

James M. Taggart. *The Rain Gods' Rebellion: The Cultural Basis of a Nahua Insurgency*. Louisville, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2020.

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At the center of this ethnographic study is a drawn-out, bloody agrarian revolt that occurred between 1977 and 1984 in the remote Sierra Norte de Puebla community of Huitzilán de Serdán. The town of just over 2 600 people is divided between the majority Nahua residents who speak Nahuatl, a dialect of Nahuatl, and an elite stratum of Mestizos comprising 10% of the population who control economic and political resources. But as ethnographer James Taggart explains, divisions within the revolt did not cleave neatly along ethnic lines. Motivations of participants were complex, and emotions ran high as ephemeral alliances among the groups emerged and dissolved over time. It was a period of fear and violence with many people injured and more than 200 who died, mostly Nahua partisans. The question addressed by Taggart in this subtle and penetrating study is what precisely is the role that culture plays in such a cataclysm?

Taggart first pursued ethnographic research in Huitzilán in 1968 and he continues to conduct fieldwork in the community to the present day. The advantages of such long-term ethnography are clearly evident in this work. His mastery of the Nahuatl language and familiarity with the people and their circumstances allows him to name names and explain in great detail the cross-currents and motivations of the major actors in this great tragedy. Getting the story straight and figuring out who the main players are in such a complex arena is not easy, but Taggart is clearly up to the task. However, the major focus of this work is not on the actors themselves. The author relies on the theoretical framework developed by James C. Scott to explain peasant revolt, turning his attention away from individual participants and towards the body of shared values, world view, and goals that are expressed in the confrontation (p. 3). Taggart is interested in the cultural



basis of the revolt. His focus is on oral narratives that he recorded before, during, and after the violence erupted with particular emphasis on analyzing stories about water spirits. He provides transcriptions of selected narrations in the original Nahuatl, supplies English translations, and interprets the texts in the context of the revolt. The findings reveal profound connections between the ways Nahua tell stories and the particular historical period in which they live.

The Nahua of Huitzilán are maize farmers and their culture (particularly before the arrival of the Mestizo population) is based on cooperation and a well-developed sense of social exchange, working together within the extended family. Taggart argues that the Nahua have clearly defined ideas of reciprocity, a feature that I would argue forms the basis of social interaction in every culture in the world. Mestizos, on the other hand, belong to a different political economy in which competition over resources can override reciprocal relations, particularly between members of the dominant and subordinate group. The revolt in Huitzilán occurred when the local Nahua felt that the behavior of Mestizos and some Nahuas violated these moral imperatives. In short, revolt occurs when values that underlie the world view of the group are desecrated. The author is careful to point out that such violations have marked Nahua–Mestizo relations from the beginning and that the history of the region is filled with violent confrontations, nativistic movements, and repressive Mestizo caciques. In certain contexts, a point is reached where the indignities and humiliations endured by the subaltern group can no longer be overlooked; despite overlapping loyalties between Nahuas and Mestizos and cross-cutting ties of ritual kinship and mutual economic dependence, violent rebellion results.

The Huitzilán Nahua rain god is called *quiyauhteot* in Nahuatl and this powerful spirit entity is believed to have human companions who live among the people. These individuals are thought to be quiet, humble, and to have the power to predict rain. Gods, the devil, and ordinary people also have companion spirits (*tonalism*), and it is often these entities that are the subjects of Nahua oral narrations. To avoid retribution, storytellers are careful to avoid direct accusations of wrongdoing by living people, particularly if they are powerful Mestizos. Instead, the stories are encoded to implicate their companion spirits—a subtle shift of meaning that is not lost on listeners. Following a common Mesoamerican pattern, the Nahua of Huitzilán do not hold public rituals to the rain god(s) but rather celebrate Catholic holidays and saints easily recognized and approved by Mestizo

elites. However, what Mestizo neighbors and other outsiders fail to understand is that to the Nahua, personages such as San Miguel are closely associated with the ancient rain gods (p. 30). Far from being mutually exclusive, Catholic saints and Indigenous deities merge, and more likely, are one in the same.

Taggart begins his presentation of this collection of tales with the narration entitled “Juan Hernandez’s Story,” which shows what happens when an old man is discovered to be the companion spirit of a rain god. He is promised a feast if he predicts rain correctly and despite his protests, he is treated as a saint when rains indeed approach. By being called out, identified and elevated above his companions, the story does not end well for him. In a story called “The President and the Priest,” the Mestizo serving as municipal authority reneges on a promise to provide a meal for a priest who says Mass in the town. The story tells of a case of negative reciprocity that deeply offends Nahua sensibility. The *presidente municipal* disappears and the priest engages the help of a silent stranger loitering near the church entrance to help find him. This man is a spirit companion of the rain god and he reveals that he knows where the president is hiding. Seeming a fool, the man searches for 12 men and 12 women, rain gods who take the form of lightning bolts, and the storyteller locates the president in the middle of a freshwater spring. The president has taken on the form of his animal companion spirit, a huge serpent with 12 mouths. The lightning bolts drag the serpent to the church where, along with the help of the human–rain god companion, they kill it, with the result being that the priest finds the president dead in his human form. Taggart interprets the serpent as analogous to the Mestizos who are few in number but, having multiple mouths, are very dangerous. The lightning bolts are analogous to the more numerous Nahua who must stick together, along with their rain god leader, in order to defeat their common foe.

The story of Juan Hernandez’s was told two years before the beginning of the revolt of 1977, while the following narration with a similar plot line was told after hostilities were well underway. The story is called “The President of Hueytlalpan” and the narrator modified his account to reflect the changing situation in Huitzilán. Probably to protect himself from reprisals the narrator locates the story in Hueytlalpan, a Totonac community north of Huitzilán. It begins with a description of the president as insane. He would lose his temper and lock people up for no reason, jail the priest for failing to notify him when he held Mass, and treat the Nahua like children.

The president then disappears, and the priest enlists the help of 12 rain gods to search for him. A hummingbird shows them where to find his animal companion spirit in the form of a huge lizard. One after the other, the rain gods penetrated the lizard's enormous body in an attempt to kill him until finally only one was left. The remaining rain god entered the lizard and cast lightning bolts, splitting the animal companion spirit wide open. When everyone returned to town, there they found the human form of the president in his bed burned to death.

By the time the second tale was recorded about the autocratic president, the local revolt was underway, and the Nahua had organized to become a significant force in the town. In this particular story only 12 Nahua rain gods were needed to kill the animal companion of the president, rather than the 24 required in the previous one. The lizard in this tale has but one mouth, indicating reduced power of Mestizos to threaten Nahuas. But there is a more subtle change between the two narrations. In the first, the president engaged in negative reciprocity indicating the exploitative relationship between Nahuas and dominant Mestizo elites. In the second, as the Nahua gained political power in Huitzilan, the president's bad behavior is attributed to a personality defect (insanity), rather than to his position in an unjust, exploitative political system. It is interesting that in both stories, Nahua actions were in support of, and supported by officials of the Catholic Church. Taggart notes that the Nahua often rely on church authorities to aid them in disputes with Mestizos, and the role of the priest in the stories reflects that relationship.

Taggart goes on to recount many stories told during and shortly after the revolt in which the rain gods attacked and vanquished the malefactors' spirit animal companions, particularly if they were Mestizos. A common theme in these stories is that these spirit entities exact their revenge on Mestizos who trick Nahuas out of their land, vanquishing the animal spirit companions of the thieves and reestablishing the rightful moral order. The author documents the trajectory of some individuals who joined in the rebellion as a response to the wholesale theft of their land. He interprets the narrations he has recorded as an attempt on the part of the Nahua to establish a sense of fairness and to revitalize their maize-producing agrarian culture so significantly based on cooperation and reciprocity.

In the several years following the revolt the stories that Taggart recorded in Huitzilan took on a very different tone. The Nahua had ameliorated the local domination of the Mestizo population over their lives and their

stories explicitly reflected this change. In this time, we hear stories of animal companion spirits living in the water who are less threatening and more clearly benevolent. In one story entitled “The *Achane* (‘Water Dweller’) of Apohpodayan,” the animal companion spirit of a girl takes a boy into the water so that he can play a drum. In a departure from stories told during the revolt, “The Man from Aychual” is a tale of a rain god who is a ritual kinsman of a certain animal companion spirit normally associated with bad Mestizos. The final story discussed by Taggart is called “The Storm,” and this one appears to reference the revolt itself or perhaps potential similar trouble ahead. The lesson recounted is found in the rain gods’ human companion who counsels listeners not to be afraid and to face the future with courage. Notably absent from this story are references to ethnic difference, exploitative relations, corrupt and venal politicians, and negative reciprocity.

In the stories assembled by Taggart in this intriguing compendium one understands that the Nahua rain gods rebelled against the animal companion spirits of representatives of the Mestizos and other non-Nahuas who exploited their social and political weakness. These narrations constitute “fantasies of revenge” (p. 175) that the author claims were put into action by the rebellion. In this work, the author addresses one of the persistent problems that lies at the heart of the anthropological enterprise: what is the role of culture in determining behavior? Taggart suggests (p. 178) that culture in the form of the stories helped to form a collective conscious favorable to the insurgency, although he is careful to avoid attributing causal efficacy to culture alone (p. 178). In his words, these Nahua “stories are collective memories, social commentary, and an inspiration for taking political action” (p. 182). Culture is necessary albeit not sufficient to account for how people actually behave to face their common challenges and existential crises.

Although it is not a topic directly addressed by the author, this is one of the finest studies I have seen that addresses how cultures change. The stories that Taggart records encode key elements of Nahua culture history and world view, and because of his long-term field research and mastery of the language, he is able to detail for readers their deeper meaning for the people themselves. He documents how creative storytellers are active bearers of their culture and how they elect to make subtle modifications of the narrations to better reflect the situations faced by fellow community members. Here we can witness culture change in action as the rain gods shift their identities, as animal companion spirits switch from being adversaries to allies, and as Nahua gradually gain control of their own fates in the face

of domination and discrimination. The account is a clear demonstration of how Nahua culture, far from being the dead hand of the past, helps people adapt to radically changing circumstances.

The Rain Gods' Rebellion is a multidimensional work that demonstrates the power of well-done ethnography to address fundamental issues in the social sciences. Not only does it provide insight into the Nahua of today and by extension other Indigenous societies, it contributes to a greater understanding of peasant or minority revolts all over the world. It is a well-researched work in which the data and the interpretations are thoroughly grounded in the social-scientific and philosophical literature. Taggart is the foremost anthropological authority on the contemporary Nahua and his expertise is on full display in this book. It is well-written, filled with new information on the culture area, theoretically sophisticated, and a fascinating look at the inner workings of a violent and bloody time of revolt. The book is a major contribution to the anthropology of Mesoamerica with full implications for better understanding of cultural dynamics throughout the world.