

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

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 7 | Issue 1

Article 6

June 2009

The Napo Runa of Amazonian Ecuador

Evan Killick

London School of Economics and Political Science

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Recommended Citation

Killick, Evan (2009). "The Napo Runa of Amazonian Ecuador," *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol7/iss1/6>

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The Napo Runa of Amazonian Ecuador. Michael Uzendoski. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005. 216 pp., 12 figures, 3 maps, bibliography, index. \$45.00 (cloth), \$20.00 (paper). ISBN 0-252-07255-3. [www.press.uillinois.edu].

EVAN KILLICK

London School of Economics and Political Science

Written by someone with a long-term relationship with the people under study, this book on the Napo Runa of Eastern Ecuador is a thoughtful and compelling study. Amazonian Quichua speakers, of whom the Napo Runa are one example, have too often been seen as falling between 'true' Amazonian or Andean people and portrayed as either 'immigrants' from the Andes or 'acculturated Amazonians' (p. 165). Uzendoski implicitly argues against such views by giving a full and nuanced exposition of Napo Runa culture and by outlining an indigenous theory of value.

The book begins with a Runa man telling Uzendoski that 'Whites [*blancos*] don't understand what it means to live by sharing. We Runa people live by reciprocity' (p. 1). For Uzendoski this statement gives a neat summary of what he calls a Napo Runa theory of value that is centred on meeting the desires of others in order to 'realize intersubjectivity as a socially meaningful being' (page 113). Uzendoski argues that value in Runa society can be seen not as 'economic' but rather as 'social,' 'specifically located in social relationships of reciprocal desire' (page 112) and involving the creation and maintenance of kinship and the transformation of substances (page 4). The structure of the book reflects this central idea and follows the life-cycle of a Napo Runa person.

The first chapter begins with a description and analysis of childbirth and childrearing. From this Uzendoski goes on to discuss Napo Runa ideas of the body and soul or *samai*, 'vital energy.' This, Uzendoski suggests, is a 'circulatory notion of the soul as stretching across kinship pathways, time, and space' (page

36) and a circulation which the Napo Runa seek to control. In this context he also discusses gender. Here Uzendoski claims that gender roles are seen as complementary (page 45) and that Napo Runa ethnography suggests that it is worth rethinking concepts of 'masculine dominance' in Amazonia (p. 48). While this is an interesting discussion this reader was struck by ethnographic descriptions that included men beating their wives, a preference for patrilocality and final permission for marriage lying with the bride's father. These facts seem to contradict Uzendoski's assertions, suggesting instead that power ultimately resides with men in Napo Runa society. The ethnography does, however, also give evidence of female agency in Napo Runa society, so perhaps all that was needed was a more explicit discussion of ideas of power between the genders rather than brief assertions of complementarity.

The second chapter considers notions of 'shape-shifting,' a term that Uzendoski takes from Candace Slater and which, he argues, 'conveys the idea of taking the corporeal substance of animals into one's own flesh' (page 54). He examines this idea in relation to myth, evangelical Christian discourses and shamanism as well as in regard to the book's central theme of kin-making. It is in the third chapter, however, that the central ritual of kin-making is described. In this impressive chapter Uzendoski offers descriptions and analysis of not only the preparations and rituals of marriage, but also of the politics and emotions involved. It is the rituals of the *Tapuna*, *Patachina* and *Bura* that the Napo Runa themselves say 'define their culture' and which, according to Uzendoski's theory of value, are key because they are central to the reproduction of society itself (page 70).

The subsequent chapter continues the discussion of kinship, giving ways, other than marriage, through which people can be brought together as kin. These include *compadrazgo*, adoption and alliance relationships. The chapter ends with a further discussion of the Napo Runa's theory of value, where Uzendoski emphasizes that this value is realized in living convivially with others. He argues that Runa households are characterized by an emphasis on 'giving and sharing' of which parental love constitutes 'the clearest case', 'a kind of unconditional 'feeding' of desires that moves mainly in the direction of parents to child' (page 113). This generosity, however, ideally encompasses all people both within a person's *muntun*, residence group, and other allied kinship groups.

In this further exposition some of the problems with Uzendoski's argument become apparent. First, while Uzendoski implicitly sets up the Napo Runa value of generosity among kin against the ideas of 'Western' society, as in his opening anecdote (page 1), his attempts at definition remain so general that it could apply to a large number of different societies. This suggests that while the author's attempts to take indigenous ideas seriously are to be appreciated, his effort to construct an idea of indigenous value remains something of an academic imposition. While Uzendoski dismisses Overing and Passes' idea of

'the good life' (see their introduction to *The Anthropology of Love and Anger*), saying that they offer conviviality as 'a universal theoretical construct rather than as a value' (page 16), the great strength of their work is to take indigenous statements at face value and not to impose foreign constructions on them.

The final chapter offers a slight change of tone, describing the *Levantamiento* of 2001 in which various people in Napo, including *mestizos*, protested against a number of issues, mostly of economic importance, including the dollarization of the Ecuadorian economy. Uzendoski shows how contemporary Napo Runa connect these events to the revolution led by Jumandy in 1578 (page 145). He argues that this is done by 'eliciting kinship between the current generation and the great revolutionaries of the past' (page 150). Unlike in the rest of the book the ethnography and analysis feels somewhat shallow, but this was perhaps unavoidable given the recent nature of the events. Nevertheless, Uzendoski's approach is to be applauded for it is only through a deep understanding of a group that their position in the current world and their feelings and reactions to indigenous and national politics can be fully understood.

The overall strength of the work lies in the manner in which it draws on a wide range of theoretical work from Wagner and Strathern, through Terry Turner and Gow, to Overing and Viveiros de Castro rather than following a single theoretical strand. While Uzendoski's attempts to synthesize these works may not always be entirely successful, his efforts are to be applauded in a field of study that is, all too often, represented as consisting of irreconcilable theoretical positions.

Sounds Like Life: Sound-symbolic Grammar, Performance and Cognition in Pastaza Quechua (Oxford Studies in Anthropological Linguistics) by Janis B. Nuckolls. 1996. Oxford University Press [<http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/>].

MICHAEL A. UZENDOSKI
Florida State University

Sounds Like Life is a book about language aesthetics that confronts much broader and deeper anthropological problems about the relativity of language and how Amazonian peoples use language and grammar to create communicative relationships with nonhuman nature. The key theoretical concept in the book is the notion of "sound-symbolism," a concept directed at how images and sounds work together in complex, embodied, non-arbitrary ways. Sound-symbolic usages in Pastaza Quechua "give an outward form to the inner movements, sensations, and awareness experienced through one's body" (page 6). Nuckolls' position is that sound-symbolism is iconic and imitative in its symbolic logic, and, she uses a sophisticated theoretical approach inspired