

Jean Molesky-Poz, *Contemporary Maya Spirituality: The Ancient Ways Are Not Lost* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006), pp. xx + 201, £21.99, hb.

Since the signing of the Peace Accords between the Guatemalan government and the URNG guerrillas in December 1996, Mayan forms of cultural expression have been increasingly present in the public sphere. Even the casual short-term tourist notices that Maya cultural events now take place in plain view. This constitutes a radical historical shift from a situation in which Mayas and their expressive cultural and political forms were violently repressed. What is even more remarkable is that Maya spirituality has entered the public sphere. This is especially so because Maya spiritual leaders have been among the most persecuted individuals in Guatemala, since the Spanish invasion in 1526.

Jean Molesky-Poz's book, *Contemporary Maya Spirituality*, explores what constitutes contemporary Maya spiritual belief and practice, according to Mayans. In particular, her book examines Maya spirituality via six themes: the public emergence of Maya spiritual practice in contemporary politics, the cosmological foundations, the process of becoming an *ajq'ij* (Maya spiritual practitioner, literally 'keeper of the days'), what constitutes the Maya sacred geography and spiritual offerings, the functioning of the *Chol Q'ij* (Maya 260-day sacred calendar), and Maya ritual ceremonies themselves. Molesky-Poz is particularly suited to explore these issues. In the early 1980s, she gained entry into this spiritual community through a fortuitous encounter with a young Kaqchikel Maya woman, Calixta Gabriel Xiquin, who was living in exile in the United States. Since then Gabriel Xiquin returned to Guatemala and has become a prominent *ajq'ij*, poet, social worker and human rights advocate. She also introduced Molesky-Poz to her husband, a K'ichee' Maya man, whose brother is an *ajq'ij* himself.

These social connections have allowed her to gain entry into the Maya spiritual and cosmological world as most people, even today, are rarely permitted. Indeed, the book is filled with rich descriptions of Maya spiritual practice and ideology from Mayas themselves, particularly, *ajq'ija'* (plural of *ajq'ij*). Although Maya spiritual practices have been a preoccupation of archaeologists and ethnographers for decades, these studies have tended to focus on the technical aspects, rather than the attitudes and opinions of the practitioners themselves, as does Molesky-Poz. In fact, for readers seeking information about the particulars of Maya divining practices and the *Chol Q'ij*, they should refer to these other resources.

To an extent, the book is a romantic, though readable and interesting, discussion of Maya ideas. Molesky-Poz tends to emphasize the cultural-historical linkages between present-day Maya practices and those in the past. This tends to frame Mayas in idealistic terms and ignore the five hundred plus years that Mayas have had to deal with foreign invaders, including missionaries, businesspersons and soldiers, bent on changing Mayas' beliefs and ways. Given that Mayas have guarded their distinct worldviews, languages and practices, albeit not without modifications in contending with these outsiders, it is easy to be romantic.

However, this may have inhibited Molesky-Poz's ability to pursue some more historically painful and controversial issues. First, this is an excellent discussion about the openness of Maya spirituality, but it does not explore the reasons for this. To a great extent, Maya spirituality has been practiced clandestinely for very pragmatic reasons. Maya spiritual leaders have been the objects of assassination by state actors, military or otherwise for hundreds of years, and as Molesky-Poz mentions,

they continue to be targeted. It is not clear what has changed in Guatemala and among Mayas to allow this phenomenon to occur. Second, *ajq'ija'* have long been controversial figures in Maya society. There is a wealth of ethnographic material, produced by anthropologists from the early twentieth century to the present, which documents this and is ignored by the author. The harmonious relationship between the *ajq'ija'* and the people of their communities, as presented in the book, contradicts this earlier material. In fact, only in passing is it revealed that contemporary Mayas are re-learning and re-interpreting their spiritual beliefs via the scholarly, predominantly anthropological, research conducted by foreign researchers. Furthermore, some of the attitudes espoused by Mayas themselves, some of whom are returning from political and economic exile, seem strikingly similar to New Age perspectives. Why these developments are so is a fascinating issue and one that demands to be pursued.

The strength of Molesky-Poz's book rests in the underlying strategy of treating it as a forum for the dialogic and reciprocal relations she maintains with her Maya in-laws, friends and colleagues. On a theoretical level, she employs Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts on dialogue, aesthetics and worldview to explore Maya spirituality and her social and academic relationships with Mayas, themselves. Although Bakhtin's ideas provide a framework for the book, this is not a tour-de-force theoretical discussion. Rather, it is a respectful treatment of Maya ideas and practices, in which the Bakhtinian theory seems more as a self-warning to the author and the book's readers to think about the ethical processes of engaging in cross-cultural dialogue.

Molesky-Poz surveys a wide range of *ajq'ija'* and believers from different linguistic groups and communities, often giving their words precedence over her own academic voice. This is refreshing and it helps to emphasize how diverse contemporary Maya spirituality is in terms of how they conceive of it and how they practice it. It also means that the book is not based in the specific practices and histories of one community. Molesky-Poz's sampling of a diverse linguistic pool of people from several communities, who come from different social classes and educational levels, seems to aim at providing a more global portrait of Maya spirituality.

The book's lack of systematic analysis will most likely frustrate social scientists and historians interested in Maya spirituality. It should be kept in mind that Molesky-Poz is a theologian by academic training and profession. She follows these conventions as she explores Maya spiritual beliefs. Linguists will find the orthography inconsistent and the linguistic analysis weak. Ethnographers will be disturbed that there is no particular place – either home or network – that is investigated. And historians will want more details on the development of Maya spiritual beliefs as constituted through time and through political and economic contexts. Rather than condemn Molesky-Poz for not writing a book that addresses these issues, it is important to recognize that what she does do in *Contemporary Maya Spirituality*, is lay a foundation for further research that truly incorporates Mayas' perspectives.

*University at Albany, SUNY*

WALTER E. LITTLE