How indigenous manuscripts and rituals preserved a people’s identity, history, and memory in the face of conquest

Euro-Americans see the Spanish conquest as the main event in the five-century history of Mesoamerica, but the people who lived there before contact never gave up their own cultures. Both before and after conquest, indigenous scribes recorded their communities’ histories and belief systems, as well as the events of conquest and its effects and aftermath. Today, the descendants of those native historians in modern-day Mexico and Guatemala still remember their ancestors’ stories. In Mesoamerican Memory, volume editors Amos Megged and Stephanie Wood have gathered the latest scholarship from contributors around the world to compare these various memories and explore how they were preserved and altered over time.

Rather than dividing Mesoamerica’s past into pre-contact, colonial, and modern periods, the essays in this volume emphasize continuity from the pre-conquest era to the present, underscoring the ongoing importance of indigenous texts in creating and preserving community identity, history, and memory. In addition to Nahua and Maya recollections, contributors examine the indigenous traditions of Mixtec, Zapotec, Tarascan, and Totonac peoples. Close analysis of pictorial and alphabetic manuscripts, and of social and religious rituals, yields insight into community history and memory, political relations, genealogy, ethnic identity, and portrayals of the Spanish invaders.

Drawing on archaeology, art history, ethnology, ethnohistory, and linguistics, the essays consider the function of manuscripts and ritual in local, regional, and, now, national settings. Several scholars highlight direct connections between the collective memory of indigenous communities and the struggles of contemporary groups. Such modern documents as land titles, for example, gain legitimacy by referring to ancestral memory.

Crossing disciplinary, methodological, and temporal boundaries, Mesoamerican Memory advances our understanding of collective memory in Mexico and Guatemala. Through diverse sources—pictorial and alphabetic, archaeological, archival, and ethnographic—readers gain a glimpse into indigenous remembrances that, without the research exhibited here, might have remained unknown to the outside world.

Amos Megged is author of Social Memory in Ancient and Colonial Mesoamerica. Stephanie Wood is author of Transcending Conquest: Nahua Views of Spanish Colonial Mexico.