

BUCHBESPRECHUNGEN

Shawn D. Haley, and Curt Fukuda: *Day of the dead: when two worlds meet in Oaxaca*. New York: Berghahn Books. 2004. 180 pp., 146 photographs, 1 map

In many parts of Central America, but especially southern Mexico, the celebrations of the so-called Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*) on the 1st and 2nd of November exert a remarkable influence on family life and economics. Focusing on the region of Oaxaca in Mexico, anthropologist and archaeologist Shawn D. Haley and artist and writer Curt Fukuda set out to examine and document the structure and background of this annual celebration.

Whereas in most Catholic countries the two holidays generally known as All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day are characterized by mourning and praying in cemeteries, Mesoamericans mark the occasion with very joyous celebrations, inviting the dead to return home and stay with the living. At the heart of the book, therefore, is the Oaxaqueñans' apparently paradoxical mediation between 'two worlds', as Haley describes the specific relationship of the living to the dead in this region. What to an outsider may appear as the villagers having 'taken leave of their senses' (3) by 'preparing a party where the invited partygoers are all dead' (3) is, in fact, not only unproblematic but entirely normal to Oaxaqueñans and many others in Central America.

To explain how Oaxaqueñans feel and think about their relations with the dead, "Day of the Dead" follows the modern anthropological tradition of transforming participant observation (Haley spent much of the past seven years in villages around Oaxaca) into a text that includes many comments recorded in the first person singular,

with Haley's own authorial position and participant relationships carefully marked out. A very distinctive feature of the book is Haley's reliance on his subjects speaking for themselves. With the help of these voices, which are presented in a particular variety of quotations, and supported by Fukuda's accompanying photographs, actions and rituals that might at first sight look irrational and naïve to a stranger are made familiar and understandable.

'They are here. They are all around us. They help us everyday', says Deborah, one of Haley's informants about her relationship with the dead (30). Quotations like hers allow the reader to become acquainted with the unusual vision of these Mesoamerican peoples, a vision that enables them to negotiate the 'very fine line that separates the world of the living from the supernatural world where the dead live' (1). 'My daughter may be dead, but she is still my daughter', continues Debora.

Oh, death makes us a little wiser so I can ask her advice when I need it. I go to the cemetery and sit beside her grave so she and I can have a quiet conversation. [...] I tell her what is going on and what I think I need to do. She tells me in here [she touched her heart] what I should do. If she were still alive, I would do the same thing except that we would talk in our kitchen instead of the cemetery and she wouldn't have the wisdom death gives you (30).

Drawing upon a wealth of personal accounts such as these, Haley achieves a fine feeling for the 'natural' connection between the living and the dead in Oaxaca, a concept built around the belief that the dead are never completely gone, but return home frequently and participate in daily life even after death.

Using the form of a classical monograph, Haley begins with an overview of Oaxaca's

people and their ways of life, examining their rituals and material culture, and describing the nature and extent of their social activities concerning the annual celebration in November. The book focuses intensely on the impact of all activities accompanying the Day of the Dead in everyday life. A long chapter is dedicated to its influence on the local economy, as a considerable trade is generated by products that are manufactured especially for the festival and sold in the Day of the Dead markets. Another chapter describes the preparations of the *ofrendas*, the altars that families usually build and decorate each year at home to welcome the dead. At the same time, the author provides a feeling for the interaction of the two worlds in Oaxaca and for how the notion that the dead are still among the living can be experienced. According to some informants, for example, candles on the altar 'allow the dead to see how to get home to earth' (69), while special combinations of flowers and chilli peppers suffuse the house with a powerful scent, which the spirits of the dead, although they 'cannot actually eat any of the real food that is placed on the altars' (88), can nevertheless enjoy.

The book continues with a description of the main festive days, divided into 'A Private Affair' on 1st November – when families invite relatives and other visitors throughout the day to join them for hot chocolate and to see their *ofrendas* at home – and 'Public Festivities' on 2nd November in the cemeteries. This second day is a very busy one, with many people cleaning and decorating the graves in the daytime, and gathering to eat, drink, chat and laugh until late into the night, often accompanied by musical groups, and sometimes even by fireworks.

Some parts of the celebration trace their origins to pre-Hispanic religious rituals. Irritated by the fact that the Day of the Dead celebrations take place on two Catholic holidays without the Catholic Church itself supporting the events, Haley started to analyse

the roots of the festival's activities in search of a solution to what he considered to be a paradox: while only a few people actually attend church, when a mass for the dead is offered they all regard the Day of the Dead as a Catholic celebration. Some items of material culture and their symbolism reveal the fusion of Catholic ceremonial elements with pre-Hispanic religious elements: according to early Spanish texts, for example, Mesoamericans used to dig up the remains of their dead, clean the bones and paint the skull with bright colours. Since this was forbidden after the *conquista*, candy skulls replaced the original ones, and they are still the most famous and attractive decoration for the Day of the Dead in Mexico today.

The Day of the Dead, with all its preparations, is a major holiday and is still the most important annual family celebration in Oaxaca. Some American companies send their Mexican workers officially on leave for this period of the year, rather than having them set out for home without permission to be with their dead and, of course, their living family. While many publications on the Day of the Dead refer to it as a 'cult of death' (162), Haley argues that, contrary to these sensational depictions, the Oaxaqueños' conception of death is far from morbid, and that the dead are incorporated into their social networks. They do not worship death but perceive it 'as a natural outcome of life or as one stage in life that continues much as it had done before but in a different location' (166). The Day of the Dead celebrations were therefore originally 'a welcoming of long-lost relatives into their previous homes for a short period of time' (166). Nowadays, while an increasing number of tourists in search of the spectacular are joining in the celebrations, younger family members are increasingly turning away from them, seeing them as 'a myth for the old, for the ignorant, the uneducated' (167), as Haley quotes one woman in the final chapter. With this perspective in

mind, the book might not only serve readers in the western hemisphere, but also find readers among future generations in Mexico who wish to study their ancestral customs. For the academic reader, the book might have benefited if Haley had pushed it more beyond the descriptive.

Two more worlds meet in Haley and Fukuda's book, two disciplines that are often set in opposition to each other because one is conventionally linked to the world of science and the other to the world of the arts, namely anthropology and photography. The number of photographs published in "Day of the Dead" with as much space being dedicated to images as to words, is exceptional. The collaboration between the anthropologist and the artist is ambitious and commendable, and thanks to the layout the pictures are continuously present while one is reading the text.

Unfortunately the colourful world of this culture was transformed not only into black and white scans, thus sacrificing much of its vibrancy, but also into many, and therefore often very small photographs, making it very difficult to discern the details. Only the coloured picture on the cover reveals the potential of photography for such a subject as the Day of the Dead: here one's eyes can really wander among the complex details of an altar and discover the various forms of representation of the natural and supernatural worlds that are described in the text. This type of photograph invites the viewer's openness and allows knowledge to emerge from the image itself.

Apart from the cover, most of the photographs inside the book are reduced to the old hand-maiden role of photography within anthropology, namely to provide visual 'proof' of the existence of something or someone. Most of the still-life photographs represent the material culture in a clear and objective way, but the images of people tend to have the character of a quick snapshot. Often taken from a distance, the anthropological concept of participating as an observer is

missing in these photographs, as are photographic qualities such as the concept of Henri Cartier-Bresson's 'decisive moment' (1952). The very long captions accompanying most of the photographs again indicate that the authors did not trust the pictures to stand as images capable of speaking for themselves. It is also a pity that Curt Fukuda, being not only an artist, but also a writer himself felt no need to discuss his conception of photography, nor did the two authors reveal their encounters and thoughts on the visual dimension involved in their collaboration. So once again photography is reduced to a kind of note-taking on an amateur level to support what Margaret Mead (1975) called the 'discipline of words'. This is disappointing: visual anthropology has more to offer than just illustrating the written facts. As photographic images do not innocently convey the anthropological idea of 'what people think and feel', photographers and anthropologists have to clarify their own artistic values for the medium in order to develop its potential to convey knowledge through images.

According to David MacDougall (1979:276), '[a]nthropology has had no lack of interest in the visual; its problem has always been what to do with it.' In "Day of the Dead" we see an attempt to touch new ground within the discipline through the collaboration of a scientific and an artistic author, with one half of the publication being dedicated to the written and the other to the visual. This is a challenging objective, and Haley and Fukuda's inspiring publication will serve as a fruitful contribution to future discussions on photography's role within anthropology, hopefully encouraging more anthropologists to reflect on the relevance of this medium and to work with professional photographers. More generally, I would recommend "Day of the Dead" to anyone looking for an introduction to Mexican culture and its specific forms as expressed in the rituals surrounding the Day of the Dead.

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Astrid Reuter: Voodoo und andere afroamerikanische Religionen. München: Beck Verlag 2003. 127 S. (Beck'sche Reihe 2316.)

Dies ist erfreulicherweise nach Pollack-Eltz (1995) ein zweites einführendes Buch in die in der deutschen Wissenschaftslandschaft noch immer unterrepräsentierten afroamerikanischen Religionen. Der schillernde und populäre Voodoo im Titel lockt den Leser auf die Fährte der drei weiteren Religionen, die die Autorin in ihrem wissenschaftlich fundierten und zugleich stilistisch ansprechend geschriebenen Bändchen vorstellt. Astrid Reuter ist bereits durch eine hervorragende wissenschaftliche Biographie Roger Bastides ausgewiesen, einer der Väter der Afro-Amerikanistik (Reuter 2000).

Das Buch bietet eine Einführung in die vier bekanntesten und bestdokumentierten afroamerikanischen Religionen, die aus einer weit umfangreicheren Anzahl religiöser Erscheinungsformen ausgewählt wurden: den

haitianischen Voodoo, die kubanischen Santería sowie die brasilianischen Religionen Candomblé und Umbanda. Ihr exemplarisches Vorgehen begründet die Autorin mit dem knappen Rahmen des auf nicht vielmehr als hundert Seiten beschränkten Buches. Eine inhaltliche Begründung etwa durch die besondere Verflechtung gerade dieser vier Religionen wird im folgenden zwar angedeutet, jedoch letztlich in seiner historischen Tiefe nicht wirklich herangezogen. Reuters Einleitung bietet, indem sie die Kolonialgeschichte des europäischen Sklavenhandels, die afrikanischen Wurzeln der einzelnen Religionen und die Folgen der durch die Verschleppung ausgelösten Entwurzelung sowie der religiösen Neuformierung im amerikanischen Exil in einzelnen Unterkapiteln schildert, insgesamt einen guten und fundierten historischen Einstieg in die Thematik. Darüber hinaus wäre eine noch genauere Darstellung der historischen Verbindungen zwischen den einzelnen Religionen hilfreich gewesen, um dem Leser klarere Kriterien für einen späteren Vergleich der Religionen an die Hand zu geben. Ein grundlegendes, aber sicherlich der besseren Lesefreundlichkeit geschuldetes Problem des Buches scheint darin zu liegen, daß die Kriterien für die Darstellung der einzelnen Religionen nicht einheitlich gewählt wurden. Auch dadurch wird ein wirklicher Vergleich erschwert. Die einzelnen Religionen werden in ihrer Praxis und in ihren Vorstellungswelten sehr plastisch und umfassend geschildert. Die Interdependenzen jedoch, die sich in besonderer Weise aus den historischen Entstehungsbedingungen erklären lassen und die das synkretistische Beziehungsgeflecht der Religionen untereinander aufzeigen können, werden stellenweise nicht ausreichend dargestellt beziehungsweise bei den einzelnen Religionen unterschiedlich stark ausgeführt. Vielleicht hätte hier die Darstellung der komplexen religiösen Kosmologien bisweilen durch Tabellen verkürzt und übersichtlicher gestaltet werden können.