

The hold life has: coca and cultural identity in an andean community book review ...

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Introduction

The book “ The Hold Life Has: Coca and Cultural Identity in an Andean Community” is an idiosyncratic ethnography of the Quechua-speaking people of the Andes. The book brings the story of this group of people into present and hubs mainly on the very real problems of cultural continuity in a dynamic world. The author manages to discover demonstrates that the hold life has in 2002 is not the same as it was 1985. This ethnography is very dissimilar from others as the author distances herself from the human scope of life in the Andes. The author also manages to lay bare that there are no substitutes for lived experience in life. This book describes life in a small town of Sonqo which is located in Southern Peru in the department of Cuzco. It serves as an example of fine ethnography.

The first three chapters describe the numerous connections between the Andean people and places. The forth chapter addresses how coca is used by the Andeans to frame the myriad social interactions. The fifth chapter focuses on alcohol drinking and the important social differences between alcohol consumption and coca consumption. Chapter six deals mainly with eating and ascertains that a shared consumption is an act that articulates social bonds in the community. The seventh and eighth chapters deal with

celebrations and public meetings. The last chapter looks at how coca consumption has been irretrievably altered by the American drug war.

Summary of the Author's Intent/Research Objectives

Thesis

Allen's thesis is that the coca leaf, chewed by Andeans for centuries, provides a central framework for social life: it ' helps alleviate life's pain and draws people together in mutual support' (1988: 7).

Research questions

The author intends to answer the following questions in her piece of work:

- i. How do the Peruvians use coca to create and maintain social ties and allegiances with each other?
- ii. What is the cultural identity of the Andean community that links modern practice with what is known about the practices of the Inca
- iii. What is the role of alcohol in the lives of the people of Sonqo?
- iv. What are the real problems of cultural continuity in a vibrant world?

The author's main intention in this piece of work is to bring the story of the Quechua-speaking people into present. She also intends to show how the Peruvians of Sonqo use coca to create and maintain the social ties and allegiances with each other. There is a lot of information about the daily lives, religion, relationships and the cultural identity of this community that links modern practice with what is known about the practices of the Inca. This book typically examines the cultural identity in Sonqo and the role of coca and alcohol in the lives of the people of Sonqo. The author also manages to lay down a plaintive description of the transformations that she

observed in Sonqo. The author has managed to add an extensive afterword based on her previous visits to sonqo in 1995 and 2000. This is done intentionally by the author so that she can be able to focus on the very real problems of cultural continuity in a vibrant world. This is a humanistic anthropology. It demonstrates in a stylish and rhythmical prose that there exists no substitute for lived experiences in life. The author also wanted to discover the effects of chewing coca and taking alcohol among the Andeans. She is able to give a clear picture of the Andeans and how they valued cola for provision of energy as they worked in the potato fields.

The main theme in the book revolves around the Andean community and their cultural practice. The main issue being addressed in the book is the cultural practice and values of the Andean community in the past and at present. The author intends to give a linkage between the past activities of the Andean community and their present values. The author managed to visit the Andean community between 1995 and 2000 and was able to get a real life experience. She used the information that she obtained from her visit to add to the work. She managed to interview the Andeans and could also see how they interacted with each other. She therefore brings a concrete evidence on the cultural practice of the Andean community after living in their midst for about five years. The book is chronologically arranged as events are arranged in sequentially on how they occurred. She is also able to link each event to the other and hence provide a smooth flow of events without any gap in the occurrence of events. The book mainly covers ethnicity and culture. The cultural activities of the Andeans are widely covered in the text.

Summary of the Author's Conclusions

The author does not reserve herself from the human scope of life in Andes and this makes the ethnography different from other kinds of ethnography. From the inception of the text, we find Andeans as fully apprehended actors who are with name and with faces. Allen has put in black and white an enthralling and highly private ethnography of the natives of Sonqo. This is a very good encounter as the author is able to show the readers the real picture on the ground based on the experience she had. This is a beautifully written and well constructed example of an ethnographic description.

Readers are likely to gain a lot of information from the detailed analysis of the basic Andean truisms as it is one of the best in existence. This book is a true anthropology as it is about people and how they think, live, reason, feel and die. Coca leaf chewing results into the assimilation of its cocaine content and the cocaine content may enter the chewer's hair follicles. The chewing of the coca leaves is widespread among the modern Andean people (Allen 1988: 220-227). There is archeological evidence from this area that suggests that the custom has an ancient tradition (Plowman 1986). Allen (1988: 225) most Andeans have some features that can easily show the culture of chewing coca.

The coca that is represented is the binding component that held everything together. There are some ceremonies that underlie coca chewing. The ceremonies bind people in a never ending sequence of mutual obligation. The coca is also used as a main constituent of ceremonial offering and also as a source of energy during the extensive labor on the fields.

Allen manages to depict all these elements in a very simple and moving

narrative. She also manages to bring close so that as readers we can participate in the narrative. This makes the reader to have somewhat a closer and an experience of the occurrences in the Andean culture.

Evaluation of the Main Sources Chosen by the Author

The author used a first person narrative and most of the points presented in the narrative are as a result of the real life experience that she had while living with the Andeans. She was able to freely interact with them and come out with concrete research about the lifestyle and the culture of the Andeans. The main source of information for the author was through carrying out interviews with the local community and direct interaction with the Andeans. This makes this narrative very authentic and different from other narratives whereby the authors mainly base their arguments on theories. The author of this piece of work gives an account of a real life experience on how the Andeans relate with each other and how they practice their culture. During the research, the author was also able to collect some information from secondary sources that she used to put together the narrative.

Sources used by the author

i. Cocaine: Global Histories by Paul Gootenberg.

This book discusses the history of cocaine, the symptoms and the behavior that chewers are likely to depict. She manages to effectively incorporate the contents of this book into her work so that she can help the readers understand more about cocaine and the reasons why the Andeans insisted on chewing coca. One of the benefits that coca had to the Andeans is that it helped them get extra energy that could help them while working in the

potato fields.

This book was used to answer the first question “ How do the Peruvians use coca to create and maintain social ties and allegiances with each other” This book was written in America and discusses the use of Coca and how it was discovered. The book was written by Paul Gootenberg and is very instrumental in determining the effects of coca and how the Peruvians found it useful.

The book however, has some limitations as it does not address the negative effects of coca or the effects that coca chewing can have in an individual’s life. Generally, the book is very sufficient in addressing the question of how the Peruvians found coca useful in terms of maintaining social ties amongst themselves.

ii. Globalization and the reinvention of Andean tradition: The politics of community and ethnicity in highland Bolivia by John McNeish.

This is a journal entry that was used by the author in analyzing the effect of globalization on the Andean culture. This journal was written in Bolivia by John McNeish who attempts to show the readers the transformations that had taken place in the lives of the Andeans as a result of globalization. This journal is only used to show the importance of globalization but does not cover the traditions of the Andeans and the impacts that chewing Coca had in their lives.

This journal addresses the fourth question “ What are the real problems of cultural continuity in a vibrant world” It was written in Bolivia and also attempts to cover issues which occur in the vibrant world. The entry specifically covers issues that erupt as a result of the changes that occur in

the world. The author also uses this book to address the specific problem of globalization and the effects that it has in the changing world.

This journal is generally adequate for the study of the Andeans as the group covered gives a general representation of the lives of the Andeans as their activities were somewhat similar.

iii. Introduction: Performing Andean Identities Journal of Latin American by Mark Rogers.

This is a journal that the author used to carry out an analysis of the Andeanist literature on the culture and celebrations of the Andeans. The journal was written in Latin America and its main function was to give an insight overview of the culture of the Andeans and how they interacted with each other. This article also contributes to the anthropological understanding of the processes involved in constructing the identities and the historical memories.

This journal entry is used to answer the second question “ What is the cultural identity of the Andean community that links modern practice with what is known about the practices of the Inca”. It adequately addresses the changes in the Andean community that were brought about by globalization. The journal entry was written by John McNeish in America and addresses issues related to politics and the ethnic ties of the Andeans. The entry however, has some limitations as it only covers the ethnicity of the Andeans who were living in highland Bolivia and leaves out the Andeans in other plain lands of Peru.

Critical Analysis

This investigation is very important for anybody studying anthropology as it

gives a clear picture of the developments that has taken place since time immemorial. The book gives the relationship between the past and the present. It is also very important as it is able to give the reader and other anthropologists a historical overview of the Andeans from a first person's point of view. However, there are some identities that have not been given up by some ancient communities (McNeish, 2002: 12). As the world is developing, more developments in terms of culture and personalities among the individuals are realized. However, the interactions between the human beings never cease to exist (Rogers 1988: 141).

Most of the information used by the author was drawn from the direct interaction she had with the Andeans. She was able to learn their culture and how they interact with each other. She was also able to learn about the division of labor which was very common among the Andeans. The interactions and the interviews that she conducted enabled her also to learn about the Andean culture and the role played by chewing coca. This type of information source is usually one of the best as it helps the writer to give a true account of the real situation on the ground.

In my own opinion, the best source of materials for writing a narrative should be from interviews carried out on the parties directly involved in the topic under study. The authors should not only rely on the already existing literature as some literature may not be accurate. If an author combines real life experience, interviews and the already existing resources, he/she can be able to have accurate results and be able to produce a quality narrative fascinating to many just like the narrative produced by Allen, Catherine J." The Hold Life Has: Coca and Cultural Identity in an Andean Community."

About the author

Catherine J. Allen is a professor in Anthropology and International affairs at George Washington University in Washington DC. She was the recipient of a 2001 Guggenheim Fellowship Award and coauthored with Nathan Garner, “The Condor Qatay: Anthropology in Performance.” The author has managed to give a narrative based on her real life experience thus making the narrative authentic and more interesting.

Conclusion

The work by Allen is very informative and interesting. The author has managed to provide an in-depth look at the Andeans and how they adhere to the customs of the ancient Incan and colonial Spanish civilization. She also performs a good job at exploring the role that coca chewing plays in the society and in determining their identity. The rituals of the Andeans will definitely fascinate the reader. In order to fully understand and appreciate this book, the reader is advised to exercise some thought and exploration towards the book and its contents. This book is one of the best books about anthropology that brings about the history of a given community and shows their culture and the way they have developed. It also gives an insight overview of how the different members of the community interact with each other and how they exercise division of labor among themselves. The author managed to demonstrate the connection that exists between the past of the Andean community and their present values. The book is written eloquently with flowing metaphors that shoves the reader toward an intensely felt understanding not only of the life of the Andeans but of the affectionate and

mystifying work of doing anthropology. This book remains one of the best ethnographies of the Andes and one of the clearest and most reachable works of its sort. It is exceedingly suitable to teaching Anthropology both to undergraduates and graduates. The second edition of the book shows how globalization has impacted the lives of the Sonqoeans and the transformations that have taken place since the first edition of the book was published. It also shows the beauty and the meaning in Andean lives.

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