

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Dana Velasco Murillo.** *Urban Indians in a Silver City: Zacatecas, Mexico, 1546-1810.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. 328 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-9611-8.

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Using a *longue durée* approach in her book *Urban Indians in a Silver City: Zacatecas, Mexico, 1546-1810*, Dana Velasco Murillo takes on the challenge of examining the development of indigenous urban communities over the course of the colonial period, which does not follow the traditional patterns and chronology found elsewhere in more central areas of New Spain. The book's most important contribution is the author's ability to clearly convey the complex and distinctive growth of migrant indigenous populations who settled in the mining Spanish colonial city of Zacatecas located in the northern periphery of New Spain where over time they developed communities and adopted Spanish institutions to foster and protect their communal political and economic interests. The book relies on deep archival research, bringing together primary source materials from many valuable repositories across the Atlantic in Mexico, Europe, and the United States.

Murillo argues that "from its discovery and founding, the evolution of Zacatecas was the tale of two settlements: one Spanish and one indigenous" (p. 19). Concentrating on indigenous communities, she highlights the founding of Indian towns that surround the Spanish city of Zacatecas and focuses primarily on settlements scattered in the area between the mines and the city center where the Spanish lived. This book benefits from a rich historiographic ethnohistory tradition while the author self-consciously writes against theoretical language that is too jargon laden. She writes: "This book rarely speaks directly of native 'agency'—preferring to use less ambiguous terms such as experiences or activities. Yet it does focus more on native peoples' active choices than

on the exploitations they suffered under colonialism" (p. 13).

The first three chapters describe indigenous community development under colonial rule that is different from the more traditional core areas in New Spain because Zacatecas was settled in a region without a settled native indigenous population. This area, therefore, did not have a ruling elite that survived the conquest and that could carry on traditional forms of community cohesion and self-governance which allowed indigenous communities elsewhere to survive under Spanish colonial rule. Instead, we find a Spanish city that attracted an indigenous population from other regions of New Spain. Over time these diverse indigenous populations created distinct communities whose path toward stability and self-governance relied on borrowing elements from Spanish church and secular institutions that remained more or less consistent from the late sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth century.

During the early settlement period in the mid-sixteenth century, Spanish settlers of the city had to deal with a combination of mining labor demands and the fact that local indigenous groups were non-sedentary. As a result, the majority of the indigenous labor force had to come from outside the area. This meant that the Spanish had to make migration and permanent indigenous settlement attractive. Forced labor was not sustainable in the long run and Spanish miners had to make changes to adopt a free wage labor system with incentives, such as decent wages, to attract indigenous settlers to the city. Indigenous populations began to

coalesce as a community by the end of the sixteenth century, in part, through their engagement with the church. As the author examines in detail, the founding and growth of various *cofradías* (lay confraternities) over time evolved into more secular institutions that provided indigenous communities with political capital they could wield, with limits of course, to protect their interests. The use of *cofradías* illustrates how indigenous communities adopted a Spanish religious institution to create community religious and political identity. As Murillo states, “Yet, as often proved to be the case in Zacatecas, colonial officials allowed native peoples substantial latitude in their own affairs as long as they did not threaten Spanish authorities or reduce the mining workforce” (p. 81).

The book traces the establishment of indigenous self-governance institutions, mainly the indigenous *cabildos* (municipal councils) at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Murillo describes how these organizations were like groups in other parts of New Spain and how they were unique to the circumstances of Zacatecas. After 1609 with the establishment of self-governing bodies, especially the appointment of two *alcaldías* (municipal magistrates), there was less impingement on self-governance from Spanish officials than in other parts of New Spain. The birth and growth of these official positions were closely associated with the growth of the indigenous population, which in turn was dictated by mining labor needs. The author highlights that the timing of the development of these institutions in Zacatecas differed from central New Spain largely due to the difference in such factors as the lack of inherited governing institutions, like the *tlatoani* (ruler) or the *altepetl* (city-state), which dated back to the precolonial period.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with how the indigenous communities asserted autonomy and self-governance in the mature period from the late seventeenth to the early eighteenth century, once communities had consolidated church and secular institutions for themselves. Historians of colonial Latin America generally break down the colonial period into three major phases, with variations depending on local circumstances: the conquest period (1492-1570); the mature period (1570-1750); and the late colonial period (1750-1810), corresponding with the implementation of Bourbon Reforms in Spanish America. Each period is characterized by various stages of development in such areas as Spanish governance, economic development, demographic growth or loss, and/or indigenous accommodation of Spanish institutions. Murillo highlights the fact that in the mature period in Zacatecas these communities interacted with Spanish authori-

ties and institutions in less deferential ways than what was expected elsewhere in New Spain and for that matter, in colonial Latin America, demonstrating that they conducted themselves as *vecinos* (neighbors or Spanish citizens) and with the confidence of being equal members of the larger Spanish community, surprising the Spanish church and secular institutions. The fourth chapter traces the effects of two economic downturns in the city on the lives of the indigenous population, beginning in the second half of the seventeenth century. The author argues that the indigenous population had a stabilizing influence during the economic turmoil of the mature period. She uses here the traditional historiographic periodization historians of colonial Mexico have used to demarcate the period, characterizing the seventeenth century as the mature period yet enforcing the view that Zacatecas had a delayed chronology in comparison to the core areas of New Spain.

Murillo notes that indigenous women had a political and social role that stabilized colonial society particularly in the late seventeenth century. It is unclear why their role became more prominent at this time. It may be a matter of archival documentation. Acknowledgment of the lack of documentation and further analysis about why women became important at this point would have clarified the discussion further. Also, in the second half of the seventeenth century, the indigenous population interacted with other ethnic groups, such as mestizos and mulattos, that recently migrated to the region due to an increase in mining labor demand. The indigenous population had interactions with these new residents, including sexual unions with non-indigenous people, and especially those who were considered *vecinos* had a stabilizing role in maintaining the identity of indigenous communities.

Indigenous communities saw their greatest challenges in the late colonial period under the changes brought about by the Bourbon Reforms. These reforms, which included increased dominance of the secular clergy over church matters along with changes in labor conditions, challenged the ability of indigenous communities to maintain their traditional group identity and self-governing autonomy and authority. Although Murillo conveys the resiliency of these communities, she notes that their status as *vecinos* during most of the colonial period was corroded over this period.

Methodologically, this is a theoretically and historiographically rich social history that relies on Mexican ethnohistory. That scholarship is seamlessly woven into a

chronological narrative of a long trajectory of the development of resilient indigenous communities. The more dynamic parts of the book are in the second half when we see the various indigenous communities interacting with Spanish authorities and growing multiethnic communities throughout the city and asserting themselves as long-term residents or *vecinos* behaving with the entitlement of that longevity we do not see elsewhere in New Spain. The author points to an interesting irony in that these communities early on were made up of migrants from the outside, yet, by the eighteenth century, they had coalesced as communities enough that they could not

necessarily outright challenge Spanish authority but had the confidence to assert themselves more or less in the manner of Spanish *vecinos*.

This book widens the scope of Mexican ethnohistory, providing historians of central Mexico a point of contrast in how indigenous populations negotiated their status as colonial subjects in this peripheral area. It expands our understanding of the conditions of the northern frontier of New Spain. It demonstrates that a region of the colonies that is otherwise considered part of the *mas ayá*, part of the periphery of the empire, was central to the economic vitality of the core of New Spain.

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