

The Rabbit on the Face of the Moon: Mythology in the Mesoamerican Tradition. By Alfredo López-Austin. Translated by Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano and Thelma Ortiz de Montellano. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996. xvii + 157 pp., illustrations, introduction, references cited, index. \$35.00 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)

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Alfredo López-Austin continues his explorations into ancient Mesoamerican religion with this collection of eighteen essays. Originally written as a series of short articles for *México indígena* (later known as *Ojarasca*) from 1990 to 1992, they result from his conscious effort to make Mesoamerican mythology accessible and interesting to the public. Each essay draws on famous and lesser known folktales, legends, and traditions to demonstrate why myths are important, even in contemporary societies, and why they should not be considered merely relics of older literary traditions. López-Austin explains that most myths derive out of the practice of daily life, becoming a source of practical (not just religious) knowledge and a guide for comprehending the workings of the cosmos and society.

Each essay provides information on different topics in the study of mythology, some of them rather sophisticated but, thankfully, always explained in accessible language rather than the esoteric jargon that is fashionable in symbolic studies. Recurring themes include the use of myths to explain the origins of the world and its components, thereby "naturalizing" what is cultural, and the prominence of duality as an organizing principle manifested in cosmic oppositions, dual classification, complementarity, and the union of oppositions. Although these themes seem less relevant to the contemporary setting, several essays demonstrate the continued importance of ancient traditions in modern society. For example, one concerns the appropriation of a pre-Hispanic Mexica (Aztec) symbol—the eagle eating a serpent atop a prickly-pear cactus—to become the central icon of the flag of the Mexican republic, with the subsequent changing of the meanings of those symbols.

The myths that exemplify these themes are drawn from colonial period and contemporary indigenous Mesoamerican peoples, including the Huichol, Mixe, Nahua, Mazatec, Tzotzil, and Sierra Totonac, although most emphasis is given to sixteenth-century Aztec traditions. This broad geographic and temporal span is designed to promote the author's thesis that Mesoamerica is a distinct cultural entity with a common cosmology and belief system. In addition to myths, López-Austin discusses nonnarrative genres, such as folk sayings, naming practices, and incantations, as well as the symbolism embedded in beliefs about such things as eclipses, choco-

late, and the nature of illness. Some topics are illustrated with designs drawn from codex illustrations and pre-Hispanic artifacts.

Reaching beyond the usual parochial attitude of Mesoamericanists, the author takes pains to demonstrate the similarities between myths and religious beliefs of Mesoamerica and those elsewhere in the ancient and modern world (somewhat in the mode of Joseph Campbell). An example is the story that forms the book's title, which explains why people saw a rabbit when they looked at the moon. The fact that a fifteenth-century Japanese Buddhist image also shows a lunar disk with a hare leads to the recognition of complex relationships between the moon and rabbits, of which myths and images are outward manifestations. Another comparison of creator couples in Mesoamerican traditions with the biblical Adam and Eve is actually a cautionary tale against overemphasis on "universals" in mythology that neglects examination of the important differences in these stories and in the belief systems that the stories represent.

The intended audience for these essays was one that was familiar with the indigenous peoples and history of Mesoamerica, yet curious to know more about myths and religious traditions; thus readers without that background may experience some difficulty in following the discussion. Although the author claims that he was simultaneously writing for scholars, the essays are necessarily short, which prevents his being able to develop his ideas as fully as one might wish. No information is presented concerning his methods of analysis and how they compare or contrast with those of other scholars. He also makes only brief references to his own very elaborated view of the Mesoamerican "cosmovision," such as his notion of the prominence of a "light/heavy" cosmic duality. Scholars will want to go directly to López-Austin's other books (e.g., *Myths of the Opposum: Pathways of Mesoamerican Mythology* [1993] and *Tamoanchan y Tlalocan* [1994]) to examine these arguments for the detail and full supporting documentation that they require.

There are two annoying production problems that cannot go unremarked. One is the use of a pre-Hispanic design as a gray watermark coinciding with the first page of each chapter, which makes it difficult to read that page. More distracting is the deletion of B.C. and A.D. date indicators from the text, resulting in a blank space where they belong and some uncertainty as to which era is being referenced.