

The Guatemalan ways of death

The Times Literary Supplement (London)

Kenneth Anderson

16 August 2002

ART AND SOCIETY IN A HIGHLAND MAYA COMMUNITY. The altarpiece of Santiago Atitlan. By Allen J. Christenson. 240pp. University of Texas Press; distributed in the UK by Combined Academic, 15a Lewin's Yard, East Street, Chesham HP5 1HQ. Paperback, £18.95. 0 292 71237 5.

RENEWING THE MAYA WORLD. Expressive culture in a highland town. By Garrett W. Cook. 292pp. University of Texas Press; distributed in the UK by Combined Academic. Paperback, £15.95. 0 292 71225 1.

A FINGER IN THE WOUND. Body politic in quicentennial Guatemala. By Diane M. Nelson. 427pp. University of California Press; distributed in the UK by Wiley. Paperback, £17.95. 0 520 21285 1.

MAYAN VISIONS. The quest for autonomy in an age of globalization. By June C. Nash. 303pp. Routledge. £50 (paperback, £14.99). 0 415 92861 3.

Lying on the far side of a large lake and hemmed in by high volcanic mountains, the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic church in the Guatemalan mountain town of Santiago Atitlan has been, until very recently, a remote and isolated place of worship. It is not a particularly striking edifice; in my own trips through the Guatemala highlands in the 1980s, I was moved to look inside it only once. It is the interior, however, where the remarkable feature of the church is to be found: an altarpiece covering the entire apse wall with niches bearing wonderfully executed icons and statues of saints. These images are, for the most part, recognizably Catholic, but they have been transformed in a complex manner by the traditionalist Tz'utujil Mayan elements in the culture of the local sculptors and artisans who made them.

The original colonial structure collapsed in severe earthquakes in 1960 and 1976. According to Allen J. Christenson, a pre-Columbian art historian at Brigham Young University, the collapse was considered a shocking disaster among traditionalist Maya of this Tz'utujil-speaking community: "the altarpiece represents far more than a decorative framework for the saints that reside in its niches. Like ancient Maya texts and artifacts, it is a living thing endowed with a k'u'x (heart), placed there by the ancestors"

The reconstruction of the altar partly co- incided with the worst period of civil strife Guatemala has ever known, a ferocious counter-insurgency campaign in the late 1970s and 80s in which government forces attacked the inhabitants of hundreds of villages like Atitlan, killing something like 100,000 of the indigenous population. A major aim of the campaign was to relocate the villagers into government-controlled zones; many villages were completely destroyed. Santiago Atitlan was in the middle of the worst violence, much of which took place around Lake Atitlan. The church and its rebuilt altarpiece survived, although the Catholic parish priest did not. Father Stanley Francisco Rother commissioned the rebuilding and collaborated closely in determining its syncretic combination of traditional

Tz'utujil and Catholic elements; army death squads assassinated him in 1981 while he was sleeping in the rectory. Parishioners, Christenson writes, "refused to allow Rother's body to be returned for burial in Oklahoma unless they could keep the heart. It now resides in a jar buried beneath an elaborate monument located just inside the main entrance to the chapel."

Thus the priest who commissioned the work of rebuilding has, in martyrdom, joined the syncretism of the chapel itself. In the twenty years since then, latterly a period of peace, the Mayan peoples have been reinvented, on a global stage, as tourist-friendly weavers and artisans. The nature of their engagement with modernity cannot, however, be gauged by straw hats or textiles. What is required is close attention to the fate of particular communities and the manner in which they have simultaneously incorporated and resisted the changes wrought by modernity.

Art and Society in a Highland Maya Community describes the reconstruction between 1976 and 1981 of the altarpiece of Santiago Atitlan by two local Mayan sculptors, the brothers Diego and Nicolas Chavez. It is an engaging, quietly intense book that is in part ethnography, in part pre-Columbian art history and in part a meditation on the nature of identity and cultural authenticity. It records, with diligence and grace, the endurance and transformation of belief in the face of natural and political disaster. The task facing the Chavez brothers was how much they should simply reduplicate the ancient altarpiece, and how much of their own ideas - and those they understood to represent their contemporary community - they should express in their wood carving. How should they address, for example, the alternative ways of expressing Tz'utujil rituals and beliefs that exist among Mayan traditionalists themselves? How should they represent the relationship between pre-Columbian and post-Columbian elements of Tz'utujil ritual and cosmology? Or the shifting syncretic relationship between traditional Tz'utujil rituals and orthodox Roman Catholicism? And finally, what of the place of the Maya in Guatemala and the world beyond? The spiritual and artistic decisions of the Chavez brothers provide a vivid example of the problems of maintaining the authenticity of a people and their spirituality over time, of finding a way to be both faithful and free.

Art and Society focuses on the process of rebuilding and, at the same time, on the study of meanings and motifs in the new and old altarpieces. The altarpiece is constructed in the form of a sacred mountain, "a fertile mountain opened wide to reveal the divine individuals that dwell within" - this being a customary structural motif in the sacred architecture of the Mayan and Tz'utujil traditions, but one not found in Christian symbolism. The church itself is arranged as a cosmogram, following the model of the world in much the same way that pre-Columbian ceremonial centers once did The central altarpiece of the church represents the first mountain of creation, and the saints in their niches are presented as if emerging from the entrances of caves in this mountain to interact with those who come to worship them.

Although Christenson readily finds elements of ancient Mayan religion in the altarpiece, he resists the idea of any linear continuation of it. The only element on the altarpiece directly borrowed from a pre-Columbian motif is, he notes, the Mayan maize god. And this is not carved in a local Tz'utujil style, but was originally suggested by Father Rother to express a Christian allegory; it is moreover a common image in Guatemala, appearing on everything from tourist brochures to money, and has no specifically Tz'utujil significance. Indeed, the Chavez brothers "avoided the use of pre-Columbian motifs on the altarpiece precisely because they are not relevant to the specific history and culture of contemporary Tz'utujil society". Diego Chavez told Christenson that he disliked the way weavers mimicked a pseudo-ancient style to depict Maya warriors and gods rather than using traditional Atiteco designs that emphasized birds. The brothers did not derive their ideas directly from ancient

Maya sculpture or texts. What they did was to take their inspiration from present-day Atiteco society, which both preserves and transforms ancestral practices.

This question of continuity with ancient Mayan religion is also at the heart of Garrett W. Cook's study of religious festivals and rituals in another Guatemalan mountain town, Momostenango. *Renewing the Maya World* is based on long-term fieldwork and close attention to recent scholarship on pre-Columbian Maya (in the 1980s great strides were made in understanding Classical Mayan epigraphy by scholars such as Linda Schele and David Freidel). Cook's thesis is that Momostenango's annual cycle of rituals and festivals - undertaken by local religious societies and teams of dancers - expresses ancient Mayan creation myths, and especially the pattern of the ancient Mayan cycle of the annual renewal of agriculture. He is concerned with festivals and attendant rituals, community enactments rather than the artefacts that are the subject of Christenson's study, but his answer to the question of continuity with pre-Columbian rituals is, again, a nuanced yes.

Certain elements of the rituals, he finds, are connected to ancient Mayan belief systems, such as the emphasis on the cyclical planting and harvesting of the maize. At the same time, there is no merely linear continuation of ancient Mayan religion, even syncretized with Catholicism. It is not a question of "old ways" versus "new ways". As Christenson puts it, the Maya are "a modern people, well aware of the broader world around them The religion of these traditionalists . . . is constantly changing from year to year as new theological, political, and economic circumstances force them to adapt."

The answers may be local, but the questions raised in these two books are clearly of import beyond the communities of the highland Maya. All over Central America - all over the world - economically and socially marginalized communities are finding that they must transform themselves, sometimes in surprising ways, in order to survive. I recently visited, as an "ecotourist", an indigenous village along the Rio Chagras in Panama. This village had made an extraordinary decision voluntarily to relocate itself from a remote, roadless part of the Darien jungle to a rainforest location deliberately much closer to medicine and healthcare, schools, government assistance and the cash economy. It did this, the villagers insisted, in order to preserve its way of life. The alternative, they said, was to fade away and die out as young people left for better opportunities. Staying in the forest also meant increased risk from the violence of the drug trade spilling over into the Darien from Colombia. By being closer to Panama City, they could preserve their traditions while earning hard currency. Was this a desperate act, for a community to abandon its land? Or was it a far-seeing act of cultural autonomy?

Guatemala has had a more traumatic history than Panama, more violent, probably, than any other country in Latin America. And the choices faced by its indigenous communities have been correspondingly constrained. In Guatemala, during the civil war, displacement of villages was involuntary. The government strategy, it may be noted, was to reorganize the countryside in order to avoid ever reaching the stalemate of the early 1980s in neighbouring El Salvador, where guerrillas effectively controlled large zones of the country. This stalemate had largely come about, according to Guatemalan military officers I interviewed in the mid-1980s, because the Salvadoreans followed a US-directed counter-insurgency strategy of "hearts and minds". A Guatemalan officer remarked to me that Vietnam-style "hearts and minds" might be a wonderful strategy, but only after the guerrilla military organization had been defeated on the ground and the civilian population convinced through massive violence against them that the guerrillas could not win and could not protect them.

The Guatemalan Army's alternative to "hearts and minds" was a strategy of mass death and the wholesale destruction of hundreds of indigenous villages. Christenson and Cook are well aware of the terrible history that Guatemalan highland communities lived through, but it is not the central subject of their work. *A Finger in the Wound*, by contrast, is fundamentally about political violence. It is not anthropology in the sense of Christenson or Cook - that is to say ethnography at the level of the village or town, tied to a particular place and particular individuals. It is rather the anthropology of a political activist whose subject matter is the whole state and whole society.

Diane M. Nelson, who first went to Guatemala as a graduate student in 1985, has extensive contacts and has clearly read widely. Her style is a mixture of scholarship, journalism, personal anecdote, postmodern jargonizing and political gossip, the latter embracing both the gossip that characterizes a small country with a tightly knit elite, and the parallel world of chit-chat generated by expatriates working in the aid industry. Although the author describes herself as a Marxist, *A Finger in the Wound* is, save for a few pages in the conclusion, surprisingly bereft of any attention to the economics of one of Latin America's least egalitarian societies. The book contains some individually fascinating passages, notably discussions with various figures in Guatemala over the past twenty years; it is hard, though, to see any organizing principle. The chapter titles tend, in keeping with other postmodern dissertations seeking publishers, to promise more than they deliver: "Gringa Positioning, Vulnerable Bodies, and Fluidarity", for example, or "State Fetishism and the Pinata Effect". The acknowledgements tell us that Nelson's relation to Guatemala has "been mediated gynocentrically through many Sweet Sisters of Solidarity". I am struck by this phrase, as it is one I coined myself while hanging out with aid workers in Guatemala in the 1980s. It was picked up later by the novelist Francisco Goldman in his darkly hilarious *The Long Night of White Chickens* (1992). Neither Goldman nor myself intended it kindly.

Of a different order of scholarship altogether is June C. Nash's *Mayan Visions*. Its subject is the Mayan communities of Chiapas, across the border in Mexico, in the heartland of the Zapatista movement. Nash, like Nelson, is a politically engaged anthropologist. The difference is that Nash has a clear analysis of what she thinks is wrong with global capitalism, from the standpoint of workers and campesinos in both Latin America and the United States, and is able to link it up with solid fieldwork and book research. This is not to say that one need agree with her. In my view *Mayan Visions* is wrong both in the pessimism it expresses about the local effects of global capital and in the optimism it reposes in the new social movements apparently resisting these effects. Indeed, one can argue that if Nash's pessimism is right, then her optimism is wrong. She believes that the economic terms of transnational capitalism threaten the "subsistence base of indigenous cultivators", and no doubt that is correct. But in a better future world, subsistence cultivation would disappear - not because of the depredations of global capitalism but because of the availability of more productive ways of life that offer better economic possibilities to the world's poorest people. It is critical to acknowledge, as Michael Walzer has observed, how much "culture" is really the culture of poverty and would disappear under changed economic circumstances.

And it is not enough to defend the rights of poor communities. It is necessary to examine the defining terms of the communities themselves - in this case the concept of the "Maya" as a cultural identity. In Guatemala, since the end of the war, this has become prominent in national discourse, but during the insurgency the guerrilla leadership, claiming to represent the peasantry, spoke in class terms drawn from orthodox Marxism-Leninism, not ethnicity. If anyone in institutional Guatemala was able to invoke ethnicity in the war it was, as Nelson notes, government military officers, who were both more familiar with, and more comfortable manipulating the cultural categories of indigenous Guatemala than the guerrilla leadership was, which meant that the military was able to wage a more effective propaganda war.

The current global currency of a "Mayan" identity owes less to internal cultural dynamics than to a new fashion embraced by the global elite. The value put on indigenous identities by international non-governmental organizations active in the country since the mid-1980s has been embraced and reinforced by global capitalism, in the form of the tourist industry. Today the outside world has ordained that Guatemala's Mayan Indians should be assigned, in a global division of labour, to the category of a cute indigenous culture, easily accessible by air from the US and Europe, and destined to produce colourful woven textiles. By a "cute" culture, I mean one that is relatively non-violent and unthreatening to tourists, that is not obviously horrible to women even if it has not eliminated misogyny, that does not stone gays to death, that is not prone to suicide bombings, or flying airplanes into buildings (or indeed flying airplanes at all) - in other words, one that can offer a quaint vacation from Western values while not posing any real threat to them.

In the shifting political fashions of the global elite, "class" is out as a central category of new social movements and activism and "ethnicity" - especially indigenismo - is in. This fashion has been transmitted as a value by extensive economic and cultural ties between these global elite institutions and local non-governmental organizations, grantees of Western foundations, as well as by the tourism industry which can mass-market visits to see indigenous ethnicity (provided it is "cute"), but not poverty. Ethnicity remains, though, for all its transmission to local institutions, a form of Western romanticism, the romanticism to which the tourist industry has owed its existence since at least the nineteenth century. It is, for example, what continues to make it possible for the self-mythologizing fictions of Rigoberta Menchu - Guatemala's most famous export after polychromatic textiles - to play as fact to an easy crowd.

This is not to say that today Mayan identity is not, in some important political sense, "real". Nor is it to say that indigenismo does not have important local and truly indigenous roots.

But as an ideology it has been constructed out of materials provided by global capitalism - specifically the aspect of global capitalism that consists of do-gooding organizations that flagellate capital while they dispense its gifts - the Sweet Sisters of Solidarity and their numerous relations.

Even if Nash were right about the uniformly pernicious effects of global capitalism, it remains doubtful that the new social movements and civil society encouraged by international non-governmental organizations among the Mayan population and elsewhere could provide the necessary resilience against cultural and economic deracination. Nash argues that the proliferation of religious and secular NGOs in Central America "is correlated with the inability of neoliberal states such as Mexico to maintain hegemonic control because of the concessions they make to transnational financial and corporate institutions". She is right about this. But it is a long way from the proliferation of NGOs to successful resistance to the new global economic order. And, from the standpoint of culture, it may be a diversion to dedicate so much energy into creating counter-cultural institutions on what is ultimately a Western model.

Once again, then, the questions resurface. What is cultural resilience and what is cultural dependency? What is cultural authenticity and what is inauthenticity? Who is authorized to change traditions? The Chavez brothers? Or Rigoberta Menchu, the Nobel Prize-winning activist who affected traditional clothing at international gatherings in order to appear more Mayan? The question can be put in the abstract, but the answer is always in context and detail. In the case of the Santiago altarpiece, it lies in the conscious selection of traditionally mediated artefacts, and in the case of the expressive culture of Momostenango, in the

continuity of individuals, families and other social institutions collectively shaping and conserving cultural institutions. In the case of Rigoberta Menchu, while her autobiography is largely self-invention, there is nothing intrinsically hypocritical about exercising autonomy as to when to wear Western clothing and when not. The point is that when clothing and other indices of cultural identity are donned solely to impress outsiders, whether it is for tourists or aid agencies or the Nobel Prize Committee, then the culture really is, as Christenson says, a relic of the past.

Beyond these specific questions there is a larger question of cultural resilience. Ways of life that can survive civil war, that can survive systematic state violence, may perish when their economic underpinnings are swept away by larger, global forces, though these are less evidently malign. They may offer no choice at all. The history of modern Europe is littered with local peasant risings, guild revolts and religious movements that took the side of the poor. They all failed. The emergence of local non-governmental institutions in a country such as Guatemala does not necessarily augur well for indigenous communities. The forces at work in the world may be beyond the ability of either traditional culture or Western-style civil society successfully to resist. For the rural communities of Central America the new era of globalization, with its attendant transformation of economic relations, concentrations of capital and accelerated labour migrations, inevitably presages the destruction of locality. In Panama an entire village moved in order to survive. In the case of the Santiago altarpiece or the festivals of Momostenango, enough local autonomy was still available for choices to be made between changing and conserving cultural practices. In the emerging global economy, at least as Nash represents it, it may well not be.