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Christine Hugh-Jones

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26

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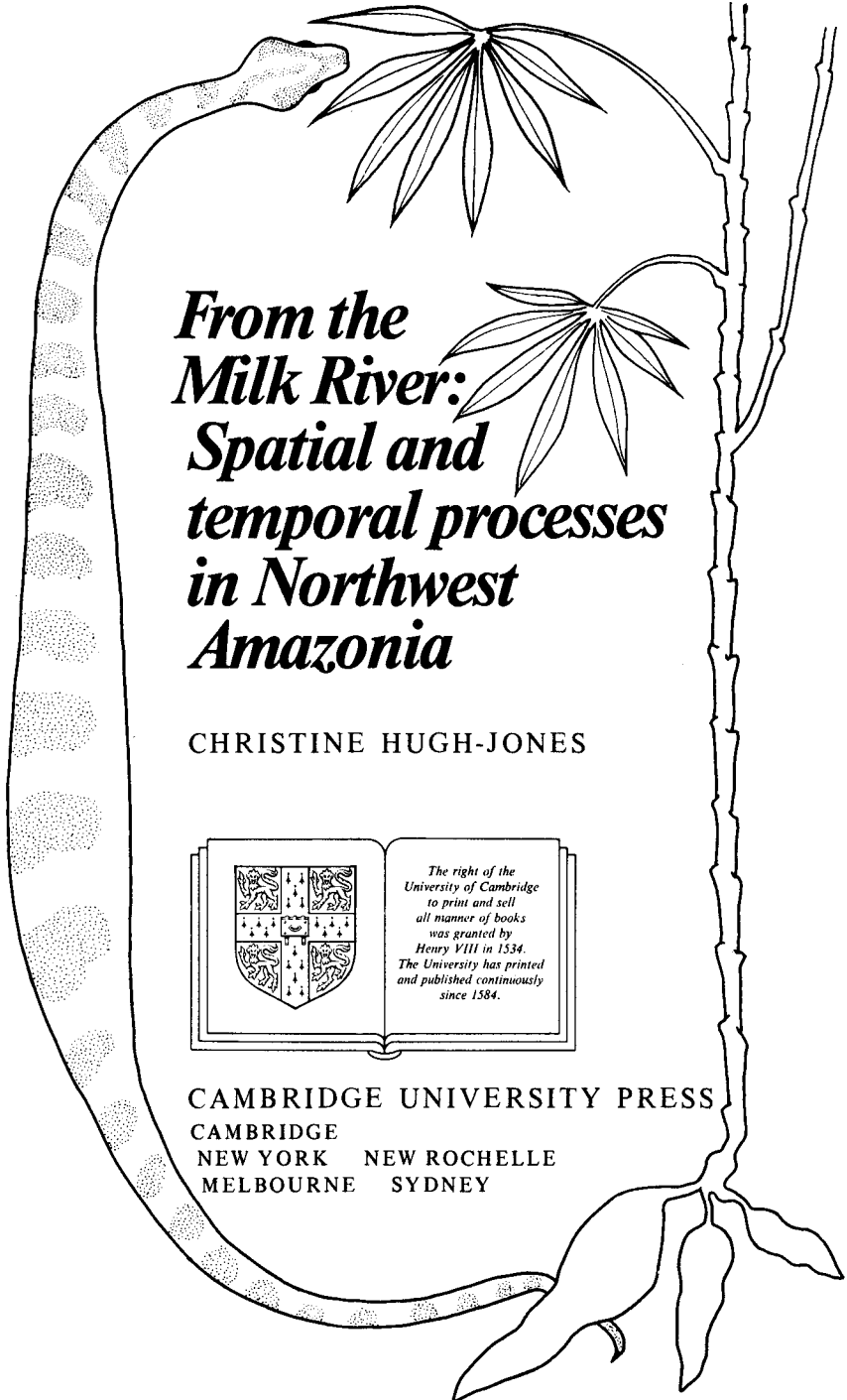
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Frontmatter

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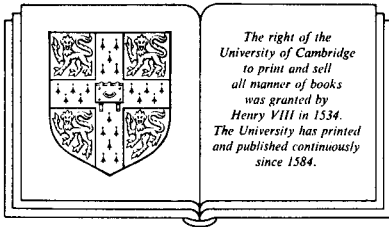
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Cambridge University Press
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***From the
Milk River:
Spatial and
temporal processes
in Northwest
Amazonia***

CHRISTINE HUGH-JONES



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Frontmatter

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FOR LEO AND TOM

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Frontmatter

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But I was so much older then,
I'm younger than that now.

BOB DYLAN

CONTENTS

	<i>List of figures, tables and maps</i>	page	x
	<i>List of myths</i>		xii
	<i>Preface</i>		xiii
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>		xviii
	<i>Orthography</i>		xx
1	Introduction		1
	Focus of the study		1
	Physical setting		3
	History of white influence		5
	Changes in traditional life		9
	The unit of study		11
2	Social structure		13
	Introduction		13
	The units		14
	<i>Tukanoans and Makú</i>		14
	<i>My use of technical terms for Tukanoan units</i>		15
	<i>A note on exogamy and language</i>		17
	The model		18
	<i>Exogamous Groups</i>		19
	<i>The phratry</i>		21
	<i>The sib</i>		22
	<i>The local descent group</i>		22
	The model applied		22
	<i>Territory</i>		25
	<i>Names for groups</i>		26
	<i>The internal organisation of Exogamous Groups</i>		26
	<i>Functions of social-structural units</i>		30
	<i>Ideology of descent</i>		33
	<i>Origin of sibs</i>		38
	The longhouse and its inhabitants		40
	<i>Composition of the longhouse group</i>		40
	<i>The longhouse setting</i>		43
	<i>The longhouse</i>		45

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35889-7 - From the Milk River: Spatial and Temporal Processes in
Northwest Amazonia

Christine Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

	<i>The longhouse interior</i>	46
	<i>Social and economic organisation of the longhouse community</i>	49
3	The set of specialist roles	54
	Erosion of the system	54
	The specialist roles	56
	<i>Politico-economic domain: chiefs–servants</i>	57
	<i>Metaphysical domain: dancer/chanters–shamans</i>	60
	<i>Domain of competitive intergroup relations: warriors</i>	63
	Analysis	64
	<i>Analogy with life stages</i>	65
	<i>Analogy with external relations</i>	69
4	Kinship and marriage	76
	Introduction	76
	The O-generation categories	77
	Marriage rules and preferences	83
	<i>Negative rules</i>	83
	<i>Positive rules</i>	84
	<i>Analysis of marriage rules and preferences in relation to specialist roles</i>	87
	Marriage practice	93
	<i>Obtaining wives</i>	93
	<i>Wife-getting methods as a function of social distance</i>	97
	General considerations	100
	<i>Continuous and symmetrical organisation of the models</i>	100
	<i>General value of the models</i>	102
5	The life-cycle	107
	Introduction	107
	The end of life	107
	<i>Life and death</i>	107
	<i>Events after death</i>	109
	<i>The elements of the individual separated at death</i>	112
	The beginning of life	114
	<i>Ante-natal development</i>	115
	<i>Post-natal development</i>	117
	<i>Birth</i>	123
	<i>Naming</i>	133
	Menstruation	134
	<i>The practice</i>	134
	<i>The nature of the menstruating woman</i>	136
	<i>Menstruation in myth</i>	137
	<i>Menstruation in the life-cycle</i>	139
	Male initiation (<i>He wi</i>)	142
	<i>The practice</i>	142
	<i>The He wi cycle</i>	145
	<i>Changes that take place during He wi</i>	147

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35889-7 - From the Milk River: Spatial and Temporal Processes in
Northwest Amazonia

Christine Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

	<i>Metaphors of change: contact with the ancestral world</i>	148
	<i>Metaphors of change: rebirth</i>	149
	<i>Metaphors of change: change through paint</i>	149
	<i>The sacred instruments and female rites</i>	152
	<i>The natural and social</i>	155
	Summary of the life-cycle	159
	Perpetuation of Pirá-paraná society	161
6	Production and consumption	169
	Introduction	169
	The sexual division of labour	170
	Manioc	174
	<i>Production</i>	174
	<i>Analysis of the manioc process</i>	180
	Meat: analysis of production	192
	Structuring time by production and consumption	200
	<i>Secular production and consumption</i>	200
	<i>Production and consumption on ritual occasions</i>	204
	<i>Reintegration through food consumption</i>	213
	Interpretation of foods	217
	<i>Starch</i>	217
	<i>Cooked meat</i>	222
	<i>Pepper pot</i>	224
	Cultivated plants and social models	226
7	Concepts of space–time	235
	Introduction	235
	Horizontal space–time	238
	<i>Description of horizontal systems</i>	238
	<i>Synthesis of horizontal systems</i>	251
	Vertical space–time	257
	Synthesis of horizontal and vertical space–time	266
	<i>Horizontal to vertical</i>	266
	<i>Vertical to horizontal</i>	269
8	Conclusion	275
	Appendix 1: Named groups	282
	Appendix 2: Kinship terminology	287
	<i>Works cited</i>	291
	<i>Index</i>	293

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35889-7 - From the Milk River: Spatial and Temporal Processes in
Northwest Amazonia

Christine Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

FIGURES, TABLES AND MAPS

Figures		
1	Units of social structure	23
2	Anaconda journeys	34
3	Tripartite classification of Exogamous Group ancestors compared with marriage relations between Exogamous Groups	37
4	The longhouse setting	44
5	Ground-plan of longhouse interior	47
6	Relation between concentric and hierarchical arrangements of specialist roles	56
7	Concentric organisation of specialist roles and longhouse structure	70
8	Functioning of internal and external aspects of specialist roles	74
9	O-generation kinship terms	78
10	Simplified kinship terminology for male ego	79
11	O-generation kinship relations	82
12	Symmetrical and continuous organisation of specialist roles and O-generation kinship categories	103
13	Transference of shamanic activity to body of client	121
14	Aspects of child development	124
15	Metaphors of birth	127
16	Life-cycle of the body	130
17	Elements of the soul	135
18	Loss of <i>Romu Kumu's</i> spiritual power	139
19	Continuity of female generations	141
20	Differentiation of ritual according to presence of <i>He</i> ; presence of women; patterns of paint on body	151
21	Body paint in <i>He wi</i> cycle	153
22	Aspects of alternation of generations	163
23	Manioc processing: cassava, juice and <i>hiari</i>	175
24	Processing and products of bitter manioc	176–7
25	Cycle diagram of cassava production	181
26	Alternative interpretations of manioc-separation process	191
27	Comparison of meat production and reproduction	193
28	Reverse cycle made in the myth of No-Anus Spirit	199
29	Coca processing	202

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35889-7 - From the Milk River: Spatial and Temporal Processes in
Northwest Amazonia

Christine Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Figures, tables and maps*

30	Structuring time by food and drug consumption	205
31	Production and consumption of protein, manioc and coca	211
32	Sequence of food shamanism following <i>He wi</i>	214
33	Transformation of female body liquids	225
34	Old house site planted with pepper and tobacco	229
35	Comparison of movable and immovable systems of space–time	238
36	The earth's surface	240
37	Alternative models of river system of earth	242
38	Comparison of typical longhouse setting with conceptual longhouse setting	245
39	Models of house as body and womb	247
40	Horizontal models of universe as womb	250
41	Models of horizontal space–time	252
42	Comparison of linear and concentric orders of horizontal space–time	255
43	Alternative models of vertical structure of cosmos	259
44	Relationship between vertical planes of house, longhouse setting and universe	265
45	Relationship between vertical and east–west horizontal axes of universe	268
46	Incorporation of Underworld into longhouse setting	273

Tables

1	Comparison of authors' use of terms for Tukanoan social- structural units	16
2	Composition of longhouse groups	42

Maps

1	The Vaupés region	4
2	The Pirá-paraná and surrounding areas	7

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35889-7 - From the Milk River: Spatial and Temporal Processes in
Northwest Amazonia

Christine Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

LIST OF MYTHS

Note *starred items are reproduced in fuller form in Stephen Hugh-Jones 1979,
part V.

*Manioc-stick Anaconda and the origin of exogamous marriage	88
Live Woman in the Underworld	110
*Excerpts from myths about <i>Romi Kumu</i>	137
(1) <i>Romi Kumu</i> 's life in the sky	137
(2) <i>Romi Kumu</i> 's immortality	137
(3) <i>Romi Kumu</i> steals the sacred Yurupary instruments	137
(4) Fire is stolen from <i>Romi Kumu</i>	137
(5) <i>Warimi</i> steals poison from <i>Romi Kumu</i> 's father	137
Frog Wife	166
*The origin of manioc	182
*The original planting of manioc	183
Dragonfly's daughters	185
* <i>Yeba</i> 's penis	185
The poisoning of White Spirit	187
* <i>Yeba</i> in the Vulture's land	188
No-Anus Spirit	197
*Origin of cultivation of coca	212
*Manioc-stick Anaconda and Macaw	261

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35889-7 - From the Milk River: Spatial and Temporal Processes in
Northwest Amazonia

Christine Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

The field research for this book was carried out in Colombia between September 1968 and December 1970. Twenty-two months of this time was spent in the field. I took part in a joint project in which Stephen Hugh-Jones and I were to study a group of Tukanoan Indians and Peter Silverwood-Cope was to study a group of semi-nomadic Makú. By careful choice of field location, we hoped to report on each side of the symbiotic relationship between specific groups of Tukanoans and Makú. However, as is the way with fieldwork projects, our plans had to be modified as soon as we had made our first exploratory trip down the Pirá-paraná. We had chosen this river because most of the Tukanoan population were still living in traditional longhouses, but it was not until we got there that we learnt that it was barely ever visited by Makú and that there were no ongoing Makú–Tukanoan exchanges. Peter Silverwood-Cope left to study the Makú on the Makú-paraná, a tributary of the Papurí (see map 1 below and Silverwood-Cope 1972). Although we could not follow our original plan, various ideas that the Pirá-paraná Indians hold about the Makú are presented here.

Throughout our stay in the Pirá-paraná, we had to weigh up the advantages of making close ties with a single community against the disadvantages of having little comparative data and relying on a mere handful of adult informants. We decided in favour of close ties with a single community. This was partly to avoid living through the difficulties of establishing our position as participant observers more than once. We found that by far the most satisfactory and congenial way of doing our research was to live in a communal longhouse, partake in communal meals and help in productive activities (in as much as our fumbling efforts counted as ‘help’). In fact, this seemed the only way, as we had a long period of language learning ahead and we also had to

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Northwest Amazonia

Christine Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

dissociate ourselves from certain aspects of ‘the white role’ if we were going to understand many facets of Indian culture. Our success in establishing our position within a longhouse depended upon finding a way in which we could reciprocate our hosts’ hospitality in a generalised way, rather than exchanging our gifts item for item. Solutions to these problems developed over time and, in spite of never being resolved to everyone’s satisfaction, the question of gifts became less nerve-racking over the months.

While we remained in a community of Barasana (*Meni Masa* sib, see appendix I for lists of sibs) located on Caño Colorado (see map 2 below) for most of the time, we also accompanied our hosts on many short visits and spent longer periods in several other communities. Together, we made extended visits to Makuna (*Sāira*) on Caño Komeyaka, Barasana (*Kome Masa*) on the central Pirá-paraná and two communities of Bará (*Munganyarā*) on upper Caño Colorado. I also visited a Tatuvo (*Hamoá*) community in the Pirá-paraná headwaters.

The Vaupés economy is marked by a strict sexual division of labour. This meant that we spent most of each day apart, each engaged in activities in which it would have been impossible for the other to participate. At times I found the female role irksome and depressing. Quite apart from such indignities as having to eat breakfast after my husband and having to sit out on most formal occasions, I suffered from the conviction that everything important was going on in the men’s world and that I was not learning the exciting things about Pirá-paraná society: I was a few years too early to have been armed with a ‘raised consciousness’. However, there was no choice but to stay in a deserted longhouse for most of the day or to accompany my companions in their repetitive round of manioc work. Progress seemed slow as I gardened, peeled, grated and sieved. Much of the time the work was too hot and tiring for conversation and, when it was not, the women were often conversing in several different languages. I must have been a dreadful liability, but my friends put up with my technical inefficiency, rude interruptions and foolish questions and, along the way, I learnt a great deal about the domestic round. It is unlikely that I could have learnt the same things in any other way, or even that I would have made the necessary effort to learn them, because I did not realise at the time that they would be an important part of my analysis. In fact, I came to enjoy much of the daily routine for its own sake, but the process of writing up my field material has led me to appreciate its theoretical significance too. A large part of

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Christine Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

the analysis contained in this book is concerned with the structure of secular life and its relation to the other structured domains, such as kinship, myth and ritual, which are usually given preferential treatment in interpretive monographs.

I hope this book will be considered a contribution to the ethnography of Vaupés Indians, but this is not its primary object. My aim is to present Pirá-paraná society as an integrated system. The analysis has grown out of my own attempt to make sense of the data in relation to each other and therefore, although I have obviously been influenced by some types of analysis more than others, in no way is this an exercise in a particular style of interpretation. Originally, I began to write about social structure in the conventional, limited sense of the word. I wished to give an account of kinship groups, the operation of marriage rules, the discrepancy between ideal models and practical behaviour and so on. I abandoned this project because it seemed to me that social structure was not a legitimate isolate and that the most interesting aspects of it could not be understood from within. However, in a sense, a concern with social structure is still basic to this work because much of the analysis is a response to the question of how to present an 'open-ended' society as a system. It is not simply that the boundaries of 'the society' are indistinct or subject to fluctuation; Pirá-paraná society is part of a wider complex whose distinctive feature is the lack of bounded groups. Instead, there are a great many exogamous patrilineal groups connected by marriage ties in an open-ended network. We are all familiar with segmentary models but these presuppose a primary, all-embracing unit. Once the rule of exogamy is attached to the highest-level units, we are obliged to recognise that a very different type of system exists. Even the well-tryed, but misleading, feature of common language must be discarded as a defining feature of 'the society' (or 'a society') because, in this case, languages are attached to exogamous groups. I believe that it is possible to represent a social system without recourse to the notion of 'a society', but it is the analysis of concepts of space and time, of life-cycle development and of other phenomena outside the realm of kinship and marriage, that have convinced me of this.

The nature of my enterprise, in attempting to show the interrelations between different aspects of Indian life, has certain implications for the form of this book. It is difficult to represent the interconnectedness of the diverse material in linear narrative form and, therefore, to help the reader there are both a large number of diagrams

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Northwest Amazonia

Christine Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

and a large number of cross-references. The style of writing is necessarily rather condensed because a wide range of material has had to be fitted into a reasonable space. It is easy to miss essential pieces of information, but the chapter sub-headings are listed in the contents to assist in their retrieval. Throughout, I have made extensive use of myth but, for reasons of length, I have included only much reduced versions and short episodes of myth. I have included a list of the myths given whole or in part in the text, and indicated which of these are reproduced at greater length in Stephen Hugh-Jones (1979). Although more complete versions of the myths to which I have referred would be interesting for their own sakes, they would not be directly relevant to the analysis here.

In order to stress the relative autonomy of this work, I have not peppered the text with references to standard theoretical works. Nor, with a few exceptions, have I incorporated other people's data into this book, either as supporting evidence or as comparative material. The data from which I work are very similar to those collected by other anthropologists from groups elsewhere in the Vaupés and, of course, from the Pirá-paraná itself, but the analysis I attempt is different from other extant works in either type of theoretical approach (broadly speaking, mine is a modified structuralist one) or scope, or both. Also, as suggested above, the notion of a discrete society (or societies) is completely inappropriate throughout the Vaupés: it therefore seems theoretically desirable to preserve the point of view of a small set of communities living on Caño Colorado as far as possible. This reflects the Indian perspective, for each longhouse community is the centre of its own world. Secondly, and following from this, the Vaupés and surrounding areas are a rich field for comparative study but, if material from different groups is fused together, the basis for comparison is destroyed. This work should be seen as a stage prior to comparison – an attempt to understand a single perspective in depth in order to see what can be meaningfully compared. Thirdly, this book is long enough as it is, without additional ethnographic examples.

I have, however, made considerable use of my husband's analysis of Barasana initiation ritual (S. Hugh-Jones 1979) which is also based on our joint fieldwork. In some respects my analysis starts where his left off. I have provided the 'general ethnography' within which his work on initial ritual belongs but, in this case, instead of the particular analysis following the general ethnography, it has been the other

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Christine Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

way round. Our separate books are intended to be complementary rather than overlapping.

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978-0-521-35889-7 - From the Milk River: Spatial and Temporal Processes in
Northwest Amazonia

Christine Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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My sincere thanks are due to very many people whose generosity has made this book possible. Of these I can only mention a few, but anyone who has undertaken the same kind of task will know that there are countless more.

The research on which this book is based was financed by the British Social Science Research Council. Their grant also lasted through part of the writing-up period, and in addition I received help from Darwin College and the Board of Graduate Studies, University of Cambridge, with the preparation of the manuscript. I am very grateful to all these institutions.

Professor Sir Edmund Leach supervised my doctoral thesis and it is due to the understanding, advice and unfailing support that he offered over many years that this book has reached its present form.

My warmest thanks are for the people of Bosco's longhouse on Caño Colorado who allowed us to share their life, their food and their knowledge. In particular, I thank Paulina who generously took care of me throughout my stay. The people of Umero's house, Maximilliano's house, Ignacio's house and many more were welcoming hosts and warm friends. Together, the people of the Pirá-paraná showed us a way of life for which I feel lasting admiration and great nostalgia. I apologise to them for any errors I have made.

In Colombia we received invaluable help and hospitality from Professor G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, Dr F. Marquez Yañez and others of the Instituto Colombiano de Antropología; from Monseñor Belarmino Corréa, Padre Manuel Elorza and others from the Prefectura Apostólica del Vaupés; and from Joel and Nancy Stolte, Richard and Connie Smith, David and Jan Whistler and several skillful pilots – all members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Dr Fred Medem, the Bright family, the Bahamón family, Rosnelle Baud and countless

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978-0-521-35889-7 - From the Milk River: Spatial and Temporal Processes in
Northwest Amazonia

Christine Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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other people made our stay a great pleasure and gave us many different kinds of help.

Both during and since fieldwork, I have benefited from the field notes, advice, information, encouragement and friendship given by anthropologists with experience among South American Indians. Above all, I have appreciated the open and generous spirit with which these have been offered. Among these friends are Bernard Arcand, Kaj Århem, Patrice Bidou, Irving Goldman, Paul Henley, Jean Jackson, Pierre-Yves Jacopin, Tom Langdon, Howard Reid, Peter Rivière and Peter Silverwood-Cope, but there are many others. I must offer very special thanks to Terry Turner for reading drafts of this work in different stages of elaboration, and providing inspiration through his extensive and illuminating comments. It is impossible for me to do justice to the extent of his help in the text, but let me say now that I have made use of his rare gift of creative criticism throughout.

Many people here in Cambridge have treated me with warm sympathy. In particular, my children, Leo and Tom, have put up with a great deal of interference from their paper sibling.

Finally, there is no way I can thank Stephen, my husband, enough for his part in this book. I have made extensive use of his field notes, his insights into Barasana culture, his time, his energy and his remarkable domestic skills. The bulk of this book was written after he had completed his own analysis of Barasana ritual and so I have had all the considerable advantages that this entails. To say that I could never have produced this work without him is certainly no cliché.

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978-0-521-35889-7 - From the Milk River: Spatial and Temporal Processes in
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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ORTHOGRAPHY

The Barasana orthography used in this book follows that developed by Richard Smith (n.d.) of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. This orthography uses symbols chosen to conform to that of Colombian Spanish. For English readers I have substituted the symbols 'h' and 'ny' for 'j' and 'ñ'; I have also not used the symbol 'q', as it has the same value as 'k' which I use instead of 'c'.

Vowels

<i>Un-nasalised</i>	<i>Nasalised</i>
a as in <i>mask</i>	ã
e as in <i>egg</i>	ẽ
i as in <i>ink</i>	ĩ
o as in <i>orange</i>	õ
u as in <i>scoop</i>	ũ
ɯ similar to the German ü	ũ̃

Consonants

b	similar to <i>buy</i> but with prenasalisation (mb)
k	as in <i>kite</i>
d	prenasalised as in <i>and</i>
g	as in <i>go</i> but with prenasalisation (ng)
h	as in <i>house</i>
m	as in <i>man</i> (phonologically a variant of b, conditioned by a contiguous nasalised vowel)
n	as in <i>nose</i> (phonologically a variant of d, conditioned by a contiguous nasalised vowel)
ng	as in <i>tongue</i> (phonologically a variant of g, conditioned by a contiguous nasalised vowel)
ny	as in Spanish <i>mañana</i> (phonologically a variant of y, conditioned by a contiguous nasalised vowel)
p	as in <i>pen</i>
r	between r and l in English
s	similar to English ts as in <i>boats</i>
t	as in <i>time</i>
w	as in <i>wine</i>
y	as in <i>yam</i>