

*Maya Exodus: Indigenous Struggle for Citizenship in Chiapas*. Heidi Moksnes. (2012). Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press. 339 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8061-4292-0.

This book explores how suffering, poverty and human rights discourses are articulated by Catholic-practicing Maya in the municipality of San Pedro Chenalhó in the highland region of Chiapas, Mexico, located about 70 km from San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Data for the book was collected using participant observation and interviews from four different time periods: March to November 1995, February to July 1996, May 1998 and July 2006. A cultural anthropologist working as a researcher in the Uppsala Centre for Sustainable Development at Uppsala University, Heidi Moksnes first began working with Catholic Pedrano Maya in 1985 while completing fieldwork for her undergraduate thesis.

The author organized the book into ten chapters with four sections: an introduction, Pedranos and the Patron State (Chapters 1 and 2), Restructuring Maya Community (Chapters 4 through 6), and Opposing the State (Chapters 7 to 10). The book may be useful for students and scholars researching three particular areas: 1) determining the relationship between Catholicism, social justice, and political activism; 2) obtaining a general overview of the lives of Catholic Maya after the Zapatista uprising of 1994; and finally 3) examining the context of the Acetal Massacre in 1996—where 45 members of the Catholic activist organization Las Abejas (“The Bees” in Spanish) were murdered in a prayer meeting—and what this means for Pedrano identity today.

The reader is oriented to the research through a brief narration of Moksnes’ social location. Acknowledging herself first as a rich and privileged foreigner, the author also discusses her disability—she is wheelchair bound as a result of an accident in childhood—which she felt made her more accessible to the community where she was conducting research. In this way, her disability humanized her amongst the Pedranos, despite her foreignness. Yet the overall tone of the book portrays the lives of Pedrano Catholics as something to be studied. Typical of work conducted on over-researched populations (Smith, 2012)—that is, Indigenous Others—Moksnes’ work uses a top-down approach to research that is emblematic of the colonial practices embedded in ethnography and Anthropology. The most difficult part of the fieldwork, the author states, “consisted of learning to know, like, and largely identify with people who lived in circumstances of severe poverty” (Moksnes, 2012, p. 27). This assertion illustrates that the practice of “going Native” is enough to allow the researcher to understand how the Other lives. Aside from being problematic conceptually, this method ignores how Moksnes literally embodies colonization as an outsider researcher and negates the fact that the lives of Pedrano Catholics continue to be impacted by colonialism. The author admits her book is a result of her limited understanding of Pedrano Catholic cultural practices and is “certain many Pedrano Catholics would disagree with much of what I describe” (Moksnes, 2012, p. xiii). This book, thus, demonstrates how an outsider researcher makes assumptions about Indigenous peoples based on Eurocentric ontological and epistemological foundations. The ethnocentric mindset—though assumingly unconscious—exhibited through Moksnes’ interpretation of her research manifests in three particular themes. The remainder of this book review will critique how the author translated her interviews, how religion and colonialism are tied together in Mexico, and how racialization is overlooked in the book’s analyses.

Like the majority of research conducted in the social sciences, part of Moksnes' data collection came from interviewing research participants. Interviews with church catechists and Las Abejas leaders were conducted in Spanish, transcribed and then translated into English. Interviews with Pedrano churchgoers in contrast were conducted in Tzotzil through a Pedrano interpreter—Moksnes qualified her comprehension of Tzotzil as rudimentary—then translated into Spanish and finally into English. Although the translation of interviews from one language to another is often a common practice, what is surprising is that the author does not mention any difficulties with this process. Participants thought that they were “simple,” “ignorant,” and “slow” in comparison to the mestizo population when learning legal concepts and theories; when the real issue, as Moksnes notes, is the difficulty translating ideas and worldviews between languages. Several authors (de Mendoza, 2008; van Nes, Abma, Jonsson & Deeg, 2010; Regmi, Naidoo & Pilkington, 2010; Wong & Poon, 2010; Temple & Young, 2004) have described the obstacles of translating interviews when conducting qualitative research, believing that although translation makes the text accessible to more readers, information can be lost during translation because individual languages can vary considerably in structure. Tzotzil is unlike English and Spanish (Eber, 2011) because it is a verb-based (de León, 2001), uses uncommon verb tenses (Aissen, 1999; de León, 1999) and uses a glottal stop (Gossen, 2013; Teratol & Péres, 2010) a phonetic element absent from Germanic and Romance languages. Given these (understandable) difficulties the Pedrano Catholics faced when presented with ideas from different onto-epistemological frameworks based in non-Tzotzil languages, it is troubling that the author did not factor translation issues into her book. In doing so, Moksnes privileges western-centric research methodologies, thereby placing more value on the English and Spanish languages than on Tzotzil.

Like other countries in the North American continent, Mexico's claim for sovereignty—and thus the citizenship of all the people who live in the arbitrarily-decided borders of the country—are a result of the colonial process instigated by Spain in the late fifteenth century. Moksnes briefly discusses colonialism within the text, noting, “Catholic villagers commonly hold that the poverty of indigenous peoples in Mexico originated with Spanish colonial rule, was perpetrated by subsequent national governments through centuries of exploitation...” (Moksnes, 2012, p. 3). The author does not acknowledge the role Roman Catholicism has had on Mexico's colonization, past and present. The justification for colonization on the North American continent came from a Papal Bull issued by Pope Alexander VI. Spanish colonialists in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries not only brought the Word of God, but also considerable violence. Bartolomé de Las Casas—the first Bishop of Chiapas, namesake of San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas, and “Protector of the Indians”—stated that colonization was savage: “even while the various ordinances and decrees governing the treatment of native peoples have continued to maintain that conversion and the saving of souls has first priority, this is belied what has actually been happening on the ground” (1552/2004, p. 32). Many Indigenous peoples in Mexico refused (Gollnick, 2008; Pardo, 2007; Pitarch, 2010) and continue to reject Christianity because it comes from a different onto-epistemological foundation. Although the author identifies as agnostic, her own understanding of the world is driven by values informed by Christianity because of her Swedish origin. In short, the inferences the author makes from her study are framed using her own value system and projected on to Pedrano Catholic and traditional Maya peoples. Furthermore, when Moksnes analyzes Pedrano Catholic practices, she does so by contrasting them with *costumbre*—the traditional faith of the Maya people of San Pedro Chenalhó—thereby

creating a binary that Others and inferiorizes non-Christian Maya. Whether intended or not, this dualism is emblematic of the colonial rhetoric used by European nations to justify their theft of Indigenous lands and genocide on the North American continent.

Despite it being considered a social construct, race, and correspondingly racism, are still rhetoric that Indigenous peoples in Mexico must contend with today. Keeping the discrimination the Catholic Pedranos face in their daily lives relegated to their ethnicity, Moksnes overlooks the fact that racism against Indigenous peoples occurs in Mexico (Fortes de Leff, 2002; Moreno Figueroa, 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Ortiz-Hernandez, Compean-Dardon, Verde-Flota, & Flores-Martinez, 2011; Wade, 2004). Given that racism can be explained by prejudicial and discriminatory practices put into action through systematic, structural and individual ways, the lack of rights Pedrano Maya face are the result of the racist ideals that are deeply imbedded in municipal, state and federal politics. Overlooking racialization in her analyses may be an issue of ethnocentrism; since Moksnes is not used to facing race-based discrimination due to her social location, she may not be attune to seeing it, an issue common with many white folks (Goodman, 2011; McIntosh, 1990; Mullay, 2010; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

Although the book is interesting and well-written, it ultimately does not achieve what it sets out to do. The kind of citizenship the Pedrano Catholic Maya are struggling for—according to the book's title—is never elucidated. Do this group of Maya want to be global citizens, citizens of their nation, or citizens of God's Kingdom? As well as falling short of its goals, the book raises three concerns that may be linked with ethnocentrism, leaving the reader with the following questions. Why did Moksnes not discuss issues of translation, or include Tzotzil and Spanish alongside English? Why is colonization—the system of oppression that created the state of Mexico—never discussed as an important factor in Maya oppression? Finally, why does Mosknes avoid mentioning racism when it is such a clear indicator of the subjugation Pedranos face? In sum, *Maya exodus: Indigenous struggle for citizenship in Chiapas* leaves the reader unsettled and wanting more.

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