

and encourage active participation. There are many ways you can take an active part in the section: as an officer, a session or special event organizer, a contributing author to *Anthropology & Humanism*, a content-provider for this column or the website.



Who was that masked man?! AAA 2002 in New Orleans. Photo courtesy F Gleach

... And if you have ideas for things we could or should be doing but don't seem to be, please let us know!

We also remind everyone that there is now a Facebook page for SHA. As of mid-August there were over 90 people signed on there; many are not members of SHA (many are not US-based), but that's fine—we want everyone who is interested and supportive of our goals to be able to participate.

But as always we do need to keep our membership numbers up, so if you can, please officially join the section. Although many activities are open to non-members (and frankly we hope those will encourage you to join), some possibilities are only available to members.

Remember that we do have a reduced-rate membership for individuals who are members of more than three AAA sections. If you can afford it and want to support the SHA you can still pay the regular fee—which we certainly encourage—but the lower fee is there if you need it.

One special event for the New Orleans meeting that warrants highlighting is a session of *pecha kucha* presentations. A *pecha kucha* is a sort of haiku-like form of presentation developed a few years ago in the arts community, constrained as 20 images each shown for 20 seconds with accompanying sound or text that is either and live, recorded, or both. These require careful planning and preparation, but are finding favor in a variety of fields. Join us Thursday afternoon in New Orleans to explore this new format!

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Society for Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology

ANNELOU YPEIJ, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Ritual Encounters: Lived Experiences with the Power to Transform Society

By Michelle Wibbelsman (UT Austin)

An online interview for *Latin America Book Review* recently gave me the opportunity to talk about a decade-long ethnographic project, and

to reflect on the contribution ritual and performance studies make toward an understanding of the processes of self-determination that underpin the social and political affirmation of contemporary Latin American communities.

The project centers on the continuing importance of ritual traditions and festival practices among an indigenous community at a crossroads of dramatic change. Contemporary Otavalans span a range of life experiences deriving in part from intense transnational mobility characterized by repeat return migration to the Otavalo area of Northern Ecuador. In the context of transforming definitions and experiences of community, annual rituals have assumed a prominent role in creating spaces that periodically bring this diversifying ethnic population together. The Otavalan community, in other words, performs itself into being on a regular basis, as Gregory Barz (2003:6) would say.

The outward thrust of expanding mobility and possibilities in the 20th and 21st centuries is counterbalanced by a simultaneous process of a conscious return to Otavalo as a point of cultural and mythic origin. This intersection of the mythic and the modern draws our attention to alternative narratives that stem from an ability to imagine a better future based on a discerning outlook on contemporary conditions and a deep knowledge of the past, what Otavalans refer to as *ñawpa yachaykuna*. In this sense, Otavalan rituals are integral to producing not only a sense of community amid global dislocations, but a vision for self-determination and collective action.

In my book, *Ritual Encounters: Otavalan Modern and Mythic Community* (University of Illinois Press, 2009), I make two fundamental claims about ritual that lay the groundwork for this observation. First, indigenous rituals are moveable feasts and tend to shift geographically as people travel the festival circuit visiting kin and friends. Reconceptualizing the relations among place, community, identity and cultural practice becomes essential as the ethnographic focus turns to the flow of people along social networking paths, including local exchanges, international trajectories and virtual contexts.

This case also prompts us to rethink rituals as temporally bounded events that punctuate the calendar. Among Otavalans, there is a less dramatic break than is often assumed between the quotidian and ritual spheres. A more apt description favors the notion of extended ritual seasons and festival complexes that capture the critical interrelation among rituals and life experiences throughout the year, and the cumulative consequence of ritual performances as the emerging frame of experience and action they represent collectively (Trouillot 1995). The energy and resources Otavalans pour into ritual activities suggest a concerted effort precisely toward extending the experience of heightened reflexivity and engagement, no longer as a transient or spontaneous phenomenon “in and out of time,” but as an evolving and enduring social condition—a *normative communitas* as Victor Turner (1995: 132) outlines.

Sustaining this heightened collective sensitivity revolves around meaningful dialogue that extends beyond the human realm to include the dead, the divine and the animated landscape in ritual and

everyday conversations that encompass otherworldly beings in a broadly defined moral community. Maintaining a continual rhythm of conversation is a bridging practice that aims at generating awareness of the interrelatedness of all living things and a sense of empathy and obligation to others.

Empathy, achieved through embodied and emotional understanding, characterizes ritual performances as well, which Otavalans undertake as lived experiences with the power to transform society. Rather than sites of representation, semiotic analysis reveals that indigenous rituals are dynamic contexts of living memory and experience in which people not only reference the past but also relive it, enact the present in its breadth of complexity and jointly imagine their future as a community across diversifying personal experiences and multivocal interpretations.

Elayne Zorn, 1952–2010

On June 15, our highly esteemed colleague and beloved friend Elayne Zorn passed away. Zorn served on the SLACA Board, first as coeditor of the 2000 AAA Conference Program and then as Treasurer (2006–09). See her obituary in the September *AN* (51[6]:50).

Please send any comments, suggestions and ideas, including photos for future columns, to Annelou Ypeij at j.l.ypeij@cedla.nl or to Centre for Latin American Research and Documentation (CEDLA), Keizersgracht 395–397, 1016 EK Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Society for Linguistic Anthropology

JAMES STANLAW AND MARK PETERSON, CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Are We Teaching Too Much Spanish?

By James Stanlaw

When President Obama was running for election in 2008, he chided an audience of mainly African American parents and high school students to stay in school. And he told them they should learn a foreign language: “But understand this. Instead of worrying about whether immigrants can learn English ... you need to make sure your child can speak Spanish. You should be thinking about how your child can become bilingual.”

I suppose this *AN* readership of anthropologists and linguists would concur. However, in terms of personal benefit and national interest, are all foreign languages created equal? That is, how significant is it for a country when a majority of its students take only one foreign language? There are many such instances, of course, English in Japan being just one example. But is the US over-emphasizing Spanish?

The president chose his example judiciously. Spanish by far is the 600 pound gorilla in the language lab. According to an exhaustive survey done in 2006 of foreign language enrollments in US institutions of higher education—conducted

by the Modern Language Association (www.mla.org/2006_flenrollmentsurvey)—822,985 students were studying Spanish. This was substantially more than the 754,825 students who were studying all the other 204 languages being taught (including American Sign Language). Also, student enrollments indicate that many more students continue on with advanced Spanish classes. There are 2,348 institutions of higher education teaching Spanish (856 two-year schools and 1,492 four-year colleges and universities). These numbers stand out compared to the next-most populace, German at 1,281.

Does this dominance of Spanish hurt the foreign language curriculum? Certainly some teachers of the so-called “less-commonly taught languages” think so. “We have scrutinized every area of Spanish and Hispanic studies, from the medieval to modern, in the upmost detail. At the expense, I fear, of everything else,” said one Asian specialist. “In an era of market driven classes, the sheer number of students is going to skew the allocation of shrinking resources. If there are 200 kids still waiting to get into introductory Spanish and 10 wanting first-year Chinese, where do you think the university is going to put its money?”

Also, with Spanish being in the same language family as English, some of the benefits of learning a foreign language might be lessened. As Dan Everett (see *AN* 47[4]) is fond of saying, from the perspective of the Pirahã—a indigenous Native American language spoken in Brazil—English, French or Spanish are the same language. And consider the importance of the cultural traditions that go along with foreign language study. Keeping with the Chinese example, it is one of the world’s oldest civilizations, with a vast literature and writing system. A quarter of the world’s population speak a Chinese language. China is now the world’s second largest economy, recently passing Japan. This seems to make the commercial value of learning Spanish less compelling.

Part of the popularity of Spanish is no doubt because of its alleged ease of learning or, conversely, the supposed difficulties of other languages. (Of course, Spanish instructors will tell you this reputation results in less motivated students). Well-established Spanish programs and faculty no doubt contribute to maintaining a strong Spanish presence on campuses all over the country. Also, proximity—being able to speak with other neighbors and classmates—might play a role in its popularity.

It is hard to suggest how things might change (or even if they should). Some figures indicate that things are slowly self-adjusting. While Spanish enrollments rose more than 10% from 2002 to 2006, many others grew faster. Chinese went up over 50%, Japanese 27%, Korean 31% and Arabic 126%. Colleges cannot offer classes that only a few students will take. And although it is true that more US students enroll in more foreign language classes than ever before, they are still not a high priority for many. In 1965 there were 16.5 language course enrollments per 100 total student enrollments, but this number has dropped now almost by half to 8.6. In the end, freshman accounting draws more bodies than introductory Spanish, and this is a fact that Americans must recog-

nize, with all its political, economic and cultural implications.

Please send your comments, contributions, news and announcements to SLA contributing editors Jim Stanlaw at stanlaw@ilstu.edu or Mark Peterson at petersm2@muohio.edu.

Society for Medical Anthropology

KATHLEEN RAGSDALE, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Medical Anthropology and US Health Policy: A View from “Across the Pond”

By Rachel Irwin (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London School of Economics)

In a 2009 *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* article, Carolyn Sargent addressed the need for the anthropological community to engage with the US health crisis. In *AN*, Merrill Singer and Pamela Erickson discussed how the body has become a source of profit and other health policy issues. According to Singer and



Erickson, “medical anthropologists are likely to be increasingly involved in work that contributes to the establishment of universal health care” (50[9]). Most medical anthropologists agree that we are in a unique position to examine health systems and that we should engage with national debates to improve health equity.

Yet few medical anthropologists have outlined the actual nature of this engagement or set forth specific actions anthropologists can take to further national health equity. Complicating the call to action is the complexity of national healthcare. For example, it is unlikely that anthropologists not well-versed in the intricacies of hospital financing or parallel trade in pharmaceuticals will be able to comment on these aspects of health policy. However, I suggest there are ample areas of health policy where medical anthropology can add significant value to healthcare debates.

Although the phrase “health systems are the product of historical, social and cultural factors” is an oft-repeated research maxim, analysis frequently stops here and neglects to address the political economy of health systems. By its nature, health systems and health services research is multidisciplinary: the field is united by its subject matter rather than by theory or analytical framework. Certainly, analyzing the complexities of health systems requires a multiplicity of approaches. The downside is that an interdisciplinary approach may lack the focus and depth that grounding in one discipline can provide. It is within these spaces that we find gaps in useful knowledge that can be filled by anthropology.

Medical anthropologists understand that much of the milieu that surrounds national health systems has more to do with political processes than with health. Anthropology provides a

method for recording and analyzing the formal and informal spaces of policy creation. One goal of medical anthropology is to understand the rationale behind political processes, such as raising revenue for healthcare. Solution: One might conduct an ethnography of Capitol Hill to understand how the US government makes decisions on what taxes to levy or how national healthcare issues are debated within the wider context of other governmental decisions. Who talks with whom? How do they convince others to include a given concern on a particular bill? Why is an earmarked tax for healthcare appropriate in one state, but not another?

Political economy, which challenges how knowledge is produced and what types of knowledge are valid, can be used to great effect by medical anthropologists engaged in research on national healthcare debates. For instance, nearly all countries face healthcare cost constraints and must make difficult decisions about universal health coverage. How such decisions are made and how national healthcare budgets are produced are areas ripe for anthropological inquiry. Health technology assessment, which evaluates the effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness of medical products, is another area that could benefit from anthropological inquiry. How can two countries use the same body of literature in assessing a new pharmaceutical product, for example, yet come up with different guidelines regarding its use? Why do some countries emphasize the use of randomized control trials more than others?

Medical anthropology’s future will increasingly involve multi- and inter-disciplinary teams to address healthcare issues. Therefore, we must consider our core competencies as a discipline and where we can truly add the most value in terms of research and applied work. It is important to ensure that medical anthropology becomes a standard subdiscipline taught in public health schools and training programs, alongside more traditional courses in epidemiology, health promotion and health policy. Only then, can researchers understand how policies affect healthcare users and how they can better negotiate the health policy environment.

To submit contributions to this column please contact SMA Contributing Editor Kathleen Ragsdale at kathleen.ragsdale@ssrc.msstate.edu.

Society for Psychological Anthropology

JACK R FRIEDMAN, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Biennial Meeting of the Society for Psychological Anthropology Santa Monica, CA, March 31–April 3, 2011

In this conference, “Subjects and Their Milieux in Late Modernity: The Relevance of Psychological Anthropology to Contemporary Problems and Issues,” we continue to innovate within psychological anthropology and reach across disciplinary and disciplinary boundaries to explore new