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Life in Oil: Cofán Survival in the Petroleum Fields of Amazonia by Michael Cepek.
Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018. 286 pp., photographs by Bear Guerra, maps,
glossary, index

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Life in Oil: Cofán Survival in the Petroleum Fields of Amazonia, by U.S. anthropologist Michael Cepek, is an accessible ethnographic account of academic-advocacy witnessing. Drawing on over two decades collaborating with and advocating for Cofán survival in an era defined by oil extraction, *Life in Oil* showcases Cepek's fluency in the A'ingae language and his knowledge of Cofán social norms and histories. His kinship with Alejandro Criollo, Lucía Quenamá, and Roberto Criollo, his main interlocutors in the Cofán community of Dureno and his commitment to Cofán survival are also highlighted. Each chapter is a testimonial of the complexity of voice and intersubjectivity in witnessing. Chapter 1 introduces Cepek, as observer, confidant, and translator of the Cofán, as well as the argument at the core of his book. Cepek asserts that non-Cofán observers predict that the Cofán will go "extinct." However, the Cofán "refuse to be destroyed": they are poor examples of the "suffering savage" (pp. 10–11). Herein lies the "paradoxical condition of life in Dureno" (p. 11), a community of about 500 Cofán people on the Aguarico River in Ecuador's northwestern Amazonia: "despite how depressing their condition seems," and even as they are "poor, sick, and unable to maintain many of their most valued traditions," the people of Dureno . . . are joyful. They are not passionately opposing the oil industry, but their sense of themselves remains strong . . . "[P]erhaps the most striking sign of Dureno residents' subtle confidence is the constant laughter one hears in their homes. No one smiles at the sickness or death of a friend or relative, but everything else is fair game for comedy . . . Any people who smile and laugh as much as the Cofán do must be convinced that life can always offer joy no matter how painful and precarious it becomes" (p. 10).

Chapters 2 through 5 contextualize the precarious conditions of this "paradox of life" in Dureno, which mirror the reality of many other Amazonian communities. These realities stem from decades of colonization schemes and land settlement programs that effect food availability and limit spatial mobility and therefore threaten ancestral ways of being. *Life in Oil* describes how the introduction of alcohol and cash economies have disrupted relations of sharing and reciprocity (chapter 2); how cultural norms and shamanism are entangled with oil industry infrastructure and activities (chapter 3); how the onslaught of diseases and health problems associated with the degradation and pollution of everyday environments have transformed Cofán life (chapters 4 and 5); and how the Cofán have mobilized against the occupation of their ancestral lands. At times this meant relying on solidarity, (conditional) coalition politics, and the power of the *atesu'cho* (shamans) who transformed into *cocoya*—invisible supernatural beings who steal people's life force—to shut down oil operations (chapter 6). At other times, reaction to occupation has entailed a "reversal" of their anti-oil stance (chapter 7). *Life in Oil* concludes with a core observation: while environmental harms are often mentioned as the most severe impacts of the oil industry, the people who settled their lands are also a threat to Cofán survival. "In their hearts," writes Cepek, "many Cofán worry their children will become *cocama* (outsiders). More than anything or anyone else, the *cocama* cause the inhabitants of Dureno to question their survival as people" (p. 92). Considering the history of epidemics, missionization, and oil camps that the Cofán of Dureno have experienced, remaining distant from the *cocama* is a way to avoid being "captured" by them (p. 96).

Life in Oil is punctuated by statements about Cepek's own position on how the Cofán navigate the politics and economies of their survival vis-à-vis the Ecuadorian state, oil com-

panies, land settlers, and environmental organizations. Reflecting on his own trajectory as a witness, Cepek writes:

when I began working with Cofán people more than two decades ago, I was primarily worried about “the Cofán” as a people. Over time, I learned to care much more about them as a group of individuals. They are my collaborators, friends, and family. I have known them for decades; some have died, others have become parents and grandparents. No matter what happens to their culture or ethnic identity, my main concern is their health and happiness. Oil has done much to threaten the future of their way of life, as they define it. To a great degree, their joys still depend on the existence of that way of life. As it changes—and as the world of the *cocama* pushes further and further into their thoughts, bodies, relationships, and lands—the people of Dureno will do all they can to make sure their own lives, as well as the lives of their children, remain meaningful and satisfying. It will be a struggle, however—one that will likely never end. (p. 123)

I support Cepek’s project to give a stage to the Cofán so that their story can be more widely known. This is not his first time doing so and it doesn’t sound like it will be his last either. My own (limited) experience with the people of Dureno back in the late 1990s resonates with his account, as do the powerful stories of self-affirmation and self-determination in the face of destruction and historical genocide that he shares as part of the Amazonian experience of life-with-oil. His position is borne out of a commitment to protect Cofán ways of life as he knows them. Note 3 in chapter 4 is an excellent, if buried, description of the problem that Cepek identifies regarding “expert” accounts of Cofán life that lack ethnographic sensibilities and which, in their assumed objectivity, harm the Cofán’s ability to speak *as themselves* (not as idealized or romanticized caricatures) about the oil industry. Regarding questions about whether the Cofán and their allies misrepresent evidence of harm by the oil industry, Cepek writes: “One could argue that my Cofán collaborators are either confused or mistaken, that they have forgotten . . . that they simply do not remember . . . I prefer to give more credence to their testimony.”

And yet, it is hard to shake a troubling feeling of voyeurism and duality between the “I-witness” (Morton 2002) and the Cofán as radical Other in Cepek’s account. As written, *Life in Oil* is Cepek’s story of the Cofán of Dureno. Cepek has poetic license and political authority to represent. He lays out the facts as he also turns the Cofán story into evidence that invites compassion and understanding. Bear Guerra’s arresting photographs aesthetically sustain Cepek’s bearing witness to the Otherness of the Cofán; they invite a response to the suffering and sacrifices of others that have become so natural to racial capitalist, oil-fueled societies. My troubled feeling about authoring the life of Others is not specific to *Life in Oil* but to an anthropology (and humanistic social sciences in general) that for its social relevance relies on the tense relationship between intellectual and advocacy work—a topic widely explored in anthropology (e.g., Hale 2006; Loperena et al. 2020). *Life in Oil* characterizes the Cofán struggle for survival as a losing game, even as refusal to be eliminated is strong. The problematic setting of joy and happiness as a “paradox” is also unsettling and requires more careful framing and reflection (to whom is their happiness paradoxical?). Some of these tensions are more explicitly examined in the last two chapters, The Possibility of Coexistence (chapter 7) and “Life in Oil” (chapter 8). Together, these give a glimpse of the Cofán breaking out of the colonial categories of “good” and “bad” Amazonians and how their decision-making continues to be cosmopolitan, bold, and intellectual. They are subjects creating their own histories, making mistakes, learning from failures, and carrying on Cofán presence, with or without the support of environmental and pan-indigenous organizations.

Life with Oil illustrates the struggle that scholar-activists face in witnessing; it is as much about the suffering witnessed as about the truncated categories—victimhood, evidence, facts, etc.—through which scholars speak for others. Cepek does not cite directly the movements and rich scholarship aiming to decolonize anthropology, many led by Indigenous scholars who speak directly to issues of voice, but there are echoes of these in his reflections on intimate allyship and in his privilege to translate the Cofán to others. Engaging

in these long-standing conversations could open up other dimensions of I-witnessing as a boundary object of responses to harm that decenters the storyteller. Though imperfect, limited, and offering no guarantees, witnessing is necessary and urgent.

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