

Book Review

Pilgrimage to Broken Mountain: Nahua Sacred Journeys in Mexico's Huasteca Veracruzana

By Alan R. Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom
University Press of Colorado, 2023. 459 pages. \$97.00 (hardcover),
\$34.95 (paperback), \$28.95 (e-book).

Pilgrimage to Broken Mountain is a welcome piece of scholarship that adds complexity to our understanding of the Nahua (Indigenous peoples with communities in Mexico and El Salvador) present in Mexico. This book culminates over forty years of research in Mexico's Huasteca Veracruzana in a Macehualmeh town (i.e., a Nahua town in Mexico) pseudonymized as Amátlan (to protect the privacy of its residents). Sandstrom and Sandstrom accompanied the Nahuas from Amátlan to a sacred mountain called Poztectli (literally, “something broken”) or Poztectitlan (“the place of something broken”) on June 1–5, 1998, and June 13–17, 2001, and in 2007 they joined a journey to other sacred mountains. *Pilgrimage to Broken Mountain* and the ceremonies at its core revolve around a now deceased *tlamatiquetl* (person of knowledge) named Encarnacion “Cirilo” Téllez Hernández, may he rest in power.

El costumbre (“custom” in Spanish), or *tlaneltoquilli* (“belief” in Nahuatl), drives and motivates Macehualmeh in their sacred journeys and ceremonial practices. For example, it was in the dreamworld that Cirilo came to understand that it was time to visit the Poztectli and other sacred mountains. Cirilo then used his own funds and rallied community members to partake in these sacred journeys. Sandstrom and Sandstrom complicate the understanding of rituals in Mesoamerican practices, noting that ceremonies among the Nahua people in Amátlan allow for variation outside of the expected tolerance for ritual practice. The goal of these ceremonies is to recalibrate the relations between nonhuman forces and the human community, and variations in practices do not trouble the practitioners or community members.

Sandstrom and Sandstrom masterfully demonstrate that the ceremonies at the core of the Nahua pilgrimage, and the sacred voyage itself, are purpose driven. For instance, in 1998 Cirilo and his community sought to address a troublesome drought that struck their area that same year. In 2007, however, the sacred walk was geared toward ensuring adequate rainfall and fertility. Sandstrom and Sandstrom suggest that acute issues require more costly offerings and

work, whereas mundane upkeep is less taxing on the community. Broadly speaking, at the heart of the pilgrimages is the sun, often referred to as Tiotiotzin, and his altar. He is both distant and omnipresent and manifested in Nahua paper cuttings, offerings, and altars in Amátlan and surrounding *pilaltepetzitzin* (Nahua towns). However, Sandstrom and Sandstrom found that the pilgrimage to Poztectli also functions as a sign of respect to fellow community members and in some ways as boundary maintenance between what it means to be Macehualli (sing. of Macehualmeh) and a *coyotl* (literally a coyote, meaning a person who is an outsider, a Mestizo, non-Indigenous, or a resident nonpractitioner of *el costumbre*).

This monograph also engages with important literature regarding the core principles of Nahua, and to a degree Mesoamerican, religious philosophical beliefs. For instance, Sandstrom and Sandstrom draw attention to the nuances of offerings and ceremonies held in honor of Chicomexochitl (Seven-flower), a male manifestation of the corn spirit. Although scholars have often believed that all crop-related ceremonies were designated *chicomexochitl*, Sandstrom and Sandstrom rely on personal communication with Nahua scholar and community member Eduardo de la Cruz Cruz to establish that only specific ceremonies belong in that category. Another notable discussion pertains to pantheism and the way Nahua people in la Huasteca Veracruzana understand the world. Sandstrom and Sandstrom connect scholarship on Central Mexican Nahuas, before the Spanish incursion, with understandings of sacredness and the world in Amátlan and suggest that Nahua communities throughout time and space share similar perspectives. For the Macehualmeh of Amátlan, Tiotiotzin, the sun, as mentioned above, is at the center of the Nahua cosmos and present in every animated being. This is strongly related to discussions of *teotl* in Central Mexican chronicles and other documents created by Spanish settlers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries based on Nahua information. What many settlers described as “gods” constituting a pantheon, scholars such as Guilhem Olivier, Alfredo López Austin, and Douglas Sharon have discussed as fluid forces that take on many shapes and forms that are interrelated. Sandstrom and Sandstrom assert that Nahua devotional beliefs and practices are pantheistic, and *Pilgrimage to Broken Mountain* highlights examples of the intricate ways that Tiotiotzin is everywhere and everything.

The role of paper in *el costumbre* from Amátlan is complex, and Sandstrom and Sandstrom grapple with the practice of cutting paper well. Nahuas in the Huasteca Veracruzana and Otomí communities in the Sierra Norte de Puebla continue to make paper cutouts as their ancestors had. *Pilgrimage to Broken Mountain* shows that in la Huasteca Veracruzana the *tlatecmeh* (paper cutouts) placed at various altars on the sacred journey are the *tonalli* (heat force) of the life forces that the walkers were honoring. Local Nahua specialists informed Sandstrom and Sandstrom that they received instructions from the dream world on which figures and designs to make. Furthermore, the authors found that in accordance with stories of how seeds for staple foods were brought to *pilaltepetzitzin*, adherents of *el costumbre* keep special cutouts for specific crops made from *papel lustre* (heavyweight paper) on an altar. The diversity and abundance of paper cuttings, Sandstrom and Sandstrom contend, is related to the pantheistic perspective of *el costumbre*. The multitude of paper cuttings express the plethora of entities that Tiotiotzin can manifest in, and they provide manageable ways for adherents to honor and petition temporary segments of the great life force. At the conclusion of ceremonies, the paper cuttings are destroyed or left to disintegrate, and the force within them can return to the large whole. These nuanced discussions of *teotl* and Tiotiotzin will propel further investigations of ceremonies in Nahua communities in the past and present.

Sandstrom and Sandstrom also add more complexity to our understanding of indigeneity in Abya Yala (what is now called Latin America). The settler colonial project has proliferated mechanisms to question indigeneity, but the most common pertain to modernization and cultural “purity.” It is not rare to hear people question the “authenticity” of a person’s indigeneity or

practices when they have been combined with Western language, religion, or ideas. Yet, no one seems to question the authenticity of Italian food despite its reliance on the *tomatl* (tomato), a Mesoamerican fruit. Sandstrom and Sandstrom provide salient examples of four cultural groups in la Huasteca Veracruzana that share similarities in ceremonial practices: the Totonac, Tepehua, Nahua, and Otomí peoples. They note that among these groups there are two discernible traditions: a Totonac-Tepehua axis and a Nahua-Otomí axis. This monograph is not ethnological in nature, though we see that Cirilo was trained by and heavily interacted with Otomí ceremonial specialists. Thus, we learn that Indigenous customs are fluid, they are shared with other communities, they vary, and they adapt without compromising indigeneity. Last, Sandstrom and Sandstrom also provide another layer for scholars to understand the variation of Nahua culture itself. As the authors note, there is distinction in traditions and practices within Amátlan and in other pilaltepetzitzin in la Huasteca Veracruzana as well. There is no singular Nahua culture; there are many.

The images contained in this monograph are astonishing and commendable. Sandstrom and Sandstrom provide photographic evidence of their decades of research in la Huasteca Veracruzana. The authors include images of their journeys, stops, altars, offerings, and the landscape. They also provide reproductions of many of the paper cuttings that Cirilo and other specialists used in their ceremonies. Much praise must be given to the University of Colorado Press for printing the images in color. Scholars of Nahua peoples and community members versed in English will rejoice and learn a great deal from the images.

Pilgrimage to Broken Mountain provides an inspiring model of crediting collaborators and citing Macehualmeh scholars. Throughout the book, Sandstrom and Sandstrom cite the likes of Abelardo de la Cruz, Eduardo de la Cruz Cruz, and Victoriano de la Cruz Cruz. One hopes that this monograph will inspire more academics to cite Indigenous scholars and privilege Indigenous scholarship and that this will eventually lead to a time when ethnographic field work in Indigenous communities is undertaken by Indigenous scholars, paying heed to calls made by Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, Adam Gaudry, and other Indigenous intellectuals.

This book is required reading for all scholars of Mesoamerica, especially those with a focus on Nahua people. My gripes are scant, such as the usage of the term “Aztec” for the Mexico-Tenochtitlan, Tetzaco, and Tlacopan Nahua triple alliance. Nevertheless, this book is informative, approachable, well-researched, and theoretically sound. We can only hope for a Spanish translation to emerge to make it more accessible for readers south of the colonial border.

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