

## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Aztec Kings: The Construction of Rulership in Mexican History.* By SUSAN D. GILLESPIE. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988. Pp. xiii+274, 41 figs., 6 tables. \$35.00.

Susan Gillespie seeks the meaning of historical texts from the Aztec past and the causes of their historiographic peculiarities before and after the Spanish Conquest. The problem is arduous. The documentary sources of Mesoamerican history are disconcerting: contradictory versions are frequent; there is ambiguity and multiplicity in the names of the personages; there is difficulty in distinguishing interventions by the gods from human actions; there are problems resulting from a lack of concordance and chronological precision; and patterns are constantly used which result in similar accounts of the origin of different peoples and the biographies of the heroes.

Gillespie proposes that historical registers be treated as symbolism in narrative form: the hermeneutics should lead to the discovery of an indigenous conception that includes the historical happenings in the cosmic cycles. The indigenous oral tradition was part of a calendrical system that placed social relations in time and space, and strongly imposed the normativity of cosmic order on human activities.

In addition, Gillespie points out the intentional reelaboration of indigenous history by the Spaniards, showing how the conquerors' euhemeristic view derived from their conceptions about classical religion.

Some of the author's methodological resources are novel. Others, already known in this field, are used adequately. Particularly original is the comparative use of African and Polynesian traditions, in which the historical account

provides a foundation for the dynastic order of feminine personages. Along other lines, together with Sahlins, she considers that in this type of tradition, social structures and even commonplace events are humanized forms of the cosmic order. Based on Leach, she takes into account the repetition of personal names as an indicator of patterns, and based on Eliade, emphasizes the exemplary and paradigmatic character of the sacred history, which impedes the possible use of such accounts as simple historical documents.

Gillespie proposes that the texts referring to the Tenochca dynasty be considered as products of a cyclical conception in which certain women were identified with the Mother Goddess, generator and founder of the dynasty. She demonstrates the amazing repetition of the names of these women, the unquieting ambiguities of their parental ties to the rulers, and the importance of incest, which she attributes not to chance but rather to the intention of molding the historical account to a higher order. She also notes the parallelism in the biographies of the Tenochca rulers called Motecuhzoma (Ilhuicamina and Xocoyotzin), Topiltzin, Quetzalcoatl, and Huemac. Gillespie stresses their historic role as antagonists/protagonists and initiators/concluders of dynasties.

Gillespie's work is an important contribution to Mesoamerican historiography and the history of religions. By calling attention to the cosmic patterns in the texts and by demonstrating that many of the coincidences, similarities, and oppositions are not the product of chance, the author not only warns against using the documents as mere registers of historical events, but also manifests the importance of the cosmic model that in traditional thinking served to shape the perception of reality (natural or social) and to normalize human action.

However, some observations are necessary with respect to Gillespie's analysis. The first is the limited dimension of the data. In spite of the relative abundance of information concerning the dynasties of the Central Mexican Highlands, almost all pertains to Mexico-Tenochtitlan. The life of the Tenochcas (two centuries in the lacustrine basin and a reduced number of *tiatoque* or rulers) is not sufficient to substantiate some of the guiding principles that the author attributes to her dynastic history. Conjectures abound.

There is, furthermore, a tendency to overvalue the model as a reelaborator process of historical discourse. In effect, Gillespie does not give sufficient consideration to the indigenous conception in which all historical phenomena, both social happenings as well as their record, are included in the cosmic model. Gillespie favors and almost limits herself to a historiographic focus. However, the reductions to cosmic order, characteristic of a traditional worldview, included the elaboration and reelaboration not only of historical accounts, but also of the event itself. The patterns forced transcendental historical happenings to such an extent that they provoked what I have called "events and lives governed by myth." Their conjunction with real political schemes produced a strong dialectic movement. Not only was there a skillful reconstruction of the historical account, but there was also an attempt to adjust the myth for political use.

Gillespie also fails to emphasize the diverse functions of historical narrative, particularly its argumentative role in the conflicts among different groups,

allies as well as enemies. The accounts are considerably modified, but the possibility of mystification has its limits. There were interested witnesses to historical events. The history of the Tenochca, as of any neighboring group, was not only recorded by the group that experienced it. Consequently, not all chroniclers reelaborated historical accounts in the same way.

In attempting to apply the model, the author is trapped between the name of Motecutzoma and the final destiny of the fifth *tiatoani*. To her, the name supposes the close of a dynasty, an event that takes place only upon the death of historical personages. The possible solution is a hypothesis of reception of the name not in life but in the posterior reelaboration of his history. Not only is the hypothesis risky, it is also implausible.

In summary, the work of Susan Gillespie is at the same time controversial and revealing. It is indispensable reading for specialists because it opens a broad road of reflection. Her elaboration of the model displays a comprehensive knowledge of the sources with an intelligent and perspicuous vision, but the application of the model is taken too far.

ALFREDO LÓPEZ AUSTIN

Translated by EMILY MCCLUNG DE TAPIA<sup>3</sup>

*Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas*

*Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*

*Ritual Poetry and the Politics of Death in Early Japan.* By GARY L. EBERSOLE.  
Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989. Pp. xii+338. \$35.00.

In this book, Gary Ebersole examines the age when Japan was first emerging as a history-bearing, literate civilization. His focus is inclusive: history, myth, ritual, poetry, politics, and social structure come under his scrutiny. The central topic of the book is the double burial practice for deceased sovereigns. But in his interdisciplinary approach Ebersole shows that the ritual functioned as a nodal point of culture, in which religion, literature, politics, and society were mutually defining.

Ebersole's main concern is clearly history, but history of a particular kind: ideological mythistory. He is not principally concerned with the ritual itself and how it was performed, though we do, of course, learn a great deal about that. He is interested primarily in how that ritual was interpreted by those struggling for political, social, and religious power. It is the historiography of the court rather than its actual history that takes center stage.

That historiography was ideological because its motive was the securing of power. It was mythistory because the court cast its interpretation in the context of the religious myth. The intention of the court's historiography "was to order and structure specific past occurrences in such a manner that the existent socio-political order was identified with a higher sacred order" (pp. 10-11). The court accomplished this in the *Kojiki* (712), the *Nihonshoki* (720), and the *Man'yôshû* (late eighth century).