

technologies are inherently commensurable with narrative; but there is also the idea that the intended audience is inherently more likely to engage with so-called ‘experience-based, affectively interactive, immersive’ digital forms (68). The book is often unclear about the target audience that is envisaged for digital representations: students, community members, researchers, general audiences? This is not to say that the authors ought to have identified specific target audiences in all the examples they give. Rather, the absence of any reflection about audiences witnessing cultural representations leads to a *de facto* deterministic view whereby, apparently, anyone would love to engage with ‘culture’ online instead of opening a book.

A few last words: in this book digital media are systematically elevated on to an ideal plane where collaboration among academics, computer technicians and communities is suddenly made more vibrant – when, as such, digital media do not necessarily, nor especially, favor such collaboration. This is arguably tied to an implicit claim about the anthropologist’s continuing relevance in ‘representing culture’, even after the communities s/he studies have appropriated digital means for self-representation. The anthropologist, no longer an expert in cultural representation, now becomes an expert in assessing ‘the potential and risk of new technology’ (23-24) – which is, at face value, a doubtful statement, one symptomatic of the book’s general inability to address fundamental analytical issues. The book’s usefulness, if any, lies in its list of concrete examples of what might be, of whatever is, ‘digital ethnography’ – a method of representing live communities in digital form, albeit a method not expounded here in sufficient analytical detail.

CHIHAB EL KHACHAB

MICHAEL A. UZENDOSKI and **EDITH FELICIA CALAPUCH-TAPUY**, *The ecology of the spoken word: Amazonian storytelling and shamanism among the Napo Runa*, Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2012.

There is an undeniable kinship between mythology and music. Lévi-Strauss recognised this when he dedicated *The raw and the cooked*, the first volume of his gargantuan *Mythologiques*, ‘to music’. His book is itself structured as if it were a musical score, with an overture, sonata, cantata, fugue, and so on. Myth and music, he argued, share the characteristic of both being languages which transcend articulate expression (1970: 15). They are isomorphic in that they operate via a different form of expressiveness, one which is defined by its *untranslatability*. The inherent untranslatability of myth can also be considered a founding principle of *The ecology of the spoken word*, a new contribution to the field of Amazonian ethnography by Michael Uzendoski and Edith Calapuch-Tapuy. The book is an exposition of mythology—or storytelling, as the authors prefer to term it—among the Quichua-speaking Napo Runa people of Amazonian Ecuador. Although rooted in anthropology, the volume will be of interest to scholars from a diversity of disciplines, including linguistics, folkloristics and ethnomusicology. The book’s well-researched ethnographic component is based not just on extensive fieldwork, but also on genuine membership of the culture at hand—Uzendoski, an American linguistic anthropologist, and Calapuch-Tapuy, a native of Napo Runa and expert in

Quichua storytelling, live at least part of the time among the Runa in lowland Ecuador.

The book is first and foremost about storytelling. For the authors, storytelling is a form of communication that radiates out much farther than the purely linguistic: it constitutes a multi-sensory experiential form of aesthetic expression. Storytelling is not just verbal, but rather forms ‘a complex aesthetic and social whole that is constituted through experience, the senses, imagery, music, and implicit social and ecological knowledge, as well as words’ (2). Taking their theoretical cue from ethnopoetics, the authors develop the central concept of *somatic poetry* through which to analyse the aesthetic nature of storytelling. They contend that all forms of Runa expressiveness, exemplified by storytelling, can be considered as somatic poetry. That is, they are forms of poesis that are embodied and that work through the body experientially. This corporeality is multimodal, incorporating ideophones, gestures, bodily kinesthetics, visual imagery, musicality, ecological perceptions, and so on. There is, therefore, a fundamental phenomenological aspect to embodied communication. Upon this premise, the authors proceed to analyse a wide range of Napo Runa mythology and music.

The ecology of the spoken word engages with recent theories concerning ontology emanating from Amazonian ethnography. The authors argue that Napo Runa culture is defined by a perspectival ontology in the vein of Viveiros de Castro’s theory of Amerindian perspectivism (1998). That is, in contrast to the naturalist perspective typical of ‘the West’, the Runa conceptualise the inter-subjective relationships between different kinds of beings very differently. In Amerindian perspectivism, the body is conceptualised not as a Cartesian mind-body unit, but rather as a fluid aggregation of capacities and dispositions constituting the seat of the perspective of the actor. Furthermore, bodies are considered capable of transformation, due to the cross-species universality of a shared soul substance, or perspective (see Descola 1996). This ontologically different conception of the body is critical for understanding the embodied and experiential nature of Amazonian storytelling. For the Napo Runa, it is argued, communication occurs between a wide range of subjectivities in the cosmos, including humans, animals, plants, spirits, and aspects of the landscape. ‘The communicative field, in other words, is much wider and more diverse than just the human domain’ (2). As the authors artfully convey, this realisation has radical implications for a study of inter-subjective communication.

Perhaps the most interesting and innovative aspect of this publication is its companion website, which aims to reflect the multimodal essence of Napo Runa storytelling through digital media. Video, audio and photographic media are presented to accompany the translations of stories in the text. Runa communication, we are told, is not confined to the formal book-based textuality common to ‘the West’, but rather is experiential and somatic in its orientation: textuality is poetically expressed via subjective bodies—human, plant, animal, spirit—as well as being inscribed in aspects of the landscape. In this sense, the multimedia interface provides an aptly multifaceted representation of the phenomenological reality of Runa storytelling. However, the authors acknowledge that this is only partial, since, like Lévi-Strauss, they contend that the full beauty and complexity of somatic poetry is ultimately untranslatable. Nevertheless, the digital media presented on the companion website are incredibly enlightening for the reader, adding a range of new dimensions to the printed book. This, one feels, is the direction that ethnography as a genre should be

moving in.

The real ethnographic value of the book is to be found in the central chapters, the bulk of which are dedicated to translating a myriad of Napo Runa stories. Combined with the resources on the website, the presentation of the myths provides a fascinating window into Napo Runa culture. Chapter 1 develops the key concept of somatic poetry in relation to a selection of examples. These include a medicinal healing rite, a poem about manioc cultivation and a shamanic song. The authors successfully demonstrate how a large proportion of this performative communication is non- or extra-verbal, including the use of gestures and ideophones. In Chapter 2, the authors transcribe a number of stories relating to the great flood, an eschatological event in Napo Runa mythology. We are exposed to storytelling via a number of different mediums, including an illuminating portrayal of the use of the Amazonian violin in Runa music. In Chapter 3, the authors discuss two origin myths about the celestial world and its principle constituents, the sun and moon. These include a fascinating analysis of the myth of *iluku*, the great potoo bird, a central character in Napo Runa cosmology. Here, the reader begins to glimpse how the Runa cosmos is structured and the role that myth has to play in its composition. Chapter 4 constitutes a discussion of the complex relationships between gender, sexuality and shamanism in Runa culture. Here the authors artfully illustrate how Napo Runa women exercise embodied sexualised power over men through shamanic songs and music. ‘Women’s songs’ are shown to be important sources of gendered, sexualised power.

Chapters 5 to 7 deal with a core set of stories in Napo Runa mythology: those relating to the culture heroes, the *Cuillurguna*, or twins. These epic stories centre around the relationships between proto-people and predatory animals, a key trope in Napo Runa relational cosmology. The stories form a sort of centrepiece for the whole book. Using the ‘verse-analysis method’, a linguistic methodology commonly employed in the field of ethnopoetics, the authors perform a detailed technical analysis of the *Cuillurguna* myths. In the penultimate chapter, they introduce the concept of ‘cosmological *communitas*’ in relation to a contemporary form of Quichua music, *Runa Paju*. Like more traditional forms of storytelling, Runa Paju is defined by communality. Loosely borrowing from Victor Turner (1969), the authors describe cosmological *communitas* as an experiential process by which meaning is condensed into the myriad signs and symbols that constitute Napo Runa cosmology.

The ecology of the spoken word also has a political orientation: the preface and conclusion are dedicated to critically opposing the ‘philosophies of life’ of Amazonian peoples and those of ‘the West’. Here, the West is condemned as the destructive enforcer of ‘machine driven naturalism’, whereas Amazonia is portrayed as the arbiter of ecological sensitivity and ‘aesthetic appreciation of the interconnectedness of all things’ (x). The emotional force behind this political dichotomy as presented by Uzendoski and Calapuch-Tapuy is certainly palpable, but their dualistic explication seems far too generalized, serving only to translate two infinitely diverse and complex regions of the world—or more accurately historical ‘cultural structures’—into essentialised caricatures. In beginning the book with a slightly naïve presentation of reified cultural stereotypes, the authors risk alienating readers before they arrive at the volume’s most valuable contribution: the stories themselves.

By and large, the central argument of the book is cohesive and clearly presented. At times, however, the

authors veer towards fetishising key terms such as ‘poetry’ and ‘aesthetics’ through their overuse. Their repetitious attempts to hammer the point home threaten to detract from the internal richness of the mythological material. One may feel that the central propositions could have been communicated more elegantly with a subtler, more nuanced presentation of the central argument. That said, the authors admirably allow the myths to do most of the talking. The uninitiated reader may also mourn the absence of an introductory ethnographic chapter that describes the Napo Runa cultural context holistically before the discussion on storytelling commences. Instead, for this the reader must refer to Uzendoski’s previous ethnography (2005). Furthermore, one may feel that certain theoretical connections could have been more fully realised. For instance, the linguistic nature of the subject matter may have allowed for a deeper engagement with recent work on ecological semiotics in Amazonia. The authors do not address the implicit question of whether there is one single overlapping form of communication, or whether there are many partially discontinuous forms, such as those defined by their use of sign, index and symbol, as highlighted by Eduardo Kohn (2007). The same applies to the potentially fruitful concept of cosmological *communitas*, which could have been more expansively developed with a discussion of Turner’s work on the power of symbols (1969). The authors neglect to describe the complex place of the concept of *communitas* in the history of social anthropology. However, these are minor complaints that should not dissuade potential readers from engaging with this rich and comprehensive text.

On balance, then, the authors must be congratulated for producing a progressive multi-media publication of rare depth that as an academic text goes a long way to mirroring their central argument that storytelling in Amazonia is a living, dynamic form of aesthetic communication. In short, *The ecology of the spoken word* is one of the most successful attempts to communicate the beauty and untranslatability of mythology to emerge from Amazonian ethnography in recent years.

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