Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl vol. 62 (julio-diciembre 2021): 376-383
ISSN 0071-1675

Lisa Sousa. 2017. *The Woman Who Turned into a Jaguar and Other Narratives of Native Women in Archives of Colonial Mexico*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Louise M. BURKHART
University at Albany, SUNY (Estados Unidos)
lburkhart@albany.edu

Lisa Sousa set an ambitious agenda for this book: examining the lives of Indigenous women from four ethnic-linguistic groups during the period from 1520 to 1750. Hers is the most comprehensive study to date on Mesoamerican women under colonial rule, filled with information from criminal cases, wills, annals, and other archival records that, even though not written by women, bring readers as close as possible to their everyday lives and problems. The criminal cases in particular bring new data to light, revealing not just the sorts of crimes that were committed but how people perceived and reacted to them. She also makes use of Christian doctrinal literature, pictorial manuscripts, and other sources. The four Indigenous peoples are the Nahuas, Ñudzahui (Mixtecs), Bènizàa (Zapotecs), and Ayuuk (Mixe). While Nahuas are the most numerous on the ground and in the archives, the inclusion of the other highland peoples adds much to the value of this book, given that so many previous studies have focused on Nahuas or, if not them, just one other ethnic group. The use of a wide range of sources from an expansive time frame also corrects for the limitations of previous work on just the late Postclassic to early colonial eras, and over-reliance on idealized and Christianizing sources such as the *huehuehtlahtolli* dialogues or the *Florentine Codex* (both of which Sousa also uses to good effect).

A key concept for this study is gender complementarity, as previously analyzed, for the Nahua case, especially by Susan Kellogg (1995, 1997), who documented a decrease in women's autonomy over the first century of Spanish rule. As she explains in the opening chapter, Sousa uses the concept "to describe a system in which men and women possessed distinct roles and responsibilities considered necessary for the well-being of their households and communities" (p. 13–14). She further cites Kellogg's notion

of "parallel structures" in various areas of social relations and cultural concepts, in which women and men played parallel and equally essential roles. Complementarity does not necessarily imply full gender equality or equal shares of political power and societal influence. But it does imply that as long as women controlled arenas of activity that were seen as essential to a functioning society, they could limit the impact of patriarchal institutions like the Roman Catholic Church and the colonial court system. Complementarity also means that this book is not just a study of women, or of interest only to scholars focusing on gender. There is no women's sphere without a complementary men's sphere, and what we gain from this study is a richer view of the colonial Indigenous community as a social whole.

The book's title refers to a 1686 criminal case with which Sousa commences the second chapter, on gender and the body. A Bènizàa man named Marcial de la Cruz confessed to local officials that he had, two years previously, murdered his wife, Catalina María. She had secured his release from jail in a neighboring town, where he had been locked up after a dispute over a mule. Having lingered behind Catalina on the walk home in order to bathe in a river, Marcial was hurrying to catch up with her when a jaguar leaped out at him from behind a maguey plant. Invoking God and brandishing his rosary, he grabbed a stick from the ground and hit the beast three times. As the jaguar died, Marcial heard a voice say, in Zapotec, "Cuckold, don't kill that woman," and the animal transformed into his wife, whom he recognized by her huipil and market basket. The case relates to a number of issues: domestic violence, adultery, the instability of the human body (which can metamorphize, as here, through nahualism), the performative construction of gender through clothing and economic activities, the easy coexistence of Christian and Pre-Columbian concepts, and the disjuncture between how an Indigenous person might view their own actions and the view of criminal responsibility a colonial court would impose on such a case of spousal murder. Catalina's death is one of twenty-five cases of uxoricide Sousa uncovered. The many historical individuals, both women and men, readers encounter in these pages make the book very engaging while also documenting the impact of colonial conditions on ordinary people's lives.

Gender, as Sousa goes on to discuss in chapter 2, building on work by Cecelia Klein (2001), John Monaghan (2001), and others, was both unstable and ambiguous. Rather than an immutable category assigned at birth, gender identity formed during childhood, as relatively undifferentiated infants and toddlers grew to perform economic and ritual roles associated

with male or female spheres, adopt gendered speech patterns, and dress and adorn themselves according to the selected category. While genetic sex generally correlated with this performative identity, cross-gendering was possible, though it is unclear how closely such choices correlated with same-sex orientation. Gender expression is always, as Judith Butler (1988) argues, grounded in performance, but cross-cultural differences are important. Even though, from what Sousa could find in the archives, a male-female binary prevailed and channeled gender identities in one direction or the other during this era, the gradualness and flexibility seen in these Mesoamerican societies contrasts sharply with European practice that assigned gender at birth based solely on genitalia.

Gender complementarity within marriage was fundamental to political and economic endeavors and to the stable functioning of community life. Sousa devotes chapter 3 to marriage encounters, including a detailed review of Pre-Columbian practice and the introduction of sacramental marriage, and chapter 4 to marital relations. Appropriately, chapter 3 begins with a 1538 bigamy case involving a nobleman from Coyoacan, and chapter 4 with, sadly, another seventeenth-century case of wife murder, one in which the dead Bènizàa woman's mother aggressively sought justice on her behalf. Colonial rule delegitimized two important aspects of marital customs: the ability to divorce and remarry, and the polygyny practiced by elites and also some commoners. Christian *doctrinas* and sermons document the efforts friars went to in trying to convince Indigenous people that such practices were sinful, struggling especially with elite men's resistance to monogamy. Couples who willingly dissolved their relationship and sought new partners could now be tried for bigamy and obliged to rejoin their original partner. Runaway spouses could be whipped and forcibly returned even if they left their community for other reasons, such as political factionalism or excessive tribute or labor demands. And community officials were obliged to expend some of their time and authority striving to keep the peace between squabbling spouses unable to dissolve their union. Church policies could prove fatal: in 1558, a Nahua woman named Juana Xochitl, pregnant by a new partner, died at the hands of her husband, Martín Tilantzin, after *altepetl* civil and religious leaders insisted that they both return to the marriage. A third major intrusion was the Catholic Church's expansive view of incest, which invalidated unions that were acceptable under Indigenous practice, such as a widowed person marrying a cousin of their deceased spouse. In the infamous case of don

Carlos of Tetzcoco, burned at the stake in 1539, it was his violations of monogamy and incest prohibitions, rather than never-proven allegations of idolatry, that led to his death.

In chapter 4 Sousa reviews the symbolic associations surrounding marriage and what people expected from the institution, the relationships between partners in informal unions (often inter-ethnic), and documented cases of domestic violence. Marriage remained a desired and respected status, the couple forming an important social unit, an economic partnership with mutual labor obligations that promoted and expressed emotional bonds, and a political partnership, whether spouses held office jointly or marriage was merely a prerequisite for aspiring male officeholders. Economic interdependence is succinctly stated by, for example, the Nahua widower Lucas Juan, who proposed to Sebastiana Ana because he had no one to make tortillas for him, and Ana Juana of Culhuacan, who complained in her will that her husband kept any money he gained by selling maize or other goods and never gave her anything. When tense relationships erupted into violence, Indigenous authorities treated the abusive partner like anyone else who assaulted a member of the community; there was not a separate designation for wife beating. A striking element of these assault cases is how actively women defended themselves, turning to friends or family members who might be able to restrain the abuser, or, if necessary, seeking justice from Indigenous or Spanish authorities. Women often succeeded in getting their husbands punished. The willingness of women to report their abuse and level charges, and of others to intervene through formal or informal channels, indicates that abuse, though it clearly occurred, was not considered socially acceptable by men or by women—despite Christian preaching that wives must submit even to a violent husband.

Chapters 5 and 6 form another pair, focused now on sexuality, looking first at attitudes and concepts regarding sex and how these interacted with Christian teachings, and then at sexual crimes. Chapter 5 opens with the case of a Ñudzahui woman with an unfaithful husband. After he ignored a warning from Teposcolula's *alcalde mayor*, she recruited five other women, one of them her mother, to join her in beating up the husband's married lover. Indigenous people valued sexual pleasure in moderation, but illicit or excessive relations had destructive and polluting effects. This danger was regulated via ritual abstinence. Finding little mention of same-sex relationships, Sousa concludes that these were either handled at the household level or not considered a threat to the community, agreeing with Pete

Sigal (2011) that such actions did not place people into a distinct social or gender category.

Sousa traces the sexual associations of food, feathers, sleeping mats, speech, and sight. Food, in particular, was linked to sex, in part because the intimacy of sharing food both expressed and reinforced the marital bond. Unmarried pairs who ate together were suspected of sleeping together. When one Bènizàa woman thought her husband was having an affair, she dragged the other woman by the hair to a metate, declaring that since she was having sex with her husband, she should also grind maize to feed him. The Christian moral teachings Sousa summarizes had some influence on Indigenous people, even though priests failed to induce full confessions of sexual acts deemed sinful by the Church or fully change their attitudes about sex. Some men claimed the Devil inspired them to commit sexual crimes, while other people adopted the view that certain acts, like adultery, were sins or offenses to God.

The criminal case that opens chapter 6 illustrates how the Spanish view that a man who caught his wife in adultery could murder both partners with impunity extended into Indigenous communities. Diego López Cachi of Coixtlahuaca was acquitted of the 1596 murder of Luis Coquixti and the attempted murder of Isabel Xaco, after insisting from the start that he had acted within his rights after finding them asleep together. Sousa reviews cases of adultery, rape, and defloration. Indigenous people valued fidelity in marriage and considered adultery a serious offense for both men and women although, in general, a woman's sexual violations were considered more serious than a man's. Wives had the right to report their unfaithful husbands to community authorities, and many did. Adultery was associated with theft, the outside partner in effect stealing the affection and attention that belonged to the spouse. For married women, rape was conflated with adultery, such that a woman could be punished for the latter offense even if she had been forced. The nineteen rape cases Sousa documented suggest that formal charges were rarely brought against non-Indigenous men; however, rape and other sexual abuses by Spanish priests were pursued more aggressively.

In chapter 7, Sousa discusses women's duties and responsibilities, concluding that their contributions were not of lesser importance than those of men. Even the stereotyped female roles of cooking and weaving were of profound economic and social significance, given, on the one hand, the labor required to process maize into foodstuffs and the economic and ritual

importance of feasting, and, on the other hand, the contribution that cloth production made to tribute payments and household income beyond the family's own need for clothing and blankets. Women worked as artisans, midwives and healers, merchants and marketers, domestic and commercial agricultural producers and livestock raisers, and in other careers. Confraternities offered opportunities for leadership in the religious sphere. Women responded creatively to restrictions on their activities; for example, Sousa cites Edward W. Osowski's (2010) study of traveling alms collectors. When women were barred from this activity, they ran shrines in their own homes instead. Spanish rule undermined women's career pursuits to some extent, notably for healers, whose practices the Catholic Church discredited and diabolized, and in cases where women had held significant political authority, as among the Ñudzahui.

"Household and Community" is the topic of chapter 8, which delves into household and family structure and (very variable) composition, kinship, fictive kinship, activities carried out within households, and their integration into the larger community. Households functioned as economic units, holding lands and other means of production, and moral units, raising and educating children and monitoring members' behavior. Immoral behavior could lead parents to disinherit a grown child or even kill them, as in the case of a respected Bènizàa man who felt he had to defend the family's honor by beating his wife-abusing and mule-stealing son to death. With their shrines and sacred images, households were religious units as well, for Christian devotions and especially for Indigenous practices that had to be concealed from the Catholic priests. Political authorities hosted feasts and conducted community business in their homes. Households functioned not as private, domestic spaces but as microcosms of the communities for which they were component parts.

Although all the chapters document women's agency, many readers will find the final chapter, "Rebellious Women," particularly interesting. The first case study describes how the people of Santiago Nuyoo, a Ñudzahui community, prevented the removal of one of their magistrates when he was accused of abusing his authority. When men came to arrest him, all the women of his household ran out and fought them off, striking them with fists and clubs and throwing chile powder in their eyes. At the next attempt to remove and replace don Tomás, women and men joined together and drove out the group of Spaniards who sought to enforce the viceroy's order. William B. Taylor (1979), in his study of violence in late

colonial Mexico, found that women participated in nearly all *tumultos* (riots) and led 25 percent of community uprisings. Sousa finds this pattern operating already in the sixteenth century and also covers cases of women warriors in earlier times. When colonial women rebelled, their targets were local or Spanish authorities who threatened their resources, lifeways, and labor. Throwing stones at officials and government buildings was a common form of protest. One of her examples occurred in 1564, when don Luis Santa María Cipac, governor of Mexico Tenochtitlan, failed to get tribute demands reduced. Indigenous people stoned his palace and a group of women broke through an outer wall, obliging don Luis to flee. In another case, in 1692, Indigenous women angry about the viceroy's mismanagement of the maize granary instigated what became a full-scale, interethnic uprising. Actions perceived as spontaneous *tumultos* were often the result of long-term struggles that finally erupted in violence. In other cases, women pursued justice not in the streets but in the courts, whether on behalf of themselves or their communities. Sousa aptly concludes the chapter by noting that her evidence "reveals a political consciousness that has been overlooked or undervalued" (p. 295).

In her conclusion, Sousa confirms that women lost some status, relative to men, over the first two centuries of colonial rule. Indigenous men, too, lost status over this period, just not quite as much. By the middle of the eighteenth century, "the overwhelming majority of indigenous people were suffering economic hardship" (p. 305). Within these straitened circumstances, women pursued what options were open to them to defend their bodies, their households, their communities, and their autonomy. Sousa has done Nahua and Oaxacan studies a great service by bringing the records of so many women out of the archives and interweaving their stories with other sources of data on life in the colonial corporate communities. This book is an essential source for colonial ethnohistoric studies.

References

Butler, Judith. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40 (4): 519–31.

Kellogg, Susan. 1995. *Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture, 1500–1700*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Kellogg, Susan. 1997. "From Parallel and Equivalent to Separate but Unequal: Tenochca Mexica Women, 1500–1700." In *Indian Women of Early Mexico*, edited by Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood, and Robert Haskett, 123–43. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Klein, Cecelia. 2001. "None of the Above: Gender Ambiguity in Nahua Ideology." In *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America*, edited by Cecelia Klein, 183–253. Washington, D. C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

Monaghan, John. 2001. "Physiology, Production, and Gendered Difference: The Evidence for Mixtec and Other Mesoamerican Societies." In *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America*, edited by Cecelia Klein, 285–304. Washington, D. C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

Osowski, Edward W. 2010. *Indigenous Miracles: Nahua Authority in Colonial Mexico*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Sigal, Pete. 2011. *The Flower and the Serpent: Sexuality and Ritual in Nahua Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Taylor, William B. 1979. *Drinking, Homicide, and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.