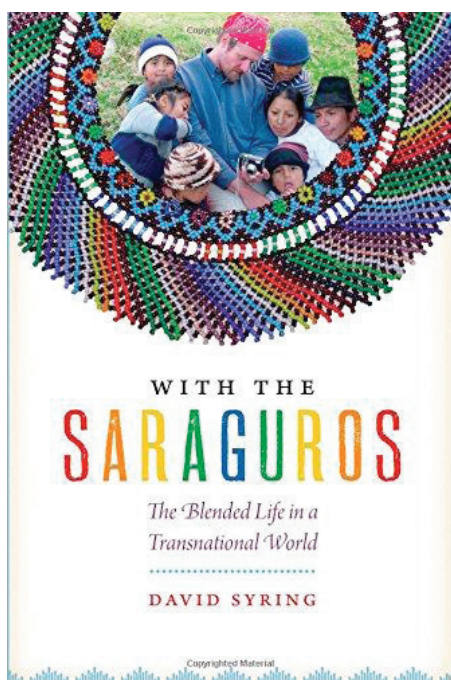


## Book Review

### *With the Saraguros* *The Blended Life in a Transnational World* Syring, David (2014)

Austin: University of Texas Press. 181pp. ISBN 978-0-292-76093-6

Livia Büchler



Written by the anthropologist and professor at the University of Minnesota Duluth, David Syring, this book is an exploration of the lifestyle and ideas of the Saraguros people, as compared to those of the author.

The author's approach is special in that he does not aim to explain particular events, but rather to generate awareness about different ways of living based on ideas and cultures. The anthropologist, as such, is committed to listening to stories about personal realities and about how the Saraguros understand and analyse the world. In accordance with this, the book investigates how different cultural identities influence each other (Syring 2014: 9, 12-13, 15).

Syring's main interests within this framework are "*work and the ways that it shapes our experience of time; [...] stories*

*about place; the relationships between tradition and creativity; and the ways that anthropological consciousness gets made*" (ibid. 13). For this reason he analyses the work and living conditions of three individuals, taking into consideration benefits like autonomy and a good salary, and disadvantages such as stress or separation from the family: Benigno, a Saraguro farmer whose fields are close to his home, works independently and normally drops by his family a few times during the day (ibid. 50-53); Maximo, on the other hand, has an exhausting job at a dairy farm in the US, has strict task guidelines, is separated from his family but has a good salary by Ecuadorian standards (ibid. 46-50, 53-56); and thirdly the author, a well-paid professor with a heavy workload but an autonomous lifestyle (ibid. 49, 56-59). (Ibid. 26-27)

The Saraguros are indigenous people who live in the south of Ecuador and make their living mostly out of artisanal work, including orders from abroad and local jobs (ibid. 27-29). The number of locals, however, who have a higher education is increasing and has an impact on their identity (ibid.). Generally, Syring sees their concept of living as a “*dynamic, creative experimentation and reflection on how tradition does and does not serve contemporary needs*” (ibid. 15):

*“Saraguros create culture day by day in imaginative acts seeking to create satisfactory lives. They are aware of the improvisational nature of this in a world where local, regional, national, and global forces all contribute to the on-the-ground realities of daily life.”* (Ibid. 90)

The author sums up his experiences during his visits to Saraguro with the following metaphor:

*“La vida matizada – the good life as a blend of diverse work opportunities, social embeddedness, and a satisfying sense of a person’s ability to shape how he or she lives – has emerged as a viable metaphor for understanding what I have learned in Saraguro.”* (Ibid. 27)

‘Matizada’ means ‘blended’, and is also what the Saraguros call the necklaces that they bead (ibid. 25-27, 88, 97-105, 145). Throughout the book Syring gives examples of ‘blended’ life in the sense of “*closer harmony with [the] local landscape and community*” (ibid. 27), for example no separation “*between the experiential spaces of work and daily life*” (ibid. 46), the freedom to work at home, autonomy (ibid. 57), “*a weak separation between spheres [...] [and] between the value of male and female work*” (ibid. 77) and to approach everything “*as if your life depends on it – because [...] these moments are your life*” (ibid. 138). It is a “*sense of the woven togetherness of our actions*” (ibid. 125). Therefore, the lack of these aspects weakens the possibility of ‘la vida matizada’. Even if the Saraguros themselves would not describe their life like this, they agree with Syring that the metaphor is compatible with their ideals of a good life, though never fully fulfilled due to conflicts generated by the capitalistic globalized world (ibid. 27, 139).

The role of the anthropologist, whom Syring calls technopelli, is based on the kokopelli-metaphor, an US traveller-trader and flute player represented in Ecuadorian crafts. The technopelli brings technology to the daily life of the Saraguros, taking notes about ideas and actions that enable a good life, but also seeks to help, to try things and to make the unseen challenges visible. (Ibid. 6-8, 146)

Apart from a few exceptions, life in Saraguro seems to be peaceful and harmonious, which raises the question of whether or not this complies to reality or whether there are underlying conflicts. Even if, according to the author, nobody reaches the ideal of ‘la vida matizada’, it is somewhat disappointing that this appealing metaphor is not discussed in more depth within the book; for example in comparison with the definition of good life referred to in Article 14 of the Ecuadorian Constitution<sup>1</sup> (2008: 29) or with the points of

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<sup>1</sup> Article 14 of the Ecuadorian Constitution: “Se reconoce el derecho de la población a vivir en un ambiente sano y ecológicamente equilibrado, que garantice la sostenibilidad y el buen vivir, *sumak kawsay*. Se declara de interés público la preservación del ambiente, la conservación de los ecosistemas, la biodiversidad y la integridad del patrimonio genético del país, la prevención del daño ambiental y la recuperación de los espacios naturales degradados.” (Constitución de la República del Ecuador 2008: 29)

criticism made in the anthropological discourse - for example by Victor Breton (2013). Breton (2013: 72-73) criticizes the concept of the 'good life' from a historical point of view as a political discourse that allows the governments to construct a static image of the indigenous and their culture - connected of course with corresponding economic and political practices.

Another aspect is the slow but steady spread of capitalism in Saraguro, the effects of which would surely come into conflict with the *vida matizada* (e.g.: the selling beadwork, an important income for families (Syring 2014: 75) and part of the cultural identity (ibid. 76)), especially the ecotourism plans of the Saraguros (ibid. 130-133), which are supported by the author, could, considering their social and ecological impact, have been evaluated more broadly (there is only one critical quote (ibid. 127)). Chaumeil (2009) offers an interesting discussion of the problematic aspects and the defining effects on the culture, which come together in clichés such as the indigenous "*nativo ecológico*" (ibid. 62).

Overall, *With the Saraguros* is a nicely written and creative book that could include a more conclusive theoretical analysis (even though the author does not define this as an objective). The critical reflection of the anthropologist's role and the difficulties of the ethnographical work are enlightening, making the subject behind the reflections become visible in its lively imperfection. An enriching, honest and personal work worth reading.

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BÜCHLER, Livia (2016), "Book Review: *With the Saraguros. The Blended Life in a Transnational World* by David Syring", *Quaderns-E de l'Institut Català d'Antropologia*, 21(1), Barcelona: ICA, pp 141-143. [ISSN 169-8298].

