



DEPARTMENT OF SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE
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Chair
Board of the Culture and Religion Studies
Jagiellonian University
Cracow, Poland

Dear Madam/Sir,

After reading and examining Ms. Monika Banach's dissertation, I judge it an excellent scholarly piece, and a welcome contribution to the anthropological literature on sacred landscapes, ritual, and history of the Highland Maya. The work is well-written and ambitious in scope, examining and deftly integrating in a single ethnographic account ritual practices, place, local histories, and political violence in the Ixil region of highland Guatemala. Divided into three "parts", it begins considering prayer in traditional Ixil ritual and its relationship to the calendar, sacred places, and spiritual beings. It convincingly explains the ways in which local landscapes are inscribed and reinscribed by ritual specialists (*b'aalvatz Tiixh*) as they perform highly localized ceremonies in a complex, dynamic and changing ritual cycle based on the sacred 260-day Mesoamerican calendar (*tachb'al q'ii*), and to a lesser extent on the 365-day annual calendar (*tachb'al amaq*). Part I also engages the anthropological literature on place and ritual, as well as the work of ethnographers, historians and linguists who have previously done research among the Ixil. Her analysis of prayer considers texts, their embedding in chant sequences, accompanying gestures and ritual actions, as well as spatial and temporal cycles in the three Ixil townships, with an emphasis on the township of Chajul, where Ms. Banach did most of her fieldwork. Part II considers sacred places, their nature, location, and geographic distribution. Ms. Banach's analysis is very detailed, containing a wealth of new information on the sacred geography of Chajul, and the community of Ilom that will be enlightening to Maya activists and scholars interested in ritual and highland Maya history. Her discussion of the collusion of extractive industries and archeological research in the area is a denunciation of the way archeology is sometimes being conducted in Ixil country, and the deleterious impact of extractive industries on sacred landscapes. Part III engages the complex dialectic between oral tradition and modern history, examining the impact of genocidal state counterinsurgency, on the one hand, and extractive industries (coffee, cattle, hydroelectric plants), on the other. Ms. Banach provides a fascinating analysis of the ways in which myth is reinscribed in oral tradition as a dynamic form of knowledge that incorporates new events in the long history of anti-colonial resistance of the Ixil people. She examines in detail the myth of the *Tx'ol Winaq*, and various interpretations thereof, comparing them also with Spanish colonial sources, as well as

Republican period records of various land conflicts in Iloom. In this section, Ms. Banach produces one of the best recent analyses I have seen of the ways in which Highland Maya oral tradition is used as a device to make sense of, evaluate and interpret the challenges of the present with the discursive threads inherited from the ancestors. She also thoughtfully examines the disjunctions and contradictions between Ixil oral tradition and academic history.

Despite the overall excellence of the thesis, I would recommend a better discussion of the contemporary religious scape in Ixil country. Understandably, Ms. Banach's work was based on fieldwork among traditionalists. However, besides some discussion of "bosques de oración" among Pentecostals, there is little discussion of place among non-traditionalist Catholics and others. Also, her adoption of the term *lugar sagrado* from contemporary Maya activists is problematic in the sense that it does not make a clear distinction between memory and ritual localities and their varying import for Ixil *communitas*. Finally, I would also add a more detailed discussion of the resignification of traditional ritual in the context of the Maya Movement after the signing of the Peace Accords that ended the civil war in Guatemala in 1996. At that time, sacred places and traditional ritual became key elements of Maya struggles and underwent a kind of streamlining that is often locally contested. It is indeed a new, creative way of reinscribing place in a new set of political coordinates.

In short, Ms. Banach's is an excellent dissertation, showing the skills, experience and scholarship required for a doctoral degree in anthropology. Once it's published, it will also be a great contribution to the field of Maya studies, useful to activists, communities, and scholars alike.

Please let me know if you need additional details.

With very best wishes,



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