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Upriver: The Turbulent Life and Times of an Amazonian People by Michael F. Brown.
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014. vii + 321 pp., notes, sources on Awajún
and related societies, index

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One cold day in 1995, Michael F. Brown found himself on the phone with a stranger, Sandra Miller. Her twenty-six-year old son, he writes, “had recently been murdered by men who were almost certainly Aguaruna She bore no grudge against the Aguaruna (now known as the Awajún). She simply wanted to understand who they were and why some of them had killed her son” (p. 1). Almost twenty years earlier, Brown had lived with Awajún people along Peru’s Upper Río Mayo. There could have been many reasons why Miller’s son died, he tells us: robbery, fears about evil *pishtaco* demons, growing conflicts with outsiders, or even Awajún politics. “Deeper conspiracies may have been in play, involving indigenous leaders determined to demonstrate their control over outsiders’ access to their communities” (p. 2). Not long afterwards, for example, the anthropologist Shane Greene (2009) narrowly escaped an attack arising from factional disputes. “The Awajún are difficult people,” Brown (pers. com.) told me recently. In *Upriver*, he revisits the “emotionally difficult issues” that eluded him as a young researcher: the Awajúns’ penchant for violence, their profound dread of sorcery, their “predilection for suicide.” His book brings to mind other personal accounts of fieldwork in Amazonia: David Maybury-Lewis’ *The Savage and the Innocent* (1965) or Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *Tristes Tropiques* (1955).

Upriver is divided into two sections. The first, which takes up nearly two-thirds of the book, is based on “outtakes” from Brown’s early field notes (1976–78). Under President Fernando Belaunde Terry (1963–68), Peru started work on the *Carretera Marginal de la Selva* (Forest Border Highway) to open its Amazon region for settlement. Subsequent military governments (1968–80) carried the highway forward. This was the “era of high development,” when the building of roads, dams, and other big projects proceeded still largely unfettered by concerns about human rights and the environment. Brown arrived on the Upper Río Mayo as mestizo pioneers were filtering into the forest surrounding Awajún communities—which is to say, at the outset of seismic upheavals that reconfigured Amazonia in the 1980s and 90s.

The Upper Río Mayo had originally been used as long-distance hunting territory by Awajún men living farther north in the Andean foothills (*montaña* in Spanish). Sometime before 1940, however, they moved there permanently to escape revenge attacks from their neighbors. Brown settled in a community called Huascayacu. From this experience, he wrote *Tsewa’s Gift: Magic and Meaning in an Amazonian Society* (1986), an ethnographic account of Awajún religious practices.

The outtakes in *Upriver* tell a parallel story. On the Upper Río Mayo, Brown came face to face with the unresolvable paradoxes of Awajún society. They are suspicious of everyone: distant relations, close family members, their own husbands or wives, adults, children, other Jivaroan groups, and total strangers. “I pondered the animosity and fear simmering beneath the surface of life in Huascayacu. Death was a remorseless enemy here: one out of three infants failed to survive,” while older people “were lost to dysentery, snakebite, suicide or murder. Why they would want to compound this heartache by accusing their closest relatives of sorcery was a mystery for which my training had failed to prepare me” (p. 70).

Even people who adopted evangelical Christianity believed in witchcraft. “Belief in the power of individuals to harm or kill by spiritual means has arisen in societies on every inhabited continent,” he observes. “What makes the Awajún version distinctive are its intensity, persistence, and defiance of conventional explanations from the anthropologist’s tool kit” (p.

219). He had come to study shamanism and curing. What he found was a society in turmoil. Many people, especially women, took their own lives.

The second part (1980–2012) relates his view of Awajún society a quarter century later. Their territory has become almost indistinguishable from other parts of the Amazonian settlement frontier. Their population has grown, and many settlements have received formal land titles and become local units of the Peruvian government. They grow commercial crops or rent out their land to mestizo farmers, with whom they also fight over land and water rights. New forms of inequality—based on wealth and political access—have emerged. Young people lead major Indigenous organizations, attend universities, and sit in the Peruvian Congress. Brown records their efforts to define a relevant Awajún identity that balances their former way of life with an uncertain future.

Early on, Brown explains that he has tried to write a “personal, textured and complex view” of a “resourceful people fighting to sustain their place in a world largely indifferent to their fate” (p. 15). Still, he skirts a few major questions. “The ultimate causes of violence,” he writes, “interest me less than do its effects: how the Awajún manage aggression—sometimes successfully, sometimes not” (p. 13). Yet this would seem to be a false dichotomy: our social selves are profoundly shaped by events that took place long before we were born. As Brian Ferguson (pers. com.) recently reminded me, sorcery beliefs often provide a critical “stress gauge” for societies under pressure, from inside and outside.

Thanks to Anne-Christine Taylor (1999) and María Susana Cipolletti (2017), among others, we know quite a lot about how such pressures produced cycles of violence over long periods in western Amazonia. Awajún sovereignty, as Brown calls it, was never a certain thing: no doubt it had to be constantly claimed and defended. By focusing so heavily on the ethnographic present of 1976–78, my guess is that he has missed important clues about the heritage of “animosity and fear simmering beneath the surface.” To my mind, *Upriver* is strongest when it turns its attention elsewhere: to the problem of young researchers working in “awkward circumstances at the boundaries of their competence” (p. 14)—in other words, most of us. In this light, his book is very much worth reading.

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