

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

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 7 | Issue 2

Article 6

December 2009

Time and Memory in Indigenous Amazonia: Anthropological Perspectives

Laura Rival
University of Oxford

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



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rival, Laura (2009). "Time and Memory in Indigenous Amazonia: Anthropological Perspectives," *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 6.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol7/iss2/6>

This Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tipití: 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.

Both stories in Chapter Two describe how knowledge of the properties and qualities of maluwanas and reed arrows was acquired by Wayana ancestors from spirit beings, and in both cases through dangerous or risky maneuvers. The location of maluwanas reflects their cosmological importance. They are placed on the underside of the *tukusipan* (communal house), where initiation ceremonies are carried out, and the painted images of zoomorphic figures can be dangerous or protective to those in their immediate vicinity. With reed arrows, it is knowledge of their physical properties which is important, as the neighboring Apalai do not possess this knowledge and therefore do not use the same reeds for arrows. The arrows are a communal identity marker, setting the Wayana apart from the Apalai.

Kulijaman explains in Chapter Three that the making of these objects were previously activities carried out solely by elder men. Now, young men make the arrows and wooden discs for sale to westerners, trivializing beliefs and altering Wayana power structures. Kulijaman explains that these changes have occurred as a result of increased contact with a monetary system.

Kaptëlo is a short book, well illustrated, which provides the reader with direct access to an indigenous account of the sociocultural effects of the commercialization of cultural patrimony. The links between environmental knowledge, material objects and cosmological beliefs are subtly embedded in the stories, and concisely interpreted by the ethnolinguist, combining to create a work that is appealing to an anthropological audience.

Time and Memory in Indigenous Amazonia: Anthropological Perspectives. Carlos Fausto and Michael Heckenberger, editors. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007. Foreword by Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, ivx + 322 pp., maps, figures, tables, notes, references, index. \$ 65.00 ISBN 13: 978-0-8130-3060. [www.upf.com].

LAURA RIVAL
University of Oxford

This edited volume explores the native Amazonian sense of history in a way that enriches previous debates about 'cold' and 'hot' societies. It shows that, in the Amazonian context, and as Manuela Carneiro da Cunha notes in her foreword, history implicates deeper questions about what counts as time, change, continuity, agency and identity. The book, therefore, does more than simply engage ethnography with temporality; it demonstrates that 'historicity' and 'identity' are mutually constitutive. Moreover, the editors, Carlos Fausto and Michael Heckenberger, use 'diachronic research,' the book's central concern, as an opportunity to take stock of a wide range of issues that lie at the core of contemporary scholarship in Amazonianist anthropology.

Anne-Christine Taylor's analysis of Shuar and Canelo Quechua regimes of historicity masterfully confirms that there is 'a distinctively Indian way of being or becoming white,' as there is one of reproducing indigeness. Equally the products of the colonial encounter, Shuar and Canelo Quechua modes of relating to the past and the future oppose and complement each other; both are part of the same relational and transformational system. In Taylor's view, the Shuar and other Jivaroan peoples can afford to ignore or forget the history of their relation to non-Jivaroans, thus appearing to reproduce themselves without any recourse to mimetic appropriation of white powers, *because* they can resort to the shamanic system of their Runa Quechua neighbours, itself the product of intense inter-ethnic encounters. And they do so whenever their own strategy of reproduction flinches, or, in her own judicious choice of words, 'when they become sick of history.' Although decisively structuralist, Taylor's method of analysis of change, temporality and memory flawlessly reconciles the Lévi-Straussian approach to transformation with a phenomenological concern for human agency. In this light, the resilience of Jivaroan culture is not to be found in the passing on of tradition, be it material, immaterial or institutionalized, for 'it is primarily a way of achieving a certain kind of selfhood' (page 151). Taylor's analysis of the Shuar/ Runa regional structure of transformation illustrates many of the issues taken up by the eight other contributors to the book, such as the fact that the characteristic native Amazonian openness to the Other may work within, as well as between, ethnic boundaries; or that the reversible identities of 'authentic' and 'acculturated' Amerindians are equally impervious to non native identities.

These ideas and insights are taken up by Carlos Fausto and Fernando Santos-Granero, who discuss two great millenarist cultures, the Guarani and the Yanesha (and their Asháninka neighbors). Here indigenous historicity is essentially assessed in terms of native engagement with the Christian beliefs and values of white outsiders. Who is to say whether the transformation from jaguar predatory logic to God's love logic found among the Guarani, or the mortality/ immortality dichotomy found among the Yanesha originate in 'structure,' or in 'history'? In broad agreement with Marshall Sahlins, Fausto and Santos-Granero simply note that meaning relates to event structurally, dialectically and dynamically. While the postcolonial Guarani believes in a God who cannot be a jaguar, the Yanesha who fights 'against the ravages of time' (page 67) longs to restore the sacred space of immortality where God is—has always been—Yanesha. Building on Fausto's and Santos-Granero's discussion of male dual identity, Aparecida Vilaça pursues her thesis regarding the impossibility of conversion in Amazonia by looking at Wari' shamanism and bodily metamorphoses. As presented by Eduardo Kohn, Napo Runa's long association with European influences has shaped representations of commodity and labour exchanges to such an extent that the landscape itself 'exudes history.' 'A study of Runa ecological cosmology is thus also a way of studying history'

(page 125). Napo Runa's phenomenological experience of the forest, however, is 'out of history,' to use Santos-Granero's expression. Like the Wari', and in contrast to the Guaraní and the Yanesha, for whom the fundamental concern is the relationship of humanity to divinity, the Napo Runa play on the human/animal dichotomy, with the caveat that for the latter, this relation is intrinsically asymmetrical and exploitative.

The third part of the book deals with ancestrality, a theme which truly renews the Amazonianist debate. Philippe Erikson's reanalysis of Matis masks and spirits brings to light the specificities of cultural continuity and tradition in the Amazon. Dead Matis are never transformed into ancestors; they become enemy figures, and must be forgotten. However, the masks invoke spirits that are, to some extent, ancestral, hence their paradoxical nature. Although they do not express any clear genealogical relationship between the living and the dead, these spirits embody the values of Matis culture, and play an important role in initiation rituals. Erikson rightly stresses the significance of the fact that these rituals symbolically link old fallows with new clearings. This is, perhaps, their most important signification. For the Matis, transforming the forest, a process through which harnessing the human potential is a concern of far greater import than that of passing on ethnicity, is also a way of making history. Matis ancestral spirits, he concludes, are ancestors-in-law. However, as I have argued for the Huaorani, this may be a male, rather than a female, point of view. In his discussion of Xinguano mortuary feasts, Michael Heckenberger, not unlike Erikson and Taylor, stresses the personification of ancestral beings: only great men—and at times women—get remembered and imitated. This leads Jean-Pierre Chaumeil to talk about a process of 'ancestralization' reserved for important figures (page 248). In his contribution, Chaumeil shows that mortuary practices are fundamental to understanding the nature of Amazonian societies. Yet, they have been somewhat neglected in the literature, which tends to reduce their meaning to the single mantra of 'ontological discontinuity or rupture between the living and the dead' (page 244). As he shows so well, however, there is more to the diversity of mourning practices than the treatment of dead relatives as strangers or enemy. Through a brilliant cross-cultural comparative analysis of the kind that few social anthropologists, let alone Amazonianists, dare attempt these days, Chaumeil demonstrates that the principles of filiation and reconsanguinization, that is, of generational continuity, do play a key role in shaping what amounts to an Amazonian kind of 'chronology' (page 272).

What I like so much about Chaumeil's piece is that it forcefully reminds us of the need to allow for similarity, as well as for difference. The volume's editors present the book as reasserting 'an anthropological commitment to understanding difference, an ambition that has been drowned in suspicion over the last few decades' (page 8). This commitment to difference is fully endorsed by Carneiro da Cunha, who cherishes reversals: 'While the logic of the West lies in the primacy of distinctions, Amazonian logic lies in the

primacy of appropriation, of encompassment' (page xii). Why reduce difference to what appears to be exactly contrary to 'our' practices and assumptions? This determination to render our common predicament invisible leads some Amazonianists to dangerous conclusions, such as Santos-Granero's filtering of historical agency into political agency (a 'white' ontological strategy) and spiritual agency (a 'Yanesha' ontological strategy), or Gow's ideological attachment to acculturation as the most authentic mode of native cultural reproduction. As Taylor indefatigably repeats, indigenous historical agency is recreated through the dynamic interplay between opposed but complementary modes of reproduction, which are not, in and of themselves, unlike those used in other, non-Amazonian cultures, including our own. As she purposefully restricts her examination of the interplay between Shuar and Canelo Quechua regimes of historicity to the period going from the late eighteenth century to the early 1980s, her analysis does not cover the last twenty-five years of historical struggle, during which the Canelo Quechua have actually managed to rally the Shuar and many other indigenous peoples in Ecuador to their ambitious conquest of the national soul. The fact that Ecuador's current President, Rafael Correa, admits in official speeches that "we have learnt from our ancestral peoples. Their values are useful for the whole country" gives us a sense of how powerful and encompassing indigenous visions of change and transformation can become.