

When Parallels Cross: Finding the Colonial Woman's Story

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Introduction

Ever since the civil rights movement, the notion of what constitutes history worth writing about has changed significantly. The mold of the white male elite narrative shattered and so began an exploration into other stories. This allowed women's histories, the histories of native peoples, of the common man, the conquered, and other marginalized groups come to light. However, the development of these sub-fields of history was a process over time. The lens of history always starts to focus slowly and still investigates the stories that are most visible first. Take for example the history of the women of Colonial Mexico, initially historians researched the perspectives and roles of Spanish women during the colonial period while the scholars of the New Philology, a school based around native language writings, investigated the aspects and functions of the indigenous peoples of Mexico both before and after the conquest. These fields did not overlap at first, leaving indigenous women unexplored by both schools of research, like a point in-between two parallel lines. By the 1990's however, these schools crossed and historians began to paint more complete portraits of the lives of colonial Mexican Spanish and indigenous women and how Spanish patriarchy impacted the aspects of their roles and privileges.

This historiography is intended to explore and narrate the breakthroughs that lead to this development and how we came to understand the conditions of indigenous women in colonial Mexico. While the studies pre-dating the New Philology do shed some light on the roles of Spanish women and the system of patriarchy that Spain's conquest introduced, it is not until historians begin to examine native language documents on the nature of pre-colonial Mesoamerican gender systems that we begin to understand both the changes and continuities that the colonial system brought to indigenous the women in colonial Mexico.

The 80's, Honor, Patriarchy, and the Usual Suspects

In the late 1980's historians researched the Spanish women of colonial Mexico. Due to the nature of the most visible documents, this field of research

gravitated straight to the top because the records of Spanish noble women are the most accessible. As in any male-centric culture, to understand Spanish women's history it is imperative to understand the nature of a society's patriarchy. Honor was the social manifestation and enforcer of patriarchy for the elite in medieval and colonial Spain. This system entirely defined the social, legal, and economic rights and expectations of the highest classes of women. Many women's historians of the late 1980's, therefore, used research on the context of honor to understand the patriarchal world of the elite Spanish woman further.

Among the earlier works include Patricia Seed's article on the value of a woman's testimony in 1988. In the work Seed looks at the position women were put in when their medieval system of honor began to erode in an ever-modernizing world. She started by defining the honor system in the context:

“Honor stemmed from either superior birth or moral integrity. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in Spain as well as in Spain's colonies, honor primarily signified moral integrity. For women in colonial Mexico, this dimension of honor meant premarital chastity and post-marital fidelity; for men, it meant courage and fidelity to promise made.”^[1]

Seed then gives examples from Spanish primary sources to illustrate that this system of honor, while patriarchal, proved as a potent force for noblemen to abide by their promises of marriage in the 16th and 17th centuries. The prestige gained from holding honor and the stigma of breaking it kept intact the value of a woman's testimony and both gave some social acceptability to pre-marital sex done on the grounds of future marriage promises as well as preventing men from doing such acts on false pretenses. The value of this testimony then began to be devalued as a capitalist society began to take hold. No amount of honor could match the prestige gained from family inheritance, and thus a man could make a false promise of marriage to have intercourse and then entirely ignore it with no repercussions for himself.^[2] Women in this period found themselves effectively trapped to uphold a medieval system that the world around them no longer valued for men.

Ann Twinam also conducted a study of the nature of honor for understanding the position of Spanish noble women in Colonial Mexico. One chapter in her anthology on Marriage and Sexuality of this period goes into some full depth on its fluidity. In her study from church documents, in the chapter Honor, Sexuality, and Illegitimacy, she looks at the aspects of a noblewoman's honor that have exploitable ambiguities to their advantage. Through quantitative use of the rate of petitions of bastards for *gracias a sacar*, a writ of legitimacy

from the Council of Indies, and the number of “private pregnancies” from church records as well as the diaries of noblewomen, this article looks at the way women worked around the dying system of honor when they broke it to their benefit.^[3] These methods included ad hoc marriages in the best-case-scenario to keeping the pregnancy secret and raising the child as “an adopted orphan” after a pre- or extramarital affair. The work concludes by comparing race to honor in this setting, something never clear cut, that had options for mobility even to “offenders” and their offspring especially during the 18th-century.^[4] This chapter thus expands on her predecessor to fully understand what leeway the elite Spanish woman had in this patriarchal system.

Finally, historians, Cook and Cook assembled a portrait of honor, marriage, and patriarchy of Spanish women in *Good Faith and Truthful Ignorance*. It is told in narrative form and gives us some perspective on how much power the honor system held fear and control over Spanish noblewomen. Our story takes place in the 16th century in both Peru and across the Atlantic in Spain. It tells of a young conquistador, Don Francisco Noguero de Ulloa, who promises to marry a noblewoman in Spain before leaving for Peru, then learns from his fiancé’s sisters that she is dead. After some success in the war against his peers, he promptly weds a wealthy widow. The trouble occurs when the promised first wife to be, Dona Beatriz de Villasur is still very much alive. Her honor and pledged estate are now in jeopardy of being lost, and she sues for what she is owed. At the same time, his new wife also has her honor at stake and fights to have it upheld. Upon arrival home, Francisco is immediately jailed for bigamy (as well as silver smuggling) but holds his actions were done with honorable intent until the pope himself clears him of his troubles by allowing him to remain with his second wife.^[5] The struggle and genuine jeopardy this situation places the women in exemplifies the importance of honor to a noblewoman of early modern Spain. They set their reputations and even their lives on merely the promise of marriage and employed the law to see it protected.

Historians looking into Spanish women set out to understand the nature of Spanish patriarchy and all roads lead them to honor. Honor stemming from family and sexual virtue determined social mobility as well as closed it out. Even as economic change slowly killed woman’s protections under honor, society still held women of noble birth to its expectations. Honor manifested as the social enforcer of the patriarchy for these women. Understanding this gender system would be imperative for future women’s historians when understanding the patriarchal legacy Spain carried to all women of colonial Mexico, including women not of Iberian descent. This system of honor is only half the story to colonial Mexico. Historians could not full understand the

position of women in this setting until they were able to understand the gender systems that Spanish patriarchy would blend into.

The Early 90's, The New Philology and Parallelism

At roughly the same time as women's historians were trying to gain a female perspective of the colonial period, the scholars of the New Philology were working with anthropologists and art historians to find stories of the conquered peoples through their languages. This method limited itself to Meso-America as it was the only civilization in the Americas to have a system of writing before the invasion of Europeans. This system allowed historians to understand both pre-contact lives and how Europeans both caused changes and permitted continuities. These works were revolutionary for understanding native perspectives and would employ a vast number of primary sources such as letters, church records, deeds and land grants, to find as much as possible about both pre-Columbian and colonial Mexico.

A significant watershed work of this school is James Lockhart's *The Nahuas After the Conquest*. This work applies the concepts of the New Philology to almost every aspect of Nahua life to argue that while the Spanish introduced many shifts, no elements totally changed nor remained exactly the same. Lockhart uses this to better understand the structure of the *altepetl* community system, the organization of agricultural land use and distribution, the very nature of words and grammar and a myriad of other topics as they all evolve during the colonial period.^[6] This work is a significant example of just how much the New Philology had opened the gates for native histories. However, one subject missing from Lockheart's work is gender. Perhaps the greatest irony of this era is that despite being a comprehensive take on the lives of the native society there are no direct segments on the roles of women. These parallel studies left the stories of native women in awkward darkness; covered by neither the advancements in women's history nor indigenous history. Lockheart's student successors would be the ones to bring this subject to light.

In the mid 90's historians began to apply the New Philology to Nahua women and finally began to get a bearing on the roles of women in pre and post-conquest Mexico. The gender system of parallelism put a roughly equal value on the actions of women but still could not be considered entirely egalitarian. Susan Kellogg's work, "A Woman's Room" skillfully applies and defines parallelism.^[7] She argues that the world of the pre-Columbian Mexica (and by extension its' neighboring subject states) were in no way egalitarian. In her own words:

“The concept refers to parallel social structures and cultural configurations for males and females. However, gender parallelism does not connote equality.”^[8]

This system put a value on the services of a woman, from housework to childbirth to the grinding of corn, and recognized that value to be comparable to the duties and services of men. In her article, she applies this to administration, religious, economic, and legal roles.

In administration, although there were few paramount leaders, the wives of *tlatoani*, the highest public rulers, held legally recognized and respected authority.^[9] Similarly there were many semi-political/religious posts women of the upper classes could hold, such as the *ichpochtlayacanqui*, an authority of the actions of young women, capable of giving punishments for misdeeds similarly to her male equivalent.^[10] Although these did give women some recognition and authority, the limits to a women’s role scaled higher towards the top. Beyond that Kellogg applies parallelism to the spheres of religion. *Chihuahualamacazque* and *Chihaucauchiltin*, junior and elder priestesses, held similar powers to their male counterparts though not quite as long.^[11] Through this concept, this work gives historians a far greater sense of the roles of women in native Mexico’s power structure and daily life.

Susan Schroder’s work *The First American Valentine* also helped bridge the two studies of women’s history and native histories. This work uses Chimalpahin’s accounts of Huitzilihuitl’s wife in comparison to the legend of Saint Valentine to understand the Mexica values of motherhood, sexuality, marriage, and family. Schroder uses the work to show how the Mexica valued fidelity and fertility in women, built their family system around the capoli and built their rulers’ thrones with both members of the marriage facing one another.^[12] The virtues for women Schroder points out and the way the society celebrates women for their roles with their roles line up with the ideas of parallelism. Perhaps more so than the last study this presents parallelism in practice through the pre-conquest period by placing not only expectations on women, but by setting a value on what labor they produced as mothers and loyal wives. These works were breakthroughs for colonial research despite being centered on pre-Columbian life. We find women being held in worth, not on entirely equal levels but their society held their roles in reverence. Be it sweeping or reproduction women gained respect through being virtuous in their duties. Kellogg even presents examples of them holding positions of power in a litany of spheres. Schroder explored what was valued and expected of a woman in Chimalpahin’s accounts. Interestingly one finds similarities in both the Native and Spanish systems of gender, as both value fidelity of both partners (albeit more strongly for women in the Spanish case) and this cross

point would decide many cases between the two cultures. While not entirely equal, the valued roles and freedoms held by native women created many political and legal waves when the Spanish overlords took power. By understanding the context of women's roles, what power they held and the value placed on what they did, the door opened for scholars to research the ways this system shifted and held the same during and after Spanish invasion.

Colonial Research: Putting It All Together

Once historians understood both the pre-colonial Mexica gender system and Spanish patriarchy, scholars could finally look into how hispanization both caused changes and continuities when the two met. Furthermore, there were discoveries into how the native women caught themselves at an especially difficult intersection of both race and gender.

Consider Kevin Terracciano's analysis of a Mixtec murder letter and trial from 17th century Oaxaca. The murderer used his native language to justify killing his wife on the grounds of unfaithfulness. Terracciano compares the stances of both cultures on adultery, Native and Spanish. The former frequently prescribed both offending genders death sentences including but not limited to being burned over chili peppers, stoning and hanging. While Spanish courts also held the act in disdain, they seldom even gave divorces for infidelity and as previously viewed by the woman's histories, the accuser and the accused suffered mainly de facto punishments of shame.^[13] Terracciano suggests that perhaps by the fact that on no grounds did the community acquit the murder that Spanish ideas of patriarchy had already influenced the natives. Spanish viewed that women should not be subjected to violent physical punishments to some degree, at least in the de jure sphere. This claim is also backed up by a change from the fact that less than a century earlier, still within the colonial period, adultery could be sentenced with hard labor or whippings presenting an arguably "intermediate" zone for the custom of law and order for a woman breaking her role.^[14] Terracciano's analysis then goes on to other factors such as grammar and local justice but what is relevant to our subject is that fact that Spanish colonial rule caused changes and allowed continuities within the native system of gender roles for women at the time.

Another case of the two worlds colliding with each other is present in one of Robert Hasket's works: an analysis of the accounts of Dona Josefa Maria of Tepoztlan. Maria persistently spoke out against Spanish institutions and for this both her and her faction were held in high disdain from their overlords and peers alike. A charge placed on her of an affair with a local man may be an example of a blend of gender systems.^[15] Whether or not this was the case,

Schroder uses the case to reflect on how the societies value of a woman had changed over time. The work calls back on the Florentine Codex, a 16th-century study into native texts in Nahua, to call upon what defined a “good” female noble in the traditional society and points out that both indigenous and Spanish systems of gender expect women to be largely chaste.^[16] There is also a callback to the days wherein women in indigenous culture were able to hold power, referencing the work of Kellogg before her^[17]. Schroder also implies that the Spanish strategically chose this charge of adultery as it focused on what both societies valued to win over native factions who were indifferent to her political views but would be outraged by her alleged lack of character. Thus this work rather elegantly defines the changes and continuities for a Natchaa woman during this period. Spanish rule did not unhinge the ideals of female sexual fidelity and modesty, but it did introduce a system that did not enjoy an “upstart” woman with political power.

The takeaway of these works is that without the investigation to understand the original pre-colonial gender systems of the Nahuas, neither of these works would be able to capture the real context of these events. Historians who assumed that all native people held women as equal would not understand why the peers of Josefa would turn on her over such a crime as adultery nor why the Mixtec courts would care that a man used adultery to justify his murder. The research into parallelism lets us have a transparent sheet to understand the full effect that the Spanish patriarchy had on the women of Mexico.

Conclusion

Understanding the positions of colonial Mexico through a female perspective is daunting. The story of colonial Mexico was one of two worlds colliding but because the civilizations shared many similar concepts one world never totally swallowed the other. A historian needs to understand the backgrounds of women in both societies to fully understand the final result. This in turn made it difficult to understand how Spanish gender systems shaped the people of Mexico, and how the native gender system shaped Spanish patriarchy. When historians began to capture the stories of women in the colonial period of Mexico, they looked into the patriarchy’s nature as it applied to the most visible women, the elite of the Spanish. When historians poured through the native text to understand the society of the conquered they only looked at the more visible gender, men. However, when historians were able to put the tools gained from both fields into context, they were able to discern how the Spanish patriarchal systems both introduced new concepts to the native

peoples but also held intact many shared concepts of the roles and expectations of women.

This historiographical journey has presented a lesson in how even the most progressive-minded historical schools cannot reach a whole story at once. So perhaps the more significant lesson here is that of intersectionality. This wave of historians must always be looking for the next less visible group in a historical group to find insight into societies of the past and be open to using the methods of other historical schools to look into them. The people of a society are seldom isolated groups and as time passes the only way we can ever get a true picture of a culture as a whole is to understand all the groups that make up the sum of its parts.

Endnotes

[1] Patricia Seed. "Marriage Promises and the Value of a Woman's Testimony in Colonial Mexico." *Signs* 13, no. 2 (1988): 254.

[2] Seed. 276.

[3] Ann Twinam. "Sexualidad Y Matrimonio En La América Hispánica", Siglos XVI-XVIII. Edited by Asuncion Lavrin, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1989). 122.

[4] Twiniam, 148.

[5] Alexandra and Noble Cook. "Good Faith and Truthful Ignorance", Durham: Duke University Press 1991.

[6] James Lockhart, "The Nahuas After the Conquest", (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

[7] Susan Kellogg, "The Woman's Room: Some Aspects of Gender Relations in Tenochtitlan in the Late Pre-Hispanic Period," *Ethnohistory* 42, no. 4 (1995).

[8] Kellogg, 564.

[9] Kellogg, 565.

[10] Kellogg, 566.

[11] Kellogg, 568.

^[12]Susan Schroder, "The First American Valentine: Nahuatl Courtship and Other Aspects of Family Structuring in Mesoamerica" *Journal of Family History* Vol 23, Issue 4, pp. 344

^[13] Kevin Terraciano, "Crime and Culture in Colonial Mexico: The Case of the Mixtec Murder Note," *Ethnohistory* 45, no. 4 (1998): 725.

^[14] Terraciano, 737.

^[15]Haskett, Robert. "Dona Josefa Maria: Activist or Adulteress?" In *Indian Women of Early Mexico*, edited by Schroeder, Susan., Stephanie Gail Wood, and Robert Stephen Haskett. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997.

^[16] Haskett, 158.

^[17] Haskett, 159.

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