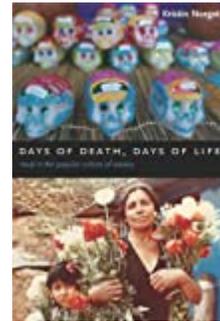




Kristin Norget. *Days of Death, Days of Life: Ritual in the Popular Culture of Oaxaca.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. x + 319 pp. \$67.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-13688-4; \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-13689-1.



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Death as a Threshold

In this multi-layered ethnographic study, Kristin Norget explores the meaning of popular religion and death rituals in the daily life of a marginal neighborhood (*colonia*) in Oaxaca city.[1] Norget argues that such practices reinforce the social bonding of the community and represent an idealized space of trust and reciprocity. The author claims that the significance these rituals have in poor Oaxacan communities lies in revitalizing social values of solidarity, inclusiveness and reciprocity. These values are extended to the dead, since the members of the community continue relating to them in their daily life. The book provides an original perspective on the significance of popular religion in shaping contemporary Mexican identity as well as the significance of the rituals of death in the daily life of practitioners.

The book is structured around three main themes. First, Norget outlines the daily cultural practices in a poor, suburban, "marginal" locality in the metropolitan area of Oaxaca city. Then she discusses various funeral practices and rituals. Lastly, she focuses on the Day of the Dead itself, interpreting actual practices and reveal-

ing the significance of this festival in the popular imaginary.

The author discusses the communitarian mechanisms of the *colonias* in which kinship and mutual aid establish the grounds for the ritual practices around death. Later, Norget situates popular religion—what I would call a sacred bricolage of complementary religious traditional folk practices—in relation to the official Catholic Church. The second part of the book thoroughly documents popular Oaxacan funeral rituals, linking them to moral principles shared by the community, stressing the role of these practices in strengthening valued forms of community and social exchange. In the third and final part, Norget argues that the Day of the Dead and related practices bring to light ethical ideals of generosity and reciprocity for the practitioners, as a preparation for meeting their own deaths. The author explores later changes in the Day of the Dead celebrations to fulfill commercial and tourist expectations. She recognizes, however, that cultural authenticity may be an intellectual desire of the ethnographer much more than a popular concern for the loss of

traditions.

An important achievement of the book is the analysis of indigenous and Catholic religious practices. Norget characterizes popular practices within formal religion as complementary rituals and thus explains the endurance of Catholicism since its arrival with the Spanish conquest five centuries ago. Norget examines the process whereby Catholicism was introduced to, imposed on and later negotiated with the indigenous population. During this process, different cultural transfers, symbioses and mutual interchanges occurred over the centuries.

Therefore, Catholicism is considered as a kind of generic or default religious faith in which diverse traditions, practices and beliefs converge. Norget also discusses the ways in which religion enables the poor and weak to be virtuous through the cults of the Virgin or the Baby Jesus. The author stresses the correlation between the engagement in ritual practices and the consolidation of the community's social structure. Norget argues that popular religion not only is complementary to the Roman Catholic tradition but also is outside the cultural mainstream and beyond the influence of wealthy elites. Furthermore, popular culture is presented not as a product but as a process in which rituals and beliefs are modified through time.

The book accounts for a set of practices aimed at reinforcing and reestablishing the social bonding of marginal communities, while death rituals celebrate and vindicate the importance of death as the "great leveler," putting the poor in a better position to meet their death. The transmutation of the deceased as a former member of the community who crossed the doorstep to the realm of the dead reveals a profound belief in the interaction of both worlds. Therefore, people continue relating to others after death, since they exist somewhere in the social universe. Through extensive fieldwork undertaken over the years, the author analyzes the dividing line between life and death through which the relation of the community with the different dimensions of existence is revealed.

Norget provides an interesting overview of the urban conditions in a marginal environment of Oaxaca city, using theories of the 1960s on the "marginal" and "culture of poverty" to describe the social, geographic and economic conditions of the *colonia* dwellers.[2] She also acknowledges, however, the later ethnographic research which considers not only the cultural conditionings but also the importance of power relations and structural or external circumstances in the creation of identity in the underprivileged realm.[3] While describing the anthro-

pological features of Oaxaca city, Norget identifies the codes underneath hierarchical social interactions. However, in ritual settings, social interaction is guided by key values such as respect and trust. Moreover, the importance of links outside kinship are highlighted, such as the *compadrazgo* (or ritual co-parents), which are intended to create "artificial" bonds between the community in order to strengthen reciprocal relations and secure the future of children in case of a premature death. Norget focuses on the values and motivations of the residents while acknowledging systemic inequalities; the emphasis in the book is on the residents' perception of the lack of opportunities as opposed to structural issues.

Residents complement their survival strategies with informal giving and reciprocal exchange practices that strengthen their social relationships and solidarity. They are thus better able to cope with the difficult living conditions of the country's permanent economic crisis. A system of cooperative labor referred as *tequio* is often used to accomplish collective work projects for the public benefit. Likewise, the *guelaguetza*, a process of circular exchange, entails reciprocity between its participants and furthers community ethics and social cohesion. Norget aptly notes that the concept of "community" is a construction that doesn't come into being just by sharing the same space, needs or interests, but is created and experienced through continual social interaction.

Norget takes us into an intimate world of rituals and survival strategies among the *colonia* dwellers and even provides a glimpse into her personal mourning, which adds further depth to her study. She provides a detailed ethnographic account of funeral practices: rites preceding burials, wakes, the raising of the cross and extended praying sessions known as *novenarios*. The final stage of the ritual takes place in the cemetery, a place of encounter for the living and the dead, where the gravesites represent an extension of the domestic realm (also referred to as the "real house").

In the final part of the study, the Day of the Dead celebrations are richly described. This ancient tradition has mixed with external influences (such as Halloween) and this mingling, according to Nestor Garcia Canclini, accounts for a modernizing tendency that secularizes traditional events that still retain their symbolic content.[4] Norget concludes that "popular culture should be seen as an array of often ambivalent, hybrid expressions fully integrated with the cultural dynamics of Modernity" (p. 267).

According to Norget's view, death provides the op-

portunity for the communities to renew themselves. She suggests that religious rituals represent the occasions when an idealized social space is produced and maintained in the *colonia*. Removing the solemnity and gravity of the subject, Norget reveals in an agile and accessible style the essential nature of death in Mexico: a natural threshold to be crossed.

Notes

[1]. In contemporary Mexican cities, squatters' settlements were formed by rural indigenous migrants. This low-income population had to go through a painstaking process of several years to access to legal tenure, basic services, and infrastructures. This phenomenon has been

studied from the 1960s in major studies referred to in note 2.

[2]. Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez* (New York: Random House, 1961); Douglas Butterworth, "A Study of the Urbanization Process among Mixtec Migrants from Tilantongo in Mexico City," *America Indígena* 22 (1962), pp. 257-274; Larissa Lomnitz, *Networks and Marginality* (New York: Academic Press, 1977).

[3]. Michael Higgins and Tanya L. Cohen, *Streets, Bedrooms and Patios: The Ordinariness of Diversity in Urban Oaxaca* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).

[4]. Nestor Garcia Canclini, *Transforming Modernity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), p. 96.

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