**Indigenous Cultural Survival: Resistance, Adaptation, & Continuity**

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**Unit Overview**

This four-week unit, designed for high school seniors, will focus on one of distinguished historian Matthew Restall’s seven myths of the Spanish Conquest, the myth of native desolation. According to this myth, Spanish societal introductions and religious conversion efforts during the seizure of power and emerging colonial period completely destroyed indigenous cultures–their religions, heritage, and customs. This unit will try to debunk this myth by highlighting examples of native cultural survival and retention of traditions across Mesoamerica, with special attention to the Nahuas of central Mexico, the Zapotecs and Mixtecs of Oaxaca, and the Mayas of the Yucatan.

**Learning Objectives**

* To learn about the rich cultural traditions and customs of the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica (i.e. Nahuas, Mixtecs, Zapotecs, Yucatec Maya, etc.).
* To read indigenous-authored manuscripts from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries that contain both pictorial and textual elements.
* To demonstrate how various Mesoamerican cultures preserved their culture, heritage, and traditions in the face of Spanish colonization and oppression.

**Unit Themes**

* Myth vs. History: how memory and myth become intertwined in the history-making process (i.e. Omens in Book 12 of the Florentine Codex)
* Religious Syncretism: the infusion of Mesoamerican religious beliefs into European Christianity and culture
* Resistance vs. Accommodation: how the natives both opposed and adapted to Spanish cultural and religious introductions
* Double Mistaken Identity: how both sides of the cultural exchange (Nahua and Spanish) perceived certain concepts, forms, and objects quite differently, yet in a way that was moderately acceptable to both parties (e.g. Nahuatl theater plays)
* Gender roles: how both men and women share complementary roles in the success of the modern pueblo or state

**Week 1, Early Encounters:   
Narratives of Violence, Conquest, and Colonization**

**Overview**

Week 1 will first examine various pre-contact indigenous cultures across Mesoamerica (divided into two groups: sedentary and semi-sedentary), and contrast their differing response to the arrival of the Europeans. The central focus will be on how various indigenous cultures preserved their customs in the face of Spanish colonization. Second, we will explore who the conquistadors were, what they accomplished, how they did it, and how they thought and felt and behaved. Integrating new findings from ethnohistory, we will explore indigenous views of the Spanish invaders, and analyze how the conquistadors were part of a larger process of exploration, invasion, conquest, and destruction.

**Topics/Exercises**

* Pictorial codices: Excerpts from Esther Jacob, *Cómo leer un códice*. We will examine how these documents not only served as expressions of art, history, and memory, but also assertions of political legitimacy, community pride, and devotion to sacred powers. During class, students will be asked to decipher a series of pictorial manuscripts pertaining to: human origins, tributes/trade, calendar, herbal remedies, history, cartography, migrations, land measurements, genealogy, ceremonial/religious, etc. Next, students will be required to mimic the style of traditional indigenous painters by retelling a story of the Spanish Conquest from the perspective of an indigenous group in Mesoamerica (Tlaxcalans, Aztecs, or Zapotecs), such as, the Meeting of Montezuma and Cortés, the Siege of Tenochtitlan, or La Noche Triste. This is an in-class exercise and will not be graded.
* Indigenous-authored texts: Students will analyze Book Twelve of the *General History of the Things of New Spain* (generally referred to as the Florentine Codex) in class to see how memory and myth become intertwined in the process of historical documentation. The Florentine Codex was an encyclopedic history of Nahua culture organized by Franciscan friar and ethnographer Bernardino de Sahagún between 1545 and 1575. Under Sahagún’s supervision, the text was compiled in partnership with elders (*principales*) from a number of towns in Central Mexico as well asNahua students from the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco. This school was established in the 1530’s in order to prepare Indian youth (exclusively those of the elite class) for living a Christian life, and, for some, to enter the priesthood. The compilation process required two steps: the *principales* firstanswered questionnaires about their culture and religion, which was recorded in their own pictorial form of writing. Sahagún’s Nahua students would then interpret the images and expand the answers, phonetically transcribing Nahuatl using the Latin alphabet.
* Sample Glyph Deciphering: Students will be given handouts of Maya and Nahua glyphs (e.g. Nahua Glyph Counting and Aztecs glyphs from the Codex Mendoza). This is an in-class exercise and will not be graded (handouts courtesy of Professor Stephanie Wood).

**Required Readings**

* Matthew Restall and Kris Lane, *Latin America in Colonial Times* (2011): Chapter 5, “Native American Empires” (pp. 67-82)
* Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (2003): Introduction andChapter’s 1-2, & 6.
* Richard E. Blanton, *Ancient Oaxaca: The Monte Albán State* (1999): Chapter 3, pp. 48-67.
* Mesolore: Read pages on *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* <http://mesolore.org/viewer/view/2/Lienzo-de-Tlaxcala> **AND** <http://mesolore.org/tutorials/learn/19/Introduction-to-the-Lienzo-de-Tlaxcala>. The Lienzo de Tlaxcala demonstrates how the Spanish invasion would hardly have been possible without the support of indigenous agents throughout Mesoamerica (i.e. the Tlaxcalans) who supplied the Spanish with tens of thousands of native warriors as well as countless noncombatant auxiliaries, such as native guides, spies, messengers, translators, porters, and cooks. The *lienzo* challenges traditional narratives that portray natives as supplementary forces, rather than conquistadors in their own right.

**Recommended Readings**

Conquest/ Colonization:

Blanton, Richard E. Ancient Oaxaca: The Monte Albán State. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge

University Press, 1999.

Carrasco, Davíd. Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec

Tradition. University Press of Colorado, 2001.

Florescano, Enrique. The Myth of Quetzalcoatl. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press,

1999.

Matthew, Laura E. & Oudijk, Michel R. Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the

Conquest of Mesoamerica. University of Oklahoma Press, 2007.

Restall, Matthew. Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest. Oxford University Press, 2003.

Schwartz, Stuart B. Victors and Vanquished: Spanish and Nahua Views of the Conquest of

Mexico. Beford/St. Martin’s, 2000.

Spores, Ronald., Balkansky, Andrew K. The Mixtecs of Oaxaca: Ancient Times to the Present:

(The Civilization of the American Indian Series). University of Oklahoma Press, 2013.

Pictorial Codices:

Boone, Elizabeth Hill. Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000.

Wood, Stephanie. Transcending Conquest: Nahua Views of Spanish Colonial Mexico.

University of Oklahoma Press, 2003.

**Week 2: Colonial Mexico: Religion, Conversion, and Consolidation**

**Overview**

Week 2 will emphasize the frustrations of the evangelists in converting the indigenous populations to Christianity. One of the biggest complaints from the friars was that the natives continued to worship pre-Hispanic idols in secret. Perhaps even more threatening to the evangelizing project was the native association of pre-Hispanic deities with Christian saints. For instance, Mary’s mother, Saint Anne, was sometimes associated with the goddess Toci, “Our Grandmother.” Saint John the Baptist was associated with water deity, Tlaloc (given that Saint John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the River Jordan and his feast day fell on the beginning of the rainy season). This resistance to conversion as well as the association of deities to saints significantly thwarted the friars’ evangelizing mission. This week we will explore what led indigenous people to accept or resist evangelization, how the native people re-evoked pre-Hispanic cosmology in Christian teachings, and the kinds of social conflict that the friars’ preaching provoked in the *altepetl*.

**Topics/Exercises**

* In-class Reading/Presentation of Burkhart: Students in groups of 4 to 5 will choose one play from the Burkhart reading (one that is not already in the “Required Readings” for this week) to act out in class. This will be followed up by a group discussion that analyzes the content and themes of the selection.
* Mesoamerican Religion: Brief discussion on Mesoamerican cosmology, or the way the world, the underworld, and the heavens were conceived, and the place of deities and humans within those realms.
* Evangelization: Students will be introduced to the different ways that various Mesoamerican cultures preserved their religious beliefs in the face of Spanish evangelization. Special attention will be given to the theme of religious syncretism.

**Required Readings**

* David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica* (1998): Chapter 1, Approaching Mesoamerican Religions (pp. 1-23)
* Louise Burkhart, *Aztecs on Stage* (2011): *Introduction* (pp. 3-30), *The Nobleman and his Barren Wife* (pp. 39-58), *Final Judgment* (pp. 59-78), and *Virgin Saint Mary of Guadalupe* (pp. 145-176).
* Note: Focus on examples of religious syncretism and the preservation of native cultural beliefs in the selection of plays, that is, the aspects of indigenous culture that are visible in these documents.
* **Homework Assignment:** Can you identify elements of these works that you would call “syncretic” or culturally mixed? Which cultural element seems to be more predominant, Spanish or Nahua? Were dramatic performances a site of indigenous agency?  Be sure to come to class prepared to share your thoughts.

**Assignment**

* Creative Writing Piece/Theater Performance: At the end of Week 2, write (and act out) a brief scene for a Nahua play dealing with Christian marriage and the proper relations between husbands and wives. Try to incorporate words and elements that Nahua audiences might have been familiar with, or that they may have interpreted differently than European audiences. The written portion of this assignment should be 2-3 pages in length (double-spaced). The oral presentation should be between 5 and 10 minutes (aims to fulfill oral and writing proficiency requirements).

**Recommended Readings**

Arts, Religion, & Theater:

Burkhart, Louise M., Sell, Barry D., Poole Stafford. Aztecs on Stage: Religious Theater in

Colonial Mexico. University of Oklahoma Press, 2011.

Cope, Robert Douglas. The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebeian Society in Colonial Mexico

City, 1660-1720*.* University of Wisconsin Press, 1994.

Dalton Palomo, Margarita, and Verónica Loera y Chávez, eds. Historia del arte de Oaxaca. Arte

prehispánico / Colonia y siglo XIX. 2 vols. Oaxaca, Mexico: Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Culturas, Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca, 1997.

Fuente, Beatriz de la, ed. La pintura mural pre-Hispánica en México: Oaxaca. 4 vols. Mexico

City: Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2005–2008.

Katz, Friedrich. Riot, Rebellion, and Revolution: Rural Social Conflict in Mexico. Princeton

University Press, 1988.

Schroeder, Susan, and Stafford Poole. Religion in New Spain. Albuquerque: University of New

Mexico Press, 2007.

**\*\* Students submit Creative Writing Piece**

**Week 3: Modern Mexico: Adaptation & Continuity**

**Overview**

Week 3 will highlight examples of Mesoamerican customs and traditions that developed in the pre-Hispanic period and that have survived to this day, such as the Pelota Mixteca (Mixtec ball game), Guelaguetza celebration, among others. The purpose is to acknowledge the resilience and determination of the people of Mesoamerica—over the course of several centuries—to preserve their rich culture, despite the deliberate and unwitting destruction wrought by the Conquest (deliberate destruction refers to the violence inflicted against native populations, and unwitting destruction alludes to the multifarious diseases transmitted by Europeans).

**Topics**

* Pre-Hispanic Ball Game: The Ball Game was one of the most important elements in the urban structure of Mesoamerican society, and was directly linked to political and religious power. In this sense, it was not simply for recreation, nor for exercise, but rather to evoke and recreate beliefs about “el Tiempo Sagrado” (Sacred Time). The pre-Hispanic Ball Game was played with a rubber ball that was hit with different parts of the body (hips and buttocks, but not the hands–although modern variations do so), and was loaded with religious and cosmic symbolism. Several hypotheses indicate that the ball court itself was supposed to represent the sky, whereas the rotation of the rubber ball symbolized the passing of the sun—and perhaps the moon. Besides having an astral significance, the game was also believed to be a ritual for the fertility of the land and a ceremony for elite warriors. It may have helped settle disputes. Interestingly, participants faced dual entities: life and death (the game could be quite dangerous), day and night (represented by the rotation of the ball). \*\***See** Justin Kerr’s Mayavase Database ANDLeobardo Daniel Pacheco Arias’ presentation on Pelota Mixteca for a more in-depth introduction.
* Celebrations: (Guelaguetza) The Guelaguetza celebration pre-dates the arrival of the Spaniards and remains a defining characteristic of Oaxacan culture. In modern-day Oaxaca, indigenous communities throughout the state gather at the Guelaguetza to celebrate with dancing, music, costumes, and food. Of course, each of these celebratory components has its own indigenous influences. **Show blog** with pictures from the Guelaguetza: <http://alisonanddon.com/2013/09/18/mexico-part-8-oaxaca-and-the-guelaguetza-festival/>
* Food: Discuss the material and cosmic significance of chocolate, maize, chili peppers, and maguey throughout Mesoamerica (with special attention to Oaxaca) both past and present. For example, in ancient Mesoamerica, the cacao bean was not only used to produce chocolate—a luxury beverage for the elite class, but also used as a form of currency—perhaps to make a payment (for tribute) or settle a debt. The maguey plant is equally important, and has been cultivated for millennia by the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica for a variety of purposes (i.e. to produce tequila, mezcal, and pulque [an alcoholic beverage of the ancient Aztecs], to make fabric and clothing, and also for medicinal purposes). The importance of corn cannot be overstated. Its significance dates back to pre-Hispanic times and occupies a central part of Mesoamerican religion, culture and society. For instance, the Mayan creation story, the Popol Vuh, tells the tale of the creation of humans from corn dough. To this day, maize and tortilla production constitute a huge component of Mexico’s food culture.
* Markets: When the Spaniards first set eyes on the city of Tenochtitlan in 1519, they marveled at its size and the sophistication of the city. One of the defining features that greatly impressed the Spaniards were the huge market places where the residents sold basic and luxury items, including jade, cacao, and woven goods. What was especially bewildering to the Spaniards was the prominent role of women venders in the marketplace. As we have seen in Oaxaca, this tradition continues to this day. **In-class film viewing** of “Blossoms of Fire” (2000) by Maureen Gosling and Ellen Osbourne for an insightful look into the dominant role of women in the markets in Juchitán, a city in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Some important themes include gender relations, women and the economy, and political empowerment. Afterwards, a **brief presentation** on the weaving cooperative at Teotitlán del Valle.

**\*\* Students submit Book Report**

**Required Readings**

* Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik, *The World That Trade Created* (2012): 1.7 “Aztec Traders” (pp. 29-31), 3.1 “Chocolate: From Coin to Commodity” (pp. 86-88), 4.5 “Beautiful Bugs” (pp. 126-129). **\*\*Visit page “**Cacti and Cochineal”: <http://blogs.uoregon.edu/mesoinstitute/about/curriculum-unit-development/stem/ethnobotany/cochineal/>
* Dreiss and Greenhill, *Chocolate: Pathway to the Gods*: Introduction and Chapter 1, “Chocolate and the Supernatural Realm: Food of the Gods” (pp. 3-40)
* Mark Cartwright, “The Ball Game of Mesoamerica” (2013): <http://www.ancient.eu/article/604/>

**Assignment**

* Book Report/Oral Presentation: At the end of Week 3, students will be required to select one of the primary or secondary source texts in the “Recommended Readings” section of this syllabus. Readings are divided into four central topics (Conquest & Colonization, Pictorial Codices & Pre-Hispanic Ballgame, Arts, Religion, & Theater, and Food & Celebrations). Although students are encouraged to choose a topic that suits their historical interests, the teacher must first approve the selected work. At the end of the term, students will submit a written review of the selected book, that is, a critical review of the text that both summarizes *and* analyzes the selection (2-3 pages). During the final week of the unit, each student will give a brief, 5-10 minute oral presentation on their selected text (aims to fulfill written and oral proficiency requirements).

**Additional Readings**

Pre-Hispanic Ballgame:

Borhegyi, Stephan F. de. “Pre-Columbian Ball-Game Handstones: Rejoinder to Clune.” In

*American Antiquity* Vol. 30, No. 1 (Society for American Archaeology, 1964) pp. 84-86.

Accessed: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/277635>.

Tokovinine, Alexandre. The Royal Ballgame of the Ancient Maya. Mayavase Database.

<http://www.mayavase.com/alex/alexballgame.html>

Food & Celebrations:

Arqueología Mexicana. El Cacao…Un Fruto Asombroso…y el Chocolate El Sabor Mexicano

del Mundo. Edición Especial 45.

Benz, Bruce, and Staller, John, and Tykot, Robert. Histories of Maize in Mesoamerica:

Multidisciplinary Approaches. Left Coast Press, 2010.

Dreiss, Meredith L., and Greenhill, Sharon E. Chocolate: Pathway to the Gods. University of

Arizona Press, 2008.

Pomeranz, Kenneth and Topik, Steven. The World That Trade Created: Society, Culture and the

World Economy, 1400 to the Present. Routledge; 3rd edition, 2012.

Staller, John, and Carrasco, Michael. Pre-Columbian Foodways: Interdisciplinary Approaches to

Food, Culture, and Markets in Ancient Mesoamerica. Springer, 2009.

**Week 4: Final Projects and Exam**

Monday: Oral Presentations on Conquest & Colonization

Tuesday: Presentations on Pictorial Codices **AND** Pre-Hispanic Ballgame

Wednesday: Presentations on Arts, Religion, & Theater **AND** Food & Celebrations

Thursday: Reading Day

Friday: **\*\*Final Exam**: Format for this exam includes 25 Multiple Choice Questions (25%), 5 Identification Questions–Who, what, when, why, significance (25%), and 2 Short Essays (25% each). Additional information will be provided at the beginning of Week 4.