Maya of Chiapas and Yucatan.

The remote location and physical geography of the Sierra Norte make the autonomy of its indigenous communities appear particularly pronounced. Native autonomy has a long legal genealogy, and has persisted more in some regions than in others. During the colonial period, the Crown recognized the independence of the *pueblos de indios* (semiautonomous, self-governing communities) of the República de Indios throughout New Spain in electing their own municipal governments, in the ownership of land, and in the practice of local customs. Today, indigenous landholding in the Sierra Norte is remarkably persistent. Almost all land is indigenous owned. The boundaries of some territorial parcels persist unchanged from the colonial period. Further, indigenous communities in Oaxaca continue to elect their own officials in their own manner, in some cases through community consensus. They continue their traditions of communal labor (*tequio*) for public works and during harvests of maize. Although Spanish is the national language, most sierra communities conduct official business in Zapotec, Mixe, or Chinantec, the languages of the

region. Many communities even operate on their own clock, refusing to recognize daylight saving time.

The autonomy of sierra communities is closely tied to the state and national government's disinterest in the region, explainable in part by the poverty of its people, the lack of profitable natural resources, and diffuse political resistance. At first glance, this attitude of neglect and forgetting seems reciprocal: as much as national and state officials seem to have forgotten the sierra, the people of the sierra seem equally content to forget the Mexican government. The sierra's native peoples speak of federal and state officials in pejorative terms, as infrequent and opportunistic interlopers in regional affairs. On closer observation, however, sierra communities have a tighter relationship with government officials than they acknowledge, thanks to the political and bureaucratic work of elite intermediary figures.

Throughout Latin America, state officials and national elites have relied on native leaders to broker fraught relationships with native communities. National histories of Latin American nation-states have tended to characterize Indian-state relations in two general modes: antagonism (including violent repression and marginalization) and co-optation (including cultural assimilation).³ *Caciques* and *gamonales*—local strongmen who rule through a combination of violence and material concessions, and use their connections with the state for personal gain—cut the archetypal figure of the native intermediary. Scholarship on *caciquismo* and *gamonalismo* has contributed immensely to our understanding of the staying power of authoritarian rule and the interpenetration of violence and political legitimacy in places like Mexico and Peru.⁴

However, the antagonism and co-optation brokered by *caciques* and *gamonales* has overshadowed an entire register of subtler forms of native brokerage and cultural mediation during both the national and colonial periods. Through political engagement and cultural struggle, native brokers and representatives of the state have co-constructed a symbolic order that has shaped native culture and identity, on one hand, and national identity and the state, on the other.⁵ In Mexico, for every *cacique*, there are many native municipal secretaries, priest's assistants, and go-betweens who through their face-to-face interactions and written negotiations with civil and Church officials keep the nation-state running in a way that avoids selling out the cultural and political aspirations of local people but

maintains enough of a relationship with the state to satisfy national pretensions to unity and territorial control.

During the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century—the era of “democratization” that followed two decades of Latin American “authoritarianism”—the brokerage of native intermediaries has provided a foundation for a new kind of relationship between indigenous peoples and nation-states. For example, the governments of Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, and Bolivia declared their nations officially “pluriethnic” in an effort to make room in the body politic for politically and culturally semiautonomous indigenous communities.⁶ Two native intermediary figures in particular have been recognized for their struggles and negotiations with their respective states: in 1992, Rigoberta Menchú Tum became the first indigenous woman of Latin America to win the Nobel Peace Prize, and in 2006, the people of Bolivia elected Evo Morales as their first indigenous president. In February 2007, Menchú announced her own historic bid for Guatemala’s presidency. These two figures and others like them have become potent agents—and controversial symbols—of a new Latin America.⁷

In the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, native intermediary figures come from prominent families in native communities, and most are men, although women have also played an active and vocal role in community political life. In some cases, the status of native intermediaries derives from their economic resources, and in others it comes from respect for political service rendered by themselves or their forebears. Their education also distinguishes them. Training as teachers, engineers, and accountants requires time away from the sierra in urban centers where they learn their way around state bureaucracies and institutions.

The role of native intermediaries requires them to spend significant time and energy in transit between the sierra and the statehouse in Oaxaca City, in taking care of “business” (*trámites*) and “managing papers” (*manejando papeles*). The issues at stake in their work vary, but they all have bearing on the daily lives of the people in their communities. For example, evangelical Protestantism made inroads in much of the sierra during the 1980s. By the 1990s, some communities appeared on the verge of dissolution as the recent converts refused to provide their labor, resources, or moral support for *tequio*, the cargo system (a system in which the community elects representatives into a hierarchy of civil and religious offices), or the innumerable religious fiestas. In one such community, when tensions finally reached a boiling point, the municipal authorities expelled the con-

verts, arguing that their refusal to participate in key elements of community life disqualified them from living in its boundaries.⁸ The municipal officials grounded their case against the converts in the legal rhetoric of *costumbre* (custom), which grants indigenous communities a degree of autonomy in the oversight of community affairs. The state responded that the article of the Mexican Constitution that protects freedom of religion should override *costumbre* in this particular case.

In the meantime, a flurry of legal activity occurred behind the scenes as the community's intermediaries—some of whom were based in Oaxaca City, and others of whom were based in the community—traveled between the community and the statehouse, attempting to broker a compromise and protect the municipal president from federal agents who were rumored to be en route to the sierra. Due in large part to their efforts, the president avoided a jail term. The tradeoff was that the community had to accept the presence of the Protestants, whether they participated in community life or not. *Costumbre* was compromised in the interests of preserving a degree of community autonomy, symbolized by the president's freedom.

As this politico-cultural negotiation makes clear, the indigenous communities of the sierra have an important relationship with the Mexican government, characterized by a pronounced tension between indigenous autonomy in local matters and dependence on the state for conflict resolution. This relationship could not exist without the native intermediaries who according to their own admission knew “the ways of the Indians and the ways of the city.” They are alphabetically, bureaucratically, and legally bicultural, bilingual, and literate. In particular, their facility with the discourses of “*costumbre*,” “community,” and “Indian”—all of which are colonial in their origins—provides them with a legal and cultural terrain on which to negotiate the boundaries between community autonomy and state intervention. Indeed, a colonial framework largely defines the political culture of the sierra. If we are to understand the workings of the Mexican nation-state, we must examine how native intermediaries brokered the tensions between native autonomy and state power, and “periphery” and “center” over the *longue durée*. The place to start is the colonial period.

This book examines the intersection of two historical processes that account for Spanish, and more broadly, European colonial power: politi-

cal expropriation and control, and cultural encounter and change. Too often they have been treated as distinct phenomena and as one-way processes: domination and acculturation imposed by “European colonizers” on “colonized natives.” More recently, scholars have encouraged us to think in terms of the cultural convergences produced by colonialism.⁹ Although this approach takes into account discrepancies in power, the focus on “colonial consciousness” and the realm of the symbolic at times either obscures colonialism’s coerciveness and violence or portrays that violence in such a totalizing way as to leave little room for subaltern agency.¹⁰

This book resolves the tension in studies of colonialism between hegemony and violence, on the one hand, and subaltern agency and institutional power, on the other. It does so through an integration of the concerns of cultural and social history: a close examination of the workings of symbolic power strongly grounded in an analysis of local social relations. I argue that native intermediaries, through their participation in overlapping social networks and their deployment of a range of communicative skills—alphabetic literacy, bicultural performance, and Spanish discourses of fealty and local custom—produced a colonial hegemony: a common symbolic framework through which native peoples and Spanish officials struggled over forms of local rule and the meaning of Indian identity. Yet the values and symbols that natives and Spaniards came to share had divergent implications and, given the proper circumstances, could ignite conflict and violence. So while native intermediaries won the grudging consent of Spain’s native subjects and secured a political legitimacy for themselves, the hegemony that they shaped was contested and fraught with the threat of violence.

As a colonial “periphery,” the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca provides an ideal setting in which to examine the work of native intermediary figures. Traditionally, scholars have focused their studies on the metropolitan “centers” of colonial society, which were considered the hub of economic, political, and cultural processes. Yet as this book will show, it was in regions that scholars have tended to identify as “peripheral” that the dialectic between state formation and native autonomy was strongest, and, consequently, where colonial processes and negotiations were at their most dynamic. By adopting “peripheral vision,”¹¹ this book participates in an effort among scholars of the colonial Americas to redefine the designations of “center”

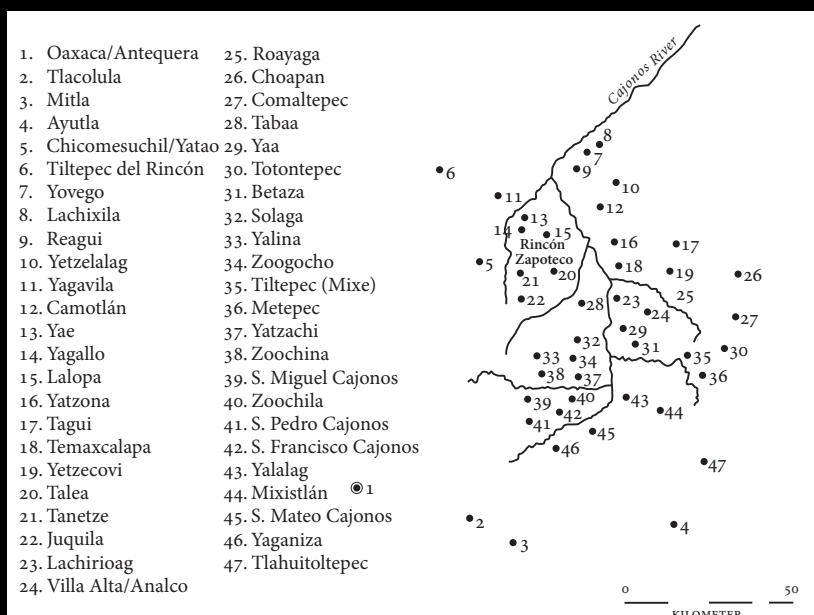
and “periphery” and reimagine the relationship between the two.¹² In this regard, it joins an innovative and growing body of Oaxaca scholarship that situates this vibrant and ethnically diverse region at the heart of global, colonial, and national processes.¹³



MAP 1 Map of Oaxaca, Mexico. Inset: District of Villa Alta, Oaxaca.



MAP 2 Map of the linguistic regions of the Sierra Norte.



MAP 3 Selected pueblos of the district of Villa Alta.

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Introduction

By an art of being in-between, he draws unexpected results from his situation.

MICHEL DE CERTEAU, *THE PRACTICE OF EVERYDAY LIFE* (1984)

A native rebellion in colonial Mexico put two Zapotec Indians on the road to sainthood. On 14 September 1700, in the district of Villa Alta, Oaxaca, leaders of the Zapotec pueblo of San Francisco Cajonos led a mob of angry villagers to the door of the nearby Dominican monastery. The leaders of the mob demanded that the friars hand over Jacinto de los Angeles and Juan Bautista, two of their fellow villagers, who had taken refuge there. If the friars refused, the village leaders threatened to kill everyone inside. Angeles and Bautista served as *fiscales* (assistants) to the pueblo's Dominican priest, Fray Gaspar de los Reyes. The night before, Angeles and Bautista had reported to Reyes that a large gathering of natives, including the pueblo's municipal officers, had congregated at the home of Joseph Flores, a community leader. There, according to Angeles and Bautista, the gathered villagers committed a grave offense against the Catholic Church and royal authority: they performed and participated in native rituals, which the Church considered "idolatry."

In the eyes of the villagers, Angeles and Bautista had betrayed their community by reporting to the priest. In the eyes of the priest,

Angeles and Bautista had fulfilled their role as his eyes and ears. For the friars under siege in the monastery, however, the *fiscales*' service to the Church was counterbalanced by the hundreds of angry villagers outside the monastery. Terrified for their own lives, the friars turned out their trusted assistants. The crowd took the two *fiscales* away, and they were never seen again. Two years later, after a lengthy investigation and court trial, Spanish colonial judges convicted fifteen municipal officers and native leaders of the Cajonos region of the murder of the *fiscales*. On 11 January 1702, the Cajonos rebels were executed, and their bodies drawn and quartered. Their remains were displayed on the Camino Real (royal highway), as a warning to would-be rebels and idolaters. Three hundred years later, in 2002, Pope John Paul II rewarded Angeles and Bautista—the “martyrs of Cajonos”—for their sacrifice on behalf of the Church by beatifying them—often a first step toward sainthood—to the pride of some Zapotecs and the outrage of others. The intense debate about the meaning of the “martyrs’” life and death illustrates the degree to which the symbolic order constructed by Spanish colonialism in Oaxaca’s highlands has endured over time; more pointedly, it reveals the centrality to that system of meaning of native people who dealt closely with Spanish priests, administrators, and colonizers.

This book asks how native leaders in the district of Villa Alta, like the “martyred” priest’s assistants and “rebel” officials of San Francisco Cajonos, redefined native political leadership, shaped the dynamics of native rebellions, and co-constructed the symbolic order that allowed Spanish colonialism to endure for three hundred years. In the period that immediately followed the conquest of Mexico and Peru, the Catholic Church and the colonial state identified the native nobility as a caste of colonial intermediaries, who by virtue of their legitimacy among native peoples could help administer colonial society. What the Spaniards did not count on, however, were the limiting effects of the strong bonds of reciprocity between nobility and commoners. The sons of native nobles who learned to speak and write in Latin and Spanish and successfully petitioned the Crown to wear Spanish silks, carry a sword, and ride a horse had to answer not only to their Spanish overlords but also to the people who legitimated their authority in native society.

Through their roles in four colonial institutions—the *cabildo* (native municipal government), the *repartimiento* (the Spanish system of forced

labor and production), the Catholic Church, and the legal system—native leaders mediated between the competing demands of Spaniards and indigenous people. In the process, they made colonial systems work and created a hybrid colonial culture. Native governors made the colonial economy function through the collection of tribute and oversight of the repartimiento. At times, however, they stood up to abusive Spanish officials and shielded their pueblos from the kind of violence and coercion that might provoke a native rebellion. Native schoolmasters taught their fellow villagers the Christian doctrine and Spanish language, but under cover of night some led their communities in native rituals. Their dual role facilitated the intertwining of Catholicism and indigenous religion. Native legal agents petitioned the Real Audiencia (royal court) in Mexico City to censor the Spanish magistrate for his interference in cabildo elections, all the while pursuing the interests of their own political factions. In doing so, they secured the political power of their lineages but also made their pueblos dependent on the Spanish legal system.

In these double-edged roles, native leaders served as cultural intermediaries and political brokers. More specifically, they held the colonial order in balance: most often, they defused tensions in colonial society, but on occasion, as during the Cajonos Rebellion, the pressures were such that they abandoned the middle ground. In these moments, the violence of colonialism came to the fore, and the material and symbolic force of that violence—the drawing and quartering of the Cajonos rebels, for instance—shaped the work of native intermediaries for decades to come. In this regard, native intermediaries provide answers to two questions that have occupied a generation of historians of Latin America: How can we explain three hundred years of Spanish colonial rule given the absence of a standing army and the prevalence of stark inequalities?¹ Why, in certain instances, did native peoples rebel?² These questions are particularly relevant for regions at the edges of the Spanish Empire, such as the district of Villa Alta. In Villa Alta, until 1700 only 10 percent of the district's one hundred native pueblos had parish priests, and a mere one hundred and fifty Spaniards were clustered in the district seat, cut off from administrative and economic centers by rugged mountainous terrain. This handful of Spaniards lived in a sea of thirty to forty thousand native people. By necessity, the Spaniards of Villa Alta relied on local native elites to facilitate the region's colonial order. In turn, these native intermediaries won the grudging

ing consent of the district's native subjects and secured a political legitimacy for themselves. But as the Cajonos Rebellion reveals in the starkest of terms, the colonial order that they built with their Spanish counterparts stood on shaky and shifting ground.

NATIVE INTERMEDIARIES

Intermediary figures, such as agents, interpreters, missionaries, advocates, and traders, intrigued and repelled contemporary observers as well as those who came after them. As people of considerable linguistic talent, cross-cultural sensibility, and sensitivity to the more subtle aspects of human communication, intermediaries evoked a world of mobility and fluid boundaries. They also inspired suspicion. Not fully rooted in any locality or social group yet comfortable and competent in opposing camps, during the age of conquest and colonialism these remarkable people traveled under the presumption of betrayal and treachery. Cross-cultural competence made their cultural and political loyalties suspect, and when situations went sour, they met closed doors, recrimination, legal sanction, or worse.

Throughout the history of Latin America, intermediary figures have played a prominent role in sewing together and exploiting the differences among the political, economic, and cultural interests of peoples of indigenous, African, mixed race, and European origins. During the colonial period, European or mixed race intermediaries most often sought to secure a position among the elite. The exploitative nature of colonialism, based on a hierarchy of race, produced a society characterized by gross inequalities, traceable along cultural and ethnic lines. In the colonial period, parish priests, local magistrates, and itinerant merchants of European origins generally maintained and reproduced these structures. Despite the ability of some to learn native languages, adopt certain aspects of native lifeways, and even sympathize with native peoples, their mediation most often had the interests of colonial power in view.

Native intermediaries present a more ambivalent moral, political, and cultural landscape than their European counterparts. Scholars rightly have represented colonialism as violent and exploitative, as the underbelly of Western narratives of European progress and rationality.³ Correspondingly, open or violent resistance to colonialism has been portrayed in heroic terms, as a testimony to the agency and resilience of colonized peo-

ples. The social history scholarship of the last three decades, hand in hand with the almost century-long intellectual and political tradition of *indigenismo*, has valorized the culture, history, and experience of native peoples across Latin America, in particular in Mexico and Peru.⁴ The immense contribution of this current of thought has provided a counternarrative to European triumphalism and has established a baseline for two generations of rich and innovative scholarship on native peoples. It has also obscured important aspects of colonial Latin American society. The heroic resistance implied by cultural survival, open defiance, and rebellion leaves little room for the ambivalence of cultural mediation. Whereas European intermediaries fit into our template for understanding colonialism, native intermediaries betray our expectations. At best, scholars have perceived them as enigmatic, but more often they have portrayed them as social climbers, tragic figures, power seekers, and lesser partners in the colonial enterprise.⁵ In short, intellectual and popular discourses evince disillusionment with native intermediary figures.

No native intermediary figure has suffered more from disillusionment than Doña Marina, also known as La Malinche, the interpreter of Hernán Cortés, “conqueror” of Mexico. Doña Marina’s image in history, particularly as portrayed by Mexican nationalists and intellectuals, is that of the traitor and the oversexed Indian woman lusting after a white man. In Mexico, to be a “Malinchista” is to allow oneself to be corrupted by foreign influences; it is to betray one’s people. Octavio Paz, who emerged on the literary scene during the 1930s through the 1950s, when Mexican intellectuals were groping for answers to what they perceived to be Mexico’s persistent conundrum—its failure to take its place among the world’s “modern” nations—captured this attitude toward Doña Marina in “The Sons of La Malinche,” a chapter in his well-known book *The Labyrinth of Solitude*.⁶

Paz situated Doña Marina in what he perceived to be a national culture and national psychology of inferiority and self-abnegation, born in part of violent conquest. He wrote that for Mexicans, Doña Marina is “La Chingada,” the mother of the nation and “the mother forcibly opened, violated, or deceived.”⁷ He insisted that as a result of her simultaneous victimhood and betrayal, “the Mexican people have not forgiven La Malinche.”⁸ But whom did Doña Marina betray? She was a Nahua woman of noble origin, and as an adolescent, she was either sold (as a spoil of war) or

gifted (in order to cement alliance with Maya-speaking people. Following exile from her kin and homeland, she was passed along two more times among the Maya. The last of these people, the Chontal Maya of Tabasco, finally gifted her to Cortés. So who were Doña Marina's people? Were they the Nahuatl-speaking nobility of her home region of Coatzacoalcas, or were they the Maya who passed her on to strangers from across the sea? Or were they Cortés and his entourage? Here, at colonial Mexico's moment of inception, as we consider Doña Marina's loyalties, the categories of "Spaniard" and "Indian" and their correspondence to the terms *conqueror* and *conquered* have little meaning.

Bernal Diaz del Castillo, a foot soldier who accompanied Cortés, highlighted the importance of Doña Marina's role in the conquest of the Aztec Empire by devoting an entire chapter of his chronicle to her life story and service to the Spaniards. At the end of the chapter, he states, "I have made a point of telling this story, because without Doña Marina, we could not have understood the language of New Spain and Mexico."⁹ Since so much of the conquest of Mexico involved almost constant negotiation, first among Cortés and the emissaries of Moctezuma, then among Cortés and the enemies of the Aztec Empire, the most important of whom were the Tlaxcalans, and finally between Cortés and Moctezuma himself, the role of Doña Marina cannot be overemphasized. Without language, negotiation, and native allies, it is unlikely that Cortés's small entourage could have survived long on Mexican shores. Indeed, as recent scholarship has shown, the conquest of Mexico was as much an Indian affair as it was a Spanish one.¹⁰ At the time, the Tlaxcalans and other allies of the Spaniards viewed the war against the Aztec empire as their own military campaign. And perhaps Doña Marina viewed the Spaniards as her people, as much as the Nahua and Maya people who had given her away.

The venom reserved for La Malinche in Mexican nationalist discourse has as much to do with Doña Marina's gender and the mythical status of the conquest in the Mexican national imagination as with her role as interpreter and cultural intermediary. Yet the associations remain: the native interpreter—*la lengua*—as a treacherous figure without clear loyalties. But there is a reverse side to the perception of Doña Marina as traitor, a counterpoint provided by ethnohistorical perspectives. For example, Frances Karttunen has rehabilitated La Malinche as a "survivor." She argues that as a Nahua woman uprooted from any meaningful network or

community, La Malinche had to play by the rules of her overseers, whether the Chontal Maya or Cortés, in order to survive.¹¹ Her life possibilities diminished and her choices narrowed by her exile, Cortés presented her with an opportunity, and she filled the role required of her with aplomb. Karttunen's interpretation encourages us to consider that intermediaries were defined not only by their personal skills and attributes, but also by the dynamic and unpredictable situation on the ground, and their efforts and abilities to maximize the room for maneuver afforded by that situation. There have been other rehabilitations. Referring to Nahuatl renderings of the history of the Spanish invasion in the pictographic *Florentine Codex*, Matthew Restall argues that in the sixteenth century, "Malinche was portrayed neither as a victim, nor as immoral, but as powerful."¹² Camilla Townsend, in her analysis of the images of Malintzin (the Nahuatl name from which La Malinche was derived) in the native conquest pictorial, the Lienzo of Tlaxcala, argues the same.¹³

In her intermediary role, Doña Marina throws into question the categories of Spaniard and Indian, conqueror and conquered. She also represents the power of native intermediaries to ignite debate and produce divergent meanings. Yet the era in which La Malinche lived, the singular nature of the encounter that she mediated and, most important, her identity as an indigenous woman, set her apart from the native intermediaries who followed her. Over the course of the colonial period, as the Spanish state imposed a system of native government and a legal system that excluded indigenous women from roles like governor and interpreter general, and the Catholic Church came to rely exclusively on indigenous men as lay catechists and Church intermediaries, indigenous women became nearly invisible in the arena of formal institutional power.¹⁴ As a result, indigenous men overwhelmingly exercised formal intermediary roles in both civil and ecclesiastical realms during the bulk of the colonial period.

The career of one of these men, Gaspar Antonio Chi, is worth examining because it provides a representative framework for understanding the balance of forces with which native intermediaries had to contend in colonial Mexico. Born sometime in the late 1520s into the noble Xiu lineage, Chi lived through the conquest of Yucatan, the Great Maya Revolt of 1546, and the violent and murderous Franciscan Inquisition of 1562 into Maya "idolatry" and alleged human sacrifice.¹⁵ Like many of the native intermediaries of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Chi was edu-

cated in a Franciscan-run school for the sons of native nobility. The friars taught their native charges how to read and write Latin, Spanish, and their own native languages (in alphabetic writing). The objective was to create a cadre of schoolmasters who would teach their fellow natives the catechism and, just as important, would serve as Franciscan interpreters in the evangelical enterprise as well as agents and informants in the battle against “idolatry.”

What is striking about the career of Gaspar Antonio Chi, who served as interpreter for Franciscan *Provincial* Fray Diego de Landa and then for Landa’s great antagonist the bishop of Yucatan and Tabasco Francisco de Toral, and finally as governor of the Mani province, is the volatile political era in which he mediated among competing Spanish interests and competing Maya interests. When in 1562, rumors of human sacrifice and persistent idolatry reached Landa, a man who until this point had defended the Maya from the rapacity of Yucatan’s *encomenderos* (Spanish colonists given rights to Indian labor by the Crown), he received the news as if his favorite children had betrayed him. He and the Franciscans of the peninsula went on what can only be characterized as a punitive rampage. During this violent period, Landa’s interpreter, Chi, delivered countless sentences of torture, lashings, and hangings to both his own kinsmen of the Xiu lineage group and their mortal enemies, the Cocomes. One can only imagine what was going through the interpreter’s head as he translated those words to “his people,” the great Xiu lords. Had his education among the Franciscans erased his affinity for his Xiu roots? Was he totally committed to the Franciscan project?

Apparently not. Landa’s violent campaign against idolatry alarmed the Church hierarchy so much so that Bishop Toral was sent to Yucatan to investigate Landa and rein him in. He asked none other than Chi to serve as his interpreter during the investigation. In this role, Chi translated and notarized countless documents indicting Landa, his former boss, and the Franciscans who had educated him for their role in the needless deaths of hundreds of Maya men and women. The irony could not have been lost on any of the men involved. Eventually Landa was sent packing back to Spain. Chi continued his varied career by making use of his Franciscan education as a tutor to the brother of an *encomendero* in Tizimin, a town in Yucatan. Later, he became governor of his home Mani province, and toward the end of his life he served as a respondent to the *Relaciones Geográficas* of 1579–

81, a royal survey of Indian lands, history, and culture. At the end of his life, he petitioned the Spanish king for a royal pension in view of his service to the Crown.¹⁶

We can only speculate as to the motives that drove Chi's stunning and unpredictable career. His actions and their context, however, are undeniable. Chi used his cross-cultural skills to leverage power, with serious consequences for local rule in Yucatan. Although it was not his choice to attend the Franciscan school, the skills he acquired there were indispensable to shaping a political situation in which the ground was constantly shifting. His acceptance of Toral's invitation to serve as his interpreter demonstrates a shrewd reading of the fluid power play of the colonial period in Yucatan. Having chosen the "winning" side, Chi participated in neutralizing what had been a dominant Franciscan power in the peninsula, and creating a more balanced relationship among the Franciscans, civil authority, and *encomenderos* of the region. Such a situation—in which the competing interests of the colonizers checked and balanced one another, and in which Chi as a broker and intermediary could play one off of the other—would prove more auspicious for him as a native governor. It also proved more favorable for the success of colonialism in Yucatan. Putting the brakes on the relentless Franciscan extirpation campaign—an unsustainable state of affairs given growing Maya resentment—avoided the very real possibility of a Maya rebellion. Chi shaped the balance of power of colonial institutions and shifted the delicate tension from overt Spanish violence and Maya rebellion to a *Pax Hispanica*.

CULTURAL MEDIATION AND VIOLENCE

The example of Gaspar Antonio Chi underscores the point that colonial power was not monolithic. Skillful native intermediaries could profitably exploit divisions among missionary orders, a secular Church hierarchy, Spanish colonists, local magistrates, the viceroy, and the Crown. They could also exploit divisions among native peoples: their rival lineage groups, communities, and *caciques*. In this regard, the term *survivor*, which Karttunen has also applied to Chi, appears insufficient.¹⁷ Both Doña Marina and Chi did more than survive and interpret: they negotiated, brokered, and played decisive roles in changing the local societies in which they lived.

The complexity of forces with which native intermediaries had to con-