The Brotherhood of Freemason Sisters: Gender, Secrecy, and Fraternity in Italian Masonic Lodges by Lilith Mahmud.

Citation

As Published
http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/aman.12162_16

Publisher
John Wiley & Sons, Inc

Version
Final published version

Accessed
Sat Jan 05 22:22:13 EST 2019

Citable Link
http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/96010

Terms of Use
Article is made available in accordance with the publisher's policy and may be subject to US copyright law. Please refer to the publisher's site for terms of use.

Detailed Terms

The MIT Faculty has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters.
when studying the formation of colonial society. This book involved the collaboration of historians, a geographer, and an archaeologist, but ethnohistory predominates.

Part 1 covers “Conquest and Resistance” and describes the Spanish invasion of Guatemala, including the violent treatment of Maya subjects and the exploitation of their labor and resources, heralding social conditions in the region for centuries to come. The authors explore the participation of Kaqchikel Maya in the conquest of their K’iche’ enemies, the Kaqchikel rebellion against their Spanish allies, and the existence of the culture hero Tecun Uman, who is not mentioned in Spanish documents. However, these and other controversies are not resolved, which fairly assesses the vagaries in Spanish documents. The authors highlight the realities of conquest, like the deaths of many Mexican allies with few Spanish losses, and the fact that Kaqchikel Maya joined the Spanish to defeat their enemies and gain prominence. Kaqchikel Maya elites sought lands and tribute from co-rulership with the Spanish, but when they learned this would not be the case, they fought back.

Part 2 on “Settlement and Colonization” discusses core and periphery regions within Guatemala. Previous scholars alluded to a Maya western part of the country and an eastern sector dominated by colonists, a core highland region versus a lowland periphery, and the existence of “closed corporate” peasant communities. However, in their nuanced discussion of economic change, demography, and the development of separate regions, the authors show that the reconstructions of cores, peripheries, and communities contain exceptions. The municipalities (municipios) of modern Guatemala—the basis of local politics, economy, and identity even today—originated in the colonial congregation programs, but they were built on Maya ethnic organizations, including the basic social unit chinamit or parcialidad, the endogamous, landholding group with its collective economy and identity.

Valuable discussions in part 3, “Labor and Tribute,” elucidate Maya settlements and demography and how they were transformed. The authors state that the origins of encomienda, or the colonial policy of controlling indigenous labor, land, and resources, have not been satisfactorily addressed in Guatemala. Through encomienda, Spanish overlords received payment in materials like gold, cacao, or food stuffs. The conquistadors eventually had to provide assessments of tribute quotas to Spanish authorities. These assessments lend critical information on the colonial economy and society. Interesting details emerge regarding long-standing ties between Maya communities from different ecological zones.

Part IV, entitled “Dynamics of Survival,” builds on the assessments of encomiendas to estimate indigenous populations before and after the conquest. The debate regarding New World indigenous demographic collapse is an important one. In the Maya area, the discussion of demography is central for our understanding of native politics, economics, and social organization and how they were impacted by the colonial period. Scholarship on demography in the New World consists of high or low population estimates. The “high counters” champion high population counts and indigenous demographic collapse, whereas “low counters” do not believe in massive depopulation but recognize decline. The authors calculate that Maya populations dropped 79 percent in the colonial period. This figure is less than a proposed population drop of 90 percent but higher than the 25 to 50 percent losses suggested by recent researchers. Maya deaths were due to poverty, strenuous labor, abuses by the conquerors, and the introduction of Old World diseases.

In summary, “Strange Lands and Different Peoples” is for scholars interested in the details of the conquest of Guatemala and the political, economic, and social aspects of colonialism and how they affected the Maya. It emphasizes documents, including original passages; tribute paid by Maya communities; and population counts. The authors also assess the utility of records and how they are important for the ethnohistory of Guatemala. With these strengths in mind, this work is relevant for scholars studying Guatemalan history, the development of society in the country, and historical anthropology.

The Brotherhood of Freemason Sisters: Gender, Secrecy, and Fraternity in Italian Masonic Lodges by Lilith Mahmud.


Graham M. Jones
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Profound paradoxes motivate Lilith Mahmud’s singular ethnography of Italian Freemason women: although the Enlightenment’s core democratic values of liberty, equality, and fraternity in many ways originated within Euro-American Freemasonry, most Italians suspect present-day Freemasons of involvement in nefarious antidemocratic conspiracies. Moreover, Freemasons’ marginalization of women betrays how deep-rooted exclusivity compromises their guiding principle of universal brotherhood. It is among the social networks of women who nevertheless gravitate to Freemasonry’s official auxiliary societies and to mixed-gender or women-only lodges not sanctioned by Freemasonry’s paramount governing body
that Mahmud conducts a form of ethnography she terms “profane”—mostly (but not always) outside sacred ritual spaces. In describing how these women style themselves as “brothers” and aspire to enact fraternity as a genderless value, Mahmud casts light on the broader tradition of European liberal humanism and its limitations.

Dialectics of discretion and discernment operate on several levels of this book—most conspicuously as a pervasive concern of Freemasons themselves. More than just a practical exigency for members of a stigmatized group, discretion is also an ethically and aesthetically elaborated hallmark of the upper-class habitus reflected in Masonic practices of self-cultivation. It allows the formidable professional women in this study to constitute a “gender-based” movement within a framework “explicitly hostile to feminism” (p. 104), pursuing gender equality through neoliberal projects of self-improvement and strategies of “corporal dematerialization” (p. 108) compatible with their upper-class notions of respectability. Discretion is an interactional modality that the ethnographer herself must master to move successfully among them.

At the same time, Mahmud employs writerly discretion in revealing her complex positionality both as a feminist, female anthropologist studying a staunchly antifeminist, androcentric group and as a black Italian anthropologist, the daughter of Eritrean immigrants, studying white, right-wing Italian elites. These discreet revelations allow the reader to better discern her methodological and ethical accomplishments in writing so empathetically about female subalterns within a hegemonic social stratum while also serving to amplify her critique of liberal humanism. “My racial otherness within Italian society took on additional symbolic value in relation to Freemasonry,” she writes, as her presence in a “virtually all white space” prompted members to expound upon the “rule of Masonic liberal humanism” (pp. 37–38). Her revelations also incidentally challenge conventions of ethnographers’ corporal dematerialization in anthropological texts.

On an even deeper level, Mahmud has ingeniously constructed the text itself according to the Masonic principle that “knowledge comes in hindsight” and therefore “must be imparted with discretion, or else it risks overwhelming its recipients” (p. 66). Perhaps in this, Masons’ knowledge practices are not so different from anthropologists’: like all the best ethnographies, *Brotherhood of Freemason Sisters* inspires curiosity that increases, rather than diminishes, with the reader’s growing sense of discernment.

The book begins with an examination of how Freemasonry constitutes a community of practice hidden in plain view (ch. 1) and ritually transforms profane initiates into members (ch. 2). It pivots around a discussion (ch. 3) of what Mahmud calls “the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the Masonic project and . . . the liberal discourse of humanism, of which Freemasonry has historically been an accomplice. Anybody could supposedly be a brother; and yet . . . chances at fraternity are . . . substantially reduced” (p. 115) for the gendered and racialized Others who do not embody the qualities of a universal, unmarked subject typified by upper-class white men. In a particularly rich Bourdieusian analysis (ch. 4), Mahmud examines the ways that men subtly invalidate women’s performances of the “symbolic capital”—essentially, refined taste—that Masonic “speculative labor” (p. 125) produces. The concluding social drama (ch. 5) demonstrates how Freemasonry refracts gender ideologies prevalent throughout Italy: when Italian newspapers published blacklists of Freemasons in 1993, they included only men, representing “Freemasonry as a masculine organization” and “reinforcing the idea that secrecy is only dangerous if gendered as masculine” (p. 176). The neoliberal value of transparency emerges as a gendered discourse that conceals as much as it reveals.

Given the lapidary quality of Mahmud’s writing and the inherent allure of her subject matter, I predict this will become a favorite teaching monograph for undergraduate and graduate seminars on topics such as gender, class, politics, and ritual. Adding to its versatility, chapters can be read independently. The book would make an ideal centerpiece for a course on the anthropology of Europe and, with proper guidance, could function beautifully in an introduction to cultural anthropology. Mahmud’s candor and reflexivity also wonderfully suit *Brotherhood of Freemason Sisters* for an ethnographic methods class. Students of methods, in particular, will do well to attend to the sophisticated—but seemingly effortless—way that Mahmud moves between brilliantly observed ideographic description, broader areal concerns of Italianist and Europeanist ethnology, and the highest reaches of social theory. It may be that her research project “came to life serendipitously” (p. 5), but she leaves nothing to chance in this exquisitely crafted book.