

Indigenous Miracles: Nahua Authority in Colonial Mexico. By Edward W. Osowski. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010. Pp. xiv, 260. Illustrations. Notes. Glossary. Bibliography. Index.

For Nahuas, the decades from 1760 to 1810 marked the most tumultuous period they had faced since they adapted to Spanish colonial rule in the sixteenth century. The Bourbon reforms challenged the cherished privileges of local self-government, a growing Spanish population appropriated rural lands, and “enlightened” churchmen sought to regulate and tone down indigenous religious expression. In this valuable analysis of late-colonial indigenous religious life, Edward W. Osowski explores several forums in which Nahua elites asserted and defended their authority through religious acts. Performances of Christian piety were the most effective means to assert political legitimacy; Nahuas had frequently to defend in civil or ecclesiastical courts their right to be, in their own view, such good Christians. These records, from the archives of the Juzgado General de Indios and the Provisorato de Indios y Chinos, provide much of Osowski’s source material.

The book’s six main chapters fall into three pairs. The first pair focuses on how images of Christ and Mary and the shrines that housed them came to function as primordial origin-places, centers of community devotion, and fonts of noble privilege. Explored in greatest depth is the Sacromonte at Amecameca, where a cave associated with the Franciscan mystic Martín de Valencia became the home of a miracle-working image of the Santo Entierro (the entombed Christ) and the focus of Holy Week processions. Such processions very effectively dramatized a locale’s sacred status: repeated annually, the procession took the holy image on a tour of the community, and then returned it to its home, showing that it belonged at this particular site. Osowski also documents the long-term success of the Páez de Mendoza family, descendants of the Nahua ruler who was most instrumental in establishing the Sacromonte shrine in the 1580s.

The two middle chapters document the fascinating late-colonial phenomenon of roving alms-collectors. Cash-strapped religious organizations would pack a miracle-working image in a trunk, load it on a donkey, and send it on the road for a year or so to raise money to maintain the image and associated devotions. The practice was controversial because of the involvement of women, who sometimes coordinated the activity and who would often place a traveling image in their household shrine, where people came to pay it homage and make donations. Osowski here finds evidence that complementary gender relations survived into the late colonial period, in the face of renewed efforts by ecclesiastical authorities to impose patriarchal family structures that, they hoped, would keep Indians in their communities and thus maintain the tax base. These authorities also feared, with little foundation, that alms-collectors would become struck with wanderlust and never return home to pay their taxes.

The third pair of chapters examines controversies over Nahua involvement in large-scale, public, multiethnic religious events. Where Spanish authorities saw excess and disorder, Osowski finds well-organized actions and established hierarchies. One highlighted activity is the construction of flower-covered triumphal arches that shaded the

route of Mexico City's Corpus Christi procession. To Spaniards, these arches symbolized Indians' political and religious submission; to Nahuas, their construction was a right and a privilege through which political hierarchies among indigenous communities were annually re-articulated. Provincial towns paid a fee—reminiscent of Aztec imperial tribute—to the native leaders of Tenochtitlán and Tlatelolco in order to participate in the colony's largest religious event. Each contributing town was granted a specific space along the processional route, with distance from the cathedral indicating a town's rank. During Holy Week, disputes centered on such popular customs as dressing as Roman centurions for Passion plays and processions and the public flogging of actors who portrayed Jesus.

Nahua leaders managed to limit the impact of "reform" efforts, even though the framework of royal and noble privilege within which they operated would soon be made obsolete by Mexico's independence. This engaging account of Nahua Christianity in the final half-century of Spanish rule adds welcome insights to the continuing re-evaluation of Mexico's "spiritual conquest."

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Cycles of Time and Meaning in the Mexican Books of Fate. By Elizabeth Hill Boone.
Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007. Pp. 320. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index.

An extraordinarily complex calendrical system structured the cosmos and lives of peoples in pre-conquest central Mexico. Books showed how this system came into being and shaped the world, its events, and human daily existence. Highly skilled artists painted these books on either hide or bark paper, forming them into folding screens that stood upright, zigzagging accordion-like across a surface. Equally skilled diviners "read" their information, probably lending drama to the exposition of these "containers of the knowledge of the world."

At one time, such manuscripts would have been ubiquitous throughout the region, but the Spanish conquest ended that (1521). Now, only nine books painted in this sophisticated tradition remain, and only six of them are clearly pre-conquest. The other three, although created in an indigenous style, were produced after the conquest, as were three colonial-influenced copies of lost manuscripts. The books in this indigenous style are key for understanding pre-conquest worldviews, thus making the earlier examples especially valuable. Beyond these books and archaeological evidence, we have only the words of post-conquest Spanish chroniclers. While the chronicles are valuable, their authors sharply mediate indigenous voices. The only primary books are the pictorial manuscripts made in the indigenous style. Many scholars have commented in detail on the books in this corpus, most frequently on single manuscripts, for an academic audience. Up to now, no one has attempted a thorough, yet broadly synthetic study that treats the corpus as a coherent whole, with such clarity as to make it accessible to both lay people and scholars. Boone's work is a tour de force.