



PROJECT MUSE®

The Ancient Spirituality of the Modern Maya (review)

George L. Scheper

The Americas, Volume 66, Number 3, January 2010, pp. 404-405 (Review)

Published by Cambridge University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tam.0.0231>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/368737>

of pre-World War II Japanese immigrants in Brazil. Isolated in their *colonias* in the interior of São Paulo state, they were separated from their cherished homeland, and with it Buddhist and Shinto sacred places. Many of these Issei were thus spiritually lost and they turned to emperor worship in place of more traditional beliefs. This led to significant suffering and even violent factionalism in the Japanese-Brazilian community in the aftermath of Japan's defeat in World War II. The author also fails to discuss the impact of the exodus of at least 350,000 members of the Japanese-Brazilian population to Japan beginning in the late 1980s and continuing to this day. Seeking a better economic future, these new immigrants have altered the dynamics of the Japanese-Brazilian religious communities dramatically. These additions would have strengthened an already important addition to the literature on religious and social diversity in Southern Brazil.

U.S. Naval Academy
Annapolis, Maryland

DAN MASTERSON

The Ancient Spirituality of the Modern Maya. By Thomas Hart. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008. Pp. xvi, 270. Photographs. Notes. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. \$39.95 cloth.

Guatemala today has become home to one of the great syncretic traditions in world religion, with Maya Traditionalism often practiced in tandem with Roman Catholicism. In a market town such as Chichicastenango, worshippers at a Catholic Mass may follow up the service with a visit to the Traditionalist shrine of Pascual Abaj on a hill outside town for a diagnosis or healing by a shaman whose prayers freely mix references to Mayan Earth Lords with Roman Catholic saints. To an outsider—whether an evangelical or an anthropologist—this looks like syncretism, neither purely Christian nor purely Mayan. But to the practitioners, it is a seamless garment of spirituality. This “ancient spirituality of the modern Maya” is the subject of Thomas Hart's book, a welcome contribution and yet severely limited in academic usefulness.

Hart intends to offer a sense of modern Mayan spirituality by presenting an anthology of edited and arranged taped interviews with some sixty Traditionalist practitioners (*Aj Q'ijab'*), while limiting his own interventions. Hart's practitioner-informants comment on such topics as the Mayan calendar, divination, dreams, shrines and altars, illness and curing, and spirits and lords of the earth. They explain how to tell prophetic dreams from just plain dreams, how illnesses and misfortunes come from breaches in appropriate behavior, or how riches or success may be obtained from dealings with an Earth Lord, but at the cost of solidarity with one's human community. We also find every sort of take on the relationship of Maya Traditionalism to Catholicism, ranging from an outright rejection of Christianity at one end of the spectrum to the all-embracing attitude of individuals who are at once Mayan Catholic priests and practicing Traditionalists.

This is rich material, giving us what so often is the missing element of the native voice, and it is to Thomas Hart's credit that he has foregrounded these interviews, which constitute the bulk of his book. But because these testimonials are presented anonymously,

and without much commentary, the native voices are almost completely decontextualized. Hart gives us almost no background about the life experiences of the speakers, and for interviews conducted during the horrendous repression of the 1980s and early 1990s, when Guatemalan communities were wrenched apart by affiliations with leftist rebels or with right wing military units, or by attempts at remaining “neutral,” the lack of such information is devastating. Religion was at the center of those violent years. The repressive government of Efraín Ríos Montt recruited Evangelical Protestantism to the cause of an “anti-communist” crusade. The Catholic Church, once firmly aligned with the social/political establishment, had developed an activist left wing devoted to liberation theology. Meanwhile, Maya Traditionalism tended to be caught in the middle, scorned by Evangelicals as pagan and viewed by liberationist progressives as out of touch with social and political reform.

By choosing not to engage with existing academic scholarship on Maya spirituality or current sociopolitical issues in Central America, Hart means to foreground the native voice. But by presenting anonymous, decontextualized voices, Hart inadvertently contributes to the essentializing of the Maya. Ironically, the diversity of views of the Maya informants is actually undercut by this decontextualization: because nothing is privileged, nothing critiqued or analyzed, the voices merge into a collection of undifferentiated oral reportage. Hart tells us that he is happy to embrace even hearsay as a way to understand the Maya, but that does not address the issue of what uses can best be made of this collection. A teacher can cite one of these anonymous testimonials by a Maya Traditionalist, but to what end? What is that speaker’s standing in his or her community? What kind of relationship has this person had to other elders, or to family members? What was this person’s experience in relation to the years of repression in Guatemala? Without such contextual information, Hart’s native collaborators speak, as it were, from a void and into a void. Fortunately, we also have a growing body of not-anonymous Maya voices appearing in print as part of the current Maya cultural revival movement and their growing prominence in the current cultural scene in Guatemala gives assurance that their participation in the conversation is at hand.

Johns Hopkins University
Baltimore, Maryland

GEORGE L. SCHEPER

Revolutions in Mexican Catholicism: Reform and Revelation in Oaxaca, 1887-1934. By Edward Wright-Rios. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. Pp. xiii, 362. Maps. Figures. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$84.95 cloth; \$23.95 paper.

This is a book about Catholic survival and resurgence in a Mexico increasingly characterized by secular and anti-Catholic political and cultural elites who put statecraft and nation building above all other considerations. The War of the Reform (1858-1860) and the French Intervention and Second Empire under Maximilian of Hapsburg (1862-1867) created a deepening rift between the Catholic hierarchy and its allies on the one hand, and liberal or eventually anarcho-socialist or socialist elites, on the other.