



# Testaments of Autonomy: How Women's Social Mobility Transformed Under Nahua and Spanish Influence

**Kiana Polanin**

*College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Florida*

Dr. Max Deardorff, Department of History

## Abstract

Did European gender values undermine the autonomy of Indigenous women in colonial Mexico? This article will answer the aforementioned question by examining women's lives in Mexico during the colonial period from approximately 1500 to 1800. Close analysis of last wills and testaments left behind by women in Culhuacan during the sixteenth century demonstrate that they enjoyed greater avenues of social mobility than did women in Toluca during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This analysis will inform readers of the evidence drawn from these cultures and the significant conclusions it generates. An examination of two separate corpuses of last wills and testaments left behind by Indigenous Mexican women exposes variances in women's avenues of social mobility under Nahua and Spanish influence in Culhuacan and Toluca during the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, respectively. Prior to Spanish invasion, Nahua culture gave the women of Culhuacan economic and social autonomy. Certain pre-Hispanic privileges, such as holding public offices, were still conserved at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, a gradual replacement with Spanish values and structures that was nearly complete by the 18<sup>th</sup> century diminished women's autonomy. But no matter how much their independence decreased, women still did all they could with what they had.

*Keywords:* Nahua culture, Spanish culture, Indigenous women, Culhuacan, Toluca, avenues of social mobility, economic autonomy, final wills and testaments

## Introduction

The written word contained in testaments gave Indigenous women in colonial Mexico the ability to assert power over their physical assets for a final time. Testaments also provided readers a glimpse into more complex, abstract ideologies such as gender relations, economic autonomy, and cultural practices of Nahua and Spanish societies. Therefore, two collections of final wills and testaments were analyzed: *The Testaments of Culhuacan* collected, transcribed, and translated by S.L. Cline and Miguel León-Portilla, as well as the *Testaments of Toluca*, treated similarly by Caterina Pizzigoni. The testaments from Culhuacan were from earlier in the

colonial period, the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, while the documents from Toluca were from the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This article asserted a comparison of the avenues of autonomy provided to women via final testaments under Nahua and Spanish influence in Culhuacan and Toluca. The evidence in the testaments demonstrated that women earlier in Culhuacan had more autonomy than women later in Toluca, which scholars attributed to a stronger influence of Nahua culture earlier in Culhuacan and increased centralization of Spanish patriarchy and power later in the colonial period.

A thorough examination of gender roles between Nahua and Spanish culture revealed differences in autonomy for women, who in the testaments, were scrutinized by societal expectations expressed in both cultures. In Nahua culture, men and women were often provided more equal avenues of mobility. “Gender parallelism” characterized Nahua society, meaning that “there were parallel social structures and cultural configurations for males and females” (Kellogg, 1995, p. 88). Susan Kellogg asserted that gender parallelism did not suggest equality, especially in the political realm, it indicated that women’s roles were respected. Women were prominent in many aspects of the social sphere, including the priesthood as *cihuatlamacazqui*, a woman priest (Carrasco & Sessions, 1998). Kellogg concluded that political, economic, and religious gender parallelism operated under a gender hierarchy in which men controlled the highest positions. Despite this condition, Nahua women were economically autonomous and demonstrated religious and political authority. The testaments from Culhuacan supported the conclusions of scholars and indeed demonstrated autonomy of women more closely related to Nahua gender roles.

Spanish gender expectations offered comparatively less social, political, and economic autonomy than Nahua gender roles. However, women in Spain and across colonial Latin America remained active in the public sphere. The constructs of gender, honor, and sexuality were all encompassed in “an ‘apparent universal sexual asymmetry’ that circumscribed women to the private, while men moved in the public, arena” (Twinam, 1999, p. 27). The patriarchy and gender roles were “broadly understood as a way of containing women’s unruliness” (Armon, 2002, p. 27). The concept of containment flourished as the “separate spheres” dichotomy “confined women to the private spaces of the home, centered upon reproduction and consumption” (Twinam, 1999, p. 27). However, even under the scrutiny of this dichotomy, for centuries scholars have studied women who broke the perceived gender boundaries and breadth

of their confines and emerged, thrived, and supported the public sphere across colonial Latin America. The testaments from Toluca affirmed a stronger influence of Spanish gender roles. The legal system protected women's economic and social autonomy evidenced through the ownership of dowries, and final wills and testaments. Legally binding wills dispersed property after death. Women and men possessed the authority to bequeath one-fifth of their assets to anyone and divide four fifths of their inheritance equally amongst legitimate children regardless of sex (Premo, 2018). Therefore, testaments displayed an excellent glance into the lives and fluctuation in social and economic autonomy of women in colonial Culhuacan and Toluca.

Culhuacan and Toluca presented similarities and were located approximately thirty miles apart as shown in Figure 1. Both experienced an amalgamation of Nahua and Spanish culture when the wills were written, but who identified with the term Nahua? James Lockhart asserted that the peoples who spoke Nahuatl were the southernmost major branch of the Uto-Aztecan family, with the core located in central Mexico (Lockhart, 1992). Scholars referred to this core group as Nahuas and have highlighted Nahua history as distinct through analysis of society, culture, and records in Nahuatl, including wills.



**Figure 1.** James Lockhart's in *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries*, 1992.

Prior to the Spanish conquest, Culhuacan, “the place of those with ancestors,” had a rich Indigenous history, which scholars believed began in the seventh century (Cline, 1986, p. 1). Culhuacan was founded on the shores of Lake Chalco at the volcanic massif Cerro de la Estrella (Cline, 1986). The lake systems were imperative to the people of Culhuacan, as the freshwater encouraged cultivators to build *chinampas*, which were “mounds of land extending into the shallow lake waters” (Cline, 1986, p. 2). In the late sixteenth century, agriculture, especially *chinampas*, was essential to the economy of Culhuacan, as eighty-six percent of the testators in Culhuacan bequeathed *chinampas*. Similar to the peoples of Culhuacan, agriculture in the form of *maguey* cultivation and the rearing of livestock was prominent in Toluca’s economy prior to and after Spanish invasion (Pizzigoni, 2012).

## Testaments of Autonomy: A Direct Comparison of the Testaments from Culhuacan and Toluca

### testators.

The calculations in Figure 2 emphasize the difference between women's autonomy in the two collections. The corpus from Culhuacan includes fifty complete testaments, forty-two percent of which were issued by women. In Toluca, thirty-eight complete testaments were analyzed, thirty-seven percent of which were issued by women. While only a relatively slight change in percentage, the average woman bequeathed fewer belongings in Toluca than Culhuacan, especially regarding property.

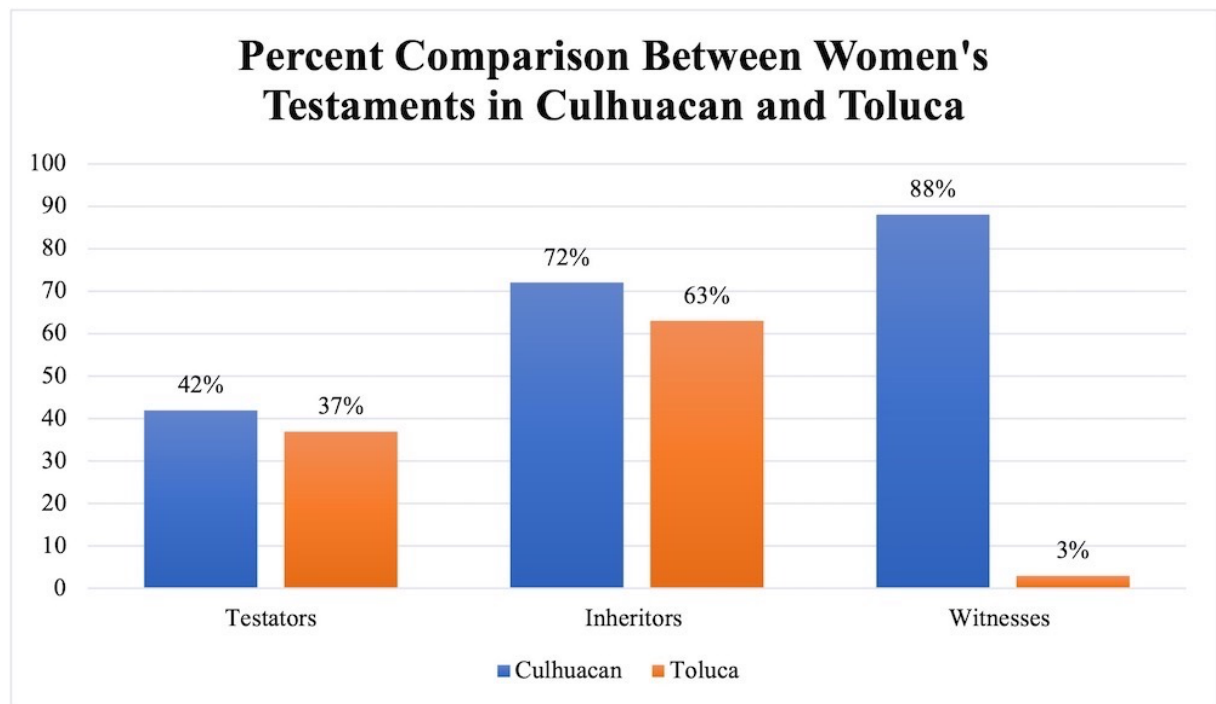


Figure 2. Percent Comparison Between Women's Testaments in Culhuacan and Toluca.

Women in Culhuacan and Toluca owned a myriad of property, including houses. Eighty-six percent, or eighteen out of twenty-one women, owned houses in sixteenth century Culhuacan. However, the testaments reveal that seventy-one percent of women owned houses in eighteenth-century Toluca. While not a drastic decline, the percentage change between the sixteenth and

eighteenth centuries does indicate a decrease, nonetheless. Moreover, women in Culhuacan could also own *cihuacalli*.

A “woman’s house,” or *cihuacalli* in Nahuatl, was a type of property prominent in the sixteenth century, but was abolished by the eighteenth century. The testament of Ana Tiacapan (a) gives insight into the possible functions of a *cihuacalli* as well other types of “houses.” In the context of her will, Cline and León-Portilla assert that “houses” appeared to be “single-room buildings in a compound, many with separate ownership” (Cline & León-Portilla, 1984, p. 20). The organization of a house like this might indicate an economic benefit to someone who owned the entire complex and then sold various rooms in the house. While the official function is not known, a *cihuacalli* may have been another economically autonomous endeavor for women earlier that was not available to women later. Frequently, a *cihuacalli* was accompanied by *chinampas* or other types of land. Cline stated that the purpose of a “woman’s house” was unclear; it could have been an area in the house where women worked, such as a kitchen, common room, or civil division of land connected to a dowry (Cline, 1986, pp. 100-101). Regardless of the specific purpose of the property, each of the explanations can give valuable insight into the autonomy of Indigenous women of sixteenth century Culhuacan versus eighteenth century Toluca. There are no instances of a woman’s house in the context Cline stated, mentioned in the Testaments from Toluca.

The largest category of property that women owned was land. Bequests of land often occupied most of the testaments, for when a testator owned a significant amount of land, it was scattered in separate parcels or further divided to distribute it to more people (Pizzigoni, 2007). Land overall is very important, but the specific types of property can reveal different jobs that women had and various ways they could benefit economically. For example, cultivated fields, animals, and *magueyes* could all indicate an agricultural background from which a woman could sell to make a profit. In Culhuacan, ninety-five percent of testators owned land and a majority owned more than one plot or type of land. The most common were *chinampas* and unspecified fields, but women also owned *magueyes*, cultivated land, “woman land,” dry land, and patrimonial land (Cline & León-Portilla, 1984, p. 111). Comparatively, in eighteenth century Toluca, seventy-one percent of women owned land, which included cultivated fields, land to produce *magueyes*, and unspecified land. In total, Indigenous women in the sixteenth century owned significantly more property than women in the eighteenth century.

**inheritors.**

Seventy-two percent of women in Culhuacan and sixty-three percent of women in Toluca inherited land, houses, money, stone, food, and religious objects. For women in both places and eras, the ownership of property should not be underestimated, as it translated into power (Cline, 1986). However, women did not inherit as often in eighteenth-century Toluca because their roles were adapting to the evolution of Spanish colonialism. Indigenous women in Culhuacan could receive all categories of property, land, houses, and movable goods from men or women testators (Cline, 1986). While there were constraints on behavior for wives, daughters, and sisters, it is clear “that this did not preclude the women of Culhuacan from standing up to their husbands, engaging in commercial activity on their own, and managing property as they saw fit” (Cline, 1986, p. 165). However, this direct engagement did not occur as readily in the eighteenth-century.

In one testament from Toluca, Don Ramón de Santiago owned various types of property, two houses, *magueyes*, oxen, sheep, and tools (Pizzigoni, 2007). He left very little to his wife and daughters: “I leave another small piece of land that measures 10 *quahuatl* with a row and a half of small *magueyes* to my wife with her three small children,” (Pizzigoni, 2007, p. 63). Don Ramón purposely excluded his wife’s name and claimed the girls were his spouse’s children rather than their children. He left her with very little to take care of herself and the girls. In a similar instance, Don Francisco Pedro owned a house and many fields. He significantly favored his two sons, Josef and Antonio, over his two daughters, Inés Rosa and Francisca Josefa. Don Francisco Pedro does not mention his daughters until the end of the document and bequeathed a mere ten *quahuatl* of land to Inés and twenty *quahuatl* to Francisca (Pizzigoni, 2007). In contrast, his sons received the house and approximately two-hundred and fifteen *quahuatl* of land in total (Pizzigoni, 2007). Later in the corpus, the bequeathing pattern in which men inherited more than women became increasingly common. In nine of the twenty-four testaments in which women inherited, wives and daughters inherited significantly less than sons and other male relatives, or in some cases nothing at all. Eight of these instances occurred after the turn of the eighteenth-century. The results from Toluca alone are not compelling, but in comparison with Culhuacan offer substantial insight into the decrease of inheritance for women into the eighteenth-century.

In the sixteenth century, women were not only inheritors more frequently, but often inherited more than women in the eighteenth century. There were only a few cases in Culhuacan in which

women inherited less than men. In one testament, a husband, Juan Velázquez, bequeathed everything to his son and stated that the house belonged to his child and that “my wife will be there, but if my child dies, then it is to be sold and (the proceeds) are to belong to him” (Cline & León-Portilla, 1984, p. 92). However, the reason his wife, Angelina Moxel, was not an inheritor is because she herself was very sick, and in fact her will was issued three months after that of her husband. Overall, in sixteenth century Culhuacan, both men and women distributed inheritance fairly amongst daughters, sons, sisters, brothers, grandchildren, wives, and husbands. For instance, Juan de San Pedro declared that “I give the house where I lie, which faces west, to my children María Tiacapan and Agustín” (Cline & León-Portilla, 1984, p. 76). The trend amongst the two collections of testaments is that women inherited more equally earlier in Culhuacan as opposed to later in Toluca.

#### **witnesses.**

Perhaps the most monumental evidence was the lack of women witnesses in the eighteenth-century contrasted with the abundance of women witnesses in the sixteenth century. In fact, only one testament in Toluca had women as witnesses, compared to forty-four in Culhuacan. Scholars such as Sarah Cline commonly asserted one important variation in Nahua versus Spanish norms, which was “women’s equal standing as witnesses” (Cline, 1998, p. 20). This is perhaps the largest decrease evident between the collections studied: three percent of women acting as witnesses in Toluca versus eighty-eight percent in Culhuacan. Caterina Pizzigoni remarks on the fading practice of women as witnesses in the introduction to the *Testaments of Toluca*:

In Stage 2 wills, of which the Testaments of Culhuacan can again be an example, often many more witnesses were called than in the Spanish tradition, and they routinely included women, frequently equal in number to the men, whereas it was not the general practice among Spaniards to use women as witnesses. In Stage 3 wills generally speaking across central Mexico, witnesses grow fewer in number, women are reduced to the disappearing point in this function, and often local officials are the predominant if not the only witnesses (Pizzigoni, 2007, p. 31).

The transition that Pizzigoni mentions is unmistakable between the two collections. There is an evident decline not only of women as witnesses, but also witnesses in general. In Elena de la Cruz’s will, which is arguably one of the best examples of women’s wealth in Toluca, the only witnesses were four men (Pizzigoni, 2007). In another document from Toluca, María Josefa’s



testament, there were three men as witnesses (Pizzigoni, 2007). Conversely, earlier in Culhuacan, testaments had many more witnesses, such as Ana Juana's, which included five men and six women (Cline & León-Portilla, 1984). One will notice that in Juana's testament the women outnumbered the men. In another testament, that of Ana Tlaco, there were eight men and four women as witnesses (Cline & León-Portilla, 1984). The act of being a witness clearly evolved over time into a predominantly male activity. Further, the responsibility for women as a public authority was almost extinguished by the eighteenth-century.

The concept of gender complementarity in Nahua culture, still present in the sixteenth century, allowed for women to not only be witnesses, but also hold leadership positions in society, such as *cihuatepixqui*, which was an official in charge of women (Cline, 1986). *Cihuatepixqui* was a title associated with four women in the documents from sixteenth century Culhuacan: Juana Ana, Ana Xoco, Juana Tiacapan, and Cristina. The women were included in six of the documents— Ana Xoco and Juana Tiacapan were each mentioned twice in separate documents— in which they usually acted as witnesses. In one testament, María Teicuh's, Juana Tiacapan was not only a witness, but also inherited a wooden column worth three tomines (Cline & León-Portilla, 1984). Further, *cihuatepixqui* were not only mentioned in testaments issued by women, but were also witnesses in testaments issued by men. James Lockhart asserted that as an official, *cihuatepixqui* “had the special responsibility for organizing and regulating women's activity” (Lockhart, 1992, p. 44). Lockhart also observed that *cihuatepixqui* were seen primarily in sixteenth-century records and that later women did not hold public office (Lockhart, 1992). No women were *cihuatepixqui* in eighteenth-century Toluca. The testaments and pertinent scholarship have validated the premise that women's economic and social autonomy decreased as the colonial period continued. The question that remains is why?

### **The Explanation**

The testaments support the findings of scholars that Indigenous women's autonomy decreased throughout the duration of the colonial period. Earlier in the colonial period, as in Culhuacan, Spanish rule was relatively less prominent than later in the colonial period. In Culhuacan, despite epidemic disease, religious evangelization, and the destruction of the Aztec empire, Indigenous culture remained steadfast. Cline wrote that Spanish presence in Culhuacan during 1580 was limited (Cline, 1986). Culhuacan housed a royal administrator, *Corregidor* Gonzalo Gallegos,

two friars, and an Augustinian prior, all of whom served approximately thirty-six hundred Indigenous people (Cline, 1986). Due to the short timeframe since contact and lack of Spanish leadership, scholars assert that this sixteenth-century environment and others were more strongly influenced by Nahua practices, which fostered an environment where Indigenous women were provided with more avenues of mobility than later in the colonial period. This does not mean that women according to Spanish gender expectations lacked autonomy, rather only that women more heavily influenced by Nahua gender roles had greater autonomy. Further, earlier in the colonial period, “the system of decentralized authority that structured Spanish colonial social and legal norms gave women— of both Spanish and Indigenous decent— substantial control over economic resources” (Gauderman, 2003, p. 1). However, the works of Sarah Cline, Susan Kellogg, and Stephanie Wood, amongst others, suggested that “while the complex cultural formations of the pre-Columbian era did not disappear overnight, on the individual level Spanish property and inheritance law, alphabetic writing, and demographic decline shaped responses to the new realities of the colonial era” (Kellogg & Restall, 1998, p. 6).

Spanish gender expectations differed greatly from Nahua gender roles. As the colonial Spanish regime strengthened throughout the eighteenth-century, Nahua influence diminished but was not erased. Prior to Spanish conquest, “indigenous groups held a wide variety of gender expectations, from patriarchal to patrilineal to more complex combinations that involved matrilineal and bilineal descent” (Poska, 2012, p. 45). Women in Nahua society dealt with contradictory conditions; the social environment championed gender complementarity, which included the belief that men and women were different but equal and independent parts to a larger whole (Brumfiel, 2011). On the other hand, women were still subject to a gender hierarchy, but not to the extent of Spanish culture. According to Spanish gender expectations, women were viewed as unequal to men, but in a decentralized cultural matrix that still allowed for certain avenues of mobility (Gauderman, 2003). However, gender complementarity was a fundamental concept in Nahua society that related to religious, social, and economic life. Therefore, the lack of gender complementarity in Spanish culture compared to Aztec culture resulted in an inevitable decrease in autonomy for women in the eighteenth-century.

### Conclusion

While Culhuacan and Toluca offered women multiple avenues of social and economic autonomy, the strong influence of Nahua culture and the lack of Spanish control, comparatively, provided more avenues of mobility for women in Culhuacan. It is true that many women were testators in both collections, inherited a variety of goods and property, and were witnesses; however, what set Culhuacan apart were the types of property and public positions Indigenous women held in their community. The ability and frequency with which women acted in the public sphere in Culhuacan granted them greater social, economic, and agricultural autonomy, thrusting their independence upward. While women's mobility faded later in the colonial period, as seen in Toluca, the simultaneous collaboration and clash of Spanish and Nahua culture allowed for some avenues of mobility to remain. Final wills and testaments assessed in this comparative analysis from Culhuacan and Toluca support the ideology of the downward trend scholars have observed in women's autonomy over the course of the colonial period in Mexico. This conclusion therefore begs the question, what else can final wills and testaments reveal about the past?

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