

*Memories of Conquest: Becoming Mexicano in Colonial Guatemala.* Laura E. Matthew. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012. ISBN: 9780807835371

The biggest virtue of world history is its global approach, in the sense that it aims to retell human experience from multiple perspectives. As scholars strive towards narratives that escape traditional Eurocentric paradigms and better reflect the complexities of history, students become better equipped to understand diversity and the history of the global community as a whole. This is the main reason why teachers and students of world history will benefit from Laura Matthew's *Memories of Conquest: Becoming Mexicano in Colonial Guatemala*. This book is a valuable contribution to the historiography of colonialism and world history, as it joins the expanding literature by on the agency of native peoples in early interactions between the Americas and Europe.

Matthew analyses the history of the *Mexicano* conquistador community in Ciudad Vieja, Guatemala. She describes how they sought to maintain their elite status above the various local Maya groups, from the mid-sixteenth century to the end of Spanish domination. Matthew provides an insight on the territorial organization of these groups, and how they collectively achieved a privileged social status as Mexicano conquistadors, exempt from tribute. Spanish conquistadors used the label "Mexicano" to describe a heterogeneous group including a diverse group of allies hailing from the central highlands and the Oaxacan valleys and Tehuantepec regions of modern-day Mexico, speaking multiple languages.

*Memories of Conquest* makes a significant contribution to scholarship through its analysis of the community of Mexicano conquistadors in Ciudad Vieja, Guatemala, throughout the entire colonial period. Matthew describes how members of this Mexicano community defended their privileges as conquistadors, how they held on to their identity by keeping track of their lineage, maintaining their languages and marrying strategically to preserve their status. The author uses a wide variety of sources for her analysis. For instance, she describes the conquest of Guatemala using the *Lienzo de Quauhquechollan*, a cartographic history presumably commissioned by Mexicano conquistadors. To discuss the status of this group within colonial Guatemalan society, and the strategies they used to defend their privileges, she uses *probanzas*, or proofs of merits and services to the Crown, contained in a document catalogued as Justicia 291.

This book is a continuation of the author's work on the agency of indigenous peoples in the process of European conquest and colonization of the Americas. In the past, within the same line of research, Matthew edited, together with Michel Oudijk, *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), a collection of several case studies of the role of the indigenous conquistadors in different territories. That work and the book reviewed here contribute

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to ongoing efforts to debunk traditional and mainstream narratives of the subjugation of Mesoamerica by Spanish conquistadors which have tended to downplay or outright ignore the role played by local indigenous peoples.

The chief argument in *Memories of Conquest* is that pre-Hispanic cultural patterns were as influential as European ones in the formation of a conquistador identity for indigenous Mesoamericans. In other words, the pre-contact history of Mesoamerica was a significant factor in the process of conquest and colonization. Rather than dealing with her object of study as a process pertaining solely to the colonial period, Matthew situates the lives and aspirations of the Mexicanos of Ciudad Vieja within the context of a long-term history of Mesoamerica. She does this by beginning her analysis centuries before European contact, offering a history of the interactions between the peoples of the Mexican highlands and the ones in Guatemala in chapter one. She offers a brief and useful explanation of the ongoing debates in the field, from the projection of the Teotihuacano civilization in the Maya area, to debates concerning the Maya-Toltec connection in places like Chichen-Itzá, to the settlement of Nahuatl-speaking peoples in Guatemala, to Tenocha imperial aspirations on the Soconusco region. She convincingly argues that, in the eyes of the Mesoamericans, the invasion of Guatemala in 1524 was as much a continuation as it was a break from previous patterns of exchange and interactions. In this manner, Matthew provides a richer and more nuanced narrative about the Mexicano community, without overstating the argument for continuity, as she recognizes the importance of European players and institutions in the process.

In the second chapter, Matthew describes the conquest of Guatemala. The focus of the narrative is the experience of the Mexicano conquistadors. Empowered by European technology, they provided their expertise on the tactics of their foes and their knowledge of the terrain. Matthew argues that they took a much more active role in the conquest than simply functioning as auxiliary troops for the Spaniards. She shows how the Mexicano conquistadors fought in the frontlines and played a decisive part in the struggle against the local Maya. While providing a detailed description of the conquest, this chapter stresses the point that the Mexicanos saw themselves as key and equal partners in an alliance with the Spaniards, rather than second-class assistants in a Spanish war of conquest.

Chapter three builds on the work of Florine Asselbergs in analyzing the *Lienzo de Quauhquechollan*, a cartographic history presumably commissioned by Mexicano conquistadors, and discusses a collection of *probanzas*, or proofs of merits and services to the Crown, to ascertain the place of the various Mexicano groups in Ciudad Vieja. Matthew describes how the Mexicanos obtained privileges, particularly tribute exemption, for their aid in the process of conquest. She also analyzes how these privileges were put to the test, and how the Mexicanos reminded the Crown of their

own merits as conquistadors to restore their advantageous place in society. The Mexicanos were in a peculiar position: they enjoyed prerogatives that the Maya groups living around them did not, while at the same time they were subordinated to the whims of the Spanish Crown. Additionally, there were distinctions within the Mexicanos: the Tlaxcaltecas and Cholultecas were set above the Tenochas and the Zapotecs. According to Matthew, the subordination of certain Mexicano groups to others mirrored pre-Hispanic patterns of war and politics, as well as the series of events leading to the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521, back in Mexico. Spanish and Mesoamerican policies of domination coincided in a hierarchical system organized according to ethnicity. This made the establishment of the Spanish imperial system an easier task, so long as they found groups that reinforced this social stratification.

Chapter four goes into detail about the projection of the various specific Mexicano polities on the geographical and social organization of Ciudad Vieja, where Matthew argues that Mexicano identity makes its most complex manifestations. Matthew analyses how the Mexicano settlement in Ciudad Vieja, created shortly after the conquest, was separated from the Spaniards and the Maya both legally and physically. The Mexicano settlement itself was further subdivided into several units, or *parcialidades*, organized according to the different polities where the warriors had originally come from: Tlaxcala, Cholula, Texcoco, Tlatelolco, and so on. Ethnicity in Mesoamerica was not strictly linked to language, territory, descent, or kinship, but Mesoamericans did have a sense of belonging to their place of origin in early colonial times. Thus, the *parcialidades* of Ciudad Vieja maintained their individual histories, patron deities and migration stories that distinguished them from the rest. Claiming provenance from one of the many polities of central Mexico and Oaxaca was part of what defined a person as Mexicano in Guatemala.

In chapter five, Matthew moves away from geography and deals with the activities that created a sense of community among the Mexicano conquistadors. She discusses the importance of confraternities, militias and cabildos (the basic municipal governing assembly in Spanish America) in the shaping of Mexicano identity in Ciudad Vieja throughout the colonial period. She asserts that Mexicanos' religious confraternities were ethnically exclusive and that each sub-group had its own militia. Militias, confraternities, and cabildos were all institutions that gave Mexicanos a formal area of interaction with the Spanish authorities, where they could defend their status as an elite among the Indians. These colonial structures helped develop Mexicano identity, along with fundamental institutions such as marriage, godparentage, celebrations and commemorations. For the latter, Matthew analyses sources pertaining the *Paseo del Pendón Real* and the *Fiesta del Volcán*, celebrations commemorating the conquest of Guatemala in which the descendants of the Mesoamerican conquistadors took part disguised as Spaniards. Both were major celebrations and assertions of Spanish

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authority that simultaneously provided a space for Mexicanos to show their privileged position over the Maya.

The last chapter deals with the assimilation of the Mexicano community into the wider group defined as *ladino*. While maintaining Nahuatl as their main language if they hailed from the central Mexican highlands, or Zapotec and Mixtec if they came from Oaxaca, they eventually incorporated Spanish as a mark of differentiation from the Maya. This usage of both Spanish and their native languages enabled them to engage in the colonial apparatus more effectively, earning them the reputation of *indios ladinos*. Even though they were still recognized as Mexicano in the nineteenth century, the use of their original languages slowly decayed. Matthew also describes the effects that the earthquake of 1541 had on this community, perhaps effectively strengthening their identity as Mexicano.

Matthew concludes with a reflection on the importance of the history of the Mexicanos of Ciudad Vieja as they provide an interesting case study that does not fit easily into what she calls the “conquest paradigm.” This story contributes to a more complete picture of the Mesoamerican experience of early globalization by admitting a wider range of indigenous experiences without losing sight of the trauma caused by epidemics and European subjugation. The book shows how Native American worldviews and actions were pivotal in the process of colonization of the Americas, even in the face of European colonialism, as much as the other way around.

One minor criticism is Matthew’s oversight of the role played by the Totonaca Cempoalan allies of Cortés. This is an odd absence in Matthew’s list of Mesoamerican allies of the Spaniards considering that they were the initial allies of the Europeans, and thus, their allegiance was an essential step towards the fall of Tenochtitlan. But this minor nit-pick, due perhaps to the absence of the Totonaca in the Guatemalan campaign, does not diminish the impressive scholarship displayed in the book.

The book contains twenty-one illustrations and four maps that complement and enrich many of the points argued in the text. The images that reproduce details of the *Lienzo de Quauhquechollan* are of particular interest, as they show the way the Mexicano conquistadors viewed themselves: equal partners, rather than servants of the Spaniards.

Specialists on colonial Latin America will find this work very informative as it is a detailed analysis of the history of Ciudad Vieja, with a focus on non-European actors. Teachers contemplating incorporating this book in their syllabus will find it useful, even though some chapters in the book may prove too complex for undergraduate students with no background on Mesoamerican history. In particular, *Memories of Conquest* is a great example of how historians can look in the sources to unearth the story of groups of peoples traditionally marginalized from mainstream narratives of the past. Since it

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skillfully uses a variety of sources to validate its argument, Matthew's book is as useful to teach Latin American history, as it is to teach the craft of a historian. Even if students are left with only the gist of Matthew's argument, their grasp on colonial Mesoamerica is sure to become stronger. More advanced students will be able to debate the questions raised in this book and contrast them to Eurocentric narratives of European expansion, or even other regional case studies, both within, or, perhaps more interestingly, outside colonial Latin America. It is important to incorporate books like this one in the world history curricula, since they offer a more nuanced and critical perspective on the history of the global human community.

Inasmuch as world history strives to develop a narrative of the global human community as a whole, students of world history will find this book useful as it focuses the attention on non-European actors in a story commonly associated to European dominance over others. It is essential to provide a voice to communities traditionally overlooked by traditional scholarship and to escape long-standing simplistic approaches to history. In *Memories of Conquest*, this is precisely what Matthew does.

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