

Review Essay

Philology Plus: New Studies in Mesoamerican Ethnohistory

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Nahua and Maya Catholicisms: Texts and Religion in Colonial Central Mexico and Yucatan. By Mark Z. Christensen. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013. xiv + 318 pp., introduction, map, tables, figures, footnotes, bibliography, index. \$65.00 cloth.)

Maya Ideologies of the Sacred: The Transfiguration of Space in Colonial Yucatan. By Amara Solari. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013. xi + 212 pp., maps, figures, notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00 cloth.)

The Mixtecs of Oaxaca: Ancient Times to the Present. By Ronald Spores and Andrew K. Balkansky. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013. xvi + 311 pp., preface, maps, figures, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth.)

The Invisible War: Indigenous Devotions, Discipline, and Dissent in Colonial Mexico. By David Tavárez. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. xii + 384 pp., charts, figures, tables, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. \$65.00 cloth, \$27.95 paper.)

Mesoamerican ethnohistory remains one of the most vital approaches to Latin American colonial history. The four books under review here illustrate the incredible specificity and depth of analysis such studies have attained, particularly those employing the New Philology approach pioneered by the late James Lockhart, then extended and further developed by his numerous students and others. Additional approaches have also played a role as well, as I discuss below. While many of these studies focus on colonial Mexico, as do the four books I cover, indigenous societies were not confined to the

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borders of the modern nation of Mexico. It therefore makes sense to consider these publications in light of the field more broadly geographically conceived. Two of the books under review, those by Tavárez and Christensen, explicitly follow the philological approach, defined by Matthew Restall as constituted by a *model* that emphasizes “native roles in colonial history through the study of native-language sources” and a *method* that “analyz[es] those sources philologically,” using historical-linguistic analysis (2003: 114). The other two books, by Solari and Spores and Balkansky, show the influence of the New Philology but also reflect the interdisciplinarity inherent in the anthropological methodologies upon which these authors draw.

Not only do the explicitly philologically approached studies base themselves on the analysis of indigenous-language texts, they examine in great detail the religious encounter between native peoples and Spaniards. David Tavárez’s book, *The Invisible War*, offers an especially significant challenge to the colonial religious historiography. While focused on the idea that the Catholic Church’s emissaries to native people often saw themselves as engaged in an “invisible war” against idolatry, the book is an extended study of the diversity of so-called idolatrous practices (“devotions,” in Tavárez’s terminology) engaged in by Nahuas and Zapotecs across the colonial period. The author argues that historical-linguistic analysis of native-produced documentation has an epistemological value well beyond that produced by outside observers about beliefs, practices, and languages they often did not comprehend well (and upon which much colonial religious historiography depends). He also rejects any notion of a generalized indigenous peasant Christianity.

While the study begins by examining the first extirpation efforts in and around the Basin of Mexico as well as a diversity of places across the Oaxaca region, the heart of the book traces the changing nature of extirpation campaigns from 1571 on—when the native peoples of New Spain were formally exempted from the Inquisition’s oversight—to the late eighteenth century. The author divides his analysis into four different periods in order to analyze a complex of ideas that indigenous practitioners hid, even as some of them played roles in local religious or civil hierarchies, learning to read and write in the process. This tour-de-force study, demonstrating sustained linguistic erudition and depth of documentary research, covers a long period of changing responses to Christianity and extirpation practices. Tavárez demonstrates that these changes did not always march in lockstep, that is, developments in indigenous responses and evangelization methods (and disciplinary oversight) responded to many influences—intercultural, but also institutional, political, even demographic—across a variety of spaces, communities, and cultures. Perhaps the book’s greatest contribu-

tion to ethnohistory lies in its exploration of clandestine literacies in which indigenous ritual specialists produced a variety of texts—calendrical, astrological, and liturgical. Tavárez's analysis of Nahuatl and Zapotec documents reveals many forms of clandestine communal or personal practices (what he calls "collective" and "elective") that occurred. Locally varying cosmologies and political ideologies led to highly diverse kinds of dissent and called forth strong, sometimes violent, disciplinary responses. Nevertheless, the energetic appropriation of European letters and numbers by indigenous intellectuals underlay the production of highly divergent texts, capturing extremely local intellectual, ideological, and devotional dogmas.

Indigenous production of ritual texts is also the focus of Mark Christensen's fine book, *Nahua and Maya Catholicisms: Texts and Religion in Colonial Central Mexico and Yucatan*; these two books could profitably be read together. Like Tavárez, Christensen rejects the notion of a single spiritual conquest and finds many Catholicisms, both European and indigenous. Also like Tavárez's book, this work is the product of enormous linguistic expertise (in Nahuatl and Yucatec Mayan) and achieves a deep understanding of religious change.

The core of Christensen's book concerns the categories and chronology of indigenous-language texts, published and unpublished, in central Mexico and the Yucatan. The first category, official and printed texts, represents the earliest type of textual production. Both ecclesiastics and natives—the latter often serving, as Christensen aptly points out, as ghostwriters—produced documents such as manuals, *doctrinas* (books containing Catholic belief and doctrine), and sermons written for both ecclesiastic and indigenous audiences. Although these documents represented official doctrine, even these purveyed variable messages, primarily because translation can never be an exact, replicable process, and intra-Church disagreements and competitiveness (among the orders, for example) also led to a diversity of messages. Both ecclesiastics and native assistants produced category 2 texts, texts for local audiences, especially local priests or their indigenous aides. These documents were subject to censorship, but, often handwritten, such copies of published work might depart from the originals and on occasion included unorthodox content. Category 3 texts consisted of "unpublished, unofficial texts written by natives for natives" (84). These native writers had undergone variable amounts and quality of training and, like the clandestine texts described by Tavárez, their texts included errors and forbidden ideas and varied more widely in the topics covered than did category 1 and 2 materials. However much religious and civil officials attempted to control and minimize all this diversity of messaging, they failed to do so.

After laying out the types of native-language texts produced in the

first part of the book, the next section examines how religious texts, both Nahuatl and Maya, conveyed Catholic beliefs and practices, especially basic ideas as well as baptism and confession. The third section deals with examples of unpublished and/or unofficial texts to show the diversity of ideas that developed about such things as testamentary production and the cult of the saints, which while spreading far and wide, did so at varying rates, with different material manifestations, and with different patterns of intensity of worship within and between regions. If not as theoretically sophisticated as Tavárez's exploration of clandestine texts, Christensen's depth of research and linguistic skill cannot fail to impress. His comparison of large numbers of texts in two very different languages and reflections upon pre- and post-Hispanic cultural differences between the Basin of Mexico and the Yucatan show that the introduction of Christianity led to diverse, multifaceted processes of evangelization. This process was one in which official texts, unofficial texts, and daily life and practices—whether in the baptizing of babies or the writing of last wills and testaments—both reflected and promoted local customs, needs, and political economies, and reinforced differences that still exist between today's Nahua and Maya communities (though Christensen's own emphasis tends toward examining internal differentiation within each linguistic-cultural group rather than comparing those larger groupings).

While Amara Solari, in her beautifully produced book, *Maya Ideologies of the Sacred*, assumes a more uniform spiritual conquest process than do Tavárez or Christensen, she develops a truly novel, theoretically sophisticated approach for analyzing conversion and colonial spirituality among Yucatec Mayas by examining the role of urbanism in that process. Combining art history with archaeology and documentary analysis of Spanish- and Mayan-language texts, especially a text known as the *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, Solari's multidisciplinary approach uncovers indigenous worldviews that illustrate how Mayas inscribed their own sacralized notions of space in documents, maps, even the construction and layout of towns and cities such as the site of Itzmal. Building on archaeological studies that illustrate the important role of travel and pilgrimage to Yucatec Maya spirituality, Solari argues that space itself played a cartographic-like role for Mayas. In addition to arguing that Mayas closely linked space and human action, Solari asserts that their spaces created and contain historical narratives she terms "spatial biographies." These biographies reinforced Maya-defined sacrality, linking notions of the sacred to a "communicentric view." Colonial Maya scribe-cartographers captured this view and created a series of circular maps that document local or regional creation accounts and/or pilgrimage or migration movements. Solari's analysis of these maps

provides a model of ethnohistorical analysis of visual sources. She makes use of a very wide array of sources and methods to produce an innovative urban ethnohistory with a sophisticated take on visual and material representations of Maya conceptions of space as well as cultural continuity and hybridity.

Also drawing on a multidisciplinary methodology, archaeologists Ronald Spores and Andrew Balkansky use what they call a “convergent methodology,” relying upon “archaeological, biological, linguistic, ethno-historic, and ethnographic data in order to form a more complete picture of Mixtec culture over three millennia” (xiv), to trace the deep history of one of Mesoamerica’s most long-lived civilizations. Divided into two parts, the first focusing on pre-Hispanic settlement, urbanism, political structures (especially the *yuhuitayo*, or “community kingdom”), and culture, the second on the transformations that accompanied the colonial era, Mexico’s independence, and twentieth- and twenty-first-century demographic, political, economic, and cultural developments, the book makes the point that migration has been a long-term constant factor shaping Mixtec cultural identity and survival.

This cultural identity can be traced back millennia to the Early and Middle Formative (2000–300 BCE) in the Mixteca area, with the Mixtec language, ranked society, and a farming technique specific to the region (the *coo-yuu* terracing system, a system of cross-channel or gully terracing farming) emerging across this time span. The book then discusses the rise of urbanism (detailing many archaeological sites that should be better known), the state, as well as further development of patterns of social stratification during the classic and postclassic periods. The authors repeatedly demonstrate the utility of the conjunctive approach and paint a highly detailed portrait not only of political and economic developments but also of religious beliefs, showing how beliefs unique to this culture persisted across many centuries yet fit within Mesoamerican patterns of sacrality.

The authors argue that while Spaniards quickly Hispanicized the region, key elements of Mixtec political and social structure survived, especially the *yuhuitayo*, even with changes in spatial organization and authority structures, both within and above the kingdom level of organization. They make excellent use of both Spanish- and Mixtec-language sources to detail the histories of particular dynasties. The roles of women within these dynasties are explored in some detail through discussion of the wealth, political power, and social stature of some of these women, with a few female lines holding onto power, status, and wealth into the nineteenth century.

But that century would bring change, first with independence, then with the establishment of the state of Oaxaca and local forms of governance

that have stayed remarkably stable through the many vicissitudes of Mexican political history after the 1820s. Descendants of the colonial dynasties lingered on as powerful figures, with some maintaining considerable political influence and landholdings. These lands, in combination with community-held lands, underwrote the agricultural productivity and marketing patterns that allowed the nineteenth-century Mixteca economy a strong degree of self-sufficiency. But demographic change and economic modernization meant that regional economic autonomy eventually declined, and the area and its indigenous population faced profound demographic, economic, and political challenges, especially in the twentieth century.

The authors ground their discussion of current issues in the region's long history of population movement, what they call the "Great Mixtec Diaspora" (228). Dating back to perhaps the fourteenth century, they show that Mixtecs have repeatedly responded to population pressure on resources with individual and family migration. The distances migrated would grow dramatically with transregional, then transnational migration becoming more common, to the point that "by the early 2000s the Mixtecs were the largest group of indigenous migrants in the Mexico-U.S. border zone" (233). A transnational indigenous migrant culture has now begun to emerge.

Spores and Balkansky have written a highly readable long-term history, perhaps the most accessible volume for nonspecialists among the four, which successfully integrates archaeological, ethnohistoric, and ethnographic sources to show the persistent adaptability and creativity of Mixtec culture. As individual community identity strengthened during and after the colonial period, this process has meant that most Mixtecs identify more closely with local communities than with the larger ethnic or cultural grouping. Paradoxically, transnational migration may bring about a broader sense of identity, as Mixtec and indigenous. One of the great contributions of *The Mixtecs of Oaxaca* is the way it looks at cultural patterns and definitions of identity as long-term processes of being, believing, and doing, subject always to change and revision even as Mixtec and related languages, political economy, spiritual beliefs, and sense of community have grounded and stabilized this Mesoamerican region and its people for thousands of years. Solari also investigates local and regional definitions of identity, moving beyond an insistence on local adaptations as the primary lens through which to examine colonial processes and indigenous change and adaptation. The intensely local focus of works adhering to New Philology models and methods contrasts with the multidisciplinary or conjunctive methods and theories that combine documentary sources with analysis of material remains and/or ethnographic evidence, which allow for transregional ana-

lyses that point to broader forms of creativity and adaptation, especially over lengthy periods of time.

Reference

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- 2003 A History of the New Philology and the New Philology in History. *Latin American Research Review* 38, no. 1: 113–34.