

REVIEW ARTICLE

HOMAGE TO THE ARAKMBUT

PAUL HENLEY

ANDREW GRAY, *The Arakmbut of Amazonian Peru*, Providence and Oxford: Berg-hahn, 3 volumes:

Vol. I: *Mythology, Spirituality, and History in an Amazonian Community*, 1996. xxv, 324 pp., Indexes, Tables, Figures, Maps, References. £40.00/\$59.95.

Vol. II: *The Last Shaman: Change in an Amazonian Community*, 1997. xxiii, 294 pp., Indexes, Tables, Figures, Maps, References. £40.00/\$59.95.

Vol. III: *Indigenous Rights and Development: Self-determination in an Amazonian Community*, 1997. xxi, 354 pp., Indexes, Tables, Figures, Maps, References. £40.00/\$59.95.

ALTHOUGH the quality of the ethnography of indigenous Amazonia has improved immensely over the last thirty years in relation to all parts of the region, the main geographical focus of interest, in the anglophone literature at least, has been moving progressively southwards during this period. In the 1960s and 1970s, most of the stimulating new work was emerging from the Guianas and the Northwest Amazon. By the 1980s, it was Central Brazil and the Xingú that appeared to be receiving most attention, while by the 1990s it was the turn of the Upper Amazon, as a series of important new books and doctoral theses on the Jivaroan, Arawakan,

Editors' note: Andrew Gray, whose work is being reviewed here, is believed to have been lost at sea following an aircraft accident in the Pacific on 7 May 1999. It is hoped to publish an obituary in a future issue of *JASO*.

and Panoan peoples entered general circulation. Now, in the late 1990s, the focus has shifted even further south to the ethnography of the Brazilian state of Rondonia, the Bolivian lowlands, and the Madre de Díos region in the extreme south-eastern corner of Peru.

This trilogy by Andrew Gray is dedicated to the Arakmbut, who number roughly a thousand people, making them the largest of the six small Harakmbut groups living in and around the Madre de Díos river basin. From an estimated population of 30,000 in the late nineteenth century, the Harakmbut have been reduced by the effects of disease, slave-raiding, the rubber boom, gold-mining, and missionization to about 2,000 at the present time. There are at least a dozen other indigenous groups in the region, mostly Panoans and Arawakans, who bring the indigenous population up to roughly 10,000, but even this total represents no more than about 25 per cent of the population of the Madre de Díos. However, despite the reduction of their population by 95 per cent in the course of this century, the local political and economic dominance of outsiders, and the abandonment of many traditional cultural features of dress, house lay-out, and ceremonial life, the Arakmbut retain a strong sense of their distinctive indigenous identity and continue to be centrally concerned with their relations with the spirit world.

Often misleadingly lumped together in the literature with culturally distinct groups under the vague generic term 'Mashco' or referred to by the term 'Amarak-aeri', which later turned out to be derogatory, the Arakmbut have not previously been the subject of such a comprehensive ethnography as the present trilogy. The range of topics covered is very broad, and at a length of over a thousand pages in total, it is surely unique in the modern Amazonian literature. Whereas there are a number of modern authors who have produced more than one volume of ethnography on the same indigenous group over a period of several years, I know of no other case of the consecutive publication of three volumes relating to the same group. Indeed, the most recent comparable case that comes to mind is Koch-Grünberg's classic account of his journey from Roraima to the Orinoco before the First World War, and even that had an area focus rather than being dedicated to a single indigenous group (see Koch-Grünberg 1981–2).

However, this work is not only a major contribution to the ethnographic literature on a hitherto poorly described part of indigenous Amazonia. It also incorporates the first substantial attempt to think through in detail the application of grand international human rights ideas to the often harsh local realities of a small indigenous people within Amazonia. Moreover, the analysis is carried out from a distinctively anthropological perspective: that is, not only are indigenous beliefs about the spirit world treated seriously as the bedrock of Arakmbut claims to a distinctive social identity, territorial security, and cultural autonomy, but also, currently fashionable ideas about human rights are not taken at face value but rather traced to their own cultural and political roots.

The author brings a broad range of experience to the task. His first encounter with the Arakmbut was from 1979 to 1981, when he was carrying out fieldwork as a doctoral student of the then Institute of Social Anthropology at Oxford,

supervised by Dr (now Professor) Peter Rivière. He returned for a second stint funded by the Danish government development agency DANIDA in 1985, and again from 1991 to 1992, while working with IWGIA, the Danish NGO. While the first fieldwork had primarily academic objectives, the second was more applied in focus and the third formed part of a project to assist the Harakmbut make their case before the UN Working Party on Indigenous Populations which was then meeting annually in Geneva. However, despite some thirty months of fieldwork and many years working in conjunction with and on behalf of the Harakmbut to secure their political rights, Gray considers his work to be no more than an outsider's account and at best a partial truth, since he believes it is impossible to escape the unequal power relations of the fieldwork encounter which inevitably vitiate understanding.

Nor can one ever overcome, he suggests, the cultural distance separating the metropolitan anthropologist from his subjects. This is particularly true with regard to religious belief. Gray states that his intention is to preserve the 'mystery embedded in the Arakmbut universe' and to avoid any attempt to explain away their ideas about the spirit world in a reductionist manner. While it is common enough in anthropological monographs to find pious expressions of such intentions, Gray honours this commitment to the extent of giving credence to such matters as the effectiveness of Arakmbut fishing spells, their ability to predict his arrival, and the belief that the spirit of a deceased shaman continues to influence affairs in the community. But perhaps the most graphic example of his openness to the Arakmbut world-view is his description of the occasion when he discovered that he had the ability to leave his sleeping body, fly across the village, and, by means of sparks flying from his fingers, apparently bring about a cure in an old man who had been bleeding profusely. Rather than rationalize this intense experience as a 'vivid dream', Gray prefers to use it as a basis for understanding Arakmbut ideas about dreaming as a means of access to an invisible world of spirits where the space and time boundaries of the normal world do not apply.

Gray's respect for Arakmbut cultural practice also extends to the way in which he has chosen to present his ethnography in the form of a trilogy. Arakmbut mythological narratives are also divided conventionally into three parts, described as the 'head word', 'centre word', and 'whole word'. Although sequential in presentation and deriving their meaning from this order to some degree, each part may be detached and developed into a new narrative which casts a different light on the whole. In this manner, Gray argues, the meaning of an Arakmbut mythological narrative can be said to derive from the superimposition of layers of meaning rather than simply from linear sequences. He further suggests that this is how the three volumes of his trilogy should be read.

The first volume is itself triadic in structure in presenting three key Arakmbut myths: if you understand these, a young Arakmbut man told him, then you will have found the key to understanding us. Gray analyses these myths in both a Lévi-Straussian and a Malinowskian manner. That is, he both subjects them to a structural, symbolological analysis, and treats them as 'charter myths', thus allowing

him to introduce many of the principal sociological and cultural themes of Arakmbut life, including the tragic history of their relations with local non-Indians. He returns to these themes in the second volume, dealing with them in much greater detail and using particular case-studies as a means of showing how they articulate with one another. The most lengthy of these case-studies concerns the traumatic events which surrounded the death of a leading shaman, though perhaps the most striking one is the account of the attempts to use shamanic means to cure a man on the point of death and the associated discussion of the politics of this event. The third volume also features a number of case-studies but is generally rather different in character, being primarily concerned with the implications for the Arakmbut and similar indigenous groups of the human rights policies which international agencies such as the UN and the International Labour Organization have been seeking to implement over the last thirty years or so. The sociological and cultural themes are still present and there is even some reference to the three key charter myths, but these are introduced simply by way of background.

Throughout the three volumes, Gray repeatedly stresses the importance to the Arakmbut of their relations with the invisible world of spirits. Their ideas about this world echo a number of pan-Amazonian themes. This is a world where materialist ideas of space and time are transcended, and in which the past, present, and future are simultaneously present. It is a world of 'potentiality', which 'contains knowledge and understanding of all the possible events which could happen and which have ever happened'. It is from here that the potential souls of human beings derive and to which they will return after death. It is also the domain of the spirits of game animals and of their controllers, as well as of various non-human, non-animal spirits which are for the most part malignant. This account of Arakmbut ideas clearly echoes the work of other Amazonist authors. Gray himself alludes to Christopher Crocker's account of the Bororo (1985) on a number of occasions, while his discussion of the role of spirit relationships in hunting provides another interesting permutation on the series analysed by Philippe Descola (1992). It also provides ethnographic support for the recent arguments of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro concerning 'perspectivism' in Amazonian indigenous thought (1998).

Relations with the spirit world are valued in a number of respects, but on a day-to-day basis the most important pertain to subsistence activities, particularly hunting and fishing, and to curing. Success in hunting and fishing depends on the development of close relationships with the spirits that are thought to control the availability of game and fish so that they can be persuaded to release the animals for living human beings to capture. Similarly, success at curing depends on being able to persuade or oblige beings from the spirit world to release the soul of a patient, since the majority of serious illnesses are attributed to soul-capture by such beings. Access to the world of spirits is achieved by two principal means: through chanting and through dreaming, the latter being regarded as the more effective. Recently the taking of *ayahuasca*, copied from neighbouring indigenous groups, has become another recognized way of entering the world of spirits. Most Arakm-

but have some ability to gain access by these means, but those who achieve the greatest recognition as shamans are both expert chanters and accomplished dreamers who have learnt to communicate directly with the spirits. In order to do so, it is essential to take on board the fact that human beings have a vision of the universe which is not shared by other beings of the forest. Thus in order to be an effective shaman, one has to learn how to view the world from the perspectives of both animals and spirits.

Less central to the work, but also a recurrent feature, is the analysis of kinship and social organization. This begins to emerge as a major focus of the second volume, though a concern with shamanism and relations with the spirit world remains prominent as well. The principal means by which relationships are categorized, which in effect determines the internal limits of endogamy, is a terminology of the kind found very widely throughout Amazonia, particularly in headwater regions such as where the Arakmbut live. Gray refers to this terminology as 'two-lined' but which, for reasons explained elsewhere, I would prefer to call 'dravidianate' (see Henley 1996). This terminology is associated with a positive marriage prescription which requires an individual to marry a category of relative which includes his or her cross cousins genealogically defined, though sister's daughter-mother's brother unions are also considered acceptable.

More distinctive in a general Amazonian context is the associated system of patrilineal clans. There are seven in total, with a possibility that an eighth clan may have existed in the past. Although these clans are exogamous and some of them are said to be further related as kin, this does not appear to be an obstacle to intermarriage, and there is no suggestion that the Arakmbut ever had an exogamous moiety system such as one finds among the neighbouring Panoans (see Kensinger 1984, Townsley 1987). Each clan has a main name, as well as a number of supplementary names, sometimes associated with animal species. But these animal names are not linked to any notion of consubstantiality with the animals in question, nor to taboos, nor to hunting specialization, though the members of a given clan may be thought to be more likely to have success in hunting associated species because of a common connection to certain spirits.

Although the clans themselves are named, they do not appear to be corporate owners of stocks of personal names, as among Panoan groups. None the less, clan identity is important in everyday life, and clan rivalries often come to a head between men during drinking parties. The clan is associated with a strong patrilineal ideology of conception. Both body and soul are said to derive from the male line, with women's wombs doing no more than moulding the shape of the child. Post-marital residence appears to be primarily virilocal, since men will do their best to avoid marrying out. If a man cannot find a woman in his own community, he may steal or elope with one from another community. Intercommunity disputes surrounding such abductions are common.

But despite the importance of the clan in other contexts, Gray reports that it is not the principal collectivity involved in marriage exchanges. Rather, he claims that the principal 'alliance arranging unit' is the *wambet*, a social entity whose

boundaries are only very vaguely defined. In some contexts, the term may be applied to a cognatic grouping that could be described as a 'kindred' as conventionally defined in the anthropological literature, i.e. one that includes all ego's siblings and direct lineal relatives, as well as his or her parents' siblings. But in other contexts, parents' cross-sex siblings are excluded on account of their affinal status in the underlying relationship terminology. These *wambet* are unnamed, more readily identified by women than by men, and are reported to be more influential in marriage alliances now than they were in the past. Their relative importance compared to the clan system is also said to vary from one Arakmbut community to another. Gray discusses *wambet* at some length, but I have to say that I found the alliance role that he ascribes to these seemingly highly permeable entities to be the least convincing aspect of his discussion of Arakmbut social organization.

In contrast, I was readily persuaded of the potential value of his regrettably brief comparative discussion at the end of vol. 2, in which he considers the social organization of the various peoples of the Madre de Díos region as so many permutations on an underlying set of sociological and cultural variables. Thus, for example, comparing a number of groups who share an underlying dravidianate terminology and positive marriage prescription, Gray suggests that the Arakmbut case, in which both patrilineal descent and a kindred-like collectivity are important, represents a midway permutation between, on the one hand, the neighbouring Arawakan-speaking Matisgenka, who have a kindred-like organization similar to the *wambet* but no kind of clan-based system, and on the other, the Ese'ejá, also neighbours of the Arakmbut, who have no trace of a kindred-based organization but who place strong emphasis on clans.

With regard to the neighbouring Panoan groups, Gray refers to another dimension of contrast, namely that while they share with the Arakmbut and the Ese'ejá a recognition of descent-based groups, they do not place as much emphasis on shamanic connections with the animal world and on male initiation. Instead, like the Matisgenka, they emphasize a female initiation ceremony 'which appears to be connected to their considerable knowledge of plants'. I am not sure that Panoan and Arawakan specialists would necessarily agree with all the details of Gray's analysis, but the approach is interesting, with possible applications elsewhere in Amazonia.

The third major focus of the trilogy is social change. Present throughout the book, it becomes predominant in the third volume. As a general theoretical point, Gray is keen to stress that the Arakmbut do not and never have lived in a static world. Indeed, it is their ability to adjust and adapt to contact with powerful outsiders, be it the Incas, the colonial Spanish, or the various fronts of expansion during the twentieth century, which explains their capacity to survive and maintain their independence. However, there seems to be no doubt that the Arakmbut are now under pressure to a degree that they have never been before, not only through the recent extensive invasion of their territory by gold-miners and lumber extractors, but also as a result of more internal factors, such as intermarriage with

Quechua incomers and other non-Arakmbut, the abandonment of male initiation and other ceremonies as a result of missionization, the undermining of the oral tradition through literacy, and the corrosive effect of a market economy on internal mechanisms of distribution, including the division of labour between men and women. These changes have been associated with the disappearance of a long-house-based settlement pattern and its replacement by scattered clusters of smaller family dwellings. Gray attempts to put a brave face on these changes by arguing that there is no theoretical reason why they should not be reversible. Sadly, this proposition, though logically correct, does not carry much conviction, since there would appear to be many practical reasons why a return to the patterns of the past is impossible.

This process of change is taking place all over indigenous Amazonia and has been described and analysed many times before. The unique contribution of Gray's treatment is his detailed discussion of the political philosophy in whose name indigenous groups such as the Arakmbut are being dispossessed. By means of a summary history of ideas, he reminds us that the claims of modern South American states to jurisdiction over indigenous areas is neither more nor less than an inheritance of the right to conquest and evangelization claimed by the first colonial powers. Even those who have opposed the violation of indigenous rights by modern states—for example, the forward-thinking indigenists who helped to frame the progressive *Ley de Comunidades Nativas* in Peru in 1974—have tended to seek solutions and reclamations within the context of a state-based political regime that in the last analysis tends to promote full social, economic, and political integration.

Against this conventional view, the indigenous groups who made representations to the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) argued that they were autonomous peoples with a distinctive cultural identity, who therefore had a right under international law to freedom of cultural expression and political self-determination. In practical terms, they argued, this should result in their own self-governance, territorial integrity, and control over all the natural resources within that territory. Clauses to this general effect were eventually incorporated into the Declaration produced by the WGIP in 1994. Since then, the Declaration has been under consideration by another UN Working Party, this time one that will report to the influential Commission on Human Rights.

Gray points out that a number of obstacles, both legal and practical, have to be overcome before the ambitious provisions of the WGIP can be implemented. First, it seems probable that a majority of states represented in the UN will oppose the degree of autonomy claimed by indigenous peoples. Secondly, since it is impractical in the majority of instances for indigenous groups to be entirely independent politically, they will rely on state authorities to guarantee their boundaries and to police them. Thirdly, protecting the rights of indigenous peoples and providing them with the kinds of specialized services they are seeking is a costly business. Bilingual education, health programmes, and appropriately conceived programmes of economic development that allow indigenous groups to produce the

surplus they need to acquire externally produced goods and services are all expensive when considered on a *per capita* basis, and in the last analysis there are very few votes to be garnered from providing them. In many instances, including on past record the case of Peru, as reported by Gray, the state is simply incapable of providing such guarantees in the remote hinterland areas where indigenous peoples typically live, even where there may be the political will to do so.

Despite the difficulties, Gray adopts an optimistic position and discusses how Arakmbut self-governance could actually work out in practice. He argues that they should be seeking sovereignty rather than independence and self-development aimed at self-sufficiency rather than economic autonomy. In the political sphere, he points to encouraging signs such as the development of local indigenous federations that suggest that the Arakmbut themselves are determined to resist the further erosion of their territorial and other rights. But the sceptical reader will note the powerful interests ranged against the Arakmbut, as well as various signs of the potential fragmentation of indigenous resistance. Recently the Mobil oil company has joined those with designs on Arakmbut lands at the very time that a schism has developed in the local indigenous federation. Even within Arakmbut communities, there is no consensus as to how external threats should be handled, with the result that often nothing will be done to resist them until it is too late.

But however the future turns out for the Arakmbut, this work will stand as a sensitive, respectful, and committed testimony to the richness of their cultural traditions even when subjected to immense pressures from outside. If it has a weakness, it derives from the fact that the Arakmbut technique of developing a narrative through 'the superimposition of layers of meaning' lends to itself to a significant degree of redundancy. While the use of three key myths to introduce the principles underlying Arakmbut life in vol. 1 is an ingenious narrative device and the case-study approach of vol. 2 an effective means of showing how these principles are played out in practice, there is considerable overlap between the two books that could perhaps have been reduced. Vol. 3 is very different from the other two volumes, but here too there is some redundancy. At times it reads as if it started life as a series of independent articles which have not been sufficiently shorn of their general background remarks, now that they are articulated as consecutive chapters of a book.

However, these are relatively minor criticisms of a largely editorial nature to be set against the monumental accomplishment of the work as a whole. There is no doubting the breadth and quality of the primary ethnographic account, as well as the many suggestive intellectual paths leading off from it, whether in relation to the comparative ethnography of the region as whole or to the politics of indigenous self-determination. It will undoubtedly come to be regarded as a milestone in the literature of the south-west Amazon, signifying the moment when the anthropological understanding of the indigenous peoples of this area first began to emulate the sophistication achieved elsewhere in Amazonia over the last thirty years.

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