

COMMUNITY, REGION,  
AND COSMOS:  
Levels of Analysis in Amazonian Anthropology

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*THE COSMIC ZYGOTE: COSMOLOGY IN THE AMAZON BASIN.* By PETER G. ROE. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1982. Pp. 384. \$40.00.)

*THE FISH PEOPLE: LINGUISTIC EXOGAMY AND TUKANOAN IDENTITY IN NORTHWEST AMAZONIA.* By JEAN E. JACKSON. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983. Pp. 283. \$49.50 cloth, \$17.95 paper.)

The Ucayali Basin of Eastern Peru is the habitat of a rich diversity of native Amazonian language and culture groups ranging from interfluvial hunter-gatherers (such as the Pano-speaking Amahuaca) to uplands fishing and horticulturalists (like the Amuesha and the Campa) to riverine fishing and horticulturalists (such as the Panoan Shipibo and the Tupian Cocama). This multicultural pattern is made still more interesting by the pervasive influence of Central Andean Quechua cultures with which the lowland groups have had a relationship of varying historical depth.

In *The Cosmic Zygote: Cosmology in the Amazon Basin*, Peter Roe takes as his starting point the idea that myth and cosmology can serve as integral parts of adaptive structure in lowland South American Indian societies. "Thus I see myth as a real participant in the hard work of cultural survival rather than as a useless but fascinating adornment of culture" (p. 9). Roe conducted long-term, firsthand fieldwork with the Shipibo of the Ucayali Basin, and the first third of his book focuses on the Shipibo and neighboring peoples of eastern Peru. In the remainder of the book, the author departs from a regional level of analysis and attempts to develop a general model of Amazonian cosmologies, a "metacosmology" based on the root metaphor of the fertilized egg: "In other words, the universe as South American Indians conceive it to be is a kind of cosmic zygote that postulates existence as a continual and self-generating process" (pp. 4–5). Thus *The Cosmic Zygote* really consists of two divergent, sometimes contradictory, theses, each of which

is concerned with a distinct level of analysis. On the one hand, Roe sets out to show how Shipibo myth, ritual, and cosmology all play a direct role in shaping the ecopolitics of indigenous and non-native peoples in the Ucayali Basin. On the other hand, Roe has set himself the far more ambitious goal of reconstructing a metacosmology for all regions of lowland South America (and to some extent, even highland regions are included). The first thesis is based primarily on his fieldwork, whereas the second one relies heavily on secondary research.

In the section on Shipibo myths, Roe makes an important contribution to our understanding of “the role of myth in the perpetuation of Shipibo culture in the context of the ever-shifting matrix of ethnic relations in the Peruvian montaña” (p. 9). Roe’s discussion demonstrates that Shipibo myths, far from masking historical and ecological processes of change and adaptation, accurately correspond to the dynamic ecopolitics of competing regional peoples of the Ucayali Basin (p. 90). In this section of the book, Roe moves away from a Lévi-Straussian, rationalist view of myth as “justification” toward an understanding of myth as a part of social action within specific ecological contexts. Most impressive is the discussion of how the Shipibo use myths and other genres of oral narrative to make sense out of their contacts with other indigenous societies of the Ucayali Basin and adjoining areas and to interpret historical contacts with non-native peoples. The author’s translations of myths and his analysis of female puberty rites provide an interesting glimpse of Shipibo culture, but he does not provide any clear explanation of how these performances fit into either local group organization or ecopolitics of the region. Nevertheless, Roe has opened a new and potentially productive area of inquiry: the role of myth, ritual, and other symbolic activities in the ecopolitics of linguistically and culturally diverse regional populations.

Roe’s attempt at formally describing a general model of Amazonian cosmology rests on the thesis that the sexual division of labor and the categories of male and female are the *materia prima* from which native Amazonians construct social and mythical realities. Although clearly influenced by the structuralist theory of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roe’s analysis breaks sharply from structuralism by shifting from a focus on structural interrelations to semantic equations. Lévi-Strauss would argue that what matters is the interrelations among signs, or their positional values relative to one another. Roe, on the other hand, explores sets of semantic equations such as “A refers to B refers to C” and oppositions between such sets (for example, male equals high status is opposed to female equals low status). The assertion that sexual opposition is primary in relation to all other classificatory distinctions emerges first as an hypothesis (pp. 4–5), then as an assumption (p. 169), and finally as a conclusion (pp. 264–71). As another reviewer has

already concluded (Weiss 1984), this kind of reasoning is difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate on empirical grounds.

Despite this shortcoming, Roe's thoughts on gender and sexuality deserve attention because they raise an important issue that has not yet been thoroughly researched: the ambiguity of cooperative versus competitive relations between the sexes. Roe observes, "Men are tied to women and women to men in the unavoidable embrace of both economic necessity and physiological need. . . . Jungle peoples appear to have adjusted to this claustrophobic interdependence by injecting between the sexes various spacing mechanisms in residence, task assignment, and matters of the sensibilities" (p. 268). Roe's hypothesis is that the ambiguity of relations between the sexes as groups is a major dilemma underlying the cosmologies of lowland South American societies. Even if one accepts the idea that cosmology can be understood in terms of a single, implicit referent, the view that interdependence of the sexes is causally prior to their independence is overly simplistic and leads to an exaggerated interpretation of spacing mechanisms between the sexes. A structuralist would view the problem the other way around: the dichotomy of male versus female must be transcended through mediating symbols that express the concept of male-female interdependence. If conceptual categories are reified, they become obstacles, rather than means, to understanding and controlling reality.

In support of his hypothesis that South American Indians assign a negative value, described as "claustrophobia," to cooperative, interdependent relations between the sexes, Roe asserts that "actual residential segregation in the form of a central men's hut surrounded by huts of women and children is not uncommon" (p. 265). This claim is more accurate for the central highlands societies of New Guinea than for lowland South American societies. Although some Amazonian groups, such as the Mundurucu, denigrate cooperative relations between men and women and have developed correspondingly rigid spacing mechanisms between the sexes, gender antagonism and separateness carried to the extreme of residential separation is exceptional in lowland South America. In fact, Robert Murphy pointed out that the separation of the sexes found in Mundurucu society is not known in any other region of South America: "The Mundurucu exhibit the most complete development of the male-female dichotomy and accompanying men's house in South America" (Murphy 1960, 101). Other groups, such as the fishing and horticultural peoples of the Upper Xingu and the Gê of Central Brazil, have a male-controlled house in the center of the village plaza that serves as a bachelor's hut for young men undergoing initiation and as a place of relaxation and ritual for adult men. But the bachelor's hut is not even universal among Gê societies (Maybury-Lewis 1968, 306). In short, residential separation of the sexes is common only in some areas

of lowland South America and, with the exception of the Mundurucu, only during the stage of the life cycle between puberty and marriage. Cooperative, interdependent relations between the sexes are truly "claustrophobic" only for the Mundurucu.

The ambiguity of interdependence versus independence of the sexes in Amazonia is more plausibly viewed as one of reciprocal influence rather than unidirectional causality. Different Amazonian societies have arrived at different cultural solutions to this ambiguity. The Mundurucu have attempted to reduce, or perhaps deny, any paradox by inventing an all-male fantasy world in myth and ritual (Nadelson 1981). In other areas, the ambiguity is not so much reduced as dramatized and heightened through collective representations that express the concept of presexuality, or a symbolic space-time in which neither male nor female gender exists as distinct, independent activities (Drummond 1981; Hill 1983, 1984; C. Hugh-Jones 1979; S. Hugh-Jones 1979). In fact, Roe's own description of the Shipibo *ani Shreati*, an initiation ritual in which women perform a radical clitoridectomy on pubescent girls, includes a powerful expression of the idea of presexuality and male-female interdependence. Citing Karsten (1964, 191), Roe notes that Shipibo men perform sanguinary operations on each others' heads during *ani Shreati* in part because they wish to express their sympathy for the girls who are being operated upon (p. 108). Such openly admitted feelings of male-female solidarity would certainly never have arisen in the course of Mundurucu rituals nor, perhaps, even in their everyday social activities. Like the Mundurucu, Roe ultimately reduces the ambiguity of the interdependence versus independence of the sexes to a binary opposition between the semantic equations of male equals high status equals purity versus female equals low status equals pollution.

The Northwest Amazon region of Brazil and Colombia is best known for the linguistically diverse, yet culturally overlapping, Eastern Tukanoan groups of the Vaupés and Papuri basins. With the exception of the Cubeo, the Eastern Tukanoans practice language-group exogamy and have one of the highest rates of multilingualism in the world. The Northwest Amazon region is also unique in lowland South America in the level of sociopolitical integration insofar as both Tukanoan groups of the Vaupés Basin and their Arawakan neighbors of the Isana-Guaínia drainage area organize themselves into larger, intermarrying social units, each consisting of a number of local patrisibs (an extended family united by ties to a core group of senior adult brothers) ranked in a serial order (Goldman 1979; Oliveira and Galvão 1973). In addition, a number of interfluvial hunting groups, collectively known as the Maku, are incorporated into the riverine Tukanoan and Arawakan societies as "slaves," or workers, who provide game meat and labor in exchange for garden produce and ritual services (Milton 1984).

The unravelling of a complex ethnolinguistic system forms the central focus of Jean Jackson's *The Fish People: Linguistic Exogamy and Tukanoan Identity in Northwest Amazonia*. The author views Tukanoan identity as a relational process in which "self is merged with other selves through participation—both cognitively and behaviorally—in various categories" (p. 5). In contrast with individual identity in modern Western societies, the concept of self as a permanent and separate being has relatively little meaning in Tukanoan society. Although the Tukanoans rationalize their social institutions in fairly rigid terms of inclusion versus exclusion, group affiliation is highly flexible and malleable in practice. Jackson suggests that regional systems of dispersed hunter-gatherers "with their local group interdependence, fluidity in territorial boundaries, and fluctuations in local group membership offer a model . . . for understanding the Vaupés" (p. 6). The anthropological concept of tribe as a bounded, territorially discrete, endogamous (in-marrying) social unit does not in any way correspond to Vaupés social structure because language groups are not corporate, do not occupy a unified riverine territory, and systematically intermarry according to a rule of linguistic exogamy.

Jackson explores the Tukanoan ethnolinguistic system at different levels of structuring: the longhouse community, the language group, the phratry (a set of about five language groups whose members view themselves as being related as "brothers," or parallel cousins), the regional system, relations between kin and affines (in-laws), relations with Maku hunter-gatherers, relations between the sexes, and relations with the outside world. Jackson's focus on fluidity versus rigidity and on identity as a relational process rather than "something absolute and eternal" (p. 4) allows her to create a sophisticated, yet highly readable, ethnography of Tukanoan society and to avoid reducing the ambiguities and complexities of her subject to a simplistic, rule-bound model of social organization. Although *The Fish People* is more sociological than interpretative in its approach to Tukanoan society, the book makes a significant contribution to an understanding of the sexual symbolism of Tukanoan myth and ritual by pointing out that "one must be careful to avoid oversimplifying the emotional meaning of male and female symbols in either their negative or their positive value for Tukanoans" (p. 191). Menstruation, for example, is ambiguously charged with negative value as a destructive, polluting process of blood loss and with positive value as a creative, life-giving process of renewal. Jackson concludes that the social status of Vaupés women is significantly higher than that of women in many other lowland societies and that their higher status underlies the relative stability of marriages in the region (pp. 192–94).

*The Fish People* is a masterpiece of sociolinguistic analysis and is solidly based upon qualitative research at the local community level

and quantitative statistical analysis of relations among different language groups in the Papuri-Inambu drainage area. The Tukanoans consciously strive to maintain linguistic boundaries. This goal is revealed by the fact that women who marry into the longhouse community are “scolded for allowing words from other languages to creep into conversations in Bara,” the language spoken by the core group of the village where Jackson’s fieldwork was centered (p. 169). The rule of linguistic exogamy was upheld in all but one of the 534 marriages included in Jackson’s survey and is basic to Tukanoan social identity (p. 94). As one informant said, “If we were all Tukano speakers, where would we get our women?” (p. 170). Thus at one level, language serves as an unambiguous badge of identity by categorizing each person in terms of his or her father language.

At another level, each individual is competent in at least one other language, the mother language, and many individuals are competent in several different languages. The Tukanoans are themselves aware of the varying degrees of closeness and distance among different languages, but they do not rank languages relative to one another. The result is a pattern of egalitarian bilingualism or multilingualism rather than the dominance of one language over others. Language groups, but not languages, are arranged into unnamed, geographically dispersed phratic confederations that are internally ranked as a set of elder to younger siblings. Intermarriage is forbidden between members of language groups that are said to belong to the same phratry. But Tukanoan phratries do not constitute exclusive social groupings, and in some cases, “phratic membership is probably epiphenomenal—that is, this pair [of language groups] does not intermarry because of distance factors alone” (p. 86). In all cases except one, the native Tukanoan model of genetic relatedness between languages reflects social and geographical factors rather than objective measurement of cognate words in the lexicon. “Frequently, those languages that are genetically the most closely related are those of language groups that do intermarry” (p. 173). In other words, intermarriage and decreasing geographic distance promote a coming together of different languages, despite the strong attempts to keep languages discrete at the local community level. Jackson provides insight into this process by noting that Bara speakers frequently use a Tuyuka word because “everyone knows it is a Tuyuka word” (p. 170). The Tuyuka and Bara are closely interrelated by marriage (p. 95), and it is easy to imagine a future time when no one among the Bara will remember that the loan word was originally Tuyuka.

The conclusive evidence that language distance reflects social and geographical distance rather than the other way around is the linguistic divergence of Cubeo, an Eastern Tukanoan language spoken mainly in the Cuduyari Basin. The Cubeo have to some degree re-



moved themselves from the regional system of linguistic exogamy and are "at times excluded in discussions of 'real people'" (p. 97) because they fail to practice linguistic exogamy, preferring instead to divide themselves into localized phratries of the same language group (Goldman 1979). The Cubeo lexicon is only 79 percent cognate with that of Desana, whereas the groups practicing linguistic exogamy all have over 90 percent lexical cognates. The divergence of Cubeo language illustrates a process of linguistic drift, reflecting the relative social and geographical isolation of the Cubeo of the Cuduyari River.

Jean Jackson succeeds admirably in demonstrating that the Eastern Tukanoans have a flexible regional system of interdependence and that the system is loosely integrated according to sociolinguistic principles that differ from, and in some cases conflict with, those structuring identity at the local community level. *The Fish People* opens up an exciting new area of inquiry by providing a basis from which to formulate hypotheses about the long-term evolution of regional ethnolinguistic systems. Jackson considers two alternative models for the origins of Tukanoan multilingualism: first, a fusion model in which external pressures forced previously hostile language groups to form alliances through intermarriage; and second, a fission model whereby language differences came to define the boundary between two exogamous moieties until "the entire endogamous unit divided into two languages along the lines of the moiety division" (p. 100). Jackson's discovery that Tukanoan phratries are less socially significant in statistical terms than pairs of intermarrying language groups suggests that the fission model is the more plausible of the two.

Neither the fission nor the fusion model is entirely satisfactory as an explanation of Eastern Tukanoan multilingualism because both are deeply rooted in descent theory and the corresponding view of local tribal groups as speakers of a particular dialect or language who intermarry primarily among themselves. In considering the relative merits of fission and fusion models, Jackson is forced to consider a time in the past when Tukanoan society was "probably much more tribal-like than at present" (p. 100). At this point, she seems to contradict her earlier suggestion that Tukanoan society is best understood in terms of a dispersed hunter-gatherer model of fluidity, interdependence, and fluctuation. As Jane Hill pointed out, the model of tribal groups as intermarrying speakers of a common language or dialect has certain advantages for understanding the presence of learned regional dialects, but "it does not account for institutionalized multilingualism, special 'trade' or 'high' languages used in contact situations, cultural mechanisms which maximize ease of learning new languages, . . . or phenomena of language structuring and usage that encompass many linguistically distinct groups" (1978, 2-3). Institutionalized, egalitarian multilingualism

is widely shared among Eastern Tukanoan groups and serves as a means for distinguishing those languages that are members of the area network from nonmember languages. The Cubeo, for example, are excluded from the system because they practice intermarriage among exogamous phratries within the same language group rather than language-group exogamy. Thus it is unnecessary for Jackson to abandon her regional model of language group interdependence in favor of a "tribal-like" model in formulating hypotheses about the long-term evolution of Tukanoan multilingualism.

Further progress in understanding Tukanoan ethnolinguistics will require studies of comparable depth and scope among Northern Arawakan and other native groups in areas bordering upon the Vaupés Basin. The Arawakan phratries of the Isana-Guainia drainage area refer to themselves as *Wakuenai*, or "people of our language" (Hill 1983, 1984), and they have had historically deep relationships of warfare, trade, and intermarriage with their Eastern Tukanoan neighbors to the south and west (Chernela 1983; Wright 1981). Like the Cubeo phratries of the Cuduyari River (Goldman 1979), those of the *Wakuenai* are (or were) localized in riverine territories and can act together as a defensive unit to repel outsiders (Hill 1983; Wright 1981). The Cubeo self-name *Pamiwa* also translates as "people of the language" (Jackson 1983, 178), and as Goldman pointed out, "One of the Cubeo phratries was, in fact, once Arawakan" (1979, 26). In-depth studies of *Wakuenai* language and social organization are just beginning to appear (Hill 1983; Journet 1981; Wright 1981), still lagging behind the study of Eastern Tukanoan societies (Chernela 1983; Goldman 1979; C. Hugh-Jones 1979; S. Hugh-Jones 1979; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971, 1976). Comparison of Northern Arawakan and Eastern Tukanoan ethnolinguistic systems and of the intermediate Cubeo system promises to reveal cultural relations of great complexity.

At a still higher level of comparison, the riverine fishing and horticultural societies of both the Northwest Amazon and the Ucayali basins share a relatively open, cosmopolitan attitude toward surrounding groups who are culturally and linguistically different. Riverine societies in both areas attribute social power to the special linguistic abilities of ritual specialists. Roe reports that a Shipibo shaman "while under the influence of *Ayahuasca* (*nishi*) will sing what he is convinced is a curing song in Quechua," even though the texts contain only Quechua-sounding, rather than actual Quechua, words (p. 89). A similar process of acquiring ritual power by importing song texts across ethnolinguistic boundaries has been recorded by Chernela among the Uanano, an Eastern Tukanoan group of the Vaupés Basin.<sup>1</sup> In the Uanano case, a shaman was locally regarded as the most powerful specialist because he knew how to sing the sacred musical language (*malikai*) of *Wakuenai*



chant-owners and shamans. In turn, Wakuenai ritual specialists enhance their social prestige by learning to perform divination and other ritual techniques of Eastern Tukanoan origins. The borrowing of song texts and ritual practices across cultural and linguistic boundaries is but one example of the exchanges between Tukanoan and Arawakan groups in the Northwest Amazon. The Shipibo shaman who sings in a Quechua-sounding language while in a trance most likely illustrates a more widespread process of exchange between different cultural and linguistic groups in the Ucayali Basin. In both areas, regional networks need to be approached as a level of cultural and linguistic structuring that interpenetrates with the local community but operates according to a distinct set of social and ecological principles.

NOTE

1. This information was conveyed to me in person in January 1983.

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