A Return to the Village: Community Ethnographies and the Study of Andean Culture in Retrospective


The editors of this volume invited 9 contributors, authors of ethnographies published between the 1970s and 2000, to write a chapter reassessing their previous work. They asked these contributors to consider their writing in the light of more recent developments in anthropology and changing historical circumstances since their earliest fieldwork in Peru, Ecuador, or Bolivia. The result is a compilation of 8 chapters based on retrospective reflection, preceded by a long introduction by Francisco Ferreira. He began his own fieldwork in 2007, which lends a prospective tinge to his personal overview of the historical situations with which the other contributors had to contend. Ferreira reviews a selection of ethnographies on Peru and, to a lesser extent, Bolivia and Ecuador, claiming that this region constitutes a “core Andean region” (p 5). Two of the book’s contributors, Tristan Platt and Enrique Mayer, object to this notion of such a geographically restricted area.

My first reaction to the book’s title was to wonder what “community ethnographies” might be. Surely all ethnographies are grounded in some sort of a community? Readers expecting a consideration of community (as developed by, say, Anthony P. Cohen) might well be disappointed. Ferreira provides a tautological definition, stating that “a conventional community ethnography … [is] a monograph based on a single community” (p 41).

Apart from Carmen Escalante and Ricardo Valderrama, who seem to accept this, other authors are not entirely comfortable with it. Peter Gose recasts it as “village-study ethnographies,” which demonstrate “focused affirmation of locality” (p 115).

The contributors who had already begun their research in Peru when Sendero Luminoso terrorists took up a violent struggle against the Peruvian state were forced to reassess their possibilities for continuing to do fieldwork in the highlands. In 1967, Billie-Jean Isbell started hers in Chuschi, the town targeted by Sendero Luminoso in 1980 when it burned the ballot boxes. These contributors explain how, in their personal trajectories as anthropologists, they were forced to respond to the rising death toll inflicted by terrorists and members of the armed forces, accompanied by massive migration to coastal cities. Gose and Frank Solomon turned to archive work and explain how this change in trajectory helped them later to develop their understanding in relation to their chosen fieldwork locations. This historical background is important too for understanding Escalante and Valderrama’s chapter on their joint fieldwork between 1985 and 1989 in the Colca Valley, Peru, with its focus on a notion of sustainability.

In her chapter, Catherine Allen reflexively puts herself into her research, describing her fieldwork in Songo, Peru, as a process of developing new habits of listening to people to take heed of ambivalences and skepticism. She provides valuable insights into the length of time required to write well-conceived ethnographies that combine the voices of one’s research participants at the same time as developing expressive strategies as an author.

Gose explains how he used his fieldwork in Huaquirca, Peru, to merge the political economy and praxis strands of Marxism with a symbolic and interpretive analysis in the style of Clifford Geertz. He challenges postcolonial theoreticians to recognize fully the role of economics in power relations, thereby unshackling anthropology from serving as “the handmaid of neoliberalism” (p 117). Arguing that mountain spirits are products of an ontological order differing from, but partially connected to, the world modernity has created, he berates recent anthropological texts for the “thinness” of its ethnographic description. He makes a strong case that anthropologists need to explore tensions between nature and culture and not to treat ontological orders as “a static or univocally benign condition” (p 122).

In his chapter, Rudi Colloredo-Mansfield also expresses discomfort over the use of the term “community,” explaining how his progression through various stages of higher education enabled him to react to this term in developing his methods for working with people in Ariasucu, Ecuador. His argument is cogent: ethnographers should take into account how forms of social organization devised, in this case, for a sewer project, are linked to older ways of doing things, permitting “individuals … to create themselves as the rightful people of a place” (p 167). It resonates with Jorge Cladera’s (2014) discussion of Comunidades Aborígenes in the Andean highlands of northwest Argentina, whose members belong simultaneously to more than one community and may find it difficult to demonstrate ancestral continuity. Their economic practices are nevertheless based on ways of living in the world connected with the past. This reference demonstrates the value of going beyond a supposedly “core” Andean region as well as supporting Colloredo-Mansfield’s observation that community studies are “unfinished business” (p 166).

Salomon recounts how he devised a methodology using “ethnography as the fieldwork of history and myth” in Huarochari, Peru, which, he explains, was regarded by his contemporaries...