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Identity, ritual, and power in colonial Puebla, by Frances L. Ramos

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BOOK REVIEW

Identity, ritual, and power in colonial Puebla, by Frances L. Ramos, Tucson, The University of Arizona Press, 2012, xxxiii + 247 pp., US\$29.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8165-2117-3

Frances L. Ramos offers a detailed study of ritual behavior in Puebla de los Ángeles in the wake of the Bourbon Reforms. She concentrates on the costly and elaborate festivals sponsored by the *cabildo* (municipal council), convincingly arguing that Pueblan elites saw public ceremonies as integral to political life. But, according to Ramos, these extravagant spectacles – whether secular or religious – were not only central in shaping political culture, they served as a model for society, reaffirmed colonial hierarchies, and fostered identities to local corporations, the *patria chica* (homeland), the larger Spanish empire, and the universal Church. Given the importance of public rituals to both the construction of power and the expression of multiple identities, she illustrates how the *cabildo* fiercely resisted the Crown's efforts to ignore local customs by limiting yearly festivals and their overall expenditures. Ramos nicely demonstrates the distance between royal policies and local realities as reformers failed to understand the centrality of ritual to the political life of Puebla.

Ramos's book consists of eight chapters that can be divided into three general parts. In the first (Chapter 1) she provides a wonderful survey of life in Puebla, which includes an overview of the city's origin myth, its initial settlement, ethnic makeup, local institutions, and customs at both the neighborhood and parish levels. She argues that the *cabildo* used rituals to create an "illusion of unity" (2) in a city that was divided, "riot-prone" (21), and experiencing economic decline. The second part (Chapters 2–6) concentrates on the actual public ceremonies the *cabildo* sponsored, which included the entrance of new bishops and viceroys, oath ceremonies, royal funerary honors, Spanish military victories, epidemics and famines, and a host of religious festivals. Ramos demonstrates how these rituals served the interests of the Crown by expanding the cult of the monarch and fostering loyalty to a distant king. But at the same time she also proves that ceremonies worked in favor of local councilmen, who were able to reinforce their position in society and make a profit. In the last part (Chapters 7–8), Ramos provides an analysis of ceremonial conflicts amongst the elites from both the *cabildo* and the Church. Moving beyond the notion of a "baroque obsession with honor" (133), she shows how ritual disputes, which often centered on proper ceremonial etiquette, highlighted the power structure of Puebla.

One of the major strengths of Ramos's work is the rich detail in which she describes all aspects of public ritual. Taking inspiration from anthropologist Clifford Geertz, she provides a "thick description" of ceremonial preparations, protocol, traditions, food, clothing, instruments, and the dates of the calendar year. Pouring over municipal records, along with other manuscript histories and published sermons, Ramos invites her reader to take a seat on the benches of the cathedral as elites argued over local customs, royal reforms, and ceremonial precedence. But it is her chapter on the industry of spectacle that is amongst the most original. Given that few scholars have explored the economic consequences of public rituals, Ramos surveys how festivals generated work for

thousands of local artisans, merchants, and laborers. But more importantly, councilmen were able to extend their networks of patronage through contracts and “ties of dependency” (113), which increased both their power and wealth. By paying close attention to the economics of spectacle, Ramos demonstrates how the costly decisions of the *cabildo* made “rational sense” (131) in their own context.

Another important contribution of Ramos’s study is her analysis of religious life in Puebla. She points out that although scholars have paid close attention to the religious institutions of the Church, they have overlooked the “spiritual objectives of municipal governments” (67). The *cabildo* of Puebla encouraged devotion to the Catholic faith by sponsoring religious celebrations for Easter, Christmas, and for patron saints. Ramos suggests that councilmen acted as spiritual leaders, seeking to create a “unifying urban religion” (68) and impose a Catholic identity upon the larger populace. They worked hard to make “universal religion locally relevant” (90), which meant connecting the people of Puebla to the larger Catholic Church worldwide. By following newer scholarship on baroque Catholicism, Ramos strikes an appropriate balance between local and universal religion in Puebla. But I felt that her spiritual topography of the city could have been extended beyond the perimeters of the urban center. There was a network of local shrines in the bishopric of Puebla that *poblanos* frequented, which also contributed to their Catholic identity.

Readers will also find Ramos’s close attention to the complexity of early modern identities compelling. Throughout her work she recognizes that identities shift over time and that *poblanos* held many ties of loyalty: to their family, neighborhood, confraternity, parish, guild, city, imperial body politic, and to the spiritual body of Christ. Hence the messages that councilmen sought to project through public rituals were not always interpreted in the same manner by the multiethnic crowd. Ramos fully acknowledges that there is a “lack of sources written by spectators” (178), which means that our major window onto *cabildo*-sponsored ceremonies and hence identity-formation is documents written primarily by members of the elite. Through rituals, the elites in Puebla, as Ramos highlights, made connections to the elites of the Atlantic world as much as they developed “a deep attachment to their patria chicas [...] which they also imagined as tightly knit entities” (2). Although Ramos rightly emphasizes the relationship between local pride and larger imperial identities, her notion of civic patriotism could have been slightly expanded to include the surrounding region of Puebla. In several devotional histories and other choreographies in the Spanish world, the *patria chica* was not entirely confined to city walls but included the natural landscape of its outskirts.

Considering that a large portion of scholarship concentrates on the viceregal centers of Mexico City or Lima, *Identity, ritual, and power in colonial Puebla* is an important and welcomed book for scholars and students of colonial Spanish America. Ramos provides a well-researched and carefully argued study of the intersection between local politics, rituals, and identities in the “second city” of New Spain. But her work will not only be useful to those interested in colonial Latin America. Her study is a model for all those seeking to decode the multiplicity of meanings in the civic and religious spectacles of the early modern world.

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