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► **To cite this version:**

Marie Noëlle Chamoux. THE CONCEPTION OF WORK AND LABOR IN CONTEMPORARY NAHUATL-SPEAKING COMMUNITIES IN THE SIERRA DE PUEBLA. American Anthropologist Association - 85th Annual meetings, Dec 1986, Philadelphia, United States. halshs-00408768

**HAL Id: halshs-00408768**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00408768>**

Submitted on 3 Aug 2009

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Published in Spanish in Chamoux, M. N., 1992, *Trabajo técnicas y aprendizaje en el México indígena*, México, CIESAS- CEMCA, p.p . 95-100

Paper unpublished in English. In your bibliography, please refer to the publication in Spanish and to the AAA meeting.

Presented at :  
American Anthropologist Association  
85th Annual meetings  
Philadelphia  
3-7 december 1986

**THE CONCEPTION OF WORK AND LABOR  
IN CONTEMPORARY NAHUATL-SPEAKING  
COMMUNITIES  
IN THE SIERRA DE PUEBLA**

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Studies of the Nahua world view have rarely focused on work and working. This lack of interest perhaps may result from a bias common to traditional anthropological approaches, which tend to isolate to excess the different levels of social life, and to set "material" aspects opposite "spiritual" ones<sup>1</sup>. Various schools of interpretations, whether based on materialist or idealist presuppositions, show this bias. But it is also present in countless monographs, based upon an empirical methodology. In most of these, work is seen as an aspect of "material" life, in that it is generally related to technology and economics, and seldom to social structure. The conception of work is quite absent in studies of ideology, restricted as they tend to be to gods and

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<sup>1</sup>The omnipresent *theory of levels* is well known. The most commonly distinguished levels are: environment; material culture and economics; social structure, which generally includes kinship and politics; ideology and representations, which includes religion, values, symbolic systems, etc. Several levels may be linked into more extensive categories (infrastructure and superstructure), or they may be subdivided. Levels, though they are relatively autonomous, are usually hierarchized according to an order of causality.

supernatural beings, ceremonies and rituals, mythologies and superstitions. In many societies, the concept of work may have an important, coherent place in the world-view. This is true of the contemporary Nahua people in the Sierra de Puebla<sup>1</sup>.

## The Concept of Work

The concepts of work and working are very important in the modern Nahua world-view. The Indians refer to them frequently in widely differing circumstances. They use *tequitl* (work) as a noun, and *tequiti* (literally: to do work) or *tequipanoa* (literally: to pass [time, or life] working) as verbs<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Field-work mostly took place between 1969 and 1974 in Nahuatl-speaking communities in the municipios of Huauchinango and Naupan (Sierra de Puebla). The pueblo of San Francisco Atotonilco, near Acaxochitlan (Hidalgo), was also partially studied. In 1980, several communities were revisited.

<sup>2</sup>The Nahuatl words have been transcribed as follows:

**a** (as )

**e** or **i** (as e or i)

**o** or **u** (as or o or u)

**p** (as p)

**t** (as t)

**c** before a, o, u; **qu** before i, e (as )

**s** or **z** (as s)

**x** (as )

**m** (as m)

**n** (as n)

**l** (as l)

**ch** (as )

**tz** or **ts** (as )

**tl** (as tl)

' (as "saltillo")

**i** or **y** (as y)

**w** (as w, or as the traditional forms hu or uh). In this matter I followed the interpretation of Michel Launay, who analyzes the forms hu and uh (as in **H**uauchinango, and tonati**uh**) as **w** (Launay, 1979).

The examples in the Nahuatl language are part of a corpus of tales and short texts gathered during field-work.

The semantic field of these words is fairly large. The most common meanings of *tequitl* are work, labor and task. The word is also used to designate a hard or difficult task. "*Nele tequitl !*", "*molwe tequitl*", or "*tlen tequitl*" mean "it is really difficult" (in Spanish: "*es de veras trabajoso*"). This use occurs in a tale: "*A'mo quimati tlen tequitl nica te'wan tlen ica timotequipanoa'...*" ("He does not know how hard it is for us here to maintain ourselves...").

This term is sometimes used to refer to a job, as in these sentences; "*Ini hombre oa'sic in nawac inon viuda. Oquilwi: 'A'mo ticpiya tequitl para nica nitequitis monawac?*" ("The man came near that widow. He said: "Don't you have a job for me, so I [can] work for you here?").

A special usage is in exclamations to disapprove of a bad result: "*San tequitl!*" ("What [bad] work!"), but the meaning here is more likely "working" than "result".

Another very important meaning is social role or office, in the sense of the Spanish word *cargo*. We shall come back to this meaning.

*Tequiti* is the usual verb meaning to work; "*Oya tequiti tlatzintla*" ("He went to the Lowlands to work"); "*Se mano onechpanoc icuac nitequiti'tica ic Cuwchinanco.*" ("Once something happened to me when I was working in Huauchinango."). When a person works or a machine runs, this is the word to be used although, in the case of machines -that the Nahuas call *tepotztli*-, it is not the only term. They also use *nemi*, which means to live and to walk (and to think in the case of people).

The verb *tequipanoa* connotes a durable condition. It often refers to an office or profession. In a tale, the Devil, while cooking, says: "*A'mo*

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Not all the terms linguistically related to work are mentioned here. The most famous, *tequio* (in Spanish: *faena*), is no longer used in this part of the Sierra de Puebla .

*nicpiya notenan, y'on aqui tequipanoa; noselto nica.*" (I don't have a wife, [or] anybody to work; I am alone here."). When a reflexive pronoun is joined to the verb, the meaning clearly becomes "to maintain oneself" (in Spanish: *mantenerse*), as in the example ( "...*tlen tequitl nica te'wan tlen timotequipanoa'*..." ).

The frequency of these words shows that the Nahuas are intensely concerned with working. One class of meanings seems particularly relevant in order to understand their world-view. *Tequitl*, as social role or office, defines the ideal situation of the individual, in human society as well as in the natural and supernatural worlds, which tend to be considered as a whole. Some aspects of this concept converge with our own Western notions, but others are quite different.

### **The Sexual *Tequitl***

With respect to the sexual division in society, *tequitl* commonly means sex role. Like many other peoples, the Nahuas consider that men and women have complementary "offices", or positions to fill. Here, the word also connotes the idea of duty. The male *tequitl* is to provide wife and children with food (or its monetary equivalent) and a house if possible. The female *tequitl* is to prepare food, bear children, take care of them and serve her husband. This conception is apparently similar to the Western tradition. Nevertheless it is not sure that it has the same implications for the Indians.

The archetype of male *tequitl* is undoubtedly farming. Other productive occupations, such as hunting, fishing, gathering in the trees, cutting trees, doing craftwork, etc, are but substitutes or complements. Wage-earning is also indicated by this word. Indeed the contemporary Nahuas do not consider that all activities or jobs for food or money are

*tequitl*. Trade, usury, any form of rent, are not. These are called *negocios*, a Spanish word.

The main archetypal task in the female *tequitl* is making *tortillas*. Other activities are also considered as part of the role: cooking, washing, cleaning the house, gathering in the woods, weaving, and making pottery if the natural and economic environment is favorable.

The sex roles and their typical tasks are symbolized in life-cycle ceremonies, which insist on the necessary skills. Informants of Cuacuila recommend putting a *mapache* paw in babies' hands, when the Sun rises. This little animal is said to have hands that are like human's. If the baby is a boy, he will become very strong. If a girl, she will make very round and thin tortillas. Other rites aid in the learning of sexual skills. In Ocpaco and Xilocuautla, The dried umbilical cord is kept and used to rub the child's head. If this is done, the male child will be able to climb trees with agility to pick fruit, and the female child to make perfectly regular and thin tortillas. In case of illness, the umbilical cord will be use as medicine "to bring back the child's spirit".

### **The Political *Tequitl***

As far as political organization is concerned , the concept of work has other facets. Although the corresponding institutions have disappeared during the last ten years, it is nevertheless worth-while to examine them.

In this part of the Sierra de Puebla, communal organization involves both civil and religious hierarchical offices, or *cargos*. *Tequitl* was

used to refer to the onerous, sumptuary costs of the *cargos*. Only the highest ranks of the hierarchy necessitated such expenses<sup>1</sup>.

The civil *cargos* which called for *tequitl* were:

-the "*presidente auxiliar*", or "*alcalde*", or "*temoto*" (the mayor of the pueblo)

-the "*segundo presidente*"(vice-mayor)

- the "*síndico*"

-the "*juez de paz*"

-the "*agente del ministerio público*".

The religious ones were:

- the "*fiscal*" or "*pixcal*" (the church caretaker)

- The "*capitanes*" or "*tlexpanlia'qui*", who financed communal ceremonies.

Ten or fifteen years ago, the Indians believed that if some of these *encargados* did not fill their *tequitl* obligations, the community would fall prey to epidemics or plagues.

Other lower-ranking offices involved some expenses, but much less. The Nahuas did not consider them as *tequitl*. This observation suggests that *tequitl* refers also to a load or hard duty, and not only to an office. In this respect, this noun could be translated by tribute, as it meant in the ancient Nahuatl language.

### **The Supernatural *Tequitl***

In Cuacuila, as well as other village, when somebody says without further commentary : "X. *tequiti*." (X. works), everyone understands that he means "X. is a shaman, or a sorcerer".This meaning is usually

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<sup>1</sup>The cargo system and its evolution in this part of the Sierra de Puebla is described in Chamoux (1981b and 1986b).

unambiguous if the remark has been made in particular contexts or with an appropriate tone of voice. To clarify this usage, we should look at other Nahuas' religious conceptions.

In various circumstances, informants said:

*"The Sun is God. He is Totecodios (Our Lord Dios). He works for mankind. He is mandatarario de los hombres".*

*"The Moon was God. But they changed him (the Moon is male among Nahuatl-speaking communities around Huauchinango, as well as for the Totonac). Now he works during the night. He is a worker (in Spanish: peon, in Nahuatl: tlaquewalli). He is the "sky-button", which holds the sky in place and keeps it from falling. He is "mandatarario de los hombres".*

According to a tale: *"Omotlaquenti'tiw in dioses wan oya'que' tequiti para quiawitl."* (The gods dressed up and went out to work to make rain.). These rain-gods are also called Tlaloque, as in ancient Nahua society.

Other supernatural beings also "work". The *Xiwnawalli*, spirits who take care of the community, work. They are "the healers of the World" (*los curanderos del mundo*)."

From all these beliefs, it follows that the supernatural *tequitl* refer to specialized activities for reproducing the cosmic order that conditions mankind's survival. Usages of the verb *tequiti* clearly shows that shamans, as intermediaries between people and supernatural beings, also accomplish *tequitl*. They become wizards or witches only if they misuse their position. In fact, something is understood: they work "with the gods, saints and other supernatural beings"., where the term "with", a translation of *ica*, indicates that the gods are a means or instruments, and not only partners for shamans.



From this description, it can be seen that the Nahuas' conception of work differ in various ways from the Western one.

First of all, **the *tequitl* concern not only material production**, but also social and symbolic activities.

Second, **the *tequitl* are always socially valued activities**. Working is not shameful, as used to be the case in ancient European class societies, and it is not a divine punishment as in the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is a duty of gods as well as of people. Idleness is, therefore, disapproved of. An interesting and very important consequence is that **no task involved in the *tequitl* is devalued**. So the typically feminine ones do not have less social value than the masculine ones<sup>1</sup>. Here too appears a difference with Western conceptions, which tend to consider both that traditional feminine tasks are not work, and that any occupation and task, performed by women, loses value .

Thirdly, **the *tequitl* are useful for reproduction** of collective structures (family, household, local community, cosmic order) and consequently for reproducing individuals. The *tequitl* activities are not done for profit. Therefore trade and rent are not seen as *tequitl* , they are matter of individual choices. This conception of trade, however, may have been different in the Ancient Aztec society, where social structure included a highly organized class of merchants. This modern conception of trade probably appeared during the Colonial period, when the social meaning of this activity changed.

Fourthly, as the ethnographic data suggest, the *tequitl* are specialized activities, whence the idea of a **division of labour**, based on

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<sup>1</sup>On the women' situation in working, see Chamoux (1981 a -c, 1983)

a **division of skills**. Gods as well as people have specialities, that contribute to the reproduction of the cosmic order.

An implication of these conceptions has to do with informal education. For the Nahuas, learning and teaching should make the young people capable of fulfilling the *tequitl* obligations. Education consists in transmitting not only necessary skills and knowledges, but also a sense of responsibility<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> About education , see Chamoux (1986 a).