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# REVIEWS

## The War for the Heart and Soul of a Highland Maya Town

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### INTRODUCTION

The introduction to *The War for the Heart and Soul of a Highland Maya Town* begins with a story about discontent in the Mayan region on the day that the North American Free Trade Agreement was implemented. This showcases Mayan attitudes and gives weight to Carlson's later arguments regarding Atiteco resistance to foreign influence. It points out the continued presence of Mayan

language and culture in modern day Guatemala. It speaks to the dedication that Atitecos have for their homeland. This book should appeal to anyone who studies anthropology, or who has been to a Mayan site and left wondering, "Where did these people go?" This book provides part of a solution to that question. It is incredibly relevant to those who have studied the history of Latin America and Guatemala specifically. The success of the new edition,

published in 2004, shows that this book continues to be relevant today.

Carlson's research is based on a combination of time spent in Santiago Atitlán and work by other anthropologists. He combined this information into *The War for the Heart and Soul of a Highland Maya Town*, his story originally ended with the expulsion of the Guatemalan army that he talks about in Chapter Seven. The new edition includes a preface that covers what has happened in Santiago Atitlán since then. Each chapter in this book builds on the chapters preceding it. Therefore, I will outline the book in a chapter-by-chapter format.

Chapter One is meant to give the reader an idea of the social climate of Santiago Atitlán in recent times. Carlson explains that political violence and military occupation have influenced much of the day-to-day existence of Santiago Atitlán. He pays particular attention to the emergence of local fundamentalist Protestantism and how it clashes with what he describes as the "still potent, traditional cultural background of the town" (p. 5). The chapter has theoretical portions that even Carlson suggests should be avoided by a "nonprofessional reader." He suggests giving that section only a superficial reading without losing sight of the overall ideas of the chapter. The overall idea is this: Despite resistance to the foreign influence he mentioned previously, the Atitecos cannot totally resist it.

Chapter Two discusses the physical characteristics of Santiago Atitlán. Among these are the geographical setting in southern Guatemala and the town layout. He

also details characteristics of the local population, such as dress patterns and linguistics. In Chapter Three, Carlson argues that the Atitecos, the residents of Santiago Atitlán, have successfully resisted their supposed spiritual conquest. He claims that a defining characteristic of the post-Columbian town is a "distinct and identifiable continuity with the pre-Columbian past" (p. 5). He claims that the Atitecos have effectively reconstituted their Mayan culture through an ancient Mayan core paradigm that they call *Jaloj-K'exoj*. *Jaloj-K'exoj* is "a Mayan conceptualization of observed processes and patterns in the natural environment, particularly of agricultural production, [and] is a central paradigm of the local culture" (p. 49). Carlson then argues that this paradigm allowed the Atitecos to assimilate new, foreign elements into Atiteco culture.

Chapters Four and Five share a similar objective. Chapter Four attempts to reconstruct and explain the historical environment that allowed for the continuity that Carlson points out in Chapter Three. Though Carlson has conducted first hand research in Santiago Atitlán, this chapter contains many references to primary historical documents and the research of other specialists. Carlson uses both chapters to present a historical reconstruction of Santiago Atitlán. He compares his personal research and experiences to the historical research of other specialists and the primary historical documents. When the research and documents shed light on older culture in Atitlán, he includes examples of contemporary Atiteco cultural behavior. For example, Carlson mentions the desire of the Spanish to force Christianity on the natives.

Carson examines elements of traditional religiosity, local Protestantism, civil violence, and how all three combine.

Despite that, he claims that the Franciscan monastery that was built has been almost entirely abandoned, and though it gets the occasional visit from traveling missionaries, is rarely used by the Atitecos.

In Chapter Five, Carlson suggests that a series of events was unleashed approximately 125 years ago that ultimately led to sociocultural change on a fundamental level in Santiago Atitlán and in other areas of highland Guatemala. He says that there was a “quantum increase in power of the Guatemalan state...coupled with a marked decline in potential indigenous power” (p. 119). This, combined with the confiscation of large amounts of Mayan land, undercut the Mayans’ economic capacity and forced reliance on outside influence. He states that, because of this, Atitlán is now “engaged in a transformation which in many ways eclipses even that which followed the Conquest” (p. 6).

Carlson uses Chapter Six to measure the magnitude of the changes that have occurred. As with Chapter One, he provides a warning to the casual reader that there are parts of this chapter that may not be enjoyable. He claims that quantitative data shows that the local population of Santiago Atitlán has yet to establish an economic and cultural base that is capable of satisfying its contemporary needs. One example would be the increasing population of Santiago Atitlán. He claims that this has led to less land being available for each Atiteco, causing less agricultural ability and less reliance on the “Old Ways” and more submission to foreign influence.

Chapter Seven contemplates contemporary Guatemalan political realities. Carson examines elements of traditional religiosity, local Protestantism, civil violence, and how all three combine. He specifically mentions how, in December 1990, the Atitecos managed to cooperate with each other in order to force the Guatemalan Army to leave their town forever, effectively forcing “peace in a land of war” (p. 6). The army left a sign that read: “Atiteco Friends, the future of Your Village Is in Your own Hands” (p. 151). Though the soldiers had killed at least thirteen of the Atitecos, the stubborn residents of Santiago Atitlán had won. Their town was once again their own.

The Epilogue discusses Carlson’s fifteen years of study in Santiago Atitlán, which included 17 trips to the town and approximately two and one half years of residency. He questions his own objectivity, expressing concerns that his time spent there compromised his ability as an anthropologist to correctly interpret events and history. Nonetheless, I feel that Carlson has been successful in his attempts to combine historical data with his personal experiences. He takes the reader into the heart of Santiago Atitlán and helps them to experience the Atiteco lifestyle. He instills such a sense of understanding that there is a definite sense of pride felt when the Atitecos finally retake their hometown. I recommend this book to undergraduates like myself, but also to those who might be interested in learning a bit about contemporary Mayan culture. When one visits ancient Mayan ruins, it is easy to forget that those people are still around. This book is a great reminder of that.

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