

Mark Z. Christensen. *The Teabo Manuscript: Maya Christian Copybooks, Chilam Balams, and Native Text Production in Yucatán*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2016. 339 pp. ISBN 9781477310816.

Reviewed by
Ben Leeming
The Rivers School

Fascination with Maya culture runs deep in both popular and academic circles. Regrettably, popular imagination tends to be fueled by sensationalized documentaries and feature films that propagate discourses of mystery and violence. For their part, scholars have tended to devote much attention to the Maya *prior* to contact with Europeans, an emphasis fueled by the stunning archaeological discoveries of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By the 1980s, the decipherment of the Maya hieroglyphic writing system came to dominate scholarship about the Maya, and with good reason. As epigraphers and linguists unlocked the histories of entire dynasties, a more complete picture of the ancient Maya emerged, revealing them to be a literate civilization that wrote extensively about many of the same subjects that captivated scribes and kings of the Old World's ancient civilizations. However, as a consequence less attention has been paid to the Maya *following* the initial attempts at conquest in the latter half of the sixteenth century. Like their Classic-era ancestors, colonial Maya continued the tradition of writing, only this time using the alphabetic system taught to them by Spanish Franciscan missionaries. Perhaps because alphabetic Maya writing lacks the aesthetic appeal of its hieroglyphic antecedent, it has garnered much less attention, leaving open the question: "What did colonial Maya write about?" Mark Z. Christensen's *Teabo Manuscript: Maya Christian Copybooks, Chilam Balams, and Native Text Production in Yucatán* makes an important and much-needed contribution to answering this question. What emerges is a striking picture of the way Maya writers thoughtfully selected foreign elements to adopt and traditional elements to preserve, negotiating a space for continuity with the past in the wake of great change.

In the summer of 2012, mere months before the much-hyped "Maya Apocalypse" was set to arrive on December 21, Christensen first laid hands on a small handwritten notebook of Maya texts in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections at Brigham Young University. Originally part of the collection of Mayanist William E. Gates (1863-1940), the manuscript had lain unstudied since it left the hands of the Maya writers who

filled its pages with miscellaneous texts, mostly of a religious nature, during a period that spanned the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Christensen refers to this curious text as the Teabo manuscript, since it appears to have been redacted by various Maya writers from the Yucatecan town by that name. The contents of the notebook are diverse, and Christensen's decision to structure his analysis in parallel with them gives the reader the satisfying experience of moving through the manuscript while reading the book. Each chapter is followed by Christensen's transcription of the relevant texts with their translations arranged on facing pages. Following the Introduction, the book's first chapter addresses the Teabo's first text, a commentary of the Genesis creation story from the Old Testament. The second chapter addresses the two short texts that follow the Genesis commentary: a genealogy of Christ based on the Gospel of Matthew 1:1-16 and a treatise on the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, also from Matthew. Chapter Three is a Maya adaptation of a popular medieval text known as the Fifteen Signs Before Doomsday. Chapter Four examines two prayers, one to Mary the other to Christ, and a brief indulgence text. The final chapter addresses fascinating late addenda to the Teabo: medicinal recipes recorded in the manuscript's available spaces and margins, and records of the deaths of prominent members of the *cab* (Maya town) of Teabo. After the book's Conclusion, the Teabo manuscript is reproduced folio-by-folio in black-and-white images.

Although the Teabo's texts appear to have been redacted between roughly 1800 and 1911, they are part of a tradition of textual copying and circulation that has its roots in the early decades following Contact. When Spanish Franciscans began their mission in the Yucatán in the 1540s, they taught members of the Maya nobility to read and write in the alphabetical form of their own language. Maya *escribanos* (scribes) and *maestros* (religious instructors) worked either in local government or assisted directly with religious indoctrination and administration. Mayas trained in Franciscan schools not only taught the friars how to speak native languages, they assisted them in the translation and composition of doctrinal materials, grammars, and dictionaries, acted as catechists for their fellow Maya, and when friars were absent, they ran the day-to-day operations of their local churches. Since the clergy were so outnumbered by the Maya, *maestros* often exercised a startling degree of autonomy. One of the ways they exercised this autonomy was in the creation of texts like the Teabo, texts which Christensen calls "Maya Christian copybooks" (12). These collections of miscellaneous handwritten Christian texts were circulated by the Maya among themselves to assist in the practice of Catholic Christianity as they understood it. Unlike the official religious texts that were the product of collaborations between friars and Indigenous writers, Maya Christian copybooks were created by Mayas exclusively for Mayas and were created outside of the supervision of the clergy. Christensen argues that autochthonous texts like these should be considered a new genre of Indigenous religious writing. By virtue of the fact that Mayas themselves chose which texts to record in these notebooks, they offer a unique perspective on what Christensen calls a "Maya Christian worldview" (5). The contours

of this worldview become clear through Christensen's careful analysis of the Teabo's contents as he highlights the many subtle ways Maya writers adapted European texts for Maya audiences. However, his analysis also sheds light on the complex and often contradictory processes that produced hybrid cultural products in colonial contact zones such as the Yucatán. Christensen's treatment of the text he refers to as the Genesis Commentary serves to illustrate both of these central points.

Christensen argues that the mere fact that the Genesis account was selected for inclusion in the Teabo highlights an important aspect of the worldview of Christianized Mayas. It is well known that the pre-contact Maya viewed the beginnings and endings of important calendrical cycles as moments of great significance. Like other Mesoamerican cultures, the Maya understood Creation as originating in mythical time at the hands of powerful deities and progressing through a number of "ages" or periods. In the oft-cited *Popol Vuh*, a colonial retelling of the K'iche' Maya creation story, each of these "creations" was destroyed by the gods as they sought to bring forth perfect beings to worship and care for them. This sequence is also mirrored in the Aztec "Legend of the Suns." The inclusion of Christianity's own creation story in the Teabo illustrates an important principle governing the way Mesoamerican peoples responded to the introduction of Christianity, a principle first articulated by James Lockhart in his seminal work *The Nahuas After the Conquest* (1992:243). Christensen writes, "Time and time again Mayas (and Nahuas) more readily adopted those aspects of Christianity – and the colonial world in general – that contained preexisting parallels" (30). Taken along with the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (which treats the Final Judgment at the End of Time) and the Fifteen Signs Before Doomsday texts, the inclusion of the Genesis commentary shows the continuity of Maya emphasis on period beginnings and endings, which Christensen notes is one of the defining characteristics of the Maya Christian worldview.

However, Christensen's analysis also underscores the dynamism of the processes that governed contact between Mesoamerican and European cultures. Maya writers didn't slavishly reproduce their sources just as they didn't merely imitate the Catholicism of their robed instructors. Instead, they entered into a complex process of cultural negotiation, exercising varying degrees of autonomy in deciding for themselves and their people which aspects of European and Christian culture to adopt and how to incorporate them into their preexisting worldview. Some analysts refer to this process as transculturation, a process that involves a dialectical give and take between dominant and subordinate actors. Christensen's analysis of the Genesis commentary and the other of the Teabo's texts offers valuable concrete examples of transculturation's operation in the colonial period and across time. The Mayas who redacted the Teabo's texts each made their own individual decisions about what to add to the notebook and how to present their sources, editorial decisions that allow Christensen to chart variations across surviving "cognate" texts. Individual decisions made in the process of redacting Maya Christian copybooks diversified the Christian message, resulting in what

Christensen has elsewhere referred to as “Maya Catholicisms” (Christensen 2012). One minor quibble I have with Christensen’s analysis of the Teabo is his use of the phrase “Maya Christian worldview,” which implies a uniformity which is at odds with the diversity of religious expression among colonial Mayas and Nahuas that he has so convincingly demonstrated elsewhere. Worldview (or “worldviews”) aside, Christensen’s approach to interpreting the Teabo manuscript is not only highly engaging but ultimately important as a model for the interpretation of the numerous Indigenous Christian copybooks that have survived from colonial times. As further analyses of these fascinating and little-studied texts emerge, Christensen’s *Teabo Manuscript* will surely be credited as the beginning of an important new direction in the study of the religious history of colonial Mesoamerica’s Indigenous people.

The uneventful passing of the 2012 “Maya Apocalypse” has quieted armchair-experts and conspiracy theorists, leaving room for more reasoned, scholarly voices to resume their rightful place at the forefront of the study of the Maya and their legacy. Christensen’s *Teabo Manuscript* confirms what was often shouted down in the furor of 2012: the Maya are still here, their various “Christianities” and “worldviews” continually adapting to the changing times, as they negotiate an on-going space of continuity with the past through creative engagement with the present.