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Puyo Runa: Imagery and Power in Modern Amazonia

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BOOK REVIEWS

Puyo Runa: Imagery and Power in Modern Amazonia. Norman E. Whitten Jr. and Dorothea Scott Whitten. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008. 336 pp., 29 figures, 3 maps, bibliography, index. \$65 (cloth), \$25 (paper). ISBN 0-252-03239-X (cloth), 0-252-07479-3 (paper). [www.press.uillinois.edu/]

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Puyo Runa is a series of thematically linked essays which testify to the authors' several decades of commitment to the Canelos Quichua of the Upper Amazon-Andean Piedmont. It is argued that the Canelos Quichua, who call themselves Runa ('real people'), challenge received categorisations of indigenous peoples in Ecuador; they do so as much by their way of life and political actions as by the very history of their ethnogenesis (they "appear" in history in the sixteenth century as a sustained cultural moment of ethnogenetic emergence out of a merger of Achuar Jivaroan and Andoa-Zaparoan peoples whose system of trade and cultural transmission is communicated through the Quichua language' (page xii). The authors 'seek to explicate indigenous culture and knowledge—*ñucanchi yachai*—as a dynamic template for cultural transformation, and to present our understanding of their senses of other cultural systems—*shuj shimita yachai*—as an axis for interculturality' (page xii).

The book has a deliberately disorientating narrative style, going forwards and backwards in time, flitting from individual anecdotes to mythic narratives to questions of national politics and grand theoretical statements, from the finer points of pottery technique to accounts of ayahuasca or datura trips. The effect is a multi-faceted and thickly descriptive account, and it is surely no accident that the form is especially well suited to the subject, for Runa stories and concepts of 'times-places' are structured spirally, weaving up and around, in and out in cycles of destruction and renewal.

Chapter One is a rather rambling introduction to Runa history and historicity, which also establishes the ethnographers' credentials and introduces some native protagonists, while, by the authors' own admission, introducing a lot of terminology, which is justified by the assertion of the 'fundamental indigenous postulate that to be fully human is to know other cultures as well as one's own' (page 27). This statement, which rings true for an Amazonianist

anthropologist, nevertheless goes against the grain of the authors' general hostility to structuralism—these words could almost have come from the pen of Lévi-Strauss himself.

Chapter Two takes as its theme Canelos Quichua ideas of reflexivity, which are already introduced in the preceding chapter through the emphasis on knowing the other as key to knowing oneself, and these are further developed in Chapter Three. The emphasis here, however, is on 'empowerment,' by which is meant the 'paradigmatic' nature of power for the Canelos Quichua, and it quickly becomes apparent that this form of power is indissociable from ideas of beauty and of knowledge. Here the female 'master potter' and the shaman are presented in association with different 'levels' of visionary experience, and the authors, again rather out of tune with their general approach, make judicious use of 'structuralist reduction' (p. 68) to discuss dreams and hallucinations. Chapter Three discusses concepts of *shuj shimita yachai* (other spoken knowledge, or other cultural knowledge) and *ñucanchi yachai* (our cultural knowledge), the relationship between which is said to be dynamic, and to correspond to the idea of *interculturalidad*, interculturality, which the authors distinguish from hybridity or multiculturalism.

Chapter Four, which is solely authored by Dorothea Scott Whitten, uses biographies of female potters to paint a vivid picture of their way of life and the far reaching importance of pottery skills — in fact this chapter is the most successful of all thanks to its use of biography as an illuminating device. As elsewhere, there are fascinating nuggets of information, such as the discussion here of a ceramic image of an oil boss represented as a monkey (pp. 112-3).

Chapters Five and Six focus on 'kinship' festivals and rituals. Here there is material of ethnomusicological interest, though without any technical discussion, and there are particularly impressive descriptions of the practice and symbolism of drumming in Chapter Five. This chapter also contains very interesting material on the *varayuj* (staff-wielding) Dominican authority figures, the tension between the church (representing authority and hierarchy) and the *yachajut*, 'the force field and spirit shield of one important set of stylized behaviors to be attached to special festive knowledge' (pp.122-3)—it is only unfortunate that the discussion is not developed further. Here (pp. 132-3) and at other points in the book the authors describe what a particular Runa is thinking, which makes the reader wonder just how much poetic license the former have allowed themselves. Chapter 6 contains a good description of the *ayllu* festival, and is particularly interesting on the treatment of the priest and his 'entourage', as an act of resistance: participants crash through the chapel wall carrying an anaconda effigy, symbolizing the indigenous *ayllu* system. In their interpretation, the authors correctly observe that people 'create traditions out of conjunctures'—the Runa 'play out their ritual...only where there is a manifestation of Catholic hegemony' (page 158)—but they seem to me rather

behind the times with their criticism of an anthropological ‘canon’ that rituals are ‘central’ to cultures—as well as out of touch with literature from Amazonia where ritual tends to be all about relations with the Other.

Chapter Seven, entitled ‘Aesthetic Contours,’ spirals from pottery technique to stories of economic enterprise (including both indigenous and external initiatives) and indigenous attempts to ‘educate’ whites and mestizos about their culture, and it includes a minute description of preparations for a major ceramics exhibition. There is no systematic discussion of indigenous aesthetic theory, but on ‘aesthetic forces’ the authors tell us that, ‘through indigenous peoples’ explication of their imagery, we came to appreciate the aesthetic force of mythology as a sort of transformational tunnel through which lore and history are projected into contemporary life’ (page 194). This sits uncomfortably with the criticism of Lévi-Strauss’s hot and cold societies distinction at the beginning of the final chapter, because the authors’ understanding of mythology is hard to distinguish from Lévi-Strauss’s own idea that cold societies collapse time, condensing historical change into the transcendent time of myth.

Chapter Eight gives a vivid depiction of the *caminata*, the indigenous protest march of 1992. It deals with the march’s ‘inner symbolism’ and its ‘pragmatic externalization’ (page 203): this is where native imagery and national history most obviously meet. There is a sense of a major historical event being narrated by an eyewitness, although in fact the chapter was based on the accounts of participants and first hand observers collected by the authors. The role of indigenous imagery in this national event is most vividly portrayed by the account of how spirits and symbols are embodied and literally woven into the headdresses worn by the marchers.

The final chapter makes more concerted attempts at addressing theoretical topics on a wider canvas, but does so in a rather sweeping and superficial way. This begins with a criticism of Lévi-Strauss’s hot-cold societies (page 252-3), which suggests that the authors have not read the most important recent work on this subject, by Peter Gow (2001). This is followed by a criticism of cultural ecology, which makes no mention of historical ecology, as though the authors were the first to see the faults of the former. The authors then accuse (not without some measure of justification) Descola and Taylor (pp.253-4), of having characterized the Canelos Quichua as ‘acculturated’ in opposition to the ‘true savages’, the Achuar. They write that ‘[b]etween his (Descola’s) deep knowledge of “Jívaro” culture and his and Taylor’s assertions about the “acculturation” of the Canelos Quichua, there is no room for the understanding of a regional cultural system such as we have been explicating throughout this work’ (page 254)—but this is exactly what Taylor does do, in another important text that the authors have ignored, which shows precisely the ‘interculturality’ of Achuar-Quichua relations, indeed how culturally and historically interdependent the Achuar and Quichua are (Taylor 2007).

This final chapter tries to sum up the relationships between indigenous and national politics using indigenous imagery, true to the authors' approach throughout. The Colombian guerrilla, paramilitary and terrorist activity and cocaine industry, and US and corporate hegemonic practices, are seen as *paju*, 'dangerous powers beyond [...one's...] control' lurking on a labyrinthine path populated by strange creatures such as the 'monkey [sounding] anaconda' (page 237). But there is also room for more conventional analysis: during a discussion of the neoliberal turn and the years of unrest under Gutiérrez and Vargas, they write that the state is 'widely acknowledged as turning in on itself, going nowhere; it seems to have lost all sense of direction' (page 236). They explicitly state that they write this in May 2007, yet curiously the only discussion of the implications of the arrival in power in January 2007 of a new, left-leaning regime under Rafael Correa, elected in November 2006, is confined to a short footnote to the final chapter. The authors emphasize the craven submission of the Ecuadorian state to the US and corporate power, and the problems of corruption and the cocaine industry, but the fact that Correa came to office with immense popular support by vowing to change these policies is a testament to the power of indigenous resistance that the book documents.

Even this concluding chapter is not devoted to a summary of the book's argument or a theoretical discussion, but the authors instead continue to 'show' rather than tell—although they do this well, the approach fits better in the main body of the book than in framing sections such as this and the introduction. This is nevertheless the occasion for more fascinating anecdotes, such as the account of how the inhabitants of Sarayacu's *guardianes de la selva* resisted petroleum companies by making lookouts, confiscating explosives and giving education ('structured conversations') in indigenous life to military personnel; the authors compare the captor and educator roles of men and women in this case to traditional roles of hunter and domesticator (pp. 242-3). In trying to make sense of such encounters with 'modernity', the authors introduce the oddly termed notion (combined with what seems an unnecessary coinage) that 'modernity and milleniariness are inextricably intertwined' (page 247)—they presumably cannot mean this to be a general rule, particularly as they must be aware that the term millenarianism originally refers to the second coming of Christ, and millenarian movements in this strict sense began with the early Christians who can scarcely be said to have been affected by 'modernity.' They would perhaps have been wiser to restrict their argument explicitly to Ecuador or to Amazonia.

The book ends with this, 'Indigenous imagery must be understood in its own cultural matrices, and not from the standpoint of Western ideology... With such appreciation the scholarship directed toward ethnography can escape "the Savage slot" and could reemerge as foundational to anthropology' (page 257). It is difficult to argue with these moralizing closing words, which are a fitting

summary of the book's overarching, or rather underlying, theoretical argument. But they also sum up the project of professional anthropology since Boas, Malinowski, Evans Pritchard and, yes, Lévi-Strauss. Most anthropologists since the Great War have tried to understand cultural practices on their own terms, and the suggestion that anthropological scholarship is confined to the 'savage slot' is at least thirty years out of date. It also contains an implicit reference to structuralist anthropologists, from whom the authors have made a special point of distinguishing themselves throughout the book. One presumes they feel this is necessary because of the latter's importance in Amazonianist anthropology, and they succeed best in the book's descriptive passages; however, their own occasional attempts at analysis of indigenous 'cultural matrices' owe an unacknowledged debt to Lévi-Strauss and his followers.

There are some minor errors in the book which should have been picked up by the editors, which reflect the authors' somewhat cavalier attitude towards the sister discipline of history, which they evoke throughout: for example, they write that the 'early modern (fifteenth- and sixteenth century) Western schism between Protestants and Catholics came to overt violence in Sarayacu in the 1980s as Catholic and other pressures built up against the Sarayacu evangelicals...' (page 233). It is not necessary to be a historian to consider it significant that the reformation did not begin until the 16th century, and that the term 'schism' is usually reserved for divisions within a church or other body, and this was not technically the case with the reformation.

The authorship of certain chapters is also not clear, which again is the fault of the editors: Chapter Seven is marked in the contents as being by Dorothea Scott and Norman Whitten, but while one must assume that they also authored Chapters One-Three, Five, Six and Nine together this is not stated (Chapters Four and Eight are marked as by Dorothea or by both of them with Alfonso Chango respectively).

Puyo Runa is a rich ethnographic source which will be of great interest to certain specialists, particularly those working with the Canelos Quichua themselves and neighboring peoples. It has many resonances with material from elsewhere in Amazonia, including a great deal of theory, but there is unfortunately almost no comparative discussion at all (which is especially surprising for a book whose title situates it in 'Modern Amazonia'), and the theoretical discussion is limited in scope, somewhat outdated, and often misses its mark. However, what this volume lacks in theoretical innovation it more than makes up for in vivid description and depth of knowledge and understanding—the reader is always aware of the years of deep immersion in Runa culture on which the text is based. This, finally, is what the authors do best, and they produce what is not only an ethnographic cornucopia but also an important document of cultural knowledge of which the Runa themselves will be proud.

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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].

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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