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Jean E. Jackson: a pioneering ethnographer in the Colombian Amazon

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Introduction

This essay celebrates the work of Jean E. Jackson, a pioneering female ethnographer who devoted most of her fifty-year career to the Indigenous peoples of Colombia. Her research, represented in an extensive set of publications from the early 1970s to the present, engages with themes of identity, stigma, and social inequality, manifested across a range of contexts. Jackson's early ethnographic work made ground-breaking contributions to the study of Indigenous Tukanoan society in the Colombian Vaupés, focusing on the Bará, an Eastern Tukanoan language group of the Papurí River area, and the Tukanoan practice of linguistic exogamy (obligatory marriage across language groups, associated with patrilineal clans). Her exploration of the relationships between gender, language, and social structure in this highly multilingual society laid the groundwork for a great deal of later work on Vaupés language and culture and has been highly influential in the study of small-scale multilingualism more generally. Jackson's work with the Bará was followed by her long-term, in-depth investigation of Indigenous experiences in the context of rapid cultural change in Colombia: how Tukanoans and other Indigenous groups in this country have adapted to changing conceptions of indigeneity and its relationship to the national society, and how these transitions bear on processes and practices associated with identity, multiculturalism, and neoliberalism. Finally, a third major thread of Jackson's research, which appeared throughout her career and both diverged from and intertwined with her work with Colombian Indigenous peoples, focused on medical anthropology, including her investigation into the anthropology of chronic pain—the experiences of the people who suffer from it, and how they find ways to cope with, rationalize, and communicate these experiences.

In this essay, we explore Jackson's contributions across her prolific research career, which produced multiple books and dozens of essays. While we focus on her pioneering work with Colombian Indigenous peoples, we also consider how this work connects to her other lines of research, and how her explorations of these themes shaped her significant contributions to ethnographic methodology. Finally, we emphasize the relevance of gender as a consistent thread throughout Jackson's research trajectory—both as a topic of attention in her research, and as a pivot point in her own approach as a female ethnographer. Our discussion draws on Jackson's many publications and on our conversations with her in the context of interviews (February 3 and February 17, 2022).¹

1. Video recordings of these interviews are available at the Archive for Indigenous Languages of the Americas, <https://ailla.utexas.org/islandora/object/ailla:286561>. Archived photographs from Jean Jackson's ethnographic collection can be found at <https://dome.mit.edu/handle/1721.3/173100>.



figure 1. Jean E. Jackson (photo by Jon Sachs [<https://jonsachsphotographer.com/>], 2012).

Trajectory

Jean Jackson was born near Chicago in 1943 and spent part of her childhood in the American south. She studied anthropology at Wellesley College (BA 1965) and carried out graduate work in anthropology at Stanford University, where she received her MA (1966) and PhD (1972). She took up a position as an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) immediately following her doctoral studies and remained on the M.I.T. faculty until her retirement in 2014.

Jackson's first entry into ethnography involved two brief periods of fieldwork with rural communities in Mexico and Guatemala, carried out in the summers of 1965 and 1966. Her interest in Latin America and medical anthropology led to her MA thesis, a library study of *pinta*—a systemic disease that produces skin discolorations found in tropical regions of the Americas—and in particular its association with social stigma (Jackson 1966). The theme of stigma continued to shape Jackson's work over much of her career.

For her PhD, Jackson decided to continue working in Latin America; however, in light of her previous experiences with rural peasant communities, she decided to turn her focus to communities that had had a less intensive engagement with colonial rule, and who might therefore be more open to sharing their cultural experiences and outlook. This directed her to lowland South America.

While Jackson had initially considered working in northwest Brazil, the political situation there at the time created significant barriers for foreigners. She describes two phone conversations with David Maybury-Lewis and Jean Lave in 1968, who told her, "Whatever you do right now, don't go to Brazil! You'll just be cooling your heels in Manaus or someplace," waiting endlessly for authorization to travel to the northwest Amazon. So, she recounts,

At the very last minute, I was calling around to anybody who had worked in Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Colombia.... [Then] Alicia Reichel-Dolmatoff wrote back this wonderful letter, saying 'Please, come!' So I felt very welcomed. I did what little I could to read up on anthropology in Colombia, and just got on a plane and showed up. (Interview, February 3, 2022)

Jackson's arrival in Colombia was the first in a series of relatively unplanned steps that ultimately led her to the Tukanoan Bará. While she had initially planned to work with the Tikuna, at Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff's suggestion she turned to the Colombian Vaupés, where a number of anthropologists were already working—many of whom have since become well-known names in the anthropology of South America: Irving Goldman, Stephen and Christine Hugh-Jones, Peter Silverwood-Cope, Patrice Bidou, Pierre-Yves Jacopin, and others. Once in the Vaupés, she initially considered working in a settlement five hours from the Catholic mission community of Montfort on the Papurí, but again changed her path after gauging the degree of missionary-driven cultural intervention that was present there. Finally, Jackson began her dissertation fieldwork with a Bará community living on the Inambú, a tributary of the Papurí River (some six days' journey or more from the town of Mitú, population 700), from 1968 to 1970. This relatively traditional community of about five families still occupied a longhouse, and, as in most Eastern Tukanoan groups, the practice of linguistic exogamy meant that the in-married women in the community all came from different language groups; they were not themselves Bará, nor was Bará their primary language.

The constituency of that community meant that once again Jackson had to change her research plans. Her original dissertation research proposal was in medical anthropology, following the trajectory she had already established, and was grounded in cognitive anthropology—which at that time placed a particular emphasis on language as a window into culturally salient categories and taxonomies of knowledge. But in deciding to work with a Tukanoan community in the Vaupés, "I ended up in a situation with 100 percent multilingualism, with a proposal that said 'What you find out linguistically lets you know, to some degree, how people think, how they structure their world, and so on'" (Interview, February 3, 2022). In order to carry out a linguistically-driven project, Jackson realized that she would have to learn three or four languages—particularly because she would be spending most of her time with women, who regularly spoke several different languages in their daily routines. For a short-term dissertation project, this prospect seemed untenable. "So I abandoned my proposal and switched to studying what I thought I was totally uninterested in—kinship and social structure... I became very interested, of course, because if you're with people for whom kinship is extremely important, you start tapping into their feelings" (Interview, February 3, 2022). As she recounts in the 1986 article "On trying to be an Amazon," she brought her research focus to bear on the "very complex marriage system [of the Tukanoan Bará], one involving over sixteen exogamous patrilineal descent units, each affiliated with a different language" (1986, 267). This decision was motivated in part by her own position as a woman and her experiences growing up as a woman in the United States—in particular, "the opinions and feelings I had about marriage, the roles of husband and wife in present-day American society, and in general the role of women in Western culture," and how these contrasted with what she observed in Tukanoan culture, despite being "at the time unaware of the effects of these concerns on my decision" (1986, 267). This work led to her PhD dissertation, *Marriage and linguistic identity among the Bará Indians of the Vaupés, Colombia* (1972); numerous articles; and a monograph: *The fish people: linguistic exogamy and Tukanoan identity in northwest Amazonia* (1983a)—which has since become a classic study of social structure, identity, and its relationship to language in the context of the northwest Amazon as shaped by the practice of linguistic exogamy.

As evident in this early trajectory, a notable feature of Jackson's capacity as a researcher has been her ability to shape the path of her work according to the opportunities that emerged and

the research questions that arose along the way. Indeed, Jackson observes that such relative fluidity of fieldwork plans was not so unusual for ethnographers of her generation: “Quite often people flew by the seat of their pants and things had to change. You had to adapt. And you kind of improvised sometimes as you went along.” Then, as now, “doing anthropology quite often involves the ability to harness all of your skills, not just your scholarly and interactional abilities, but to read the lay of the land and figure out the local politics and so forth” (Interview, February 17, 2022).

Similarly, much of Jackson’s fieldwork was relatively self-directed, as was also true for her dissertation writing and subsequent research. There were no other South Americanists at Stanford during her time there as a student, and she likewise saw relatively little of the other anthropologists who were doing fieldwork in the Vaupés while she was in the region. As she explains,

We never saw one another in the field because the distances and transportation were difficult. We did meet each other in Bogotá and spent time together, but they had very different research interests than I did... After I finished fieldwork, that was when intellectual scholarly interactions happened, such as exchanging papers and seeing each other at the Paris Americanistes meetings in 1976. (Interview, February 3, 2022)

The same was true at M.I.T. throughout Jackson’s long career there: as a university focused on training scientists and engineers, M.I.T. channeled her teaching primarily toward general anthropology courses aimed at undergraduate students, although she was able to develop courses relating to certain broad themes of particular interest to her research, including gender and questions of ethnic and national identity.

Nonetheless, Jackson built up a rich network of interactions with a broad community of anthropologists working in lowland South America. She was one of the founding members of an active academic network, which ultimately grew into what is now the international Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America (SALSA). Jackson participated in SALSA’s early phases—a series of summer conferences organized by Ken Kensinger at Bennington College (Vermont), which grew out of informal meetings held by a group of scholars at Columbia University. Her milestone bibliographic review (Jackson 1975) of the existing literature on lowland South America both grew out of and contributed to these initiatives. After Kensinger retired in the late 1990s, the society was reshaped again into its current form and continued to grow from a relatively small US-based group into a thriving international community. Jackson comments, “I think SALSA is really a success story... It’s a volunteer organization of people with like interests who want to talk to one another and who can help one another.” Alongside its biannual conference (initially held every year and a half) and journal *Tipiti*, Jackson notes the important contribution made by the SALSA listserv, “where people bring up issues that are urgent and serious, or things that are happening right now, and links are shared and discussions happen” (Interview, February 17, 2022).

Following Jackson’s dissertation fieldwork, however, the situation in Colombia became rapidly more complex. The FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) gained ground in Andean regions, and the “coca boom” got underway, entering the Vaupés in the early 1980s. Violence and criminal activity became more and more commonplace throughout the region. Access to the region by non-Colombian anthropologists entered a period of official restrictions: governmental policies instituted in the mid-1970s demanded that thirty percent of a project’s research funds be turned over to the Anthropology Institute. When Jackson attempted to return to the region to carry out further research, she was told that she would have to provide officials with some \$10,000 in order to obtain authorization to go forward. In fact, they had already planned out how the money would be spent—to buy an airplane for use in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta region. She later discovered that some of her younger

anthropologist colleagues were referring to her as “*La señora de la avioneta*.” This policy was ended in the mid-1980s, and Jackson returned to Colombia in 1985, and to the Vaupés region in 1987. By this time, however, the Bará longhouse community where she had carried out her previous ethnographic work had broken up, and its former inhabitants dispersed among regional settlements and Mitú, the capital of the Vaupés department. Jackson then took up the second major phase of her research trajectory, focusing on the politics of the national Indigenous movement and processes of cultural transition.

Once she was able to restart her research in the country, Jackson returned nearly every two years for the next two decades. Initially, she was able to carry out fieldwork in Mitú and other locations in the Vaupés, and much of her work during this time was focused around CRIVA (*Consejo Regional Indígena del Vaupés*), an Indigenous organization that formed in 1973 through the intervention of Catholic missionaries—who aimed to help Tukanoans defend their rights and lands, but also had the goal of countering the incursions of protestant missionaries (particularly the Summer Institute of Linguistics/Wycliffe Bible Translators and New Tribes Mission). As Jackson explores in various publications from this period, informed heavily by interviews carried out in Mitú and Bogotá, CRIVA faced many challenges and contradictions that particularly involved the disconnects between more traditional Tukanoan and non-Indigenous models of governance and political leadership. These challenges both paralleled and highlighted those faced by Tukanoans more generally as they navigated a changing society.

After 1993, an increased FARC presence in the Vaupés—which came to a head during a violent incursion in Mitú in 1989 (and a subsequent one in 1998) —made it impossible for Jackson to work there safely, and her work subsequently took place in Bogotá and other parts of Colombia. This shift allowed Jackson to expand her comparative perspective on Indigenous experiences and political movements in Colombia, through which she investigated questions of Indigenous activism, identity, and jurisdiction; Indigenous experiences with the armed conflict; and struggles over rights, cultural practices, and political positioning.

These explorations of multicultural experiences in the Vaupés and more widely in Colombia informed some three decades of articles, a coedited volume (*Indigenous movements, self-representation and the state in Latin America*) with Kay B. Warren (2002), and ultimately a crowning monograph that synthesizes much of Jackson’s work across her long career. This volume, *Managing multiculturalism: indigeneity and the struggle for rights in Colombia* (2019), explores the evolution of the Colombian Indigenous movement, how communities and activists adapted to the changing cultural and political conditions over time, and their success in establishing a voice and achieving control of a substantial piece of national territory despite centuries of colonial intervention. As can be seen in the acknowledgement sections of these works, Jackson’s research in Colombia was deeply enriched and supported by her ongoing friendships and collaborative interactions with members of the Indigenous communities and organizations with whom she worked, as well as with Colombian scholars and many other interlocutors. Her critical evaluation of the challenges faced by Indigenous political initiatives has likewise been received with appreciation by many other scholars who are committed to benefitting Indigenous communities, for whom her insights have offered new ways to understand the complexities they encounter.

Alongside her work in Colombia, Jackson also pursued her third major strand of ethnographic investigation throughout the 1980s and 90s: her work on chronic pain. This work began with a period of intensive field research (1986-1987) at Commonwealth Pain Center, located in the state of Massachusetts, USA, following an experience where she herself was a patient there for one month in 1984. This work also led to multiple articles and to a monograph: “*Camp Pain*”: *Talking with Chronic Pain Patients* (2000; see also Jackson 2011 for an

important review article on this subject). While in most ways independent from her work with Indigenous peoples in Colombia, the work with chronic pain explores some of the same broader themes, particularly questions of social stigma, authenticity and authority, and identity politics relating to ways in which people are understood as “insiders” and “outsiders” in relation to social groups. As she comments in the first chapter of *Camp Pain*, “acculturated Tukanoans and chronic pain patients both find themselves evaluated by others as “spoiled selves” (2000, 16).



figure 2. Jean E. Jackson with the Bará (photo by Fernando Castillo [Tukano], 1969)

Ethnography

As the previous section lays out, Jackson's ethnographic work engages with a range of topics and locations that are in some respects very different, yet bring together a common set of themes and concerns. These include an interest in identity and in community—whether this is a community of people in a longhouse, a community of Indigenous activists, or a community of chronic pain sufferers in a pain center. They also include an attention to stigma and to inequality—whether associated with health, social transition, or other factors.

In many respects, Jackson's early fieldwork followed classic ethnographic practice: a comprehensive study of the way of life of a people whose cultural context differs radically from that familiar to “Western” audiences, based on a long-term and intensive period of participant observation. Jackson spent many months in a small Bará community, which occupied a single longhouse in a region far from urban centers. She recalls finding herself welcomed into the community, where she spent most of her time with the women. She reflects, “It was very hard... the insects and the fungus on my feet; but I have very, very fond memories” —which contrasted with some of the interactions she had at the time with non-Indigenous Colombian men, who “would say outrageous things like ‘You’ve got to have a revolver’... I wanted to say, ‘Yeah, to protect me from guys like you, not the Indians!’” (Interview, February 17, 2022).

Jackson was also able to witness firsthand the trajectory of cultural change as it played out in the lives of the people she worked with in the longhouse on the Inambú through their transition to Mitú. When she first returned to Mitú in the mid-1980s, after several years of absence (see the section on “Trajectory”), she came face to face with the abruptness of the disconnect between peoples’ former lives and their current existence in a town of 5,000. Upon arriving, she looked for the son of the headman from the longhouse and located his house. She recalls, “Nobody seemed to be at home, and then, I heard The Mamas and the Papas singing ‘I Call Your Name,’ and I thought, ‘What is going on here?’ They had a television in another room, and the television was showing rock stars from the United States, singing in English. I couldn’t believe it” (Interview, February 3, 2022).

Experiences like these encouraged Jackson to focus deeply on the relationship between cultural change and inequality in the region. As Jackson observed in her early fieldwork, the traditional Vaupés context involved social hierarchies—among Tukanoan clans within each language group, and between the river-oriented Tukanoan peoples and the forest-dwelling “Makú” (Naduhup and Kakua) groups. But the neo-colonial context has both built on and departed from the existing hierarchies, fostering profound social inequalities that have deeply affected Indigenous life, especially in urban centers. As Jackson observes, “There was a foundation of hierarchy; not a class system at all, but a hierarchy that had several layers added to it with the coming of the non-Indigenous people. People [in the Vaupés] express that all the time.” She was struck by the fact that, as these profound social changes took hold, Indigenous people “were turning into ‘poor people,’ whereas out in the forest, although they needed certain things, in many respects they were very self-sufficient” (Interview, February 3, 2022). In fact, a concern with inequality had long resonated with her: “The history of slavery and the racism that continues [in the United States] is something that I have very extremely strong feelings about... I have my own experiences as a very young child [spending four years in the southern US]... I think that those experiences have continued with me and inform some of my research interests” (Interview, February 3, 2022).

Much of Jackson's ethnographic work has explored these questions of inequality, particularly in light of how perceptions of social difference and stigma have developed and changed for Colombian Indigenous people. One of the early contexts in which this topic emerged for her, and likewise for other Vaupés-based anthropologists, was the ever-increasing impact of missionary activity in the region, headed in particular by the Catholic Church. As she reflects,

“Early on, that was one of the reasons that I was so angry at missionaries—they just saw themselves as so superior, and the Indians as so savage and in need [of intervention]” (Interview, February 3, 2022). Her critical exploration of these issues in her 1984 article “Traducciones competitivas del evangelio en el Vaupés, Colombia,” which explores the competition between Catholic and Protestant missionaries, points out that the emerging sense of cultural anomie and loss of self-esteem among Vaupés Indigenous peoples at the time had much to do with the disruption of an integrated sense of the world via the importation of alternative belief systems.

Many of Jackson’s key articles likewise address the complex relationship between perceptions of social hierarchy, status, and cultural change, and some offer critical insights into why particular efforts to promote indigeneity in the Colombian context have ended in failure. Two notable examples are addressed in Chapter 3 of her 2019 monograph, as well as in earlier articles. One of these explores the experiences of the Nukak, a previously uncontacted Indigenous group who appeared in the Colombian town of Calamar in 1988. Shortly after their emergence, the regional authorities flew the Nukak group to Mitú, expecting the local Tukanoans to assist with their transition. To the authorities’ surprise, however, the Nukak were met with extreme hostility by the Tukanoans. Drawing on interviews with Tukanoan and non-Indigenous people who had been present at the encounter, Jackson explains the Tukanoan reaction as stemming from their perception of a social hierarchy in which non-Indigenous people outrank Tukanoans, who themselves outrank the forest-dwelling “Makú” peoples. As previously uncontacted, nomadic people, the Nukak represented the furthest negative extreme for the Tukanoans; yet their positive reception by non-Indigenous representatives seemed to invert the Tukanoan-Nukak positions, making the Nukak a scapegoat for Tukanoan insecurities. The discussion casts light on Tukanoans’ “painful dilemmas” and “agonizing” confusions (1991, 27) over their identity as Indigenous people in the 1980s Vaupés.

A similar case was the 1983 effort, initiated by a non-Indigenous Colombian government agent, to establish a “shaman school” in which older Tukanoan ritual specialists could pass their knowledge on to younger people (Jackson 1995b). Again, this initiative met with failure, which Jackson explores via interviews with teachers encountered in Mitú several years later. The teachers’ reflections on what went wrong highlighted the tensions between traditional and “new,” or Western-oriented, approaches to cultural knowledge and its transmission—including the school’s location in a mission town, far from the traditional contexts associated with shamanic knowledge and practice (which resulted in the impossibility of adhering to a special diet, using ayahuasca and coca, etc.), and questions of monetary payment. The discussion underscores the importance of understanding such practices as shamanism in terms of an “integrated system” within a larger cultural framework.

As Jackson concludes, “both cases, Nukak emergence and the shaman school, illustrate the ways that understandings and misunderstandings in the minds of dominant outsiders—the tendency to rank degrees of authenticity and indigeneity, and the failure to take into account internal divisions, oppositions, hierarchies, and antagonisms—affect the people subject to those stereotypes and imaginings, at times in major ways” (2019, 126).

Contributions

The contributions of Jackson’s research have been many-sided. Her early work on Tukanoan multilingual society and the practice of linguistic exogamy that structures it stands as a source of foundational insights into the relationship between identity and social membership, and their relationship to language in this part of the world. Her 1983 monograph *The fish people*, together with various articles on the topic, represent a key step toward a revision of our understanding of how multilingual societies may be structured. For example, her article “Language identity of the Colombian Vaupés Indians” (1974) critically explores the concept of the “speech commu-

nity,” which at the time was conceptualized primarily as a group of people who speak the same language or dialect. The Vaupés, however, requires a radical rethinking of this formulation. As she expresses in her 2019 book, “language groups can be understood as different sections of a symphony orchestra, whose players jointly produce a coherent, harmonious performance using different instruments and different versions of a single score” (2019, 66).

These observations have provided an enduring foundation for studies of small-scale multilingualism—explorations of the social and cultural dynamics of societies in which multilingualism is normal and everyday, and relations between the languages are not hierarchical or necessarily determined by social inequalities. As Jackson herself notes, “I certainly would say multilingualism is the norm [worldwide]. In the US, we’re just virulently monolingual in a lot of our policies and assumptions. But the vast majority of people speak more than one language” (Interview, February 17, 2022). Indeed, the idea that small-scale multilingualism may in fact have been the default case throughout much of human history has been gaining ground in recent years (see, e.g., Lüpke, 2016; Evans, 2017), and it is likely that the dynamics of multilingualism as seen in the Vaupés are not nearly as exotic as they have often been perceived, either in the context of lowland South America or more widely (Epps 2020).

Jackson’s work has also probed methodological questions relating to ethnographic practice. The 1970s saw an awakening of new interest among anthropologists in ethnographic methods—how they might differ across individuals, and how anthropologists’ subjective experiences and personal positionings might shape the outcomes of their research. These questions prompted Jackson to write two articles about the practices involving fieldnotes, in response to an invitation to participate in a symposium on the topic at the meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). As she recalls, “They were thinking I was going to be kind of the classic, into-the-bush fieldworker... And I said: ‘I don’t want to talk about *my* fieldwork; I’m going to go and interview a bunch of anthropologists about *their* fieldwork’” (Interview, February 17, 2022). The resulting articles, both published in 1990 (“‘I am a fieldnote’: fieldnotes as a symbol of professional identity,” and “*Déjà entendu*: the liminal qualities of anthropological fieldnotes”) drew on these extensive interviews to explore how anthropologists at the time approached the process of taking fieldnotes; their views about the confidentiality of notes, and whether or not they could or should be shared; their attitudes toward the quality and usefulness of their notes; the role of personal memory; and the general lack of any standard methodology. As Jackson observes in “I am a fieldnote” (1990a, 33), “if ‘the field’ is anthropology’s version of both the promised land and an ordeal by fire, then fieldnotes symbolize what journeying to and returning from the field mean to us: the attachment, the identification, the uncertainty, the mystique, and, perhaps above all, the ambivalence.”

Jackson’s ongoing exploration of Colombian indigeneity in the face of rapid cultural change represents another significant set of contributions (see Jackson, 2005, 2009, 2019, *inter alia*). A principal focus of this work relates to the challenge of defining and describing “indigeneity” and “culture” more generally, particularly in the context of change. Like culture, indigeneity itself is fluid and malleable—but this fluidity is not always well received by anthropologists and other observers. In her 1989 study of CRIVA and processes of fashioning new Indigenous identities (“Is there a way to talk about making culture without making enemies?”), Jackson probes “the difficulty encountered in our attempts to describe, in a nonoffensive manner, how a given group of people invent, create, package. and sometimes sell their culture” (Jackson 1989, 127). Indeed, the

term *culture*, because of some of the underlying assumptions in its conventional meanings, is anything but useful when we try to describe how people with an indigenist awareness of themselves modify their culture as part of their inter-ethnic strategies... Anthropologists or activists often find it academically or politically expedient to use *culture* to describe continuities between the past and present, in cases warranting a more sophisticated analysis because such continuities may in fact exist only superficially, the underlying meanings being radically different. (1989, 127)

Similarly, her 1995 article “Culture, genuine and spurious: the politics of Indianness in the Vaupés, Colombia” explores “how Tukanoans have mobilized around notions of recapturing and preserving culture as they work to recover land, maintain language, and protect traditional healing systems.... Tukanoans are involved in a process of contesting and negotiating what cultural forms they wish to retain, modify, or discard” (1995a, 6).

As she explores in her 2019 monograph and reflects on in an interview, “Indigeneity can be discussed only in very abstract terms because how it manifests on the ground varies a great deal in terms of geography, in terms of local history and national history, international history, in terms of international law and so on.” Similarly, “culture” itself “belongs to a community; a community is made up of individuals and groups, and they never agree about everything... And then you factor in change over time... People have, it seems to me, very complicated feelings about their traditions, and they do disagree among themselves” (Interview, February 17, 2022). Culture, Jackson concludes, is best understood via the analogy of a jazz musician’s repertoire (1995a, 2019): it is manifested through the interplay of tradition and improvisation according to the moment, the setting, and the people involved. And ultimately the decision of how to perform this repertoire is up to the people themselves. As Jackson observes,

in the Vaupés, anthropologists... have always had opinions about what is good and bad about Tukanoan traditional cultural forms, as compared with the values and behaviors intruding from mainstream Colombian society... Clearly, anthropologists must think about how to behave ethically and about furthering the well-being of their research community. But at the end of the day, Indigenous peoples have the right to choose nonnutritious, nonbeautiful, non-“authentic” cultural forms. If the goal is to analyze such choices rather than judge them, an objective and neutral terminology is needed. (2019, 96)

Alongside these perspectives on culture and change among Colombian Indigenous groups, Jackson’s work has also contributed significantly to our understanding of Indigenous movements and political organizing in Colombia and Latin America more generally, as surveyed in Jackson and Warren (2005, “Indigenous movements in Latin America, 1992-2004: controversies, ironies, new directions”), and in their 2002 coedited volume. Jackson’s 2019 book (particularly Chapter 4) explores these themes both retrospectively and prospectively, drawing on her decades of work with Indigenous activists in the Vaupés, in Bogotá, and beyond.

Ultimately, throughout the various strands of her research, Jackson’s work contributes important reflections on the fluidity of culture and identity, and the relevance of these considerations to questions of health, wellbeing, and justice for peoples in many different contexts—from a traditional Tukanoan longhouse, to Indigenous rights activists, to people in a chronic pain center.

Gender

The relevance of gender runs deeply through Jackson’s work. In her early ethnographic research of Bará social structure and linguistic exogamy, gender was a particularly evident social variable; it was the in-married women in the community—with whom Jackson spent much of her time—who were not in fact Bará and did not see Bará as their “father language” (as all Bará did, and despite the fact that most of these women were quite fluent). As she observes in her 1996 article “Coping with the dilemmas of affinity and female sexuality,”

Tukanoan society and others like it in the Amazon place the most basic social distinction between men and women... a distinction echoed in ritual and cosmology. The distinction underlies the basic model for constituting society. Male-female relationships, alternatively complementary and hostile, are represented symbolically in terms of one gender’s dominance over the other. (1996, 95)

Yet, as Jackson discovered, the relationships between men and women in Bará society were complex and in many respects unlike those she was familiar with from her own society. As she writes in her 1986 article “On trying to be an Amazon,”

one of the lessons of fieldwork was the actual experiencing of—as opposed to reading about—a culture where women did not feel as inferior in the ways I (although largely unconsciously) did. I realized this about Tukanoan women at the same time I was comprehending that in many respects Tukanoan society was a male-dominated one, where both men and women overtly expressed sexual antagonism. (1986, 267)

Her 1988 article “Gender relations in the northwest Amazon” builds on these observations, arguing that, while male dominance is heavily referenced in Tukanoan symbolic expression, in practice Tukanoan women are in fact able to assert considerable independence and power, and that, indeed, “Tukanoan social structure blocks men’s efforts to translate symbolic dominance into action” (1988, 33).

A significant component of Jackson’s argument is methodologically driven. As she observes, previous anthropological work in the region had tended to emphasize it as heavily male-dominated and even geared to the political subordination of women. Yet, at the same time, interpretations of gender roles in the Vaupés varied considerably among ethnographers. Jackson points out that much of this difference can be attributed to different ethnographers’ personal perceptions, themselves informed by their own gender and associated social experiences. As she observes (1988, 18; see also her 1983 article on the topic), it is important to

recognize that individuals are often unaware of significant structures and dynamics in their own society and under given conditions, choose to ignore and distort others. The researcher must be cognizant of the fact that both men and women in a given society tend to give outsiders a male-oriented perspective. As is so often the case, the dangers of an overly superficial portrayal of females in a given society are increased when the researcher is male, talks about women only with males, and is unaware of his own ethnocentric assumptions concerning sex differences. (1988, 18)

Jackson’s own experience as a female researcher—among the first to work in the region—was key to her recognition of the relevance of the ethnographer’s own point of view. Initially, in her fieldwork, she recalls,

I didn’t think that much about being a woman, except that I wanted to have more time with the men. So I’d sit with them in the evening gatherings, where the women were gathered in the back and the men were in the front, and they would laugh about it and say: “Oh, younger brother’s daughter, yes, you come to listen to us.” But it wasn’t like I was getting any great information; I just was rebelling against this sex segregation that was so pronounced. (Interview, February 17, 2022)

But as her work progressed, Jackson found that spending time with the women in the community provided insights into aspects of social structure that will necessarily be much less visible to male researchers. As she reflects,

If you want to study an institution, don’t go to the center; go to the periphery, where it’s *not* working.... [For example,] if you want to find out about marriage in 17th-century New England, look at the very few cases of divorce, because otherwise you’re looking at sermons and letters [that focus primarily on] how things ought to be. And the same goes for looking at a community where age and sex are the two axes that divide people... In the Vaupés, it is married women that introduce the heterogeneity in every longhouse, in terms of membership and in terms of what people are speaking. I was spending my time with non-Bará women; none of the in-married women were Bará. [Yet] people were teaching me how to speak [Bará]. I saw some funny things that, if you’re a man learning Bará with other men, just don’t come up. And the same is true for other kinds of behavior.” (Interview, February 17, 2022)

Jackson’s observations about gender in ethnography were groundbreaking. In the early 1970s, the topic was barely in focus; she notes that the book in which her 1986 article was published (*Self, sex and gender in cross-cultural fieldwork*) was among the very first to examine

these questions—alongside the larger topic of writing about the identity of the fieldworker. Jackson herself taught courses on gender beginning in 1972, when she first arrived at M.I.T. (with a course originally titled “Sex roles” —before the term “gender” was even established). As she emphasizes, the literature on gender underscores the point made in her early writing

that there are vast areas in many societies where men just simply can't penetrate... certainly birth and reproduction; women's knowledge may not be taboo to men, but as we know in our own societies, women know things that men don't and men know things that women don't... So it's really quite valuable to be a woman in fieldwork settings where there haven't been a lot of researchers who are women. (Interview, February 17, 2022)

Her critical attention to gender continued through her later work, particularly involving its intersection with questions of inequality.

When I started expanding and looking into the Indigenous rights organizing, I frankly saw a lot that upset me. It seemed as though the leadership was very dominantly male, which was politics in Colombia in general, with some interesting exceptions. If you were from one of the top families and you were a woman, your family connection allowed you to become a politician, partly because you had maids at home taking care of the children, and you could go out and have a job or have a government appointment and so forth.” (Interview, February 17, 2022)

Yet she found that writing about these observations was too fraught: as someone who was not herself a member of either Colombian or Indigenous society, she felt that leveraging any critique assumed a position of authority that she could not justify. As she observes, there is frequently a “tension between a feminist agenda and an agenda that promotes Indigenous traditions. It just comes up over and over again, Mexico, Guatemala, over and over again. It's very tricky” (Interview, February 17, 2022).

Conclusion

Jean Jackson's long career has laid a lasting and many-sided foundation for new research trajectories and approaches. Her pioneering work in Amazonian ethnography has inspired a generation of researchers whose attention to questions of gender, multilingualism, and cultural change draws deeply on Jackson's contributions, in both lowland South America and beyond. As one of the first women to carry out ethnographic fieldwork in the Amazon basin, Jackson's critical perspectives have helped to shape our understanding of how gender intersects with and informs ethnographic practice, analysis, and interpretation. Likewise, her exploration of the multilingual fabric of Vaupés social structure has become a classic reference point for research on small-scale multilingualism around the world, feeding a growing recognition that the long-term, stable coexistence of multiple languages may be a normal feature of the human social condition. Jackson's work on Indigenous movements in Colombia and Latin America more widely has contributed key insights into issues of multiculturalism, neoliberalism, and indigeneity, and into why particular initiatives associated with these frameworks may succeed or fail. In all of these areas, and likewise through her work with chronic pain sufferers, Jackson's research illuminates questions of identity, stigma, and social inequality. Ultimately, Jackson's career stands as a pioneering contribution to the promotion of wellbeing and justice for peoples in Latin America and around the world.

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