

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

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 17
Issue 1 (*includes Issue 2*)

Article 8

3-15-2021

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Recommended Citation

Rahman, Elizabeth (2021). "A Walk to the River in Amazonia: Ordinary Reality for the Mehinaku Indians by Carla Stang," *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 8, 84-86.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol17/iss1/8>

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A Walk to the River in Amazonia: Ordinary Reality for the Mehinaku Indians by Carla Stang. New York: Berghahn Books, 2009. 221 pp., figures, plates, references, index glossary

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Carla Stang's *A Walk to the River in Amazonia* is an ethnographic enquiry into consciousness. Focusing on the Mehinaku of the Brazilian Alto Xingu, it asks how Amerindians perceive and experience the life they live. Stang's audacious prerogative is to write plainly about what the Mehinaku are like as a people to help readers understand their world and their animist reality. Affirming a phenomenological approach to this project, the book opens with an early fieldwork description of Stang's experience of walking to the river with her female companion Wanakuwalu—who is the same age as Stang—and closes with a stream-of-consciousness description of how Wanakuwalu would experience such a walk herself. The in-between bits, that is, the bulk of the book, are “an attempt to come to terms with this lived world” (p. 183).

Stang explores the substantial manifestation of the Mehinaku's world and the consciousness that enables it. For Stang the maintenance of firm (bodily) forms and clear outlines is necessary due to the otherwise overly loose dominant reality: “Mehinaku deliberately promote or project definition because in fact the opposite is the case . . . [so] . . . they must consciously uphold the forms that constitute their reality” (p. 128). Their reality is a “consensus reality” (p. 55), and upholding the “structures of life” (p. 102) involves a fluctuating sense of being made by the world or of being actively engaged in the project of world-making itself. It includes the practice of emotional restraint and the cultivation of a joyous outlook, *ketepemunaki* (p. 116), as means to the good life—*awëshëpai*—an ideal circumstance that enables the “integrated flow with all things” (p. 156). Thinking, *naöntëkanatër*, means “all the body is going to think what to do” (p. 39), and the beautiful *awitsiri* state of consciousness and *bom pensamentos* (p. 115) are what enable *awëshëpai*.

This focus on the substantial makeup of the Mehinaku world includes a discussion of the potency of people's “smell clouds” (p. 36) and how the extension of the self informs practices of opening and closing to other people, to perceptions, sensations, and experiences.

Like other Amerindian groups, the Mehinaku are “always striving to make themselves” (p. 35). Stang explores containing the unruly roaming of desire, in which also exists its healthful satisfaction (p.85). Stang calls this the “dynamic of daring,” the principle through which to “improve form, one must risk form” (p. 107). It describes the extent to which one discerns the need to cunningly take a risk for personal or collective betterment without being judged ruthlessly antisocial. With readers doubtless recalling regional trickster myths, we learn of the men's taking of *kawëka* flutes from the women, of the men gaining knowledge of ritual dances and songs, and of the slaying of the alligator lover by a cuckold husband that eventually engenders the sprouting of *akai* fruits, all examples of this dynamic ultimately evinced by the drawing of danger into the center of the village (cf. Ewart 2013).

The predominance of myths in her monograph is corroborated by Stang's assertion that the Mehinaku make sense of life through the collective and directive narration of experience—that is, the storytelling tendencies of the Mehinaku themselves (p. 137). The narration of experience as a world-making enterprise in these convivial settings appears connected to the deliberate performance of a joyous outlook, reminding me of other ethnographic descriptions of smiling the bad feeling away (e.g., Lagrou 2000; 2006).

Though certain references to the Amerindian literature are missing or perhaps purposefully omitted (Santos-Granero 2006; Londoño-Sulkin 2005), the book is full of lucid insights,

both ethnographic and potentially theoretical, on ownership (*uwekebè*) (Fausto 1999; 2009), cloning (Rival 2001), alterity (Vilaça 2002; 2005), and gender (Siskind 1973; McCallum 2001). Stang details the substantial differences of men and women, respectively, a cosmogonic state of affairs that predicates the capacity of women to be more gentle and caring than men. This leaves them at the more favourable end of the “soul continuum” (pp. 58–59), with men more likely to fall into the passion-led desires associated with the *apapanye* spirits/people-animals and, as a logical consequence, to become sorcerers. Women, on the other hand, better conform to the gentle human-child *yerepèhè yeya*-original, which becomes them. For this reason, they are better able to uphold human society.

Citing Viveiros de Castro (1998), Stang ponders the nature of intentionality (soul), concluding that “not only is there the shifting of surfaces, bodies, skin-envelopes but also fluctuations and sometimes transformations of states and identities of souls” so that “the corporeal/skin affects the state of the spirit/soul but also vice versa” (p. 60). Stang’s “substantial consciousness” in which “right *yakulai*-consciousness . . . promotes strong *umènuṣiri*-body (p. 103) well resonates with the Warekena’s understanding of strong, firm selves (Rahman 2015).

While avoiding anthropological jargon and classical Amerindian frames of analysis in favor of descriptive conclusions, Stang does engage Jungian psychology and Platonian (and Eliadian) archetypes, with the latter arguably illustrating a convincing similarity to Mehinaku original types (*yeya*). And Stang is admirably up front about what she thinks she knows and doesn’t and how she comes around to the conclusions she makes. The book succeeds in breathing fresh air into the important, well-nit-picked quotidian dealings à la Overing (and citing Gow 1991; 2001); by fleshing out “life’s dull round” readers get a good sense of what it is like for the Mehinaku to live with the anxious burden of upholding the life they know and want.

The final deeply introspective and tightly laced narrative fiction of Wanakuwalu’s walk to the river expertly amalgamates, and is cross-referenced to, the key points made in the book. But this is one of the reasons why I remain unconvinced of the usefulness of Stang’s description of the walk to the river as a heuristic method allowing us to understand the lived reality of the Mehinaku themselves. Rather, I would have liked to have seen more sensorially replete thick description of day-to-day life itself and to have gotten to know Wanakuwalu herself: heard her reported speech, been told what she looks like, who she lives with, how she does things, so as to empathize with her personally. If this is an exploration of consciousness, I find it hard to believe that Wanakuwalu *thinks* about so many things when she walks to the river.

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