

# Caribbean Words in Mexican Toponymy

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LATE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, men such as Antonio Peñafiel, geographer and linguist, Nicolás León, anthropologist, and Cecilio Robelo, historian and investigator of native languages, gave the initial impulse to the serious study of Mexican toponyms. In Mexico, attention has been directed in the main toward the country's principal native languages, especially Nahuatl and Maya, and to a lesser extent Tarascan. The wealth and variety of the native languages have encouraged and given direction to toponymic studies, although a strong nationalistic motivation based upon the exciting events of the first contact between natives and Spaniards is frequently discernible. Toponyms of Hispanic derivation have never been a popular theme for investigation in such surroundings. The same can be said of terms derived from other non-Mexican sources.

The geographical strategy of the conquest and settlement by the Spaniards has added another feature to the total picture of Mexican toponymy, this feature being the terms of Caribbean origin learned by the Spanish in their island colonies of the West Indies, then carried to the American mainland. The early nature of their introduction gave a number of these words sufficient impetus to find their way into Mexican Spanish and to compete successfully with terms of indigenous Mexican origin, displacing some of the latter and co-existing with others. Many have found their way into the colloquial and literary levels of the language and have currency wherever Spanish is spoken.

However, the role of these terms in distinguishing the dialect zones of Mexican Spanish has not been clearly determined. The late Pedro Henríquez Ureña, who established five subdivisions of the zone corresponding to Mexican Spanish, does so almost exclusively on the basis of their phonetic characteristics. Of the larger zone he says:

The Mexican zone constitutes an historical unit because all its territory formed a part of the Viceroyalty of New Spain or was under its influence. In its lexical aspect, the abundance of terms derived from Nahuatl gives character to the zone.<sup>1</sup>

Terms of Nahuatl origin, consequently, are not particularly helpful in establishing boundaries of the subdivisions, and significant lexical information must be sought elsewhere. In order to bring a clearer focus upon the problem, I have examined contemporary Mexican toponyms derived from sixteenth-century native languages of the West Indies. These lexical items, within certain limitations, are readily available in published sources and need not be sought by slow and expensive work in the field. Furthermore, their geographical location can be determined with considerable accuracy and pinpointed on modern maps of Mexico.

Some consideration of the process by which these terms found their way into the Spanish language generally and that of Mexico will serve to place them in their proper historical perspective. The first contact of Spanish with one of these tongues occurred during the first voyage of Columbus when he landed at Guanahani, probably Watling's Island, one of the Bahamas. Unfortunately, the log of this voyage has not been preserved, but Father Bartolomé de las Casas examined it and made an extract of it in the early sixteenth century and surviving accounts are based on his version. Columbus describes the gentle Island Arawaks who spoke Tainan (in Spanish *taino*), a language extinct since the middle of the sixteenth century. During the first two weeks of his voyage through the West Indies, only Spanish terms denote the new objects observed by the Spaniards, but when Columbus reached Cuba, Tainan terms become frequent, although the possibility exists that these reflect the vocabulary known to Las Casas.

There is clear evidence, however, that Columbus and his men added Tainan words to their vocabulary. Peter Martyr, the Walter Winchell of the period, interviewed many of them when they returned to Spain and the first letters of his *De orbe novo*, begun late in 1493, relate the adventures of Columbus in the West Indies, mentioning items peculiar to the New World by their native names:

<sup>1</sup> *El español en Méjico, los Estados Unidos y la América Central* (Buenos Aires, 1938), p. 334.

*canoa* "dugout canoe," *cantbal* "cannibal," *age* "variety of sweet potato," *yuca* "cassava," *maíz* "Indian corn," *bohío* "native house," *cacique* "chieftain," and many others.<sup>2</sup> Their use in the Spanish of Santo Domingo, Cuba, and Puerto Rico of the early sixteenth century is amply documented in the writings of chroniclers and explorers who lived in the area, men such as Las Casas, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, Juan Ponce de León, and Vasco Núñez de Balboa.

Hernán Cortés and the men who accompanied him to Mexico in 1519 had all spent several years in Santo Domingo or Cuba where Tainan terms were a part of daily vocabulary. Cortés had come to Cuba in 1511, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, the author of the *Verdadera historia*, in 1515, after spending several months on the Isthmus of Panama; likewise, the captains of Cortés, among these Pedro de Alvarado, Francisco de Montejo, Cristóbal de Olid, Diego de Orgaz, Juan Velázquez de León, Juan de Escalante, and Francisco de Morla. The writings of the chroniclers of the conquest give ample evidence of the presence of terms derived from Tainan in the Spanish used by the captains and soldiers. One only need read the *Cartas de relación* of Cortés, the *Verdadera historia de la conquista de la Nueva España* of Bernal Díaz, the *Relación* of Andrés de Tapia, and the *Itinerario* of Juan de Grijalva, among others.

In Mexico, Spanish came into contact with Nahuatl, the dominant native language of the central Mexican area. Borrowings from Tainan which designated objects also found in Mexico thus met competition from Nahuatl and entered into mortal conflict. In some cases the results were decisive in favor of the West Indian term, which to all intents and purposes supplanted the derivative from Nahuatl:

*Maíz* "Indian corn" displaced the Nahuatl word *centli* and allied forms, which survive largely in place names.

*Maguey* "agave" or "century plant" was victorious over *metl*, a Nahuatl term which probably designated a slightly different variety of the plant.

*Tabaco* "tobacco" originally referred to a kind of cigar or tube in which dried leaves were smoked. *Yetl* or *picietl*, Nahuatl designations, have left few traces.

<sup>2</sup> *Décadas del Nuevo Mundo* (Buenos Aires, 1944), pp. 6, 7, 8, 15, 24.

*Cacique* "Indian chief" has been borrowed from Tainan and has currency in all areas where Spanish is spoken, including Mexico. *Tlatoani* "lord" or "noble" has survived in some regions, retaining a specialized meaning.

*Canoa* "dugout canoe" encountered opposition from the Nahuatl *acal*, but won out handily. Cortés, in his third letter to the king of Spain written in May, 1522, shows the conflict clearly when he says of the Indians of the Aztec capital: "...they were going to go out into the lake in their *canoas* which they call *acales*, and others went up into the mountains."<sup>3</sup>

*Jagüey* "cistern for water," a designation learned by the Spaniards on Haiti, met little opposition from Nahuatl.

Other words derived from Tainan, particularly in the realms of fauna and flora, also emerged victorious: *caoba* "mahogany wood," *carey* "tortoise shell," *guacamaya* "macaw," *guayaba* "guava apple," *iguana* "large lizard," *mamey* "mammee," *papaya* "papaw," *tuna* "fruit of the prickly pear."

In far greater numbers, however, the terms of Nahuatl origin triumphed, because of priority of existence among a numerically large group of speakers with a relatively homogeneous and advanced culture. These have been the decisive terms in determining the Mexican dialect area of American Spanish, at least vocabulary wise. A few examples will illustrate:

*Jobo* "wild plum," first used by the Spaniards in the West Indies, has given way in most of Mexico to the Nahuatl derivative *jocote* "sour fruit."

*Bixa* "annato, a red dyestuff" persists in the West Indies and South America, but in Mexico and Central America, *achiote*, of Mexican origin, predominates.

The same holds true for *maní* "peanut," the usual term in the West Indies but rarely heard in Mexico, where *cacahuate* usually designates this plant; likewise *ají* "chile pepper," the usual term in the West Indies and South America, but replaced by *chile* in Mexico.

<sup>3</sup> *Cartas de relación de la conquista de México* (Buenos Aires-Mexico, 1945), p. 148.

Actually, relatively few terms of West Indian provenience have established themselves in Mexican Spanish. A somewhat greater number co-exist with terms of indigenous Mexican or Hispanic affiliation. All groups, however, are represented in contemporary Mexican toponyms.

The present study is of an exploratory nature whose aim is to determine whether there exists any relationship between the tentative subdivisions of the zone of Mexican Spanish on the one hand, and the geographical distribution of vocabulary items of Tainan or West Indian origin on the other hand. The first step in the process has been to find a suitable collection of place names for the area concerned. This is readily available in the gazetteer for *Mexico*, prepared by the United States Board on Geographic Names and published by the Government Printing Office in Washington in 1956. This volume of 750 pages contains the names of approximately thirty-three thousand inhabited places and geographic features of the Republic of Mexico.<sup>4</sup> The latitude and longitude of each point are indicated so that it can be charted on a map. The features of accuracy of nomenclature and location, plus the number of toponyms it contains, make this work a convenient starting place.

Among the approximately thirty-three thousand toponyms contained in the volume, 402 can clearly be traced to a Tainan or perhaps a West Indian Carib origin.<sup>5</sup> Figure 1 (p. 11), in which each dot represents a toponym of this type, shows graphically the areas of density of these terms.

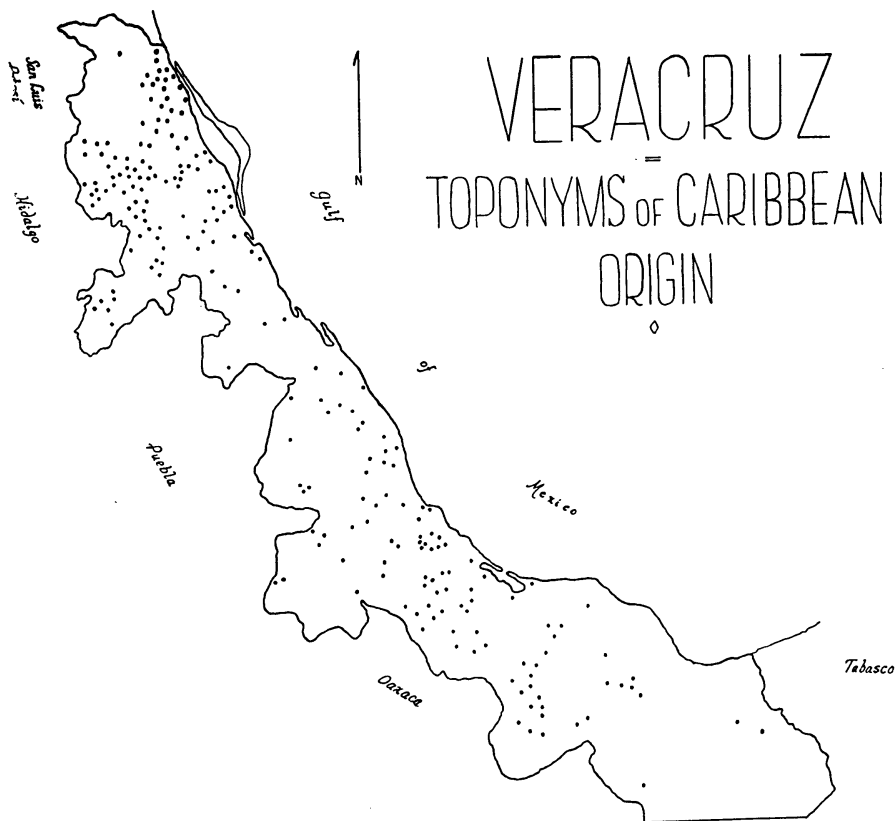
Their concentration is greatest in the coastal areas, particularly on the Gulf Coast, in the states of Veracruz and Tabasco, and to some extent in Campeche. The peninsula of Yucatan, however, is almost devoid of such toponyms because of the predominance of the Maya language there. However, certain nuclei of these terms appear also on the Pacific Coast, one in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, another in western Jalisco and Nayarit, and others in northern Sinaloa and southern Sonora. There are no well-defined clusters in

<sup>4</sup> The volume contains 53,000 entries as indicated on p. i, but of these somewhat more than one third are cross references, hence the estimate of 33,000.

<sup>5</sup> For this purpose I have used Georg Friederici, *Amerikanistisches Wörterbuch* (Hamburg, 1947), supplemented by Pedro Henríquez Ureña, *Para la historia de los indigenismos* (Buenos Aires, 1938), and Alfredo Zayas, *Lexicografía antillana* (Havana, 1914).

the central plateau. Rather, the toponyms are scattered there and Nahuatl tradition has been the decisive feature in toponymy.

Two factors must be considered in explaining the density of the coastal areas. On the Gulf Coast, the historical factor is significant to a considerable degree. It was settled by the Spaniards in the early



colonial period; the city of Veracruz in 1519, the Pánuco area to the north in 1523, and Campeche in 1540. This was the era when life in the West Indies was still fresh in the memories of conquerors and soldiers who became *encomenderos* in Mexico. The same factors, however, cannot operate in the Pacific area, which was generally settled somewhat later, particularly in its northern reaches of Sinaloa and Sonora.

One feature is obvious in all coastal regions. There is a close relationship between the frequency of Caribbean toponyms and the ground cover. The luxuriant vegetation of the Mexican tropical lowlands has more in common with that of the West Indies than it does with that of the arid and relatively barren highlands. Items of tropical flora are clearly represented by such terms as *anona* "soursop," *caobal* "mahogany grove," *ceiba* "ceiba tree," *jobo* "hog plum," *papayo* "papaw tree," *guayaba* "guava apple," *guayacán* "lignum vitae, a large tropical tree," *guácima* "West Indian mulberry tree," *hicaco* "coco plum," *mangle* "mangrove," and other trees and shrubs. The botanical explanation is applicable in the case of the Pacific locations, for there the toponyms were applied throughout the colonial period as late as the eighteenth century and are somewhat removed from the Caribbean area geographically and distant in time from the linguistic conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century.

At least two terms are of little value in determining dialect areas. The word *maguey* "century plant," with its inflected and modified forms, appears 47 times (over one tenth of the total), both along the coast and throughout all the central plateau. The same applies to *tuna* "fruit of the prickly pear," which is listed 24 times. Both items are considered distinctive features of the Mexican landscape. However, *matz* "corn" is almost completely absent from the picture, for it occurs only twice in the list of four hundred items. For toponymic references to corn, Mexico relies almost exclusively upon derivatives from native languages.<sup>6</sup>

One well-defined area of the toponyms of West Indian origin coincides closely with one of the dialect subdivisions tentatively set up by Henríquez Ureña twenty years ago. He lists six regions, one of which he describes as "the lowlands of the Gulf Coast, which, through the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, are joined with those of the Pacific."<sup>7</sup> The dot map of toponyms clearly outlines this region, which includes the Mexican states of Veracruz and Tabasco on the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific lowlands of Oaxaca and Chiapas. The phonetic qualities of the speech of this area resemble in several respects the Spanish of the Antilles:

<sup>6</sup> Paul F. Griffin, "Allusions to Corn in Mexican Toponymy," *Journal of Geography*, LII (1953), 165-167.

<sup>7</sup> *El español en Méjico...*, p. 335.

1. The vowels are full and the consonants tend to erode in final position.
2. /s/ final in a syllable is a voiceless aspirate, as in many lowland areas of America.
3. Intervocalic /x/ is weak in intensity and is little more than a voiceless pharyngeal.

Evidence from Figure 1 indicates that this area can be defined on the basis of its toponyms as well as by the phonetic qualities of its speech.

In order to obtain a check on the accuracy of Figure 1, I have employed the same methodology for smaller areas of the country, using as source material various volumes of the latest available census of Mexico. The state which I have examined most carefully is Veracruz, in which 8,688 inhabited places were listed in the census of 1940. Of these, 230 bore names derived from Tainan or a Carib language, distributed as shown in Figure 2 (p. 14.).

This material coincides closely with that shown in Figure 1, as at least two features will indicate. First, both maps show a concentration of toponyms in the extreme northern portion of the state. This is the area of the Pánuco, whose settlement by Hernán Cortés was begun in late 1522 or early 1523, when thirty Spaniards received encomiendas of Indians. The second feature in which the census material coincides with that of Figure 1 is the extension of these place names into the eastern portion of San Luis Potosí, not shown in Figure 2 but verified by a tentative dot map of that state.

I have extracted place names of Caribbean origin from the census statistics of several other states of the center and west of Mexico and have drawn up tentative maps of their distribution. This source will be used to advantage in the continuation of the study because it is readily available and each toponym can be located accurately by municipality. Furthermore, the census volume for each state provides abundant information concerning the toponymy of the lesser geographic features, which are an ample source of the place names under discussion.

Dialectologists have not yet defined clearly the subdivisions of the zone of Mexican Spanish. From the evidence presented here, an investigation of toponyms can contribute definitely to refining and determining their boundaries.



