

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

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 1

June 2007

Introduction

Suzanne Oakdale

University of New Mexico - Main Campus, soakdale@unm.edu

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

 Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Oakdale, Suzanne (2007). "Introduction," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol5/iss1/1>

This Introduction 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.

Introduction

SUZANNE OAKDALE

University of New Mexico

soakdale@unm.edu

This issue of *Tipiti*, with its focus on life histories, autobiographical narratives, and diaries, is part of a growing trend in lowland South American ethnography to engage more directly with what have been called “personal documents.”¹ For a variety of reasons (see Saez 2007), this type of material has not had a central presence in publications about lowland South America, especially in comparison to the ethnography of other areas, such as Native North America. Research on dreams (Guss 1980; Kracke 1981, 1988; Basso 1992; Santos-Granero 2003), ritual and performance (Graham 1995; Bacigalupo 2001; Oakdale 2005), and history (Ramos 1988; Gow 1991; Basso 1995; Taylor 2007) that draw increasingly on personal documents, may signal a shift. There are also an increasing number of life histories published about lowland men and women, including those by Watson and Watson-Franke (1982, 1985), Muratorio (1991), Hendricks (1993), and Rubenstein (2002). Building upon these previous works, the essays in this issue are, I believe, indicative of the growing realization that such materials offer a rich and distinctive new perspective on the nature of cultural and social life in lowland Amazonia.

The first three essays, focusing specifically on elicited narratives (life histories and diary entries), give a sense for how, over the past century, people in the lowlands have been simultaneously engaged in relationships at several levels of expansiveness. These relationships vary from the very local levels of households and local groups, to the more encompassing and abstract levels of regional, national, transnational, and cosmological linkages. These essays offer insight into how individual people retrospectively integrate or simply hold in their consciousness their own (or others’) movements through these disparate social spheres. Lowland archaeology (Heckenberger 2002; Hornborg 2005) has made it clear that wide ranging social networks have been an important part of many people’s lives in the lowlands for a very long time, despite the fact that village-centered ethnographies often fail to fully capture them. Life histories and other personal documents do not, of course, map these networks as such. Rather, they give a subjective sense of how wide-ranging networks covering vast geographical and social distances are experienced, as well as

4 *Suzanne Oakdale*

how they are partially entered into and how they become meaningfully integrated with (or work in opposition to), other local-level relationships. Although many social science and national discourses emphasize ethnic and/or racial boundaries, as well as the boundaries of local groups, in the lowlands, personal documents, such as the ones presented here, describe complex affiliations, porous boundaries, and hybrid identities (see also Brooks 2008:262).

Hanne Veber's essay focuses on segments of a life history that she recorded with Miguel Camaiteri, a Pajonal Ashéninka leader in Peru. With the help of biographic material, Veber presents a portrait of an indigenous leader who has courageously entered into an array of institutions, such as the Peruvian military, government agencies, regional indigenous organizations, the film crew for *Fitzcarraldo*, as well as the Ashéninka political process. Veber describes how Miguel incorporates techniques, knowledge, and styles of leadership from each of these domains to become a new type of regional leader in the Pajonal. She also calls attention to the potential political significance of life histories for the leaders of politically marginal groups. Bearing this kind of potential in mind, even the act of narrating a life history can be understood as a part of a process of navigating ever-expanding social networks.

William Crocker's essay explores a corpus of diary entries from his extensive four-decade-long diary research project among the Canela in central Brazil. Diary entries are not retrospective to the same degree that life histories are. Crocker explains, for example, how he designed the Canela diary project so that each diarist could produce written or tape-recorded entries either daily or monthly. Over the course of decades of involvement in the program, the perspectives of the diarists are continually changing as the diarists move through different social positions and phases of life. The subject matter of the Canela diarists also varies from reports of their own experiences to recounting of daily events. Crocker focuses on several diarists' opinions regarding a killing committed by a young Canela man in 2006 in the surrounding settler community. The comments made by the diarists about this man reveal some of the ties connecting the Canela to the wider regional society, such as trade relations and the presence of drugs and alcohol, in addition to family and village dynamics. Reading the very different ways each of the nine diarists talk about the young man's motivations also gives a sense of how, at one moment, and with respect to the same issue, these social relations are important in different ways for different people. Some, for example, comment that the killing was committed because of a regional problem with alcohol and drugs, while others focus on village and municipal leaders, singling them out for their

lack of guidance. Still others fault the man's parents and family members. While in Veber's essay we see one person moving through expansive and contractive networks over a span of time, Crocker's material offers a range of subjective perspectives on a single event and shows how, for each diarist, different levels of local and regional social relations are more or less salient.

Crocker also presents a valuable personal history of his Canela diary project. The picture of the project that emerges is one in which all involved have routinely entered into expansive social relations that transcend usual community boundaries. Rather than stressing the political potential of the diaries, as Weber does with Miguel's life history, Crocker focuses on the emotional effect of the diaries. He explains how the arrival of the taped diary entries to his museum office brought him a sense of almost quotidian conviviality with Canela men and women who were far away from him in both space and in lifestyle. The comments Crocker includes from diarists regarding their own participation in the program suggest that they, too, have experienced a remarkable sense of connection with Crocker over the years. The essay concludes with an invitation for younger scholars to make use of this archive (a total of 2,000 hours of tape and 150,000 written pages)—truly a collection of a lifetime. In keeping with lowland sensibilities, this is an offer that wonderfully transcends the more usual boundaries in academia.

My own contribution focuses on excerpts from two senior Kayabi men's life histories elicited in the 1990s and analyzed in terms of the symbolic importance of "alterity" (see Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2001). In these excerpts, narrators describe themselves as becoming Kayabi or reconnecting with Kayabi relatives through a process of becoming separated from a previous life with either spirits or with the "white" society of the Brazilian frontier. As such, the narratives provide subjective and historical accounts of a pattern that many scholars have noted concerning indigenous Amazonia, that of kinship being wrested from a background of alterity. However, these narratives also show that this process can repeat itself over the course of a lifetime: these two narrators describe themselves as moving into and out of different communities of people and beings in the frontier and cosmos. In their discussion of this movement between communities, both men give a central role to, and emphasize the emotional salience of, treatments to the surface of their bodies. In this way, the expansive, heterogeneous social networks characteristic of the twentieth-century Brazilian interior are perceived from the vantage point of a few of the particular, culturally specific, embodied subjectivities that made such networks possible.

6 *Suzanne Oakdale*

The final essay by Pierre Déléage focuses on an indigenous genre of first-person narrative song and the context of its performance. These songs, called *Caqui Caqui*, are sung in Yaminahua village homes along the Peruvian banks of the Purus River. *Caqui Caqui*, Déléage explains, are currently sung when the singer is overcome by feelings of nostalgia, that is, by memories of an event or person both distant in time and space. Déléage explores the inherent contradiction that these completely formulaic, inherited songs can be understood to be autobiographical. He argues that the key lies in looking not only at the content of the songs, but at how the content relates to the context in which they are sung, a juncture that is also key for understanding their emotional impact. Déléage also discusses the fact that before singers can sing these songs publicly, they must embody the ideal of personal comportment that the songs describe. Déléage views this as evidence that this narrative form is oriented as much toward bringing a future into being as it is to narrating the past. Many indigenous genres of first-person narrative in the lowlands seem, in fact, to be oriented more toward facilitating identity shift than focused on documenting distinctive past experiences (Urban 1989; Basso 1992; Graham 1995; Oakdale 2002, 2005; Course n.d.). In many lowland autobiographical genres, song is a crucial part of this process. Déléage's discussion offers a perspective on the ways that a narrative genre can work to give people a relationship with the lives and experiences of their ancestors and can, at the same time, enable the establishment of certain kinds of identities in the present.

Overall, lowland Amazonian men and women emerge in these essays as persons who move through a wide range of relationships with other people distant and near, past and present, even as they continue to live their lives in so-called "face-to-face" communities. People and groups appear in these accounts as permeable, relational, transformable, and dialogic. These findings resonate with the observations of so many other ethnographers. The various forms of personal documentation collected in this issue—including life histories, diaries, indigenous genres of autobiographical narrative and song—do more than simply describe the permeable boundaries and wide-ranging connections of social, political, religious, and ecological life in lowland Amazonia. What is also revealed is that these types of narrative forms are themselves an important means through which boundaries are overcome and connections are created.

NOTES

1. "Personal documents" refers to "any expressive production of the individual that can be used to throw light on his view of himself, his life situation, or the

state of the world as he understands it, at some point in time or over the passage of time” (Watson and Watson-Franke 1985:2).

REFERENCES CITED

- Bacigalupo, Ana Mariella
 2001 *La Voz del Kultrun en la Modernidad: Tradición y Cambio en la Terapéutica de Siete Machi*. Santiago: Editorial Universidad Católica.
- Basso, Ellen
 1992 “Dreaming and Dream Research.” In *Dreaming: Anthropological and Psychological Interpretations*. Barbara Tedlock, editor, pp. 86–104. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
 1995 *The Last Cannibals*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Brooks, James F.
 2008 “Seductions and Betrayals: La frontera gauchesque, Argentine Nationalism, and the Predicaments of Hybridity.” In *Small Worlds: Method, Meaning, and Narrative in Microhistory*. James F. Brooks, Christopher R. N. DeCourse, and John Walton, editors, pp. 247–264. Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research.
- Course, Magnus
 n.d. “Why Mapuche Sing.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. Forthcoming.
- Gow, Peter
 1991 *Of Mixed Blood*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Graham, Laura
 1995 *Performing Dreams*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Guss, David M.
 1980 “Steering for a Dream: Dream Concepts of the Makiritare.” *Journal of Latin American Lore* 6(2):297–312.
- Heckenberger, Michael J.
 2002 “Rethinking the Arawakan Diaspora: Hierarchy, Regionality, and the Amazonian Formative.” In *Comparative Arawakan Histories*. Jonathan D. Hill and Fernando Santos Granero, editors, pp. 99–122. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Hendricks, Janet W.
 1993 *To Drink of Death: the Narrative of a Shuar Warrior*. Tuscon: University of Arizona Press.
- Hornborg, Alf
 2005 “Ethnogenesis, Regional Integration, and Ecology in Prehistoric Amazonia.” *Current Anthropology* 46(4):589–620.
- Kracke, Waud
 1981 “Kagwahiv Mourning I: Dreams of a Bereaved Father.” *Ethos*

8 Suzanne Oakdale

- 9(4):258–75.
- 1988 “Kagwahiv Mourning II: Ghosts, Grief, and Reminiscences.” *Ethos* 16(2):209–222.
- Moratorio, Blanca
- 1991 *The Life and Times of Grandfather Alonso*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Oakdale, Suzanne
- 2002 “Creating a Continuity between Self and Other: First-Person Narration in an Amazonian Context.” *Ethos* 30(1–2):158–75.
- 2005 *I Foresee My Life: The Ritual Performance of Autobiography in an Amazonian Community*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Saez, Oscar C.
- 2007 “Autobiografia e liderança indígena do Brasil.” *Tellus* 12:11–32.
- Santos-Granero, Fernando
- 2003 “Pedro Casanto’s Nightmares: Lucid Dreaming in Amazonia and the New Age World.” *Tipiti* 1(2):179–210.
- Ramos, Alcida
- 1988 “Indian Voices: Contact Experienced and Expressed.” In *Rethinking History and Myth*. Jonathan Hill, editor, pp. 214–34. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Rubenstein, Steven
- 2002 *Alejandro Tsakimp: a Shuar Healer in the Margins of History*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Taylor, Anne-Christine
- 2007 “Sick of History: Contrasting Regimes of Historicity in the Upper Amazon.” In *Time and Memory in Indigenous Amazonia*. Carlos Fausto and Michael Heckenberger, editors, pp. 133–168. Gainesville: University of Florida Press.
- Urban, Greg
- 1989 “The ‘I’ of Discourse.” In *Semiotics, Self, and Society*. Benjamin Lee and Greg Urban, editors, pp. 27–51. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo
- 1998 “Dravidian and Related Kinship Systems.” In *Transformations of Kinship*. Maurice Godelier, Thomas R. Trautmann, and Franklin E. Tjon Sie Fat, editors, pp. 332–385. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution.
- 2001 “GUT Feelings about Amazonia: Potential Affinity and the Construction of Sociality.” In *Beyond the Visible and the Material*. Laura M. Rival and Neil L. Whitehead, editors, pp. 19–44. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Watson, Lawrence C. and Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke
- 1982 *Conflicto y Identidad en Una Familia Urbana Guajira*. Caracas: Universidad Católica, Centro de Lenguas Indígenas.
- 1985 *Interpreting Life Histories*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.