
REVIEW ESSAYS

INDIGENOUS LITERARY HERITAGE

Dr. Maarten E. R. G. N. Jansen
Leiden University, the Netherlands

Their Way of Writing: Scripts, Signs, and Pictographies in Pre-Columbian America. Edited by Elizabeth Hill Boone and Gary Urton. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2011. Pp. x + 412. ISBN: 9780884023685.

Parallel Worlds: Genre, Discourse, and Poetics in Contemporary, Colonial, and Classic Period Maya Literature. Edited by Kerry M. Hull and Michael D. Carrasco. 4th ed. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2012. Pp. xi + 493. \$85.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781607321798.

Mesoamerican Memory: Enduring Systems of Remembrance. Edited by Amos Megged and Stephanie Wood. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012. Pp. viii + 320. \$55.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780806142357.

The Complete Codex Zouche-Nuttall: Mixtec Lineage Histories and Political Biographies. By Robert Lloyd Williams. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013. Pp. xvii + 348. \$60.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780292744387.

The indigenous peoples of the Americas have produced an impressive and fascinating literary heritage, preserved in different forms of graphic, or otherwise codified, registers or through oral transmission. These precolonial texts and images have become a topic of special disciplinary interest, particularly in Mesoamerican studies, where the texts—in pictographic or hieroglyphic writing systems—constitute one of the principal sources of information about ancient cultures.

Four books exemplify scholarly progress in the interpretation of different forms of Mesoamerican and Andean writing. Only one of these books (Williams)

was written by a single author; the other three are edited volumes by groups of experts. Editors' introductions define the central themes and objectives of the collective works. All four books were published within the past three years by well-known academic houses. All four are well written, well structured, well illustrated, and well distributed, as one might expect. All have indexes that help to locate the various topics treated within the volume. Together they cover four fundamental aspects of this field of research: the different forms, scopes, and themes of ancient American writing systems (Boone and Urton); the narrative content of long precolonial texts (Williams); the social and historical contexts of the texts and their role in the construction of memory (Megged and Wood); and the literary aspects of these texts and the continuity of those aspects in contemporary indigenous society (Hull and Carrasco).

Indigenous cultures and languages are not a thing of the past, as indigenous peoples exist today and have an enormous impact on national societies. They may be marginalized and discriminated against, but they are certainly not marginal in terms of cultural value. The continuity aspect is made explicit throughout the volume *Parallel Worlds*, edited by Kerry M. Hull and Michael D. Carrasco, which deals, in chronological order, with hieroglyphic Maya texts in precolonial times, colonial alphabetic documents, and present-day oral tradition. The other works under review focus almost exclusively on the precolonial and colonial periods but, even so, pay occasional attention to the topic of continuity.

Though it is far from being a mainstream practice, there is an important tradition of exploring cultural continuity as a key to understanding the art and religion of indigenous civilizations in the Americas. One such exemplary and paradigmatic work is by the German zoologist, geographer, ethnographer, and linguist-philologist Leonhard Schultze Jena, which curiously is not even mentioned in *Parallel Worlds*. In order to prepare for translating the Popol Vuh (the sacred book of the K'iche' Maya), Schultze Jena travelled through a series of Mesoamerican communities in 1929–1931. He studied the languages, wrote grammars and dictionaries, and registered oral traditions. Finally, staying for four months in the K'iche' region, he documented there such important cultural elements as the ongoing use of the Mesoamerican calendar and its symbolism, all in the K'iche' language of course.¹ In line with his research, several authors have emphasized the need to include the study of cultural continuity in approaching ancient American cultures. Such scholars include Karl Anton Nowotny, Ferdinand Anders, and Luis Reyes García in the field of codex studies, and Linda Schele and Nikolai Grube in the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic texts.²

1. Leonhard Schultze Jena, *Indiana*, 3 vols. (Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1933–1938).

2. Cultural continuity plays a central role in the research on Mexican codices that Mixtec researcher and activist Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez and I have been doing together. In line with these ideas an interdisciplinary and intercultural group of PhD candidates at the Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University, is presently studying the symbolic universe of Mesoamerica, with the support of an advanced grant from the European Research Council. This review has benefited from comments by several members of that team: Omar Aguilar Sánchez, Ilona Heijnen, Ivette Jiménez Osorio, Raúl Macuil Martínez, Manuel May Castillo, Laura Osorio, Emmanuel Posselt Santoyo, Juan Carlos Reyes Gómez, Ángel Iván Rivera Guzmán, Ludo Snijders, and Paul van den Akker.

SCRIPTS, SIGNS, AND PICTOGRAPHS

Their Way of Writing, edited by Elizabeth Hill Boone and Gary Urton, offers a series of in-depth case studies on different forms of graphic register and notation in the ancient civilizations of Mesoamerica and the Andes. The introduction (Urton) and the final essay (Boone) pave the way for a comparative perspective. In both Mesoamerica and the Andes, there existed complex systems capable of “transmitting information through time and across space in its original form and mode(s) of expression” (4). This is, indeed, a key factor in writing, meaning that, in principle, ancient texts should be accessible (decipherable) today. The problematic lies in the importance of additional cultural information that was well known to the producers and users of these systems but is of course known less, or not at all, to modern researchers.

This book focuses on issues of decipherment. The opening essay, “The Cold War and the Maya Decipherment” (Michael D. Coe) concerns the work of Yuri Knorosov, the Russian philologist who demonstrated the phonetic (logosyllabic) character of Maya hieroglyphs and whose work took a long time to be accepted in Western academia because of the post-World War II conflicts. From a programmatic perspective, the article’s placement might suggest that decipherment is essentially unraveling the sound value of signs. Later chapters of the book, however, make explicit that writing is much more than just a phonetic register. The reference to the Cold War reminds us of the impact of sociopolitical conditions on scholarly work; it also brings to mind the military violence against the Maya peoples in the second half of the twentieth century in the name of a “defense against communism.” This armed conflict has had a significant and painful impact on indigenous society and culture.

The following contribution (Stephen D. Houston) goes deeply into the nature of Maya writing, paying attention to its development and variation in time and space. It analyzes basic features and gives a valuable state-of-the-art synthesis of topics such as the relationship between signs and language, the issue of which languages—considering elite diglossia—were actually used, as well as the social context of production and transmission. This brings us to specific areas where decipherment is still lacking, such as the pre-classic Maya inscriptions, but also the writing systems of Cotzumalhuapa (Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos), Teotihuacan (Karl Taube), and Classic Oaxaca (Javier Urcid). These essays contribute concretely to the systematization of knowledge and propose specific decipherments.

Following a thematic approach, Michel R. Oudijk suggests that the audience already knew the narratives (for example, about origins of the dynasty or community) and that this may have led to elaboration and abbreviation in performance and register. The implication here is that elliptic versions may be better understood by situating them within a more complete structure, to be reconstructed in comparison with other sources. In a similar vein, Federico Navarrete examines the coherence of texts in terms of temporal-spatial organization. He uses Bakhtin’s concept of “chronotope” as an anchor for the ideology behind historiography. Interestingly, he shows this dynamic to work both in Mexica codices and in famous Mexica historical stone monuments.

Colonial invasion meant painful destruction and losses of Mesoamerican pictography but also interaction with Spanish visual (mimetic) art, alphabetic writing, and European subject matter (Boone). As a consequence of this hybridity, or rather creative cultural synergy, Nahuatl texts were written in alphabetic script and Spanish catechisms were written in a new form of pictography, nurtured by principles of the ancient system as well as by the European tradition of the “*Biblia Pauperum*.”

The images painted on Moche vessels are, in some ways, comparable to Aztec-Mixtec pictography and seem also to be equally semasiographic, that is, codifying ideas and meaning directly onto images, or using other graphic means, without relying on a full register of speech (Margaret A. Jackson). The images do not have a syntax determined by language. Rather, contextual elements, both in terms of both the knowledge and memory of the audience and of performance and agencies involved in transmission, are crucial factors in communicating their meaning. This is even truer of other, non-iconic Andean notation systems. Decoding the numerical structure of recurring abstract motifs on textiles leads to a hypothetical interpretation of these decorative patterns as calendars (R. Tom Zuidema). More complex geometric designs or symbols, known as *tocapu*, seem to have some rather general meaning but do not form consistent phrases (Thomas B. F. Cummins). Knotted cords, *quipus*, lend themselves for registering quantities in categories, but information about the categories (and therefore the key to interpretation) is lost. Still, a well-argued typology of these artifacts is elaborated (Urton and Carrie J. Brezine). In addition, a fascinating historical and contemporary use of *quipus* is documented (Frank Salomon, Brezine, Reymundo Chapa, and Víctor Falcón Huayta). The articles on these topics are extensive, detailed, and fundamental. They make a particular effort to synthesize what can be said about these notation systems on the basis of a wide array of examples that have been analyzed in detail and contrasted with all the relevant historical information.

The different registers and notation systems throughout the Americas show a strong connection and continuity between signs that are motivated by language, that is, codified speech elements, and those that communicate information directly (semasiography). Though phonetic signs are dominant in Maya hieroglyphs while iconic signs are dominant in Aztec-Mixtec pictography, both categories actually appear in combination and they mutually reinforce each other in the interest of communication.³ This also seems to be the case in Andean visual art; *quipus* fulfill similar functions to the register systems called “writing” in other societies. It is already common practice to speak of Mesoamerican precolonial “books” (codices), so why not refer to these varied register systems as “writing.” Far from representing a primitive or preliminary stage, these systems are sophisticated and mature. This brings us to an understanding that the category of writing, as it is generally defined in Western scholarship, is problematic and Eurocentric. The

3. See also the important works by Luis Reyes García: *La escritura pictográfica en Tlaxcala* (Tlaxcala: Universidad Autónoma de Tlaxcala, 1993); *Matrícula de Tributos o Códice de Moctezuma* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997).

study of nonalphabetic and nonphonetic registers implies an expansion of this concept and may thus foster deeper insights into the plurality (and richness) of human communication and semiotics.

LINEAGE HISTORIES AND POLITICAL BIOGRAPHIES

Subsequent to the decipherment of individual signs, the connection between them, in terms of narrative and/or symbolic structures, is the basis for more complete and convincing interpretations of a complex text and/or work of art such as the long inscriptions and books (codices) or painted cloths (*lienzos*) of ancient Mesoamerica. Writing a commentary on their contents involves serious examination of earlier studies on the semiotic system and the different components of the text. It also requires thorough knowledge of the themes of cultural memory and of the cultural, historical, and social contexts within which the work was produced and transmitted. This implies the use of a range of sources about the past (archaeology, visual art, historical documents, oral traditions) in a way that is coherent and specific to indigenous customs, concepts, and values.

The Codex Zouche-Nuttall, renamed Codex Tonindeye, is one of the few preserved precolonial pictorial manuscripts from Ñuu Dzau, the Mixtec region in Southern Mexico.⁴ It presents the history of the dynasties that ruled various city-states during the six centuries before the Spanish conquest, and a biography of a central and famous figure in Mixtec history: Lord 8 Deer “Jaguar Claw” (AD 1063–1115). Robert Lloyd Williams’s commentary on this precolonial book is an accessible English text that helps nonspecialists to follow the sequence of pictographic scenes; it contains useful notes and tables as well as a complete set of small but clear color photographs of the original pictorial manuscript. The text does not include much scholarly discussion, however, and lacks an adequate overview of earlier research or a comprehensive system of bibliographic references and notes.

Williams bases his commentary mainly on the ideas of another codex specialist, John M. D. Pohl, who, in his view, “almost single-handedly established the paradigm for modern research in the United States on these Native American manuscripts” (16). This presumption ignores the fundamental contributions by other US researchers, for example, the decipherment of Mixtec toponyms by Mary Elizabeth Smith, the recalculation of the chronology of Mixtec genealogical history by Emily Rabin, and the analysis of Mixtec narrative pictography by Nancy Troike (which Williams mentions only in passing).⁵ Similarly, Williams recognizes the groundbreaking discoveries of the Mexican scholar Alfonso Caso

4. On this corpus see, for example, Maarten E. R. G. N. Jansen and Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez, *The Mixtec Pictorial Manuscripts: Time, Agency, and Memory in Ancient Mexico* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2011).

5. Mary Elizabeth Smith, *Picture Writing from Ancient Southern Mexico: Mixtec Place Signs and Maps* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973); Emily Rabin, “Toward a Unified Chronology of the Historical Codices and Pictorial Manuscripts of the Mixteca Alta, Costa and Baja: An Overview,” in *Homenaje a John Paddock*, edited by Patricia Plunket, 101–136 (Puebla: UDLA, 2004); Nancy P. Troike, “The Codex Colombino-Becker” (PhD dissertation, University of London, 1974).

but ignores other studies published in Spanish. Nor does he pick up the interesting contributions by Mixtec scholars, for example the PhD thesis of Ubaldo López García on Mixtec literary language and ceremonial discourse.⁶

Furthermore, Williams takes for granted a number of interpretations by other scholars, but he does so in an eclectic manner and frequently omits references to the original publications. Thus it is often not clear why he follows some and rejects others. At the same time, he postulates certain unwarranted principles as bases for his own theories. For example, he suggests that some scenes should not be read following the well-established pictographic reading order but should instead be accommodated or rearranged on the basis of sequences of dates that seem to be related (38). The commentary lacks argumentation and remains superficial. Most of Lord 8 Deer's biography (half of the codex) is transcribed as simple lists of dates and personages. More familiarity with Mixtec culture, language, and landscape would have enabled Williams to bring in Mixtec terms and concepts, to recognize the literary and dramatic character of this narrative, and to reconstruct the dynastic, religious, and ideological aspects of the depicted events.

MEMORY

The volume edited by Amos Megged and Stephanie Wood, in contrast, abounds in detailed social, cultural, and ideological information and has a clear focus on the formation process of the texts that are analyzed. This is, in part, due to the shift in time period and method; most of the thirteen contributions deal with the colonial period and follow a microhistorical approach, nurtured by the presence of relatively ample documentation. The central topic is the contextual analysis of the construction and transmission of memory in Mesoamerica. The introduction situates this effort in a theoretical framework of cultural memory and semiotic mediation, with their ideological implications and performative aspects.

In the dramatic and violent transformation of values and social order following the Spanish conquest, certain central symbols and concepts remained. The first essay (Daniel Graña-Behrens) focuses on the intellectual figure that is central to the construction and transmission of memory, called *itz'aat* in Maya glyphs and *tlamatini* in early colonial Nahuatl texts (still known as *tlamatke* today), all terms that refer to a person of knowledge and wisdom. The essays that follow mainly examine indigenous documents from colonial archives, such as land titles and lawsuits concerning land rights, power, and privileges. In part, these claims had to fit within the manipulations of Spanish administration. However, they also contained precolonial concepts concerning origins, sacred geography, divine ancestors, and lineage history. There is a direct link between these documents and present-day customs and memories that are often connected to symbolically charged places in the landscape, particularly caves and other ritual sites. This is evident in the case of the indigenous peoples in Guatemala, where remembrance (including ancestral narratives) is connected to revitalization and recreation (Ju-

6. Ubaldo López García, "Sa'vi: Discursos ceremoniales de Yutsa To'on (Apoala)" (PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 2007).

dith M. Maxwell). The role of the calendar and calendar specialists in this process is extremely interesting.

The book offers a wealth of social historical detail and fascinating perspectives through time, as well as novel interpretations of sources and hypotheses on the coherence of memories and symbolic thought. Curiously lacking is a more theoretical approach to the issue of representation, in the sense of Edward Said and related authors ranging from Albert Memmi to Homi Bhabha.⁷ Epigraphic and iconographic analyses that are heavily based on colonial sources have to be sharply aware of the agendas and prejudices of those colonial authors. Postcolonial theory would help to achieve an even deeper understanding, to deconstruct dominant notions and to connect the past to the present in a creative and critical manner.

GENRE, DISCOURSE, AND POETICS

Parallel Worlds focuses explicitly on the literary character of texts in diverse Maya languages in three successive epochs: precolonial, colonial, and contemporary. A central aim of the book is to contribute to the interpretation of precolonial hieroglyphic texts, inscriptions, or codices. The opening article, by Nicholas A. Hopkins and J. Kathryn Josserand, shows how comparing narrative structures, as found in contemporary texts, with the composition of hieroglyphic sequences may inform the interpretation of the latter. A series of sixteen further contributions analyze the formal structures of verbal art or literary language: the well-known parallelism (couplets) and its specific form, the *difrasismo* or hendiadys (distinguishing its lexical, morphological, syntactic, and semantic aspects), metaphors and metonyms, the composition of discourse (for example, the marking of episodic beginnings and the use of stylistic figures such as syntactic inversion or chiasmus), aesthetic aspects (performativity, humor), and specific genres such as prayers, genealogies, and historical or religious narratives. The study of colonial documents shows the continuous presence of native poetic elements even in the translations of the missionary doctrines (which may be seen as a form of “strategic appropriation”), and their “striking continuity” can be traced to the present day.⁸ It is important to note and understand how specific indigenous terms and actions express (religious) experiences, refer to the realm of the sacred, to morality and values, and so strengthen the sense of community.

This book is clearly a major step forward from previous references to parallelism as “archaic” or “characteristic of some other primitive literatures” (287). The comparison between sources from different periods leads to quite a few interesting observations, and this may be a solid basis for further interpretations. The literary phenomena identified in the Maya texts are classified according to terms

7. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1977); Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957; Boston: Beacon Press, 1991); Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

8. Compare Mixtec colonial texts as analyzed by Maarten E. R. G. N. Jansen and Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez, *La Lengua Señorial de Ñuu Dzau: Cultura literaria de los antiguos reinos y transformación colonial* (Mexico City: Colegio Superior para la Educación Integral Intercultural de Oaxaca / Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca / Yuu Núú A.C., 2009).

from classical and Western literary studies (parallelism, chiasmus, synchysis, hyperbaton). This has a double effect. On the one hand, this type of analysis seems to validate the Maya texts as literature, in the Western sense of that word, and in this way can contradict discriminatory notions about indigenous languages. Indigenous languages were, not so long ago, considered primitive “dialects” with neither grammar nor vocabulary; in fact, many schools still prohibit the use of indigenous languages (and do not teach pupils to read or write them, much less offer any literary overview or analysis). On the other hand, this validation, using Western terms, can also be construed to reinforce the supremacy of Western cultural criteria, concepts, and methods, the more so due to the fact that many other terms in the description and analysis also come from Western vocabularies.

One such example would be the “Drum Major headdress,” later identified as a “crown,” handed to the new “king” of Palenque as an element in the “legitimation of power” in ancient Maya society. The authors of the essay (Karen Bassie-Sweet, Hopkins, and Jossierand) discuss this view critically and offer an interesting comparison of ancient ritual roles with present-day religious offices in Maya communities. On the basis of this comparison, they point out that this headdress may have been a sacred object with its own name, in fact, a living “Being” (196–203). Indeed, in Mesoamerica there are numerous examples of objects that actually are Beings. An indigenous interpretation, therefore, creates doubts about the applicability of the term “object” in such cases. It would also point out that words such as “magic” or “shamanic” are generally not used in present-day Maya communities and that it would be preferable to use indigenous categories.

Meanwhile, the scholarship in this book is impressive and lays the foundation for further questions of literary analysis, such as who is speaking in the text, to whom, and why, and who is not speaking. The literary heritage of indigenous peoples for the past centuries has been formed, transformed, and transmitted in a colonial context of inequality and injustice. Modern literary criticism and postcolonial theory have much to offer when it comes to issues of representation, gender, power, and social ethos. In turn, the focus on indigenous texts of the past may help to create attention for indigenous voices in the present.

LITERARY HERITAGE OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The encounter with the indigenous world always implies a confrontation with the history and ongoing presence of colonialism. The book title “Their Way of Writing” is an expression taken from the Franciscan chronicler Motolinia; it signals the independent position of ancient American writing systems vis-à-vis the European alphabet, but it also unwittingly continues an “us-them” dichotomy and a colonial perspective on a distant Other as an “interesting object,” without a voice. Unfortunately, the exclusion of indigenous people from the study of their heritage is still a general practice. Among the fifty participating authors in the four books reviewed here, I find only one native speaker of a Mesoamerican language (the late Luis Enrique Sam Colop, in *Parallel Worlds*). What if all studies of Chaucer or Shakespeare were to be carried out without the participation of native English speakers?

Given that the decipherment and interpretation of indigenous texts consists of “fitting” possible readings and applying them in different contexts (including wordplay or so-called rebus writing), knowledge of the language in question is a *sine qua non*. Native speakers and cultural participants are in a privileged position to explore meanings and connotations of the signs, terms, and concepts of ancient texts. They may recognize specific elements of material culture or the landscape that are crucial for their identification in images or hieroglyphic signs. The same is true for the identification of technical terms, religious concepts, and material culture.

A consequence of the structural exclusion of indigenous experts is that it not only impoverishes the interpretive process, it also leads to the ongoing presence of a colonial gaze. Modern scholarly texts are—often explicitly—written for Western (academic) audiences. Their perspective, terminology, and choice of topics are mostly influenced by Western points of view. They may even reproduce and follow the discriminatory language and presuppositions of the colonial sources (for example, in the archaeological designation of figurines as “idols”). This “othering” is particularly manifest in the emphasis on exotic and sensationalist themes, such as human sacrifice, magic, exorcisms, shamanism, myth, and mystery. In a similar vein, the idea that the ancient texts and works of art were mainly focusing on the legitimation of power seems to be inspired by modern Western ideological interests.

This leads to a widening gap between the (outsider) researchers and the peoples in question, a gap that, on the one hand, may create misunderstandings and false images and, on the other, may alienate descendant communities from their heritage—all the more so when colonial mentalities underlying the history and practice of research are not questioned. Equal participation of indigenous colleagues, experts, and students is, therefore, indispensable in both ethical and scholarly terms. This is not a plea for just introducing a more emic approach, or for involving more “indigenous informants” or “mining” the present for data to illuminate the past. This is about the empowerment of indigenous peoples, about indigenous experts regaining access to and control over their heritage and thus contributing actively to the whole research and interpretation process. Decolonizing methodology will create a better understanding of cultural-linguistic heritage and will situate its value for descendant communities at the center of our attention.⁹

9. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999); Manuel Ríos Morales, “Béné Wha Lhall, Béné Lo Ya’a: Identidad y etnicidad en la Sierra Norte Zapoteca de Oaxaca” (PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 2011).