



Vol. 11, No. 3, Spring 2014, 321-325

Review / Reseña

Van Valen, Gary. *Indigenous Agency in the Amazon: The Mojos in Liberal and Rubber-Boom Bolivia, 1842-1932*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013.

The Mojos' Willing Agency

Mack Scott

Kansas State University

As they peppered their enemies with arrows and buckshot deep in the heart of the Bolivian Amazon, the Mojo—a native Arawakan-speaking people—seemed to be struggling desperately and against all hope to maintain their traditional way of life. Indeed, many previous accounts often construed the survival strategies employed by indigenous peoples throughout Latin America along the binary of sealing off communities from the outside world or partaking in rebellions that were doomed to failure. Within these paradigms, the Mojo—and other Indian peoples—were ultimately ineffectual and completely subjugated to the whims, desires, and needs of an outside power. Thus, the bellicosity exhibited by the Mojo on

13 March 1887, was nothing more than the futile spasms of a dying culture. However, a deeper consideration of the exigencies and contingencies that informed individual or group action, as well as an expanded appreciation for what these actions entailed, challenges the general simplicity of earlier interpretations. It is through this expanded lens that Gary Van Valen views the Mojo. The author's interpretive focus on the agency of indigenous peoples reveals a much more dynamic and complex reality. As Van Valen explains, "by looking through the prism of agency, we can see that the Mojos were not inherently victims or powerless in the face of changes imposed by others, and that they would prove to be active participants in shaping the course liberalism and the rubber boom would take in their region" (3). Indeed, understanding how the Mojo helped to shape not only their own realities but also the experiences of the greater community constitutes the heart and value of Van Valen's work. To reveal the world inhabited by the Indians, he employs the words, accounts, testimonies, and records of non-Mojos. Therefore, Van Valen must glean the meaning and intent that informed Mojo agency from these non-native sources. One area where the author's focus on indigenous agency exposes a more layered reality than thus far appreciated appears in the author's discussion of the Mojo's mission experience. Although some accounts—and not without reason—focused on the compulsory nature of the work performed by the Indians and the harsh punishment administered to those who failed to comply, Van Valen's deeper analysis reveals that the Mojo were not simply exploited victims but active participants and contributors to the creation of early cross-cultural social, economic, and political realities. For example, the author explains, "after suffering the incursions of Spanish settlers" some of the Mojo "eventually decided that a Jesuit presence would both protect them from slave raids and provide access to salt and iron" (27). Therefore, some of the Indians were active participants in the establishment and success of the missions system.

Through their mostly voluntary association with the Jesuits, the Mojo not only helped to create an economic structure based on reciprocity known as *temporalidades*, they also helped shape the political realities of mission life. Despite the Jesuit practice of dividing the Indians into two

groups—the *familia* (or elite) and the *pueblo* (or common people)—kinship ties provided a bridge between these two classes. The *familia* occupied an ambiguous position as mediators between the Spanish authority and an indigenous populace with whom the Jesuits held intimate ties. Thus, both sides turned to the *familia* to execute their own interests. It was this access to and manipulation of *familia* that allowed the Mojo “in partnership with the Jesuits” to create “a new, viable mission culture” (27). As Van Valen explains, the rebelliousness and seclusion so commonly associated with indigenous agency took place for the Mojo primarily after the expulsion of the Jesuits and the establishment of more repressive and exploitative regimes.

Like those of the mission experience, earlier chronicles of the region’s rubber boom tended to highlight and stress its abusive nature. Within this interpretation, the indigenous population became little more than recalcitrant peons who were essentially powerless to affect their realities. But as Van Valen shows, significant exigencies and contingencies existed that shaped the unique experiences of indigenous peoples. For example, the author explains that “with regard to the quality of life of Beni Indian workers in the rubber industry, we must take into account the difference between boatmen and rubber gatherers” (67). This was because both occupations placed native peoples in varying degrees of proximity to the patrons who oversaw and directed their labor. Indeed, the boatmen, who were mostly under the direct supervision of patrons, enjoyed less autonomy than the gatherers who often only saw their patrons once a week. Thus, both groups necessarily manifested their agency in different ways. For example, although their work was often strenuous and dangerous, the boatmen could ameliorate the severity of their experience. As Van Valen explains, “while on isolated portions of the river, a patron could not enforce any order without the approval of most of the crew” (72). Indeed, disgruntled Indians could simply abandon their charges or let “a boat slip over the falls at night, while the owner was asleep on board” (72). Although the relationships established between boatmen and their patrons were by no means equitable, the indigenous people who paddled the rivers and

tributaries of the Amazon were not without recourse to shape their experiences.

Similarly, gathering rubber might have been one way in which Indians could accommodate the social, political, and economic changes associated with liberalism and the abolition of communal property. Van Valen asserts, “rubber work may even have been an attractive opportunity to escape the taxes, tribute, and continuing unpaid labor of the former mission towns” (104). However, this conclusion exposes the limitation of Van Valen’s work because he is left to draw assumptions about the possible meaning and intent of indigenous agency.

To be sure, Van Valen’s task is a difficult one. And although his methodology is sound, deducing meaning and intent from the actions of historic actors remains a harrowing endeavor. This reality is made more difficult by the fact that the author was forced to draw his conclusions from non-indigenous sources. Such restrictions do not necessarily leave room for ambiguity as we try to understand an indigenous world through multiple non-indigenous filters. These limitations aside, Van Valen offers a powerful rebuttal to the limited scope of earlier accounts. The author clearly and convincingly advocates for an expanded appreciation of the differing manifestations of indigenous agency. Employing this outlook helps us to better understand the parameters of the Mojo’s bellicosity.

When a contingent of Mojos attacked an expeditionary force in 1887, they did not hope to overthrow nor undermine the authority of the Bolivian government. As Van Valen explains, the Mojo of San Lorenzo—an indigenous settlement on the outskirts of the Amazonian frontier—“respected established forms of political authority” and only rejected their representatives in Trinidad. The Mojo even went so far as to establish a new *cabildo* in San Lorenzo—a local town government—similar to those used in Spanish municipalities. Nor did the Mojo intend to seal themselves off from the outside world because just a few weeks prior to the attack some Mojo had “carried a Bolivian flag in their Carnival dances” (120). As the author shows, such realities challenge the old and all-encompassing paradigm of seclusion and rebellion as the only manifestations of indigenous agency. And although we are left wondering about the exact

meaning and intent behind Indian agency, Van Valen has brought us one step closer to appreciating the complexities that lie therein.