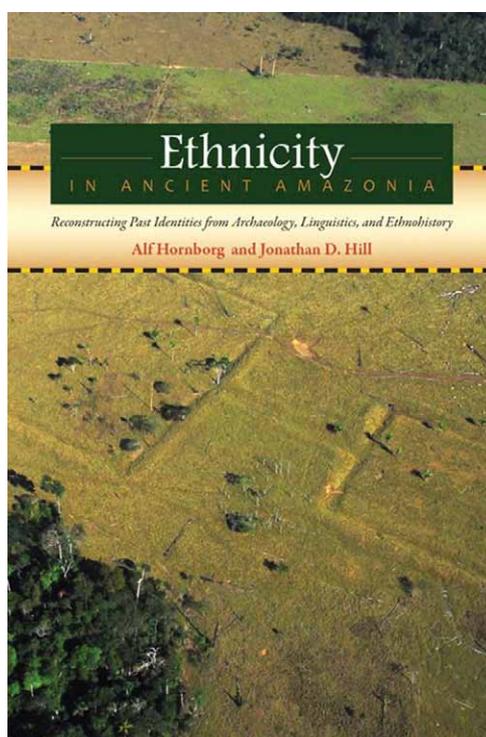


Hornborg, A. & Hill, J. D. (eds.) 2011. Ethnicity in Ancient Amazonia: Reconstructing Past Identities from Archaeology, Linguistics and Ethnohistory. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, £60

Phil Riris*

Ethnicity in Ancient Amazonia represents a significant contribution to the systematization of knowledge in a macro-region that is characterised by an exceedingly high level of social, cultural and biological diversity. By means of a single edited volume – divided into archaeological, linguistic and ethnohistorical case studies – the editors present a wide range of papers that each provide an insight into the construction of ancient identity in Amazonia. These works stem from three meetings hosted in Lund (Sweden) and Washington DC (USA) between 2006 and 2008. Hornborg and Hill's introductory chapter squarely aims the book towards advancing theory and method in the respective fields of the contributors, as well as providing an updated view on the construction of indigenous identity in Amazonia. The individual studies, when taken together, embody a great deal of variety in the questions asked, as befits the subject. The tripartite division of *Ethnicity* helps to lend focus to this challenging endeavour. Between the 16 chapters (or 18 in total, to include the editors' introduction and Neil Whitehead's afterword), the reader is directed to consider the manifold



ways in which past societies were able to create enduring forms of identity.

In tracing a phenomenon as complex as ethnicity over deep periods of time and large geographical scales, it is fair to expect that the information necessary to address it should be equally complex. The crux of the book's value for present and future scholars

* Faculty of Humanities, University of Southampton, Avenue Campus, Highfield, Southampton, SO17 1BF, United Kingdom, p.riris@soton.ac.uk

is that each chapter succeeds at viewing their objects of study *in relation* to other subjects, agencies and structures. Fittingly, this generates an impression of Amazonian societies as embedded in – and constituted by – practices. To this end, the authors make use of spatial information, environmental data, material culture, as well as linguistic models and ethnography throughout the book. Being that Amazonia remains a vast and as of yet underexplored territory, it is gratifying to see the integration of many different kinds of evidence and approaches to the past. Writing from the perspective of an archaeologist, I observed that chapters written by archaeologists or archaeologists in collaboration with researchers from other disciplines (e.g. Dahl and colleagues, chapter ten) make an effort to successfully integrate disparate datasets. By virtue of this, these chapters make for the most engaging reads, and the wider relevance of the works were readily apparent, such as for peopling of the Americas debate (Dahl and colleagues, again).

It is apparent in reading *Ethnicity* that many of the authors devote at least part of their attentions to the exploration of ethnic identity amongst Arawakan groups, a fact acknowledged by the editors. In keeping with the theme of diversity in ancient Amazonia, and the relational thesis of Hornborg and Hill, the analytical emphasis is nonetheless always clearly on how Arawak-speaking people operated relative to other groups in the past (for instance, Panoan speakers in chapter 6 or Tupí-Guarani groups in chapter 13). In fulfilment of the editors' goals, the notion that ethnicity must be "understood as a means of communicating a group's distinctiveness" is borne out in these comparative and constructivist works. In practice, this leads to a collection of works whose worth stems from transcending extant boundaries and dissolving traditional divisions between etic terminologies. The specific example of the predominance of Arawak in the collected works can be viewed as a reflection of the importance that understanding these

groups have for the rest of Amazonia, rather than an outright bias or mistaken usage as an abstracted culture-historical label.

Continuing with the theme of deconstructing imposed cultural, linguistic and geographical boundaries, it is fortunate to note that the editors have made an effort to include research from outside Brazilian Amazonia. Here, I highlight the studies of Dudley and Whitten (chapters 15 and 16), respectively situated in the piedmont of Bolivia and the "Forest of the Canelos" of Ecuador. Both chapters are concerned with tracing various processes of inter-regional systems of interaction as mechanisms which underlie ethnogenesis. Understanding the effects of exchange and communication in the past goes a long way towards emphasising the hybrid nature of many forms of ethnic or ethnolinguistic identity. Interestingly, even Amazonia, as a heuristic device, begins to break down into a broader field of relationships that extend beyond its traditional boundaries. The collected accounts of how past groups engaged with, and created an impact on one another and their inhabited environments are enriched by this achievement and it will be intriguing to see how studies of this nature develop in the future.

Additionally, some chapters in *Ethnicity* possess a certain degree of complementarity, providing the reader an overall more holistic impression of a given topic. Two good examples include chapter eight by Danielsen and colleagues and chapter nine by Facundes and Brandão. These authors employ structural and lexical analyses of Arawakan languages respectively, which produce mutually reinforcing conclusions on the relationship between certain shared features of languages of this stock. It is worth underscoring, with reference to earlier comments, that these chapters are concerned exclusively with internal relations between speakers of Arawak languages. Their close relationship adds value for the reader whose field of expertise may be well outside, in this particular case, historical linguistics, and also

contributes to the overall coherence of the book as a whole.

One topic covered in the volume which would benefit from further development is the role played by cultural and natural landscapes in the constitution of ethnic identity. Specifically, research by archaeologists and anthropologists who incorporates ethnobotanical or palaeoenvironmental data into their work would do well in this volume. This class of data is not absent, for instance the contributions of Neves (chapter two) on the site scale and Hill (chapter 13) at the level of landscape. There is a strong history of synergy between traditional methods of investigation (excavation and/or ethnographic fieldwork) and complementary evidence of human-environmental interaction in the context of Amazonia, the obvious example being *terras pretas* or Amazonian dark earths. The absence of additional direct investigations into the recursive relationship between humans and their inhabited environments in *Ethnicity* is thus rather conspicuous.

In summary, for the academic specialist the individual chapters and sections provide a good deal of interesting and original work. The book advances the agendas of linguists,

anthropologists and archaeologists working in or around Amazonia within a common framework, which is by no means a small feat. It is, however, students of Amazonian culture to whom I primarily recommend *Ethnicity*. As a panorama of current research on selected topics, it delivers an updated look at where some of the key issues lie in the three disciplines and beyond. I suspect that seasoned academic readers will feel that some of the topics covered in the book represent a logical step forward for research, rather than a paradigmatic re-evaluation of scholarship. Conversely, the less senior reader will perceive new horizons and possibilities for future research. In either case, *Ethnicity* is an indispensable read for scholars who carry out their work in the South American continent.

As a final note, the quality of certain images in the e-book edition of *Ethnicity* employed for this review left something to be desired. Whether the apparent low resolution and poor legibility is due to the software that was used to display the book or an issue with the files themselves, I can only speculate, but let this serve as a caution for the prospective buyer.