

[Matallana Peláez on Sousa, 'The Woman Who Turned into a Jaguar, and Other Narratives of Native Women in Archives of Colonial Mexico'](#)

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The following book review from H-LatAm may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

Author:

Lisa Sousa

Reviewer:

Susana E. Matallana Peláez

Lisa Sousa. *The Woman Who Turned into a Jaguar, and Other Narratives of Native Women in Archives of Colonial Mexico*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017. 424 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5640-2.

Reviewed by Susana E. Matallana Peláez (Universidad del Valle) **Published on** H-LatAm (October, 2018) **Commissioned by** Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

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Lisa Sousa's book takes us into pre-conquest and colonial (1520-1750) Nahua, Ñudzahui (Mixtec), Bènízaa (Zapotec), and Ayuuk (Mixe) households, the centers from where indigenous women were thought (and expected) to co-govern and co-balance the world in indigenous Mesoamerican gender complementarity and reciprocity social thought systems. The everyday lives of men and women unravel before our eyes, bringing to life gender relations as well as the centrality of women in indigenous societies from central and southwestern Mexico (Oaxaca) before the conquest, as they strained to cope with the first two centuries of Spanish colonial rule. This optical effect is achieved through the talented use of a rich and diverse corpus (Mixtec, Zapotec, and mainly Nahuatl-language and Spanish civil and criminal records) that excels most particularly in the attentive and careful interpretation of Mesoamerican pictorial writing.

Sousa makes several important clarifications. She begins by establishing a connection between the concept of the body as an unstable and fundamentally transformational entity and the lack of gender essentialization in Mesoamerican thought. She is careful to explain that the indigenous Mesoamerican household was a much wider, net-like basic social unit than the European household; it was based on shared, communal living arrangements rather than patrilineation, where the Euro-patriarchal divide between public and private space did not operate. She is also careful to point out that pre-conquest male household heads did not legally represent the members of their domestic units; women were equally accountable with men in the eyes of Mesoamerican society. At the same time, she is keen to emphasize the Mesoamerican understanding of sex as one of the

principle pleasures in earthly life and a right for both men and women. These much-needed caveats, together with the insightful analysis of cross-cultural indigenous formal speeches and pictorial documents as well as colonial confessional manuals and law suits, make for a vivid understanding of the extensive range of action and empowerment that indigenous women enjoyed before the Spanish conquest, and of its slow erosion under colonial rule.

Most notable is Sousa's analysis of economic gender roles and relations as demarcated by a gendered reciprocity/mutual obligation and redistributive social mindset. Noteworthy is also her rendering of the crucial role of women in uprisings, civil disobedience, and general resistance against the Spanish colonial establishment. Sousa argues that indigenous women responded as a group in times of conflict and hardship, and that their political reach was significantly curtailed by Spanish patriarchal institutions, foremost among them the imposition of male legal representation. Women, however, maneuvered by learning the ropes of the Spanish colonial legal system and by negotiating alliances with powerful men, both Indian and Spaniard. But they still had to face the far-reaching political and economic consequences of Spanish prohibitions on traditional indigenous serial monogamy and polygyny, which condemned them to abusive relationships and most often impoverished them as well as their households. In the end, Sousa makes the convincing argument that at least for the first two centuries of Spanish colonial rule, indigenous women managed to retain much of the centrality and power accorded to women in Mesoamerican gender complementarity social thought systems, only to be even more heavily affected later (1750-1850) by the consolidation of patriarchy through the Bourbon Reforms and mestizo Republican rule.

Although the argument for continuity between pre-conquest and the first two hundred years of Spanish colonial rule regarding the relative status of women in indigenous households and society at large is a convincing one, Sousa's book tends to bypass the multigenerational traumatic impact of the violence of Spanish conquest and Spanish patriarchy on the lives of both indigenous men and women, but most important on the lives of women. In particular, the naturalization of violence against women that Christian patriarchy was slowly able to insert into Mesoamerican societies, which until the arrival of Europeans did not make any distinctions between violence against women and violence against any other members of the community, deserves a wider debate. At times, one gets the impression of an almost smooth continuity far removed from the highly disorienting and multidimensional dispossessing process that it was in reality.

Nonetheless, *The Woman Who Turned into a Jaguar, and Other Narratives of Native Women in Archives of Colonial Mexico* is a welcome and accomplished contribution to the study of the history of Mesoamerican societies that very accurately places gender analysis at the center of understanding societies whose gender complementarity, reciprocity/mutual obligation, and redistributive structures differed greatly from patriarchal European societies.

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