

SERIES PREFACE

The Arakmbut are an indigenous people who live in the Madre de Dios region of the southeastern Peruvian rainforest. They are one of seven Harakmbut peoples all of which belong to the same linguistic family and which number in total about two thousand people. Despite having been known as Mashco and Amarakaeri during their forty years of contact with Peruvian national society, the people of the community of San José del Karene, with whom I have lived periodically since 1980, request that they be known as 'Arakmbut'.

Since their first encounters with missionaries in the 1950s, the Arakmbut have shown resilience and determination to affirm their identity in the face of difficulty. For the last fifteen years, the Arakmbut have been under threat from a gold rush that has attracted hundreds of colonists onto their territories.

This trilogy traces the ways in which the Arakmbut strive to overcome the dangers that surround them: They use their mythology to reinforce cultural strength; they demonstrate social flexibility in the face of alien peoples; and they show a discriminating capacity to incorporate positive non-indigenous concepts and activities into their defence strategies. Each of these factors reflects the constant presence of the invisible spirit world, which provides a theme connecting these books to each other.

The mythology of the Arakmbut is extremely important to them and to the way in which they perceive the world. On my departure from the community of San José del Karene after two years in 1981, I was told by several elders that I should write up my material around the three central myths. The first volume of this trilogy looks at each of these myths in order to introduce different facets of Arakmbut life.

The first myth, 'Wanamey', tells of the origins of the Arakmbut, the visible world and their social and cultural existence. It provides

the impetus for a discussion of Arakmbut social organisation, which is based on various overlapping principles such as gender, age, residence, patrilineal descent and marriage exchange.

The second myth, 'Marinke', tells of the relationship between human beings, animal species, and the invisible spirit world. The visible and invisible worlds interconnect in ways that parallel social relations within the community, and this accounts for the constant presence of spirits and soul-matter in Arakmbut daily life.

The third myth, 'Aiwe', describes the abduction of an Arakmbut child by white people (Papa) who threaten his people with destruction, yet provide the means for their survival. It looks at the history of Arakmbut contact with outsiders, and charts the effects of the rubber boom and the period that the Arakmbut spent in the mission of Shintuya. After their dramatic escape in 1969, the Arakmbut founded their present communities.

The book ends with a discussion about the relationship between myth and history, showing how the Arakmbut recreate their myths at dramatic moments in their history. The conclusion reflects on power relations, the significance of the spirit world, and the relevance of the political concept of self-determination. Furthermore, embedded within Arakmbut myths are strategies for defence against colonisation. By looking at Arakmbut social organisation, cultural diversity, and historical experience, the first volume shows how myth provides a bridge linking the visible and the invisible worlds.

The second volume looks at the changes that have taken place in the community of San José del Karene between 1980 and 1992 in order to establish the two main dynamic factors involved in social, political, and cultural change – shamanism and politics. The book begins at the outset of the gold rush, with the death of the last great shamanic dreamer in the community. It continues by investigating the invisible world and the different techniques used by the Arakmbut to make contact with the spirits in order to promote the well-being of the people. Food production and curing are used to illustrate the complicated web of communication linking animals, spirit, and human beings to ensure Arakmbut growth and health. In both cases, a profound knowledge of Arakmbut biodiversity is necessary to enable a shaman to influence spirits.

Arakmbut politics is based on an understanding of the relativity of the social world, linking together the contrasting dynamics of desire and generosity. Through numerous daily encounters, the Arakmbut build up opinions, make decisions, solve disputes and acknowledge skilled persons through titles reflecting their prestige.

Arakmbut politics is in constant flux, shifting its emphasis from one social principle to another.

The period from 1980 to 1992 witnessed a marked change of social organisation within the Arakmbut community of San José del Karene, from a comparatively hierarchical to a more egalitarian pattern of life. The book offers multiple explanations for the changes, including the influence of the gold rush, the cumulative effect of the domestic cycle within the community, and the presence of the spirit world.

The book demonstrates that Amazonian communities are not fossilised settlements but that they are, and have always been, highly dynamic. The patterns of change over the last fifteen years in San José reflect shifts that have taken place throughout its history. The generating factor for this change comes from the invisible world, which enters both political and shamanic fields of activity. The conclusion explains why the death of the shaman provides a key to understanding the changes that have taken place and continue to take place in the community.

The third volume looks at the Arakmbut's growing awareness of their rights as indigenous peoples to their territories and resources. This awareness has risen concurrently with the growing development of indigenous rights internationally. The book takes the concepts of territory, people, cultural identity, government, development, and self-determination and looks at their emergence in a non-indigenous framework, juxtaposing them with their relevance in an Arakmbut context. The result is a mapping between indigenous and non-indigenous perspectives. Fundamental concepts such as 'territory' and 'peoples' broadly cohere, whereas concepts such as 'development' or 'self-determination' are present in practice but not expressed verbally.

While there is no necessary matching between human-rights concepts and indigenous perspectives, the Arakmbut quickly grasp the meanings of the terms as they become relevant to their practical conditions. With the violation of their rights, the Arakmbut are beginning to use the concepts of human rights as a means for defending their lives. The conclusion is that whereas non-indigenous human rights legislation receives its legitimacy by judicial means, the Arakmbut find their legal system legitimised through the spirit world. Whether through access to resources, expression of cultural identity, potential for development and the assertion of self-determination, the spiritual features of Arakmbut life are a constant presence. For non-indigenous observers, the invisibility of the spirit world makes it appear non-existent; however, overlooking its impor-

tance prevents outsiders from understanding and appreciating its significance in the Arakmbut struggle for survival.

The perspective adopted here is one of an outsider who has been invited into the periphery of Arakmbut social and cultural life in order to explain the complexities and depths of their views of the world to others. The discrimination that the Arakmbut suffer is based on ignorance and lack of respect on the part of non-indigenous people, who consider their territories and existence as a people to be fair game for predatory colonial expansion. These books are not meant to explain away the Arakmbut into tidy packages, but to use the non-indigenous imagery of structures and processes to understand the importance of their survival in the future as a people and to express solidarity with their struggle against adversity. The conclusions here are not timeless truths, but the particular views of a person on the margins of their world.

Each of the three main Arakmbut myths is divided into three parts corresponding to the head word, the centre word, and the whole word. Although each section is independent, it also fits into a series. As with the internal structure of the myths, so with the relationship between the myths themselves: each one looks at a different aspect of Arakmbut life from within a similar framework. The theme which links them together is the blending or separation of the human, animal, and spirit worlds in the face of the constant threat of outside forces – harmful spirits and non-indigenous peoples.

A trilogy is thus an appropriate structure for writing about the Arakmbut, and these three volumes fit together within the framework of their mythology. Each book takes a theme that relates to the three Arakmbut myths analysed in the first volume: creation and organisation of social and cultural life; growth and change in the relationship with the animal and spirit world; and the relationship with non-indigenous peoples, the threats they introduce, and the ways in which the Arakmbut can combat or avoid the dangerous consequences of invasion. However the relationship between the volumes like so much of Arakmbut life, involves the superimposition of layers of meaning covering different aspects of the triadic relationship.

The first aspect is the narrative form which starts from one situation and draws the listener through a variety of experiences to a new set of conditions at the end. Both artistically and ceremonially, a triadic narrative structure is common to many cultures. The famous anthropological example consists of rites of transition marked by three phases: separation, liminality, and reincorporation. The directional nature of these triadic rituals makes them as linear as the tri-

adic narrative convention found so frequently in Victorian novels. The meaning comes from the sequence.

A different view of triadic structures comes from a more spatial perspective, which places less importance on the sequence. Arakmbut myths are 'cubist', in that any section or theme can be taken out of the main structure and transformed into a new story, showing the original narrative from another angle, or complementing the theme. This cubist or sculpturesque point of view is illustrated in Lambert's observation about Eric Satie:

Satie's habit of writing his pieces in groups of three was not just a mannerism. It took the place in his art of dramatic development, and was part of his peculiarly sculpturesque views on music It does not matter which way you walk round a statue and it does not matter in which order you play the three Gymnopédies' (Constant Lambert, *Music Ho!* 1948:92).

Another aspect of the triadic structure of Arakmbut myth is the way in which each part 'eavesdrops' on the others, picking up themes and characters who reappear in different guises, drawing our attention to various facets of the stories. In this way the myth becomes a triptych in which each 'panel' makes sense in term of its similarities to and differences from the other two parts. John Russell points out that the painter Francis Bacon has frequently painted in groups of three (1985:127): 'Bacon in his triptychs plays over and over again with the idea of the eavesdropper – the figure who looks across to the central panel and directs our attention to it.' Arakmbut myths demonstrate this element through thematic cross-currents, which appear as the shifting of meaning within a framework of imagery such as birth/death, growth or cooking.

Each Arakmbut myth combines narrative, multiple perspectives, and thematic cross-currents, all of which take the listener into different domains, looking at the world from a variety of angles. The three volumes here also share the three aspects of Arakmbut triadic relationships within their mythology. From one perspective, the three volumes constitute a narrative moving from the first volume's description of the difference between mythical structure and historical process, to the second volume's account of the process itself and the third volume's demonstration of the struggle as to who controls history.

The three books can be seen as cubist in that there is a common element in each volume that is investigated from three different angles. This is the position of the spirit world, which is a constant articulating presence for the Arakmbut in their everyday life, as guarantor of myth-

ical knowledge, as cause of the generative process of change and as the legitimiser, arbitrator and guardian of acceptable behaviour.

The final triadic aspect of Arakmbut mythology that connects these three volumes is the constant movement from one aspect of the triptych to another. In each of these three volumes there is information that adds, reflects and comments on the material contained in the others. The creation myth of Wanamey reappears regularly through the pages, pointing to the main crises of Arakmbut existence; the constant relativity operating between human beings, animal species, and spirits appears in different guises throughout the visible and invisible worlds according to the contexts such as the myth of Marinke, in curing rituals or when hunting; and the invasions arising from the gold rush have mythological connotations in the story of Aiwe and appear as a trigger for change with the emerging consciousness of indigenous identity.

In this way, these three volumes fit together as a trilogy, providing an interpretation of Arakmbut experience from a peripheral perspective and trying as far as possible to reflect the aims of Arakmbut mythology – to draw attention to the importance of the invisible spirit world in the present struggle for survival.