Stability and Change in Individual and Culture

A review of

*Developing Destinies: A Mayan Midwife and Town*

by Barbara Rogoff, with Chona Pérez González, Chonita Chavajay Quiacaín, and Josué Chavajay Quiacaín


Reviewed by

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*Developing Destinies: A Mayan Midwife and Town*, a remarkable book, is many things at once: a memoir, a cultural history, a theory of knowledge construction, and a labor of love. Barbara Rogoff, one of the most renowned developmental and cultural psychologists of her generation, has written an intensely personal yet immensely informative account of a Mayan sacred midwife [*iyoom*], Encarnación (Chona) Pérez, now in her 80s, who lives in San Pedro la Laguna, Guatemala. Rogoff first met Chona over 35 years ago, has remained in close contact over the years, and has access to documentation of her earlier life from field notes kept by the anthropologists Lois and Benjamin Paul.

In telling the story of Chona’s life and work, Rogoff tells the story not just of a remarkable woman over a long and fascinating period of history, but also of the cultural practices of a community undergoing substantial changes. The work is enriched by a wealth of sources, from pre-Hispanic Aztec practices reported in the Florentine Codex, to the Pauls’...
1940s field notes and photographs, to Rogoff’s own deeply revealing reminiscences. Rogoff writes, “Usually, when I write a book, it is a project that I have chosen. In the case of this book, though, the project chose me” (p. 3).

The author’s treatment of culture is thoughtful, thought provoking, and timely, given the increasing attention to culture in the field of psychology (e.g., Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Medin, Bennis, & Chandler, 2010; Nisbett, 2003). Rogoff notes that, in the United States, culture is typically essentialized (Gelman, 2003), viewed as an unchanging, inborn, encompassing identity that determines an individual’s attributes.

On this view, culture reduces to a box—a box that one checks off on the census, and a box that stands apart from other boxes and delineates who one is. In contrast, Rogoff provides rich evidence that culture is a set of practices, extending back to prior generations and continually changing. Positing a single culture such as “Mayan” is an oversimplification, given great variability among members of the broader group.

For example, different Mayan communities around Lake Atitlán speak different languages and differ in their degree of engagement with outsiders and in their relations with other cultural groups. But, as Rogoff points out, the solution is not to form smaller boxes, as the very notion of a fixed, mutually exclusive cultural identity is misleading. Culture is dynamic and active (e.g., the incorporation of Catholic practices into Mayan religion). However, it is not a unidirectional set of changes:

Cultural change is not a linear sort of “progress” but rather a matter of building and adapting what is provided by prior generations, in light of new circumstances as well as ideas from other places. This would involve some spiraling around, with some practices “recycling” in a new form. (p. 211)

*Developing Destinies* is profoundly developmental, returning again and again to the themes of stability in the face of change and change in the face of stability. Chona speaks of becoming a midwife as her destiny, and indeed, portents of one’s destiny emerge repeatedly in midwifery practices: spots on the umbilical cord foretell the spacing of future children; the ancient Mayan calendar foretells an infant’s temperament; and a birth “veil” (caul) portends becoming a midwife. But at the same time, destiny is not fixed; it is but a starting point: “Each generation builds on what it was given, and transforms it” (p. 9).

The book is particularly engaging in its discussion of childbearing, childhood, and development. It provides rich discussion of changing attitudes toward schooling, taking care of younger siblings, attitudes toward childhood mortality, children’s play, children’s work, beliefs about pregnancy and reproduction, and changing birth practices. It also provides lovely illustrations of how spiritual practices do not precede or take the place of medical practices, but the two coexist (e.g., Rosengren, Johnson, & Harris, 2000).
Developmental psychologists will be intrigued by the implications of the work for pedagogical practices and ways of learning (see, e.g., Csibra & Gergely, 2009; Harris & Koenig, 2006). For example, in an utterly fascinating set of studies, Chavajay and Rogoff (1999) and Correa-Chávez and Rogoff (2009) found that children in San Pedro are more attentive than European American middle-class children in California to interactions that are directed toward others. A Pedrano child will closely observe a research assistant teaching his sibling how to make a new toy and correspondingly learn more from this opportunity to observe. Rogoff suggests that children who are steeped in the daily routines of community life (as in San Pedro) learn to attend to the actions of others in a way that is less likely to be exhibited by children who are more segregated from adult activities (as in middle-class communities in the United States).

Developing Destinies is unusual for an academic book. The beautifully written narrative is highly accessible, even gripping. It is enriched by photos that span decades. The account is personal and moving, weaving in stories of the author’s own evolution as a participant–observer and ethnographer along with her relationship with Chona. At the same time, it has very broad reach, illuminating some of the most profound themes of human development. The book truly is a must read for all with interests in development or culture.

References


