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*The Sun God and the Savior: The Christianization of the  
Nahua and Totonac in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, Mexico*  
(review)

Ariadna Acevedo-Rodrigo

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Irish filmmakers who made *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* (2002) received Chávez's cooperation by promising to portray him positively. "This agreement—although contrary to responsible documentary filmmaking—is immediately apparent from the film's unabashed pro-Chávez stance" (p. 337). Nelson interviewed spokespersons from two organizations that have attempted to assist the victims of the events of April 11: the government-funded ASOVIC (Asociación Nacional de Víctimas del Golpe de Estado 11, 12, 13, 14 de Abril) and the independent organization VIVE (Víctimas Venezolanas de la Violencia Política). The author accepts the integrity of VIVE spokespersons without question, but writes that those associated with ASOVIC had a conflict of interest in talking about the events because they held government jobs.

Nelson's book is an engaging read that conveys much of the chaos, uncertainty, and horror of those three days in April. His conclusions may be valid, but his lack of evenhandedness undermines the credibility of the book.

*College of William and Mary, Emerita*  
*Williamsburg, Virginia*

JUDITH EWELL

## ETHNOHISTORY & INDIGENOUS POLITICS

*The Sun God and the Savior: The Christianization of the Nahua and Totonac in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, Mexico.* By Guy Stresser-Péan. Foreword by Alfredo López Austin. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2009. Pp. xxix, 664. Foreword. Bibliography. Index. Maps. Illustrations. DVD. \$75.00 cloth.

Guy Stresser-Péan's erudite compilation of contemporary Nahua and Totonac beliefs resulted from fieldwork carried out in the 1980s and 1990s, but summarizes the knowledge and experience of an ethnographer whose work in Mexico commenced in the 1930s. He describes the book's core region of study as an area covering part of the municipalities of Huauchinango and Xicotepec, and the small municipalities of Naupan, Pahuatlán and Chila-Honey in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, as well as part of the municipalities of Acaxochitlán and Tenango de Doria in the state of Hidalgo. However, in various chapters his reflections expand beyond this area as he discusses the ethnography of neighboring regions, such as the southern part of the Sierra Norte, where the Nahuatl dialect known as Olmeca-Mexicano is spoken, and the Totonac villages to the north of the Pahuatlán river that were studied by Alain Ichon. Likewise, the title only mentions the Nahua and Totonac, but his discussion often includes the Otomí and sometimes the Tepehua.

Despite its subtitle, the main purpose of the book is not so much an analysis of christianization but a detailed description, and a careful and measured interpretation, of the survival of pre-Hispanic beliefs and traditions. They include those that have mixed with Christian beliefs, as well as those that have remained separate, but which do not stop communities from having deeply held Christian beliefs in other aspects of life. Stresser-Péan is clear to point out that he considers the indigenous groups studied to be sincerely

Christian but, compared to those of central Mexico, they seem to have retained to our days more of their ancient beliefs and traditions. This was possible because of geographical isolation and because christianization occurred “in a relatively calm period where there was a general trend towards religious conciliation that was quite different from the conflictive and repressive tendency that reigned in and around Mexico during the first years after the conquest” (p. 572).

Stresser-Péan’s book has an encyclopedic quality, covering in great detail dances, narratives of cosmogony and cosmology, and beliefs in supernatural beings such as the Sun, the Moon, Old Thunder, the God of Maize and Nine Wind. The author describes all these beliefs and traditions as found during recent fieldwork, carefully discussing their differences to pre- and post-Columbian beliefs known through codices and colonial sources, and comparing his findings to those of other researchers. Stresser-Péan’s fine detective work is particularly rich in his discussion of sacred drums (*Huehuetl* and *Téponaztli*) in Chapter 8 and dances in Chapters 12 and 13. The division of the book into 21 chapters with detailed subtitles facilitates reading. Each chapter may be read independently as the information in previous chapters is generally not taken for granted. This results in some repetition but eases consultation of specific topics.

As part of this impressive collection of contemporary indigenous thought and traditions, Stresser-Péan found that the ancient Mesoamerican calendar survived at least partly among some Totonacs and Nahuas in his core region. Additionally, in Tepetzintla, Stresser-Péan found a good number of informants who remembered an agricultural ritual of ancient origins, which had never been completely abandoned. On his initiative, the festivity was reinstated in 1991. Filmed by Stresser-Péan and his wife Claude, a DVD of “The Corn Fiesta” is included with the book. Its images are a stunning companion to the book’s discussion of the ritual, though neither in the book nor in the film does the author tell us the extent of his intervention to organize this extraordinary festival.

There are limits to the book’s organization in self-contained, relatively short chapters. For example, in Chapter 9, we are not told why women are central to the organization of the Tepetzintla agricultural ritual, leaving the reader to assume that perhaps it was because this was a celebration of fertility. However, in Chapter 14, we learn that, increasingly, as indigenous beliefs and practices have lost prestige, women have taken over as repositories of indigenous knowledge. This provides a plausible explanation for the fact that Stresser-Péan’s main informants and restorers of the Tepetzintla festivity were women. The richness of the Tepetzintla ritual is also better appreciated once we have read the chapters on the various ritual elements, as well as the chapter on calendars. Thus, information and interpretation are at points slightly too spread out, somewhat marring the narrative. Yet the reward is there for those who persevere.

*Centro de Investigación y de Estudios Avanzados  
Mexico City, D.F., Mexico*

ARIADNA ACEVEDO-RODRIGO