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The Mesoamerican codex re-entangled : production, use, and re-use of precolonial documents

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Summary

THE MESOAMERICAN CODEX

RE-ENTANGLED

Production, use and re-use of precolonial documents

This work is an attempt to piece together the cultural biography of the precolonial Mesoamerican codices. It will be shown that modern technology is capable of elucidating even the earliest episodes of this biography. The less than twenty manuscripts that still exist today are all that remains of the Mesoamerican book-making tradition. Past studies of these pictographic and hieroglyphic manuscripts have focussed mostly on their content. The lack of a focus on their physical characteristics has meant that not enough is known about the production, use and re-use of these books.

As with any object, the biography of the codices begins with the creation process. Much about this process is unclear, as its study is made difficult by a number of factors. The first of these factors is the understandably protective policy of the institutes that have these books in their care. Any investigation of the originals has to be done in a fully non-invasive manner. The methods currently available for non-invasive investigation of materials all use spectral analysis at different wavelengths. These methods are able to identify inorganic materials such as mineral pigments, but have limited applicability to organic materials. Earlier studies have shown that these codices are made on strips of either leather or paper, which was folded like an accordion to make pages and then covered with a chalk or gypsum gesso. On this bright white surface the scribes painted their figures using mostly organic dye-based paints. What the source of these dyes was is often impossible to ascertain using the non-invasive methods. Next to these modern investigations, there is however also a number of early colonial Spanish documents that provide information on the materials that were used

by precolonial Mesoamerican peoples to make colours. These two sources of information provide a list of possible ingredients for the making of a codex. Within the context of this study experiments have been performed with the ingredients on this list to: better understand how to work with this material; what previously unidentified secondary materials may need to be included; and also what techniques, skills and tools are needed to successfully make a full scale codex. During this reconstruction process it becomes clear that these books are the result of intensive interaction between many people. First of all, some of the materials identified in these books come from sources with a wide geographical spread. The wide range of skills needed to extract the resources and make all the components for each codex furthermore suggests a complex interaction between different craft specialists.

When an object is finished, it enters into a new phase of its biography: a period of actual use. There is very little securely known about the use of these books, though it is clear that these books were sacred texts rather than everyday objects. Some texts contain information that can be considered more historical in nature, though these books were also not objects for simple everyday use. A basic distinction that can be made is private versus communal use of a text. This distinction is important when considering the location of use, as well as all the other objects and people involved in its use.

When the remaining codices are studied closely, it becomes clear that these books are fragile. Danger comes from fire, water, light and simple handling. Thus throughout their use they are in constant danger of deterioration and will eventually need to be either repaired, or disposed of in a proper manner. From Spanish descriptions as well as some very rare archaeological finds it can be seen that one way of disposing of an old codex was by putting it in a

burial, either in a cave or in the ground. Both of these leave very little archaeological remains. This helps explain why so few codices exist today.

The second big reason for the disappearance of entire libraries is to be found in the encounter between the Mesoamerican and the European worldviews. In Europe centuries of war against internal and external “Others” had associated non-Christians with the realm of evil. In the European imagination there was a whole realm of evil, subjected to the devil, where demons were worshipped. In European art devils and demons were depicted as hybrid creatures, exhibiting both human and animal characteristics. In the Mesoamerican writing traditions, humans are often depicted with animal features in their dress. This was originally meant to be related to the name of the character, but was reinterpreted by Europeans to show that these were evil books used for demon worship. As a result the Europeans destroyed them. The codex *Iya Nacuaa* (Colombino-Becker) shows an indigenous reaction to the threat of destruction levelled at the Mesoamerican writing systems as a result of this imaginary demonology. This document is one of the most damaged documents, but the damage is intentional and can paradoxically be seen to be directed towards a goal of preserving the document.

Almost all books that have survived the colonial period did so within the walls of European institutions. For many of these books it is not well known how they got there, or where they came from. For some it was even forgotten that they came from the Americas. In these institutes the books lost their meaning and the workings of the writings system were forgotten. It was only with their reproduction that they could be studied and started to regain some of their meaning. The strategies of reproduction can be considered as a new chapter in the cultural biography of these codices. The different ways of reproduction transformed the objects in fundamental ways. Inaccurate reproduction is one obvious transformation, but even photographic reproduction, with its two-dimensionality, changes the codex. A second aspect of transformation is the creation of access to these books through reproduction. Whom they are reproduced for is as important as how they

are reproduced. Reproduction of these books has given more access to scholars, but has due to the costs of many of the reproductions had a limited impact on the general public. As with any rare and thus valuable object, these codices have attracted the attention of forgers, which again transforms the meaning of these objects. Modern digital technology is on the rise as one of the ways of creating access to cultural heritage, though it has not yet been applied extensively on these manuscripts. The new possibilities that these techniques offer, as well as the pitfalls that need to be avoided, are important aspects to consider for the future of these books.

Modern technology has been the main tool for the investigation of the earliest phase of one of the Mesoamerican codices. During the 1950s it was discovered that one of the codices had lived a life before the use of the known text: the *Codex Añute* (Selden) is a palimpsest. Hidden underneath the gesso layer, and older layer of images can be found. When it was first discovered, technology had not advanced far enough to allow the investigation of these images without removing the gesso. Within the project here presented researchers from Leiden University, Delft University of Technology, and the Bodleian Libraries of the University of Oxford, have recently teamed up to recover these images in a non-invasive manner. A whole range of techniques was applied to obtain as much information as possible on the images that were already exposed – due to natural wear and the invasive investigation of the 1950s - as well as previously invisible images on pages still completely covered with gesso. This opened up a whole series of new questions which may now be asked of this object: why was it reused? Was this normal? What can the hidden text tell us about Mesoamerican history?

All these new questions indicate that the cultural biographies of these manuscripts are not yet finished. One possible future chapter may be to use these books to reconnect present-day Mexican indigenous peoples with their cultural heritage. One medium for this may be the internet. The final part of this work contains a brief discussion of the possibilities and the pitfalls that this would bring.