

A Note on Terminology, Translation, and Pronunciation

CONVEYING A PEOPLE'S history to outsiders in terms the people themselves would understand and approve of brings certain challenges. In this case, even their name presents a predicament, for technically speaking, there never were any "Aztecs." No people ever called themselves that. It was a word that scholars began to use in the eighteenth century to describe the people who dominated central Mexico at the time of the Spaniards' arrival. Its use is often confusing, as some people employ the term the way the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectuals did; others use it to describe not only the dominant group but also all who were ruled by them, which included villages extending across most of central Mexico and a few others scattered more widely, extending as far south as El Salvador. In this book the term *Aztec* is used to refer to the people who controlled the region from their city-state of Tenochtitlan, as well as all those living in the central basin¹ who were closely allied with them. Despite the word *Aztec* appearing in the title and in the introduction—where it is desperately needed as a communication tool—I do not use it so unsparingly in the rest of the book. If I am speaking of the ethnic group that rose to power, I use the word they used, *Mexica* (Me-SHEE-ka), and if I am speaking of their close allies, I call them by name, too. If I am referring to the people spread across central Mexico who shared a language and a cultural outlook, many but not all of whom were conquered by the Mexica, I call them what they called themselves, the Nahuas (NA-was). After the introduction, I use the term *Aztec* only when I am discussing later perceptions of times past; then readers will hear about what "the Aztecs" are generally thought to have been or done.

There is a comparable issue regarding all the people who lived in North and South America long before anybody else. Over time, different words have been used to talk about them, some pejorative, some not. Today, people of

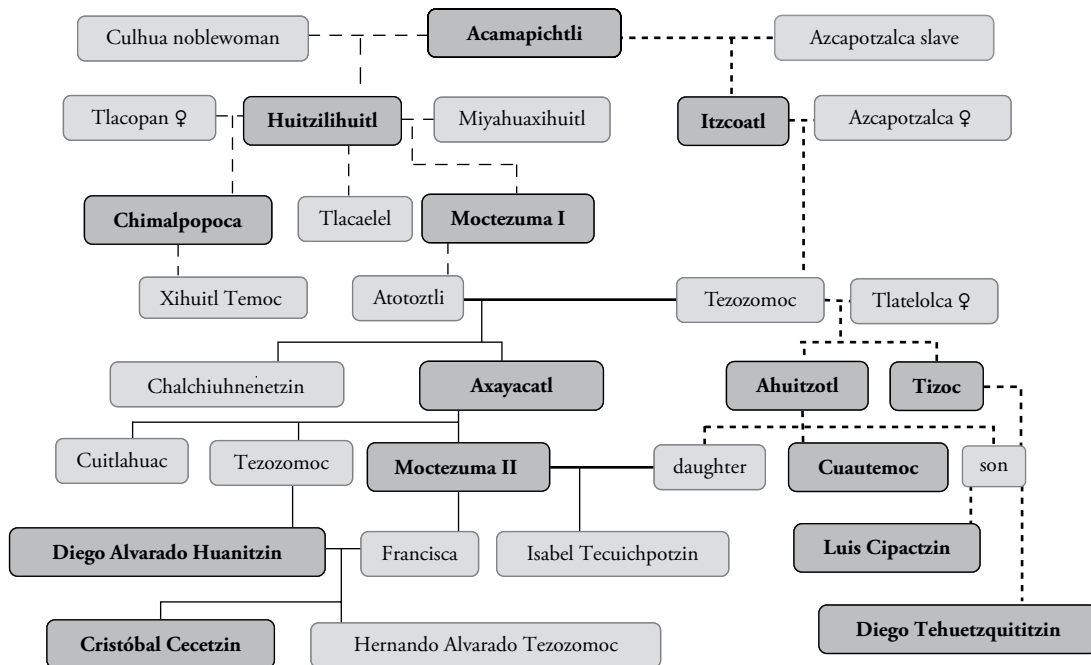
descendant communities in various regions often have different preferences as to what they should be called. In Canada, they tend to prefer First Nations, and in Mexico, indigenous. In the United States, some choose Native American and others American Indian or just Indian. Each group has valid historical reasons for its preference. I do not choose between them, but instead use all these terms interchangeably.

There are also innumerable decisions to be made about the translation of words. When, for instance, the Mexica wished their hearers to understand that a woman in a noble family was understood to come from the line that would bear the heirs, they called her *inhueltiuh*, or “their Elder Sister.” That phrase is cumbersome in English, so I have substituted the word “princess,” although those who know the Mexica know very well there is no word meaning exactly that in their language. In another example, when people gathered of an evening for a celebration, performers told them their history and sang to them in varied combinations. When I write about these historians who were also artists, I sometimes refer to them as “the bards,” but others might opt for “history tellers and singers.” There simply is no perfect solution to translation questions of this kind. The footnotes will help those readers who seek greater specificity.

Presenting individual people’s names in a foreign language can also be difficult. The word “Chimalxochitl” does not roll off the tongues of English-speaking people. A reader who is wrestling valiantly with the name can lose the point of the sentence. But if the girl is simply called “Shield Flower,” does she become trapped in a world of charming and poetic names? Will we subtly condescend to her if she isn’t named “Elizabeth,” or “Maria”? This book attempts to resolve the issue by moving back and forth between the two possible names, but always using the English translation when the paragraph might otherwise become bewildering.

The first time each Aztec-language or Nahuatl (NA-wat) word is used, the approximate pronunciation is given in parentheses. Three rules will help readers speak most Nahuatl words relatively easily. First, the “tl” consonant is pronounced softly; in English, the closest equivalent is a simple “t” sound. Second, when “h” is followed by the letter “u,” the intent is to produce a “w” sound. (Both of these rules are illustrated in the word “Nahuatl.”) And finally, our “sh” sound is represented by the letter “x.” Since the “sh” sound is common in Nahuatl, that guideline is worth remembering. The people we often call the “Aztecs,” for example, called themselves the “Mexica,” pronounced Me-SHEE-ka, and the word “xochitl,” meaning flower, is thus SHO-cheet. For those who wish to expose themselves more thoroughly to this beautiful language, several excellent books are available.²

THE TENOCHCA ROYAL FAMILY





VALLEY OF MEXICO, 1519

