

Brown, Michael F. 2014. *Upriver. The Turbulent Life and Times of an Amazonian People*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press. 321 pp. Pb.: \$29.95/£22.95/€27.00. ISBN: 9780674368071.

This beautifully written book is the personal story of the journeys of American anthropologist Michael Brown, a seminal scholar on leadership in Amazonia, to the Peruvian Amazon: firstly, in the 1970s when he lived with the Awajún people, and then in 2012 when he returned to the site of his earlier fieldwork. The title of the monograph, *Upriver*, is highly appropriate as the Jivaroan-speaking Awajúns live in the upper water sources of the Amazon. Moreover, “upriver” also constitutes a metaphorical reference to the challenges confronting these people, which are similar to those of other indigenous groups in the region. *Upriver* is both topical and timely because the people followed by Brown’s narrative are pivotal figures in Peruvian indigenous politics.

The book is divided into two parts, the first supplying rich details of the community and its events during Brown’s first fieldwork in 1976–1978, and the second focusing on the period between 1980 and 2012. Part I, comprising approximately two thirds of the book, presents lively yet careful descriptions of the characters and their personalities, taking the reader into the field, while Part II analytically relates the case study to theories dealing with the development of the state, hierarchical societal systems, and (de)centralised power; it also provides greater contextualisation within global and Peruvian politics.

The organisation of the chapters makes the book a dynamic reading experience. For instance, in Chapter 5, entitled *Puzzle Pieces*, the author brings together topics that at first may seem dissonant, such as marriage practices, beer-drinking parties, forced entry to the world of bureaucracy, land titles, and money, to produce a harmonious compendium. The following chapters demonstrate how Christianity is lived in Amazonian indigenous society, noting that while its acceptance often reduces the consumption of fermented manioc beer and the practice of seeking visions through the use of shamanic plants, fear of sorcery and witchcraft accusations remain. In the more analytical Part II, it is argued that sorcery continues to exist due to lack of trust in communal relations and because it provides comfort when facing illness and death (p. 221). The author posits the life of the Awajún as unstable; there have been so many setbacks from epidemics, exploitation, and colonial suppression that the people no longer feel secure, rather recognising sorcery even in intimate relations.

The Awajún are known not only for combativeness, the practice of sorcery, and violence, but also for a high rate of suicides, a subject which Brown addresses in this book although he has preferred not to discuss it in his previous publications. He regards suicides and attempts or threats to commit suicide as a reaction to frustration, not receiving enough assistance, and weak relations among kin. Ethical questions are also brought under examination as Brown openly writes about his critical position in a field in which children are accused of sorcery and people seek revenge with murder. *Upriver* also reveals women’s attitudes to their private relationships. Brown’s partner, Margareth, joined his fieldwork at one point, providing him with knowledge of women’s expectations

and opinions regarding their spouses and the future of their children, and also the secrets of caring for their gardens.

Several Awajún have become prominent political actors in Peruvian indigenous politics, some of them well-known cosmopolitan figures who travel extensively abroad. Many Awajún have entered universities, aiming to boost the value of their knowledge and ways of knowing in academia. Despite criticism of the actions of the Catholic Church and American missionaries, the author reminds readers that religious groups active in the rainforest introduced literacy to indigenous peoples, which has provided them with an empowering tool for registration and participation in the issues concerning them. Paperwork seems only to increase through governmental policies and bureaucracy in the world of the projects.

As the author explains in Part II, by the time of his return to the Alto Mayo after 30 years, the region had transformed so greatly that, due to increasing colonial settlements and agribusiness, it was difficult to locate all the Awajún settlements of his previous fieldwork. It has been claimed that the Peruvian government has parcelled out 72% of its Amazon rainforest area to logging and petroleum companies, and the subsistence economy of the Awajún has been altered dramatically. Urbanisation has impacted many groups, and large numbers of people are now mobile, shifting between towns, villages, and semi-urban settlements. Thus, the book offers crucial insights into the social reality of the local people and their struggle during a time of profound alteration.

Awajún leaders (e.g. Eduardo Nayap) have been pivotal figures in pressuring the government to instigate free and prior consultation affected groups whenever any economic acts are planned for indigenous territories, and also to improve the quality of education. Practice, however, is far from theory. In 2009, for instance, a violent incident occurred in Bagua when mostly Awajún and Wampi protesters started a peaceful demonstration, only to be attacked by police using firearms. In contemporary turbulent times, the Awajún are increasingly finding comfort in different religious groups as well as from their shamanic plants.

The fact that Brown reflects on his experiences over a long period of time makes this book as an extraordinary trip to the heart of the tropics. In contrast, entering into greater detail about personal histories in the contemporary period would have balanced the book better and, in addition, the reader might have expected the shamanic practice of visualisation to be explored more deeply. The practice 'proclaim a vision' (p. 118, 262) could have received the same in-depth attention as the author gives to an examination of sorcery, ritual speech, and suicides, for example. Nevertheless, the book is an easy and fascinating read, and it is warmly recommended to anyone interested in Peruvian Amazonia, environmental, economic, and legal anthropology, and ethnographic practice itself.

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