

The Allure of Nezahualcoyotl: Pre-Hispanic History, Religion, and Nahua Poetics. By Jongsoo Lee. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008. xii + 282 pp., introduction, notes, glossary, index. \$34.95 cloth.)

Susan Toby Evans, *Pennsylvania State University*

Nezahualcoyotl is the Renaissance man of pre-Hispanic Mexican history. Like Thomas Jefferson, he has been credited with a breadth of achievement

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that engenders respect even at a substantial remove of time and culture. Much of Aztec, or, more properly, Nahua, culture is alien to our experience as modern people, but this law-giving poet king emerges from the shadows of history as a sympathetic character on a scale that transcends any regional or temporal context. This "allure" of Nezahualcoyotl, however, may have resulted from deliberate misrepresentations in the colonial era, long after the king's death. Jongsoo Lee's examination of Nezahualcoyotl's image in modern scholarship helps put these perceptions into perspective. Lee details the extent to which the image of the Texcocan king was fabricated, years after his death, by deliberate efforts to use him as a bridge between precontact Nahua and colonizing Western worlds. Ideas that he did not have and achievements he did not accomplish were attributed to him in order to create a human touchstone that would personalize this other culture as well as prepare it for transformation.

Lee's insights result from extensive scholarship, with particular effort devoted to a close examination of colonial-period Texcocan sources such as Pomar, Zorita, and Alva Ixtlilxochitl. The last, especially, was a terrific booster of all things Texcocan, and scholars find his accounts of pre-Columbian history to be frustrating, with so much obvious exaggeration that one hesitates to use any of it as reliable fact. Alva Ixtlilxochitl's claims that Texcoco was the most powerful city of the Aztec empire were probably motivated by a desire to enhance the status of Spain's Basin of Mexico ally in the conquest, seeking security in the political system of New Spain. Nezahualcoyotl's reputation as an originator of laws also rested on a similar motivation, to cast Texcoco in the role of the seat of intellectual debate, a civilized Athens in contrast to Tenochtitlan's brutal Rome.

Another important aspect of the Nezahualcoyotl legend that Lee addresses is that of his alleged role as religious maverick, if not reformer. Nezahualcoyotl is supposed not only to have believed in one great god, but also to have eschewed human sacrifice. Here, the misinformation goes back to Christian proselytizers who needed a native precedent for their belief system, and Lee offers many examples of Nezahualcoyotl's participation in ritual sacrifices, as would be expected of an important ruler in the Aztec world.

The book offers a wealth of documentation, including annotated images from sources such as the *Codex Xolotl* and the *Mapa Quinatzin*. It would have been helpful had the author sharpened his critical appraisals of these sources and made them more consistent throughout the book. From the outset, for example, the narrative refers to “emperor Xolotl” until finally, on page 57, Lee notes the unlikelihood of the seminomadic Chichimecs having an “emperor.” This puts the reader in an odd position. Lee’s casual use of certain terms gives the impression that the scholarship is less

than rigorous, and even when the usage is later examined and explained, the impression remains. Lee regards Texcocan sources as suspect because of their anti-Tenochtitlan and self-aggrandizing bias, but Tenochca informants, Chalcan informants, etc., all had biases too. Alva Ixtlilxochitl is taken to task for exaggeration, but then used as a presumably reliable source when the need arises. It is sometimes difficult for a reader to determine, from Lee’s narrative, exactly what the author knows about ancient cultures, believes to have been true of the Aztecs, or can document to have been fabricated.

As an archaeologist of the Late Postclassic Basin of Mexico, I use ethnohistorical sources to flesh out the material culture record, and I welcome critical appraisals such as Lee has presented. My own respect for Nezahualcoyotl (yes, I admit it, I’m a fan) is not, however, based on his alleged monotheism or even his poetry (even poems will shatter). I admire his survival skills, leading Texcoco as the peaceful ally of the suspicious and bellicose Tenochca for many decades. I stand in awe of the design of Texcotzingo, though perhaps someone will someday prove that those rock-cut channels and circular baths were not executed under Nezahualcoyotl’s direction. The dike that maintained Tenochtitlan’s environmental security may have been designed by some other civil engineer. A few more reexaminations of Nezahualcoyotl’s legacy and it will be shorter than his name. However, someone in a position of authority in fifteenth-century Texcoco maintained a substantial domain in the face of a ravenous neighbor, created great public works and monumental gardens, and generally seems to have had a range of interpersonal and intellectual skills that left a strong mark on history. For the sake of convenience, I’ll think of that person as Nezahualcoyotl, still alluring.