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Upper Perené Arawak Narratives of History, Landscape, and Ritual

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Upper Perené Arawak Narratives of History, Landscape, and Ritual by Elena Mihas. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014. lxxix +402 pp., appendices, notes, glossary, references, index.

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PANAMA

Elena Mihas's *Upper Perené Arawak Narratives of History, Landscape, and Ritual* is the latest in an illustrious line of collections of Ashaninka myths, narratives, and testimonies (Anderson 1986, 2000; Casanto Shingari 2002, 2003; Fernández 1986; Kindberg n.d.; Kindberg et al. 1979; Shaver Swanson and Shaver 1976; Veber 2009; Weiss 1975). Ashaninka is the general term used to refer to the cluster of Arawak-speaking peoples living in Peru's Selva Central region, a cluster that includes speakers of Asháninka, Ashéninka and Nomatsiguenga. The present book fills an important void, since previous collections were compiled mostly among the Asháninka of the Tambo, Ene, Pichis, Satipo and Gran Pajonal areas. The Upper Perené Ashéninka differ greatly from the Asháninka living in those areas insofar as they were unaffected by the horrors of the rubber boom, lived in closer contact with the national society, were more deeply involved in market-oriented productive activities, and were the most influenced by Seventh-day Adventist missionization. At the same time, the book nicely complements other collections gathered among the Ashéninka of the Lower Perené and Pichis valleys.

The book begins with a detailed introduction in which Mihas presents the historical background and present-day socioeconomic situation of the Upper Perené Ashéninka. She also discusses the methods used to collect the data, the criteria utilized to select the fifty-eight narratives included in the book, and the rationale for the book's three-part structure. In addition, and in the spirit of a true collaborative project, she makes a very useful presentation of the characteristics of each of the thirty narrators represented in the text.

Mihas has divided the narratives published in this volume into three thematic groups dealing with the history, landscape, and ritual life of the Upper Perené Ashéninka. The first section, devoted to history, contains a mix of myths, historical narratives, and personal testimonies describing the creation of the earth, the origins of manioc and fire, the deeds of the hero/villain Apinka, the struggle against white invaders, and the tragedies generated by internal slave raiding. The second section, which deals with the landscape as both inscribed history and an animated entity, consists of a set of narratives on the origin of several important landmarks (including the famous Cerro de la Sal), the functioning of ancient indigenous ironworks and ceremonial centers, and the dangers posed by a host of spiritual entities living in caves, lakes, rivers and cliffs. The last and longest section, dedicated to Ashéninka ritual life, contains a variegated set of mostly short accounts dealing with the worship of ancient divinities, the offerings made to the masters/owners of animals and fish, the rituals surrounding key life-cycle events such as puberty, marriage and death, the dangers of witchcraft, and the activities of tobacco shamans and herbalist healers.

Each of these sections is preceded by an introduction in which the compiler presents a critical and nuanced summary of the existing literature on the topic. These introductions serve the purpose of contextualizing the narratives of each section which are not otherwise annotated. They are very helpful to situate the Upper Perené Ashéninka narratives in the broader context of Ashaninka sociocultural practices. What I find missing in these introductions is a more direct comparison between the narratives collected by the compiler and those published in previous collections. As Mihas herself notes, there are often important differences between the narratives, for instance, with regards to the moral appraisal of Apinka, the mythico-historical character associated with the eighteenth-century rebel leader Juan Santos Atahualpa. It would have been interesting to explore whether these variances are due to internal cultural differences within the Ashaninka cluster (unlike other Ashaninka subgroups, for instance, the Upper Perené Ashéninka have been strongly influenced by the neighboring Yanesha), to the effects of

the passage of time (some of the earlier collections were gathered thirty, forty and even fifty years before Mihas's), or to the theological and cultural impact of Seventh-day Adventist missions (which for several decades had their administrative center in the Upper Perené region). This omission, given Mihas's training as a linguist, may respond to her greater interest in the linguistic and discursive aspects of the narratives she collected.

Overall, this is a first-rate text touching on central issues that are often still not well understood by specialists; for instance, whether Ashéninka and Yanesha colonial iron-works operated under similar parameters; whether internal slave trading depended only on violent raiding or on a combination of violence and the willingness of some agents to sell undesirable kin; or whether child and female sorcery accusations were only individual affairs or could assume the form of collective hysteria. For its contributions to these and other important issues, Mihas's *Upper Perené Arawak Narratives of History, Landscape, and Ritual* is bound to become a classic that will be consulted by anthropologists and Ashaninka scholars alike for many years to come.

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