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## Land. Its occupation, management, use and conceptualization: the case of the Akawaio and Arekuna of the Upper Mazaruni District, Guyana

Janette Bulkan  
*Colby College*

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***Land. Its occupation, management, use and conceptualization: the case of the Akawaio and Arekuna of the Upper Mazaruni District, Guyana.* Audrey J. Butt Colson. Panborough, Near Wells, UK: Last Refuge Ltd, 2009. 408 pp., 8 figures, 8 maps, 42 plates, bibliography, index. £40 (hard cover). ISBN: 978-0-9544350-7-3 [www.lastrefuge.co.uk].**

JANETTE BULKAN  
*Colby College*

*Land* by anthropologist Audrey J. Butt Colson provides a definitive account of the Akawaio and Arekuna, two of Guyana's nine surviving indigenous peoples whose homeland lies in the north Pakaraima mountain range that straddles Venezuela and Brazil. *Land* is evenly divided into two sections: 'Part 1: the historical record,' and 'Part 2: the ethnography,' that together confirm the ancient presence of these peoples in this landscape, infused with their cosmology and belief system.

Part I includes an exhaustive and valuable sixty page annotated chronology of all published archaeological and historical references to the Akawaio and Arekuna. Butt Colson's explicit aim is to lay out their irrefutable ancestral and customary rights to their homelands. *Land* provides a variety of data to counter two often-repeated claims found in accessible documents: first, that the Arekuna are relatively recent migrants from Venezuela in the 1920s into the Upper Mazaruni District, and, secondly, that the original inhabitants, named Serekon, were absorbed by the Akawaio. Refuting these claims is not a matter of academic nicety but part of the evidence cited in the current court case brought by the Akawaio and Akawaio against the Government of Guyana, in which they demand recognition of their right to a contiguous territory, not the status quo of discrete villages bordered by river and land mining operations for gold and diamonds. Butt Colson outlines again in this publication, as in other of her writings, the auto-denominations and denominations in the indigenous naming system, and the misinterpretation that has resulted from the failure by outsiders on short visits to grasp that a multiplicity of names may refer to just one self-identified people.

The ethnographic section of *Land* is based primarily on the author's two lengthy periods of doctoral fieldwork among the Akawaio, first in 1951-2, and then over a six months period in 1957. Since then, Butt Colson has kept in close touch with the Guyanese Akawaio and Arekuna through intermediaries and travel among the neighboring Venezuelan Kapon and Pemon peoples. The chapters in this section build on her accretion of knowledge and interpretation, creating a sense of solid grounding from evidence over a wide area.

The account of the penetration and missionization by the Capuchin Catalans in the western Guyana area in the 18<sup>th</sup> century summarizes a wealth of information in the Venezuelan archival records hitherto inaccessible in English. *Land* sheds light also on the identity of the so-called ‘Spanish Arawaks’ of the coastal north-west district of Guyana. Butt Colson makes a convincing case that they are more likely a population that made its way back to its homeland after the destruction of the Mission by the Bolivarian Revolution of 1817, rather than a new wave of indigenous settlers in the 1840s, as given out in current historical understanding. In the present government terminology, the ‘Spanish Arawaks’ were ‘re-migrants.’

In *Land*, the Akawaio people bestride the northern half of Guyana – from the Corentyne River in the east to the circum-Roraima area in the west. With the Caribs, they were the principal trading intermediaries between the Dutch traders and the indigenous tribes, and they used their favored position to extend beyond the high mountains and the open savannas of the Pakaraima Range to the northern coastal plain.

*Land* does not interrogate this historical record in the way of much revisionist history: the Akawaio were one of the four favored ‘free’ nations, so designated by the Dutch during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, contracted to sell other indigenous peoples into ‘Red’ slavery, and also to cut off the possibility of free settlements of escaped African slaves in Guyana – as was occurring in Suriname in the same period. The convulsions of the era are calmly recounted. *Land* does not vary from a normative register in setting down the story of indigenous peoples like the Akawaio and Arekuna who both suffered the impacts of colonialism and became its agents.

Given its didactic aim, *Land* would have benefited from a discussion of the British colonial legislation that set up Amerindian reservations in 1902 (revised in 1910) and the regulation of mining from 1905, and the effects of those laws on indigenous peoples. *Land* makes clear that the Upper Mazaruni River peoples were largely protected from undue outside intrusion by their geographical location and the difficulties of access until the Second World War. They had been largely able to set the terms of engagement until the coming of small aircraft opened up their homeland to mining interests. *Land* makes little reference to the already-known negative impacts of mining on related indigenous peoples, including the Akawaio downriver, detailed by the colonial officer, P. Storer Peberdy following his extensive fact-finding missions from 1943-5, nor the traumatic implications of the de-reservation of one-third of the Upper Mazaruni area by the colonial government in 1959. The striking photograph in Plate 1 of the junction of the mine-polluted upper Mazaruni River with the clear stream of the Kamarang River illustrates a major biophysical impact of the colonial era policy.

But these are small caveats. Butt Colson’s ethnography vividly and masterfully provides a detailed account of two gracious and unfailingly

generous peoples. Her description of the segmentary system of land use, in which there is a relative autonomy within individual river settlements that make up a larger Akawaio nation, linked by language, culture, religion and marriage and trading alliances, allows the reader to appreciate the logic of Akawaio and Arekuna arguments for an intact homeland, much as the Makushi have successfully done in Raposa-Serra do Sol in nearby Roraima State, and the Kuna in Panama.

The volume is handsomely produced, and includes historical and boundary maps, photographs from the 1950s and recent aerial views taken by photographer, Adrian Warren. From personal experience, I know that Butt Colson is counted among the Akawaio *esak*, “guardian of the extended and joint family unity” (p. 267). Land provides another fitting justification for this well-deserved ascription.