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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Weaving the Dynamic Cosmos

Review by Megan Parker

Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion

by James Maffie

University Press of Colorado, 2014

Aztec Philosophy is James Maffie's attempt to reconstruct Aztec perceptions of nature and reality at the time of European contact. To do so, he draws upon a variety of sources including ethnohistorical, ethnographic, archaeological, and linguistic data. Maffie rejects the notion that Western culture is the sole progenitor of philosophy and seeks to demonstrate how non-Western peoples also practiced the self-reflective and critical act of *doing* philosophy (as opposed to merely having a philosophy (p. 4). Indeed, the Aztecs had a word for such an individual, *tlamatini*, "knower of things" who contemplated the nature of reality and existence. Maffie successfully accomplishes his goal by presenting an impressive body of philosophical and metaphysical analysis and interpretation that enriches our understanding of Aztec culture.

Maffie begins by introducing the concept of *teotl*, the dynamic, eternal, self-generating energy that constitutes everything (p. 12). In direct opposition to the Western notion that reality is characterized by a state of Being, in Aztec metaphysics that which is real is only that which is Becoming, moving, and changing. *Teotl* is the only thing that exists and everything is identical to it; everything is a temporary manifestation of this energy (p. 25). *Teotl* is not anthropomorphic and has no goals, intentions, consciousness, or purpose but is an amoral force that both creates and destroys indiscriminately (p. 23).

In Western philosophy, that which is sacred is pure and enduring, at odds with a changing, perishable world. However, *teotl* is also a sacred energy and in Aztec metaphysics there is no distinction between

that which is sacred and secular. Therefore, that which is sacred is that which moves, changes, and transforms – in essence, everything. The Aztecs even had a category of sacred filth associated with the earth/fertility complex and demonstrates an intimate understanding of the role of excrement in amending soil to produce nourishing food (pp. 97-99). In this way, both what is pure and what is impure is still sacred; pure things are merely better ordered and that which is impure is disordered. Teotl is also homogenous and non-hierarchical. That which is ordered more fully reveals teotl - such as jade, art, and quetzal feathers - while that which is disordered veils and obscures it, such as excrement and filth (pp. 100-102). However, both are necessary components to a life-death cycle and as such neither is ranked greater than the other.

In the next chapter Maffie argues that the Aztecs were pantheists. The fluidity of the Aztec pantheon supports the idea that “deities” actually represent clusters of specific natural processes (pp. 79-87). These are the micro-processes that act as interwoven threads in a cloth that result in teotl, a macro-process of eternally changing Becoming and transformation. Chapter 3 addresses teotl’s “cyclical struggle between paired complimentary polarities,” such as life/death, light/dark, hot/cold, and male/female (p. 137). These pairs do not represent opposing forces but rather ends of a spectrum or dual aspects of a single force. This cyclical struggle is necessary for balance, which itself is not a state but a process much like walking: a series of temporary imbalances that work together and result in a sustained overall balance (pp. 138-140). These pairs are dependent on one another and not distinct, but maintain one another’s existence. To use one of Maffie’s metaphors, a tennis match does not exist without two opposing players whose goal is to subvert the other. But without the process of this back and forth struggle there would be no game at all (p. 146).

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 describe and discuss the three fundamental ways teotl moves, or the different patterns its processes take. These are *olin*, *malinalli*, and *nepantla*, which together interact to result in a process of cosmic weaving. *Olin* is an up/down, back/forth, rising/falling, or pulsating motion associated with the bouncing of a rubber ball and defines the shape of life (pp. 186-190). It’s important to note that the rubber ball was a requisite component to the Mesoamerican ball game, which was a metaphorical recreation of the 5th sun’s journey from the underworld each day, a defining life-giving and creative process. *Malinalli* is a twisting, spiraling, revolving, spinning motion that transforms one thing into another (pp. 261-262). It is represented by those who spin rough grasses or fibers into ropes or threads, acting upon disorder with the ordered motion of twisting. It is also associated with sweeping, an act performed with a spiraling motion that moves what is disordered to the periphery to

allow for order (pp. 279-281).

Nepantla is the most difficult form of motion to grasp and yet probably the most fundamental. It represents the process of being betwixt and between, middling, neither one nor the other (p. 361). It represents a state of moving between or being in between two states or phases, which is both creative and destructive. It is reminiscent of Victor Turner's (1979) state of liminality, in which an individual exists neither outside of nor in the social order, but occupies a place of powerful ambiguity. However, Maffie rejects this comparison, arguing that liminality is a temporary state of extraordinary significance, while nepantla is a continual and mundane process of the everyday (p. 363). This process is associated with weaving, which is a powerful act associated with creation; the cosmos itself is a weaving in progress (p. 363, 403). Chapter 7 discusses teotl's role as time-place. Time and place are not distinctive concepts, but concrete realities that exist as a single entity anchored together (p. 422). In Chapter 8, Maffie discusses how the weaving of the cosmos is a process fundamentally dependent on the energy-pattern of nepantla, the back and forth middling motion of creation and destruction.

Maffie's synthesis of Aztec metaphysics elevates its status to that which is equal to Western and Eastern philosophical traditions and is one of the first works to do so for New World cultures. As a result, Maffie's contribution is both unique and desperately necessary. His analysis approaches Aztec philosophy at the same academic and intellectual level as other bodies of philosophical knowledge. As he demonstrates, Aztec philosophy is rich and dynamic, conveying a sense of connection to the greater cosmos not found in Western philosophy. By doing so, he elucidates a way of perceiving reality at odds with Western thought.

I would recommend this book to anyone with a professional interest in Aztec culture, or Mesoamerican culture more broadly. It is worthwhile to a wide audience, including philosophers, historians, theologians, anthropologists, and archaeologists. However, this book is a committed read and probably not the best choice for beginners in philosophy. As someone with a background in archaeology, I sometimes found it difficult to follow some of the concepts presented. That being said, Maffie offers simplified metaphors that guide the reader along a path of comprehension. It is certainly worth the investment of time and effort to garner a greater understanding not just of the Aztecs, but of philosophical thought. In reading this book, I feel as if I have not only increased my knowledge of Aztec culture, though. I feel as if it has altered my own personal philosophy of how to Be in the world, or better, how to engage in an active process of Becoming.

References Cited

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Megan Parker is a professor of anthropology in the Department of Cultural and Behavioral Science at Georgia State University, Perimeter College. She is an environmental archaeologist and ethnobotanist who conducts research in Mesoamerica with a focus on the Maya lowlands.



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