

Francisco Rodríguez Cascante and Ricardo Martínez Esquivel, eds. *Subjetividades esotéricas: Estudios sobre masonería, espiritismo y teosofía en Costa Rica*. Puntarenas: Editorial de la Sede del Pacífico, Universidad de Costa Rica, 2019. xxiii + 397 pp. ISBN: 9789930968536.

Since the first decade of the twenty-first century, an effort has been made in Latin America to provide a space for the study of esotericism. This endeavour has focused primarily on demonstrating the way in which various movements that are studied under the category of esotericism are in fact fundamental parts of the historical, social and cultural constitution of Latin American countries. For scholars it is fundamental, through the studies on esotericism, to contribute to a wider understanding of identity configurations and cultural productions of the region, and the existing multilateral and entangled dialogues and connections of these identities and products with the rest of the world. This is where *Subjetividades esotéricas: Estudios sobre masonería, espiritismo y teosofía en Costa Rica* (“Esoteric Subjectivities: Studies on Freemasonry, Spiritism and Theosophy in Costa Rica”) comes into play.

The book is a compilation edited by Francisco Rodríguez and Ricardo Martínez. It unites publications from prominent scholars on the subjects of Freemasonry, Spiritism, and Theosophy, and in particular their role in the history of Costa Rica, although it also touches a little upon other Central American countries, as well as Colombia. Composed of seventeen chapters, the book has eleven contributors, most of them from Costa Rica, with the exception of Otto German Mejía (El Salvador) and Massimo Introvigne (Italy). The reason why the book focuses on these three subjects is mainly historical; the three movements were, from the nineteenth to the first decades of the twentieth centuries, some of the most influential alternative configurations spiritually, socially, politically, and ideologically speaking to the prevailing dominance of the Catholic Church in particular, and of Christianity in general, in Costa Rica.

The book is a mixture of old, revised and new articles; six of the seventeen texts were written exclusively for the volume, six more are revised, edited or corrected texts, and five consist of old, unaltered articles. The rationale behind this composition stems from the fact that the development of studies on esotericism in the region, and in Costa Rica in particular, are still at an early stage. As the editors succinctly put it, the topics surrounding esotericism and its relationship with Costa Rican history have long been marginalized and kept outside the interests of academia. This is why the book is presented as a collective endeavour to shed light on the complex network of manifestations and movements connected to the field of esotericism with different social, cultural and historical realities.

The objectives of the book are not developed without problems. One particular issue underlines the whole volume: the lack of clarity on the involved scholars' position concerning the conceptual debates existing within studies on esotericism. For example, from the very beginning of the book there are at least two conflicting perspectives. In the Foreword, the Argentinian scholar Juan Pablo Bubello makes certain distinctions which, for their part, the editors of the book avoid. Bubello distinguishes the study of Freemasonry from the study of Western esotericism, and establishes close links between the two without putting them in the same category. Furthermore, Bubello discusses esotericism in terms of "Western" esotericism, following a tradition stemming in particular from Antoine Faivre's propositions. This is one of the concepts that has generated many heated debates in recent years (including in this journal).¹ For their part, the editors, without going into the subject in depth,

1. On this debate see Egil Asprem and Julian Strube, eds., *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2021); Liana Saif, "What is Islamic Esotericism?" *Correspondences* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1-59; Egil Asprem, "Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism," *Correspondences* 2, no. 1 (2014): 3-33; Michael Bergunder, "What is Esotericism? Cultural Studies Approaches and the Problems of Definition in Religious Studies," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22 (2010): 9-36; Kennet Granholm, "Locating the West: Problematizing the Western in Western Esotericism and Occultism," in Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic, eds., *Occultism in Global Perspectives* (London: Acumen Publishing, 2013), 17-36.

abstain from using the word “Western” when mentioning esotericism, and they mainly utilize “esotericism” as an umbrella term to deal with the movements and societies comprising the contents of the book. They do not dedicate any paragraph into defining esotericism, but take it for granted that the studies in the compilation are within the study of it. In contrast to Bubello, then, who gives to Freemasonry a space different to that of Western esotericism, the editors use the word esotericism freely as the term containing the topics of the book, including Freemasonry. Unfortunately, both the editors and Bubello do not discuss or define their concepts or positions on the study of esotericism, creating a difference in the use of terms within the book with no rationale behind it. It would have been useful to have a bit more of debate on these distinctions, instead of having a foreword and an introduction with different but non-critical perspectives. Unfortunately, the contributors of the volume refrain as well from engaging in this conceptual debate.

The chapters comprising *Subjetividades* come to repeat some of the topics and information amongst themselves, most probably due to the selection of old, revised and new texts. As the space of this review does not allow me to engage all of the chapters, I will focus my review on a select view. I want to firstly mention three articles that give a clear state of the art of studies on esotericism in the country. Secondly, I want to focus on two articles that offer initial steps for new research.

The first text is Ricardo Martínez’s contribution to establishing clear definitions for Freemasonry, the Theosophical Society and Spiritism. Martínez gives a nuanced balance between the way these movements have been conceptualized in international scholarship and how, in the context of their conception and development in Costa Rica, they ended up being something slightly different, conditioned to the country’s history, economy and society. The author also explores what connects as well as distances these movements from each other in Costa Rica. An example he gives is the *Virya* lodge, the first Theosophical organization in the country and in Central America, which was configured in 1904

under the leadership of the Andalusian immigrant and artist Tomás Povedano de Arcos, who at the same time was Grand Master at the Great Lodge of Costa Rica.

Chester Urbina's chapter on the events surrounding the Colegio Superior de Señoritas, which, founded in 1888, was the first educational institution dedicated exclusively to the education of women in Costa Rica, is crucial in understanding the constant struggle between Freemasonry, the Theosophical Society and Spiritism on the one hand, and the Catholic Church on the other hand, in the country. With an impressive amount of detail and primary sources, Urbina outlines how the religious and ideological controversy involved even educational institutions, with the church trying to remove Esther de Mezerville, the director of the *Colegio*, from her position by accusing her of supporting the inclusion of theosophical ideas in the teachings the students were receiving. De Mezerville defended herself in the newspapers, denying these accusations. Fascinating to consider, perhaps, is the fact that she was not just part of the Theosophical Society but also a freemason.

Furthermore, some chapters discuss how the three movements became integral components in the country's history, and involved some famous historical figures. José Ricardo Chaves, for example, explains how the Theosophical Society had no strict political allegiance. This came to light during the dictatorship of Federico and José Joaquín Tinoco (1917–1919). Both Federico and his wife María Fernández Le Capellain (de Tinoco) were connected to the Theosophical Society, yet the opposition to Tinoco's regime was formed, in part, by theosophists.

Finally, I would like to highlight two contributions that greatly instigate the initial steps for novel research. These are Jacqueline Murillo's work on the presence of women in the history of Costa Rican Freemasonry, and Fernanda Gutiérrez's article on race, sociability, and esoteric movements in Costa Rica at the beginning of the twentieth century. Murillo problematizes the lack of discussion and research on women and esotericism in the country, like female figures such as the aforementioned Esther de Mezerville and María Fernández

Le Capellain,² who are important characters in the history of the esoteric movements, as well as for the development of ideas and events in the fields of society, education, politics and literature. Gutiérrez, in turn, emphasizes the importance of discussing the configuration of esoteric societies, such as the Theosophical Society in the Caribbean, in the context of the projects of “whitening” (scientific racism, social Darwinism, etc.) advanced in Latin America between 1830 and 1930. Through the analysis of the Costa Rican nation’s development and its objectives of moulding a white “racial homogeneity,” and the creation of esoteric societies happening at the same time, Gutiérrez points out how the national processes of progress and unity omitted, in many cases, both the indigenous and afro-descendant populations and their contributions in the configuration of Latin American culture.

To conclude, *Subjetividades* is an important introduction regarding research on esotericism in Costa Rica, and it will benefit the ongoing development of more academic projects on this topic, not just in the country, but in the Central and Latin American region. The approach to the study of esotericism in Latin America has until now been predominantly through the field of cultural history. The various articles comprised in this book focus mostly on problems of a historical nature. This perspective should be seen not as a limitation, but as an invitation to start working on Latin American esotericism through a more interdisciplinary approach, considering fields such as literary studies, material culture, anthropology, sociology and visual studies. This book then hints at a future where we could start having diverse interdisciplinary configurations, and therefore more research questions related not just to a historical approach. We could start taking into account, for example, gender and critical race studies, as Gutierrez initiates, or the material culture of Freemasonry, Spiritism, and

2. Capellain wrote the novel *Zulai* (1909) and *Yontá* (1909) under the pseudonym Apaikán. These are the books that deal metaphorically with the history of America and Costa Rica, the relationships with other cultures and nations, such as India and Egypt, and how these links can be found in the history of indigenous pre-Columbian people in the country.

Theosophy in current times. The three movements are constituent parts of the social dynamics of power occurring even today. The studies on esotericism can help in the acknowledgment of the religious, esoteric and ideological diversity that constitutes not just Costa Rica, but Latin America more generally. Within the context of hegemonic systems, discourses of belief and national identity, this is a region in which Christian religious institutions such as Catholicism and Evangelicalism have tried, among other actors, to avoid or suppress the mere idea that such diversity exists.

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