

## Aztec place-names and ethnonyms and their interrelation\*

The written sources for Central Mexico's precolonial history tell a story, in which not individuals but ethnic groups of varying size and complexity are the outstanding actors. In most cases the ethnic group referred to corresponds neatly to the inhabitants of a certain place, i.e. a town or small scale region. In order to create place-names (the most important subset of toponyms) and names of ethnic groups (ethnonyms or gentile names) and to convert names of one category into the other, the Aztec language or Nahuatl provides various sets of grammatical rules. The colonial grammarians, however, did not concern themselves with all the details, many of which may easily have escaped their attention anyway.

Studies on the place-names of certain regions have been published in Mexico since about a hundred years ago. They were mainly restricted to attempts at translating the Aztec names and to give some etymological interpretations, too often without paying attention to even the most fundamental structures of the Aztec language. None of these efforts can be considered today a really exhaustive contribution. On the other hand, a study devoted to ethnonyms is still lacking altogether. Consequently, a more penetrating and systematic study of the formation of Aztec toponyms and ethnonyms seems necessary.

As contribution to this task and in contrast to previous studies, the authors of the present essay emphasize the structure of the two categories of names, i.e. ethnonyms and place-names, and the mechanism of their mutual dependence. The layout of the study is synchronic, analyzing the names documented in 16th century sources in order to establish the respective structure of Classical, that is, 16th century Nahuatl. Consequently the study had to consider the primary data, i.e. the literally thousands of names to be found in the historical texts. A considerable portion of these names have been provided by the DECODEZ data bank for precolonial Central Mexican history.\*\* This corpus was expanded by the bulk of toponyms contained in the *Padrones de Tlaxcala*, the *Matricula de Huexotzinco* and some other early colonial administrative documents. The study centers on the region of »general central Nahuatl« (Canger 1982), the subregions of which, however, will not be uniformly represented due to the local bias of the existing historical sources.

Most Aztec names – this applies to toponyms, personal names and ethnonyms – are transparent: they could and can be analyzed, understood and translated according

\* The present essay summarizes the results of an extensively documented monograph on Aztec toponyms and ethnonyms which will be published in the near future (Dyckerhoff and Prem, in press), where also the complete apparatus will be found. Preparatory work has been made possible in part by grants of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft to Ursula Dyckerhoff (collection of historical and modern toponyms) and Hanns J. Prem (DE-

CODEZ data bank system).

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\*\* The names from the DECODEZ data bank have been extracted and adapted using some computer programs especially written by Prentiss Riddle, Austin, Texas.