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Alejandro Tsakimp: A Shuar Healer in the Margins of History

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Alejandro Tsakimp: A Shuar Healer in the Margins of History. Steven Rubenstein. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. xxv + 322 pp., afterword, charts, cast of characters, glossary, notes, references, index. \$24.95(paper). ISBN0-8032-8988-X.
[www.nebraskapress.unl.edu]

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I remember the collective sigh of relief among anthropologists working in Amazonia in the 1970s and 1980s as the “ethnic association” model spread to almost every indigenous population in the region. No longer would anthropologists have to resign themselves to serving as part of a colonialist enterprise. Instead, we could support new forms of political organizing that would enable indigenous people to control their own destiny. Henceforth anthropologists would be able to integrate their research agendas into the political agendas of indigenous people. The first exemplar of the new era was the Shuar Federation of southeastern Ecuador, organized by Shuar (formerly known as Jívaro) headmen at the suggestion of Salesian missionaries from Italy in 1964. It has been widely cited as a model to emulate ever since.

Life histories go way back in anthropology, but they too have been perceived as a refuge from the moral dilemmas of the profession. If we allow our informants to become narrators in control of their own story, if we really let them speak for themselves, then we cannot be accused of editing what they say in order to push our own interpretations. And so, the “native voice” has become an important source of legitimacy in anthropology. But the life history and native voice produce their own crop of problems. How can anthropologists avoid picking and choosing whom we enshrine as native voices? What if the native voice makes declarations that are questionable or even reprehensible? Does the anthropologist have the right to turn off the cassette recorder and go find a more amenable voice?

Alejandro Tsakimp is a Shuar shaman, cattle owner, and one of the founders of the Shuar Federation, which he has repeatedly served in an official capacity. Half the book bearing his name consists of Tsakimp’s stories about his life, which Steven Rubenstein taped on numerous occasions and put into chronological and thematic order. In the other half of the book Rubenstein explains how he came to do fieldwork with Tsakimp and other Shuar leaders and ruminates on the resulting dilemmas. Evidently the author, as well as his editors Kirk Dombrowski and Gerald Sider, feel cornered. *Alejandro Tsakimp* is the third volume in the Fourth World Rising series, edited by Dombrowski and Sider. They want to get beyond the “radiant innocence” (p.xiii) of an earlier applied anthropology, and of many aid projects even today, by publishing

ethnographies about indigenous struggles. They are particularly interested in the “intensifying inequalities within and between native communities” (p.xii), in what works and what does not, in who benefits and who does not. These are very timely objectives. But Dombrowski and Sider are also worried that, if they publish such critiques, they will discredit indigenous leadership (p. 253).

Originally Rubenstein intended to study conflicts between Shuar shamans and the Federation. A more experienced colleague warned him against working with the Shuar at all, on the grounds that it would embarrass the Federation (p. 246). As if to underline the warning, the next thing Rubenstein ran into was a Federation moratorium on anthropological research (p. 6). But for better or worse, Alejandro Tsakimp did not give a damn whether or not the Federation granted permission: “I am a Shuar. The Federation has no right to tell me what to do” (p. 10). And so, Rubenstein found a father-figure and friend who became every anthropologist’s dream, a bottomless source of stories about local life. Unfortunately, Rubenstein discovered that, in these stories “every collective effort—whether in the form of the patrilineage, the *centro*, cooperatives, or the Federation itself—collapses under the weight of the contradictions of the colonial situation” (p. 246). To make matters even worse, if I read Tsakimp correctly, he is far more likely to blame his fellow Shuar than colonialism for problems in Shuar society.

Because Rubenstein did not want to edit Tsakimp’s stories into literature, and because they thus retain much of the quality of oral storytelling, I sometimes lost the thread for a paragraph or two. But the overall picture is clear enough. He is the son of a shaman. As a youth he has favorable experiences with Catholic and evangelical missionaries, but the need to cure his father of a deadly illness leads him to his shamanic calling. He seems to regard gringos (including “Italian gringos”) as more trustworthy than Ecuadorians, and he seems to have fewer problems with either than with his fellow Shuar. There are frank evaluations of his three Shuar wives but nary a word about his fourth, who happens to be a German, maybe an aid worker who moved on. He has terrible rows with relatives, including quarrels with his siblings over the land inherited from his father (p. 69). Toward the end, his beloved first wife dies from snakebite—partly because one of her sons did not want to interrupt a folk remedy with antivenin. Then his beloved son Lorenzo is murdered, by an in-law who stole 250,000 sucres from a development project for which poor Lorenzo was the treasurer (pp. 231-34).

The Shuar Federation, it would appear, is one of those solutions that has created a raft of new problems. Its very success in stabilizing Shuar boundaries with colonists, attracting foreign development projects and promoting Shuar leadership means that it has internalized conflicts which, in an earlier era, might have been primarily with outsiders. The Shuar now compete for land and resources primarily with each other, including their own siblings (pp. 77, 81). The basic problem, in Rubenstein’s words, is that

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the Federation is chartered by the state, mimics the form of the state, and is at times an instrument of state policies. By representing the Ecuadorian state in its hinterland (through surveying and registering land and adjudicating local disputes), the Federation also serves to promote private property and a complex division of labor. Thus, while Shuar are converted into Ecuadorian citizens, they are also converted into farmers, wage earners, and salaried workers. Although the Federation represents “Shuar,” it is also promoting the division of Shuar into economic classes. And as Alejandro’s ambivalent feelings suggest, leaders of the Federation seem to benefit from this process disproportionately (p. 242).

Some Shuar have become salaried professionals who send their children to college while others continue to subsist from their farms, cattle and the forest.

Studying a famous indigenous federation is obviously tricky. Rubenstein ultimately obtained permission to do his research, and he has never been thrown out, but he clearly visualizes the possibility, and he has yet to publish his history of colonization and the Shuar Federation. Here is the trap as he describes it:

All of Alejandro’s answers to my questions about his life add up to a story in which Alejandro cannot be loyal to the values of his culture without somehow furthering some of the colonial project, and in which he cannot resist colonialism without betraying not just other individual Shuar but the Federation itself. These paradoxes are unavoidable when the individual represents both Shuar egalitarianism and capitalism, and the Federation represents both the Shuar people and the state. These paradoxes necessarily define my situation as a member of a state and a capitalist society—and that of Euro-American readers of this book as well. Thus, I cannot help either Alejandro or the Federation without at the same time being an agent of the capitalist economy and American power abroad, and I cannot subvert the authority of the West, or resist its spread, without in some way betraying my Shuar friends.... I have spent years studying and thinking about colonialism and the Shuar, and I am still afraid of acting for fear of doing the wrong thing (p. 230-31).

If this sounds a bit abstract, consider the dilemma of the chain saw. What does Rubenstein do when, in return for all the help his sources have provided, they ask him to give them a chain saw so they can cut down rainforest faster? I have been asked to buy a chain saw myself, by people who have to sweat for every *centavo* they earn.

Still, by the end of the book, I was becoming impatient with Rubenstein’s disabling sense of guilt (or so he presents himself here—the Rubenstein I know has never struck me this way). We live in a world defined by American power and world capitalism, but probably only for the short term. The current moment in which Shuar are able to negotiate peacefully with Ecuadorians is a

hard-won accomplishment that could also be fleeting. What is to follow could be far worse. Meanwhile, between student loans, a lousy job market and the cost of living, the “privilege” of most anthropologists is very modest—the majority of us have sacrificed higher incomes in order to concern ourselves with people and problems that we could easily ignore. The problem of guilt can be left to anthropologists who are doing far better than most of the readers of this journal. For those of us who will never become academic barons, two questions should suffice. First, how much power do anthropologists have in comparison with the military men, oil prospectors, road-builders, loggers, drug mafias, et cetera, trooping through indigenous territory? Usually the answer is, very little. Second, would the departure of anthropologists improve the situation? In most cases, the answer is, no. Sometimes, moreover, the departure of anthropologists will worsen a situation because, on many issues, we offer less partisan assessments than most other participants.

Nothing will be gained if, of all the different groups involved, the profession most likely to produce a nuanced analysis of debates over indigenous rights shames itself into silence. The contradictions of indigenous federations will not disappear simply because anthropologists shy away from publishing about them. If Alejandro Tsakimp has complaints about the Shuar Federation, then it is the duty of an anthropologist to report them. It is also an anthropologist’s duty to report what other Shuar have to say. If some Shuar do not want public discussion, others undoubtedly will. Rubenstein, Dombrowski, Sider, and other authors in this series should get about their work with a lighter conscience.

Salt of the Mountain: Campa Asháninka History and Resistance in the Peruvian Jungle. Stefano Varese. Translated by Susan Giersbach Rascón, foreword by Darcy Ribeiro. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003. xxxvi + 236 pp., figures, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 (cloth). ISBN 0-8061-3446-1. [www.ou.edu/oupres]]

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I am delighted that this superb, authoritative ethnography and ethnohistory of Asháninka resistance to external domination is now available in English. *Salt of the Mountain* is a sensitive portrait of a people who have retained their distinctive way of life through some four centuries of European intrusion. Perhaps most importantly, it shows that ideology is central to maintaining cultural viability. My own experience with the Asháninka inspired my entire career of advocacy anthropology in support of indigenous peoples, as well as my concern with global problems. I took