

# Colonial Latin American Historical Review

---

Volume 4  
Issue 1 *Volume 4, Issue 1 (Winter 1995)*

Article 5

---

12-1-1995

## Charles Andrew Hofling, *Itzá Maya Texts: With a Grammatical Overview*

Jill Brody

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Brody, Jill. "Charles Andrew Hofling, *Itzá Maya Texts: With a Grammatical Overview*." *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 4, 1 (1995): 95. <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr/vol4/iss1/5>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colonial Latin American Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

## Book Reviews

---

*Itzá Maya Texts: With a Grammatical Overview.* By Charles Andrew Hofling. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press. xii + 321 pp. Bibliography. \$35.00 cloth.)

As the last of the Mayan peoples to be conquered by the Spaniards, the Itzá hold a special place in Mayan prehistory, history, oral history, and ethnohistory. They are also remembered through the places that still carry their name, from the important archaeological site of Chichen Itzá to Lake Petén Itzá, where they now make their home, across the lake from Flores, the capital of the Guatemalan department of the Petén. The conservatism and spirit of resistance of the Itzá led to their remarkable persistence into modern times. Nevertheless, the Itzá are a greatly diminished and absorbed people, and their language is dying. As one of the more than thirty Mayan languages currently used, it is spoken today by a few dozen, with only the oldest individuals being fluent. (See Charles A. Hofling, "The Revitalization of Itzaj Maya Language and Culture," to appear in a forthcoming issue of *Human Organization* [Spring 1996].) Hofling's study of the language is thus important in a number of ways: as a work of salvage linguistics, the careful documentation of the language is invaluable for understanding its unique internal structure and its relation to other Mayan languages. Mayan linguistic and cultural worlds were and are by no means homogeneous, which adds poignancy to the loss of a language and makes documentation that much more urgent. In addition, every language embodies a view of the world, the loss of which is a cultural as well as a linguistic tragedy.

Hofling's work is more than one of salvage. He has presented a grammatical overview of the language, allowing interpretation of its structure and comparison with other Mayan languages for purposes of reconstruction, and providing important information for the interpretation of the ancient hieroglyphic writings.

Most of the book is given over to the words of the Itzá, sensitively transcribed, analyzed, and translated by Hofling. The selection of texts is representative of the genres known by the speakers with whom he worked. Four main genres are presented. There are eleven personal narratives, where speakers talk about their daily lives, revealing both the persistence of cultural traditions and the amount of cultural change that has gone on in the community. There are seven traditional stories, some of which take us into the spirit world and echo the story of creation. Five texts are expository, describing everyday activities from the Itzá's own perspective. Finally, there is an

extensive conversation; it is rare and welcome to find conversational data included in a text collection, since conversation is, after all, the most normal type of discourse, and therefore a means whereby we can find out about what people really think, and how they really speak about it.

Hofling's analysis of the texts is carefully designed to provide information important for both the linguistic specialist and the general reader. Each line of every text is presented first in Itzá, second in linguistic morphological breakdown, and third in a fully colloquial translation into English. The first line provides invaluable data for the specialist and allows the generalist to get a feel for the language. The grammatical overview explains the major features of the language, permitting full interpretation of the second line. The third line gives us the English version of the stories and conversations, which take us into the Itzá world.

The revitalization of Mayan languages (resulting in part in an official orthography for the language, respelling it as Itzaj) and attempts at the establishment of an Itzá Biosphere project (Hofling, to appear) give hope for the preservation of this unique and wonderful language and culture.

Jill Brody  
*Department of Geography and Anthropology*  
*Louisiana State University*