Time, Essential and Relative

Politics of Representation of Incas and Mayas

Review essay by Arij Ouweneel


1. As the recent pasts still part of the present, the everyday history of political conflicts all around the world witnesses the power of very old (‘historical/mythical’) discourses in our own time. Despite such signs of the past in the present from all over the world, anthropologists, perhaps the social scientists in general, are in the midst of diehard relativism – sometimes but erroneously labelled the deconstructive turn – in which writers have difficulties accepting such continuities in culture. The social sciences, it is said, produced discourses that trafficked heavily in generalisations, and were stuck in essentialistic postures. It is particularly important in analysing ‘indigenous’ or ‘native’ cultures. In 1993, anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod saw herself confronted with this ‘polities of representation’ and consequently with the limitations of the standard anthropological monograph. She chose ‘writing against culture’.¹ Diehard relativism offers an anti-essentialistic solution that shapes a way for Western writers not to execute – in Foucauldian or Derridian sense – epistemic violence to the discourses of the Other. However, this has given birth to other problems. First of all, continuities do exist which form and reform the present all over the world. And second, because the discourse of the Other is always written in the words of the anthropologist or social scientist, it is based on the selection and editing of that scientist.

In her recent book on Pan-Maya activism in Guatemala, Kay Warren describes a conflict with those activists resulting from her anti-essentialistic stance. Professor Demetrio Cójí Cuxil, the dean of Maya public intellectuals, asked her to describe ‘continuities in Maya culture, the timeless characteristics that make the Mayas Maya’.² She had answered that in the given epistemological circumstances – in short: ‘according to the stories Western social scientists tell themselves’ – she could not write like ‘an ethnohistorian who finds continuities and, whatever their current significance, argues that they are the Maya culture core’. Her position included identity formation as a continuing process, the global interplay of politics and cultures, the continuous reworking of identities – eventually within agrarian class relations and not always from a defensive and oppositional reaction. But her own self-declared ‘constructionist al-
ternative’ was received by this particular Other as suspect; in fact as being a kind of neo-colonialism.\textsuperscript{3} In other words, it was the ‘epistemic violence’ of ‘colonising’ the Other with diehard relativism.

Interestingly, only a few years earlier, the New York anthropologist Gary H. Gossen had published in the ‘flagship journal of the American Anthropological Association’ a well-informed comment on the 1994 Zapatista movement in Chiapas.\textsuperscript{4} It was based on a careful reading of new Maya research and the articulation with his fieldwork experience. Gossen added the element of cultural agency to the more usual interpretations of the revolt. His basic argument was on continuities, on ‘typical’ Maya elements in the revolt. He combined research on the Classical Maya from the first centuries AD with insights collected during his own fieldwork. The description of continuities came naturally to this anthropologist. And Warren, like Gossen, speaks invariably of traits being ‘Maya’, and suggests, and even underscores, evidence of continuity.

The problem here as I see it is perhaps a typically Western one: taking an absolute position in being either in favour or refusal of ‘essentials’. In other scientific investigations similar discussions have interfered with advancement in knowledge and insights. In agrarian history, for example, historians discussed for decades the onset of an ‘agrarian revolution’ in the eighteenth century (in England) or the nineteenth century (on the European continent). But after years of research, B. H. Slicher van Bath concluded that some elements of agrarian development were constant (with a tendency to stay the same over a long period of time), others were fluctuative (with a tendency to change on the short term), or variable (with a tendency to change in the long run).\textsuperscript{5} A similar conclusion seems to be in the making for cultural anthropology. For example, I read Lars Rodseth’s 1998 article on ‘Distributive Models of Culture’ as a witness to that process.\textsuperscript{6} Looking at cultures as species and applying the analogy of Darwinism is in fact consistent with both relativism and essentialism. I do not want to defend Rodseth’s introduction of Edward Sapir directly, but his basic point of departure seems in line with other introductions of this location, for example Dan Sperber’s (1996).\textsuperscript{7} The ‘core’ of the Maya culture would include constant and variable elements, while fluctuative elements and the transfer of some variable elements – or factors, the wording is subjective here – shift following particular historical moments. In short, research into this interplay of these historical forces could satisfy both the Pan-Maya nationalists and Western anthropologists and historians. It is a kind of naturalistic approach, stressing continuities within change.

2. One successful publication stressing continuity in Maya culture and naming several constant and variable factors is Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman’s Path, by David Freidel, Linda Schele and Joy Parker (Quill New York, 1993). A central feature of the book was the recognition of the importance of celestial movements in the development of myth and ‘discourse’ of the classical Maya. The key part of the book was called ‘Linda’s Encounter with Creation’ (pp. 75-107), and it has reshaped ‘mayaology’ forever. Most of the classical symbols, figures, tales and myths recognised in drawings and glyphs on tombs, stone monuments, vessels, pots, codices and the like could be articulated with the movement of stars and planets. The Milky Way, the Big Dipper, Orion and the ecliptic could be pieced together in a creation myth
similar to the one in the *Popol Vuh* of colonial Guatemala and contemporary myths from the Maya world. The book strikes like a lightning bolt in the reader's mind and will not be put aside easily for years to come.

William Sullivan set up a similar project in the Andes in more or less the same period of time. To write his *Secret of the Incas*, Sullivan departed on a voyage through the stellar bodies and Andean myths from a older book, *Hamlet's Mill* by Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend (1969). Santillana and Dechend argued that myths could be deciphered as a kind of ‘technical language’ designed to record and transmit astronomical observations of great complexity, particularly those connected with the precession of the equinoxes. Their conclusion was a bold one. None of the myths of any ancient people on earth could be understood without taking celestial movements into account. And there were only three basic rules: 1) animals are stars, 2) gods are planets, and 3) topography is analogue to positions of the sun on the celestial sphere. In short, ancient texts were astronomy and astrology at the same time. Sullivan set out to collect Andean myths and Inca architecture in order to ‘decipher’ the language stored in them with the help of those insights.

Sullivan describes ancient astronomical monuments as ‘hardware’ and the myths as ‘software’. Astronomical observations were embedded within myths that could be dated at least as accurately as carbon dating. This enabled him to compare the contents of myths so dated with the archaeological records. He ran this ‘software’ on the architectural ‘hardware’ trying to understand the Inca Empire. He came to investigate the legend that the Inca Empire was born under the shadow of a prophecy. The father of the first Inca foretold that after five generations the Empire and its religion would be utterly destroyed by their own Creator, who was disappointed by the human race. The last Inca would be Huayna Capac. Now, this could be a myth that was fabricated after the incredible defeat of thousands of Andean warriors against some 175 Spaniards. But Sullivan found consistency in a set of stories that concerned a ‘flood’ that had destroyed all but a few peasants around 650 AD. According to the anthropologist the astronomical or precessional event that corresponded with this occurrence was the phenomenon that the Milky Way at sunrise on June solstice could not be seen for the first time in 800 years. It meant, he deduced from the myths, that the Andean people thought the gates of the land of the gods had slammed shut. Some 800 years later in 1450, the Inca astronomers predicted a similar precessional event that would shut the gates to the land of the ancestors. They recognised that after this event the end of the relationship between ‘man’ and his ancestors would be a reality. According to Sullivan, a group of young Indian nobles began a quest to prevent this from happening. The foundations of Andean cosmology rested upon a ritual interchange with the ancestors. As these rituals were especially significant during the December solstice, the ancestors could be mobilised to cooperate in the enormous undertaking to stop time. Perhaps in a romantic mood – but not principally anti-scientific – Sullivan saw the Inca Empire in operation for this sole purpose of stopping the celestial bodies in their tracks. Ritual warfare and human sacrifice could achieve this. Each tribe had to offer a child in order to send emissaries back to the Creator to keep the bridgehead to the ancestors open. The Incas wanted to take leave of time, but the Creator, obviously, was not impressed. He closed the bridgehead to the Incas and, right on time, sent in the Spaniards'.
3. Without referring to Sullivan’s work in her *The Shape of Inca History* (1999), Susan Niles, a Lafayette College anthropologist and renowned writer on Inca myths, sees the Andean monuments not as a instruments to stop time from ticking but as attempts to satisfy the Inca rulers’ obsessions to perpetuate their remembrance. For them, a work of architecture was a way to prove the accomplishments of an ancestor. This could be said of Mitterand’s Louvre, too, and is more in line with our own twentieth-century sceptical minds. I myself might follow Niles much easier than Sullivan. Sullivan’s text could been seen as the ‘junk’ that accompanies the dawning of the Age of Aquarius packaged in scientific argument and style. But the Incas did not have a sceptical mind. They acted in accordance with the celestial movements as the Maya did. This has made me wonder if Inca astrological cosmology has perhaps been done wrong by a text like Niles’, and served by Sullivan’s?

The research of Susan Niles is based on well-known sixteenth-century texts (especially Betanzos), legal documents, and the archaeological record. She focuses on the life of Huayna Capac and the records – both archival and archaeological – from his estate in today’s ‘Valley of Gods’ near Yucay. The archaeological findings showed that Huayna Capac’s buildings were different from his ancestors’. The stylistic and technical innovations reflect the turbulent political atmosphere at the time of his accession. Of course, ancient cosmology was still part of the ceremonial practices, but no clues are offered – or could be uncovered by my reading – of a war against time. On the contrary, the Inca buildings were to reflect the persistence of ancestor time. The Inca was to live on in his buildings. Every Inca started a lineage, we know, and his palaces were to be the central focuses of these lineages. The lineage had its own mythical time, its own fabricated history. This means that the buildings did reflect myths, but that these myths were based on the location that the ruling Inca gave himself within the overall official historical picture of the Empire. It seems to have little to do with the movements of the celestial bodies per se, although the ceremonial activities of the Incas are clear.

It was a historicised, commemorative landscape the Incas have left us, and Niles describes the formation of one of these. She concludes that Inca building should be understood within its historical context. I found the connections between building activity, that historicisation of the landscape, and Andean memory to be the most interesting pieces in the book. In a detailed analysis of texts and architecture, Niles shows that the buildings were both the result of the narrative construction and the source of subsequent ‘historical’ narratives, mostly mnemonics of war and conquest. Both artefacts – buildings and texts – reinforced themselves into a powerful cultural legacy; a legacy that above all seems to have served the legitimisation of the warlike Inca dynasties. The tragic story of a people deserted by their Creator as told by Sullivan contradicts sharply with the empirically informed narrative of Niles in which the Incas were constantly showing the commitment of the gods to their project of ruling the world. This is clearly the argument of a relativist who follows – perhaps unconsciously – the naturalistic and professionally historical approaches: the past as the result of the limited forces of time and space. Inca building, then, floats fluctuatively upon a calm sea of constancy. Sullivan will have a thorny time refuting the seriously founded and informed investigations like the one carried out by Niles.
4. In retrospect, most quality social science discourse seems as if it were written from the naturalistic approach, stressing continuities within change. Gary H. Gossen's *Telling Maya Tales* (1999) may serve as another pre-eminent example. The book is an ethnographic portrait of the Tzotzil Maya from Chamula, as the author experienced it from within and from without. It is composed of ten chapters, most of them previously published. The book begins with a short overview of Gossen’s career in anthropology and doing research in Chamula, the Tzotzil town so intensely visited by tourists in the past decades. In the thirty-page preface, Gossen introduces these two tales of the book, a multiscenario ethnographic portrait of the Chamula Tzotzils as he listened and learned to know them, and a personal chronicle of doing research among ‘Indians’ for more than three decades. Both stories go from static or ‘essentialist’ to dynamic or ‘historical,’ and in that respect they are more a reflection of the development of anthropology as a science than of relationships within and without Chamula.

The first chapter is a funny, clever discussion of Gossen’s position as a ‘Kansan’ in Chamula. The piece was originally published in *Cultural Anthropology* (1993), and ever since I have regarded it as an exemplary piece of ‘fieldwork narrative’. It is a pity that ethnohistorians have not as yet been able to describe their own experiences ‘in the field’ in this personal way and, at the same time, be able to offer a theoretically informed discussion of the subjects under scope. This particular combination is an alternative to the ‘writing against culture’ of Abu-Lughod, and, I think, is special because of its construction as autobiography and dialogue. The most amusing part of the chapter is focussed on the topic ‘to see ourselves as other see us’. Here, the problem of doing research is constructed from the image the researcher has in the community he studies. From his partners in conversation, Gossen found out the Indians probably did not regard him as being one of the real world. Simply to know if he was a real man, and could do his human duties, the following scene occurred one day in the *pus* or two-person sweat bathhouse behind the hut of one of his Indian friends:

> My friend tossed the hot water on the heated stones, shut the door and instructed me to lie down quickly and to beat myself with the branches. In the intense heat, steam, and darkness, I suddenly felt his hand on my naked crotch. He then found my left hand, which lay next to him, and placed it on his crotch. No words were spoken. So we remained in this intimate contact for perhaps half a minute – I, utterly incredulous and frightened, but not resisting. After that briefest of encounters – which seemed at the time to be an eternity – we both resumed beating ourselves with the branches. Nothing else happened. We emerged after about twenty minutes, dressed, felt refreshed, and had a drink of rum together. Not a word about what had happened was ever spoken between us, much less to our families.¹⁰

Of course, we ethnohistorians cannot have such experiences with our subjects; they are usually long dead. And although we may sometimes experience similarly embarrassing situations (yes, I have had some as well), work in the archives consists mostly of reading and making notes; or simply making photo-
copies of documents. The scene described above is an integrated part of Gos-

ten's position as someone from another time and – of course – another place, 

indeed another cosmos. Although the story runs the risk of being another ex-

ample of positioning the Other as specifically exotic, his personal experiences 

and the conversational tone of the piece prevent this. In fact, what he stresses is 

what I like to call the constant cultural factors that form part of human life in 

that specific Tzotzil Maya town.

In discussing work by Rosaldo and the well-known volume of Marcus and 

Fischer, Gossen successfully executes an exercise in reflexivity, an attempt to 

take seriously the challenge of the ‘crisis of representation’. The first chapter 

alone will inspire future anthropologists, and perhaps ethnohistorians as well, 

if they can articulate their daily experience and archival readings. It is this spirit 

the other chapters develop, some more distant from Chamula – commenting 

upon the Zapatistas and Mexico’s future for instance –, some almost from the 

belly button of the ‘native’ world, illustrated by tales, stories and illustrations 

from Gossen’s partners. Chapters like ‘True Ancient Words’ (new), ‘On the 

Human Condition and the Moral Order’ (published in 1993), ‘Language and 

Indians’ Place in Chiapas (new) describe the Tzotzil cosmos as experienced by 

the anthropologist but with close translations of the Indians’ words. To my joy, 

the well-known essay ‘The Chamula Festival of Games’ (1986) – made famous 

by Freidel and Schele in the Maya Cosmos – is included in the volume. Al-

though it is a most traditional piece in anthropological narrative, yet in line 

with the ‘celestial bodies’ argument of trying to influence the heavenly move-

ments, it shows perfectly the more constant factors of Maya culture at work, 

combined with addenda not previously published (textual sidebars with Tzot-

zil narratives of cultural memory).

It will be difficult for students starting their careers to imitate this kind of 

work, but it should be an inspiration to them. Rarely have I read a text as 

enjoyable as it is instructive on the Maya culture. Maya like Cojí will be happy 

with the book because it illustrates continuity with a large history of cultural 

identity and self-consciousness. Anthropologists will be pleased to find that 

these continuities are not isolated from their current significance. Gossen nev-

er argues that Maya culture has a static core beyond change. Some of the fac-

tors of Maya cosmology are presented as variable (constant in the short term, 

but changing over a long period of time) or fluctuative, as in the cases of the 

diaspora and the Zapatista movement. In all, the picture I have of the book is of 

a constant culture, self-confident in its expression, but nevertheless specific in 

time and space. The changes are indicated and underscored with data and ex-

amples as strongly as the continuities. The links between architectural pat-

terns, ceremonial places and other artefacts are clearly shown. The Maya tales 

Gossen wishes to (re)tell live on in part because of these artefacts. 11

However, when reading Gossen’s book from a Derridean position, the text 

reveals one continuous struggle with time. In the first chapters, also the first to 

be written, Gossen stressed continuities, but in later chapters, under the influ-

ence of post-structuralism, he focuses more on time-space limitations. A sec-

ond struggle with time is the question whether Maya culture is surviving time, 

that is, the pressures of the twentieth century. Gossen seems to be not so cer-

tain. He shows that the Maya could easily make changes and adaptations at 

some point, but when considering other aspects of modernisation, greater
changes would alter their cultural habits significantly. New artefacts are being articulated with modern narratives (just think of Protestantism!). Yet at the same time, new groups like the Tzotzils living in diaspora are reinventing artefacts and are persisting in ‘ancient’ and ‘old’ ways of living in a thoroughly new historicised landscape. The book is obligatory for anyone struggling with the issues of ‘indigenous identities’; nevertheless it also shows that no definitive answers can yet be formulated. But in our time, no one is expecting that.

5. The books under review were read as an experiment in the laboratory of comparative human cognition. Indeed, without exception – and even including Sullivan’s speculative story – these books can be seen as benchmarks in the study of cultural and contextual foundations of human development. A crucial feature in all these texts is the artefact – tools, instruments, texts – as the foundation of continuity: myths, buildings, sacred time, mission. Where artefacts are simultaneously ideal (conceptual) and material, cultures exploit them as instrumental factors in the continuation of cultural characteristics over long periods of time. This view has a long history in anthropology and cultural psychology and should not be sacrificed by the other more fluctuative and variable factors of specific time/space limitations. I do not see why the recognition of such factors by outsiders like Niles, or Gossen, and their comments in, for example, ‘coherent stories’ on cultures should be expressions of any ‘violent politics of representation’. From this perspective, I see no reason to ‘write against culture’ at all.

Notes

8. The precession is a gyroscopic-like wobble of the earth’s axis of rotation requiring 26,000 years to complete a single cycle.