

4-2003

## Review of: Mayan Visions: The Quest for Autonomy in an Age of Globalization

David Carey

*University of Southern Maine, [dcarey@usm.maine.edu](mailto:dcarey@usm.maine.edu)*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Carey Jr., David. 2003. "Mayan Visions (Book)." *Comparative Studies In Society & History* 45, no. 2: 422.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in History by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu](mailto:jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu).

# CSSH NOTES

June C. Nash. *Mayan Visions: The Quest for Autonomy in an Age of Globalization*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Prior to anti-globalization demonstrations in places like Seattle and Prague, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army for National Liberation, EZLN), better known as the Zapatistas, became a leader in the struggle against neoliberal economic policies and a model for peaceful change in the twenty-first-century. June Nash's erudite book *Mayan Visions: The Quest for Autonomy in an Age of Globalization* provides a local ethnographic analysis of the "fissuring and fusing" of the Zapatistas in the context of national and international influences. For example, female Zapatistas, who comprise 40 percent of the EZLN, are not only fighting for national and international autonomy but also for female representation and power in their local patriarchal indigenous communities. These women do not see indigenous rights and women's rights as mutually exclusive; they strive to change the world more radically than most of their male counterparts and in so doing they display how revolutionary movements can simultaneously be agents of change and subjects of reform. Nash adeptly argues that "indigenous peoples will become the chief protagonists of change in the coming millennium" (26) partly because they articulate a plausible alternative to neoliberalism (based on the right of self-determination, moral authority as a means to power, collective strategies for survival, and multiethnic and nonhierarchical worldviews). In fact, the Zapatistas are already changing the face of civil society in Mexico, and their savvy communication skills (led by Subcomandante Marcos) buttresses and protects their organization by attracting those outside the country to their goals and techniques.

To understand the implications of the Zapatistas' attempt to achieve autonomy without isolation and highlight how their efforts can inform others, Nash employs feminist theory reasoning that "Gender issues subvert dichotomies of class and ethnicity because they transcend both social groupings" (245). Her holistic theoretical framework, which avoids the tendency of some postmodernist theorists to rely on exclusive approaches (e.g. discourse analysis, identity formation) to the detriment of comprehensive analysis, will prove valuable to anthropologists and feminist scholars as well as historians and other social scientists. She encourages anthropologists to become increasingly sensitive to the changing needs and goals of the people whom they study and situate these interests in a global context. Nash brings tremendous depth (she began her fieldwork in Chiapas in the late 1950s) and impressive breadth (she has also carried out extensive anthropological studies in Bolivia and Massachusetts) to this

ethnographic study, but also a refreshing symbiotic approach that combines her professorial roles of scholar and teacher: not only did she take undergraduate and graduate students to Chiapas with her from 1988 to 1993 with a grant from the National Science Foundation, but she enriches *Mayan Visions* by incorporating their research, insights, and scholarship.

At times Nash's assertions lack historical analysis. For example, she claims that for 500 years Mexico's indigenous people had only "defended themselves against *ladino* domination in the context of fragmented communities with leaders co-opted by the state" (146). However, the 1712 Cancuc rebellion in which thirty-two towns participated, the Caste War of Yucatán that began in 1847, and the Yaqui (and Mayo) rebellion led by Cajeme in the late nineteenth century stand as reminders that indigenous people organized beyond the communal level to resist unwanted incursions and assert their rights. While her writing is engaging, redundancy (especially between the notes and text) disrupts the flow of parts of the book. But these are minor shortcomings. As one of the foremost scholars in anthropology, Nash does not disappoint with this book whose appeal is both interdisciplinary and transnational.

———David Carey Jr., University of Southern Maine

Susantha Goonatilake. *Anthropologizing Sri Lanka: A Eurocentric Misadventure*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.

In this "exercise in the sociology of anthropology" (p. xii), Susantha Goonatilake portrays contemporary anthropology of Sri Lanka as "worse than anything colonial anthropology wrought, and, in fact, worse than the colonial writings of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries" (xiii). Goonatilake focuses his attacks on selected works by Gananath Obeyesekere, Richard Gombrich, Bruce Kapferer, and Stanley Tambiah, and in the last chapter widens his critique to include almost every other scholar of Sri Lanka. While Goonatilake offers very good summaries of these texts and provides some pointed critiques, especially of Tambiah's more explicitly political writings, his analysis does not add up to an effective dismissal of post-colonial anthropological thought on Sri Lanka. While Goonatilake's book seems to try to be a Sri Lankan version of Ronald Inden's *Imagining India*, he undermines this ambitious project with his personal political animosities and his misreadings of anthropology.

Goonatilake regularly misinterprets anthropology much more than the anthropologists whom he examines misunderstand Sri Lanka. He finds anthropological methods of participant-observation that underlie ethnography unscientific and insufficient, claiming that "no visitor to the country who tries to describe Sri Lanka with the tunnel vision derived from a small village study that makes him an 'expert' on the country can get at the total picture" (273). For him, a year of research "is too short a time and too restrictive a frame to en-

compass the nuances of a total civilization” (53). Yet he never states how long would be enough, besides a lifetime, nor what he means by “civilization,” a term he uses throughout the book. Goonatilake focuses his book solely on Sinhala, ignoring Sri Lanka’s minority communities of Tamils and Muslims, who do not seem to contribute to his concept of Sri Lankan civilization. He defensively highlights Sinhala agency, creativity, and occasional superiority vis-à-vis the West to prove that Sinhala Buddhists do not live in “the isolated social pocket of the classical anthropologist” (78, 265).

Goonatilake argues that “the anthropology of the four authors is seriously flawed with respect to basic facts on the ground, the methodology used and the conclusions arrived at” (xiii), yet the same could easily be said of him. For example, he discusses anthropological theory only up to the mid-1970s, ignoring much recent scholarship that has influenced Sri Lankan studies (24–27, 277–78). He then consistently misreads academic deconstruction of ethnicity and nationalism by equating it with advocating the destruction of Sinhala and the Sri Lankan nation-state. Additionally, he often provides unsubstantiated counter-arguments, such as claiming that the spread of alcohol use was “only a post-World War II phenomenon” (83), a statement which neglects the centuries-long existence of an entire caste of toddy tappers in coastal Sri Lanka.

This book may appeal to scholars of Sri Lanka who wish to see how Goonatilake skewers their colleagues. However, to non-specialists it will be useful only as an example of a conservative appropriation of postcolonial theory, since Goonatilake’s attacks provide little opportunity for comparative analysis. Moreover, his criticisms of the four authors quickly become vociferous and petty, to the point of calling Obeyesekere and Tambiah “Uncle Tom” and “house nigger” (271). In the end, Goonatilake’s dismissal of one of Kapferer’s books is readily applicable to his own writing: “the book is . . . patchy and could well be considered easily and eminently forgettable” (122).

———Daniel Bass

Mariane C. Ferme. *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History, and the Everyday in Sierra Leone*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. 287 pp., 6 b/w photos, 3 figs.

As the intriguing title of this extraordinary study of Mende social life and history suggests, things are seldom what they seem. Indeed, the cover illustration of the inner side of a Poro society mask suggests this hidden complexity. Inscribed with magic squares which refer to passages from the Qur’an which give its wearer special powers and protection, this mask also hides an individual’s identity while presenting a public face. However, Mariane Ferme focuses not on masks and masquerade ritual but rather on an examination of the underlying cultural logic of “strategies of concealment” associated with everyday

things, such as hammocks and fishing nets. It is through an analysis of these unassuming things, Ferme argues, that the social dynamics as well as the historical and political economy of this region may best be understood. While this study took place in a small Mende village in southeastern Sierra Leone beginning in 1985—before the “War of Theft” of the 1990s began—it provides a means for understanding how everyday conflict occurs and how it may escalate in unpredictable, contestable, and violent ways, of particular relevance for contemporary Sierra Leone. For, as the author observes, “The valuing of a whole range of cultural skills aimed at producing and interpreting deferred meaning is partly the product of a violent history—reflecting regional and global forces” (7).

The book begins with an introduction that considers these themes, and the six chapters that follow examine the ambiguous and unpredictable qualities evidenced in various aspects of everyday life. This begins in Chapter 1 with the Mende landscape itself, with its history of chiefdoms, slavery, and ephemeral colonial projects. Chapter 2 examines gender and social spaces, focusing on the ambiguous role of the *mabole*, a woman whose social position allows her to participate in men’s secret political functions while also fulfilling her role as wife and mother. In Chapter 3, Ferme considers the ambivalence felt toward marriage, referring to a past in which slaves became kin through conjugal relations. Chapter 4 focuses on the impermanence of “big (women’s) houses,” subject to the contingencies of politics and gender relations, while Chapter 5 discusses the concept of “big people,” who have power by virtue of their secret knowledge but who are also vulnerable to the deceptions of others. In Chapter 6, the ambiguous position of children, who are both small and apparently insignificant but also potentially dangerous through their connection with the non-human, spirit world and their potential for violence. Interspersed between these chapters are three short “interludes” which focus on particular objects, for example cloth, kola nuts, and palm oil, that have special significance for adjacent chapters.

This volume will be of interest not only to cultural anthropologists, Africanist historians, and gender studies specialists, but also to sociologists, political scientists, and development studies specialists; anyone searching for a nuanced analysis of Mende rural social life just prior to the outbreak of a vicious civil war, with its own particular historical antecedents of violence, coercion, and extraction.

—————Elisha Renne