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# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

## **Between Animatism and Pantheism: Religion and the Supernatural in Ancient Oaxaca**

**Review by Hilary M. Leathem**

*Ancient Zapotec Religion: An Ethnohistorical and Archaeological Perspective*

by Michael Lind

University Press of Colorado, 2015

In *Ancient Zapotec Religion: An Ethnohistorical and Archaeological Perspective*, anthropological archaeologist Michael Lind offers an interdisciplinary approach to defining and understanding ancient Zapotec religion. By focusing on sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish colonial documents, the archaeological record, and brilliant murals, his project encompasses expertise from a variety of fields and methodologies (ethnohistory, archaeology, and art history). The book is truly integrative, and instead of being divided into sections according to methodology, the individual chapters end up flowing rather seamlessly into each other. Chapters 1-4 are where Lind imparts to the reader a general knowledge of Oaxaca and the Zapotec, surveys the different ways that anthropologists and archaeologists have approached the study of religion, and then analyzes Spanish colonial documents, slowly painting a picture of Zapotec religion and its caretakers. These chapters are primarily ethnohistorical and document-based.

It is also in this section that Lind makes one of the major interventions of his research project. According to Lind, and as he demonstrates rather effectively throughout the book, ancient Zapotec religion includes both a pantheon of deities (whether these be gods or deified ancestors), animatistic beliefs, and a hierarchal priesthood. On one hand, his argument contests the view Joyce Marcus put forth—that the Zapotec had no pantheon of gods, and were animatistic, imbuing objects with supernatural force—in the now classic edited volume *The Cloud People: Divergent Evolution of the Zapotec and Mixtec Civilizations* (Flannery & Marcus 2003 [1983]). His point is not that she is

“incorrect,” but rather partially correct in that there is a certain degree of animatism in ancient Zapotec religion; however, Lind maintains that scholars who argued that Zapotec religion included a pantheon and shared some similarities with other Mesoamerican religions are also correct (8-10). In essence, Lind asks and argues: why not both? In doing so, he shows us how ancient Zapotec religion defies neatly packed categories.

The next section, Chapters 5 and 6, are the most archaeologically-intensive. Lind takes an old problem to task—that is, the problem of the temple. Not only does Lind seek to understand the place of temples in Zapotec religious life, but he also aims to parse out the distinction between Zapotec palaces and temples (116). “Nothing is ever easy in archaeology, and this is especially true when trying to distinguish Zapotec palaces from temples,” he writes (115). And so he focuses on two instances of Zapotec temples: one in Mitla, the second in Yagul. His juxtaposition of Mitla against Yagul is colored by typological dualities. For instance, he argues that there are two types of temples among the Postclassic Zapotec — a Classic-style called a TPA (temple-plaza-altar) and TRPA (temple-residence-plaza-altar), which is Postclassic. Lind’s assemblage of data eventually leads him to conclude that the Mitla temple was a far more “special place” and most likely unrivaled in the Valley of Oaxaca (349).

In Chapters 7, 8, and 9, Lind returns to the archives, although this section focuses on very different aspects of what he perceives to be integral to Zapotec religion. In this section, Lind attempts to reconstruct the lives and roles of the *colaní*, a class of Zapotec priests in Prehispanic times that dedicated themselves to the community; he also interrogates timekeeping among the Zapotec, providing his view on what their sacred calendar was like, and then turns his careful and well-trained eye to an illuminating examination of the Mitla murals. Finally, Chapter 10 synthesizes the evidence that Lind procured and demonstrated to the reader, yielding exactly what Lind set out to do: a comprehensive overview and description of ancient Zapotec religion at the time of the Spanish conquest.

Herein he also makes his second major intervention. The archaeologist Arthur A. Joyce argued once “that religion served to legitimate the elite.” Lind states that this is compelling but asserts: “However, religion encompassed more than legitimating the elite. It also served to create a unifying force within any given Zapotec city-state” (349). Thus, in a way, Lind’s vision of religion is a less menacing and oppressive one. Indeed, it is generous, and bolstered by his increasing evidence (and data emerging elsewhere from other archaeologists in the Valley of Oaxaca), that the most integrative force was the cultural center of Mitla. Overall, Lind’s book provides substantial evidence that Mitla was and is the most important place in Zapotec religion. Even in the twentieth-century “Zapotecs in the Sierra Juárez believed the souls of their dead resided in Mitla” and people from all over pilgrimed there to

acquire pieces of the ruins to take home due to their extraordinary sacredness (350). His conclusion is, in essence, of three parts: 1) Zapotec religion features a pantheon of gods, a hierarchy of priests, and animatistic beliefs; 2) Zapotec religion unified city-states into a cohesive identity and, perhaps, formed a specific ancient Zapotec imaginary; and 3) Mitla's significance cannot be overstated.

As many scholars of Oaxaca and of ancient Mesoamerican religion in general know, there is a paucity of literature on Zapotec religion when compared to what is known about the Maya and Nahua belief systems. Lind's project is thus timely and offers new insights into this little known area of ancient Zapotec society. Until now, most of what was known about the Zapotec was inferred from archaeological excavations or from Mixtec codices. In recent years, rediscoveries of lienzos (in this case, painted Zapotec genealogies) and a burgeoning interest in the Postclassic period has enabled scholars to shed new light in this area. Moreover, research in Oaxaca on the Zapotec has overwhelmingly focused on the Formative and Classic periods, on craft economies, and on agricultural and ecological practices and knowledge. Recently, though, this has begun to change and should continue, a trend well represented by Lind's text. In short, I highly recommend this book for scholars of Mesoamerican religion, Oaxacanists, and those interested in conducting interdisciplinary research in challenging historical subjects.

### References Cited

Flannery, Kent V. and Joyce Marcus, eds.

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