

December 2003

Trekking Through History: The Huaorani of Amazonia

Norman E. Whitten Jr

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

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



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Whitten, Norman E. Jr (2003). "Trekking Through History: The Huaorani of Amazonia," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol1/iss2/4>

This Reviews 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.

BOOK REVIEWS

Trekking Through History: The Huaorani of Amazonia. Laura M. Rival. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. xx + 246 pp., plates, maps, tables, figures, notes, references, index. \$62.50 (cloth), \$31.50 (paper). ISBN 0-231-11844-9, ISBN 0-231-11845-7.

[www.columbia.edu/cu/cup/]

NORMAN E. WHITTEN, JR.
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

The themes in this work flow and interweave in multiple and redundant ways. Rival seeks to understand what Gregory Bateson termed *ethos* and *eidōs*—the overriding emotional tone and the fundamental cognitive orientations that motivate and structure a cultural system—as applied here by Rival to the Huaorani native people of Amazonian Ecuador. The Huaorani (Waorani) separate themselves into *huaomoni* (us) and *huarani* (others [like us, but enemies]) all of whom are differentiated from the *cobouris*, until recently regarded as cannibal others (pp. 10, 212) by whom they are surrounded and who prey on them.

A prominent ethotic theme is that of *pīī*, which “constitutes a mixture of courage, fearlessness, anger and force—both mental and physical—to kill with a spear” (p. 56). By broadest contrast with this ethotic quality is *huentey*, described by the author as a “form of ‘social work’ that helps to restore harmony in a longhouse” (pp. 100–101).

The state of *pīī* occurs in either men or women, especially when one learns of the violent death of a close relative. Only men, however, become *pīī inte*, which means not only to be stricken by the overriding emotion but to actually become that emotion, to embody it and to enact its externalization. In this state, which the author translates as “homicidal furor” (p. 56) a man may turn first to spear his own children, so women run with the small children to the forest while older children escape on their own. By chanting while undertaking such activities as planning a raid, spying on victims, and sharpening spears, a man maintains his state of homicidal rage and communicates it to others who also come to embody it and, eventually, if the cultural state persists, go off together on a spear-killing raid to reciprocate past death with present death. At this point the men are like jaguars who prey on other Huaorani or *cobouris*.

Huentey is a state brought about by another form of specialized chanting by a man lying in his hammock within the longhouse (*nanicaboiri*). Here the very opposite of jealousy, rage, anger, or schism is absorbed by all people within this tightly knit, all-encompassing exogamic social kin group. The themes of rage leading to spear killing and of expanding inner harmony leading to peace

and sustained cooperation permeate this work. Oddly, they are not represented in the index.

A root metaphor, or cultural paradigm (à la Victor Turner), of a providing and nurturing forest is another theme interwoven with cultural rage and social tranquillity. In Huaorani eidos the giving forest has grown from the anthropogenic work of previously unknown but real people, Huaorani and non-Huaorani, who planted many trees and other edible forest products deep within the forest. The most important of these is the peach palm, which in this territory, the author tells us, apparently fruits for about six months of the year. The peach palm is slow growing, is tended sporadically, and is identified with the contemporary people of a given territory, as well as with the known and unknown ancestors who have left behind potsherds and stone axe heads.

Periodic festivals (*eēmē*) where manioc food beverage and other beverages are served together with ample forest food punctuate quotidian life and, through arranged or partially arranged marriages between people in different longhouses, tie people in these longhouses together and recreate consanguineal and affinal ties. Cultivated manioc (and more recently plantain) is the key element in the festivals. Sweet manioc drink is prepared by an interesting process similar to Canelos Quichua *allu asua* (mold brew) except that no mold enters (pp. 132–133). The Huaorani ethos deprecates manioc as a fast-growing, temporary crop, that only yields its edible roots after one planting, and Rival argues that they treat it much like any other forest product. Those who prepare the large amounts of manioc brew for a festival, the hosts, are said to be trees, and those who attend are said to be like birds flocking to the fruiting tree. Rival writes:

Marriage forms an integral part of alliance politics . . . of group formation politics. Marriage, like death, constitutes a moment in social life when individuals can affect the course of social reproduction. Each marriage and each death affects the boundaries between allied and nonallied house groups, given the negotiable and open character of huaomoni-huarani clustering [endogamous] formations (p. 142).

Uxorilocal marriage brings an outsider male into the household controlled by an in-law senior male, if one is still alive, and he must be tamed or domesticated to soothe the potential explosive rages that living among nonconsanguineals may engender. Eventually, he becomes a pacified consanguine of the embodied longhouse. If he lives long enough, the in-marrying man becomes the household head and endeavors to control the marriage of his grandchildren so as to manage the social body constituted of a few endogamous allied longhouses in a world of danger, rage, and killing. An ideal marriage begins in an ascending generation with two brothers marrying two sisters, and in ego's generation, a man from one of these marriages, living in one longhouse, marries a woman from the other marriage, living in another longhouse.

Failure to reach the integrative level of marriage leads to violence at the *eēmē* and subsequent organized spearing-to-kill attempts between men of the longhouses involved in the failure. The case of the emergence of the now infamous Tagaeri into Huaorani, Ecuadorian, and international history is one of several cases offered. Basically, a Huaorani Christian group brought a Tagaeri woman by force to a festival to forge a marriage, but she refused to cooperate. They returned her to her group but they were attacked and one of the initial kidnapping group, called the Babeiri, was speared to death.

The author writes that history is constituted of two murderous tendencies that are revealed and talked into history during treks. The first is a long series of predatory attacks perpetrated by people represented as cannibal outsiders from the Amazon rubber boom to the present, and probably long before, and second, from the continuous destruction caused by culturally patterned homicidal madness (pp. 64–65). This, she says, is characteristic of an “Amazonian cultural logic” (p. 65) wherein killing inserts memory into social life:

. . . in the words of one of my Huaorani guides: “a long time ago, there were many Huaorani people, who defended themselves fiercely against cannibals and protected their lives from encroachers. They began to kill each other. Only a few people were left. They said: ‘we have killed enough, let us stop being angry, let us grow children and become many again’” (p. 48).

Rival begins her work with the concept of trekking as it relates to history. To situate the people in their own cultural system and possible cultural history, she creates the didactic yet deceptive contrast between Amazonian specialists as cultural ecologists who construct evolutionary sequences as opposed to those who stress functional adaptation. According to Rival, both ignore history. She takes a position propounded, explicated and demonstrated by William Balée (one of the editors of the historical ecology series in which this book is published), that people have, from time immemorial, created their own cultural niches and need not be placed in evolutionary phases wherein they either progress to a higher stage or devolve to a lower one.

She relates trekking to war and destruction, as contrasted with localization, which she relates to intensified horticulture. “Nomadism,” her conception and perception of the basic Huaorani cultural ethos and eidos, involves foraging and warfare associated with uxorilocality and endogamy. It contrasts with sedentism, as potentially signaled by manioc horticulture, which represents pacific village life associated with virilocality, exogamy, and new political alliances.

The ideal region for trekking is the forest, described (p. 80) as a patchwork of successive fallows. She explicates the cultural nature of the forest in fine detail as conceptualized by the Huaorani and links their viewpoint to western scientific knowledge. Her ethnography of people trekking in the forest is

impressive and convincing. Her interpretations, however, strike me as worthy of discussion. It would seem from her descriptions that the forest structure reflects long-term horticulture as fundamental to the Huaorani economy, and manioc production and drinking at festivals as a key to the entire social organization that unlocks the possibility of cooperation and fastens bonds that prevent the Huaorani's own foreknowledge of possible self-annihilation. Her interpretation of horticulture in Huaorani ecosystems is so radically divergent from that of James Yost or Miguel Angel Cabodevilla as to raise serious issues fundamental to research in greater Amazonia.

The author is given to very broad and perhaps unwarranted contrasts and generalizations, such as: "There is a staggering tendency in Amazonian anthropology to stress the cultural homogeneity of lowland South American societies" (p. 3). Although the Huaorani live in the Upper Amazonian-Andean Piedmont region, she characterizes their system as "societies" of the "Amazon-Orinoco drainage" and as "Northwest Amazon." She goes on to write that culture-area specialists "typically assume that variation in technology, systems of production, or social organization is not significant" (p. 3). I find this statement astounding. Just reading relevant literature on this small western corner of Amazonia, I cannot believe that such homogeneity has been or is stressed by those who have written significant ethnographies on the Shuar, Achuar, Shiwiar, Canelos Quichua, Naporuna, Cofán, Secoya or Siona, none of whom live so very far from Huaorani territory. Pursuant to the same theme, her radical dichotomy between settled, horticultural systems and trekking systems is undercut by the ethnographies of the people mentioned above, among many others.

She next deals with the known ethnohistory of Tupian, Tucanoan and Zaparoan people of what is now Amazonian Ecuador, Colombia and Peru, to make the point that the Huaorani cultural niche creation seems to be of independent longhouse systems on high hills away from the expanding horticultural systems of the rivers. This brings the more recent Huaorani history into this system. Then comes a chapter on "Huaorani Nomadic Isolationism" within which the rage and anger are explicated and placed in cultural contexts. The fourth chapter on cultural ecology is strong and should be required reading for all interested in forest ecology and horticulture. The subsection on chanting is especially informative and shows how people constitute and transmit cultural knowledge in nondiscursive manners. After discussion of the *eēmē* festivals, that again make us think more of the complementarity of horticulture and trekking, quite contra to her central thesis, she writes of "Schools in the Rain Forest," where the international and national history of the Huaorani is revealed in its regional modernity.

In 1956 the Huaorani (then derogatorily known as "Auca") speared themselves into international history by killing five Summer Institute of

Linguistics (SIL) personnel who attempted to “contact” them by landing on a beach of the Curaray River. Subsequently, two women missionaries, related by marriage and consanguinity to the victims, accompanied by a famous Huaorani woman, Dayuma, trekked into the area from Arajuno and settled at Tihueno where Dayuma’s native group (the Guiquetairi) lived. There, they befriended, *inter alia*, one of the Huaorani killers and “pacified” the people, and subsequently others, who came in for the abundance of goods and modern resources distributed by the missionaries (pp. 156–161).

Thus began the new Huaorani historical epoch that featured the spearing of the five SIL representatives and the alleged shooting by one of them of a Huaorani attacker, Dayuma’s brother Nampa, who subsequently died (p. 158). From these reciprocal deaths and the contact by missionary women with new rules and great external abundance came the indigenous adaptation of taking from the others, but not following (necessarily) their dictates. By 2002 the Huaorani were taking from oil camps, ecotours, missionaries, scientists, and others, using the schools to enter global modernity, essentially on their own terms as they continued to trek toward the future with decreasing forest resources but increasing exogenous resources.

On May 26, 2003, the breach between Huaorani living near the Coca-Tigüino road, called the “*vía Aucas*,” and other Huaorani from the far southeast erupted in yet another historical incident. Huaorani from the Tigüino region speared eight women, five children, and an uncertain (if any) number of men of a Taromenane longhouse. This incident produced and is producing a historical marker in Ecuadorian legal and constitutional “plural culturalism.” On the one hand, the Huaorani who took part in the raid gave interviews to the effect that they were enacting intracultural justice, reciprocating present deaths for a past death (the Tagaeri incident mentioned above). On the other hand, and in perhaps a complementary relationship to this exegetical interpretation, is the position, backed by evidence, that the illegal Colombian lumber extractors working in Tagaeri territory induced the Huaorani to make this raid to create an atmosphere of intimidation to drive the Tagaeri and/or Taromenane away from the illegal operations. The Huaorani indigenous organization and regional indigenous organizations all exonerated the Huaorani spearmen from the killing of multiple women and children, and condemned the *madereros* for inducing the incident and creating a mood of fear and unrest in the region.

Rival’s *Trekking Through History* is an excellent ethnography of three interrelated sectors of Huaorani society: the forest, the longhouse, and the modern village. When the author veers from her own ethnography, however, to cite second-hand information about other peoples, she sometimes errs. Attention to the rich ethnographies available for the broader region of Ecuador’s Oriente would have forestalled many interpretative glitches.