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Kensinger, Rabineau, et. al.: The Cashinahua of Eastern Peru

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Kenneth M. Kensinger, Phyllis Rabineau, 
et al. The Cashinahua of Eastern Peru. Brown 
University: The Haffenreffer Museum of 
Anthropology. Studies in Anthropology and Material 

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The Cashinahua of Eastern Peru is volume 1 of a 
series devoted to publication of the archaeological 
and ethnographic collections of the Haffenreffer Mu-
seum of Anthropology of Brown University. This publi-
cation focuses on items of material culture collected 
by Kenneth Kensinger in 1968 in Cashinahua villages 
located along the Curanja River in southeastern Peru 
near the Brazilian border.

The book can be divided into roughly three sec-
tions. The first 85 pages, written by Kensinger, di-
sscuss various aspects of Cashinahua linguistics and 
etnography derived from field experience. In the 
next 60 pages four papers on specific aspects of 
Cashinahua material culture, based on Kensinger’s 
field information, are presented by Phyllis Rabineau, 
Helen Tanner, Susan Ferguson, and Alice Dawson, 
respectively. The final 85 pages contain a catalog of 
The Cashinahua collection with text by Phyllis Rabini-
neau, who again utilizes documentation by Kensinger.

The orientation and quality of the various presenta-
tions are determined by several factors, including 
Kensinger’s particular approach to ethnography and 
to the presentation of ethnographic data, the fact that 
the emphasis is on material aspects of culture, and 
the anthropological expertise of the various authors.
Readers’ reactions to the volume will probably also 
vary depending on whether the book is regarded as 
basically a catalog of museum pieces or an ethnog-
graphic analysis of particular aspects of Cashinahua 
culture.

Kensinger’s initial goal in the field was to learn an 
unwritten language and, through it, the culture it ex-
presses. Consequently, both his perception and his 
presentation of Cashinahua culture is heavily struc-
tured by his interest in linguistic analysis. (His held 
work was conducted under the auspices of the Sum-
mer Institute of Linguistics and the Peruvian Ministry 
of Public Education.) His express intent was to ac-
quire the necessary linguistic expertise to deal with 
pragmatic problems of day-to-day living rather than to 
systematically collect information on specific prob-
lems or topics of anthropological interest. Rather than 
utilize such commonly found modes of ethnographic 
presentation as the individual life cycle or the annual 
round of community activities or the framework of so-
cial relations or ecological adaptations, Kensinger’s 
presentation is linguistic, focusing on specific lexical 
domains. Not surprisingly, the resultant picture of 
Cashinahua culture is rather static and formal. Except 
for a personal, lively, and all-too-brief discussion of 
the problems encountered when one tries to learn 
from base zero to communicate cross-culturally, there 
is little sense of the dynamics of Cashinahua life. In-
stead emphasis is placed on Cashinahua linguistic 
classifications (domains, classes, types, and varieties) 
of specific phenomena, including genders (4 clas-
ses), fishing (4 classes), manioc (2 subdomains, 
7 subtypes or classes, 22 varieties), ceramics (an ex-
clusively female craft divided into 9 classes), and 
headaddresses (a primarily male craft with approxi-
mately 7 classes). Each class, type, and variety is 
discussed in considerable detail, providing ethnog-
ographic richness itself, in the opinion of a cultural 
anthropologist who is not a linguist, little sense of 
both the overall texture of Cashinahua life or the 
dynamic interplay of social, economic, political, and 
ideological factors that constitute the basis of Cashinahua 
culture and experience.

On the other hand, as Jane Dwyer, director of the 
Haffenreffer Museum, points out in a Foreword, the 
richness of the ethnographic documentation that Ken-
singer provides for the ornaments, headaddresses, ce-
ramics, tools and weapons, textiles, basketry, matting, 
and ceremonial objects that constitute the collection 
is one of the unique aspects of this assemblage. It 
also results in a museum catalog that is unusually in-
teresting and informative. Ironically, the broader cul-
tural context—regardless of mode of presentation—
that Kensinger provides for the pieces he collected 
whets the reader’s appetite for more, and ultimately 
(though perhaps unfairly) makes an exceptional mu-
seum catalog also appear as a disappointing ethnog-
raphy.

With one major exception the other authors who 
contributed to the volume do little to brighten this pic-
ture. The brief papers by Tanner on weaving, Ferguson 
on craftsmanship and design in ceramics, and 
Dawson on graphic art are formal proclamations fo-
cusing mainly on technical fine points. Their discus-
sions do sharpen our appreciation of the techniques 
and expertise exhibited in Cashinahua art. However, 
other comments, heavy with cultural and symbolic im-
lications, are never followed through. For example, 
Tanner and others note in passing that Cashinahua 
aesthetics requires a degree of asymmetry in design 
and color. Ferguson mentions without further discus-
sion that pottery manufacture and weaving reflect a 
woman’s personal worth just as successful hunting 
provides esteem for men. Dawson also states that in 
both the creation of an object and hunting, skills and 
attention to details are the major measure of beauty 
and of the individual’s capability, but she does not
pursue the subject. Dawson mentions, too, that a person cannot use an undecorated club to kill an enemy, but does not explain why. Similarly, we learn, again in passing, that white, black, brown, red, or orange colors are used in painted designs, and color plates show combinations of red, blue, white, and yellow on headdress feathers. It is also mentioned that designs used by a given individual must be chosen according to moiety and generation status.

Although comments such as these cry out for further elaboration, virtually none is provided. Yet the anthropological literature on tropical America contains much relevant information on such topics as color symbolism, the association between decorative arts and socio-ideological concepts and identities, and the use of design styles and color to identify the cultural realm and the world of nature; and the symbolic significance accorded to various animals and birds whose pelts or feathers are used in decorative arts and the symbolic significance associated with evidencing skill and control in creating such designs.

Even if Kensinger's notes do not contain specifics on such matters as they relate to Cashinahua culture, more analysis could have been done by Dawson, Tanner, and Ferguson utilizing cross-cultural comparisons.

The paper by Phyllis Rabineau provides the major exception to this complaint. In fact, Rabineau's contributions to the volume are by far the most intellectually exciting and satisfying precisely because Rabineau links material objects with social processes and provides considerable symbolic and cultural contexts for the material she examines. In her paper, "Artists and Leaders," Rabineau draws on cross-cultural materials and her own appreciation of cultural dynamics to deftly examine the relationships between the aesthetics and technology of headdress styles and manufacture and the social and ideological roles of shamans and village headmen. We learn, for example, that among the Cashinahua the wearing of ornaments represents true humanness; that feathers are symbolic of authority; that successful leaders who are skilled in the arts of compromise and ostensibly put community concern above self-interest also use a praiseworthy (in Cashinahua eyes) restraint in headress decoration, while men who have been unsuccessful in establishing leadership positions tend to create extravagant headdresses, which are also regarded as failures in terms of Cashinahua ideas regarding proper use of feathers and color, that headmen whose power derives mainly from acceptance by human society create more orderly headdresses, while shamans, who are in contact with the vicissitudes of the spirit world, produce more individualistic and diversified featherpieces.

In the final third of the volume, the Catalog of the Cashinahua Collection, Rabineau again relates material culture to the dynamics of social and ceremonial life with descriptive and analytical commentary. In sum, while the volume is uneven in quality, the emphasis accorded to ethnoarcheographic background and the recognition of the interplay between social process and material culture, particularly the decorative arts, is highly commendable. It is to be hoped that these directions will be pursued in later volumes of the series, which, all things considered, is off to a good start.


Reviewed by Stuart J. Sigman
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I laid down Mary Ritchie Key's recently edited volume and found myself feeling strangely uncomfortable and unsatisfied. Although the papers are of uniformly high quality, they differ significantly in the manner and degree to which they address the book's ostensible theme: verbal and nonverbal behavioral relationships. A second disappointment is that the three papers which comprise most of the book, the third of which are the most important section, "Theoretical Approaches to Human Interaction," were not written by scholars primarily concerned with or trained in face-to-face interaction, do not make mention of unresolved theoretical issues broached by the other authors, and do not integrate their remarks into the larger interactional literature. This is not to suggest that the book is without its merits, which I am happy to describe below, but the fact that the whole is simply not up to the sum of its parts I found somewhat disappointing.

The book is divided into five sections. Key's contribution to the book comprises the first section, "Language and Nonverbal Behavior as Organizers of Social Systems." In addition to this and the final one on theoretical approaches, there are sections on "The Suprastructural Integration," "Organization of Language and Nonverbal Behavior," and "Acquisition of Communicative Behavior." Key's section sets the tone by summarizing and commenting on the remaining contributions, and by relating these to previous and ongoing research. The article demonstrates Key's already well-established command of a diverse bibliography and is a good introduction to some of the debates surrounding interaction studies: the universality of gestures, language and meaning, intentionality and awareness, and so on. Perhaps Key's most significant