

## Colonial Latin American Historical Review

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Volume 5

Issue 1 *Volume 5, Issue 1 (Winter 1996)*

Article 6

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12-1-1996

### Susan Kellogg, Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture, 1500-1700

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#### Recommended Citation

Smith, Michael E.. "Susan Kellogg, Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture, 1500-1700." *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 5, 1 (1996): 78. <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr/vol5/iss1/6>

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*Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture, 1500-1700.* By Susan Kellogg. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995. xxxiii + 285 pp. Charts, tables, map, glossary, bibliography, index. \$34.50 cloth.)

In this superb example of ethnohistorical scholarship, Susan Kellogg applies anthropological theory and the ethnographic approach to a set of early colonial documents to explore Nahua (Aztec) adaptations to Spanish rule. Kellogg presents her basic argument as follows:

The colonial legal system became, I argue, a powerful tool of acculturation, profoundly altering Mexica and Nahua conceptions of family, property and gender. And it played a critical role in establishing and maintaining Spanish cultural hegemony. (p. xxix)

Her evidence consists of a series of lawsuits over property heard before the Real Audiencia in Mexico City. All of these cases involve Indians; fifty-five cases are from the sixteenth century (the earliest is 1536), and eighteen cases are from the seventeenth century. Most include lengthy testimony in both Spanish and Nahuatl.

In chapter one, "Actors in the Archive," Kellogg applies Victor Turner's concept of social drama to the lawsuits. She views these cases not simply as private disputes overouselots and fields, but as embodiments of broader social and cultural themes. This chapter focuses on the participants in the cases, from the Spanish judges to the Nahua Indian litigants. The Nahuas turned rapidly to Spanish law after the conquest and used it for their own purposes; their active participation made the legal system one of the major arenas in which the new hegemonic colonial society was forged.

The second chapter, "Social Dramas as Narratives: Texts, Representations, and Symbols," is an ethnographic examination of the lawsuits as texts, emphasizing argumentation, rhetoric, and the representation of key concepts. The Indian litigants and their lawyers drew upon three categories of symbols to support their cases: Mexica symbols, Spanish symbols, and, after 1585, synthetic colonial symbols that "reflect a hegemonic construction" (p. 76).

In chapter three, "Law and the Transformation of Women's Roles," Kellogg traces the post-conquest decline of women's status and power in the finest treatment of Mexica women's roles anywhere in published literature. While prehispanic Mexica society was characterized by gender parallelism in which women's roles were highly regarded, the Spanish legal system contributed to the reduction in women's status in several ways. For example, the courts emphasized "the centrality of the conjugal couple and the nuclear family, eroding Mexica women's independent jural identity" (p. 104). The breakdown of Mexica social institutions after the conquest also contributed to the declining position of women.

"Wills, Property, and People," the fourth chapter, analyzes sixty-three wills made by Indians of Mexico City between 1550 and 1700. The introductions of wills after the conquest proved to be a powerful force in the transformation of concepts of property, and Kellogg traces this process by comparing wills and other documents from different time periods.

The fifth chapter, "Law and a Changing Family Structure," is the high point of the book. Building on her earlier studies of Mexica kinship, Kellogg presents the most comprehensive and sophisticated discussion of prehispanic kinship and household available anywhere. She then analyzes the changes that occurred after the conquest, which included

a new emphasis on the nuclear family as a social and moral unit; a shift away from a cognatic kinship system, formed around sibling and intergenerational ties, toward patrifilial

emphasis; and the emergence of more hierarchically ranked and gender-defined domains. (p. 160)

After documenting these changes, Kellogg explores their causes in both the material (demographic catastrophe and the imposition of Spanish tribute) and the cultural domains (the Spanish legal system and the adoption of Catholic belief and practices). Here, as in the rest of the work, Kellogg emphasizes the dynamic interplay between everyday life and the larger social and cultural forces of colonial New Spain.

*Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture, 1500-1700* is an outstanding study that not only opens up a fascinating new set of documentary data, but also greatly advances our understanding of Mexica society before and after the conquest. I recommend this book highly to anyone concerned with Mesoamerica, historical anthropology, or the effects of imperial domination on people's lives.

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