

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

ISSN: 2572-3626

Volume 1 | Issue 2

Article 5

December 2003

Families of the Forest: The Matsigenka Indians of the Peruvian Amazon

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Recommended Citation

Weiss, Gerald (2003). "Families of the Forest: The Matsigenka Indians of the Peruvian Amazon", *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70845/2572-3626.1059>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol1/iss2/5>

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Families of the Forest: The Matsigenka Indians of the Peruvian Amazon. Allen Johnson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. xvii + 258 pp., maps, tables, figures, glossary, references, index. \$21.95 (paper). ISBN 0-520-23242-9. [www.ucpress.edu]

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This work by Allen Johnson adds to the ethnographic literature on the Matsigenka of eastern Peru that has been accumulating over the years, a body of literature to which Johnson himself has already made a valuable contribution in earlier publications. Ultimately, all the ethnographic reports on the Matsigenka by different authors need to be compiled and their overall accuracy and completeness assessed. The present work contains a good amount of information on social organization, both qualitative and quantitative (including time allocation data, as might be expected from this author), information on cosmology that is rather sketchy, and limited information on material culture and manufactures. This is in keeping with the author's express purpose of substantiating a particular theoretical understanding—the reality of Steward's "family" level of sociocultural integration—by using the Matsigenka as an example (p. 2).

To say that is to reveal that Johnson, in this work, engages in what might be called "advocacy" ethnography. This would involve the author assembling the ethnographic data supporting his position, and interpreting the data to that end. Johnson is explicit that the present work is written along such lines (p. 8). As practiced by Johnson, such interpretation is not offered separately, after the evidentiary data, but is interlarded, so that the reader must be vigilant to distinguish one from the other.

There is the question as to whether Johnson proves his case, that the Matsigenka exemplify, hence prove the reality of, Steward's "family" level of sociocultural integration. One problem is that, it is not clear, when he writes of a "family level society," what Johnson means by a family and by a society. Steward himself was vague about his levels of sociocultural integration. In one place he distinguished between the family and the band, in another between the nuclear family and the extended family. Johnson seems to vacillate in what he means by "family" (in "family level society") between just the nuclear family (giving little attention to the polygynous families occurring among the Matsigenka) and a bracketing of nuclear and extended families. He does not give the evidence that would be needed to demonstrate that the Matsigenka hamlets are in fact extended families, as he claims (see p. 169 for the composition of one of these "extended family hamlets").

Furthermore, he seems to take each settlement as constituting a society, which would make each hamlet a society, as well as each "nuclear family" or

“single family” living separately. He presents a vision of the Matsigenka as alternating between isolated “single-family households” and “extended family hamlets.” Yet he mentions in passing that a number of hamlets with single-family outliers may in fact combine to form a “very loose neighborhood” (p.225), currently taking the form of school communities but in the past brought into existence by “shamans or charismatic political leaders” (p. 183; cf. pp. 141, 176). Johnson also mentions Matsigenka villages, located downriver, that are more regularized than such “neighborhoods,” but are a recent, government-induced development (p. 142). If we recognize a web of kinship connecting all the Matsigenka into a larger society—that of the entire Matsigenka population—then we can take into consideration this entire array of Matsigenka settlement types as existing within the society.

Steward’s theoretical model of multilineal evolution incorporates a number of “levels of sociocultural integration,” which we may recognize as levels of political integration. Steward distinguished between family and band levels, the former being the most problematic element in his scheme. An alternative view that might be considered is that the band level or type of tribal social organization allows for the division of bands into sub-bands even as small as conjugal families (monogamous or polygamous) for periods of time, as the result of an unforgiving environment, as was the case, for example, during most of the year among the Great Basin tribes, and seasonally among the Inuit. As for the Matsigenka, Johnson himself suggests resource scarcity as a “main reason” for their dispersed living habits (pp. 148, 225), but there is also the past history of these people being victimized by raiders, a possible contributing cause of their dispersion (as touched upon on p. 36).

It may be that many Matsigenka live for periods of time in isolated “family” households, but there are also hamlets and consolidations of hamlets (“neighborhoods”), apart from the villages down river. Each “neighborhood” may be recognized as constituting a band with its headman, and even a hamlet may be viewed as a small band. These would then be the semisedentary, horticultural bands of the Matsigenka. It is of interest that the word “band” does not appear to be in Johnson’s active vocabulary in describing either the Matsigenka or human social organization generally.

Having demonstrated to his own satisfaction that the Matsigenka have a “family level society,” Johnson disregards his own suggestion that such a situation is a response to resource scarcity (hence arising only under special circumstances), and makes the leap to identifying the “family” level of sociocultural integration as a universal, worldwide stage of human social evolution prevailing throughout “much of prehistory” (p. 223). In support of this claim, he includes in his list of New World pre-Columbian “family level societies” the Ona, the Siriono, and the Campa (p. 224), while elsewhere he describes the !Kung in the same terms (pp.3, 223). However, this is not correct, as all these peoples lived and live in band (suprafamily) groupings. Johnson is

230 *Tipiti*

perhaps on more defensible ground when he includes reference to the Jívaro and the Yahgan, who are described in their respective ethnographic literatures as living in dispersed families. Yet, even here, the families belonged to bands that came together for warfare among the Jívaro and for important ceremonies among the Yahgan. Perhaps it should be mentioned that Johnson does not distinguish the Ona and Yahgan but instead refers generally to Tierra del Fuego.

Some other issues might be raised in considering the publication under review, but they are relatively minor or overly recondite, having to do with points of information and interpretational details, methodological problems and philosophical stance.

The Indians and Brazil. Mercio Pereira Gomes. Translated by John W. Moon. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000. xvi + 300 pp., notes, appendices, bibliography. \$55.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-8130-1720-3. [www.upf.com]

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This book is an anthropological study of the relations between Brazilian society and the indigenous peoples who live within Brazil's borders. Central to an understanding of this association is an appreciation of the history of the dealings between the two peoples. Gomes presents three different phases through which these parties have passed. The early phase, during which the War of Extermination occurred, was when many Indians were killed or enslaved as Portuguese colonial dominance was established. The middle phase was when Brazilians conceptualized Indians as *caboclos* (tame Indians) and foisted a paternalistic relationship on them (p. 54). The present phase is characterized by what Gomes calls "the Indian demographic turnaround" (p.x), in which, beginning in about the late 1950s (p. 91), indigenous populations increased rather than decreased to the point of extinction. Today they have ceased to be *caboclos* and are in the process of affirming their ethnic identity.

However, having described this sequence, Gomes offers the tantalizing observation that what is important about this history is the role Indians have played in the construction of the Brazilian self-image and consciousness. He places indigenous peoples at the core of the process whereby Brazilians forged their national identity, and he warns that, although this may offer Indians their greatest chance of survival, economic realities may ultimately defeat them (p. 12). From early royal orders and recommendations to debates about Indians that took place during the Brazilian empire on into the twentieth century when the Indian Protection Service (SPI) was created and Indian rights were debated at national constitutional conferences, Gomes shows us the key position