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MESOAMERICAN ETHNOHISTORY

Frances F. Berdan
Department of Anthropology, California State University, San Bernardino, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, CA 92407, USA

Abstract

Research in Mesoamerican ethnohistory has made great strides over the past few decades. Innovations and refinements in the field follow several themes, including increased availability and more sophisticated interpretations of pictorial codices, the bringing to light of additional documentary materials and their translations, an increase in research on colonial life, a continuing interest in the Spanish conquest itself, and the development of particularly useful interpretations and perspectives from anthropology, history, and art history. Building on these themes, ethnohistory is in a position to further develop documentary analyses and text translations, encourage multidisciplinary and comparative research endeavors, and generate more sophisticated models for understanding culture change.

It was somewhat less than two *katuns* ago when Howard F. Cline wrote his "reflections" (1973), and H. B. Nicholson penned his "overview" (1975) of Mesoamerican ethnohistory for volumes 12 and 15 of the *Handbook of Middle American Indians*. These articles were included in a monumental four-volume compendium of Mesoamerican source materials pertinent to ethnohistorical research (1973–1975). Ethnohistorians today are the very fortunate heirs of this exceptional four-volume effort and the many works on which it was based.

SOME THEMES FROM THE RECENT PAST

I take Cline's and Nicholson's statements of the condition of ethnohistory at that time as my jumping off spot for this little essay. Their assessments were reinforced a few years later by Spores in an article published in *Annual Review of Anthropology* (1980). All of these "state-of-the-art" articles stress similar themes in the relatively small but dynamic field of Mesoamerican ethnohistory. I find these issues still relevant today, since they have persisted, shown significant development over the past few decades, and promise to enhance and enrich this field in the future. The themes focus on: (1) the increased availability of high-quality reproductions of pictorial codices and translations of native-language texts; (2) increasing sophistication of contextual analyses of pictorial manuscripts; (3) the bringing to light of additional documentary materials; (4) an increased commitment to unraveling the nature of native life following the Spanish conquest as well as before that signal event; (5) a continuing interest in the Spanish conquest itself; and (6) the development of particularly insightful interpretations of native life before and after the Spanish conquest based on the enhanced documentary foundation and on evolving perspectives in anthropology, history, and art history. These six themes serve not only as retrospective views, but also as guides to future research. As a side note, I would like to emphasize that this discussion is more representative than exhaustive (and I apologize for any grave omissions).

Email correspondence to: fberdan@csusb.edu

Increased availability of high-quality reproductions of pictorial codices and translations of native-language texts

In 1975, Nicholson called for an increased availability of high-quality color reproductions of pictorial codices, observing that the Akademische Druck-u Verlagsanstalt in Graz, Austria, and the Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología in Mexico were on their way to fulfilling that need (1975:498). They continued to do so, for example, with publication of the *Matrícula de tributos* in 1982 and the *Códice Borbónico* in 1991 (Anders et al. 1991). Since the mid-1970s, several other organizations and publishing houses have entered the codex arena with enthusiasm, producing excellent color facsimiles and interpretations of Mesoamerican codices. Recently, special issues of *Arqueología Mexicana* have been exclusively devoted to the reproduction, translation, and interpretation of four central Mexican codices: *Matrícula de tributos* (Sepulveda y Herrera 2003), *Códice Fejérváry-Mayer* (León-Portilla 2005), *Códice Nuttall* (Hermann Lejarazu 2006), and *Tira de la peregrinación* (Johansson K. 2007). This same journal has also published thematic issues on codices and writing (e.g., Fray Bernardino de Sahagún 6(36); Códices Coloniales 7(38); Calendarios Prehispánicos 7(41), and La Escritura Maya 8(48)), more focused articles on codices and writing (e.g., Baudez 2002; Izquierdo y de la Cueva 1999; Noguez 2006d; Rossell 2001), and periodic brief discussions of the essentials of selected codices (e.g., Noguez 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2008).

Other codices have been made available as full facsimiles and have added to the ability of ethnohistorians and others to conduct enhanced and detailed research on topics ranging from iconography to social organization. Among these facsimiles are the *Codex Mendoza* and *The Essential Codex Mendoza* (Berdan and Anawalt 1992, 1997), the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* (Quiñones Keber 1995), Sahagún's *Primeros Memoriales* (Sahagún 1993; Baird 1993), *The Codex Magliabechiano* (Boone 1983), *Códice Azoyú* (Vega Sosa 1990), *Códice Cospi* (Laurencich Minelli 1992), *Códice de Santa María Asunción* (Williams and Harvey 1997), *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (Kirchhoff et al. 1989), and *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan, No. 2* (Carrasco and Sessions 2007). Another important pictorial genre encompasses the maps associated with

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the sixteenth-century colonial *Relaciones Geográficas*, now available and commented upon especially by Mundy (1996).

Contributing to this trend of accessibility of documentary sources, several major textual sources, initially produced in Nahuatl and deriving from colonial times have now been translated with extensive commentaries. Being post-Conquest in date, these sources provide valuable information on native adaptations to Spanish rule. But they also deal with pre-Conquest histories and culture and can be mined for intriguing clues on pre-Conquest life. These include the important works of a Chalcan with the daunting name of Don Domingo de San Antón Muñon Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin, or Chimalpahin for short (Anderson and Schroeder 1997; Lockhart et al. 2006), The Annals of Cuauhtitlan and Legend of the Suns (Bierhorst 1992a, 1992b), and the encyclopedic works of Bernardino de Sahagún. The Nahuatl texts of Sahagún's *Primeros Memoriales* have been translated by Sullivan (1997), and the ground-breaking translations of that same friar's *Florentine Codex* by Anderson and Dibble (continuing in revisions until 1982) provide a magnificent corpus of linguistic and cultural data. Also enhancing this record are Catholic catechisms and other religious texts rendered in Nahuatl. Since these texts frequently contain indigenous imagery and metaphors, their translations contribute to an understanding of the more subtle dimensions of native culture (Anderson 1993; Burkhart 1989, 1996; Sell and Burkhart 2004).

Contextual analyses of painted manuscripts

Rich cultural information from ethnohistoric sources has become not only more available, but also more meaningful through an increasing emphasis on contextual analyses of pictorial codices. Virtually all recent publications of individual codices include extended translations, commentaries, and analyses. Approximating another of Nicholson's suggestions, significant efforts have been made to assemble and analyze groups of codices, whether by content or style categories. The need for this is easily justified in that "The Mesoamerican pictorials should never be studied in isolation but always within their meaningful cultural contexts. Their publication in contextually integrated groupings would positively facilitate this approach" (Nicholson 1975:498). Boone's two synthetic overviews of historical annals (2000) and "books of fate" (2007) provide valuable models for understanding classes of codices and their content. A special section of *Ancient Mesoamerica* on Mixtec codices presented "a sampler of the most recent thinking on the Mixtec manuscripts" (Fowler and Houston 1990b:97), highlighting the importance of understanding these types of sources in context. This was also important for its interdisciplinary melding of history, archaeology, ethnography, and linguistics. In other areas, the reissue (2005; with expanded notes and comments) of important works such as Nowotny's 1961 classic *Tlacuilolli* (focusing on the Borgia group of codices) and similar reissue (1994) of Robertson's 1959 *Mexican Manuscript Painting of the Early Colonial Period* (focusing on the "Metropolitan Schools") speak to the high level of scholarly need for detailed descriptions and analyses of classes of pictorial documents.

Additional documentary materials

Only a year after Nicholson's article in the *Handbook of Middle American Indians* a new genre of documentation arrived on the scene with the potential to redirect at least some ethnohistoric research. This genre initially embraced Nahuatl documents written in Roman script and then expanded to similar Mixtec and Mayan sources. These were for the most part civil and notarial records documenting daily life matters in colonial times—wills, litigations, taxes and tribute, censuses, town council minutes, even personal letters. The archives are full of them. Publication of translations of these documents began with the broadly conceived *Beyond the Codices* (Anderson et al. 1976) and blossomed with additional works in central Mexico focusing on matters such as town council minutes (Lockhart et al. 1986), censuses (Cline 1993), wills (Cline and León-Portilla 1984; Kellogg and Restall 1998), local histories (Gómez García et al. 2000), and primordial titles (Haskett 2005). This style of Mesoamerican ethnohistory has also been pursued in the Maya (e.g., Restall 1999) and Mixtec (e.g., Terraciano 2001) areas, culminating in a comparative work encompassing native language writings from central Mexico, Guatemala, and the Yucatan (Restall et al. 2004). A considerable number of very productive works have derived from the many translations of these types of documents, mostly concentrating on native adaptations to Spanish colonial rule (see below).

In the meantime, other types of documents have come to light. Gerhard's 1993 revision of his 1972 *Guide to the Historical Geography of New Spain* includes valuable information from several documents unknown to scholars in the 1970s (including a large *Relación Geográfica* from Tlaxcala). The *Códice de Xicotepec*, a pictorial document deriving from the Sierra Norte de Puebla, surfaced in 1992 (Stresser-Péan 1995), and two *lienzos* from nearby Acaxochitlán appeared three years later (Stresser-Péan 1998). The "discovery" of these and other documents, some through happenstance and some through deep digging in the archives, has continued to expand our ethnohistoric database, in some cases (such as these examples) filling in regional gaps in the documentary record.

Post-Conquest studies

Interest in native life under Spanish rule is nothing particularly new to Mesoamerican ethnohistoric research—Charles Gibson's landmark *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule* and *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century* were published in 1964 and 1967, respectively. He was accompanied in these sorts of studies by scholars such as Ricard (1966) and Chevalier (1963). These and other similar works were heavily researched, based on Spanish-language documentation, and the general approach, simply stated, focused on how the natives fit into Spanish-introduced institutions and lifeways.

More recent colonial research has delved into what may be called "regional ethnohistory." Maintaining an empiricist perspective and often drawing on previously untapped archival sources, these studies have cast a broader net throughout a wide diversity of areas in Mesoamerica (Altman and Lockhart 1976; Carmack 1981; Chance 1989; Clendinnen 2003; Farriss 1984; Hill 1992, 1996; Jones 1989; Spores 1984). Most of the articles in *Explorations in Ethnohistory* (Harvey and Prem 1984), in *The Meeting of Two Worlds* (Bray 1993), and in the *Ethnohistory* supplement to the *Handbook of Middle American Indians* (Spores 1986) are devoted to indigenous life under Spanish rule. In addition to providing essential data and thoughtful syntheses on differing groups and areas, these studies uniformly emphasize the cultural, social, and historical diversity of these regions in colonial times (see below).

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Accompanying the avalanche of native-language notarial and civil documentation was a further innovation—a focus on indigenous adaptations to the new lords of the land. This approach stresses indigenous strategies, survivals and continuities, "arguing that despite broad structural shifts, Indians succeeded in maintaining a separate culture with many distinctive cultural values and behaviors" (Kellogg 1995:xxii). To achieve this understanding, contributions with this orientation present the native voice: a native view from native documents (Lockhart 1991; Restall 1997; Wood 2003). Much of the research is topical. For example, studies range from local history (Schroeder 1991) to women's roles (Schroeder et al. 1997), town government (Haskett 1991; Terraciano 2001), legal matters (Kellogg 1995), Spanish-native relations (Horn 1997), and family and other social relations (Kellogg and Restall 1998). Ranging from the sixteenth through the less well-known eighteenth century, the *tour de force* of this research is James Lockhart's *The Nahuas After the Conquest* (1992), which pioneers this point of view and applies it to the natives of central Mexico on a vast panorama of cultural and social topics.

The always-fascinating Spanish conquest

It seems that too much cannot be said about the Spanish conquest. The events, personalities and complex interactions on many cultural and social levels continue to pose intriguing questions and stimulate considerable research (García Martínez 2001; Restall 2003). Even as recently as 1993, Alistair Hennessy (1993:5) wrote that "The more that is written about the Conquest the more puzzling it becomes." And more and more has indeed been written. Published in that same year, Thomas' (1993) *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortés, and the Fall of Old Mexico* superseded earlier accounts dating back to Prescott's classic 1843 conquest history. Thomas, drawing on the enormous numbers of primary and secondary sources on the conquest, along with an interesting collection of additional unpublished documents, has brought the genre of "conquest history" to a new level of comprehensiveness. Nicholson (2000:135), while admiring this work but also citing some errors of fact and interpretation, emphasizes the need for historical works of this sort to "make a major effort to acquire as accurate knowledge as possible of the cultures of the indigenous polities that were overrun by Cortés." Indeed, in recent years "the Conquest" has emerged as more complex and textured than previously understood (Restall 2003).

This increased knowledge of the indigenous side of this clash has been pursued in much the same vein as the studies of native cultures following the Spanish conquest (see above)—by revealing the native voice, native tellings, native perceptions, and native understandings. These indigenous accounts can be found, for example, in Anderson and Dibble (1978), Jones (1998), León-Portilla (1992), Lockhart (1993), Matthew and Oudijk (2007), Restall (1998), Restall and Asselbergs (2008), and Sahagún (1950–1982, Book 12). These native accounts are extremely revealing, yet still must be understood in concert with Spanish accounts (as some of these works do) to reveal a meaningful understanding of the complex interplay between native and Spaniard in those early years of the sixteenth century.

Scholarly interest in the Conquest itself also continues because of fascination with the main actors themselves; not just Motecuhzoma and Cortés, but a whole bevy of pivotal characters populate the unfolding scenarios as the Conquest proceeds. To what extent did the personalities and decisions of these individuals affect the outcomes of the conflict? This question is worth posing and pursuing. For instance, Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin himself remains enigmatic, and his role in trying to maintain his empire in the face of Spanish military pressure has been recently reexamined (Graulich 2004).

While there have been many momentous conflicts throughout history, few are so well documented to allow such an intimate understanding of both sides of the conflict. As such, it has the potential to serve as a template for understanding culturally embedded human behaviors in dramatic moments of history (Restall 2003).

Useful interpretations and perspectives

Clearly, the documentary base available for understanding pre-Conquest and post-Conquest Mesoamerica has expanded considerably over the past couple of decades. The broader range of documentary records has enhanced the ability of Mesoamerican scholars to pursue more in-depth and sophisticated research questions and to apply more refined approaches and perspectives to get the most mileage from this extensive database. While many different approaches and interpretations have been advanced, I will limit myself here to a brief discussion of five of these.

First is the matter of incorporating the native voice into ethnohistorical interpretations. With more native-language sources translated and available, concentrated data on myriad native cultural and social features ranging from kinship to economics to ritual have been marshaled to gain in-depth "insider" understandings of native life. The Spanish filter through which we previously viewed native life has been muted, in tune with the anthropological tradition of cultural relativism.

Second, the native-language sources have not only provided fertile ground for investigating indigenous life under Spanish rule, but have also encouraged changing perceptions of native-Spanish interactions. Today, the native peoples are seen as more proactive in their colonial adaptive strategies (e.g., Chance 1989; Lockhart 1992). So, for instance, indigenous Tlaxcalan commoners become more affluent and uppity—than previously perceived—by diligently producing cochineal, much to the ire of the indigenous nobility (but not, apparently, bothering the Spaniards). The council of that same town hired a Spaniard to manage and increase their sheep flocks, threatening to fire him if he is not successful (Lockhart et al. 1986). And native residents of the town of Jalostotitlan confidently petition the king, complaining bitterly of the outrageous behavior of their local priest (Anderson et al. 1976:166–173). These and many other examples have added an opportunistic dimension to the nature of indigenous life under Spanish rule.

Third, these ideas suggest the importance of agency in understanding the dynamics of the colonial world. The events of the Conquest itself provide fertile ground to examine similar questions of agency in contributing to the train of history. Agency theory focuses on individual actors along with their actions and decisions, but not in isolation. Johnson (2004:246) suggests that researchers "examine the potential and constraints of specific cases where agency, structure, and power intersect." Mesoamerican ethnohistorians are on their way.

A fourth issue is the methodological matter of offering general interpretations from specific cases. This actually appears in several twists. The best known of these is "upstreaming"—conceptualizing lesser-known cases from better-known ones. The most popular form of upstreaming involves moving back in time from modern ethnographically revealed cultures to those in the past

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where the documentation is more fragmentary (especially into colonial times and from there into the pre-Spanish world). Yet this assumes a level of cultural continuity and consistency that is increasingly difficult to support (Chance 2001:9). Along somewhat similar lines, questions have been raised about the wisdom of using highly urban Tenochtitlan as a model for Aztec life in other communities. It is seductive to do this, since the information on life in Tenochtitlan is so rich and abundant, yet this city was unquestionably atypical and other centers must be understood more on their own terms (see M.E. Smith 2008a). Again along similar lines, the profusion of documentary sources on central Mexico has made that region a particular hotbed for ethnohistoric research and an attractive model for interpreting conditions in other regions. However, researchers have increasingly resisted the temptation to generalize from that especially well-documented region. Much progress in understanding regional variation has been made by applying this perspective (see, for example, Chance 2000). So whether present to past, urban to rural, or well-known region to less-known region, scholarly perspectives have recently opted for the greater empiricism, recognizing greater complexities and variations than we had previously thought.

A fifth matter concerns the integration of ethnohistory with other disciplines active in Mesoamerican research. Ethnohistory readily interfaces with archaeology and other disciplines such as art history, ethnology, and geography. Where documents are mute or ambiguous, these several other fields can offer or suggest clarifications or alternative interpretations. Conversely, ethnohistory provides critical clues in the pursuit and refinement of research in these other disciplines. Interdisciplinary approaches are particularly evident in recent studies merging ethnohistory and archaeology (Byland and Pohl 1994, Joyce et al. 2004, and Pohl and Byland 1990 for the Mixtec; Hill 1996 for the Highland Maya; Brumfiel et al. 1994, García Chávez 2002, and López Luján 2006 for the Aztecs), blending ethnohistory, archaeology, and art history (Berdan et al. 1996; Olivier 2003; Umberger 2008), combining ethnohistory with ethnology (Hill and Monaghan 1987), and uniting ethnohistory, archaeology, art history, and ethnology (Berdan et al. 2008). Such approaches today are not just popular. They are expected.

INTO THE FUTURE?

I think it is safe to say that the field of ethnohistory has more dimensions today than it did in the mid-1970s. Certain valued dimensions have continued from the inception of the field, notably an empirical focus on illuminating the past through intense study of historical documents and a reliance on interdisciplinary input (especially from anthropology and history). Considering these parameters, over the past few decades ethnohistory has expanded its scope and made important strides on several fronts. Where might it go over the next *katun*?

Ethnohistory is a child of anthropology and history and has traditionally been cross-fertilized by the interaction of scholars and ideas from those core disciplines. Now, as the field has matured it has developed its own internal momentum, and it benefits from contributions of art historians, historical geographers, demographers, epigraphers, and others (Barber and Berdan 1998). Ethnohistory as a field of inquiry has a sustained vitality in part at least because of its very hybrid nature.

In this spirit, refinements in documentary analyses and cultural reconstructions surely will continue to be made (e.g., Rojas 2007). I would anticipate that these would include an improved evaluation of documents using sophisticated art historical, epigraphic, content, and technological analyses. For instance, the many variants of Mesoamerican glyphic writing have been studied for decades, but the book is far from closed on issues of writing (Bricker 1992). Bodies of glyphs in pictorial documents still remain to be translated, as with the numerous native glyphs embedded in portions of Sahagún's pictorial corpus of the *Florentine Codex*. For example, in the mere space of 24 separate illustrations in Book 9, no fewer than 18 Aztec glyphs (as single units or composites) appear, many of them phonetic—some have been translated, many have not (see Berdan 2009; Peterson 1988). Beyond translations, persistent lively issues in the world of Mesoamerican writing include the presence and extent of phoneticism—local variation vs. general patterns, flexibility in rendering written symbols, and the written forms' relation to oral recitation and renditions (Boone 2007; Boone and Mignolo 1994; Lacadena 2008a, 2008b; Zender 2008).

Furthermore, the availability of a wide range of documentation has spawned considerable research relating to characteristics of the documents themselves as well as to their varied and fascinating content. The works are legion that have drawn on these sources, and they are sure to stimulate additional such research in the future. As brief examples, Batalla Rosado's (2007a, 2007b) close examination of the *Matrícula de tributos* and the second part of the *Codex Mendoza* allows him to convincingly argue for a pre-Columbian origin for the former document, as well as for scribal associations between the two documents. Similarly, Hammond (2005) has gone beyond the earlier studies of the *Codex Mendoza* and has analyzed the colors of the images with greater precision.

Interdisciplinary research involving ethnohistory has become commonplace and has proven to be particularly productive, although it still has the potential to contribute even more (M.E. Smith 2008b). This generally takes two forms. In one style, scholars from a single field (singly or jointly) apply related approaches and data to a research question (Kepecs and Alexander 2005; López Luján 2006; M.E. Smith 2008a; Umberger 2007). Individual researchers today (and in the future) can draw on relevant aspects of more than one field, solving little puzzles and yielding progressively more interesting ideas. So, for instance, I have often wondered about Sahagún's brief description of "feather spinning"—how was this actually done? McCafferty and McCafferty (2000) suggest that tiny spindle whorls uncovered archaeologically at Cholula were used for this purpose. Progress. And then, more recently, art historical and technical analysis of an actual colonial Mexican spun feather artifact revealed something more—the feathers were entwined with cotton (Phipps and Commoner 2006). Even more progress in unraveling this little mystery, ultimately relying on input from ethnohistory, archaeology, and art history (and, potentially, some experimental archaeology).

A second style of interdisciplinary research involves collaborations of scholars from related fields to produce multidisciplinary works on focused problems, drawing on the strengths of each specialization (e.g., Berdan et al. 1996, 2008; Smith and Berdan 2003). Ethnohistory can be central to such pursuits. For instance, in a recent volume on Nahua ethnicity (Berdan et al. 2008), Chance's ethnohistoric contribution to Colonial-period ethnicity proved pivotal in understanding the broad temporal panorama from pre-Conquest to modern times.

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A few other approaches have become well established and promise to yield very productive research results in the future. Today, ethnohistorians and their colleagues explicitly acknowledge local variations in time and space. This recognition, and the research and data it has generated, establishes a firm base for more extended comparative studies framed around specific conceptual approaches (such as *The Postclassic Mesoamerican World* [Smith and Berdan 2003] and *Sexual Encounters/Sexual Collisions: Alternative Sexualities in Colonial Mesoamerica* [Sigal and Chuchiak IV: 2007]).

A further arena with considerable research potential is the Postclassic-Colonial transition. Until recently, pre-Spanish and Colonial period Mesoamerica has been studied rather separately, with the events of the Conquest itself constituting a kind of hiatus between the two. However, newer approaches suggest the value of looking at these historic scenes more holistically and more as transitions and transformations (see especially Kepecs and Alexander 2005; Spores and Robles García 2007); indeed, we are reminded of the tendency in some pictorial annals to move rather seamlessly from pre-Conquest events, through the Conquest, and on into the colonial regime. In terms of research questions, Gasco (2005:96) suggests that "Rather than framing the issue as one of survivals and extinctions, a more productive approach might be to focus instead on how and why these different groups were transformed in distinct ways over the past 500 years—what were the conditions that led people to make such different choices?" For even greater insights, this good question might be applied to pre-Spanish times as well, as that history was also full of conquest, domination, rebellion, autonomy, and subsequent conquest, along with the economic, social, and political consequences of those events. In a broader sense, ethnohistory is well poised to develop interesting and useful models for comprehending more broadly conceived issues of culture change and dynamics.

These are possibilities. Much as Nicholson could not anticipate certain innovations in ethnohistory after his state-of-the-art article was published, nor can I foresee the field at the end of the next *katun*. Nonetheless, the energy, creativity, and solid contributions to scholarship of this area of inquiry have blossomed over the past few decades, and I feel confident that ethnohistory will continue to be a lively and productive field for several *katuns* to come.

RESUMEN

Este artículo discute los avances y progresos en la etnohistoria de Mesoamérica durante las décadas recientes. Las innovaciones y los mejoramientos en la etnohistoria conforman a diversos temas, incluyendo un incremento en las publicaciones de los códices, interpretaciones mas penetrantes de estos tipos de documentos, traducciones de documentos de archivos (que no han sido usados anteriormente), más investigaciones sobre la vida colonial (especialmente la vida indígena), un interés continuo en la conquista española, y el desarrollo de útiles interpretaciones y perspectivas de antropología, historia e historia de arte. Extendiendo estos temas, ahora la etnohistoria está en una posición favorable para desarrollar mejores análisis y traducciones de documentos de diversos tipos, para estimular trabajos multidisciplinarios y comparativos y para generar modelos creativos para comprender las dinámicas de las culturas generalmente.

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