

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The View from the Top of the Temple: Ancient Maya Civilization and Modern Maya Culture. By Kenneth Pearce.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5z91n0g2>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 7(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Berlo, Janet Catherine

Publication Date

1983-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Reviews

The View from the Top of the Temple: Ancient Maya Civilization and Modern Maya Culture. By Kenneth Pearce. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984. 273 pp. \$24.95 Cloth. \$12.95 Paper.

In his preface to *The View from the Top of the Temple* Kenneth Pearce asserts: "Most visitors to Mayan Middle America find it difficult to visualize the connection between the old civilization and the culture of the modern Maya." This, he goes on to say, "has resulted in a popular but misleading impression that the past belongs exclusively to an illustrious but long-dead elite, and that the contemporary Maya Indian has inherited none of their cultural traditions. This book has been written, within the limits of present knowledge, to bridge the gap by portraying some of the customs, traditions, beliefs, and rituals demonstrated to have roots in the aboriginal past, and visible in the public and semi-public ceremonies of the contemporary Maya" (xi-xii). The author's aims are admirable, and the gap of which he speaks sorely needs to be bridged. Unfortunately this book is a disappointing attempt to illustrate that the ancient and modern realms of the Maya are one continuous fabric.

The book is divided into three geographic sections. "Priests, Prophets, and Peasants" focuses on archaeology and modern Maya culture in the northern Yucatan. "The Lords of the Golden Triangle" looks at Classic Maya civilization in the southern lowlands. "Children of the Fourth World" considers traditional communities in Chiapas and the highland villages of Guatemala. In thirty brief chapters (ranging from 1.75 to 14.25 pages) the author skips from Puuc archaeology to the caste wars of Yucatan, from the Peten Itza to the "mysterious megacenter of Mirador" (p. 102), from the tourist market at Chichicastenango to the Year Bearers ceremonies in Jacaltenango.

No biographical information on Kenneth Pearce is provided except for the noncommittal statement that he is "a physical scientist who has pursued studies of the Maya for many years."

Although Mesoamerican studies has a long history of "non-specialists" who achieved distinction in the field, this non-specialist lacks command of the literature.

It is evident from chapters on the ancient Maya that Pearce is no archaeologist. He has not relied enough on the tremendous advances of the past twenty years in his interpretations of archaeological data. We hear echoes of the outdated views of Sylvanus Morley and Eric Thompson in his pronouncements that the Classic Maya did not practice human sacrifice or "worship idols" (p. 43-44) but that "to the Maya time was worshipped as a god" (p. 121). He presents recent discoveries on the dynastic history of Quirigua (p. 112-14) yet inexplicably ignores the richer and better understood epigraphic record at Palenque. Although the bibliography lists one of the volumes in which such information can be found (M.G. Robertson, ed., *Proceedings of the Segunda Mesa Redonda de Palenque*, 1976), in the chapter on Palenque he footnotes only Alberto Ruz's earlier excavation report (which is then omitted from the bibliography).

Because of his outdated remarks on some topics, I was surprised to see current information on settlement patterns at Tikal, the use of breadfruit in the diet of the Classic Maya, and the recently discovered system of manmade canals in Guatemala and Belize (p. 92-94). On art, religion and ideology, however, his knowledge is extremely spotty. This prevents him from making many of the connections between archaeological evidence and modern practice that would make the book convincing.

Sections on the modern era reveal that the author's knowledge of the traditional life of the twentieth-century Maya derives from a handful of scholarly books, all in English, all well-known to first-year graduate students in any branch of Mesoamerican studies. While the facts on rain-making ceremonies in the Yucatan or ancestor veneration in the Maya highlands are interesting, especially to the novice reader, they are not well synthesized with the archaeological data to present a convincing case for continuity of belief. Instead of digestion and synthesis, Pearce merely presents an accumulation of other people's data, so that the narrative lacks even the excitement or authority generated by an expert presenting his or her own discoveries.

The author cannot seem to decide if he is writing a travelogue, a serious work of cultural synthesis, or a guide to the ruins. This indecision is likely to leave any reader unsatisfied. Pearce's own

unique voice emerges most authentically when he is describing the local scene. His description of the Rio Dulce area evokes the hubbub of the crossroads truck traffic so at odds with the beauty of the landscape enroute to the archaeological sites of the Peten (p. 66-69).

Anyone who has driven the tortuous road from the isthmus of Tehuantepec to San Cristobal de las Casas will recall every detail when reading this account of the route: "The road climbs from sea level to 5,000 feet in fifteen miles, clinging precariously to the heavily forested slopes of the western escarpment. Rain and the unending mist that sweeps in from the Pacific take their toll on the narrow road, feeding the mountain streams that constantly undermine the road bed, shearing off huge sections of pavement that crash into the foggy depths below" (p. 146). Those who have not driven will resolve not to.

Furthermore, the tour guide's characteristic blithe disregard of modern political problems is evident here. To state in a volume published in 1984 that the Guatemalan government, "ever aware of Indian solidarity and the specter of revolt in the highlands has consistently sided with the Quiché (against the Catholic church), encouraging the Indians to worship as they see fit" in Chichicastenango (p. 206) is a pathetic travesty of the real relationship between the Maya and the military government(s) of Guatemala. The pivotal role of tourism in the Guatemalan economy plays a hand in allowing the "photogenic natives" to burn their incense on the steps of the church in Chichicastenango regardless of the preferences of the Catholic authorities.

Elsewhere Pearce propagates the romantic and erroneous notion that in Guatemala "traditional cultural patterns have been modified only minimally;" "Indian and Latino culture have maintained an arm's length relationship with each other" and "cultural roots have been effectively isolated from external influences" (xiv). One can make a valid case for strong cultural continuities among the Maya without disregarding the dramatic and often tragic changes that the twentieth century has brought to these people.

Nowhere does the author mention the tremendous upsurge in evangelical Protestantism among the Maya and its resultant fragmentation of community life and customs.* The well-established

*See *Is God an American?*, S. Hvalkov & P. Aaby, eds. London, 1981.

view of modern Maya religion as a syncretic blend of Christianity and indigenous belief is dismissed: "It has been fashionable among many modern writers to describe contemporary Maya religion as a product of acculturation, as a blending of elements of Catholic doctrine with pagan practices. Little evidence substantiates such a position within the more traditional Maya communities" (xii). It would be fairer to say that some earlier scholars may not have appreciated the extent to which traditional practices have been maintained. Acculturation takes many forms; without doubt, Maya religion as practiced today in its many regional variants is a result of the acculturative processes of the past 450 years.

I would be more forgiving of this book's many flaws if it were published by a commercial press. But for the University of New Mexico Press, which has a distinguished history of publication in Middle American studies, to publish such an amateurish volume is particularly disappointing. The volume is poorly edited, with little continuity from chapter to chapter. It is poorly proofread and rife with typographical errors and misspellings (diety for deity, p. 155; Jaceltenango for Jacaltenango, p. 216; Quetzaltenango for Quezaltenango, p. 194). The footnotes are often incomplete, lacking page numbers. Many of the photos are mediocre, and they seldom are referred to directly within the text. The reader must intuit their import. The line drawings are disgraceful and would certainly have been unacceptable for publication in most journals. Why were they not professionally redrawn for publication here? For example, figure 44 is a sloppy and inaccurate sketch of year bearer ceremonies in the pre-conquest Dresden Codex. The manuscript page is not identified (it is page 28). The drawing itself is not referred to in the chapter on year bearers in the Guatemalan highlands today (chapter 30), where it would enhance the point that this book purports to demonstrate: the remarkable ties between the archaeological past and the ethnographic present. All of these are details of a most pedestrian nature and should have been remedied by an attentive editor.

Despite my numerous misgivings about this book, it does serve a limited purpose. While it is certainly not for the scholar (despite the claims on the book jacket) or the advanced student, this might be a useful volume for the intelligent but untutored traveler who is eager for something to augment the simple tourbook.

Such a traveler might pack it along with (but certainly not in place of) a specialized archaeological guidebook, such as C. Bruce Hunter's *Guide to Ancient Maya Ruins* (Oklahoma, 1974).

However, the unwary reader should be cautioned that *The View from the Top of the Temple* is remarkably like the view from the top of most any Maya pyramid he is likely to climb in the thickly forested northern region of Guatemala: a very limited view indeed.

Janet Catherine Berlo
University of Missouri-St. Louis

Earth Power Coming. Edited by Simon Ortiz. Short Fiction in Native American Literature. Tsaille, Arizona: Navajo Community College Press, 1983. 282 pp. \$12.00, Paper.

This light-strewn collection of stories comes from the future, from the clay-fragrant breath of legends and the momentum of each waking day. The writings of some thirty authors have been selected and sequenced by editor Simon Ortiz with characteristic attention to beauty. Those who grieve the alleged disintegration of American Indian life can rejoice in this literary song of a society in continuous renewal while throughout the book, surprising images of White culture surface with casual precision.

The writing is dreamily realistic, unraveling an interconnectedness of experience intrinsic to Indian thought. "Turtle Meat" by Joseph Bruchac III describes love between an Indian man and a White woman in visions of passion past and undeniable present dignity. In "New Shoes" by Linda Hogan an Indian woman has the not uncommon task of raising her child alone and often invisibly in a White city. In talking to her daughter's teacher she tries to explain her child's background, her heritage, her roots, her spiritual ability to paint the center of herself in the scenes around her. "That's nice," says the teacher. "That is nice."

There are no wooden Indians in this book and few wooden Whites. The characters are buoyant, tangy and sometimes profoundly grim. Louise Erdrich places the anguish of a stolen son, the undiluted courage of a mother and the deodorized righteousness of a social worker side by side in her story "American Horse." "The Sonofabitch and the Dog" by Ralph Salisbury, and his future fable "The Gleams," hold up the malice of corporate