

## Reseña de libro

*Nukak: Ethnoarchaeology of an Amazonian People*. Gustavo G. Politis. 2007. Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, CA, USA. 411 pp. ISBN 978-1-59874-229-9.

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It is unfortunate but nonetheless true that many archaeologists do not value modern ethnographies. Why? Archaeologists need information on material culture – how it is made, who uses it, how long it lasts, what happens when it breaks, what happens when its owner dies, and so on. Although there are some notable exceptions, few modern ethnographies pay attention to such mundane things. But archaeologists need these data to construct arguments that allow us to make secure inferences from the material things that we recover. For this reason, a few archaeologists have climbed out of their trenches and conducted ethnoarchaeological research with the living. Politis is one of those archaeologists, and *Nukak* is the result of his efforts. This book covers some of the same ground as his 1996 *Nukak* (published by the Instituto Amazónico de Investigaciones Científicas) but is updated, placed in a larger theoretical context, and made available to the largely monolingual North American audience.

The Nukak are a small group of hunter-gatherers who live in the Columbian rain forest. Politis worked with those who were least acculturated to western society. As an archaeologist who has also done ethnographic research, I understand the effort that lies behind *Nukak*. Ethnography, especially that of nomadic peoples in isolated places, is not easy. There are the usual problems: language barriers, medical issues, feeding yourself and your students, explaining yourself and your task to the people. In addition, ethnoarchaeologists must justify their preoccupation with odd things such as trash, pits left in the ground after pounding food in a mortar, or what happens to the remaining bits of a hammock burnt in a marital dispute. The Mikea, with whom I worked in Madagascar, never believed my (honest) explanation of

what I was doing there. Instead, they were certain I was searching for gold or silver, and one of my students had to fend off accusations of witchcraft when measuring the diameters of house posts. Most people can understand an interest in kinship, religion, and politics, but trash and house posts? For this reason, I admire the amount of information that Politis was able to collect in his several visits to the Nukak.

Every archaeologist (and ethnographer) interested in hunter-gatherers, and especially those interested in tropical hunter-gatherers, will find something of value in *Nukak*. Politis describes their settlements in detail, noting the differences between wet and dry season camp construction and how these condition differences in how trash is left behind. *Nukak* contains some of the only information I know of on how long it takes to put a camp together, or to take one down in order to move. Politis describes their residential and logistical mobility, providing about the only account of how people actually move camp – who does what, what paths they follow, and whether old camps are reoccupied (they are not). He describes their traditional technology and their subsistence, giving special attention to animal exploitation. The book ends with a chapter devoted to what the Nukak data have to say about several perennial issues in the anthropology of hunter-gatherers (at least, those issues that concern archaeologists). He includes two appendices: one containing data on the wet and dry season foraging trips he recorded, and one by Gustavo Martinez on faunal material recovered in the camps. There are many wonderful anecdotes, including the use of a parrot's entrails as a fishing lure.

Politis begins the volume with background on the Nukak's environment, his fieldwork methods and the conditions of his research (for example, his eighth session was prevented by the Columbian military) In

addition, Politis lays out his theoretical framework. Interestingly, it contains elements of Lewis Binford's materialistic approach as well as Ian Hodder's postprocessual approach. In each chapter, Politis provides information on the "function" of material culture or on a more Binfordian behaviorist approach. For example, the discussion of the use of space shows how the particular kinds of structures built by the Nukak in the wet season conditions how trash is deposited (as opposed to the dry season when the Nukak do not build structures). But, in each chapter, Politis also discusses the social and ideological meaning of the chapter's subject. For example, in the chapter on space use and discard, he notes how the trash of a deceased woman was treated, resulting in an archaeological record different from that produced by daily living in a camp, and that directly records some (as yet unknown) links between trash deposition and death.

In the chapter on shelters and camps, Politis also describes non-residential structures – everything from "ritual" structures to more mundane things such as children's playhouses. In fact, his contribution on children's toys and their effects on the deposition of trash and other items in residential structures is a crucial contribution. It turns out that children are a strong determinant of the final disposition of material culture in the archaeological record. To me, this is an important observation because anything that signals "children" archaeologically also tells us that a site is a residential camp, rather than, for example, a hunting camp.

Politis also explains that the Nukak avoid previous campsites because these places become wild gardens, the result of gathered seeds left behind (either in trash or feces). With the secondary (but not the primary) canopy removed as the camp is made, these plants thrive in old camps. The Nukak live in a more "constructed" environment than we might think.

Throughout the book, Politis is able to give archaeologists the information that they crave and yet often do not find in other ethnographies. For example, exactly how does one hunt monkeys with a blowgun? There are also useful descriptions of things that carry purely symbolic information, such as the wall of *seje* leaves that forms a protective wall around a camp to prevent invasion by the spirits of jaguars. This is all useful information that many archaeologists will make profitable use of in years to come.

This book is well worth reading, but I must admit that I was disappointed with one aspect of it.

Throughout *Nukak* Politis criticizes the approach of human behavioral (or evolutionary) ecology, specifically its use of optimal foraging models. As a practitioner of human behavioral ecology I admit to some bias, but I also can see that his criticisms of this approach will not convince any other such practitioner that the approach is incomplete or misleading. For example, in a discussion of Nukak mobility, Politis states that "the Nukak abandon camp when many products are still abundant ...that are not found further away, which therefore generates a negative cost-benefit energy balance....there are no obvious resource limitations that would prevent the Nukak from staying in their residential camps for longer periods of time. The causes for their high residential mobility must be sought elsewhere." He argues that mobility produces more patches of edible plants (through the formation of the wild gardens), is necessary to perform rituals, is for sanitary reasons, to avoid a recently deceased person's spirit, or is for the sheer pleasure of moving (or to satisfy a taste for honey or fish).

These are all good reasons to move, and several are mentioned in other ethnographies of foragers. But these reasons could be the proximal reason for moving a camp, while the ultimate reason may lie in food acquisition. Optimal foraging models do *not* argue that foragers move when nearby food reaches the point of depletion. Indeed, the marginal value theorem argues only that foragers move when the current return rate equals the average return rate of the environment taking travel time into account. In many instances this means that foragers move long before depletion begins; in fact, the "marginal value theorem" leads us to expect that in an environment with high average return rates that people will leave camps long before the point of depletion (I demonstrated this with a simple simulation in *The Foraging Spectrum*). Another example: there is a significant difference between wet and dry season mobility – the Nukak remain longer in wet than dry season camps and yet move shorter distances when they move in the wet than in the dry season. The data tables show that fish and honey are more important in the dry than the wet season. Do these resources account for the differences in seasonal mobility?

Elsewhere, Politis shows that taboos on certain animals, such as tapir, cannot be explained by materialist reasons. He is correct. And yet how would an archaeologist know if the lack of food remains was the product of a taboo? Behavioral ecology's diet breadth model offers a way. This model predicts which

resources should be in a diet based on their return rates assuming that nothing other than strict economic concerns are at work in food selection. If the predicted diet breadth model predicts that tapirs should be included in the diet, and yet the archaeological remains demonstrate that they are not, then we can safely assume (providing that other information shows that tapirs were available) that something else is at work – a taboo, for example. Unfortunately, we cannot really judge the utility of optimal foraging models in the case of the Nukak because their fundamental piece of data – return rates on the various plants and animals—are not

in the volume. I admit that this was a disappointment (the data in tables 8.14 - 8.17 are not adequate as these provides returns, not return rates). In sum, those who use the paradigm of behavioral ecology will be somewhat disappointed with the volume.

But set that aside: *Nukak* contains some wonderful and wonderfully-detailed information on a little-known group of foragers. It is a solid contribution to hunter-gatherer studies that deserves to be read by anyone, archaeologist or ethnologist, interested in this rapidly-disappearing class of humanity.