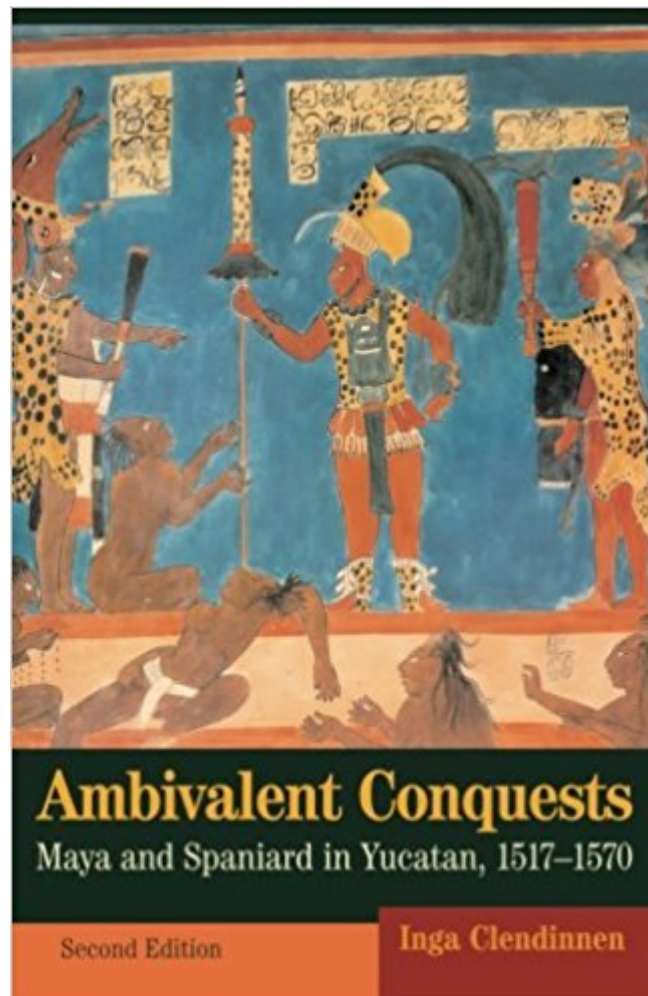


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# Ambivalent Conquests: Maya And Spaniard In Yucatan, 1517-1570 (Cambridge Latin American Studies)



## Synopsis

In what is both a specific study of conversion in a corner of the Spanish Empire and a work with implications for the understanding of European domination and native resistance throughout the colonial world, Inga Clendinnen explores the intensifying conflict between competing and increasingly divergent Spanish visions of Yucatan and its destructive outcomes. In *Ambivalent Conquests* Clendinnen penetrates the thinking and feeling of the Mayan Indians in a detailed reconstruction of their assessment of the intruders. This new edition contains a preface by the author where she reflects upon the book's contribution in the past fifteen years. Inga Clendinnen is Emeritus scholar, LaTrobe University, Australia. Her books include the acclaimed *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge, 1999), named a Best Book of the Year by the New York Times Book Review, and *Aztec: An Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1995), and *Tiger's Eye: A Memoir* (Scribner, 2001).

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Clendinnen's elegantly written work describes the devastating effects of Spanish conquest and settlement on the politically fragmented Maya of the Yucatan until 1570.... Her account of the 1562 investigation into Maya religious practices and the political conflicts that accompanied it makes fascinating reading." *Choice*"This is a splendid book by a gifted historian. With great subtlety and imagination, Inga Clendinnen draws us into the swirls of missteps, ambitions, deceptions, and fantasies that constituted the conquest drama in Yucatan....Clendinnen has written a remarkably

powerful and compelling book....This study ranks among the very best scholarship on the region and will dazzle any serious student of native American peoples, Christian missionaries, and colonial situations." American Historical Review

This is both a specific study of conversion in a corner of the Spanish Empire, and a work with implications for the understanding of European domination and native resistance throughout the colonial world. Dr. Clendinnen explores the intensifying conflict between competing and increasingly divergent Spanish visions of Yucatan and its destructive outcomes. She seeks to penetrate the ways of thinking and feeling of the Mayan Indians in a detailed reconstruction of their assessment of the intruders.

I needed this book for a class that I enrolled in and it arrived promptly. I was happy with the condition of the book, as it was in better condition than described. Great service.

Interesting take on colonization. This copy has underlinings and scribbles in the margins but that's fair at the price I paid and it serves its purpose for a class I will be taking.

Well documented and writing, I would like to include more information from the other side, not as always, the history is written by the winners

As described, provided quick service.

Clendinnen's book is excellent and I highly recommend it to anyone interested in colonial Latin America. The book focuses on the Yucatan peninsula. Clendinnen looks at the Spanish side of things first, then at how the Maya understood--and resisted--their new rulers. A central figure in the book is the Franciscan Diego de Landa. Landa is portrayed as both a man dedicated to God, and as a man with a sadistic streak. He strongly suspected that the Maya were continuing to practice idolotry rather than the Catholicism Landa wanted them to adopt. As a result, Landa brought the Spanish Inquisition to Yucatan. Landa also had a strong will to power; Clendinnen covers his battles, mostly victorious, with other Spanish officials. The second section of the book deals with the Mayan response to things Spanish. She attempts to sort out truth from fiction in the "confessions" wrung out of the Maya by the Spanish Inquisitors. One of the more interesting aspects of this is Clendinnen's discussion of how the Maya appear to have adopted certain elements of Christianity

while retaining most of their own beliefs. Anyone interested in religious syncretism or relations between conquerer and conquered would do well to pick up this book.

Overall, Inga Clendinnen's book serves as a vivid illustration of history. The images from the text stick to memory, and specific events and people (Diego de Landa, Nachi Cocom, Francisco Hernandez, and Fray Francisco de Toral) from almost five hundred years ago, come alive. The book is divided in two parts: the Spaniards and Indians, where what happened in Yucatan between 1517 and 1570 is examined from two different perspectives. It almost seems like there are two books within a book, as there are two beginnings and two epilogues, yet the connection between the two parts is never lost. The structure of the book is not only interesting, but also appropriate to the message the author seeks to convey: it illustrates the idea of "confusion of tongues", the fact that the perceptions of the Maya and the Spaniard were almost irreconcilably different. The book is also thoroughly researched, employing both primary and secondary sources. I enjoyed Clendinnen's discussions of the books of Chilam Bilam, of Landa's *Relacion de Las Cosas de Yucatan*, and of the confessions that Landa extracted from the Indians in 1562. I also appreciated the fact that where information is unavailable, and deduction from what is known goes a little far, the author is not afraid to acknowledge it. I should also mention that the author makes an implicit assumption that the reader is Christian, and has a good understanding of Christian faith and practices. When explaining Mayan human sacrifice, for example, Clendinnen writes that "we have somehow to detach ourselves from our Christian-drenched notions of sacrifice..." In terms of evaluating the persuasiveness of the book, I should say that although in the beginning of the book, she raises the question about to what extent the information that Indians confessed under torture was exaggerated or true at all, toward the end of the book she seems to have accepted the assumption that there was at least some truth in the confessions - that human sacrifice and crucifixions did happen, and were not just a product of Landa's imagination, as she had previously suggested. So she never really proves that human sacrifice and crucifixions did happen, but kind of explores the possibilities of "what if they did" and "what if they didn't." Also, in the epilogue, the author makes a quick conclusion that the events of 1562 were significant because it was only after these events that the Maya finally accepted Christianity, or some Mayan version of it. It does make sense that the events of 1562 and the general intrusion of friars into the Maya spiritual domain would demonstrate to the natives that Spanish presence would not be temporary, that the Spanish were there to stay, and must be taken seriously. But this is in the political realm. As for the spiritual realm, it is unclear why the violence, the sufferings inflicted by the friars, and the destruction of

Mayan idols would result in the Maya acceptance that "the time of the old Gods was over", and that Christian deities and the Christian God would now rule. The events of 1562 do not demonstrate the superiority of the Christian faith relative to the Mayan beliefs. Why didn't the violence the friars inflict on the natives make the natives reject Christianity and to revolt against the Spaniards, instead of accepting the Christian faith? This raises the further question of why some populations abandon their religion and accept the faith of the group that conquers them (after all, this is not the only time this scenario came up - Islam spread with the Muslim conquests, for example), while other populations or groups hold on to their own religions and religious practices for very long periods of time while living in exile (Jews in Christian and Muslim countries for example). What factors does the likelihood of accepting the religion of the dominant group depend on - on the political coercion and missionary offensive of the conqueror, or perhaps on the ability of conquered peoples to resist this offensive by shielding behind the strength of their own religious beliefs and practices? What influences what form the acceptance of the religion of the dominant group take - absorption of new religion into the old religion, absorption of old religion into the new religion, or perhaps complete abandonment of former religious beliefs and practices in favor of the new ones. How unique is the Maya case? Or perhaps the acceptance of the new faith isn't something that abruptly takes place at conversion, but a lengthy, gradual process that takes generations, whereupon the old faith gradually fades away? If so, do elements from the pre-conquest period still survive in the religion of the Yucatan Maya? All these questions deal with the larger implications of Clendinnen's book: implications for the understanding of the domination of the conqueror (both military and religious) and the resistance of the conquered peoples, not only in Yucatan, but throughout the world. Do true conquests happen, or are all conquests to some extent ambivalent?

This is really the first book I read in depth on the subject of the Maya. I have read substantial parts of other books, but this author's approach is remarkable in that she is able to delineate at all times between the religious and the historical which can be very much intertwined during this amazing period. It is clear that the histories of the Inca, Maya, and Aztec are very much different. You get from her account an almost novel type of reading experience as it becomes so lifelike. It is truly a remarkable book about a fascinating and extremely resilient and committed people. It was not easy for me to read in the sense that it is so dense as far as the knowledge is concerned, and I was hurried. But it is extremely well documented and this helps a great deal in cementing one's understanding to the truth of what actually took place. It is truly a tragic period in human history presented in great clarity and compassion.

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