

Roots of Identity: Language and Literacy in Mexico. By LINDA KING. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994. Illustrations. Maps. Tables. Figures. Appendix. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. xii, 193 pp. Cloth, \$37.50.

Given the rapidly changing relationship between indigenous peoples and the state in modern Mexico, *Roots of Identity* is bound to attract attention. Linda King is a social anthropologist who worked for Mexico's National Literacy Program from 1981 to 1986. During that time, she conducted a series of interviews with indigenous and mestizo literates and illiterates that explored the relationship between indigenous cultural identity and Spanish literacy. *Roots of Identity* critiques official language policy past and present in Mexico, and attempts to revindicate the role of anthropology in literacy campaigns. To these ends King is quite successful.

Spanish illiteracy is highest in indigenous communities, King writes, because speaking and writing in the Spanish language remain marginal to social organization. Indigenous languages also form barriers against mestizo society and help ensure the cultural survival of Mexico's more than 50 ethnic groups. King devotes three occasionally ahistorical chapters to a discussion of colonial and national language policy; the former admitted indigenous languages out of necessity, and the latter suppressed them in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the interest of national unity, to the point where most languages were lost in their original written form.

In theoretical terms, *Roots of Identity* fails to break new ground. King revives and critiques the developmentalist assumptions of writers like Jack Goody, who argued in the 1960s that literacy was the key to democracy and modernization. These assumptions and their 1970s-era critiques belong to a previous generation of literacy studies; it is unclear why King chooses to resuscitate them here. She does engage in a more useful dialogue with the new generation of literacy scholars, like Brian Street, that views literacy as a mode of communication used in culturally specific ways.

Theoretical debates notwithstanding, the fact remains that indigenous people in Mexico today need Spanish literacy skills every time they interact with mestizos or travel or migrate to an urban environment. King's interviews make this abundantly clear. How can Spanish literacy be taught without threatening the cultural survival of indigenous communities? Attempts since 1952 to use indigenous teachers in bilingual bicultural schools have failed because, as King writes, "bilingual bicultural" indigenous teachers are neither. Most assume the ideology, values, and language of the dominant mestizo culture; this is why Zapatista communities in Chiapas expelled "bilingual bicultural" teachers from their midst in early 1994. Writing before the revolt, King held vague hopes that Mexico's ethnic groups would push for a revival of their languages in written form.

In the end, then, *Roots of Identity* represents an informed critique of Mexico's language policy but leaves little in its place. Explicitly and implicitly it points to the need for further historical and anthropological research, especially as the status of indigenous peoples in the Mexican state and nation continues to evolve.

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