

REVIEW

AUTHOR(S)

Alan and Pamela Sandstrom pour five decades of study and experience into their book *Pilgrimage to Broken Mountain: Nahua Sacred Journeys in Mexico's Huasteca Veracruzana* to create an intellectually and visually stimulating study of Nahua religion. On the surface, the book is an account of the authors' five pilgrimages to four sacred mountains in the Huasteca Veracruzana region just northeast of Mexico City. However, a deeper dive into the book's preface, nine chapters, four appendices, coda, and glossary of Nahuatl religious and pilgrimage terms reveals a treasure trove of information and analyses on Nahua religion and worldview valuable to any scholar or graduate student. Particularly useful to such an audience are the large portions of the chapters dedicated to reviewing, engaging, and critiquing the work of other scholars who examine similar aspects of religion and pilgrimage, helpfully placing the work among a larger body of scholarship and trends.

The book achieves a variety of goals the authors outline upfront, including the recording of religious traditions that are quickly fading in the face of modern change as more Nahua youth abandon villages for cities, as Protestantism continues to garner converts, and as efforts to create a more orthodox Catholicism continue. The authors also have the bold goal of actually making their research applicable (even useful!) to the reader by arguing that the principles behind Nahua religion and rituals can help people make better sense of their lives and their place in the world while achieving some sort of balance—something everyone searches for in any religion or ideology.

To achieve these goals, the first two chapters establish a foundation from which the reader can appreciate the details of the pilgrimages described in subsequent chapters and appendices. The village of Amatlán and its ritual specialists serve as ground zero for the work. From here, the authors outline the basics of Nahua religious practices (or *el costumbre*), vocabulary, and offices; the setting of Amatlán; the role of the human body, landscapes, colors, and numbers in the Nahua worldview; and popular myths that give meaning to the pilgrimages themselves. For example, the authors expertly weave various accounts together to form the Seven Flower myth, which explains the importance and role of the broken mountain of Postectli in maize cultivation and universal balance, providing the

reader with a textual and visual summary. In understanding the myth, the reader also understands the method and reason for pilgrimages.

Central to the book's contributions is its argument for the optimal framework to understand Nahua religion. Rejecting western-influenced dualism while pushing back against polytheism, the authors advocate for the monistic philosophy of pantheism, according to which everything derives from a single source. This is best seen through Totiotzin. Rather than a supreme deity, the authors describe Totiotzin as "a kind of force or energy" (60). Everything in the Nahua cosmos—from mountains to springs to anthropomorphic representations often labeled "deities" by scholars—is a manifestation of this single presence. The authors argue that the pilgrimages and their rituals are all designed to engage and find balance with these myriad representations of Totiotzin.

This is all further illustrated through the detailed accounts of the authors' two visits to Postectli, along with their visits to three other sacred mountains. As the reader accompanies the authors and members of Amatlán on their pilgrimages, the significance of religious expressions (music, chants) and objects (altars and their accoutrements) are all addressed. Regarding the latter, particular emphasis is paid to the paper figures cut to represent myriad spirit entities who in turn represent the many anthropomorphized forms of Totiotzin. These entities affect crops, rain, and health, and their supplication and satisfaction are of the utmost importance. As the authors explain, these paper figures allow traits of Totiotzin to become realized into subjects that the Nahuas can then approach and entreat through their rituals to maintain and restore the delicate balance of life. And such paper figures (meticulously documented through the book's illustrations and charts) underline the pantheistic religion of the Nahuas. Indeed, the authors note that although the figures themselves differ in size and character, and often require distinct clothing, offerings, and rituals, to the ritual specialists who cut them out, they are "all the same" (405).

Along with pantheism, the book clearly demonstrates that the key to understanding Nahua religion is to understand milpa agriculture and its central role in the lives of the Huasteca Nahua. Indeed, milpa farming goes hand in hand with the Nahua religious tradition, an oft overlooked fact that intimately connects people to the earth through reciprocity and balance. This equilibrium requires a belief that one's actions impact, for good or ill, the communal welfare and cosmic balance. And while this may seem a burdensome responsibility, it also imbues the individual with place and meaning in the world. Or as the authors state, "Nahua pilgrimage is

the ultimate act of respect toward fellow human beings and the forces of the cosmos that sustain life” (280).

The recording and analysis of someone else’s personal, religious beliefs is difficult and sensitive work. And throughout the book the authors make abundantly clear the debt owed to the Nahua ritual specialists and their communities in allowing them to observe and document their religion, which they do through careful prose that strikes an appropriate balance between humility and authority, the known and the unknown. Overall, the Sandstroms have produced something quite remarkable for an academic book: a read that is both good for the mind and the soul. In an increasingly me-centric world often lacking in social awareness and concern for how personal actions affect others, we would do well to learn from the Nahua and their pilgrimages.

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