

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

SHAWN D. HALEY and CURT FUKUDA, *Day of the Dead: When Two Worlds Meet in Oaxaca*. New York & Oxford: Berghen Books. 2004. 149 p., Index, 147 black and white photographs, 1 map, ISBN 1-84545-083-3 (pbk)

The *Day of the Dead: When Two Worlds Meet in Oaxaca* is a little book on a curious subject. Having been weaned as an undergraduate on Oscar Lewis and Robert Redfield by Drs. Ruth Gruhn and Harold Barclay, I awaited my review copy with much anticipation. On opening the mail, the delicious photograph on the book's cover further wetted my appetite. Before me was an exquisite colour photograph of an *ofrenda*. A vision of Mexico's gastronomic pleasures – a simple table laden with fresh fruits, vegetables, flowers, *mole negro*, some beers and *mescal*, complete with bottled water for later; all overseen as if blessed by a portrait of the Virgin Guadalupe. I found my favourite reading chair and sat back to revisit the land where every year the souls of the dead return to enjoy the company of living friends and relatives. It was the end of October. As the day grows shorter than the night, autumn in the northern hemisphere can be a melancholy time.

Haley and Fukuda know their subject well. Their presentation begins with three chapters. The first describes the pre-Columbian and Spanish origins. The second provides a description of the social relations characterizing the city and state of Oaxaca. The third follows with a description of some of the peoples' interpretations of death, and how they conduct funerals. The ethnographic core of the book is in the next four chapters. Accounts, mostly from older women who live in the valley communities surrounding the city, provide the expository details. The chapters nicely describe the markets, the household preparations, the first day of visitations, and next day's visit to the cemetery. All of these chapters are clear, succinct, and wonderfully illustrated. Each page is graced with telling photographs, regrettably in black and white, of the people, their homes, and activities. The eighth and penultimate chapter moves toward an integration of these empirical observations into a slightly more abstract theoretical framework. Mention is now made of syncretism and its paradoxical melding of 'pagan' and Christian beliefs. This chapter also introduces a brief discussion on some of the symbolic undertones embedded in the particular rites and practices. For example, the yellow colour of the marigold, which is the traditional flower on the *ofrenda*, symbolizes both death and the south in Zapotec cosmology, and candles are used to symbolically light the path for the travelling souls of the dead. In the short concluding chapter, the

authors mourn the impending loss of tradition, as international tourism turns local religious belief into commoditized spectacle. The subtitle becomes a double entendre.

Almost one hundred years ago and at the end of the Mexican colonial period, Charles Macomb Flandrau in *Viva Mexico!* (1908/1974) identified how Mexico suffered from an annual invasion of tourists, the least innocuous of whom had a “suddenly acquired mania for being conspicuous” (p. 224). Others found finishing “their luncheon in the cathedral, threw orange peel and sardine tins on the floor, and upon leaving washed their hands in the holy water” (p. 228). Shortly thereafter, Mexico embarked on a long and bitter civil war often referred to as the Revolution of 1910. A chaotic forty year postcolonial modernization project followed. Along the way, the Institutional Party of the Revolution was entrenched by Mexican military and financial elites. During the 1920s the party, under the leadership of General Alvaro Obregon, hoping to inspire national allegiance, initiated a massive cultural re-education program. Artists and anthropologists were commissioned to glorify, unearth, catalogue and publicize the greatness of Mexico’s history and peoples.

One of the internationally most famous was Diego Rivera. His ‘Day of the Dead’ fresco was painted in 1923 in the Court of the Fiestas at the Ministry of Education in Mexico City. Desmond Rochfort in the *Mexican Muralists* (1993: 59) reports that Rivera depicted it as “a raucous, even drunken celebration ... with prayers and offerings of food ... a quiet yet unmistakable eulogy to peasant life”. The Mexican Renaissance of the 1920s put Mexico on the cosmopolitan’s cultural map. This was a two way street. During the 1930s Rivera and Frida Kahlo, among others found receptive international patrons. Rivera’s infamous mural at the Rockefeller Centre in New York City is a notorious example. Kahlo’s sardonic portrayals of life and death were greatly admired by Andre Breton. He first showcased her work in the 1940 *Exposicion Internaccional del Surrealism* in Mexico City. Kahlo has now achieved widespread recognition due to the feminist art historian recovery of her work in the 1970s and 80s. Her last home in Coyoacan, along with Leon Trotsky’s a couple of blocks away, are now well attended curiosity shops for many bus tours. Mexican culture has become a profitable tourist lure.

Along the costal resorts and within in regional enclaves like Oaxaca the tourist invasion continues unabated. Oaxacan Day of the Dead celebrations entice large numbers of visitors from many parts of Mexico and the world. Living arrivals descend on the 31st of October. On the 1st of November family members, primarily the older women, go visiting but always leave someone at home to tend the *ofrenda*. The doors are left open to welcome the souls of deceased friends and relatives, who may have commandeered someone’s body, and who may be accompanied by other living friends and relatives. The dead may occupy a living person without their knowledge. All hosts, so as not to offend the dead, are obliged to welcome all visitors. In recent years this hospitality has become much publicized and its economic advantage was not lost on entrepreneurs.

Some tour operators encouraged their charges to enter and enjoy any home with an open door. One of Haley and Fukuda's informants told how "in 1990 she had one tourist in her home but by 1996, she had over a dozen who barged in to look at and photograph her family's *ofrenda*" (p.85).

Tourism, oil and gas, automobile manufacturing and service, along with military preparedness and war, count among the world's largest industries. Local governments, hoping to buttress their coffers, promote the quaintness of their communities. Whole sections of urban newspapers advertise affordable trips to exotic lands. For example, the 29th October edition of the *Globe and Mail* (2005) had an almost full page travel story beckoning visitors to 'Todos Santos' in Guatemala. That country and the state of Oaxaca rank among the poorest in Mesoamerica. They are also areas of extensive out migration. Many of the working age men of these communities have gone north in search of work. Tourism and out migration provide much needed money to support a precarious economic base. The women's annual enactment of *Dia de Muertos* brings the younger members home and reconnects families to their ancestral past. Tourist currency simultaneously bolsters family finances for the coming winter.

In their final words Haley and Fukuda, like Rivera before them, sing a eulogy to the past: "It is inevitable that the roots of the celebration will weaken until the Day of the Dead is nothing more than a quaint folk custom to be amused by" (p.141). Maybe so, but it has endured 400 years of colonialism, and 100 years of modernization. We now live in era of mass cross-cultural contact; the tourist gaze has little distance from ethnographic observation. Cultural tourism may contaminate 'authentic' culture but human agency is always both enabling and exploiting. A newer syncretism will emerge. Borrowing from Peter Wollen in *Raiding the Icebox* (1993: 210), I remind the authors that creativity "always comes from beneath, it always finds an unexpected and indirect path forward and it always makes use of what it can scavenge by night". Culture is not static. Whether tourists disembarking from international flights, or families making yearly commemorations to their dead, culture materializes in the stark reality of everyday life. Praxis makes the world. Haley and Fukuda's monograph will provide both tourists and neophyte ethnographers an empathetic, and brilliantly photographed, introductory understanding of the ongoing beliefs and practises of the Oaxacans.

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