

Book Review:

Mayalogue: An Interactionist Theory of Indigenous Cultures.

VICTOR MONTEJO. 2021.

SUNY Press. Albany. 258 pp.

\$95.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 9781438485751

by C. Mathews Samson
Davidson College
masamson@davidson.edu

In his latest work, Victor Montejo – Jakalteq Maya scholar and emeritus professor of Native American Studies at the University of California, Davis – seeks to problematize the relationship between Indigenous peoples and anthropologists. His point of departure is Jakalteq culture, particularly with reference to his experience growing up in the western highlands of Guatemala and the intent “is to discuss how Native knowledge is produced (Maya epistemology) by referring to the traditional knowledge that I learned as a child and as a Maya man who has lived and struggled between two worlds” (6). Jakalteq culture is presented as an extension of the other Maya linguistic communities in Mesoamerica, and linkages between Maya worldviews and those of other Indigenous communities in the Americas and in other parts of the world are emphasized through the work. Beyond the need to decolonize the relationship between academics and Indigenous peoples foregrounded in work, the desire is to create a space for interaction and conversation that moves beyond critique and highlights the importance of building “a Native theory as contribution to the dialogue between anthropologists and Natives” (1).

For Montejo, the “Mayalogue” transcends Western binaries and “include[s] the nonhuman persons as part of the cosmic web of life we call *qinjal*, which means *life, time, and existence*” (1). To illustrate this shift in perspective, the work engages Maya culture and history as well as the contributions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars past and present to “argue that those traditional communities [studied by anthropologists engaged in ‘salvage’ ethnography] had their own philosophy of life that was based on an interactionist mode between humans, nature, and the supernatural world” (20). The work provides a primer on the arc of anthropological theories that marked Indigenous peoples as savages, or at best as barbarians, from the standpoint of Western (and academic) culture, and it serves as a response to denialist theories that served as “racist statements that negate the human abilities of Indigenous People to produce knowledge” (39). In response, Montejo reflects on how *Mayalogue* is grounded in both empirical knowledge and “the ideological understanding of the world and life” found in the *Popol Vuh*, which is reflected in the Maya calendar “used as a unifying element of universal categories” (12). The influence of Maya cosmology is unpacked in the attention given to a range of customary beliefs and practices: oral

tradition and mythology; Maya conceptions of cycles of time and the flow of history; the relationship between the human person and our animal spirit bearer (*yijomal spixan*); and ideas of community service embodied in the Mesoamerican cargo system that has its own counterpart in Maya cosmology where the four year bearers take their place “at the four corners of earth sustaining the heavens and take turns carrying the year’s load” (163). This comprehensive view of life reveals the Mayalogue as “a trialogue or *komontatism* approach to cultures (*a community of beings and their relationships*), where Indigenous People understand themselves as part of a whole in a continuous process of reciprocity” (45). Reciprocal interrelationships are inscribed on the landscape in the way in which house construction mirrors the shape of the universe (48), the *Witz-ak’al* is given thanks as “the guardian of the mountains and valleys” (65), and Maya crosses present in local communities represent the continuing presence of the supernatural in daily life (168).

The larger message of the book is that Maya (and other Indigenous) cosmocentric perspectives build on myths that show how humans are engaged in “a continuous process of world building, world maintenance, world dismantling, and world renewal” (222-223). This tracks with contemporary concerns for environmental justice or earth care in other discursive contexts, and Montejo’s contribution is in the insistence that “Native belief systems” are pertinent in global conversations about ecology and the human place in the cosmos, in the growing acceptance of “the tri-focal philosophy of connectedness between humans, nature, and the supernatural world” (223). The COVID-19 pandemic is mentioned as an example of the possibility of disruption at the global scale. In the face of such disruption, the book’s last chapter is titled “Prophetic Cycles and World Renewal.” The Mayalogue, then, depends not only on the teaching of the ancestors but extends into a future yet to be apprehended. In an earlier chapter introducing readers to Maya cycles of time and the Maya calendar as foundational for both knowledge and action, Montejo remarks that “to know is to understand our responsibilities as humans and recognize the ‘dignity’ of other living beings, while constructing a world of respect, peace, and brotherhood” (96). Towards the end of the work, he comments on the attention that Maya views of time received on 21 December 2012, the end of the roughly 5200-year period since the inception of ancestral Maya time. While we don’t know what the future holds, one key to making sense of Maya cycles of time is to note that 2013 “was the beginning of another set of thirteen *b’ak’tuns* (13 x 400)” that won’t end until the year 7212 (225). In Montejo’s words, “As human beings we cannot avoid the cosmic cycles through which earth must go as it follows its path through the universe. For this reason, we must rethink and correct our actions in relation to the natural world, and the unknown powers and mysteries of the universe” (226).

Montejo has produced a book worthy of consideration, particularly by undergraduates receiving their first exposure to Maya culture and those with interests in epistemology and the comparative study of knowledge systems that take Indigenous worldviews seriously. Unfortunately, the work would be stronger with a more complete editing regimen by SUNY Press. It is not always clear which Mayan language is used when words are translated from English, and consistent errors in text references and in the formatting of the bibliography also detract from the work. Still, the focus here should be on Montejo’s effort to frame the Mayalogue, “a triological communication and interaction practiced by Indigenous People for the maintenance of unity and harmony in a more balanced world” (100). In a world where all too often we can hardly hear each other over the clamor focused on particularistic desires, this is an essential discourse for the human journey.