

Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626

Volume 1
Issue 1 *Special Issue: Politics and Religion in Amazonia*

Article 1

June 2003

Introduction: Politics and Religion in Amazonia

Jeffrey D. Ehrenreich
University of New Orleans, jehrenre@uno.edu

Javier Ruedas
University of New Orleans, jruedas@uno.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ehrenreich, Jeffrey D. and Ruedas, Javier (2003). "Introduction: Politics and Religion in Amazonia", *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 1.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70845/2572-3626.1001>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol1/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

Introduction: Politics and Religion in Amazonia

JEFFREY DAVID EHRENREICH

Department of Anthropology, University of New Orleans
jehrenre@uno.edu

&

JAVIER RUEDAS

Department of Anthropology, University of New Orleans
jruedas@uno.edu

The history of the papers in this special issue of *Tipiti* is tied directly to the establishment of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America (SALSA) and the creation of its journal. In 1999, shortly after his arrival to chair the Department of Anthropology at the University of New Orleans, Jeffrey Ehrenreich started talking to William Balée, who was then chair of the Department of Anthropology at Tulane University, about possibilities for organizing a conference on Amazonia. Both Balée and Ehrenreich lamented the fact that specialists in the field rarely had opportunities to come together, except in the context of larger association conferences. Each had done their graduate work in New York City and had participated in the ecological seminars and in the meetings that regularly brought graduate students and faculty working in Amazonia together for intellectual exchanges. Balée and Ehrenreich also had participated over its twenty-year run in the summer conferences on Amazonia hosted by Kenneth Kensinger at Bennington College. Balée had attended occasionally, while Ehrenreich had participated regularly, and both recalled with fondness how significant the Bennington meetings had been in their training and development. The Bennington meetings were small (15 to 30 people) and informal. Participants stayed in the rooms of the dorm house that Ken Kensinger was master of during the academic school year and in which he lived year-round. Ken's apartment in the house served as the gathering place for arriving participants on the first Friday in August, and then on Saturday morning, presentations would begin. The talks ranged from thirty to sixty minutes, with comments and discussion by the entire group to follow. The meetings ended after lunch on Sunday.

The last of those meetings had been held in 1996, at the time of Kensinger's retirement. Since then there had been a few attempts to rekindle

4 Jeffrey David Ehrenreich & Javier Ruedas

those meetings in some way, but so far, nothing concrete had emerged. From the onset of their discussions to hold a New Orleans Amazonian conference, Ehrenreich and Balée had it in the back of their minds that it might be an opportune moment to organize a society of Amazonian specialists, which in turn could become the base for a new journal in the field.

The conference that Willian Balée and Jeffrey David Ehrenreich organized together took place January 11th to 14th, 2001, at Tulane University. It was sponsored by Tulane's Center for Latin American Studies; the offices of the Dean and the Provost, University of New Orleans; and the departments of anthropology of Tulane and the University of New Orleans. It was called "Indigenous Amazonia at the Millennium: Politics and Religion," and it brought approximately 40 participants to the city of New Orleans.

At the plenary session held near the end of the conference, the gathered participants discussed and debated the central agenda issue of forming a society around the common intellectual interests and concerns represented in the room. The idea was to have an academic society with a regular meeting away from the business of other societies, one that would also produce publications in the field. It should be recalled that the conference in New Orleans occurred shortly after the publication of Patrick Tierney's *Darkness in El Dorado*, a work that had fractious and disruptive consequences in anthropology generally and among Amazonian specialists in particular. There were principals and partisans on all sides of these issues in attendance at the conference, and it was a delicate moment in the history of Amazonian studies to be attempting to create an umbrella organization to house all the contentious elements, positions, and factions that were in existence already or forming around the crisis at hand that all of anthropology was facing. Balée and Ehrenreich were determined not to allow the disagreements over *Darkness in El Dorado* to derail the opportunity presented by this meeting to form such a society, and proceeded to conduct the plenary session in a way that avoided hostilities spilling over into the enterprise at hand. Among the specific accomplishments of the meeting were: agreement to form a society and to explore the means to formally and legally create such an entity; the approval of a name for the new organization, SALSA (the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America); and agreement on the purpose for the group. The purpose statement agreed upon read: "The initial purpose of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America is to help promote and safeguard sound and ethical research on issues related to the region of lowland South America, its peoples, and its environments." The plenary session produced a blueprint for proceeding

Introduction 5

to investigate the process for further establishing the society by creating a committee consisting of nine members who agreed to meet later in the year. Under the leadership of Bill Balée, and through sponsorship commitment he obtained from Thomas Reese, the Director of the Latin American Center at Tulane University, a meeting of this committee was held again in New Orleans in October, 2001. Seven of the nine members of the originally constituted committee attended this meeting. They ratified articles of incorporation that Balée had prepared with the help of legal council. It was decided that SALSA meetings would occur every year and a half apart, and that a journal would be established to publish research in the field. There was general agreement as well that the field would be defined geographically as broadly as possible. It was recognized that the lowland/highland dichotomy could be misleading, and also that the term “Amazonia” was exclusionary. So, “lowland” areas would include all of Amazonia, the coastal and foothill regions, the llanos, the lowland savannahs, and all other geographic regions not properly defined or expressly understood as “highlands.” It was also understood that even some areas that were in fact not physically part of South America could be considered, on the basis of cultural, linguistic, and historical connections that made them relevant to scholars who studied and worked in the lowland areas of South America. It was also decided that the first issue of the journal would be based on the papers given at the 2001 New Orleans meetings, and that Jeffrey Ehrenreich and Javier Ruedas would undertake the task of editing that volume. Ehrenreich was later appointed to be the editor of the new journal, which after deliberations a few months later was named *Tipiti*.

This first Special Issue of the journal *Tipiti* is then the product of the history outlined above. The papers in this volume are not unified by adherence to the editors’ particular theoretical or political viewpoints, but rather by their general adherence to the theme of the Amazonia at the Millennium conference: politics and religion, broadly defined. As might be expected from a theme so broad, the papers reflect a variety of approaches and opinions and belong to no single theoretical or methodological school. Nevertheless, each in its own way represents some of the important trends in contemporary anthropological research in Amazonia.

The first two papers by Turner and Heckenberger are representative of a current trend that is gathering steam among anthropologists interested in indigenous Amazonian politics: the increasing focus on and awareness of hierarchy and inequality in lowland societies. Terry Turner has been arguing this point for some time, particularly since his seminal 1979 articles on the subject in Maybury-Lewis’ edited volume *Dialectical Societies*. In his current article, “The Beautiful and the Common: Inequalities of Value

6 Jeffrey David Ehrenreich & Javier Ruedas

and *Revolving Hierarchy Among the Kayapó*,” he assembles data on numerous aspects of Kayapó social life in making his argument concerning the nature of hierarchy in Central Brazilian indigenous societies.

Turner argues that a main locus of hierarchy among the Kayapó—and by extension other Central Brazilian and Amazonian societies—is the social construction of persons. Persons acquire certain qualities—*metch* and *adjuò*, translatable by the English words beauty and power—through rites of passage. Inequality develops in terms of how much of these distinguishing qualities different people acquire. Those able to acquire full amounts of beauty and power can communicate their special identity and status through genres of discourse and performance that are restricted to them. To gain recognition and leadership in the community requires acquisition of these qualities, which itself is premised on the maintenance of a social system in which sons-in-law are exploited by parents-in-law, and women by men.

Turner’s paper raises significant issues that should inspire debate and further research. Aligning himself with Claire Lorrain (2000), he argues that the symbolic objectification of the female gender role is an essential precondition for the ascription of dependent tasks to women. His focus on “ideological processes of objectification and reification,” as well as on the socioeconomic structure of gender relations, is a clear statement of position in what is developing as one of the more important theoretical issues in Amazonian studies: the causes of female oppression and the dynamics of gender politics. We believe we are seeing the opening salvos of a debate that will be long lasting, because the application of current gender theory to Amazonian studies is still in its infancy (e.g., compare Gregor 1985, Murphy and Murphy 1985, and Siskind 1973 to Conklin and Morgan 1996, and McCallum 2001). Of equal significance is Turner’s articulation of multiple levels of social analysis to show how gender-based oppression and the social organization of the extended family are linked to the construction of hierarchy, and how the ideological “naturalization” of the domestic unit underlies its hierarchical subordination to collective institutions such as age grades and men’s houses. His argument that the ideology of female oppression is a consequence of the need to maintain the solidarity of collective men’s groups should also be carefully considered. This is a paper filled with provocative arguments.

Michael Heckenberger’s arguments parallel Turner’s in many ways. In “The Enigma of the Great Cities: Body and State in Amazonia,” Heckenberger focuses on evidence of hierarchy in Xinguano society. In a position similar to Turner’s, he notes that hierarchy is constructed in rites of passage where members of chiefly lineages receive special body paints and ornaments, which serve to set them apart from people of lower status.

Heckenberger also argues that the accumulation of unequal symbolic resources, what Turner calls “surplus,” underpins the existence of political power. However, there is an important difference in the directions Heckenberger’s and Turner’s arguments take. Heckenberger argues that chiefly individuals can transform their accumulation of symbolic resources into economic capital—material wealth and the ability to control labor. In contrast, Turner argues that the accumulation of surplus material wealth is not a central feature of Amazonian political economy, suggesting instead that the social recognition (in the Kayapó case, as “powerful and beautiful”) resulting from the accumulation of symbolic resources is a goal unto itself and not a simple precursor for the acquisition of material products.

Of great significance in Heckenberger’s paper is the combination of ethnographic, ethnohistoric, and archaeological data used in making his argument. This is important because, as Heckenberger notes, there is a tendency to dismiss any evidence of hierarchy in contemporary Amazonia as resulting from the influence of the world system or from encapsulation in larger states. By connecting hierarchy to village spatial organization and multivillage social organization, and then mustering ethnohistoric and archaeological data to show cultural continuity with pre-Columbian Xinguano society, Heckenberger makes an effective argument that current expressions of hierarchy and inequality in the Xingu are “contemporary manifestations of structures with very deep histories ... guided by ancient ideologies.” Also notable in Heckenberger’s paper is his argument that hierarchy and inequality are common features of Arawakan societies in the area. Thus, according to Heckenberger, there is a “correlation between language and culture,” such that societies of Arawakan speech tend to have hierarchy and inequality as an aspect of their cultures. He then connects this observation to an argument that “culture plays a determinant role in differential development in the Amazon.” Such expressions of cultural determinism are rare among archaeologists.

Donald Pollock’s paper focuses on the politics of identity in the Brazilian state of Acre. Identity politics is a topic of major current interest for anthropology in general (e.g., Hill and Wilson 2002) and for the anthropology of Latin America specifically (e.g., Hale 1997, Warren and Jackson 2003), and much research in this topic has been carried out in South America in recent years (e.g., Brown 1993, Warren 2001, Conklin 2002). In his paper, entitled “Regionalism and Cultural Identity in Western Amazonia,” Pollock makes an important contribution to our understanding of contemporary Amazonian identity politics by pointing out a shift in identity formation processes that is currently under way. Pollock argues that language as primary marker of identity is being replaced in many

contexts by regionalism, a phenomenon he calls “ethnoregionalism.” His explanation of this process and of its consequences is highly enlightening and parallels events of recent years in the area where one of the editors works, the Javari River basin of Brazil (cf. Ruedas 2001, 2003). The direction taken by this trend in indigenous identity formation, and its future consequences, is something anthropologists working in the area should keep an eye on in coming years.

Loretta Cormier’s paper is the only one in the collection to address issues of religion rather than politics. In “Animism, Cannibalism, and Pet-keeping among the Guajá of Eastern Amazonia,” She addresses several of the most important issues in current research on religion in Amazonia, including the work of Descola (1992) on animism, of Fausto (1999) on pet-keeping, and of Viveiros de Castro (1998) on perspectival multinaturalism, as they apply to the Guajá. In a refreshingly lucid and accessible style, she points out that while some aspects of Guajá relationships to pets accord well with major contemporary theories on Amazonian religion and relations to the natural world, there are nevertheless aspects that represent significant disjunctions with these theories. In particular, the modeling of the relation between pets and pet-keepers on the mother-child relation among the Guajá is something that theorists of animal/human relations in Amazonia specifically, and of Amazonian cosmologies more generally, should carefully consider in fine-tuning their models.

Finally, we are proud to conclude this special first edition of *Tipiti* with Kenneth Kensinger’s paper. In “Being a Real Man: In Memory of Grompes,” Kensinger presents his memories of forty years of friendship with the headman of the Kaxinawa village of Balta, Peru. It is extremely rare to find this amount of time-depth, this breadth of fieldwork, and this intensity of emotion in an anthropological essay. The result is a work that is uniquely fascinating and revealing. It could have come only from the pen of Kensinger (see Kensinger 1995), and it confirms his well-earned reputation as one of the most outstanding fieldworkers in the history of South American anthropology and as the field’s current “dean.” As well as making a contribution to the literature on indigenous Amazonian leadership, this paper addresses many other important issues in Amazonian anthropology. For example, with its vignettes covering forty years of history, it is an exceptional record of the changes that have occurred during that time. It also expresses many of the dilemmas of fieldwork and of relationships to informants. It clearly shows the way a relationship to an informant is transformed into friendship, and the way this leads to changes within the anthropologist over time. Most importantly, it memorializes Grompes, who was clearly as exceptional a man as his chronicler.

REFERENCES CITED

- Brown, Michael F.
1993 "Facing the State, Facing the World: Amazonia's Native Leaders and the New Politics of Identity." *L'Homme* 33:307–326.
- Conklin, Beth A.
2002 "Shamans versus Pirates in the Amazonian Treasure Chest." *American Anthropologist* 104:1050–1061.
- Conklin, Beth A., and Lynn M. Morgan
1996 "Babies, Bodies, and the Production of Personhood in North America and Native Amazonian Society." *Ethos* 24:657–694.
- Descola, Philippe
1992 "Societies of Nature and the Nature of Society." In *Conceptualizing Society*. Adam Kuper, editor, pp. 107–126. New York: Routledge.
- Fausto, Carlos
1999 "Of Enemies and Pets: Warfare and Shamanism in Amazonia." *American Ethnologist* 26:933–956.
- Gregor, Thomas
1985 *Anxious Pleasures: The Sexual Lives of an Amazonian People*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hale, Charles R.
1997 "Cultural Politics of Identity in Latin America." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26:567–590.
- Hill, Jonathan D., and Thomas M. Wilson
2002 "New Identities." *Identities* 9:1–6.
- Kensinger, Kenneth
1995 *How Real People Ought to Live: The Cashinahua of Eastern Peru*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
- Lorrain, Claire
2000 "Cosmic Reproduction, Economics and Politics among the Kulina of Southwest Amazonia." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6(2):293–310.
- McCallum, Cecilia
2001 *Gender and Sociality in Amazonia: How Real People Are Made*. Oxford: Berg.
- Murphy, Yolanda, and Robert Murphy
1985 *Women of the Forest*, 2nd edition. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ruedas, Javier
2001 *The Marubo Political System*. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Tulane University.
2003 "Marubo Discourse Genres and Domains of Influence: Language and Politics in an Indigenous Amazonian Village." *International Journal of American Linguistics* 68:447–482.
- Turner, Terence
1979a "The Gê and Bororo Societies as Dialectical Systems: A General Model." In *Dialectical Societies*. David Maybury-Lewis, editor, pp. 147–178. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

10 *Jeffrey David Ehrenreich & Javier Ruedas*

- 1979b "Kinship, Household, and Community Structure among the Northern Kayapó." In *Dialectical Societies*. David Maybury-Lewis, editor, pp. 179–214. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Siskind, Janet
1973 *To Hunt in the Morning*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo
1998 "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4:469–488.
- Warren, Jonathan
2001 *Racial Revolutions: Antiracism and Indian Resurgence in Brazil*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Warren, Kay B., and Jean E. Jackson (editors)
2003 *Indigenous Movements, Self-Representation, and the State in Latin America*. Austin: University of Texas Press.