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## Book Review

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*Pilgrimage to Broken Mountain: Nahua Sacred Journeys in Mexico's Huasteca Veracruzana*. 2023. By Alan R. Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom. Denver: University Press of Colorado. 478pp. \$97 (hardcover), \$34.95 (paperback) \$28.95 (e-book).

Reviewed by: Alice B. Kehoe, Marquette University, [akehoe@uwm.edu](mailto:akehoe@uwm.edu)

With *Pilgrimage to Broken Mountain*, Alan R. Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom have produced a true magnum opus: a book of 478 pages, eight and one-half by eleven inches, nearly three pounds in weight. Exceptionally clearly printed color photographs. Appendices recording, literally step-by-step, pilgrimages on which the Sandstroms accompanied their Nahua hosts. Superb ethnography. Masterly discussion of theories. A very heavy rebuttal to the notion that all you ever need should be on your laptop screen. And at the price of an airport paperback, everyone can afford to buy this book.

Alan Sandstrom is an anthropologist by profession, now retired from teaching for many years at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne. Pamela Effrein Sandstrom is associate librarian emerita at the same university and formerly served as head of reference and information services there. Although Pamela Sandstrom is not an anthropologist, she accompanied Alan throughout his ethnographic fieldwork, collaborating with him to ensure that the ethnography was not biased or limited by a single fieldworker's gender. They also sometimes brought their son Michael with them into the field, which reflects their trust and respect for the Nahua people. (Parenthetically, I took my children with me while I did fieldwork, and after they were grown, several of my hosts told me that they felt comfortable speaking freely because I trusted their communities in this way, listening sincerely to their philosophies of the moral life, explained to me so that I might guide my children.) The foundation of the Sandstroms' book is their immersion *as a family* in the Nahua village of Amatlán (a pseudonym).

Chapters range from detailed ethnography to high-level scholarly

discussion of interpretations of behaviors and discourse that academics label 'religious'. At the heart of the book is the basic question of translation—from Nahuatl into Spanish and then English, and from experiences into scholarly discourse. The crux may be on page 4, bottom of lefthand column, where the Sandstroms write that, 'we make the case that Nahua religion is pantheistic' only to immediately clarify that they mean 'not theistic' as are the religions of the Book. 'For pantheists', they say, 'the creator and the creation are one and the same: the cosmos itself is the sacred entity'. From this understanding, they assert that 'Nahua religion is a form of monotheism ... [it] exemplif[ies] ontological monism'.

A quick Google search on 'ontological monism' brings up pictures of Spinoza and William James. The Sandstroms, I think, would agree that Spinoza and James shared their view of a monotheism quite distinct from the Biblical conception of an active, even anthropomorphic, singular God. My own teachers among Northern Plains First Nations, particularly Robert Goodvoice (Dakota), held that the universe *is* a power that vitalizes everything; Goodvoice told me that he used the term Almighty Power when speaking in English.<sup>1</sup> Those of us who, in the words of anthropologist John H. Moore, 'hang out' with First Nations communities in their landscapes can absorb this perception.<sup>2</sup>

Having stated their standpoint of ontological monism, so far as academic theory goes, the Sandstroms begin their ethnography-centered account of a Nahua world in the sierra of northeast Mexico. After describing the location and ethnic characterization of the Nahua of the village they joined during many seasons of fieldwork, they have a chapter on 'The Nahua Sacred Cosmos' that again engages with theories of pantheism. Thus prepared intellectually, readers are then taken on the first of five pilgrimages to sacred mountains that the Sandstrom family shared with their Nahua hosts. Following this experience—depicted in photographs as well as with words—we have the core of the Sandstroms' particular fascination with the paper cut-outs of spirit entities, for which these Nahua are famous. As it focuses on a Nahua 'ritual strategy', this chapter transitions well into the next chapter, 'Keys to Nahua Ritual Strategies'. The volume concludes with 'Pilgrimage in Perspective', 'Conclusions About Mesoamerican Pilgrimage', and 'A

1. In 2020, years after Goodvoice died, Daniel Beveridge edited sixteen taped hours of his narration of Dakota history and knowledge and published the volume as *The Red Road and Other Narratives of the Dakota Sioux* (University of Nebraska Press).

2. John H. Moore (1939–2016) was a Marxist who read a good deal of Karl Marx's work and fruitfully interrogated it with his own insights and understanding derived from years of protracted visits with Cheyenne communities, 'hanging out' with their members, as he put it. His standpoint can be gleaned from his work, of which two pieces are included in the reference list.

Coda on Monism, Pantheism, and the Infinity of Images'. That last 'infinity of images' is dramatically exemplified by the actual tens of thousands of paper cut-outs prepared by Nahua ritualists. The book circles through the actual cut-outs and interpretations, as human consciousness does.

At this point, I want to expand on the Sandstroms' brief section on paper-making and cutting. Paper-making was developed in China about two thousand years ago, out of the widespread Asian craft of felting. Its diffusion across Eurasia is well documented. Mesoamerican paper is made of fiber from the paper mulberry plant, just as Asian paper was, though it also incorporates maguey and agave fibers. The process of making paper is the same as the basic process of making Asian paper (Kehoe 2016: 98–101), and sheets of paper have been found in a box in the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlán (Sandstrom and Sandstrom 2023: 185). A Chinese expert on the art of paper cut-outs of deities once observed the Nahua and neighbors' method of cutting spirit figures and declared that the difficult technique is the same as used by Chinese artists (He 2005). The Sandstroms' *Pilgrimage* book covers contemporary Nahua paper-making and cutting, so it need not consider Asian contacts a millennium or more ago.

Although it may seem an outlandish notion, scholars of religion should not reject the possibility of pre-Columbian transoceanic contact between Asia and the Americas, especially during the period of the medieval spice trade, when very large, highly seaworthy *junks* sailed ever eastward from what is today China. Solid evidence for at least one Asian contact with at least one Maya city has been excavated recently in El Salvador: several large clay figurines of lion- or dog-like animals with collars of little bells around their necks, found close to the remains of a temple.<sup>3</sup> A number of small clay figurines of animals with wheels and axles through their feet have been found at the same site and at another in adjacent Mexico. The wheels are not spindle whorls; they were made to be wheels. These resemble wheeled animal figurines that were common in eastern Asia for some two millennia. The Mexican wheeled animals are the *only* wheel-and-axle artifacts anywhere in the Americas before the Columbian invasions (Kehoe 2016: 96–98).

*Pilgrimage to Broken Mountain* could be used in teaching courses on religion from a general point of view; on pilgrimages; on Mesoamerica; on materials and cosmology; or at the graduate level, on how to do

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3. I am indebted to Paul Amaroli, Karen Olsen Bruhns, and Marshall Becker for information about their work at Cihuatán during the 2013–14 winter season. Due to the military danger in this locality, plus COVID, further work at the site was curtailed and at the time of this writing, May 2023, it has not been published for circulation.

ethnography. Frequently, the Sandstroms indicate or discuss their consciousness of political circumstances, old and current, affecting Amatlán and their status as white, American professionals working in a First Nations community. On many levels, *Pilgrimage* is a rewarding read for any anthropologist or scholar of religion. Its subsidized price makes it attainable for students at any level and lets them own and keep this old-fashioned form of treasure. Personally, I shall be citing it in relation to a number of topics in comparative religion and Mesoamerican studies—and as a standard of excellence in scholarly publishing.

### References

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