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Ideas: Indigenous Historical Agency in Revolutionary Western Mexico

Towards a Cosmohistory of the Cristero Wars

Morris, Nathaniel. Soldiers, Saints, and Shamans: Indigenous Communities and the Revolutionary State in Mexico's Gran Nayar, 1910-1940. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2020, 371 pages.

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The Indigenous people of the Gran Nayar region—the Wixaritari, Náayeri, O'dam, Audam, and Meshikan—are among anthropologists' favourites, for purportedly being "traditional" and little influenced by Christianity. As a result, the region's rituals, mythology and traditional arts are well documented. The study of its history has not been a priority, but now Morris shows us that the history of the region can be as interesting as its cultural anthropology. Given popular images of the region as dominated by unspoiled, shamanic communities, the amount and intensity of the fighting there during the early twentieth century may be surprising, but even more so are the changing and often paradoxical alliances, for and against the post-revolutionary governments of Mexico.

The Mexican Revolution was motivated by the fight against oppression, ignorance, and poverty. The Gran Nayar was and is one of the most marginalized regions in Mexico. So one might think that everybody there was happy when the post-revolutionary governments sent teachers and started to show some interest in the progress of the Native population. But local hatred of the teachers turned many Indigenous people against the revolution. The teachers were

racists and saw themselves as missionaries of science and rationality. They believed that in order to build a modern nation-state, it was necessary to overcome the backwardness of the people, who were seen as ignorant and primitive. In other words, the revolutionary task required the destruction of local political structures, languages and supposed superstitions. Teachers sometimes took children away, kept them in prison-like boarding schools and punished them for using their native languages. Some teachers also colluded with local mestizo elites to steal or divide communal Indigenous lands.

Disappointed with post-revolutionary governments, many local people joined the Cristero counter-revolutionaries. The Cristeros have often been depicted as Catholic fundamentalists, opposed to the social and anti-clerical reforms promoted by the progressive post-revolutionary governments. But in the Gran Nayar, many Cristeros were actually animists who practised shamanism and were motivated to defend not the church but the traditional systems of education and government. Above all, they defended what is known as *costumbre*: ritual relations to corn, ancestor deities, sacred places, and territories in general. Ironically, the communities that sided with the federal government against the Cristeros had very similar motivations: defending communal territories and traditional forms of government.

It is important to note that although Morris is a historian, he conducted ethnographic fieldwork among all four peoples of the Gran Nayar. Participant observation was key to his learning about costumbre, which was necessary to understand how the Gran Nayar practise history and construct memory. In Indigenous history, events, and legends are always interwoven, while historical figures are often identified with gods or saints. It is amazing to see how much precise historical information Morris extracts from such oral traditions. Only by getting to know the people of the Gran Nayar so well was Morris able to fully understand the importance of autonomy for members of Indigenous communities. As is the case today, the practice of costumbre was never separate from the defence of autonomy and should therefore be understood as an actively pursued political project, not as a remnant of ancient folklore or whatever classical anthropology used to say. Whenever costumbre and/or autonomy is in danger, Indigenous communities develop strategies to defend this project. In this sense, Morris has many arguments to prove that the warriors of the first half of the twentieth century had good motives for taking up arms. But this is only one of several strategies of resistance that can be observed in the region.

It seems impossible not to like Morris's book, but Liffman is somehow ambiguous about it. He does not say it explicitly, but apparently, he is unhappy with Morris for not quoting enough Americans. Well, US anthropology on Mexico is not as important as it used to be. Few US anthropologists still conduct fieldwork among Indigenous Mexicans, partly because it is considered too dangerous and partly because traditional ethnography is no longer fashionable in US academia. However, there is now a whole generation of Mexican ethnographers who are continuing the work of Gran Nayar and who are often quoted by Morris. Contemporary Mexican ethnographers are influenced by the Zapatista movement, so autonomy is often an important theme in their work. So is the anthropology of ontologies. The two are intrinsically related, as the Zapatistas have always fought for "a world that can contain many worlds."

Liffman used to like to quote Marisol de la Cadena, but nowadays he seems to have problems with the anthropology of autonomy, ontologies, and the like. He still identifies with symbolic anthropology, a rather apolitical theoretical current that flourished in the late twentieth century. Since culture is understood as a "text," he uses a terminology full of words like "tropes," "metonym," and "synecdoche" to interpret the Wixaritari. For symbolic anthropologists it is unquestioned that it is the academic alone who does the interpretations. On the other hand, like many US anthropologists who have been exposed to Gramsci, Liffman believes Indigenous people are part of the subaltern class. Eternal victims of history, subaltern peoples are by definition incapable of developing their own strategies, and their dreams of autonomy or ontological self-determination are just illusions. Quite consequently, Liffman also thinks that the ones he calls "ontological anthropologists" tend to exaggerate the political agency of these people. At this point he is quite explicit when he doubts that Indigenous people can switch between identities: "It's as if Indians were cosmopolitical liberals free to pick and choose identities like changes of wardrobe." Well, those who cannot because of the limitations of their ontology are precisely the naturalistic Westerners (Viveiros de Castro 2002). The people of the Sierra are often trained in shamanism and consider themselves capable of accumulating identities, transforming into other species and managing relational complexity.

It is disappointing to observe how often US academia tries to do epistemological business as usual, even when confronted with the catastrophes of the Anthropocene.

Anthropology of ontologies, ethnographic theory, and cosmohistory, as practiced by a growing number of Latin American researchers, should not be understood as discussing just another bunch of fancy theories proposed by master thinkers from France, but as thought experiments that are part of an attempt to create anti-colonial, non-Eurocentric, non-anthropocentric, non-extractivist knowledge practices.

The goal is to create more symmetrical and collaborative ways of talking about modes of existence, histories, and alterities, so that Indigenous costumbre must be taken at least as seriously as Western theories (Martínez and Neurath 2021). As a matter of fact, Morris could take cosmohistory even further, maybe in a future book. For now, Morris' distilling of historical facts out of legends is fascinating, but still based on a somehow (mono)naturalist epistemology. Following Amerindian multinaturalist ontologies and epistemologies, we really should not rule out that saints participate in wars, and we should consider the possibility that time is not always linear, continuous and homogeneous. So why should ancestors not be able to come back and participate in political struggles? Recently, I had the opportunity to observe how the deified ancestors of the Wixárika participated quite effectively in a "real world" lawsuit, with their testimony being accepted as evidence by the judge (Neurath 2018).

As states like Mexico slowly move towards a redefinition as multinational countries, more people are embracing the idea of ontological plurality. Because of this tendency, there may be a slim hope that the mistakes made by previous progressive governments in relation to Indigenous peoples, such as those Morris describes in his book, will not be repeated eternally.

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