

FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

MAYAN REVISIONISM

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In recent years, historians have questioned the image of the indigenous peoples in colonial Spanish America as victims and now argue that the Indians retained much more control over their lives and were much less passive in the face of Spanish colonialism than traditional historiography suggests. Inga Clendinnen's *Ambivalent Conquests* is clearly able to illustrate this revisionism in a powerful and effective manner.

The Spaniards tried maliciously to mold the Mayans into loyal subjects and to destroy their old, familiar culture with the intent of instilling traditional European values into the "heathens." In their effort to break up Mayan solidarity, Spanish friars attempted to chase Mayan inhabitants out of their homes and into new, Spanish-controlled towns, where Spanish laws and customs could be introduced. To ensure that Mayans would not return to their "old" stomping grounds, the Spaniards burned down their villages, believing that the Mayans would be forced to succumb to Spanish domination.¹ However, the Spaniard found that the Mayans were a very stubborn people, as they refused to retreat permanently. Many of the Mayans returned to their land because it was the only place they knew. One reason for their reluctance in abandoning these villages completely was because these were the places where each generation of Mayan children learned Mayan customs, and more importantly, it was in these villages where their places of worship were erected, and where Mayans traditionally carried out rituals in order to appease the gods. Spaniards tried, but failed to break the spirit of the Mayans.²

Religion and its important role in daily life was the one parallel that transcended through the two clashing civilizations. Mayan priests believed or at least claimed to have

¹ Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570*, 2d ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 142.

believed that god sent messages to the people through the stars. They claimed that these “messages” could be deciphered through patience and extensive documentation. At the same time that the stars shifted in a certain direction, the events of the town would be documented alongside that pattern.³ Using this system, priests were able to determine the various seasons and recurring weather patterns,⁴ which was essential information for the townspeople to know in order to successfully carry out their slash and burn farming.⁵ Clendinnen characterizes the Mayas as a people who believed that “all things have pattern, however little obvious that pattern may seem to be...” This important job that priests had in observing the stars allowed their social status in society to be unmatched.⁶

These documents of the stars were sacred and all attempts to hide them were made during the Spanish onslaught of Mayan villages, as Spaniards destroyed any Mayan religious books they came into contact with. As for the books that were destroyed, Mayan children were able to re-write many of them using the European-Phoenician alphabet that they learned in the missionary schools they were required to attend. These children met with Mayan priests in Mayan villages and translated their teachings, which came from many of the books that were destroyed, so that the knowledge would be preserved for generations to come.⁷ In this manner, the Mayans were able to retain their autonomy under Spanish rule as they looked to these translations for guidance during the times of their oppression.⁸

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 151.

⁴ Ibid., 146.

⁵ Ibid., 140.

⁶ Ibid., 153.

⁷ Ibid., 134.

⁸ Ibid., 139.

While Mayans found ways to keep much of their culture and heritage alive, the introduction of Christianity was still the biggest disruption to Mayan life. As it is written in the books of *Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, which are comprised of all the Mayan documentations of the stars and events of the day that survived to the present-day, when the Christian god was introduced to the Mayans, “it was the beginning of [their] misery. It was the beginning of church dues...the beginning of robbery with violence, the beginning of forced debts, [and] the beginnings of debt enforced by false testimony...”⁹ This quotation was one of the many additions to the “historic” journals of the Mayans during Spanish rule.¹⁰ The preceding quote was important for many reasons. Not only does it show the reaction of the native Mayans to their Spanish conquerors, but it also shows the extent and the reasoning as to why they were completely opposed to Spanish rule

Spaniards introduced new rules and laws that Mayans were forced to abide by, laws that were completely foreign to them. Mayans had never had codified their laws. Every agreement they had previously entered into was a verbal agreement, and it was never written down.¹¹ Just as the case is for immigrants to a new country, time was needed for the Mayans to adjust to the new written laws, religion, and customs. In their case, the Mayans became the immigrants since the Spanish took over their territory.

Slowly, the Mayans learned to adjust to Christianity. They began to replace Mayan symbols with Christian ones, but in their rebellious persistence, the Mayans kept the original meanings alive.¹² However, every now and then, native Mayan Lords were

⁹ Ibid., 157.

¹⁰ Ibid., 135.

¹¹ Ibid., 25.

¹² Ibid., 165.

still found to have set up missionary schools, under the guise of teaching Christianity, when in reality the Mayan Lords were continuing to teach their traditional religious customs to a new generation of Mayans.¹³ This type of rebellion was tolerated more so, after fifty years of Spanish rule because several generations of Mayans had lived as Christians, whether they truly believed in it or not. Since the Mayans had caved in to Christianity, there was no longer a need to oppress them as much. Therefore, both the Spaniards and the Mayans were more willing to accept each other's historical customs since order and a new tradition was in place.¹⁴

This acceptance of the historical customs of each group allowed the Mayans to get away with using "riddling messages" that Spaniards would not understand when the Mayans performed ceremonies and shows for the gods and for the entertainment of the Spaniards.¹⁵ After the conquest, the Mayans were forced to become more democratic and allow commoners to participate in these sacred Mayan ceremonies that had once been reserved to nobles because the main goal of the Mayan Lords became to keep their heritage alive.¹⁶ Inga Clendinnen has shown that throughout the conquest, the Mayans were not passive at all, and that they did whatever they could to keep their customs alive and to retain their autonomy despite the major intrusion of Christianity into their lives.

Reassessing the indigenous responses to Spanish colonialism is very important because all of the traditional writings on the Spanish conquest have been from the vantage point of the Spanish. This perspective is highly tainted and only one-sided, as the Spanish probably would not record all of the disturbances that they met along the

¹³ Ibid., 164.

¹⁴ Ibid., 159.

¹⁵ Ibid., 161.

¹⁶ Ibid., 162.

way, not to mention that they did not know everything that the Mayans were doing or how they intimately thought about their conquerors. Inga Clendinnen in *Ambivalent Conquests* is able to humanize the cause and purpose of resistance for the Mayans. They fought bitterly for their beliefs and for their way of life; they were not passive. Spanish claims that the Mayans were passive were either made as propaganda to imperial Spain to show further progression in spreading Christianity than had actually been achieved, or because the Spanish were not fully aware of the force that they were up against.

Works Cited

Clendinnen, Inga. *Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570*, 2d ed. New York:
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