



Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570

Inga Clendinnen

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s/t: Maya & Spaniard in Yucatan 1517-1570

In what is both a specific study of conversion in a corner of the Spanish Empire and a work with implications for the understanding of European domination and native resistance throughout the colonial world, Inga Clendinnen explores the intensifying conflict between competing and increasingly divergent Spanish visions of Yucatan and its destructive outcomes. In *Ambivalent Conquests* Clendinnen penetrates the thinking and feeling of the Mayan Indians in a detailed reconstruction of their assessment of the intruders. This new edition contains a preface by the author where she reflects upon the book's contribution in the past fifteen years. Inga Clendinnen is Emeritus scholar, LaTrobe University, Australia. Her books include the acclaimed *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge, 1999), named a Best Book of the Year by the New York Times Book Review, and *Aztec: An Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1995), and *Tiger's Eye: A Memoir* (Scribner, 2001).

Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570 Details

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From Reader Review Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570 for online ebook

Liz says

I enjoyed this book, although a lot of my classmates did not. There were some fragment sentences that I did not notice apparently. Anyway, that aside, I think Clendinnen did some nice work and I learned a lot about this subject. This is no novel though, but it is an interesting historical work. Very short as well.

Alison Zoccola says

This is a dense but fascinating historical analysis of the Spanish "conquest" (I add the quotes because no real conquistadors in the mold of Cortes were involved in the Spanish subjugation of the native Mayans) of the Mayan people. Unlike the Aztecs or the Incas, the Mayans were never truly "conquered," as the Inca and the Aztec empires were much more cohesive before the conquest than the Mayan empire was (there was no real pre-existing empire to take over), and the Mayans' empire had far less of the natural resources that the Incas and Aztecs did and the Spaniards lusted after. Elsewhere, the book explores the complicated relationship between the Spanish settlers and Spanish missionaries and how those two groups (the missionaries in particular) interacted with the native Mayans and engages in a thorough and thoughtful scholarly analysis of an especially lurid topic: human sacrifice, which has multiple meanings, some you wouldn't expect. Overall, if you're interested in the history of Latin America, the Spanish Conquest, or just what happens when two radically different cultures collide, I highly recommend this book to you.

Deb says

Brief but rich sourced book on the 1500's Spanish Conquest of the Yucatan

A worthy read for understanding the Spanish Conquest and the impact on the indigenous people in the Yucatan in the 1500's.

Christian Layow says

A very well written scholarly book that focuses mostly on the 'ambiguous' conversion of the Maya to Catholicism in the 16th century by the Franciscan friars. There is particular emphasis on Diego de Landa and his Mexican Inquisition in the state of Yucatán in 1562. It seems rumors of the natives sliding back into their old religious practices fired Landa with a zeal for torture and punishment that is a hallmark of religious fanaticism. First it was some admittance to idol worship, then under torture some Maya told stories of human sacrifice for the gods. Some 4,500 people were tortured and 158 died during torture or from the results of torture. The author demonstrates from her research that the stories of human sacrifice were most likely fabricated under the duress of the torture. Quite a few Maya committed suicide to avoid the humiliation, misery and possible death while being tortured.

Admittedly there were quite a few friars previous to the 1562 inquisition that defended the natives from

excessive abuses of the encomiendas (a type of feudalism enforced by the Spanish). This was a pattern throughout the Spanish colonies. Still the friars committed their own forms of abuse on the local population. During the 1562 inquisition even some encomenderos were shocked at the behavior of the friars and they tried ineffectively to protect their wards.

I made a recent travel through the Yucatán and I found this book very intriguing. It was during this same inquisition that most all of the books written by the Maya in their own script were destroyed in a ritual fire, what Landa called an auto-de-fe (demonstration of faith). In that fire we lost a vast majority of the history and culture of a grand civilization. Clendinnen demonstrates though that of all the peoples of the Americas the Maya retained the most of their previous culture and religious experience. It can still be felt today if you visit the Mundo Maya.

Kevin says

A companion to the Aztec book of Clendinnen, this exhibits the Maya's vastly more entertaining insurrection from Spanish rule. Despite their decentralized territories, and their cooption by the Chichen in the north, the Maya remained the single most difficult large-scale area inhabitator to conquer. In the 1800's, a Maya revolt almost kicked the Spanish garrisons off the Yucatan (it would have effectively terminated their control of the region), but the rainy season began and like clockwork, the Maya severed the battle and headed home.

AskHistorians says

Often the Spanish Conquest is understood as a quick and relatively one-sided affair that swept through the totality of Mesoamerica. *Ambivalent Conquests* sheds light on the experience of the Maya following the arrival of the Spanish in the Americas and their subsequent resistance (and alliance) with the conquistadors as they expanded the Spanish Empire. Clendinnen does a remarkable job of humanizing the Maya, who like other native groups are often rendered silent in Conquest histories. Readers will also find her treatment of the Spanish, particularly the infamous Diego de Landa, both enlightening and unique from other texts available on this subject matter. As a whole, *Ambivalent Conquests* epitomizes why Clendinnen and her scholarship are so respected in the field today.

Miriam says

Focusing on the events surrounding Franciscan missionaries' 1562 discovery that supposed converts were continuing to practice human sacrifice, Clendinnen argues for a more complex view than a simple conqueror-subject dynamic.

Clendinnen presents her case persuasively, but there are a couple difficulties with it. First, she is to some degree attacking a straw man: I don't see any contemporary scholars promoting the simplistic position that she claims to be questioning. That many Mayans continued their traditional practices while either giving lip-service to or assimilating Christian cult is hardly a shock. That is pretty much the standard model for colonized populations. And I'm not convinced that this really constituted any extra-ordinary agency on the part of the Mayans. When the friars found out and started torturing people, it was the objections of other colonists that had influence, not anything the Mayans did.

Still, Clendinnen is exploring an interesting story, and provides excellent descriptions of Mayan social structure and cultural practices. I suspect that this is really what interests her, and that she was told by the publisher or her tenure committee to make the work seem more important and trendy by throwing some theory in.

Dulguun says

“When the Spaniards discovered this land, their leader asked the Indians how it was called; as they did not understand him, they said uic athan, which means, what do you say or what do you speak, that we do not understand you. And then the Spaniard ordered it set down that it be called Yucatan... (Antonia De ciudad Real, 1588)

The book speaks of the Yucatan province of Maya Empire during the Colonial period. First part of the book is about the Spaniards in Yucatan that being explorers, conquerors, settlers, missionaries as well as the conflict between them. Second part is about Indians. Missionaries very few in the beginning of the colonialization of Yucatan and one of the first friars to appear in Yucatan was called Fr Diego de Landa later become Bishop of Yucatan. When he was fresh and young, he went to bushes to convert Indians and apparently saved many souls. But later when he become powerful he killed and tortured as many as he saved. His argument was “it takes long time to convert them truly without force and by then everyone would go to hell”. I would say Friar Diego de Landa was one of the Crusaders in Latin American continent. Alas, there were not any Immanuel Kants born at the time to stop the Crusade in New Spanish at that time. I had an impression that the indigenous people in Latin America were very subservient. The reason is that they were subjugated to the kings under great empires then moved to different kind of encomenderos until late 19th century. Why they seemed to be submissive? Or am I incorrect in my judgment?

Dan says

"It takes patience and perseverance to hear those long-ago Indian voices at all, speaking as they do from an unfamiliar world and an unfamiliar experience. The attempt also requires from both reader and author a tolerance of ambiguities, and of inherently contestable judgments."

- Inga Clendinnen, 1987

"When the Spaniards discovered this land, their leader asked the Indians how it was called; as they did not understand him, they said 'uic athan', which means, what do you say or what do you speak, that we do not understand you. And then the Spaniard ordered it set down that it be called Yucatan."

- Antonio de Ciudad Real, 1588

"Let's gooooooooo!"

- Me, starting this book, 2017

Excited to be an old grandpa (not really) reading history books but get me this stuff and not WWII

Also this book offers a nice indictment of torture if you need anymore of that

Philippe Billé says

Je n'ai pas le temps d'étudier en détail *Ambivalent conquests : Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570*, je me contente de feuilleter attentivement cet ouvrage d'Inga Clendinnen (Cambridge University Press, 1987). Le Yucatan est la grande péninsule qui s'avance dans la mer des Caraïbes, au sud-est du Mexique. C'est le pays des Mayas, que l'on a parfois présentés comme les Grecs d'une antiquité méso-américaine, dont les Aztèques seraient les Romains, ces derniers plus modernes et moins raffinés que les premiers. Le livre examine ce que l'on peut savoir de la façon dont a été perçue, du côté des arrivants comme du côté indigène, l'invasion de cette terre par les Espagnols, en vagues successives d'explorateurs, de conquistadors, de colons et de missionnaires. Il semble que les Mayas aient éprouvé plus d'hostilité envers le clergé européen, qu'envers la religion nouvelle, qui n'était pas sans affinité avec le culte traditionnel : le *Popol Vuh*, soit la «Bible» maya, comportait une Genèse similaire à celle de l'Ancien Testament ; un rite local était une sorte de baptême ; les livres prophétiques de Chilam Balam annonçaient d'une certaine façon la conquête. Un des personnages centraux de cette histoire est le franciscain Diego de Landa (1524-1579), resté doublement célèbre pour avoir mené une féroce répression contre l'idolâtrie persistante (férocité qui lui valut un procès) et pour être l'auteur d'une *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, qui reste aujourd'hui la principale source documentaire sur une nation à laquelle il a porté le plus grand tort (faisant martyriser des hommes et détruire nombre d'objets) mais envers laquelle il éprouvait en même temps une évidente sympathie, comme en témoignent des remarques dans ses longues descriptions des mœurs, des hiéroglyphes et du calendrier. Je regrette de n'avoir pu consulter l'une des deux seules versions françaises de ce texte, soit celle de l'abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg, qui découvrit le document dans une copie manuscrite et en fit en 1864 la première édition, accompagnée d'une traduction, soit celle d'un homonyme de Jean Genet, parue en 1928. Je me suis contenté de parcourir une petite édition espagnole bien faite (par Miguel Rivera, chez Historia 16, 1985). Landa ne cache pas non plus ce qu'il y avait de plus brutal dans les coutumes locales, notamment les sacrifices humains. L'évocation du supplicié badigeonné de bleu, renversé de dos sur l'autel de pierre et maintenu par quatre hommes pendant que le prêtre lui plonge son couteau d'obsidienne dans la poitrine pour en arracher le cœur, et aller arroser de sang frais les idoles, a sans doute inspiré Mel Gibson dans son *Apocalypto*.

Le livre de Clendinnen ne présente qu'une dizaine d'illustrations, parmi lesquelles une saisissante scène d'arrachage de cœur, provenant de Chichén Itzá. Je me suis souvent demandé dans quelle mesure, si le christianisme a si facilement conquis l'âme des Américains, malgré la rudesse de certains de ses représentants, cela n'était pas parce qu'il représentait une belle occasion d'échapper aux coutumes traditionnelles, plus rudes encore. Toujours dans le monde maya, on trouve sur le net de belles photos des scènes terribles figurant dans les fresques du site de Bonampak. Ici un vaincu est rudoyé par le vainqueur, qui le tient par les cheveux. Là des prisonniers attendent d'être suppliciés : des gouttes s'écoulent des doigts de ceux qui sont assis, car on vient de leur arracher les ongles, pour les mettre en condition.

PS. Un paragraphe de Landa retient mon attention car il montre que même pour de moindres misères, le prêtre européen pouvait être un recours : «Une Indienne qui devait être baptisée est venue se plaindre à moi au sujet d'un Indien déjà baptisé, qui était amoureux d'elle, car elle était jolie. Il avait attendu que le mari s'absente, pour aller la trouver un soir chez elle, où après avoir manifesté en vain ses désirs, avec beaucoup de galanteries, il avait entrepris de lui offrir des cadeaux, qu'il avait apportés dans cette intention, et comme cela ne donnait aucun résultat, il avait essayé de la forcer. Or, bien que ce fût un grand gaillard et qu'il eût poursuivi ses tentatives toute la nuit, il n'avait réussi qu'à susciter en elle une telle colère, qu'elle était venue se plaindre à moi de la méchanceté de l'Indien, tels étaient ses termes.» (27 VI 2008)

Ushan says

According to a 16th-century source, "Yucatán" was a corruption of the Mayan phrase "What did you say?" which the Maya said in response to the Spanish question, "What is this land called?" The first Spaniards to land in Yucatán were a dozen sailors shipwrecked in 1511; all but two were sacrificed to Mayan gods, one was later discovered by the Spanish, and since he learned Maya, he became an interpreter with Hernán Cortés together with a woman who spoke both Maya and Nahuatl, the Aztec language. The other, one Golzalo Guerrero, went native. He married a high-ranked Maya woman and had children by her, became not only a warrior but an officer, and organized the defense of the Maya states of South Yucatán against his native land; his tattooed body was later found in Honduras among dead Indians. There is now a statue of him in Yucatán since he is considered the father of all mestizos. Unfortunately, the shipwrecked Spaniards also seem to have caused an epidemic of what must have been smallpox. The Spanish expeditions of discovery met with hostility; the Spaniards heard the Indians say "Castilan", which means that Guerrero must have warned them. Several attempts of conquest met with resistance, although the Maya had very bad projectile weapons compared to the muskets and cannon of the conquistadors. The Spanish finally conquered Yucatán in 1540-1542, and suppressed a general uprising in 1546.

After the conquest, Franciscan friars asserted their authority over the secular powers in Yucatán. In 1562, only twenty years after the supposed conversion of the Maya to Christianity, it was discovered that some of them still worshiped their traditional gods. Bishop Diego de Landa, which comes out as a completely demonic figure, instituted the trials that the Spanish Inquisition is famous for, but with fewer legal safeguards than was possible in Spain. Over three months, more than 4500 Indians were tortured, 158 died under torture, 13 committed suicide, and 18 disappeared and probably committed suicide out of the public view. Landa also destroyed as many Mayan books as he could lay his hands on (27 on this occasion and more on others); only four are known to have survived into modern times. The crimes Landa claimed to have uncovered included human sacrifice in a manner blasphemous to Christians. Another bishop, Francisco de Toral, apparently did not trust these reports and believed that innocent Indians were being slandered by the friars; he used his authority to free the imprisoned Indians. Landa went back to Spain to present his case, and while in Spain wrote a book on all things Yucatánian. We still do not know whether the human sacrifices actually took place; this book is as much history as meta-history, like Jonathan Spence's *The Question of Hu*: we have documents, but do not know, what to make of them, other than the background of the time and place that they reveal.

What is remarkable is how the post-Conquest Mayas adopted the outward forms of the European culture, while completely refusing to understand its internal logic, like the Chukchi of Russian folklore. When the Spaniards made the Indians dismantle a native temple and build a Christian church out of its stones, they wanted to demonstrate the weakness of the native religion in the face of Christianity, but to the Maya they demonstrated the impermanence of all things, including the Christian church. The total lack of understanding between the Spanish and the Maya reminds me of Jan Tomasz Gross's book about the Soviet annexation of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus in 1939: there was a similar total lack of understanding between the former Polish citizens and their new Soviet rulers, who believed themselves to be in possession of the one and only truth and a duty to spread it through the world, like the Franciscan friars.

Evan Albright says

BOOKS ABOUT YUCATÁN. I read anything I can about the Yucatán Peninsula, especially history, so this

book is in my sweet spot. There wasn't much in *Ambivalent Conquests* that I had not read elsewhere, but the charm of this book is that it is one of the most concise histories of one of the most complex regions in the world, especially its early colonial history. Clendinnen is a compelling writer, and I literally would deconstruct her sentences to try to figure out how she was able to pack so much information and nuance into her prose. This book may not be appropriate for the casual history reader, but for a student of the Yucatán it should be required reading.

JoséMaría BlancoWhite says

An interesting look at the encounter of Spaniards and Mayas through conquest and colonization. An eye-opening essay that -as it should- brings into the consideration of the reader all the possible interpretations that the facts allow. I think the title is very appropriate because not everything is just black or white; there aren't just angels and devils in the story of the conquest and colonization of South America. The amazing thing is that all the protagonists have their dark and their bright side to tell. The book is divided unevenly on two parts: the first part zooms in on the Spaniards, their motivation and arguments for what they did; the second, shorter, centers on what little -if anything- we know first-hand from the natives. The book cleverly picks up on the life of Franciscan friar Diego de Landa. His story serves as the thread that connects all others.

The book is not the typical show-off product from the liberal Ivy League college professors. Plus it's very readable, free from academic jargon.

The minuses are its second -but shorter- part, having no written testimonies from the natives, and the lack of any map or illustration of worth. We are told that the book focuses on the encounters that took place on the Yucatan peninsula, but there's a lot of traveling and action taking place here and there, and no help is given to the reader to geographically situate himself.

If only for the first part, the book is a very interesting read and brings a new light on how both peoples must have felt in their daily encounters with their new neighbors.

Ricardo says

I read this recently and I think there are few books that attend to the complexities surrounding culture contact within the context of the conquest as well as this one. Clendinnen avoids easy interpretations of motivations and actions, preferring to tease out the irrationality in human behavior. She also looks at the Encounter in the Yucatan from both the European and the Maya point of view, demonstrating how much we can infer about indigenous beliefs and practices from inherently problematic sources. Eloquent written, but dense.

John says

I thought this was really great, even for the non-historian. It is fine work of historical scholarship, and it is also short and the esoteric academic language is mixed in really well with lots of nicely detailed stories. Clendinnen really tries here to address both sides: she spends the first (a little more than) half on the Spaniards in the Yucatan and what they were thinking and how they looked at this new world, and then the

last half (really third) of the book she examines the Maya as best she can, and tries to divine what they thought of the world and how they viewed the invading Spanish. A lot of the book revolves around a period when the Franciscan friars found out that the Maya were still secretly worshiping idols and practicing sacrifices, even after years of efforts at conversion, and they tortured the Maya to get more information, producing a lot of very dubious confessions.

This reads really easily, although there are certainly a few dry sections the reader may want to skim. But if you are interested in a brief overview of the Mayans and the Spanish conquest of them, with lots of vividly re-created scenes, this should work for you.

After the third time through, I am changing this to five stars. This has become one of my favorites. Just a great combination of general synthesis, history detective work, and excellent writing. This should be read by anyone interested in the religious aspects of the encounter between Europeans and Native Americans. It is a short book but there is so much to it.
