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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

MORELLI, CAMILLA. 2023. *Children of the Rainforest: Shaping the Future in Amazonia*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. ISBN 9781978825215

Children of the Rainforest traces cultural change over several decades in small communities of Matses speakers. The area encompasses the upper reaches of the Amazon in Peru and Brazil. The Matses have been buffeted by the usual outside forces affecting the indigenous peoples of Amazonia, but Morelli's focus is on how change affects childhood and the reverse, how children contribute to change. She achieves a unique perspective having visited the Matses community annually since 2010. Her first-hand accounts are extended back in time through extensive ethnohistorical interviews with key informants.¹ Another characteristic of Morelli's work is the thoroughness with which she documents children's perspectives using continuous observation, conversations, child-drawings and child-produced photographs and animation.

Through historical ethnography she documents three distinct phases in the nature of Matses childhood. In the earliest period lasting into the 1960s, the Matses depended entirely on nomadic foraging, subsisting through hunting and gathering. As is the case in most hunter and gatherer societies documented to date, children were intimately involved in subsistence practices from an early age. Morelli notes that, "the ability to move confidently in the dangerous forest world, learning how to trek and hunt proficiently, is what turned boys into...men" (p. 21). During this period, children underwent several rites of passage, such as tattooing, to make them better adapted to the forest and more resistant to its harmful effects.

This period also included inter-tribal raiding and attacks on the settlements by encroaching settlers. These were followed by punitive raids by the government. Missionaries intervened and brokered a mass movement to forested areas adjacent to navigable rivers. The Matses were encouraged to build permanent villages, and schools were established.

This migration, in turn, led to a major generational shift. While the more mature members of the community continued to make their living from forest foraging, their children disdained the forest and, rather, embraced the riverine ecology, quickly becoming expert canoeists and fishers. They feel "passionately" about this environment which also serves as the primary "play space." Hence, they not only led the way in adapting to the river, but they also adopted fishing techniques that were previously unknown among the Matses. As Morelli notes, this pattern is at odds with WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) assumptions about children's learning where children are introduced to and integrated into new environments by their parents.

Not only do Matses children provide a significant addition to the family's food supply, they contribute through working in the family's garden, and looking after the home and caring for younger siblings. So, in many respects, the picture of indigenous childhood that Morelli describes is quite typical and very widespread, but hers is the first study to discover and document a wholesale "conquest" of a new environment by children.

¹ To the best of my knowledge, there are only three long-term studies of children and social change covering several decades. These include White's study on Java; Greenfield and Maynard's work in Chiapas, Mexico and Rogoff and colleagues' study of a Guatemalan village.

Another important finding is that, following relocation, children deliberately and consciously rejected hunting and gathering. Morelli suggests that the transition to sedentary living and improved access to modern medical care led to a population spike which in turn led to over-use of the immediately adjacent forest. Treks became much longer and she notes that when children consent to accompany their elders, they display boredom, fatigue, disorientation and the loss of forest knowledge and hunting skills. When interviewed, children emphatically express their negative attitudes towards the forest. Elders, by contrast, express their preference for the forest while fishing from a canoe is "boring."

In the present (the focus of several chapters), Morelli finds that children are, increasingly, oriented to modern lifestyles and urbanization. As distant as they are from any urban setting, Matses children seek glimpses of the modern world like a miner panning for gold. As Paloma, an informant expressed it, "I crave concrete." As little as they may know of urban centers, their imagination fills in the gaps. These aspirations of modernity are not diminished by reality, as Morelli notes that, "in the past five years, a growing number of teenagers...have started leaving the forest and moving to towns...to satisfy their craving for concrete" (p.6). They live a threadbare existence in the slums and may return, empty-handed and disillusioned. Schooling has been a "broken promise" (p.64). But Morelli makes it a central theme of her book that indigenous children are not powerless victims of globalization but, through their voluntary actions, play a leading role in driving social change.

This brief summary of *Children of the Forest* barely conveys the significance of this grand accomplishment. Seldom has childhood been studied so thoroughly nor yielded so many original findings. This is a must read for anthropologists who study childhood and scholars across the spectrum interested in the process of social change.

Author Bio: Beginning in 1968 in Liberia, David Lancy has done extensive cross-cultural fieldwork and repeated surveys of the ethnographic record with children as the focus. In total, he has authored nine books and edited three. His current research interests center on the study of delayed personhood, the chore curriculum, children as a reserve labor force, children growing up in a Neontocracy, how children acquire their culture, socio-historical analyses of schooling, and the culture of street kids. His distinctions include the Utah State University Career Scholar award and Carnegie award for teaching excellence.



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