

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

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 9 | Issue 1

Article 4

2011

Urarina Society, Cosmology, and History in Peruvian Amazonia

Bret Gustafson

Washington University, St. Louis

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

 Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gustafson, Bret (2011). "Urarina Society, Cosmology, and History in Peruvian Amazonia," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol9/iss1/4>

This Reviews 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.

Urarina Society, Cosmology, and History in Peruvian Amazonia. Bartholomew Dean. Gainesville, FL.: University Press of Florida. 2009. 344 pp., 31 figures, bibliography, index. \$69.95 (cloth). ISBN 0-8130-3378-0. [<http://www.upf.com/>] 69.95. 344 pages.

BRET GUSTAFSON

Washington University in St. Louis

In an era in which the discursive exploration of multi-scalar, transnational, and global flows seems to have lost sight of what counts for solid ethnographic research, Bart Dean's *Urarina Society, Cosmology, and History in Peruvian Amazonia* offers a grounded return to theory and ethnography that remedies the limitations of both old-school ethnology and the new fads of global-speak. *Urarina Society* is a sophisticated study of contemporary Urarina life, an unabashedly "modernist" ethnography – as Dean puts it – which delves deeply into the gendered politics of exchange, hierarchy, cosmology, and social reproduction in Peruvian Amazonia. To claim the modernist banner is a defiant gesture against the discursive turn, yet Dean's book is modernist in a new way. This is a nuanced ethnography not of stasis, structure, and tradition, but one of ambivalence, ambiguity, and agentive creativity traced through Urarina relations between themselves and with "agents of the postcolonial order"– the *ribereños*, *mestizos*, *regatones*, and *gringos* – who have been coming their way for several hundreds of years. With erudition and authority, Dean takes us through Urarina cosmology, kinship, economy, hunting, and shamanism, modernist topics of ethnology to be sure. Yet the book does so in ways that challenge conventional theory and bring to life daily dramas and struggles that make of such cultural forms and social relations contingent and complex stagings for quotidian Urarina efforts at survival. Here we see intersections of mythic history and practice, the negotiation of gendered longhouse hierarchies, the dramas of adultery, and accommodation and resistance to systematic violences of debt and commodity peonage relations upon which the Urarina have become dependent. As well as an original contribution to Urarina ethnography, the book is a primer on core themes motivating Amazonianist anthropology today.

The chapters follow a convincing tactic – blending sophisticated theoretical engagement with explorations of historical context, cosmological charter, case studies or descriptive accounts, and theoretical reconsideration. Chapters one through three set the historical stage by considering cosmological and historical accounts of extractivism in the region, the foundations for contemporary dynamics of commodity peonage and relations of unequal exchange with the non-Urarina world.

Chapter four explores contemporary dynamics of extraction and exchange through consideration of mission economies, the rise of the nation-state, and the rise of river commerce. In the context of the violences of the rubber era – familiar to students of the region – Dean traces the emergence of relationships between the colonial onslaught and representations of indigenous difference, tracing, for instance, the outsider fixation on the violent headhunter, itself a product of colonial invasion. Gendered violences of white enslavement of indigenous peoples are explored, as these interpenetrate and intensify internal gender hierarchies for peoples like the Urarina. Chapter five continues explorations of women's dependence on male-mediated exchange relations with mestizo society, exploring the political marginality of women in both 'traditional' and new modes

of political organization. Dean suggests that such legitimation of gender inequality – as expressed in Urarina mythic charters – might be productively critiqued by new modes of cultural creation and reproduction associated with processes like bilingual intercultural education. Chapter six continues the exploration of gendered dependencies through consideration of women’s agency and autonomy (or lack thereof) in marriage and kinship relations. Dean takes on debates about bride price and bride service, to argue against the notion that women are basically compensation, an object traded in exchange relations between men. By exploring a case of adultery – and the ensuing mobilization of the two cuckolded sister-wives – Dean shows how wider social relations, including access to children, fragile longhouse relations, and contestation of male prestige, are of more significance than the exchange value of women. Though circumscribed, women exercise considerable autonomy and agency in shaping these marriage and wider kin relations. Chapter seven considers, as a counterpoint, how women’s production of palm fiber wealth – a traditional anchor of Urarina identity and cosmology – has suffered processes of commoditization and entered more firmly into the male-mediated exchange relationships with mestizo society. This erosion of a sphere of women’s value and autonomy is a direct effect of commodity peonage which reinforces local models of male dominance.

Chapters eight and nine turn to male-centric spheres of hunting and shamanism. While the commoditization of bush meat is resisted, somewhat, hunting still entails linkages with mestizo purveyors of bullets. Nonetheless, hunting and bushmeat sharing retains centrality in the reproduction of gendered interdependencies at the heart of longhouse relations. Shamanism, treated with Dean’s historical, theoretical, and cosmological grounding, also retains its centrality in Urarina society. Here we see debates over millenarianism, perspectivism, and ontological predation revisited. Dean argues that shamanism is as much about its meanings as a bastion against the colonial onslaught, as it is a reflection of millenarian thinking. It is not thus, so much, about a millennial desire for western goods, but about desires for liberation that emerge as critical tension in relation to internal hierarchies and as a sustained moral and political critique of the colonial economy associated with mestizo accumulation, extraction, and stinginess.

This is in short, a thought provoking ethnography that returns our attention to the quotidian realities of indigenous social, cultural, and political-economic reproduction in the context of ongoing colonial violences. At first glance, one might ask why Dean did not spend more time on contemporary pan-indigenous politics – indeed a phenomenon now changing contemporary Peruvian resource politics in the Amazon. However, on reflection, such treatments of indigenous politics are of late somewhat formulaic, i.e., neoliberal state enacts certain projects which meets indigenous resistance and varying layers of accomodation and contested self-representation. What is lacking in much of our current work is a reconsideration of these very textured relations of economy, exchange, and daily life – that are, at the end of the day, the fundamental issue of concern to indigenous peoples and their politics of short term survival and longer-term social and political transformation. In reading *Urarina Society*, I was myself reminded of what, if anything, anthropology might have to offer to indigenous struggles for their ‘own’ forms of social and economic transformation. It is here that we should follow such examples to reconsider local economies and their social and cultural imbrications, as well as rethinking, the ways that we engage wider political processes and advocacy-like efforts at

the level of policy, indigenous rights, and movement support. Here the book is a valuable anchor for a much needed rethinking across anthropology.

If one had to ask for more – it would perhaps be for more engagement with the Urarina on an interpersonal level. Dean obviously has the deep local knowledge and intimate relationships to build upon. While we hear from numerous elders and speakers, more portraits like that of the adultery scandal – which brought to life a vibrant and intensely human social drama – would have added texture. Nonetheless, this is a minor point outweighed by the volume’s thick contributions as detailed above. In addition to its rich ethnographic work, the book offers for specialist and student alike a survey of the central theoretical debates of the field. As such it is necessary reading for students of Amazonia, and would be a valuable contribution to any survey class on contemporary ethnographies of indigeneity, and indeed, of Latin America more broadly.