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James Howe's *Chief, Scribes, and Ethnographers: Kuna Culture from Inside and Out*

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James Howe's impressive work, *Chiefs, Scribes, and Ethnographers: Kuna Culture from Inside and Out* concerns one of the most studied indigenous societies in Latin America. Howe surpasses the temporal scope and subject of his earlier publications to cover the San Blas Kuna's writings and representation in outsiders' written works. This book presents the "social and intellectual encounter between writing, anthropology, and the Kuna" to explore how this society redefined its image to the outside world (20). Rather than providing a complete history of the Kuna, this book examines several events when the Kuna rejected, embraced, and then employed writing politically in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Howe arranges the book into three chronological sections. The beginning chapters focus on the initial resistance of Western schooling in the 1800s to the acceptance of using scribes for internal and external communication. The latter involved Kuna leaders overcoming their suspicions of the growing influence of young literate men. The book then shifts to examine Panamanian government functionaries and North Americans' discourse over the Kuna's race, sovereignty, and character during and after the 1925 rebellion. Successive chapters highlight the racialized character of U.S-Panamanian literary and scholarly works such as the ethnographic studies of Erland Nordenskiöld and Reina Torres de Araúz, among others. The foundational and questionable field research of those figures launches the next chapters on the latter half of the twentieth century's ethnographic boom. Here Howe notes some of his contemporaries' own

anthropological work as well as the Kuna's successful venture to redefine their image by working alongside scholars.

Throughout the book, the author emphasizes the Kuna's struggle and gradual acceptance of writing and literacy. Early twentieth-century Kuna leaders feared Western teaching methods would threaten traditional oral discourse. In Howe's prior book, *A People Who Would Not Kneel: Panama, the United States, and the San Blas Kuna* (1998), he demonstrates how President Belisario Porras's agenda indeed intended to westernize the Kuna with education. However, determined elders utilized newly educated young men as dependent scribes to write grievances to the Panamanian government between 1912 and 1924. Howe demonstrates, rather than assimilating and becoming subservient to the Panamanian state, the Kuna's tactfulness in borrowing Western methods of communication for self-defense. Unfortunately, Howe did not analyze the impact of schools and literacy. Nevertheless, he presents an interesting account.

Howe provides a multi-dimensional tale in considering the writings of government authorities and foreigners describing the Kuna culture during the early half of the twentieth century. He examines an array of census records, maps, and official letters to demonstrate the negative representations of the Kuna in state documents. In many cases, Panamanian officials' reports refused to acknowledge the Kuna's claim to sovereignty after the 1925 rebellion by claiming outsiders encouraged separatist notions. Howe also reveals North American and European poems, short stories, and travelogues, which glorified the Kuna's racial purity and sexuality. Within this section, Howe covers a wide range of characters such as U.S. adventurer Richard Marsh who considered the Kuna an ancient White tribe.

The majority of the book examines the evolution of anthropology as a profession and the Kuna's desire to produce their own scholarship. Howe details the collaboration between Kuna scribe Rubén Pérez Kantule and Swedish anthropologist Erland Nordenskiöld in the late 1920s and 1930s. This endeavor even led Kantule to visit Sweden in 1931, where scholars published the largest collection of ethnographic material on the Kuna. Howe maintains the Kuna found their own voice and became an integral part of publishing ethnographic material about their history

outside of Panama after working alongside anthropologists. Howe also uses this opportunity to encourage his contemporaries to cooperate more with the Kuna during and after conducting field research. In an eloquent conclusion, he cautions scholars to avoid “lamenting the past” and insisting that the Indian has all but vanished (249).

Howe aptly uses Kuna, Panamanian, and foreign letters, reports, and numerous publications to depict the Kuna. He also collected oral testimonies to develop the book’s background narrative. Although this monograph at times seems designed for anthropologists, other specialists will find it useful. The analysis is a valuable study of an indigenous society’s development of writing as a political tool.

Howe, James. *Chiefs, Scribes, and Ethnographers: Kuna Culture from Inside and Out*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009. 360pp.