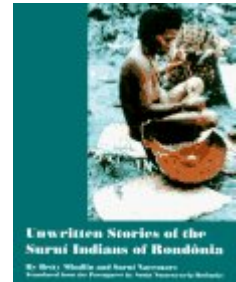


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Betty Mindlin, Surui Narrators. *Unwritten Stories of the Surui Indians of Rondonia*. Austin, T.X.: Institute of Latin American Studies, 1995. xiii + 147 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-292-75191-0.

Reviewed by Robert M. Levine (University of Miami)
Published on H-LatAm (August, 1996)



Betty Mindlin, an anthropologist at the Brazilian Institute for Anthropology and the Environment and the University of Sao Paulo, has gathered the traditional narratives of sixteen elders of the Surui (Paiter) community in Brazil's Rondonia. They are part of a group of 650 surviving Tupi-Monde-speaking Indians in Rondonia, where their people had lived in forested seclusion until 1969, when the first peaceful contacts were made with the Brazilian Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs (FUNAI). In 1976 they were given reserved territory of 240,000 hectares in the heart of Rondonia, as remote a location from modern urban life as any in the Western Hemisphere.

Mindlin started recording narrations in 1979, at first working alone and later with Surui translators, including a Surui named Ipokara who was living in Sao Paulo. All of the translations, as well as Mindlin's construction of a written language for the Tupi-Monde, were done in collaboration with members of that community, tasks not usually realized by scholars. As the written versions of the tales are revised—there are, of course, no “correct” accounts of the spoken tales, since they vary each time in the telling and because every teller offers a different rendering—Mindlin hopes to publish them bilingually (Portuguese and Tupi-Monde) so that they may be used by Indians in their community schools. Mindlin tells us that the people who recounted to her their legends and tales wanted to learn to read and write, and “to get to know and master their colonizers' society.” One is tempted to see this assertion as politically correct wishful thinking, but Mindlin knows the Surui better than any other outsider, and she deserves the benefit of the doubt.

The Surui narrative tales fall into three types: sto-

ries, famous warriors, and the shamans. Most of the Surui people know the most traditional tales, even though the plots seem puzzling and difficult to comprehend even though they touch on universal themes. They begin with the story of the Dirty Palop, a demiurge, the Creator of the World. The story of the moon is about incest; the Surui story of the tapir is a Don Juan parable warning against stealing women's hearts. The story of the eagle is a fairy tale; the story about the locust (cicada) comments on the need to protect children. The stories are playful, filled with tricks and moral lessons and the propensity of the Surui to laugh. They deal with a wealth of human behaviors and emotions: madness, pregnancy, initiation rites, health, homesickness, magic, scatological wisdom, fire, agriculture, hunting, and dreams.

The stories of legendary heroes tell us that the Surui did not practice cannibalism, as their enemies did, and reveal glimpses of the Indians' reactions to the coming of Brazilians from the outside world. These stories are filled with descriptions of battles, of suffering, and of cruelty. The stories of the shamans, which are the most fragmentary of the tales, depict the relationship of the Surui to their spiritual world, and to their beliefs about the crossing of souls to the realm that follows physical death.

Ethnographic oral histories provide marvelous opportunities for insights into the lives and dreams of people who otherwise would not leave a historical record. It would be helpful if others might record complementary oral histories from Brazilians who were present when the Surui for the first time interacted with modern Brazilian society less than three decades ago.

The book is handsomely illustrated with photographs of the Surui as well as by lithographic illustrations drawn

by nineteenth-century naturalists, including von Spix and von Martius and William Gore Ouseley. The translations are graceful and easy to read. The author provides a very useful and extensive glossary of those Tupi-Monde terms that are best left untranslated. Mindlin offers some advice to her readers: though the temptation to interpret everything is enormous, she asks that we first read the

tales and consider them for themselves, "before we go off in search of structures and archetypes."

Copyright (c)1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net at H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Robert M. Levine. Review of Mindlin, Betty; Narrators, Surui, *Unwritten Stories of the Surui Indians of Rondonia*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. August, 1996.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=559>

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.