
Book Review

Aztec Antichrist: Performing the Apocalypse in Early Colonial Mexico. 2022. By Ben Leeming. Denver: University Press of Colorado/Albany, NY: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies. 314pp. \$100 (hardcover), \$35.95 (paperback), \$29.95 (e-book).

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Nowadays in Nahua communities, performance is called *nemiliztlama-huizolli*. *Nemiliztli* is ‘life’ and *tlamahuizolli* is a ‘show’. I have organized several performances with family and friends, first as a child growing up in Chicontepec, Mexico, and later as a Nahuatl instructor. My parents told me that in the past my *altepetzin* (community) had a *tablado* (stage) that was used for theater. Theater and performance have long histories in Nahua villages. I collaborated with Louise Burkhart, Daniel Mosquera, Nadia Marín Guadarrama, and Rebecca Dufendach on the digital project *Passion Plays of Eighteenth-Century Mexico*, the goal of which is to make Nahua plays from the colonial period accessible to Nahua people today.¹ As a Nahua scholar, I am committed to making sure that Nahuatl documents and texts written during Mexico’s colonization remain accessible to Nahuatl speakers. In *Aztec Antichrist: Performing the Apocalypse in Early Colonial Mexico*, ethnohistorian Ben Leeming demonstrates a similar commitment.

In 2014, Leeming discovered the devotional notebook of Fabián de Aquino, a sixteenth-century *nahuatlahtohquetl* (Nahuatl speaker), at the Hispanic Society of America in New York City. *Aztec Antichrist* is both the product of and a depiction of Leeming’s *tlatequipanól* (labor), and it is based largely on primary sources. *Tlatequipanól* is a term used by Nahuas when we collaborate with someone or on something. The kinds of undertakings that comprise *tlatequipanól* usually do not involve payment because they are understood as a service. *Tlatequipanól*

1. Online: <https://passionplaysofeighteenthcenturymexico.omeka.net/project>.

aptly describes the research conducted by Leeming, especially because he makes the Nahuatl materials from Fabián de Aquino available to Nahuas and English-reading scholars alike. Leeming's book invites us to consult the religious literature for performances produced in early colonial Mexico.

Leeming transports readers to the past by focusing on Nahuatl plays, particularly those from the sixteenth century. His analysis highlights the legend of the *antexpo* (Antichrist) in New Spain, which was performed in Nahuatl plays as an appropriation and adaptation of a genre of theater in the land of Nahua people after the conquest of Mexico. These *tlayehyecalhuiliztli* (representations) promoted migration from central Mexico to the provincial *altepeme* (towns). Leeming provides one example of a play performed in 1587 that depicts an epiphany experienced in Tlaxomulco, which is now part of Guadalajara, Jalisco. The plays integrated Judeo-Christian and Nahua elements and built on a popular tradition of outdoor performances in Nahua communities. Leeming argues that Nahua people performed the Nahuatl discourse and thus occupied a role between representer and represented. The audience *macehualmeh* (Nahua people) watching the *tlamahuizolli* received the catechistic message as more of a spectacle than an act of conversion.

Leeming explores performances of Christ's second coming in Nahua communities. These performances depicted the time after the end of the world and final judgment—in short, the apocalypse. Two of Leeming's main sources are religious dramas recorded by Fabián de Aquino, which he translates and titles *Antichrist and the Final Judgment* and *Antichrist and the Hermit*. As performed in Mexico, these plays disseminated Christian doctrines related to moral issues in Nahua society and the severe punishments in store for religious skeptics. They were meant to inspire terror in the audience, with the goal of modifying believers' behavior as part of the program to extirpate Indigenous religious practices. In other words, the evangelical plan to teach new doctrines focused on exalting doomsday scenarios as punishment for *tlahtlacolchihuanih* (sinners).

The play *Antichrist and the Final Judgment* portrays the Antichrist as a false divinity related to Quetzalcoatl and centers on the second arrival of Christ, who along with the archangel Michael, appears to redeem the sinners and condemn the *axcualmeh* (bad ones). *Mictlan*, one destination of the deceased as conceived by the Mexica (Aztec), is likened to Hell, and *ilhuicatl*, a more pleasant afterlife realm, is understood as Heaven. *Antichrist and the Hermit* is a drama, wherein Antichrist tries to tempt new converts away from Christianity and the titular Hermit interrogates a range of characters, including sinners damned to Mictlan and Aztec deities, the latter of whom are revealed to be not gods but creations of the Christian God. Names like *tlacatecoltl* or *tlahueliloc*,

both types of 'demons' associated with the seven deadly sins, appear with an *apilolli* (water jar). Many of the demons are associated with a pre-Contact deity and would have been familiar to the native audience. *Lociper* or 'Lucifer' appears first and represents *nepovaliztli* (pride); *Tlaloc*, who depicts *tecocolliliztli* (envy) appears second; third is *Tezcatlipoca*, associated with *tecuilontiliztli* (adultery); then come *Huizilopochtli*, for *qualanilliztli* (anger), and *Quetzalcoatl*, for *xixicuiyotl* (gluttony); next is *Otontecuhтли*, for *tlatzihuiyotl* (laziness); and finally, *Cihuacoatl* stands for *teoyevacatilliztli* (greed). These seven demons are the antagonists, and they represent *iztlacatotiotziztin* (false deities). For Nahua today, these characters are considered *totiotziztin* (deities) and are still connected with pre-Hispanic religious thought.

Leeming provides context about the early colonial period with *neixcuitilli* (examples) from New Spain. The book is divided into historical content, analysis, discussion, and conclusions related to the Antichrist. In the back matter, he provides the transcription and paleography of the two dramas, as well as their translations into English, including linguistic notes where he discusses the meanings of words. Scholars of classical Nahuatl will appreciate the inclusion of the original text, but Leeming also makes these readings accessible to public audiences through his paleographic work.

Because of the intensive evangelization of Nahuas during the colonial period, contemporary Nahua people have a number of sayings related to end times. In Huasteca Veracruzana, you may hear someone say *tipohuizcehya* ('We will disappear soon') or *temoz totiotzin*, ('Our god will descend'). These expressions are often associated with the apocalypse as interpreted by Protestants, who link natural disasters to the end of the world, a strategy that encompasses new Nahua souls. We Nahua people still do not believe completely in the idea of doomsday, but this Christian thought has influenced our beliefs.

For those interested in the origins of the collision between Judeo-Christian religion and Nahua *tlaneltoquilli* (beliefs) documented in religious plays performed in central Mexico, I recommend reading this *amatlahcuilolli* (written text) by *notequixpoh* (my colleague) Ben Leeming, who has used his skills magnificently to interpret sixteenth-century Nahuatl dialogues for a modern audience.