

# Introduction: Colonial Mesoamerican Literacy

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Kathryn E. Sampeck, *Illinois State University*

Two longstanding literate worlds, Spanish and Mesoamerican, met and remade each other as part of colonial encounters. The 2012 International Workshop on Indigenous Literacy in Mesoamerica and the Colonial World at the John Carter Brown Library (JCB) at Brown University hosted a diverse group of scholars to debate the social consequences of colonial Mesoamerican literacy. This issue of *Ethnohistory* is the result of that productive interaction. Comparing highland and lowland Mayan, Mixtec, central Mexican Nahuatl, and southern Nahua (Pipil) literacy from the Late Postclassic (AD 1200–1521) to the present day reveals commonalities as well as regional, and even individual, variation in the form, method, and consequences of literate practices. Investigating literacy allows us to move beyond debates about what constitutes writing per se and instead recognize that inscribing, no matter the method, was part of a sustaining environment of literacy that gave expressive practices their relevance and value in colonial Mesoamerica.

In his master chronicle of the history of Guatemala *Recordación Florida*, Francisco Antonio Fuentes y Guzmán (1972: 74) argued that writing in all its forms fulfilled a basic human need, that “la necesidad es madre de la humana industria” (necessity is the mother of human industry). While Fuentes’s philosophy was overly functionalist, he recognized the social place of reading, writing, and having texts—that is, literacy. Writing (communicating by inscribed marks) has seen more scholarly attention in the last decade or so, but the cultural context, consequences, and practice of literacy has garnered far less scholarly attention (Salomon and Hyland 2010). Considering literacy rather than writing systems opens a path to resolv-

ing some of the greater divides that have arisen in the definition of writing. While one approach for studying writing accepts a wide range of symbolic forms, such as quipus, textiles, and other notational or “semasiographic” symbol systems (e.g., Boone and Mignolo 1994), others define writing minimally as inscribed marks or, even more narrowly, as representation of utterances (Daniels and Bright 1996). Rather than view these as competing positions, the articles presented here illustrate how all of these kinds of symbolic communication are part of the matrix of literacy and how inscribed marks, gestures, spatial arrangement, and utterances relate discursively. In other words, inscribed marks do not exist in isolation but instead inhabit a sustaining environment of literacy that not only gives them relevance and value but also preserves, reinforces, and remembers. It allows analytic space to those people at the margins of literacy, who did not read or write inscribed marks but who nonetheless made literacy part of their lives and in fact sustained practices that colonial officials worked hard to obliterate. This collection of articles also broadens notions of canonical colonial writing by showing that even formulaic texts such as some kinds of *testamentos* (wills) were in fact variable and entrenched in local dialects and history. To consider whether expressive practices constitute writing per se overly narrows the realm of inquiry.

Authors in this issue first presented their papers in the workshop at the JCB 15–17 June 2012. The JCB cosponsored the event with the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and Illinois State University. A few of the papers from the workshop have already been published as a special section (dossier) in volume 55 of *Mesoamérica* (2013). In addition to the authors in the present issue and the *Mesoamérica* dossier, Laura Matthew (Marquette University), Caterina Pizzigoni (Columbia University), Sergio Quezada (Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán), Camilla Townsend (Rutgers University), and Stephanie Wood (University of Oregon) were invaluable participants in the workshop and many reviewed articles submitted to this issue. We also benefited from advice and writings of the late James Lockhart, who did much to contribute to the success of the event. The workshop spanned an intensive three days of discussion and included a viewing of rare imprints and manuscripts in the JCB Library collection organized by Ken Ward, the Maury A. Bromsen Curator of Latin American Books. In this scintillating intellectual environment, we dissected the role literacy played within the crucible of colonial transformation in Mesoamerica. This issue as a whole represents productive lines of inquiry that emerged from our debates.

Why focus on Mesoamerica? As Stephanie Wood noted, nowhere in the hemisphere but in Mesoamerica do we have such a massive produc-

tion of texts, and those texts give us an unparalleled view into indigenous voices and perspectives. From this point of view, an important part of the story of colonialism in the Americas is inextricably bound to literacy: who wrote, when, how much, for which audiences, and the consequences of writing, reading, and having texts. It is a perspective typically taken for granted when considering Europeans of the period, yet Mesoamericans were equally entrenched in literate practices. Despite the ubiquity of writing and reading throughout Mesoamerica, pan-regional comparisons are few. Even though most of the scholars at the workshop were aware of each other's work, many had not met before. The conversations sparked a series of insights that show the contrasts and commonalities within the region, the ways in which literacy permeated social life, and how literacy was such an important tool that it took on a life of its own. In many cases, the pen was the best defense against the sword, thwarting colonial desires and transforming those very institutions at the same time. A summary of several of the main themes below demonstrates that important insights about the history of literacy can be gleaned from understanding the rich legacy of one region well and that Mesoamerica is well understood by examining its literacy.

### Literacy in Mesoamerica: Writing Was Not a New Technology

The first essay in this issue, by Victoria Bricker, was also the keynote for the 2012 workshop. It set the stage for subsequent discussions in several ways. Bricker shows how to detect individual scribes by examining minor variations in formulaic passages. Pre-Columbian Maya scribes were part of the nobility. Evidence from Tekanto shows that some colonial scribes were likewise nobles, but others, who may or may not have been *almehenob* (nobility), took care of formulaic testaments. This suggests some specialization among scribes, and those differences show up in discontinuities in orthography and speech communities (see also Vail, this issue). The social life and relationships of the scribe and the degree of continuity in scribal families and guilds played into the ways in which they performed literacy, including, as Bricker shows, methods (orthography), the curation of texts such as the hidden documents guarded by maestros cantores (Chuchiak 2010; Hanks 2010), and even how those scribes are depicted—that is, the symbolic place of the scribe. For example, in the Códice Sierra Texupan, the scribe is depicted frontally, facing the reader, while tribute bearers and officials are in profile (Terraciano, this issue).

The scribe also shaped the political and social content of writing, even if done under the watchful eye of colonial officials. For example, place

names are in themselves distilled descriptions and histories of a locale and are often accumulative, much like other Mesoamerican texts, with Spanish names added to Nahua-, Maya-, or other Mesoamerican-language names. When at least some portion of pre-Columbian names persisted, they were an index of history, a past that was situated in land and memory. For these reasons, places often had multiple names, and which one an actor deployed was a political choice of which language, which histories to recognize. The degree to which these distilled texts were anthropomorphized varied: Nahua *altepetl* names crystallized the idea of the place but did not refer to a person, while K'iché town names occasionally were a person's name. The Spanish place-naming practice of appending saint's names to towns made colonization personal by using a person's name, effectively adding on the colonial experience to the condensed text of the place name.

Because writing, reading, and having texts was so thoroughly a part of the pre-Columbian Mesoamerican world, Mesoamericans encountered European alphabetic writing as a useful tool more than as a fundamentally new activity. In this respect, the articles of this issue and the others presented at the workshop demonstrated time and again the idea that alphabetic writing did *not* “tame the voice” of indigenous expression (Mignolo 1996: 294). William F. Hanks (this issue) discusses at length the utility of alphabetic writing, what he referred to during the workshop by the acronym “PRIUS”: alphabetic writing is *portable* (the skill of writing, through memorization and practice, as well as the physical texts), *reversible* (anything written can be spoken and vice versa), *iterable* (movement from writing to oral and oral to writing can be iterated in series), *universal* (anything in the language can be written), and *selective* (it abstracts a grapheme from the greater complexity of the acoustic stream). Mesoamericans took the tool of alphabetic writing and ran with it, such that each area, region, and even settlement had its own literate history.

In the Nahua world, the alphabet spread beyond specially trained priests (*tlacuiloque*) to something approaching a popular literacy. Even so, probably only a small percentage of the Nahua population could read, mostly elite males; even fewer could read pictographic writing (for Yucatec Maya, see Chuchiak 2010). While writing in various and at times combined forms occurred even in legal domains, writing itself was not a common, everyday thing. Literate practices that informed daily life occurred more in the realm of ceremonies, and common legal documents such as *títulos* (titles) become increasingly abundant, blossoming from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century.

From families to guilds of professionals, Mixtec, Maya, Nahua, and other authors developed ways of creating texts in forms not intended, both

within canonical genres, such as the recording of testaments (Bricker, this issue), and for subversive uses (e.g., George-Hirons, Hanks, Knowlton, all this issue) such as incantations. This inventive, politically and socially situated production and use of texts and writing triggered changes in canonical European genres as they were employed in the colonies, with decidedly Mesoamerican elements such as cartographic forms of land titles, poetic parallelism, and even numbers and kinds of witnesses all altering standard Spanish legal practices. This variation from the norm redirects our attention to the importance of peculiarities, as that is some of the best evidence that tinkering went on all the time (Bricker, Hanks, this issue) and that such tinkering shows a resourcefulness for implementing decidedly political agendas and resistance (George Hirons, Knowlton, Maxwell, all this issue) as well as individual expression (Bricker, this issue).

### Juxtaposing Writing Systems as a Dialogue

This question of canons and variations from them brings up another, related phenomenon: the side-by-side placement of inscriptions of different styles, such as writing in Mixtec, Spanish, and Nahuatl (Terraciano, this issue), in a single document necessarily and implicitly invites comparison. These different systems beg the question not only of *what* was canonical but of *whose* canon? Likewise, the juxtaposition of image and text, such as European-source depictions of astronomical knowledge within a Maya treatise on medical and ritual knowledge (George-Hirons, this issue), bent the rules for both genres, a playing with convention that recapitulated the tensions and contradictions of the colonial experience but at the same time made them comprehensible or, at least, displayed how some elements were fundamentally irresolvable and could not be neatly folded within previous standards.

The landscape of multilingual and graphically plural texts generated a discourse about the modes of literacy for authors and audiences alike. In many cases, which version had instrumental authority—that is, which was deemed the “correct” or satisfactory version, if any at all—is not clear. This plural discourse questioned colonial authority at the same time that it had all the trappings of capitulation to colonial demands. In fact, Sergio Romero (this issue) shows that Spanish evangelization, despite no small reluctance, had to accommodate indigenous linguistic and referential criteria to be able to reach their audience; the lingua franca of Nahuatl only went so far. Attention to the social space of literacy spotlights precisely these issues. While the linguistic framework of glosses, syllabic, logographic, and rebus-like writing systems emphasize the relationship of symbols and speech, these acts equally gain their significance and “grammar” from how they relate to

each other, to their oral, gestural, and spatial contexts. This larger context of literacy brings the discussion to the next point: to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, the medium of literacy in many cases was the message.

### **What Texts Said Was Less Important Than Their Existence**

A consistent observation about literate contexts from the Late Postclassic through the colonial period is that literacy is power because literacy was a way to control knowledge, mark rank, and deploy people into action and social relationships. Gabrielle Vail (this issue) describes how nobles distinguished themselves by their ability to write. Whether their subjects could read what they wrote was less important than the act of writing, and particularly of recopying, by elites. The succession of scribes in Tekanto shared the techniques of writing from one generation to the next, even though the content of the set of texts—wills with no property—was economically uneventful (Bricker, this issue).

Because of this relationship of literacy and power, the condition of literacy was itself transformative, involving equally those who could read inscribed marks, patterns on textiles, spatial orders, and gestures (Maxwell, this issue). Though the majority of the population (including a fair number of Spaniards) could not read inscribed marks, all participated to one degree or another in other means of communication and recording, which in turn built the community that made literacy relevant and meaningful. Hanks (this issue) observes that

once written, the text artefact becomes the zero-point or origo in a series of indefinitely many re-readings (including ours). Subsequent oral renditions can in turn be re-transcribed, iterating the same cycle of exchange of visual for oral and oral for visual. This iteration, I think, is what makes the alphabetic archive what it is, a relatively durable sedimentation of multiple time series, and the reduction of sound long extinguished into texts still with us. Recopying further implies that individual texts, and not only series or texts, are sedimentations of multiple sources.

In this sense, writing is always writing history, but it is also the releasing of new potentials. For example, Maya and Nahua ritual prognostications (Knowlton, Sampeck this issue) prescribed a set of actions that had to be done in the correct, syntactic order to communicate a message, but the effect was to transform relationships between the supplicant(s), the celebrant(s), and deities or cosmic forces. Paja Faudree shows the pivotal role of

translation (this issue); even where the Spanish translation closely followed the Chontal original, the message was radically altered. Texts were a catalyst not so much because of their content but because of their very existence, as with formulaic wills. That the condition of literacy was so profoundly a part of prosaic life is well illustrated by the Yucatec word for desire: *dzib ol*, which translates as “to write in the heart.”

When are the content of the document and the ability to read it important? The existence of the text seemed most crucial in public, canonical settings, whether Maya stelae, a Chontal título, or Nahua notarial documents. The content of the text was pivotal in secret or hidden documents, whose clandestine, subversive information had to be understood because it could not be propagated freely otherwise. These texts, such as the Ritual of the Bacabs that Timothy W. Knowlton discusses (this issue), were clearly used to elicit performances that were heretical from a Spanish perspective but that preserved those literary, poetic traditions central to ritual performance (Hanks, this issue). These writings outside the watchful eye fostered community and vitality because of their content more than because they were written. Testaments, on the other hand, mattered much less for their content and more for their very existence.

## Appropriation

A remarkable feature of clandestine texts is that Mesoamerican authors used the tools of alphabetic writing, and even European genres, to pursue their own goals. In some cases, such as that of Ixtlilxochitl, who used pictographic texts to advance his own agenda of validating lineage, the alternate literacy systems were aiming at several audiences at the same time. The pictographic form encouraged legitimacy within the Nahua community, but at the same time it fit Spanish legal goals of documentation (see Chuchiak 2010 for Maya examples).

At the same time, Spaniards took advantage of Mesoamerican literacies to further their political, economic, and evangelical goals. Mesoamerican writing challenged European notions that privileged alphabetic writing, yet chroniclers such as Fuentes y Guzmán recopied and described these writings to understand them as well as claim them (Sampeck, this issue). The Testerian manuscripts, evangelizing documents written by friars in a pictographic style, were attempts to transmit the message to analphabetic but literate audiences. Notarial documents such as litigation and land titles likewise included cartographic and annals histories in pictographic and syllabic graphemes to support claims and satisfy documentation requirements. Spanish appropriation of Mesoamerican writing was not a retreat

to less-than-writing but stood as an endeavor equal in literacy to the more common alphabetic texts.

Much of the time, Mesoamerican appropriation of alphabetic writing or European textual schemes was a colonial necessity, the expedient solution. The choices of media, illustrations, and form were all ideological choices of the scribe, and the degree of freedom for these different choices varied according to context and goals—how much access did Spaniards have to the scribe? What was the writing for? The final picture is that no choices were neutral; literacy in all of its forms was ideological.

### Temporality and Memory

Another crucial element in the context of literacy was its potential for recording and managing time and memory. Mesoamerican writing, here beautifully illustrated by Mixtec, Maya, and Nahua (Pipil) accounts, is accumulative in nature. Many texts demonstrate multiple iterations of a text and/or additions of old scripts, prognostications, and histories to the new (see Vail, this issue).

This accumulative nature carries within it the ability to direct the record along highly specific paths, favoring particular lineages (with all of the political implications that entails) or coming from the perspective of single groups, settlements, or regions (Pizzigoni 2007). This selectivity plays out in the element of authorial choice at every stage of the practice of literacy: what part of a text or act a practitioner reproduced, how it was used, and why (Faudree, this issue). The interplay of accumulation and selectivity highlights how the cultural setting of literacy was created by the source language and of its broader linguistic and social implications, including local pronunciation and the act of writing, choices about orthographic heterodoxy and whether to borrow, the extent of popular literacy, and how the graphically illiterate received texts and incorporated them into their literate practices (Faudree, Knowlton, this issue; Lockhart 1992; Matthew and Romero 2012; Villa-Flores 2007; Wood 2003). With this in mind, one can see literacy as more a process than a condition. This accumulated memory had long-term effects, especially for the perpetuation of identity in the face of profound colonial change.

### The Persistence of Mesoamericanness

Pre-Columbian literate contexts of code, action, and curation appear in both obvious and subtle ways, through structural and symbolic elements such as the graphic representation of linguistic units. Mesoamerican writ-



ing encoded language through morphology, poetics, declarative mode versus referential mode (Romero, this issue), and indexing as well as through logossyllabic graphemes, rebus-like symbols, and pictograms (Sampeck, Vail, this issue). Poetics can be subtle, such that the text has to be read aloud to hear parallelism (Hanks, this issue). Even bequests, which had the same grammatical construction as Spanish canons, conveyed the sense of performing because they were written in the present tense. As Hanks observes, “oral performance interpellates the reader into the script” (ibid.).

The interplay of image, alphabetic writing, and other kinds of graphemes was strongly tied to local conditions, such that no standard, progressive evolutionary sequence from pictographic to alphabetic writing occurred. All forms of writing appear at about the same time and persist in different ways until late in the colonial period. The material or media itself for the texts could be a symbol of heritage or its loss, whether on amatl paper, on cloth, or in a printed, bound book. Metalinguistic literate acts included painting, with the verb “to write” being the same as “to paint” (Reents-Budet 1998; Vail, this issue). What does this polygraphy imply? That multiple modes of expression were an essential part of the Mesoamerican colonial literate milieu, that alphabetic writing was embedded in other semiotic media, and that these modes maintained practices of entextualization (Knowlton, this issue).

Instances of profound, comprehensive changes to language occurred among Yucatec Mayas with the rapid and widespread conversion of Yucatec to what Hanks (2010: xiv) calls “Maya reducido.” Bricker’s work on the Motul dictionary has found that the alphabet used for entries and example sentences was not adequate for the language it recorded because it had only the five vowel signs used for Spanish, but Maya actually had six vowels at the time (Bricker and Orie 2014). It had no symbol for the glottal stop, and it marked the distinction between laryngeal and velar *h* inconsistently. The pronunciation of Yucatecan Maya during the colonial period can be determined only by examining variation in spelling. Workshop conversations brought out the point that among Yucatec Maya, the tactic of flight, of fluid movement to and from the *monte* (wilderness or bush), encouraged and accelerated processes of linguistic change that were so comprehensive that all colonial Yucatec documents—including the Chilam Balames, vocabularios, Ritual of the Bacabs, and notarial documents—were written in Maya reducido.

The impact of *reducción* policies varied, having a different effect for the highland Maya K’iche and Kaqchikel (García Ixmata’ et al. 2013). While for some *huidos*—escapees from colonial subjugation—fleeing was an option, this tactic was a much more difficult prospect in the highlands, as the flight

led to another nearby linguistic group rather than to the wild *monte*, as was the case in the Yucatán peninsula and Petén region of Guatemala (Chuchiak 2010; Hanks 2010). In the highlands, the ecclesiastical *visita* was not regular, and even if they fled, people tended to reoccupy areas. The comprehensive language change of Yucatec Maya *reducido* did not occur, partly because highland Maya groups had been resisting such change for a very long time. For these reasons, highland Maya language was “irreducido,” a dramatic contrast with *reducido* lowland Yucatec Maya.

The linguistic changes evidenced and promulgated by texts such as dictionaries were pan-Mesoamerican and rooted in the everyday environment of literacy. Romero (this issue) highlights the timeline of change in ecclesiastical documents in colonial Guatemala, showing that the earliest texts often set the precedent for later ones in other nearby regions, even if from a different linguistic group. In this way, the history of literacy had effects far beyond any single linguistic group and can best be seen as a colonial project.

### Kinds of Sources

What changed most substantially in the literate environment was the range of genres in the colonial repertoire. In that sense, Ángel Rama (1984) was right: writing was a colonial apparatus. But at the same time, these new modes of literacy also fostered different styles of resistance and survival. Mesoamerican strategy, precisely because of its long history of literacy, did not block the colonial but instead took up those new forms and propagated them, a “viral” spread that went far beyond colonial control. In Central Mexico, particularly the Nahuatl regions, mundane, notarial documents blossomed from very early on. Kevin Terraciano (this issue) shows that in the parts of Central Mexico with Mixtec speakers, alphabetic writing happened later and pictographic writing continued later than in Nahuatl zones, with the result that Nahuatl scribes probably had some hand in training Mixtec scribes in alphabetic writing. In the Maya area, hieroglyphic writing was not abundant, and in a general sense, loss of literacy occurred in Yucatán. Vail (this issue), however, strongly contradicts the interpretation that the Late Postclassic witnessed a loss of literacy in any significant way. From this perspective, the evidence for continued hieroglyphic literacy during the early colonial period shows that literacy was part of the lowland Maya world. In concert with this maintenance of hieroglyphic literacy, Hanks (2010, this issue) shows the genesis of language based on dictionaries and the evangelical project of *reducción* that propagated widely and quickly; literacy was integral to this global change.

Taken together, the different examples of the practice, history, and context of literacy in Mesoamerica show considerable regional variability in the timing of the adoption of alphabetic writing and the volume and kinds of texts indigenous writers wrote. What was consistent was that alphabetic writing became part of the colonial toolkit of literacy, in some cases supplanting, in other cases adjunct to, other forms of inscription within the wider realm of communicative strategies. The importance of one method compared to another shifted dynamically as part of the iterative process of recording and communicating preserved symbolic forms, such as hieroglyphs, that colonial officials and clergy censored. Part of this discursive process of appropriation included European preservation of Mesoamerican vocabulary and symbolic expression as curious, poorly understood signs; that is, they were met with less than literate understanding but recorded nonetheless in an effort to control knowledge. The political and social agendas of literacy, whether European or Mesoamerican, were consistent and, from that vantage point, both mutually reinforcing and ultimately combative: to conserve clandestine knowledge, to prove legal grounds, to show moral worth, and to make the world intelligible. Though literate acts (writing) often happen as the work of individuals, the literate context—how that writing, whatever its form, has relevance and effect—is socially and historically contingent, a point well illustrated by Faudree’s Chontal Maya example from the seventeenth century. Colonial literacy in Mesoamerica was more than the ability to read inscribed marks and reached far beyond the relatively small coterie who could do so; it was propagated, sustained, and embellished in different ways by a wide variety of actors, a resonant force in colonial life.

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