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Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice: An Ethnobotanist Searches for New Medicines in the Amazonian Rain Forest. By Mark J. Plotkin.

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Author

Smith, Dean Howard

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longer form a basis for common values. In the fourth chapter, Boldt suggests that Indian cultures are in a state of crisis; if Indian peoples are to survive as Indians, they must revitalize their traditional philosophies and principles to develop a clear direction and consensus about who they want to be culturally.

The last chapter evaluates the design of economic development. It has become evident that a new strategy must be developed to address Indian economic issues, since previous government policy to initiate economic development has not been a success. Community development has become just as important as economic self-sufficiency. Boldt emphasizes the importance of economic self-sufficiency and independence for Indian political autonomy and social health.

Menno Boldt's *Surviving as Indians: The Challenge of Self-Government* is the culmination of twenty-five years of study in the field of aboriginal issues and is the most thought-provoking publication to date. It suggests to both aboriginal and nonaboriginal people that the Indian future will eventually be worked out with Canadians; however, to succeed in reaching an understanding, the two societies will need to discuss the harsh realities facing them both. Even though Boldt did not intend this discussion to contribute to academic research and theory, academics who are researching aboriginal self-government, and those who are in the field of political analysis and policy development, should put this text on their "to read" list.

Art Beaver

Trent University
Peterborough, Ontario

Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice: An Ethnobotanist Searches for New Medicines in the Amazonian Rain Forest. By Mark J. Plotkin. New York: Viking Penguin, 1993. 320 pages. \$22.00 cloth.

Rarely does a book come along that deserves to be devoured in one reading, and even more rarely is that book a work of nonfiction, but this is one of those times. Plotkin's work is both fascinating and important. The story he tells rolls along at a rapid pace without ever becoming bogged down in scientific analysis—although much analysis is provided. The reason this work is important, however, is that he proves that indigenous cultures have a vital

role to play in the global success of *Homo sapiens*, and that this role can also aid in the prosperity and preservation of these cultures.

Plotkin details his trips to the Amazon rainforest beginning in 1979, when he was a student at Harvard University. During the ensuing decade, although not specifically discussed, he completed his formal studies and continues to conduct research on the medicinal uses of plants.

The overall goal of the book is to provide clear evidence that the shamans from the Amazon rainforest tribes have an immense knowledge of the uses of naturally occurring chemicals found in plants—chemicals that have potential for improving health and treating diseases in other parts of the world. Plotkin believes not only that this knowledge should be developed and used to treat illness, but that the indigenous peoples should gain from sharing this knowledge. Problems occur when the intellectual property rights of the indigenous cultures are abused:

Briefly stated, no matter what disease an ethnobotanist might find a cure for during the course of his research, the indigenous peoples who taught him the cure would not benefit from the sales of the new drug (p. 15).

In order to combat this difficulty, Plotkin established the following procedure:

I decided that before I would have the plants I collected in the forest analyzed in the laboratory, I would wait for two things to happen: for the drug companies to regain their interest in natural products and for some company, some mechanism, some law to appear that would help me channel profits from the potential drugs back into the hands of the Indians themselves. Until then I would just store my plant specimens in the herbarium and keep the data I collected on ethnobotanical usage to myself (p. 16).

Thus the focus of the book is not simply to report the ethnobotanical information Plotkin collected during his stay, but also to provide an understanding that this knowledge can be used to benefit both the medical world and the indigenous cultures.

A corollary to this is that in order to fully realize the potential cures available from natural means, it is necessary to preserve the rainforests and the cultures that maintain the knowledge of how to use the rainforest. Toward these ends, Plotkin has aided in

developing not only a global understanding of the importance of the rainforest but also a training program for apprentices, both of which appear to have successful futures.

It is clear that economic development can be both a cause and an effect of the indigenous cultures and lifestyle. The native population has the knowledge, customs, and ability to provide increased income for itself, and the potential income provides incentives to maintain and refocus tribal life on those very customs and traditions. Plotkin points out that, prior to his help in initiating the apprenticeship programs, few, if any, individuals were learning the traditional methods of treating illnesses; now that has changed.

Of course, this is a problem endemic to many, if not all, Native American cultures: The old ways are being lost. However, a culturally sensitive merging of economic potentials with a refocusing on the customs and traditions of the tribe can result in successful social development.

Plotkin points out that many of the problems involving losses of culture were due to insensitive—even antagonistic—approaches to “developing” the local populations. The influence of missionaries and the invasion of the dominant societies for the purpose of harvesting both souls and resources had severe consequences for the local tribes as the old ways started to be lost. For instance, the missionaries typically arrived with medicines for the treatment of various diseases, or shotguns for hunting. But after several years of reliance on these modern tools, the native people found the supplies drying up when the missionaries left. Since the new ways were no longer available and the old ways had been forgotten, several villages faced severe problems. Thus, the newly developed practices of merging the old and the new are far superior to the domination techniques of the past, which are still continuing in some areas.

Besides the lessons that can be learned and applied to other indigenous cultures across the globe, this is a very enjoyable book. Plotkin provides detailed accounts of his travels and visits to the villages, which range from the comedic to the pitiful. These stories help pace the book and make it a very interesting read. He also provides background material from the ethnobotanical literature to help prove or further explain his points. The work is full of detailed discussions of the various uses, medical and otherwise, of the botanical material. It also explains the psychological aspects of healing. But, rather

than presenting his material in a dry, academic manner, Plotkin places the scientific aspects within the context of the particular experience he is reporting, which makes the presentation very holistic in nature and not simply clinically scientific. The reference list includes sources for the technical aspects. This reviewer is an economist with very little knowledge of ethnobotany or related fields, but this never presented a problem in understanding the material. An ethnobotanist, of course, might find these sections somewhat rudimentary.

There are only two minor problems with the work. Plotkin's experiences are so compelling that the secondary materials mentioned above are, at times, distracting. The second minor problem is repetitiveness. Minor tidbits of knowledge, such as the description of paca, are repeated throughout the book. But these minor problems do not obfuscate an otherwise pleasurable work.

Besides being a simply fascinating story, Plotkin's book is important because of the lessons it teaches about the possible merging of indigenous culture with economic development and global interaction:

I feel strongly that this effort has helped validate their culture in the eyes of the Indians This work constitutes a true partnership between Western and Indian cultures: both share in any potential material benefits, but more important, this approach to ethnobotany helps the indigenous peoples understand the potential global importance of a fundamental aspect of their culture (p. 287).

If this global importance can be developed for other fundamental aspects of indigenous cultures, then a new world can be invented for all concerned.

Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice goes a long way toward helping realize that goal. This book would be useful in courses discussing social development, economic development, indigenous cultures, indigenous religions and the like. Besides that, it makes for a thoroughly enjoyable way to greet the dawn: once you start it, you won't put it down.

Dean Howard Smith

National Executive Education Program
for Native American Leadership