

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

ISSN: 2572-3626

Volume 2 | Issue 2

Article 4

December 2004

Histories and Historicities in Amazonia

Minna Opas

University of Turku, Finland

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



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Opas, Minna (2004). "Histories and Historicities in Amazonia", *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70845/2572-3626.1072>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol2/iss2/4>

This Reviews 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.

of the figure of the witch into elite discourses, the existence of organized legal practices centered on the persecution of sorcery, and the notoriety generated by the inquisitorial trials no doubt *increased* the perceived power and effectiveness of magic. Mello e Souza points out that it was not until after the colonial period that the realization hit that “the best way to eliminate witches was to make them look ridiculous” (p. 212).

Sorcery, of course, is alive and well in Brazil today. Following the lines of Mello e Souza’s argument, one might suggest that this reflects Brazil’s uneven modernization. On the other hand, we might also view the resilience of certain common denominators of Brazilian popular religion—including the pervasive use of magical practices—as a form of resistance to modernity on the part of the Afro-Brazilians, cabolcos, and poor whites who have been marginalized by the project of modernization.

Histories and Historicities in Amazonia. Neil L. Whitehead, editor. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. xx + 236 pp., maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$25.00 (paper). ISBN 0-8032-9817-X. [unp.unl.edu]

MINNA OPAS
University of Turku, Finland

Histories and Historicities in Amazonia, edited by Neil L. Whitehead, is based on papers presented at a special session of the American Society for Ethnohistory. In the introduction the editor outlines the starting point for the collection by stating that Amazonia can be seen as the “last frontier for the study of history” (p.vii). Due to its inaccessibility, social and cultural marginality, and lack of historical sources, Amazonia has been seen almost exclusively through the perspectives of its colonizers. This colonizing history suffers from a lack of “cultural significance and historical depth” (p.vii). Only during the last decade have there been significant efforts towards challenging and correcting this record. However, according to Whitehead, in spite of recent promising historical and anthropological research, the methodological problems created from the lack of historical materials and the bias of the existent materials still prevail in the study of Amerindian histories. Whitehead proposes simultaneous archival and ethnographical research as the key to solving these methodological problems.

The aim of the volume then is to investigate the cultural schema and attitudes that make the past meaningful, that is, to produce “historicités.” Whitehead underlines the importance of the distinction between history and historicities for the ways of doing ethnography and for anthropological theory in general. By *history* is meant the different culturally constructed representations,

such as texts or oral performances, which make specific histories. By *historicities*, on the other hand, is meant the “cultural proclivities that lead to certain kinds of historical consciousness within which such histories are meaningful” (p.xi). At the present moment, anthropological understanding of Amerindian (and other) histories has expanded at a faster rate than has the understanding of the historicities that lie behind them. The articles in the volume explore this conjuncture of histories and historicities and aim at suggesting ways for further developing anthropological research that takes this conjuncture into account.

The book is divided into four sections, each with a special point of view concerning the making of histories. The first, “Landscape and Cartography,” explores the differences and interconnectedness of indigenous and Western readings of landscape and their ways of producing maps of indigenous territories. Domingo A. Medina describes the self-demarcation process of the ancestral lands of the Ye’kuana people of Venezuela. He sees the mapping of the Ye’kuana land, using Western cartography, as a means for indigenous peoples’ communication with the outside world. He also interprets the mapping as a strategy for showing control over their culture and territory, as well as for promoting their relation to and historical and mythical linkages with the environment. Silvia M. Vidal analyzes the relationship between cartography and the religion of Kúwai. She shows how the Guianian Warekena have different ways of encoding mythology, tradition and history in landscape and how these—when represented in maps—have helped the Warekena successfully interact with the national colonial powers. Independently Medina and Vidal observe that it is not only the actual mapping or self-demarcation, but also the processes leading to these that are important to the peoples in question. The processes have brought up new ways for indigenous self-identification, and for the experience of unity and self-respect. Furthermore, in and through these processes traditional knowledge has become transmitted to younger generations. Such knowledge is not only about territories but also, for example, about beliefs and values. The last article in this section is by the volume’s editor, Neil L. Whitehead. He discusses the importance and usefulness of the concept of “landscape” in anthropology. He sees landscape as more than the natural physical environment. According to him, landscape is comprised as much by the dynamic activities of humans, animals, plants, and spirits as by biota and topography. Amazonia should be considered a cultural artifact and not just a natural environment. This is not, however, a new observation. In other cultural and disciplinary contexts, landscape has for quite a while been seen as a cultural product. Whitehead goes on to show how indigenous ecological practices are intertwined with historical memory. For example, in the Guyana highlands, the Patamuna, while doing their daily activities, recall important or distinctive landmarks such as trees as “discursive tropes in myth, ritual, and other oral performances” (p.76). Thus, history and landscape cannot be separated from one another.

The second section is entitled “Contact and Power.” The two articles in it look at power relations, both within indigenous communities as well as between these communities and the outside world. Berta E. Pérez examines cultural continuity amongst the Aripaëño of Venezuela. She shows how the indigenous population has been able to maintain cultural continuity by actively using both indigenous and Western political models in defining their social, territorial and cultural borders, as well as the permeability of those borders. In political negotiations the Aripaëño employ their traditional historical narration, which is connected with the landscape and ancestral legacy. Nádia Farage uses *discourse* as a key in her examination of Wapishana construction of social memory. By showing how the use of different rhetorical codes in discourses about the past is a “strategic locus to depict historicity” (p.109), she contributes to the development of useful methodologies for the study of indigenous historicities.

Loretta Cormier begins the third section, entitled “The Cultural Transformation of History,” with her fine essay on Guajá making of history. She shows how the *form* of history making is too often forgotten in studies on indigenous histories. In the case of the Guajá, the past is “encountered” through dreaming and rituals, not through texts. By ritually transforming the past, the Guajá manage to some extent to control acculturation and to preserve their own cultural values and social structure. Their historicity decolonizes the past. In her contribution, Mary Riley shows how the Makushi use their history to enhance the present day Amerindian rights movement in Guyana. Both of these articles examine the relationship between “us and them,” and “we and the others.” The articles shed light on the different ways in which the past and the present are exhibited *for* others, on the one hand, and *of* others, on the other.

In the last section, entitled “Archaeology of History,” two articles stress the importance of archaeology and its methods for the understanding of Amerindian histories as well as historicities. Franz Scaramelli and Kay Tarble discuss the role of the introduction of distilled spirits in transforming indigenous drinking practices and subsequently, in changing economic and political relations among the peoples of the Orinoco region. Rafael Gassón takes up the question of ceremonial feasting. He suggests that its importance in indigenous life is first as a key feature in their political economy, second as a means for the transmission of historical information to younger generations, and third as it functioned in the construction of collective identities.

This collection of essays faces the challenge of overcoming many methodological and disciplinary chasms in Amazonian anthropology—and may be said to manage the task well. The volume also succeeds in giving the term “landscape” new methodological and theoretical weight, as some of the writers use the term as a tool in their analysis of indigenous histories and historicities. However, not all the articles in the collection carry the same methodological or theoretical significance. While some authors manage to offer intriguing questions and viewpoints, and to provide theoretical insights,

others are not quite as convincing in positioning some elements as central to indigenous peoples' traditions in their present territorial or other political struggles. Furthermore, it should be noted that the articles are predominantly from northeastern Amazonia, including the Guiana Shield and Orinoco drainage areas, and that they do not cover other parts of the Amazonia. Despite these limitations, the volume raises important questions for future research in anthropology. I recommend this work to scholars interested in theoretical issues surrounding the production of indigenous histories and historicities, geography and power relations, as well as in methodological and theoretical questions in anthropology.

Amazon Sweet Sea: Land, Life, and Water at the River's Mouth. Nigel J.H. Smith. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002. xii + 296 pp., plates, map, notes, appendix, bibliography, index. \$39.95 (cloth). ISBN 0-292-77770-1. [www.utexas.edu/utpress]

ALF HORNBERG
Lund University

Nigel Smith has produced a beautifully illustrated volume on the practicalities of natural resource management around the mouth of the Amazon, with a particular focus on Marajó Island. In ten chapters he provides detailed accounts of how rural people in this area use various kinds of little-known fruits, nuts, wood, fish, and game. In part because it is filled with anecdotes and lore, this catalogue of resources is accessible and enjoyable reading. It is a storehouse of rare and sometimes vanishing information on the ethnobiology and technology of the Amazon estuary, much of which has its roots in indigenous cultures that are no longer intact. Most of the text deals with very concrete matters regarding the physical appearance and occurrence of various species, harvesting techniques, transport, storage, and consumption, but there are also sections discussing general issues such as urban markets, globalization, and sustainability. The text often seems second in importance to the many photographs, most of which portray smiling youngsters posing with some exotic grocery or artefact.

The first two chapters briefly present the physical geography and economic history of the Amazon estuary, from its tectonic formation eight million years ago to the collapse of the rubber boom and its aftermath in the twentieth century. The following seven chapters deal, respectively, with livestock ranching, several useful species of palm trees, wild fruits, agriculture, logging, fishing, and hunting. The tenth and final chapter briefly discusses the threats and possibilities of economic globalization, mentioning timber extraction as the most recent boom-and-bust cycle in Amazonia, opportunities for ecotourism,