Matallana Peláez on Ochoa and Guengerich, 'Cacicas: The Indigenous Women Leaders of Spanish America, 1492-1825'

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Reviewed by Susana E. Matallana Peláez (Universidad del Valle) Published on H-LatAm (November, 2021) Commissioned by Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

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The twelve contributors to Cacicas: The Indigenous Women Leaders of Spanish America explore how indigenous female leaders and authority figures, commonly called cacicas, fared during the three hundred years of Spanish colonial rule. Drawing examples from North, Central, and South America, from the female batabs of the Yucatán peninsula to the capullanas of coastal Peru and the diplomatic emissaries of the Argentinian pampas, this work examines how the institutions of pre-Hispanic female leadership, female lineages, and female succession evolved across three centuries of progressive Spanish patriarchalization of the Americas.

By focusing on the largely overlooked existence of indigenous female leaders in the Americas, this book takes a grand step toward the normalization of this little-known, though major, historical fact. Indeed, despite colonization and its attendant patriarchalization, elite indigenous women managed to retain a portion of the power they had traditionally enjoyed in pre-contact times, so that even under Spanish rule and as late as the early 1800s, native women in positions of power in the Americas were not exceptional. This book does a great job at making this clear. It also does a great job at expounding the diverse mechanisms through which pre-Hispanic Amerindian female power was curtailed by Spanish institutions. Using mainly civil and criminal records, the nine chapters in this book show how native female succession lines were outlawed, how elite indigenous women were stripped of their property, how they were banned from holding political office or sitting on native cabildos, how they lost their pre-contact legal independence, and how Spanish, mestizo, and indigenous men took advantage of Spanish laws in order to usurp traditional power and authority away from native women. At the same time, this work shows how despite all this, indigenous women, while being completely aware of their colonial condition, refused to be subservient to it. Regardless of the fact that unlike their male counterparts, elite native women were barred from acquiring Spanish literacy, and thus, a vital instrument of self-affirmation in the new colonial order, they were amply familiar with the Spanish legal system, engaging in frequent and prolonged legal disputes very early on in the sixteenth century and well into the early 1800s. Hence, this book clearly shows that native women were active agents in maintaining traditional systems of indigenous rule as well as conscious political actors who influenced and helped shape colonial Hispanic America.

However, at times, this book seems to suggest that Spanish colonization actually inflated traditional Amerindian female leadership, thereby obscuring the role pre-contact conceptions of gender and
power as well as pre-Hispanic institutions played in preserving and upholding native female power and authority under Spanish colonial rule. While it is true that Spaniards favored those rulers who cooperated, and that elite native women often cooperated with Spanish authorities—though always in their own self-interest and almost always in the interest of their own communities—native female rule was certainly not a product of Spanish colonization, as some articles in this work seem to insinuate. A stronger emphasis on pre-Hispanic gender-neutral and/or dual-complementary conceptions of power, divine man-woman power pairs, kinship structures and their political implications, spiritual leadership and its role in governance, matrilineality as well as parallel gender structures, and traditional communal decision making that allowed, and indeed encouraged both men and women to participate in governance, would certainly have gone a long way in furthering the book's stated objective of divulging and normalizing the historical fact of Amerindian female leadership. Having said this, this work is a welcome and well-oriented contribution toward the firm establishment of native female leadership as a widespread historical fact in the Americas.


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