Reviews

Biography and autobiography

Oakdale, Suzanne. I foresee my life: the ritual performance of autobiography in an Amazonian community. xvi, 206 pp., map, illus., bibliogr. London, Lincoln; Univ. Nebraska Press, 2005. £32.95 (cloth)

Suzanne Oakdale’s excellent monograph on the Kayabi Indians of central Brazil is centred on ritualized autobiographical performances given in various contexts while also giving a more general picture of this indigenous group’s recent interactions with and reactions to Brazilian national society.

It begins with a description of Stone-Arm, a Kayabi shaman, performing a cure for his ill grandson soon after Oakdale’s first arrival in the community. Oakdale shows how Stone-Arm’s central narrative is based on his own career as a shaman, but how within this basic framework he encompasses references to the wide variety of powers and relationships with which the Kayabi have contact, including Oakdale herself as a foreign researcher. In this way, the narrative acts on a number of levels, diagnosing the grandson, encouraging others to welcome and help the new visitor, but also giving a more general warning about the outside world.

Through such analyses, Oakdale’s focus on three different kinds of ritual public addresses – political oratories, Maraka curing songs, and kawosi rituals that signal an end to mourning – allows her to explore a number of aspects of Kayabi society. In particular, she uses the narratives, supplemented with other ethnographic data, to show the manner in which the Kayabi deal with the transformations that have occurred in their lives and those of recent generations.

The central example of these transformations has been the Kayabi’s move from areas where they faced intense pressure to assimilate into wider Brazilian society to the relative protection of the Xingu national park. Oakdale notes that this move from areas where Indian identity had a pejorative connotation to one where it has more positive, but still circumscribed, associations has forced the Kayabi to address many different facets of Indian identity as well as new forms of commodity consumption, residence patterns, and leadership. For example, she shows how leaders have learned to negotiate their own positions and identities with the outside world. While within the Xingu they compare themselves to the more ‘traditional’ groups in the Upper Xingu, to outsiders, Oakdale argues, they are willing to fit themselves to an archetypal notion of ‘ideal Indians’: ‘unaware of bourgeois evils’ and making judicious use of the forest. In some cases, this involves the deliberate physical acting out of ‘culture’ in dress and rituals that outsiders can observe and participate in. Oakdale notes that this idea of acting ‘Indian’ is not completely alien to the Kayabi but rather fits within wider Amazonian cosmological ideas in which masks and clothing are understood to encourage the transformation of unstable bodies.

As with this example, the strength of the work lies in showing how older Kayabi understandings of the world, and in particular notions of alternative perspectives and of personhood, are used to make sense of their contemporary situation. Based on these ideas, Oakdale argues that public discourses are well suited to guiding people through contemporary transformations. As in the first example of
of international contextualization through a discussion of the regional indigenous movement is in my view the book's only flaw; albeit one that is heavily outweighed by the depth and beauty of the local and individual analysis.

The book's theoretical discussions of community give much to think with, but its real strength is in the excellent ethnography: really vibrant, clear, detailed, and convincing. This will be great to teach with, for students at all levels, as a complex but still clear analysis of Latin American indigenous politics and economic life and, more simply, of the politics of constructing and asserting local communities as political actors.

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In this interesting and insightful book, Hasso explores the relationship between intimacy, state policy, and legal processes in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. Her analysis is influenced by Foucauldian scholarship on biopower and is based upon study of a wide range of documentary and audio-visual sources and interviews with activists, intellectuals, religious leaders, students, and state officials. Hasso highlights how the codification of family law serves to restrict the autonomy of judicial powers and how the legal processes which surround ‘birth, marriage, inheritance, guardianship and divorce’ (p. 25) allow for the state’s increased involvement in and regulation of the domestic lives of its citizens. This expansion of state influence is frequently justified by proclaiming the state’s desire to safeguard the well-being of the nation, to support and develop the family, and to protect the rights of women. Yet its legitimacy is further reinforced by the sensationalist discourse about family crisis which circulates in Egypt and the UAE.

Hasso claims this widening and deepening of state control over the intimate lives of citizens receives active support from unexpected sources. Many of the objectives both the Egyptian and Emirati governments declare in an attempt to justify intervention in this domain are championed by liberal and feminist activists. Such actors, then, often collaborate with the government in an effort to democratize ‘gender and family relations’ (p. 171), amongst other things. These activists do voice critique when government policy and practice is perceived to reinforce, rearticulate, perpetuate, or insufficiently tackle existing inequalities. Yet, interestingly, they do not question the state’s right to exercise power over this domain.

Hasso notes that in the process of implementing new forms of biopolitical regulation, states often challenge, erode, or reshape pre-existing power structures. She argues that discontent with these pre-existing structures can help explain why the intensification of state regulation over kinship ‘can be so compelling for people without a stake in the expansion of state power or authoritarianism’ (p. 172). She highlights how the state’s expansion of control over familial life can serve the interests and needs of a number of its citizens. For example, state policies and practices in this area can assist women seeking to ensure that male kin fulfill their economic responsibilities. Yet the availability of such support can lead to a situation where women and others become dependent upon the state to help fortify their position within familial structures. This is a dependency that, Hasso boldly argues, contributes to the continuation of authoritarian regimes in the Middle Eastern and North African region.

This argument is, in the context of the Arab Spring, particularly thought-provoking, and one wonders how recent political events would affect the author’s conclusions. Hasso is very adept at highlighting the differences between Egypt and the UAE, but occasionally makes broader generalizations about the region as a whole based upon data primarily drawn from these states. Nevertheless, she provides a much welcome analysis on unregistered marriage and presents a distinctive contribution to the study of the intersection between kinship and state within this region.

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HOLES, CLIVE & SAID SALMAN ABU AHERA. Poetry and politics in contemporary Bedouin society. xvi, 351 pp., illus., bibliogr. Cairo, New York: American Univ. Cairo Press, 2009. (paper)

This book is essentially a scholarly edition of forty-one ‘political’ poems by five contemporary Bedouin poets. Each poem appears in three versions: in Arabic script, in transliterations, and in English translations. The authors, Clive Holes and Said Salman Abu Ahera, have combined

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