



**[A review of] "Masked Metaphors: Masks of the Spirit:
Image and Metaphor in Mesoamerica
by John H. Markman and Roberta T. Markman"**

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No Abstract

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Masked Metaphors: Masks of the Spirit: Image and Metaphor in Mesoamerica, by Roberta H. Markman and Peter T. Markman

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Introduction

Masks of the Spirit: Image and Metaphor in Mesoamerica, by Roberta H. Markman and Peter T. Markman is an imposing book. Physically it resembles an art history text, with 250 10 x 13 pages set in double columns of type, 68 black and white plates and 16 color plates. Temporally it spans the period from proto-Olmec culture (ca. 1400 BCE) to contemporary folk culture and the work of Mexican artist Ruffino Tamayo. Geographically it covers Mesoamerica, defined as the area from the southern edge of Guatemala to the northern border of Mexico. Conceptually, it is fundamentally interdisciplinary, as the Markmans link religious studies, the history of art and architecture, and theory of art and architecture.

The intellectual agenda of the book is threefold: examining the concept, function, role and meaning of mask in Mesoamerica; sympathetically and appreciatively unfolding Mesoamerican religious understanding to a contemporary western audience; and demonstrating the persistence of original motifs, beliefs, images and practices throughout Mesoamerica.¹

¹ They write that:

a painstaking examination of the remaining evidence of spiritual thought . . . contained in the archaeological record, the few written sources that survived the

Masks of the Spirit is organized into three parts, "the Metaphor of the Mask in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica", "Metaphoric Reflections of the Cosmic Order", and "The Metaphor of the Mask after the Conquest". In the first section of Part One, the Markmans investigate the historical development of the image of the (were)jaguar in association with rain divinity and the authority of rulership from the Olmecs until the conquest; in the second section they consider the ritual use of masks throughout Mesoamerica during the same time span, first demonstrating "the use of the mask as a metaphor for the god" and then illustrating "the nature of the interaction of human beings with those gods." (p. xxi) In Part Two they explicate the theology they find underlying these images and rituals, and in Part Three they discuss the transformation and persistence of these images and themes after the conquest.

Strengths

The Markmans have identified two needs to which their work responds. The first is the need in the west for a deeper

Conquest, Colonial documentation of indigenous practices, and early and contemporary ethnographic studies . . . with an intuitive sensitivity to the numinous and an intellectual openness to its spiritual implications clearly reveals "the primary meaning" of reality throughout the centuries-long development of Mesoamerican religion. From its shamanic beginnings to the height of its development in the intricacy, complexity, and subtlety of Aztec religion and to its syncretic merging with Christianity and its present status as a folk religion, that primary meaning remains constant and is constantly expressed through the central metaphor of the mask. (p. xx)

understanding of Mesoamerica, a need which takes on greater urgency in the United States, since Mesoamerica is our immediate neighbor and people steeped in Mesoamerican traditions are becoming an increasing percentage of our population, adding their cultural traditions to American multi-culture. We ignore their depths not only at the expense of spiritual impoverishment, but also of political and socio-cultural fragmentation, conflict and misunderstanding.

The second need is that of understanding the interrelation of religion and the built environment.

The cultural landscape is the accumulated sedimentation of what we now call the arts, architecture and the design professions. Thus all meanings and systems of meaning are caught up in the context of the built environment - the world of material culture. John W. Dixon, Jr. goes so far as to claim:

If the word "religion" is to have any use any longer, it should be applied to this structure. My "religion" is not my beliefs, my devotional feelings, my behavior. It is the totality of my world as I live it, within which I work out my character and my destiny.
(p. 22)

"Religion" narrowly defined as institutions, beliefs, rituals, practices and so forth, takes shape and gains its meaning within the total pattern of world experience within which it exists. The actual construction of the cultural landscape is a matter of religious concern. Although this notion seems new to the academic study of religion, it is not at all new to religion, which has always been profoundly generative of material culture.
(Carp, in press b)²

²Cultures differ in terms of their deep structures of perceptual experience, each having "its own characteristic manner of locomotion, sitting, standing, reclining and gesturing." (Hall, 1980, p. 75)

The process of ordering the body correlates with that of

The Markmans have identified this fundamental linkage in the world (between religion and material culture) and approached it with the necessary interdiscipline (religious studies and the history of art and architecture).

Another strength of Masks of the Spirit is the Markmans appreciation of the shamanic background of Mesoamerican religion. In addition, their ample illustrations and lengthy analysis of specific art works and complexes of art works centering around a theme provides the reader with sufficient visual and analytical information to comprehend and consider the authors' point of view.

Unfortunately, these strengths are offset by weaknesses that undercut and, ultimately, vitiate the purpose and validity of the work.

The Metaphor of Mask as a Mask for Metaphor

The first of these weaknesses is a tendency to assume at the outset what they later claim to have demonstrated. This flaw is most remarkable with respect to their central thesis, that the metaphor of the mask is key to understanding Mesoamerican spirituality. They state their thesis in these terms:

focusing the world. "External perception and the perception of one's own body vary in conjunction because they are two facets of one and the same act." (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 205)

The developmental task of structuring body/world is accomplished within and in relation to the cultural landscape. The deep structures of the acculturated body correspond to those of the cultural landscape to which it acculturates. (Carp, 1989, p. 70)

the mask served the ancient thinkers and seers as a multivalent symbol. In addition to, and as a result of, its use as a way of understanding the mystery of the underlying spiritual reality, the mask was used metaphorically to delineate the ultimately sacred nature of worldly power and in that connection to sanctify current rulers, to deify rulers of the past, and to define as sacred the seats of power they occupied. In fact, the divinely ordained ruler was himself a "mask," worn by the gods to make visible their spiritual essence in the world of nature. (p. xxi)

In order to explore the use of an image "metaphorically" it is necessary first to understand it in its straightforward, or "original" meaning. We might expect, then, that prior to examining the metaphor of the mask, the Markmans would begin by examining actual masks and inquiring into their use and meaning and then proceed to consider the insight this brings into a larger, metaphoric use of the concepts "mask" and "masking".

Unfortunately the Markmans do not begin with masks, but with the metaphor of the mask, a metaphor not drawn from a Mesoamerican understanding of masking, but from their own. They then confirm what they have begun by assuming.

In her essay, "Metaphor and Message: On Exhibiting Mexican Masks," in Behind the Mask in Mexico, Maria Teresa Pomar, Director of the Museo De Artes and Industrias Populares del Instituto Nacional Indigenista, in Mexico City, writes:

The traditional mask is not an inanimate object, it acquires life from its user . . . how different it is to contemplate a mask as a solitary object isolated from its human component than to observe it in its appropriate environment, enlivened by the motivations and intelligence of its wearer, the accompaniment of its special music, and its ability to delight or frighten throngs of small children and to provoke in the adults of the community a contemplation of the content of the dance

which it serves and for which it was made. (p. ix)³

At some points, the Markmans seem to recognize this fact, as for example when they say, "Although the mask and the wearer might be discussed separately, they existed as one. . . Without a face under it, a mask would be a meaningless conception . . ." (p. 191)

Since masks "exist" only in animated use, we have no access to true masks through the archaeological record. This difficulty could be overcome, to some extent, by relying on depictions of masks in use and on other sources that communicate the experience of masks from the standpoint both of users and viewers. The Markmans take this approach, but only in the second section of their work, after they have already established the key themes they intend to explore.

They begin with an arena of evidence that cannot be considered "mask" by any stretch of the imagination: sculpted and painted images of divinity, which they call "masks" but which could never have had a "face behind them."⁴ Once they identify these images as masks, they assume, since there can be no face behind them, that

³For another statement of this same view, see Pernet, 1988.

. . . nous nous en tiendrons en principe a la definition qui considere qu'il y a masque lorsqu'un object couvre tout ou partie de la figure pour deguiser le porteur ou dissimuler son identite. (p. 19)

Pernet insists that a mask can cover any aspect of the person, so long as it disguises the ordinary identity of the wearer. (p. 20 - 21)

⁴ These images are often referred to as "masks" in the literature. This minor metaphoric misapplication only becomes crucial in a context such as Masks of the Spirit in which the concept of mask is fundamental.

there must be something else there. This something else, they claim is "the ultimate nature of reality" (p. 96) (the "face" of reality); from this assumption they proceed to uncover a complex cosmology of hiding and revealing based on their own "metaphor of mask".

In their initial discussion of stone carvings, ceramic bowls, and other images of the Olmec were-jaguar, Cocijo, Tlaloc and Chac, the Markmans fail to distinguish between image and mask, conflating the two and asserting that images of these gods are masks, simply because some depictions of masks use these images.⁵ Thus they have assumed what they wish to prove, that Mesoamerican thought viewed all forms of religious discourse as masks that express "the basic Mesoamerican belief that the natural world is but a covering or mask of the supernatural." (p. xxi)

Mesoamerica on Whose Terms?

Substituting "Mesoamerican" for "South American", the Markmans would agree with Laurence Sullivan that:

Understanding South American peoples not only requires that we change a few ideas about them but that we dismantle the foundations of who we ourselves are. . . . We cannot rediscover our own creative place in history without uncovering the creative role of South American religions in our common human history. (1988, p. 2-3)

Yet their text is riddled with contemporary, often psychologistic, metaphors of questionable appropriateness. The Markmans seem to

⁵ That an image of a god is used on a god-mask to identify the wearer as impersonating that god by no means translates to the assertion that the image itself "is" a mask or can be approached through the concept of "mask".

project their own, often theological, concepts on the data of Mesoamerican religion.

Most concerning of these is their constant opposition of "inner" and "outer" as corresponding to "material" and "spiritual", "true" and "false". This is especially disturbing in their treatment of shamanism, in a key chapter called "The Shamanistic Inner Vision". In this title, they project a contemporary, Eurocentric spatialization onto Mesoamerican shamanism. We experience the world as a dichotomy between an internal, personal and psychological world and an external, physical and material world. From our perspective, any movement away from the blatantly physical and material must occur through retreat, a movement inward. This is not the case in many other cultures, who perceive the possibility of movement elsewhere and elsewhere through journeys that are in no way psychological or interior. In fact, as Sullivan makes clear in his study of South American shamanism, "ecstatic specialists learn to control the passage of the soul out of the body. Using special techniques, their souls exit the body at will for various purposes." (p 390) The journey is not at all inward, but precisely outward, away from ordinary time/space and experience, into a variety of worlds accessible only after training and transformation. The shaman travels and returns, encounters and consults beings of other orders, (eg., ancestors, gods), finds souls lost by members of the community, and, generally, works in regions of being not encompassed within the duality of in and out. Certainly these journeys are not understood as taking place

"within" the psychic reality of the shaman.⁶ The Markmans substitute their own theology for that of their object of study. We also find this in their repeated use of terms such as "life force" (with its Shavian background) and "ground of being" (with its Tillichian roots) which are deeply loaded with theological meaning in European and American discourse.

Instead of unfolding Mesoamerican meaning in its own terms and allowing it to clarify itself for us, the Markmans tell us from the outset what Mesoamerican thought means, often in the most contemporary and Western of terms.

Interdisciplinary Scholarship

The Markmans subtle but definite overlay of Western and psychological thought on Mesoamerica may be traced to a lack of sophistication on their part in the study of religion. They do not reflect on their methodology in the study of religion, nor do they discuss contemporary concerns or debates within the field. When reflecting on religion, they primarily rely on two sources, Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade, Campbell more heavily, with a subsidiary reliance on the work of Victor Turner to illuminate aspects of ritual and ritual symbolism. This is a thin list, and a troubling one.

Joseph Campbell's work achieved a high level of popularity,

⁶No insistence that psychological reality is, in fact, transpersonal, spiritual, or otherwise connects beyond individual psychic experience can elide this fundamental difference in spatial and temporal metaphor.

and he struck a chord in the yearnings of the contemporary world. He may deserve recognition as a mythicist, viewed as one who writes or generates texts that function as myths. None of this, however, qualifies him as a student of myth or a scholar of religion. Robert A. Segall, in Joseph Campbell: An Introduction, enumerates and elucidates some of the reasons that Campbell's work has not been widely held in high esteem among scholars of religion. There is not space here to spell out his arguments or to follow his careful, book by book, investigation of Campbell's career. The essential criticism is related to one I have brought to bear on the Markmans: Campbell does not investigate myths to test his theory; he assumes the truth of his theory and uses it to "extract" universals from bits and pieces of mythology. (p. 139) Campbell severs myth both from narrative and social contexts. He rarely discusses particular myths, almost never in their totality. Rather he asks questions about "the meaning of myth in general" without demonstrating that such a category has a meaningful existence. (p. 138)⁷ In the Introduction to Masks of the Spirit he states:

⁷Campbell elides the sorts of economic, political and gender based distinctions that might illuminate myths. Although in Volumes One and Three of Masks he attributes differences between groups of myths and another to economics (hunters vs planters) and gender (patriarchy vs matriarchy)

He never utilizes any information about either economics or gender to understand these myths. Rather he infers economic and sexual conclusions from the myths themselves. (p. 138)

He ignores both Weber's insight into the necessity of institutionalization in religious development and Durkheim's that even individuality is socially produced. (p. 139) He is also self-contradictory on issues central to his own theories: "why

The first task of any systematic study of the myths and religions of mankind should be the identification of the underlying universal ingredients . . . it must be remembered that in the final analysis, the religious experience is psychological and in the deepest sense spontaneous and universal. (p. xiv)

This may be so, but it remains to be demonstrated. If one begins with the identification of universals, no concrete particulars will ever count sufficiently to overcome the assumption of universality.

The situation with Eliade is more complex. He is one of the great founding figures of the study of religion. His work helped inspire my own interest, and I had the fortunate opportunity to study with him for a short period. He will always be held in esteem among scholars of religion. Nonetheless, there are important critiques and reevaluations of his work currently taking place of which the Markmans seem unaware. Most of his sources predate the 1940's despite presumed revision of earlier works at later dates. He often relies on authors whose work is currently discounted, and he is both inaccurate and selective in his material. (Leach, 1966; Voss, 1986). Recent research into African and traditional Tamil (ancient Dravidian) cultures reveals an

myths are the same, whether myths are the same and what their message is." (p. 140) But the central criticism remains a lack of attention to the minute particulars of actual myths on behalf of a sort of "proof-texting" through bits of mythology for perceived similarities.

An attempted analysis of actual myths would constitute one fair test of his claim that the meaning, not to say the origin and function, of all myths is universal rather than particular, symbolic rather than literal, nonhistorical rather than historical, and psychological rather than social. Instead, Campbell takes his claims for granted and, on the basis of them, extracts the experiences and beliefs of mankind from myths. (p. 139)

absence of the dualism sacred/profane upon which much of Eliade's work rests. (Zahn, 1970, eg. p 270, Zuehlebil, 1981, eg. p 13-25) The current picture shows archaic ontology to have a substantially less monolithic structure than Eliade would allow.⁸

Like Campbell, and, indeed, like the Markmans, he has also been criticized for what is absent from his work. For example, despite his focus on the sacred/profane contrast, he shows practically no familiarity with three anthropologists whose work on this issue is seminal: Mauss, Hertz and Van Gennep. (Leach, 1966, p. 29)

The point here is not that Eliade is a poor source for a student of religion, but that the uncritical use of his material as a sole or primary view of religion is inadequate and naive.⁹

In the case of Turner, the problem is that the Markmans seem

⁸Throughout this section I am indebted to Stephen Hopkins of the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University.

⁹Laurence Sullivan, a student of Eliade's, puts the issue in proper perspective:

There is no need to be shy about claiming descent from James Frazer, Carl Clemen, Raffaele Pettazzoni, Gerardus van der Leeuw, or Mircea Eliade, because no compulsion drives one to apply their schemes . . . their theoretical foundations and specific interpretations are dated in many cases and are problematic or unacceptable in others . . . These scholars are exemplary primarily because they set the question of the general history of religions in proper perspective. (1988, p. 15)

What is troubling in the Markmans case is that they seem unaware of the work of Frazer, Clemen, Pettazzoni and van der Leeuw, (and of other more contemporary theorists of religion), much less of the dated, problematic and unacceptable character of many of the "theoretical foundations and specific interpretations" of Eliade.

not to have read him overclosely. Turner is exquisitely careful to interpret symbols in a complex political, social and cultural field, in relation to specific circumstances, and in a nuanced manner. In The Forest of Symbols, Turner advises that each ritual symbol be examined from a variety of perspectives: an "action-field context" in which a ritual is merely a phase, in the context of a specific ritual, in relation to the behavior directed to it, and in the structure of the group using it, including both enduring organizing principles and temporary transient alliances. (p. 46-47). In this same section Turner notes a significant distinction between dominant symbols (which tend to have a high degree of stability of meaning in different contexts) and instrumental symbols (which may take on different, even oppositional, meanings in differing contexts). He also notes that even dominant symbols may in one situation represent one social group or principle, in another situation represent another group or principle, and in aggregate represent "the unity and continuity of . . . society, embracing its contradictions." (p. 46)

Similar criticisms could be made of the Markmans' use of scholarship in area studies in Mesoamerica and even, though less extensively, in Mesoamerican art history.¹⁰ For example, they make minimal use of Carrasco's careful studies of the relationship in Aztec cosmology between terror, imperial control, and the

¹⁰ For example, little attention is given to Pasztory's seminal works on mesoamerican art history - listed in the bibliography but cited only in passing and never considered in depth, or to the work of Roman Pina Chan on the Olmec.

metaphoric of human sacrifice. (eg., Broda, Carrasco, and Moctezuma, 1987). Although the Markmans, inevitably, discuss human sacrifice, they view the sacrificial victim as yet another "mask" of the god he or she becomes in the ultimate religious act. This is well and good from the spectators' point of view, but, despite the widespread practice of non-fatal forms of autosacrifice, sacrificial victims were almost always prisoners of war or taken from the underclasses of society. As Carrasco is careful to point out, certain sacrificial rites, including ceremonies involving the use of masks, involved bringing the leaders of vanquished and subjugated peoples to Tenochtitlan to witness the ritual slaughter. Surely terror, both mythic and actual, play a crucial role in this phenomenon!¹¹

One might also ask about the absence of analyses rooted in distinctions of social class, region, relations of conqueror/conquered, or gender.¹² Johanna Broda, for example, has articulated an interpretation of Tlaloc, a key figure in the Markmans' analysis, as "simply another male aspect of the earth." (1987, p105) She emphasizes the importance of the cult of the ancient earth mother **Cihuacoatl** (Woman Serpent), of whom the Aztec **Coatllicue**, is but one manifestation. (p. 103) She suggests the importance of an ancient, goddess-centered cult based on "the

¹¹ In relation to the commonality of belief in Mesoamerica, one can hardly fail to wonder about the religions of resistance that must have grown up in subject communities.

¹² See Note 8.

sacralization of earth and water." (p. 106)¹³

What is disturbing is not so much the specific positions the Markmans reach on particular questions, as their seeming lack of participation in scholarly debate. Despite a long bibliography and many notes, their work is curiously separate from ongoing discussions. Nowhere is this more evident than in one of their key theological interpretations.

The Markmans produce an impressive list of names (Seler, Beyer, Caso, Leon-Portilla, Hvidtfeld, Nicholson, Thompson, Hunt, Flannery, Marcus, Pasztory, Schele and Miller) (p. 135), and use brief citations to show that pantheism, monotheism and polytheism have all been proposed to describe the nature of Mesoamerican theology. (p. 136) They then state:

We are fortunate that the use by scholars of such diverse terms, some of them contradictory, suggests a great deal more disagreement about Mesoamerican religion than actually exists. (p. 136)

Without any discussion of the "diverse and contradictory terms" or an explanation of how or why these thinkers and terms are not in disagreement, they refer to "the widespread agreement of Mesoamerican scholars" which they proceed to articulate.

From their perspective, all of the Aztecs "so-called gods are ultimately manifestations of a single divine essence" (p. 138) They assert that "this conception of godhead was Pan-Mesoamerican" (p. 139), and to claim that "'gods' were actually manifestations of the essence of divinity called into 'existence' for specific ritual

¹³One might also investigate the work of Barbara Tedlock on gender based religious symbolism among contemporary Maya.

functions and fading back into the generalized world of the spirit at other times." (p. 139) This concept then becomes the bedrock notion of Mesoamerican spiritual thought that animates the remainder of the book.

This view, set forth in somewhat different terms by Hvidtfeld in 1958 and reinvigorated by Townsend (whom the Markmans cite) in 1979 has, according to Cecilia F. Klein "failed to sit well with most scholars." (Esser, 1988, p. 8) In contrast to the Markmans, who believe that only the naive peasants may have believed in gods while priests did not, Esser believes that "there were probably real gods in the Aztec capital, at least . . ." (p. 8) She adduces a variety of evidence for this point of view, including social-structural and political as well as religious perspectives.

Again let me stress that the primary issue is not the Markmans' view of Mesoamerican spirituality. The Townsend/Hvidtfeld hypothesis has its followers. What is troubling is the Markmans refusal to participate in the debate over its aptness, their insistence on presenting a spurious unanimity of belief among the scholarly community, and, once again, their tendency to universalize, theologize, and simplify.

One must compare Masks of the Spirit with Laurence Sullivan's Icanchu's Drum, which he calls "an orientation to meaning in South American Religions." Sullivan has chosen to investigate modern, rather than archaeological religion,¹⁴ but, like the Markmans,

¹⁴A strategy that might have proved wise for the Markmans as well, given the innate difficulties in investigating "mask" an archaeological context. As it is, a good third of the book is

he considers material culture extensively in his work and incorporates reflections not only on art and architecture, but on music, dance, performance and the practical arts such as canoe building and pottery. In doing so he brings together a range of resources that dwarfs those in Masks of the Spirit, yet in a manner more tentative, thoughtful, and aware of the ambiguities of the project. Where one hears the Markman's repeatedly echo the "always and everywhere" with which they start their work, Sullivan proceeds with a keen awareness of the uncertainties involved in a comparative work encompassing such a broad scope.¹⁵

The Theology of Art

One final critical comment must be made regarding the Markmans view of art and the artist. Both "religion" and "art" belong to

devoted to post-conquest Mesoamerica. Rather than investigating it on its own terms, as a creative element of the modern world, they are forced to view it in terms of "survivals" of an ancient past.

¹⁵ On the one hand, similar motifs and symbols appear in the religious life of South American peoples who are linguistically, geographically and sociopolitically far apart. On the other hand, groups that are near neighbors in all these respects often manifest striking differences in religious expression. (p. 6)

This tentativeness is echoed, eg., in Johanna Brody's call for "more research" to test her emerging hypotheses (1987, p. 106) and Gary Gossen's tentative listing of five, quite general, symbol clusters "having both temporal and spatial persistence in Mesoamerican thought." (1986, p. 5)

As Gossen puts it, while seeking a revised regional synthesis that acknowledges the evident interconnectedness of Mesoamerica, "serious symbolic studies of both the micro- and macro-varieties acknowledge the complexity, even the discrepancies and contradictions, of local knowledge." (p. 5)

Euro-American culture, have developed in relation to one another and are implicated in each other's meaning in the history of Western thought.

[Our understanding of] "Art" and "artist" must be viewed in the context of their emergence contemporary with modernity in the West, beginning in romantic Germany of, say, 1840. The figure of the artist took on charismatic qualities formerly associated with religious or political leaders and became decisively associated with "creativity", heretofore a theological concept, and still a key metaphor in Judaic, Islamic, and Christian imagination. (Carp, in press a)

(Thus) artists in our culture are linked with fundamental sacred principles, while artists themselves live at the margins of our culture. Economically, politically, and in terms of the psycho-social traits commonly attributed to them, artists are "liminars" in our actual and symbolic economies. Thus art and artists are involved in a metaphoric net that also includes religion and the sacred. There is a certain "charge" associated with art and artists that links them with the divine or the demonic. (Carp, in press b)

This linkage of art, artists and the sacred is sometimes, but not always, found in other cultures; for example, it was not characteristic of Western culture prior to Romanticism. Like their mentor Campbell in The Inner Reaches of Outer Space, the Markmans simply assume this theo-social complex. In a telling passage in which they recreate it they comment:

The creative impulse in mankind, expressed most clearly in artistic creation, is mysteriously part of the cosmic creative force, and that creative force expresses itself through the visionary artist. (p. 149 - 150)¹⁶

¹⁶The Markmans are here glossing an Aztec poem in which there are similarities with some aspects of our thought about art and spirituality. However the Markmans fail to recognize either that the regnant notions of divine creativity are fundamentally different in the two traditions, or that the Aztec poet may well not generalize his comments about verbal art to all domains (such as stone sculpture and mask making) that they consider to be "art".

Clarity on this point takes on special importance in relation to Mesoamerica precisely because there are similarities between the Mesoamerican and the Eurocentric concepts of the relationship between artists and divinity. Careful comparison and contrast, rather than conflation, is called for. For example, Gossen suggests that beautiful language (and not necessarily other forms of what we consider to be "art") may, in Aztec thought, primarily play the function of ritual sacrifice, a somewhat different notion than we are accustomed to in the West.

In effect, beautifully executed speech and song are the only substances, with the possible exception of blood, that the human body can produce which are accessible to, and worthy before, divine beings. . . . If divine beings are pleased, human life is allowed to continue. (1986, p. 7)

Concluding Comments

Roberta H. and Peter T. Markman's Masks of the Spirit: Image and Metaphor in Mesoamerica offers insight into the enormous potentials and equally enormous pitfalls of interdisciplinary scholarship. The potentials are manifest in its undeniably important aims and in the way that the deeply interrelated disciplines it brings together reflect on one another, demonstrating their potential to shed substantial light on fundamental issues raised in the study. The pitfalls are revealed through a lack of thorough grounding in each discipline which

Thus at least as much is covered up as is revealed in the comparison.

vitiates the argument and undercuts the study.¹⁷

Ultimately the Markmans do not give us a detailed investigation of the role of masks, masking and the metaphor of the mask in Mesoamerican religious traditions. They give us, rather, a reading "in a Mesoamerican key" of their own spiritual hopes and dreams. When read in this way, Masks of the Spirit becomes a moving and sometimes profound rendition of the contemporary yearning to find a universally experienced and aesthetically rendered revelation of a ground of being hidden within each human psyche.

¹⁷This should not be read as an argument for a disciplinary rather than a transdisciplinary view of knowledge. It could be rewritten: The pitfalls are revealed in a lack of thorough grounding in scholarly discussions relevant to their topic of study.

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