

BOOK REVIEWS

Steven L. Rubenstein, *Alejandro Tsakimp: A Shuar Healer in the Margins of History*, Fourth World Rising (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002). xxv + 322 pp. \$70.00 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

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Alejandro Tsakimp is a Shuar shaman born in the 1940s, who lives and works in the Ecuadorian Amazon. In 1988, Steven Rubenstein was a 26-year-old anthropology graduate student from New York City interested in studying conflict between shamanism and Shuar Federation leaders. This book, based on Rubenstein's dissertation field research, undertaken between 1988 and 1992, excels in its analysis of the encounters between Tsakimp's and Rubenstein's very different worlds as it extends far beyond that initial topic to touch on a wide variety of themes, including some of the moral and political dilemmas inherent in ethnographic research.

The book is organized into three parts. The first part ("Introductions") establishes the setting for the study. As the title implies ("In the margins of history"), Rubenstein examines how scholars have traditionally understood and portrayed the Shuar and places his work within that context. In particular, he questions the portrayal in classic studies such as Rafael Karsten's 1935 *The Headhunters of Western Amazonas* and M.W. Stirling's 1938 *Historical and Ethnological Material on the Jívaro Indians of the Shuar* as the most warlike people in South America. Rather, Rubenstein examines how Shuar violence is a response to state aggression (pp. 29-30).

Building on these ideas, Rubenstein takes his analysis well beyond the now well-worn but curiously persistent constructions of Indians as noble savages. He does not present a romantic image of the Shuar; instead, he engages the complexities of human interactions. Rubenstein recognizes both shamans and Federation leaders as humans complete with their flaws and failures together with their successes. He touches on issues of identity, authority, and political representation, including the theme of who has and gains the authenticity and legitimacy to speak for the Shuar (p. 43). In his sensationalistic 1995 book *Savages*, Joe Kane examined the complexity of these issues for the Huaorani, and it would have been interesting to pursue further these same issues for the Shuar in the context of a scholarly book. Unlike Kane, Rubenstein is sensitive to the political implications of deconstructing these struggles which limits his willingness to criticize his friends and hosts. As the series editors note in an afterword, "anthropologists have talked about 'deconstructing' each other's and their informants' texts as if it were a kind of game" without the recognition that this practice can pull "apart people's families and social lives" (p. 255). Rubenstein does not seek personal and short-term academic gains at the risk of harming the Shuar's political struggles.

Rubenstein notes that he quickly realized that his initial intent to study conflicts between shamans and political leaders as a clash between tradition and modernity was overly simplistic (p. 12). Although rarely applied as an analytical model to indigenous struggles in Ecuador, "Red Power"

Indian rights movements in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s often inverted the social dynamics of activists' relationship to their broader culture as compared to other contemporary social movements. Unlike leaders of civil rights and anti-war movements in the 1960s, Indian activists presented themselves as conservative traditionalists bent on preserving their culture while the modernizing progressives were "Uncle Toms" willing to sell out tribal interests to the dominant culture. Rubenstein notes the complexities of interactions between "subversive" and "conservative" stances toward culture, political organization, and the government, and it would be interesting for other students of Ecuador's indigenous movements to reflect as well on these dynamics.

What really interests Rubenstein and truly motivates this study is the issue of shamanism and the role it plays in Shuar culture. He notes that it was Michael Harner's 1972 book on Shuar shamans *Jívaro: People of the Sacred Waterfalls* that inspired him to study the Shuar. Rubenstein maintains that Harner's depiction of the Shuar, based on field research conducted in the late 1950s, is largely accurate. Instead of challenging or rewriting that work, he extends his analysis into new areas which often results in interesting observations. For example, Rubenstein describes how the interactions between Shuar shamans with shamans from other parts of Ecuador results in a type of syncretic shamanism (even though he does not use that term). The impact of globalization on shamanism is a fascinating topic that would be worthy of further study.

The second part ("His Stories") comprises about half of the text of the book, and consists almost exclusively of edited transcripts of interviews that Rubenstein conducted with Alejandro Tsakimp between May 1990 and July 1991. Rubenstein makes it clear that the purpose of this life story is not to present a linguistic analysis of the Shuar language or a study of Shuar narrative structures, and instead points readers to Janet Hendricks' excellent 1993 *To Drink of Death* for such material. Instead, a series of eight chapters touches on a wide variety of themes, including familial relations, marriage, death, religion, and disease. It is unclear how some of these topics (like lying) relate to the book's theme. One might also legitimately wonder whether Tsakimp should be listed as a co-author inasmuch as approximately half of the book consists of the shaman's "stories." Indeed, it would be interesting to see how the book would have differed had Tsakimp been a full co-author.

This section of the book includes two lengthy chapters on shamans and the Shuar Federation. As with the rest of this section, the material is presented from Tsakimp's perspective, a middle-age male somewhat at odds with Shuar Federation leadership. This leads to almost incidental asides which would be fascinating themes for further analysis. For example, in a solitary paragraph Tsakimp mentions differences between male and female shamans (p. 148). Although Rubenstein later notes cultural norms which limited his contact with Shuar women, it would be intriguing to explore the issue of female shamans. As far as I know, little work has been done on this topic.

Similarly, Rubenstein hints at themes related to the political organization of the Shuar that present themselves as important topics for further study. For example, scholars often present the formation of the Shuar Federation in 1964 as the first indigenous organization in Ecuador (mistakenly, I would argue, since in 1926 Jesús Gualavisí had already organized the Sindicato de Trabajadores Campesinos de Juan Montalvo in Cayambe). What led to the formation of the

federation? How does it work? What role do women play in these politics? Rubenstein mentions splits within the Shuar Federation and different leadership styles, but it would be interesting to learn more about this. Rubenstein spent many hours interviewing Federation leaders and he mentions other studies that he has in preparation. Hopefully in time he will give these themes their due consideration.

In all fairness, in the concluding section (“The Return”) Rubenstein reflects on why it might not be politically wise to pursue such topics. He notes how anthropological field research may likely embarrass or compromise the Shuar Federation (p. 246). Indeed, such sensitivity to the potential political implications of this study is admirable. In many ways, this final section of the book with its reflections on colonial relations, elite privileges, and the role of informants in anthropological field research is the most compelling part of the book.

Rubenstein’s book is a fascinating study of Shuar culture, and makes an important contribution to the growing body of literature on this ethnic group.