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Patterns Through Time

An ethnographer's quest and journey

By Norman E. Whitten, Jr

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Patterns Through Time

An ethnographer's quest and journey



Norman E. Whitten, Jr

For well over a half century, Norman Whitten has spent a third of his professional life undertaking ethnography with Afro-Latin American and Indigenous peoples living in tropical forest-riverine environments of northern South America. He has spent the other two thirds engaged with theory construction in anthropology in institutional settings. In this memoir, he tells of his contributions to ethnography as a theory-constructive endeavor, and depicts an academic and practical environment in which strong support exists, but where obstacles and strong resistance must also be navigated.

Ethnographers construct theory within and sometimes against disciplinary frameworks, working back and forth between explication and explanation to make contributions to diverse and sometimes divergent literatures. This book traces Whitten's career from graduate student through a long and productive career as an anthropologist and ethnographer. Along the way, the reader gains valuable and sometimes surprising perspectives on American anthropology from 1950s to the present day, and insights into the different roles of the professional anthropologist. Whitten poignantly describes and analyzes the wrenching experience of moving from immersion in an Amazonian shamanic universe to administrative duties in a dysfunctional academic setting. As a mentor, author and editor of prominent books and journals, he highlights the importance of connecting a local study with the wider world. As a museum curator, he argues that it is above all a deep connection with living people that gives resonance to objects on display and agency to those studied. Throughout, Whitten makes a resounding case for serious, longitudinal ethnography as the foundation of anthropological theory, past, present and future.

Patterns Through Time offers a moral and intellectual compass for all those who are embarking, traveling, looking back upon, or otherwise navigating the journey from casual observer of human life worlds to engaged ethnographer and accomplished professional anthropologist. This thoughtfully crafted, imaginative, and powerfully written memoir by a respected elder with more than five decades of experience as an ethnographer, author, editor, and beloved mentor should be required reading for all anthropologists and anyone who cares about the future of the discipline's unique blending of scientific rigor and humanistic values.

Jonathan D. Hill, Professor of Anthropology, SIUC and President Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America (2014–17)

Author

Norman E. Whitten, Jr is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and Latin American Studies and Curator of the Spurlock Museum at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign..

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