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Identité, cosmologie et chamanisme des Tsachila de l'Équateur.

Montserrat Ventura i Oller. Forward by Jean-Pierre Chaumeil. Paris: L'Harmattan. 2009.

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The anthropology of South America has traditionally been divided in two bodies of literature. One is primarily focused on the supposedly simple, small-scale societies of the tropical lowlands; the other is mainly concerned with the allegedly more complex societies of the Andean highlands. Even though the doctrine of environmental determinism, which originally justified this division, has fallen into disrepute (at least in social anthropology), there are surprisingly few contemporary works that combine both angles. To be sure, there is the odd article or book chapter where the case for more mutual engagement is made and there has even been an entire conference specifically dedicated to overcoming the artificial split between Amazonian and Andean anthropology¹. Still, full-length monographs that tackle the relation between lowlands and highlands head-on and engage with the different kinds of problems raised by the two distinct bodies of literature in a sustained way are fairly exceptional. Montserrat Ventura i Oller's state-of-the-art ethnography of the Tsachila—indigenous people of Ecuador who live at the intersection between the Pacific coast and the Andean sierra—is one of these rare exceptions.

The Tsachila ancestral territories are situated near the city of Santo Domingo de los Colorados, in the Andean foothills. In fact, the term “Tsachila” is currently their preferential self-designation but most people in Ecuador know them as the Colorados, an externally imposed name derived from their men's habit of painting their hair red with annatto (*Bixa orellana*). In the first part of the book—“Chronicles at the Crossroads”—Ventura sketches the colonial history of the region. More particularly, she highlights the crucial importance of the road between Quito, Ecuador's capital, and Santo Domingo between 1920 and 1940. She gives a detailed account of the role of the Ecuadorian State and of the repercussions of the notorious 1936 *Ley de tierras baldías y colonización* (“law concerning empty, non-cultivated lands and their colonization”). This is essential to understand many of the ongoing conflicts and disagreements about land rights, natural resources, and wildlife conservation. Ventura's ethnography beautifully illustrates that the exact meaning of “non-cultivated” has been highly contested for a long time and remains contested today.

Since the completion of the road from Quito towards the Pacific coast the influx of settlers and immigrants has increased greatly and interactions between Tsachila, *mestizos*, and all sorts of outsiders has become commonplace. Yet, this frequent interaction is not so much a break with the past as the intensification of certain patterns that existed long before the dramatic increase in population of the twentieth century. Ventura argues that the Tsachila have been participating in networks of trade and exchange throughout their history. Through a meticulous study of colonial documents and various other archival materials, she shows that enterprising Tsachila voyagers regularly visited the Pacific coast (where they had close relations with the Chachi, the indigenous inhabitants of Esmeraldas), the Andean highlands (where they frequently visited the famous indigenous market town of Otavalo), and occasionally even the Amazonian lowland regions east of the Andes (connections with Shuar people have been documented). What is more, these networks did not just involve the ex-

change of material goods such as cotton, gold and annatto for salt and merchandise of Hispanic origin, but also of shamanic knowledge and medicinal plants.

In the second part of the book (“The Person”), Ventura notes the conspicuous absence in the historical records of any sign of violent resistance against colonial officers, tax collectors or missionaries. This is somewhat puzzling, given the relatively common occurrence of particularly fierce indigenous revolts during the colonial epoch elsewhere in Ecuador. Ventura suggests that the Tsachila’s preferred tactics were indifference and/or dispersion into the deep forest rather than open combat. As she puts it in her own words:

“All their cultural practices are suffused by this attitude of pacifism; conflicts of all types tend to be resolved by means of retreat rather than direct confrontation. For example, when there is a problem with *mestizo* encroachers they would not create a fuss but rather express their disagreement by means of silence and avoidance”. (p. 137, reviewer’s translation)

However, she immediately adds that this peculiar attitude should not be confused with passivity or cowardice: “...the shyness that appears to be inherent in this conduct of evasion does not imply submission. To the contrary, it involves a distinctive sense of pride” (p. 137). Ventura convincingly argues that this cultural strategy of evasion cannot be grasped as a mere effect of colonial history; archival evidence indicates that the Tsachila used it not only in their initial contacts with representatives of the Royal *Audiencia* of Quito and with Hispanics more generally, but also when they had to confront neighboring indigenous groups (cf. Salomon 1997).

The third and final part of the book—“The Ways of the Cosmos”—is devoted to the role of the *pone*, the Tsachila shamans whose healing techniques are of great renown in all parts Ecuador. To some extent, these shamans fulfil classic tasks such as protecting their communities from sorcery attacks, vampire spirits, wandering ghosts, and all thinkable sorts of evil. Yet, they also cater to “the national market.” In fact, many of them are of such high repute that they mostly give care to non-Tsachila patients who often come from as far away as Quito or Guayaquil to seek treatment. For the most successful among them, curing is a quite lucrative business nowadays. In this way, it is suggested, they have perfected and updated an age-old form of indigenous cosmopolitanism of which their craft is perhaps the most striking manifestation but which pervades, in fact, the society as a whole. Some aspects of this argument may appear debatable to some, but Ventura’s great merit is that she always favors descriptive subtlety and nuance over grand hypotheses or scoring theoretical points. Overall, the tone of the book is lively, at times almost poetic and at times fairly critical, but never pretentious or pedantic. *Identité, cosmologie et chamanisme des Tsachila de l’Équateur* is a remarkable ethnographic achievement and sets a new norm for anthropological research on the Pacific coast of Ecuador.

1 The conference was co-organized by Mark Harris, Isabelle Daillant, Gilles Rivière and Tristan Platt, and took place in St Andrew in 2006. It was entitled “Andes-Amazon: Comparisons, Connections, Frontiers.”

REFERENCE

Salomon, Frank 1997 *Yumbos, Niguas y Tsachila o “Colorados” durante la Colonia Española: Etnohistoria del Noroccidente de Pichincha*. Quito: Abya-Yala.