

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

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 1

Issue 1 *Special Issue: Politics and Religion in Amazonia*

Article 17

June 2003

Salt of the Mountain: Campa Asháninka History and Resistance in the Peruvian Jungle

John H. Bodley
Washington State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bodley, John H. (2003). "Salt of the Mountain: Campa Asháninka History and Resistance in the Peruvian Jungle," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 17.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol1/iss1/17>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

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]

JOHN H. BODLEY
Washington State University

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

the Asháninka as a prime example of a people who demonstrated that you could “turn back the hands of the clock,” and that “progress” was not inevitable.

As Varese details, in 1742 the Gran Pajonal Asháninka heartland was blanketed with Franciscan missions, and they were seemingly being overwhelmed by an alien material and ideological culture. Yet at that moment they literally turned back the clock under the enthusiasm of a messianic movement, and enjoyed another century of cultural autonomy, before the “walls” began to close in as settlers and missionaries pressed in again. I read this as demonstrating that history is not preordained, the destruction of the tribal world is not inevitable. “Contact” and “acculturation” alone do not destroy cultural autonomy. Given the will, or a determined ideology, and a secure territory, people like the Asháninka can maintain themselves. They are also a prime example that alien technologies such as metal axes, cooking pots, and shotguns do not by themselves destroy autonomy. How people get them, how they think about them, and what they do with them is what matters. The Asháninka believed that material culture, including imported manufactured goods, was god’s gift to humanity, and that having the essentials of life did not require surrendering their independence.

The Asháninka were able to survive because their core understanding of their place in the cosmic order remained strong, and included the existence of very different peoples. It was also crucial that they were a large population in a vast, remote and rugged territory. Centuries of communication with Andean peoples before the arrival of Europeans must have contributed to the successful Asháninka cosmological synthesis.

In his introductory article on the tribes of the Peruvian and Ecuadorian Montaña published in 1948 in volume three of the *Handbook of South American Indians*, Julian Steward observed that the Arawak-speaking Campa (Asháninka) were perhaps the largest and “least acculturated” indigenous groups in the tropical forest region. He suggested that they were certainly worthy of further study. Remarkably, aside from missionary linguists and the missionary anthropologist John Elick, no anthropologists took up the challenge until the 1960s when Varese, Weiss, and I, apparently quite independently, carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Asháninka territory from different and complementary perspectives. Weiss completed a descriptive analysis of traditional cosmology based on Campa in the Tambo River region. I collected extensive life history, genealogical, and socioeconomic material from the Ucayali, Pichis-Pachitea, and Gran Pajonal, to document how the Campa were impacted by outsiders. Varese did general ethnographic work in the Gran Pajonal, and then combined it

in the present masterful synthesis of history, well-rounded ethnographic description, and persuasive interpretation of the total Asháninka confrontation with the non-Asháninka world, emphasizing the ideological dimensions.

I first met Stefano Varese in Lima in 1968, shortly after his fieldwork with the Campa had ended, as he became caught up in the political events that followed the Velasco coup. Stefano's personal encouragement was a real boost for my research. It was obvious that we shared an enthusiasm and respect for the Campa, and a sympathy for their stubborn resistance to invasion, but our approach to anthropological methods was different. I carried a copy of *La Sal de Los Cerros* into the field, but at the time I read it more as history than as an introduction to the Campa spiritual world. This was an unfortunate oversight, but I was still a single-minded empiricist and a materialist. Much like Stefano confesses in his introduction to this English edition, on my arrival in Campa land I wanted to count and measure what was visible in the Campa world. However, Stefano quickly moved into the less obvious world of Campa ideology and spirituality that became the framework on which he so effectively hangs the historical narrative of invasion and their resistance. I also worked on the language, was acutely aware of history, and was continually confronted with the Asháninka world of spirits, myth, and shamans, but I insisted that I could not do everything. I thought that how people made a living was the most important reality after all. I remain a dedicated empiricist, but I am now convinced that what is in people's heads is the key to understanding how they relate to the physical world, and that it can explain far more than I ever imagined. Re-reading this book today, it is clear that Stefano gained a deeper understanding of the total reality of the Campa cultural world than I was able to gain with my narrow materialist focus.

Varese's book is now itself a window on an exciting period in the history of anthropology, modern Latin American history, and the contemporary struggle for the rights of indigenous peoples. The new introduction reveals biographical details that help explain the context and intellectual strength of Varese's work. As an Italian immigrant, he began his anthropological work in Peru with a Gramscian slant. His mentors included Jehan Vellard, the French empiricist and traveling companion of Lévi-Strauss in Brazil, and Onorio Ferrero, an Italian historian, antifascist idealist philosopher. It is not surprising that Varese was more than an intellectual advocate for indigenous peoples, for in 1969 he set up SINAMOS (National System of Social Mobilization), an official agency under the revolutionary Velasco government. SINAMOS documented the precarious social situation of indigenous groups in the Peruvian Amazon, and helped create the Law of Native Communities to afford native territories legal protections. It is also noteworthy that in 1971 Varese—along

with Brazilian anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro, and Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, both now deceased—was one of the signers of the radical document, the Declaration of Barbados, “for the liberation of the Indians.” All of this took place just as the world was learning about the genocidal atrocities perpetrated by Brazil’s Indian Protection Service. My own advocacy document on the Campa appeared in 1972. This new English edition also fills in more of Asháninka history since 1970 up to the present, during which they resisted the Maoist Shining Path guerrillas as well as the drug trade. Today Asháninka indigenous political leaders are prominent at national and international levels.

Varese’s historical narrative does not deal with the messianic elements in the Asháninka response to the arrival of Seventh-Day Adventist missionaries in the early 1920s, nor to the partially successful armed rebellion in the Pichis region that preceded the Adventists. Apparently there were Asháninka “missionaries” who made their own interpretation of the Advent message of a returning messiah and world renewal that must have resembled the Juan Santos Atahuallpa episode. Varese’s interpretations of the Asháninka cosmology and their overall response to invasion wonderfully illuminates all of these events in the history of the Asháninka people.

Viviendo Bien: Genero y Fertilidad entre los Airo-Pai de la Amazonia Peruana [*Living Well: Gender and Fertility among the Airo-Pai of the Peruvian Amazon*]. Luisa Elva Belaunde. Lima: Centro Amazónico de Antropología y Aplicación Práctica and Banco Central de Reserva del Perú, Fondo Editorial, 2001. 268 pp. \$25.00 (paper). ISBN: 9972-608-13-1. [www.caaap.org.pe]

Ver, Saber, Poder: Chamanismo de los Yagua de la Amazonía Peruana [*Vision, Knowledge, Power: Shamanism of the Yagua of the Peruvian Amazon*]. Jean-Pierre Chaumeil. Lima, Peru: Centro Amazónico de Antropología y Aplicación Práctica; Instituto Francés de Estudios Andinos (IFEA); Centro Argentino de Etnología Americana (CAEA-CONIDET), 1998. 361pp. \$35.00 (paper). ISBN: 9972-608-05-0. [www.caaap.org.pe]

Guerra de Sombras; La Lucha por la Utopía en la Amazonía Peruana [*War of Shadows: The Struggle for Utopia in the Peruvian Amazon*]. Eduardo Fernandez and Michael F. Brown. Lima, Peru: Centro Amazónico de Antropología y Aplicación Práctica; Instituto Francés de Estudios Andinos (IFEA); Centro Argentino de Etnología Americana (CAEA-