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Sastun: My Apprenticeship with a Maya Healer

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As growing numbers of ethno-botanists and Maya studies students take interest in people's growing concern for ethnobotany and Maya studies, *Sastun: My Apprenticeship with a Maya Healer* (1996) by Rosita Arvigo, will become a textual point of reference. The volume relates Arvigo's personal journey into the world of an elderly bush doctor in Belize, whose forest pharmacy retreats ever farther from the door of his shack with the passing of years. Trained in Chicago as a naprapathic physician, Arvigo casts her apprenticeship to Don Elijio Panti as a relationship born of both respect for the healers work and a sense of extreme urgency to record his knowledge. The title, *Sastun*, refers to a tool of divination and spiritual guidance used by ah men, lowland Maya spiritual and physical healers, Don Elijio is king.

Arvigo's book is directed at a wide, non-specialized readership, although those familiar with the rudiments of botanical medicine will appreciate her frequent accounts of plant properties and uses. With her decision to live and practice in Belize, Arvigo slowly shifted from a North American pharmacopoeia to a Central American, and, specifically, a Belizean one. Her growing acquaintance with Don Elijio was the impetus behind this decision. Still, as difficult as the mastery of local plant names and uses was for her, she faced the still more challenging task of understanding the system by which plant and prayer resources together form a medical philosophy and worldview, one which recognizes the volition and agency of the Maya spirits. Despite personal hardships, and only after years of training with her mentor and a formal initiation by him, Arvigo gradually accepts the workings of the Maya spirits, both benevolent and malevolent, and performs her therapies accordingly.

Throughout *Sastun*, the cultural experience, "Maya", surfaces often but remains itself unqualified. The author a priori offers this term as an explanatory category, in effect, leading the way to interpretive problems. For instance, what might a distinctly "Maya" medicine be? Is it a singular set of experiences and knowledge? In a like vein, she also moves quickly past the circumstance of Don Elijio's teacher being Carib and Don Elijio's subsequent practice of "Maya" medicine. Arvigo's account would have profited from a discussion of how she conceptualizes what "Maya" is, as so much of her understanding of the healing rain forest hinges on a "Maya" perspective. Her understanding of this critical term seems limited to the local experience, with only passing reference to the existence of millions of other Maya and Maya experiences throughout Middle America.

Arvigo's portrait of Don Elijio takes another unqualified turn when she concedes that he is a "Latin male", an identity assignment that occurs only when she learns of his sexual liberties as a younger, married man (p. 171). She packages and offers up this identity as readily as, and as hazily as, his identity as a Maya, as mentioned above. Her reduction of Latin males to sexuality invites questioning about the viability of reducing Maya healers to plants and personal initiative, as the piece tends to do.

Arvigo fails to situate her mentor within the broader context of the region's religio-medical transformations. This tendency to under-contextualize gives the impression that modern-day Maya healers operate in isolation from continual historical inputs and from each other. While much can be said about the generative quality of individual agents of culture, Arvigo overlooks how, in the Maya area, at least, "traditional" medicine remains as much a function of multi-sectorial influences as it does of a personal sense of work.

By leaning heavily on the local Belizean Maya or Latin experience, however, Arvigo succeeds in tacitly underscoring the critical roles local meanings and local realities play in the creation of culture. For Don Elijio, his world is certainly Maya, be it punctuated by Catholic Trinities and Coca-Cola posters. The meaning-full world of practice makes for cultural significance, although Arvigo opts to let this point find its way through the pages, without stating it herself. This is probably also why she doesn't follow the more common route, in the case of herbal texts, of giving the Old or New World provenience of every plant she describes and lists: these differences long ago stopped mattering to Maya peoples, the plants becoming part of this hemisphere's reality through centuries of incorporation into medical world views. Healing is what matters to healers and to patients, outcome being more important than the materials used, and local ascriptions of value to resources and activities prevailing over external ascriptions of value to these.

One of the most serious threats faced by the healing tradition disclosed in *Sastun* is the proliferation of Evangelical Protestantism in Belize. Chapter 19 relates how there is little room for practitioners of forest medicine in the lives of Protestant...
converts, even when those converts and their families have relied in the past on traditional healers. For certain Protestant sectors, forest medicine becomes the “devil’s work”, fit to be condemned and discarded along with other institutions that inhabit the crossroads of Catholic and Maya experience. Arvigo correctly treats the Evangelical Protestant question as one equal in importance to the better-known set of issues relating to direct developmental destruction of the rain forest. Taken together, the rejection of traditional knowledge that Latin American Evangelical Protestantism espouses and the outright elimination of the botanical heritage, which is the ultimate consequence of rain forest burning and plowing, represent a two-fold vector of destruction that is outpacing urgent work like that of Arvigo’s and Don Elijio’s.

While for the greater part of the narrative, Don Elijio represents for Arvigo the last hold of a generation upon a millenarian Maya tradition, she also sees him, at times, as a loving, aging, and often lonely, man. She expresses his pain at the loss of forest resources, and at the loss of faith in his system among younger, more “modern” people. To offset the disappearance of rain forest acreage, and to encourage a sustained interest in forest medicine, one of Arvigo’s present tasks has been the management and promotion of rain forest as a renewable resource. Her project takes into account how people and neotropical ecosystems have coexisted for centuries, and that routes to rain forest preservation can and must include humans as part of their formula for survival.

Arvigo’s closing message is one of urgency: the cures to many of man’s greatest illnesses may be in the very forests we are destroying, so both the forests, and those who know them best, must be properly respected. Sastun offers this plea through a lively, bittersweet account of two people and their relationship with the suffering natural world, providing an informative narrative as well as a necessary read for persons of the West, persons with the means of advocating conservation of the few remaining rain forests of the globe.