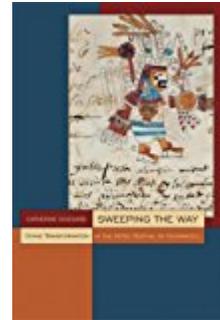


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Catherine R. DiCesare. *Sweeping the Way: Divine Transformation in the Aztec Festival of Ochpaniztli*. Mesoamerican Worlds: From the Olmecs to the Danzantes Series. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2009. Illustrations. 229 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87081-943-8.

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Published on H-LatAm (October, 2012)  
Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo



The Aztec, or Mexica, are probably best known for the spectacular ceremonies of human sacrifice that structured much of their religious calendar; the autumn festival of Ochpaniztli is one of the most intriguing and contested of these celebrations. Focused around the primal fertility goddess Toçī (“Our Grandmother”), Ochpaniztli, “the Sweeping” or “Sweeping the Way,” involved a fascinating blend of ritual violence, gender transgressions, and symbolic imagery of fertility and femininity. Some of the ambiguities surrounding this festival originate from the fact that there are many different colonial accounts, both pictorial and textual, and in *Sweeping the Way*, Catherine DiCesare sets out to unpack these multiple versions and use them to shed light on both the festival and the colonial filters through which it must always be perceived.

DiCesare argues that scholars have often privileged textual accounts in their interpretations of Ochpaniztli, and she instead focuses on the pictorial representations of the festival, particularly those of the Codex Borbonicus. For many years, this pictorial screenfold (which features only a few Spanish glosses) was believed to be the only surviving pre-Columbian manuscript from the Valley of Mexico, but it is now generally accepted to date from the years immediately following the conquest of Mexico. One of the richest sources for Ochpaniztli, the Borbonicus appears to present the festival as a principally agricultural rite, a fact that is at odds with nu-

merous other representations which focus on issues of sexuality, parturition, and purity. The vibrant and detailed depictions of the codex, as well as its indigenous style, have often been seen as authoritative, but DiCesare argues that “the singular nature of the Borbonicus precludes its functioning as an authoritative model for most colonial representations,” and she treats it instead “as a separate, unique manifestation of the festival” (p. 13). In doing so, she resists the temptation to reconcile the many contesting accounts of the Ochpaniztli celebration and contends that discrepancies between documents reveal the very different agendas that affected their production. It is this peeling back of the colonial, indigenous, and contextual layers of meaning that is the most valuable and illuminating aspect of DiCesare’s work. *Sweeping the Way* is a close study of the festival of Ochpaniztli and its associated sources, but it is also an interrogation of the ways in which curiosity, apprehension, practicality, reverence, and restriction led Christian friars and indigenous Mexicans to negotiate and adapt understandings of Aztec beliefs and practices.

Many of the ethnohistorical sources relating to the Aztec ritual calendar, pictorial and alphabetic, were produced under the aegis of missionary friars, and the extent of their influence on the material has been a subject of constant debate, with scholars in recent years broadly falling into two camps that emphasize colonial corruption and indigenous agency respectively. While ac-

knowledging the influence of European cultural and literary forms, such as books of hours, DiCesare suggests that Nahua *tlacuilos* (painters) chose to adapt these forms to their personal purposes, emphasizing indigenous influence rather than missionary imperative. Read within this framework, the choice to depict particular ritual paraphernalia, implements, and adornments becomes a deliberate expression of Nahua choices and understandings, and, for DiCesare, any attempt to synthesize the many different documents regarding Ochpaniztli fundamentally misunderstands the multiple ways in which it was deployed and understood. Scholars studying the festivals of the Aztec solar calendar have attempted to reconcile the differing records into a single coherent ritual cycle; in deconstructing the accounts of Ochpaniztli, DiCesare suggests that “there is no single version of the nature or function of this pre-Columbian *veintena* [monthly] festival, nor of its associated patron entities” (p. 158). She strongly emphasizes that neither the sources nor the events they depict are ahistorical and argues “that ostensibly contradictory details among the sources indicate instead that the festival took particular forms in particular years governed by specific local and temporal imperatives” (p. 161).

The final chapter of the book applies this historicity to the evidence of the *Codex Borbonicus*, which prominently depicts the maize goddess *Chicomecoatl* (Seven Serpent) and her accoutrements alongside an aspect of the earth goddess *Toçi*. These associations have traditionally led to understandings of Ochpaniztli as an annual agricultural festival even though such connotations are lacking from most other sources. DiCesare argues that this inconsistency can be explained by the fact that the *Borbonicus* depicts the rites in the years One Rabbit and Two Reed, moments in the calendrical cycle traditionally associated with plague and famine. At the specific date depicted by the *Borbonicus*, which is probably the Two Reed year of 1507, successive seasons of crop failure and the decimation of grain stores by rats had led to widespread suffering and starvation, and so it is not surprising that spectacular rites propitiating and honoring the gods of fertility, maize, and rain should have accompanied Ochpaniztli in this year. The *Borbonicus* has often been regarded as the authoritative representation of Ochpaniztli practice, but identifying the unique nature of the ceremonies depicted does not devalue it as a source; instead it enriches our understanding of indigenous practice. For DiCesare, the *Borbonicus* images illustrate the “dynamic and malleable” nature of indigenous festivals “shifting and responding to ethnic, local, envi-

ronmental, and temporal needs” (p. 153). This is an important and compelling insight, which provides a valuable counterweight to essentializing accounts of the indigenous world, which are sometimes influenced by the sense of a society “frozen in time” at the point of conquest. For me, as a cultural historian, the book suggests a potential approach to the ceremonial calendar that focuses attention on the flexible and very human nature of ritual events that have often been seen as static and unchanging. This focus on the temporal specificity is one that could lead to more nuanced understandings of the Aztec religious world. A sensitivity to historical context is extended in the book not only to indigenous perspectives and practices, but also to missionary understandings; this is especially evident in chapter 4, which examines the creation of multiple identities for *Toçi* as a means of coping with her moral ambivalence and separating the nurturing and sensual aspects, which were irreconcilable in the Christian imagination.

As I have suggested, the insights and approaches of this book are valuable and original, but I was a little puzzled by the organization of the material, which leaves the key arguments regarding the *Borbonicus* until the final chapter. DiCesare explains this as a means of presenting the codex as “a corollary to the issues and images discussed in previous chapters rather than as the authoritative model from which all other readings and interpretations flow,” but I would have liked to see the concluding arguments foregrounded more clearly (p. 153). The importance of the earlier chapters (on sources, methods of production, ceremonial regalia, and the multiple identities of *Toçi*) only really came into focus for me after reading the following sections. The first four chapters felt more like individual article studies on first reading, and their overall coherence only became clear with the “reveal” of the last chapter.

This is a detailed study, which offers much to the specialist (including a wealth of up-to-date and detailed notes and a full bibliography), but it is unlikely to be suitable for most general or student readers. The technical language and structure occasionally betray the work’s origins as a doctoral thesis and its successive incarnations, and, although there is an excellent introduction explaining the historical context and the complexities of colonial source material, this is not a book that is likely to find a place on undergraduate reading lists. The book is well illustrated, and the images provide an excellent resource for anyone interested in the festival, but it is a pity that no color plates were included. As DiCesare’s text makes clear, color in the codices is richly symbolic, so

even a handful of colored illustrations would have been valuable both to evoke spectacle of the festival and to help with interpretation.

Nonetheless, DiCesare uses Ochpaniztli to demonstrate an approach to reading colonial sources that is subtle and sensitive to context, and that synthesizes pictorial and textual material effectively. *Sweeping the Way* makes

a compelling case for the flexibility and specificity both of indigenous ritual practices and the documents that record them. As well as contributing to our understanding of Ochpaniztli, this approach is certainly applicable elsewhere and suggests many other fruitful avenues for exploration and reinterpretation of the Aztec ritual calendar, a world that is too often seen as divorced from human influences and imperatives.

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**Citation:** Caroline Dodds Pennock. Review of DiCesare, Catherine R., *Sweeping the Way: Divine Transformation in the Aztec Festival of Ochpaniztli*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. October, 2012.

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