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# Mobility and Migration in Indigenous Amazonia: Contemporary Ethnoecological Perspectives

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***Mobility and Migration in Indigenous Amazonia: Contemporary Ethnoecological Perspectives.* Miguel. N. Alexiades, editor. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009. Studies in Environmental Anthropology and Ethnobiology. Xviii + 310 pp., figures, tables, notes, references, index. \$90.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-1-84545-563-7 [<http://www.berghahnbooks.com>].**

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This collection of studies illuminates the complex relations between human movement, exchange, knowledge and ecology among the native peoples of Amazonia since Pre-Columbian times. It brings together and integrates two prominent and seemingly contradictory discourses on indigenous Amazonian societies: on one hand, the acknowledgement of their historical contingency, dynamism and fluidity, and, on the other, the celebration of their traditional ecological knowledge and harmonious human-environmental relations. Although we conventionally tend to assume that the latter are a product of long-term emplacement and spatial stasis, Alexiades uses the eleven case studies in this volume to demonstrate that intimate knowledge of the environment can be generated in a comparatively brief time and under volatile conditions.

The extreme illustration of this argument is Robert Voeks' chapter on the ethnobotany of descendants of African slaves in lowland South America. Escaped slave communities such as the Brazilian *quilombo* adapted African ethnobotanical knowledge to the local flora, often through interaction with native Amazonian Indians. Paradoxically, many American crops and weeds had already arrived in West Africa and been incorporated into African ethnobotany centuries before the peak of slave traffic. Thus, when Yoruba slaves from present-day Nigeria arrived in Brazil, they recognized many of their familiar healing plants. But the Yoruba-derived system of plant classification also assimilated a number of newly encountered species into what became the Candomblé healing flora.

Similar evidence of the historically dynamic nature of ethnobotanical knowledge is presented in a chapter by Miguel Alexiades and Daniela Peluso on the Takana-speaking Ese Eja on the border between Peru and Bolivia. After centuries of recurrent displacements and interaction with various neighbors, the Ese Eja categorize their composite knowledge of medicinal plants in terms of the social origins of such knowledge, whether deriving from ancestors or outsiders. Social identities are thus projected onto plants in a highly fluid socioecological historiography. In the same region, Conrad Feather finds that the propensity of Panoan-speaking Nahua to constantly be on the move has shaped their mythology, cartography, post-mortuary practices, and even dreams. Miguel Pinedo-Vazquez and Christine Padoch show that the emphasis on mobility is no less pervasive among the mainstream peasant class of *ribereños*

or *caboclos* of mixed ancestry that today inhabit the Amazonian floodplains. In a study focusing on the Tamshiyacu Tahuayo Communal Reserve in Peru, Helen Newing discusses the role of individual mobility as a source of social tension and local resource depletion in conservation schemes focusing on the notion of “community.”

Giovanna Micarelli reviews some of the challenges faced by the inhabitants of a multiethnic *resguardo* outside Leticia, Colombia, composed of members of at least ten different ethnic groups plus some ten per cent *mestizos* and *colonos*. While thirty per cent of the population are Tikuna, another forty-two per cent have a diverse ethnic background, including Uitoto, Muinane, Bora, Miraña, Andoke, Nonuya, and Ocaina, but self-identify as “People of Centre” or “People of Coca and Tobacco.” Micarelli suggests that this multiethnic identification as *Gente de Centro* reflects an ancient regional polity that once controlled extensive territories between the Putumayo and Caquetá Rivers. In the *resguardo* near Leticia, the *Gente de Centro* are considered relative newcomers and engage in negotiating an alliance with the Tikuna, who are considered to be in their original territories. Micarelli shows how the assertion of territorial rights is intertwined with place-naming and the cosmological relations between plant species, coexisting “harmoniously in the *chagra* under the leadership of the coca and tobacco plants,” but also mentions resentment over recent identity politics involving “re-Indianized” urban bureaucrats petitioning for land plots and political offices in the *resguardo*. The transformative role of identity politics is also addressed in a chapter by Simone Ferreira de Athayde, Aturi Kaiabi, Katia Yukari Ono, and Miguel Alexiades on the effects on Kaiabi basketry of the relocation of most of the Kaiabi to the Xingu Indigenous Park in the 1950s and 1960s. The study shows how a lack of traditional materials in combination with changing sociological circumstances have fundamentally transformed the social significance of basketry among the Kaiabi.

Laura Rival’s chapter on the ethnobotany of the Huaorani, Ecuador, challenges the view of William Balée and others that agriculturalists generally have more elaborate ethnobiological knowledge than foragers. Rival proposes that the foraging Huaorani have developed a linguistically codified ethnobotanical knowledge as rich as that of the horticultural Ka’apor, studied by Balée, but that this knowledge gives precedence to phenological context and ecological relations rather than principles of taxonomy. The case of the Huaorani poses the relation between mobility and ecological knowledge somewhat differently than most of the other chapters, as the mobility in focus is intrinsic to a traditional foraging lifestyle rather than imposed by colonial displacement. Similarly, the chapter by Charles Clement, Laura Rival, and David Cole discussing the domestication of the peach palm is more concerned with the Pre-Columbian role of human mobility in plant diffusion and genetic variability than with colonial disruptions. Following Lathrap and Bellwood,

these authors suggest that the expansion of the Arawak and Tupi linguistic families accompanied the diffusion of key crops, but that this linguistic-cum-horticultural dispersal originated in southwestern Amazonia some 3,000 to 5,000 years BP, and that a key crop was in fact peach palm. Although the southwestern origin of both language families is quite plausible, as is the idea that highly valued crops accompanied the diffusion of ancient cultural complexes, this does not warrant an understanding of linguistic expansions as equivalent to the migrations of human populations (pp. 132-133).

The requisite distinction between cultural and biological groups that is missing in this chapter, however, is admirably handled in Meredith Dudley's chapter on the ethnogenesis and historical ecology of the Lecos of Apolo, Bolivia. Dudley reviews the complex historical processes through which factors such as language, exchange, politics, and ecology have interacted to generate the mosaic of ethnic identities in the Bolivian piedmont. These factors include the traditional Inca classification of lowland groups as either *chunchos*, *antis*, or *sacharuna*; Inca imperial expansion into coca-growing areas by means of roads, administrative centers, and the imposition of loyal Quechua-speaking colonists; centuries of intermediation with Arawak-speaking Kallawaya herbalist merchants; post-conquest marginalization and conflicts with Spanish *conquistadores*; multiethnic coexistence in Augustinian and Franciscan missions; environmental and livelihood changes accompanying various extractive cycles; anthropological and modern linguistic categories; and, finally, ethnic identity politics involving essentialist notions of "authenticity."

Equally rich is Stanford Zent's chapter on the historical ethnogenesis of the Piaroa of the Middle Orinoco, whose shifting ethnic and territorial boundaries have reflected transformations of regional exchange and power relations. In pre-contact times the Salivan-speaking Piaroa traded forest products such as *curare* and manioc flour in exchange for fish from Arawak-speaking floodplain groups, but lived in fear of the predations of Carib-speakers. By 1841, twenty out of the thirty ethnolinguistic groups on the Middle Orinoco had succumbed to the "biocultural holocaust" of the European conquest. Interfluvial survivors merged with refugees from the floodplains in the interior hinterlands, while some groups such as the Karinya Caribs flourished as commercial middlemen between these groups and the Dutch. The Piaroa struggled to maintain a healthy distance to both colonial intruders and indigenous slave traffickers, but later gradually and peacefully expanded their territory by assimilating other ethnic groups occupying adjacent and more vulnerable territories.

In his detailed and useful introductory chapter, Miguel Alexiades observes that ethnoecologies are constituted and negotiated through complex "historical, political, symbolic and material mechanisms," and challenges the view that "sophisticated ethnoecological systems are mainly...the product of deep historical emplacement" (pp. 23, 25). This is the main and quite convincing

argument of the book. Only occasionally is it contradicted by passing mention of people's traditional knowledge of a habitat "where they have lived for centuries" (p. 65), the Nahuatl's "intimate and much longer-term relationship with the forest" (p. 76), the *ribereños*' "traditional ecological knowledge passed down over some 400 years" (p. 99), the genetic results of exchange among farmers "over a long period of time" (p. 128), biocultural diversity "resulting from continuing and sophisticated human practices and longstanding occupation of the environment" (p. 195), and the relative "immaturity" of African diaspora pharmacopoeias (pp. 276, 283). Whether these lapses into conventional conceptions of "traditional ecological knowledge" imply that habits of thought are hard to change, or that the message of the volume has been slightly overstated, is difficult to say. Whatever is the case, this volume persuades us to change our perspectives on several conventional assumptions about migration, local emplacement, and traditional ecological knowledge. The comparative anthropology of Amazonia has once again contributed to a decisive transformation in our general understanding of culture, history, and human-environmental relations.