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978-0-521-27822-5 - The Fish People: Linguistic Exogamy and Tukanoan
Identity in Northwest Amazonia

Jean E. Jackson

Excerpt

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1.

Purpose and organization of the book

The social system of the Tukanoans of the Central Northwest Amazon has intrigued virtually every scholar who has come into contact with it. Each of the more than sixteen languages spoken there is identified with a named descent group. Although these groups have sometimes been called tribes, they are rather strange tribes. For one thing, with a few exceptions, they are exogamous. This book is intended as a general introduction to the Vaupés, the Colombian sector of the Central Northwest Amazon, and more specifically to Tukanoan social identity.

To a considerable extent, the book's conception and organization reflect the way Tukanoans organize their social world. Most of the chapter topics derive from categories and distinctions Tukanoans themselves make among kinds of people and among other kinds of beings in their universe. By providing clues about the essence of being Tukanoan, these categories offer a logical starting point for discovering the content and organization of Tukanoan social identity, as Tukanoans conceptualize it and as they reveal it in their behavior. The general progression of chapters can be understood if we imagine ourselves to be looking at Tukanoan society through a series of lenses, each successive lens of lower power than the preceding one and thus encompassing units and categories of increasing scale and magnitude. The geographical scope of an image increases chapter by chapter, beginning with the traditional local unit, the longhouse, and ending with the entire Tukanoan universe. The first chapters serve to distinguish kinds of Tukanoans by such characteristics as kinship or language affiliation, whereas later chapters take up contrasts of wider scope, such as those between Tukanoans and Makú (the other indigenous inhabitants of the Vaupés), between Tukanoans and nonhuman spirits, and between Tukanoans and whites. The field of view does not increase evenly in every chapter: For example, discussion of the male–female polarity comes toward the end because it is a distinction of great scope, even though our starting point, the longhouse, includes both men and women. In addition, other considerations have in places supplanted the progression from small to large scale: The book ends, for example, with the contrast between Tukanoans and whites, because it is white society that is destroying

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traditional Tukanoan culture. Among other things, this final chapter deals with some of the unhappy transformations Tukanoan identity will undoubtedly undergo in the future.

The time reference of this book, unless otherwise noted, is the ethnographic present of 1968–70. This means that some of the discussion, particularly concerning acculturative influences, is now somewhat outdated. Rather than alter the picture to adjust it to the changes I know have taken place (for example, those caused by the penetration of the cocaine trade into the area) I have decided to maintain consistency and hold to the time period of my fieldwork. Not having returned to the Vaupés since then, I would otherwise skew my descriptions toward aspects of recent change that have reached my attention, neglecting others that have not.

A discussion of some of the theoretical and methodological issues addressed in these pages follows.

Social identity

This book takes as its focus and orientation those components of identity that derive from a Tukanoan's membership in various social groups, categories, and positions. It analyzes the various social roles Tukanoans play throughout life and how these affect the way the people are conceptualized and categorized by themselves and others. The stage on which these roles are performed – the Tukanoan world – is described as well. As already indicated, emphasis falls here on social rather than strictly personal identity, that is, on those components of a person's identity that are acquired through relations with other people. These components include relatively abstract analytical relations, for instance those of similarity and contrast as well as others embodied in relatively concrete relations of genealogy, location, or language. Gender is by this definition an aspect of social identity, whereas sex, if defined strictly in genetic, anatomical, or physiological terms, can be seen as a feature of personal identity. (Transsexuals, whose gender and sex diverge, exemplify this distinction. Even for transsexuals perhaps, the two types of identity are not unrelated, but they *are* analytically distinct.)

A number of authors have stressed the social constitution of identity. For Peirce (see Singer, 1980), because the self is both a product and an agent of semiotic communication, it is both social and public. Individual identity, in his theory, is “also a social and cultural identity and is not confined to the individual organism” (Singer, 1980, p. 485). Similarly, Hallowell, while acknowledging the universality of the concept of self, notes that the cultural form this concept takes is highly variable: “the individual's self-image and his interpretation of his own experience cannot be divorced from the concept of the self that is characteristic of his society” (1955, p. 76). G. H. Mead has also stressed the social nature of

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concepts of self, and Kaplan goes so far as to say: “action is not to be understood as some by-product of the real characteristics of the person but as being the only means of constituting reality itself. The person, in effect, creates himself by what he does” (1961, p. 310). Given that human beings do not spend their lives in a closet (or the Tukanoan equivalent, alone in the forest), such an existentialist position implies that the action that constitutes social identity is interaction with others.

Although I basically agree with these statements, my use of “social identity” is narrower. This book concentrates on the crucial features Tukanoan society highlights when assigning its members to different groups. Kinship, marriage, age, sex, humanness – identity components of this sort are in large part created and refined by the actual relations between individuals and groups. The Tukanoan version of this essential interconnection between social identity and social structure, in particular between identity and regional and linguistic organization, will emerge as the book progresses. Of course, identity components not comprehensively treated here, such as ideas of conception and growth, anatomy and physiology, are extremely important and do influence social identity. Space does not allow a thorough treatment of these and other topics such as the effects of Tukanoan socialization patterns on personality or the feelings Tukanoans have about their individual selves. Still, in my opinion, the areas of life and culture stressed here – the assignment, symbolism, and performance of social roles – although they do not provide a complete picture of Tukanoan identity, do fill in a large part of the canvas.

Of course, my information on Tukanoan social identity comes from individuals with distinct personalities living in unique slices of space and time. My goal is to understand what Tukanoans have in common without hiding or ignoring those things that make them different from each other, to transcend individual variability so as to see the logic of Tukanoan identity as a system. This goal demands that in a number of places throughout the book I wrestle with the slippery issue of how one distinguishes individual idiosyncrasies from other sorts of variation, such as regional differences.

As a concept, “identity” defies easy definition. Erikson simply considers it to be a person’s “name . . . and what station he occupies in his community” (1968, p. 61). If we broaden this a bit to include all the names and labels by which Tukanoans are known and all the statuses and roles they play in life, we have a fairly adequate initial definition. Given the quintessentially Western nature of the preoccupation with identity as linked to *individual* identity and individualism (for recent examples, see Burrige, 1979; Macfarlane, 1978), one runs quite a few intellectual risks in extending the concept to small-scale non-Western societies. To begin such an undertaking, therefore, perhaps what should be discussed first is how the Tukanoan self differs from its more individualistic Western counterpart. It should be noted that the Western notions of self, other, and identity as

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presented here may seem simplified and almost stereotypical without the nuances and contradictions we know to be there. But as a foil for Tukanoan identity, stereotypes are sufficient.

Basically, Tukanoan notions of self and other are more relational, contextual, and evanescent than those of many Western societies, in that the more individualistic Western notions place greater stress on the permanence of differentiation between self and other. Bará or other Tukanoans in contrast, although they certainly could speak of an individual in terms of a unique intersection of characteristics that occurs in no one else (i.e., in terms of space, time, genealogical position, gender, language, etc.), seldom seem motivated to do so. When they distinguish X from Y or X group from Y group, they usually make the contrast in terms of only one or two characteristics relevant to the situation at hand, leaving other features of X and Y in abeyance. In Western society, we too make context-specific distinctions that lump people into broad categories at the same time they distinguish them, but as a general tendency, we are more ready than Tukanoans to conceptualize people as distinct individuals and to make much of the complete bundle of characteristics that makes each person unique.

Further discussion of the Tukanoan-Western contrast is saved for Chapter 13, after the necessary ethnographic foundation has been laid. In the meantime, however, the themes of permanence versus transience and relationality should be kept in mind, along with the notion that the Tukanoan self, like the Bororo self, “is created, defined, and systematically transformed by other selves; the person does not exist except as it is reflected by these” (Crocker, 1977, p. 144).

In this book I try to show that although we can analyze Tukanoan social identity in terms of features and dimensions, identity is both structure and action. The abstract qualities and dimensions I have listed take on meaning only within a contextualized action that is simultaneously moral (e.g., I am a human Tukanoan rather than an animal if and because I continue to behave in a moral manner), instrumental (e.g., I am able to do this because I am Bará, and would not if I were Makú), and relational (e.g., I am Bará, which is in part defined by what I do and am vis-à-vis Tuyuka) action. At times, contradiction results, a paradox best seen in Tukanoan terms as a necessary outcome of sets of principles that, when acting concurrently, overlap in incongruent fashion. Many examples of this incongruity are given later. Of course, Western notions of self also embody paradox and contradiction but in a somewhat different fashion, which follows from differences in the roles played in the two systems by morality, instrumentality, and relationality (a theme also discussed further in Chapter 13). Tukanoan society, although full of oppositions, does not oppose the individual *qua* individual against others nearly as much as we might expect. Instead, it transforms oppositions into continua and it allows individuals to slide back and forth between different positions on these continua according to the context at hand. With the emphasis on self and other as a process, an identity to be maintained rather than something absolute and eternal, self and other become even more flexible

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concepts and are often literally and figuratively linked together in conceptualization and action. Although all of this occurs in the West, I argue that it does so to a lesser degree; we tend to see ourselves more in terms of being effectively and permanently separated. Many markers of distinct identity exist in both systems (among Tukanoans, the system of language identification is a prime example), but in the West the markers tend to distinguish us as separate individuals in a unique and more permanent manner.

The Bará (or other Tukanoan) self is indeed a distinct self, but to a greater extent this self is constantly merged with other selves through participation – cognitively and behaviorally – in various categories. Oppositions can involve the self as an individual, but these are transient, and more often oppositions involve collectivities of people. In sum, although without doubt a Bará has at his or her disposal any number of clearly specified reference points with which to contrast himself or herself with others as a distinct individual, I argue that the opportunity and motive for doing so occur far less among Tukanoans than in many other societies.

Regional perspective

Whenever possible, this book stays with the regional perspective introduced in the Preface. As noted there, in certain respects a single Vaupés settlement is anything but a microcosm of the larger social system. A settlement, although often equivalent to other like units, sometimes stands in complementary, antagonistic, or other kinds of nonidentical relationship with other settlements. Furthermore, settlements are also internally divisible along a number of structural dimensions; they do not always stand as homogeneous, whole units. As settlements are nodes in a regional network, so are their individual members and subdivisions. Regional interaction involves, for example, marriage, residence and visiting patterns, ceremonial and trade relationships, and, in the past, warfare. In addition, it soon becomes obvious that Tukanoans themselves see the Vaupés as a single system. Linguistic evidence also supports this view. Although structurally differentiated along several dimensions, Tukanoan groups display a remarkable degree of cultural homogeneity, using many of the same rules for conceptualizing and participating in a single system, although at times occupying different positions in it.

The unity of the Vaupés social system, moreover, has been at least conceded or implied in previous works on the area, even when they take a more particularistic approach. Goldman, although confining his monographic study (1963) to a single group, the Cubeo, notes the cosmopolitanism of the region, and in his article in the *Handbook of South American Indians* (1948), he treats the Vaupés as a unified culture area. Brüzzi Alves da Silva (1962, 1966) concerns himself with the integration of social units in the region, emphasizing their underlying similarity; the same is true of Fulop (1955) to a lesser extent. Reichel-Dolmatoff

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(1971), although more impressed by differences than similarities, also examines the relations between language-affiliated units (see the discussions in Jackson, 1972, pp. 16–17, and S. Hugh-Jones, 1979, p. 22). Sorensen's well-known article on Vaupés multilingualism (1967) emphasizes how apparent diversity can sustain integration and regional unity. Århem (1981) also demonstrates the existence of a complex territorial organization linked to descent and marriage systems for Makuna in the Pirá-paraná.

In the last few years two new books on Tukanoan culture, by Stephen and Christine Hugh-Jones (both 1979), discuss the importance of focusing on a region, in this case the Pirá-paraná, in addition to looking at a single exogamous group (the Barasana). Their books complement this one because they pay more attention to symbolism than to the sociological concerns emphasized here. Nonetheless, the Hugh-Joneses and I find ourselves in substantial agreement on the form of regional integration in the Vaupés, if not on all details of its content. In general, almost all the ethnographers of Tukanoan peoples have acknowledged the unity of the Vaupés and grappled with the implications of that unity. I do feel that mine is the most full-fledged regional approach; I am not castigating other investigators for any neglect on their part but rather extending an already established tendency (see also Goodenough, 1981, pp. 1–3).

Often it seems difficult to communicate to nonspecialists what characterizes the Vaupés system and the lessons, both methodological and theoretical, that can be learned from it. The kind of approach I am espousing here is discouraged by the size of the area in question, roughly that of New England. Indeed, as pointed out in the Preface, extremely difficult issues relating simply to size of the unit of study must be dealt with constantly, at times in the form of rather unsatisfactory compromises. Regions characterized by thick forest cover, no roads, frequent rapids, and unreliable communication and transport do put obstacles in the way of regional studies. Still, we must not allow these admittedly important considerations to lead us into ignoring the reality of extralocal, and often long-range, interaction and its symbolic significance; Tukanoans overcome such obstacles and so must we.

Indeed, such interaction among widely dispersed local groups characterizes virtually all low-density populations around the world, especially hunter-gatherers such as the Shoshone, Montagnais-Naskapi, San Bushmen, or Australian Aborigines, who ipso facto form regional systems because local groups are not self-sufficient in every respect and because they exploit extensive territories.¹ Dispersed hunter-gatherers, with their local group interdependence, fluidity in territorial boundaries, and fluctuations in local group membership, offer a model, I would suggest, for understanding the Vaupés. Although Tukanoans affiliate with groups and categories in less flexible ways than many hunter-gatherers, and Tukanoan institutions appear to be less amorphous and malleable, they still preserve considerable freedom of choice within the framework of these more

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rigid institutions and their rules of membership. This flexibility, operating out of a rigidity at a more abstract and idealized level of Tukanoan social structure, is a central concern throughout the book.

When one takes into account the Tukanoan view of the Vaupés as an unbounded system (that is, a large geographical area in which people are basically similar and distance and differentiation are seen in terms of degrees rather than absolutes), one can understand why the ubiquitous term *tribe* does not fit anywhere in the region. This label has been applied most often there to the language-affiliated units encompassing a number of local settlements, but this usage leads to so much confusion that I have substituted *language group* in its place. The substitution brings its own difficulties, as we shall see, but they pale in comparison with the confusions of *tribe*.

Anthropologists have not been able to agree on a single definition for the word *tribe*, although many of the same definitional criteria turn up repeatedly (see Fried, 1975; Godelier, 1977; Helm, 1968). These include (1) a shared territory with discrete boundaries, (2) statuses and organizations for the tribe as a whole, (3) more interaction within the tribe than without, (4) more marriage within than without, (5) significant cultural differences with neighboring units, (6) a shared tribal language. Singly or in combination, these criteria do not work for Tukanoan language groups.

By definition, the members of a language group share a patrilineally inherited affiliation with a language, but the problems encountered when trying to use language as a criterion of tribal membership are manifold (Hymes, 1968). Very infrequently do all members of a language group occupy a discrete territory that is considered theirs and to which they have exclusive or almost exclusive rights. This state of affairs is most closely approached in the Pirá-paraná region (see Århem, 1981; Bidou, 1976), but in general we may speak only of segments of language groups occupying continuous stretches of rivers, and even in the Pirá-paraná, where occupation of a continuous territory by *all* member settlements of a language group may be said by them to be the ideal, "in practice there is considerable overlap between descent-group territories" (C. Hugh-Jones, 1979, p. 25).

The criterion of statuses or organizations whose point of reference is the tribe as a whole (with the implicit assumption that the tribe, at least to that extent, is a corporate body), does not work any better in the Vaupés. Activities involving everyone in a language group, or an individual or group selected to represent all the others, are conspicuous in their absence. Language groups may perhaps have acted as political units in the past, but they certainly do not today. Although roles in ritual often incorporate aspects of language group identity, this identification does not make them "tribal" roles.

Because language groups are exogamous, the criterion of tribal endogamy, of course, works not at all. And, given language group exogamy and settlement

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exogamy, people deal almost as frequently with members of other language groups as with members of their own. Indeed, the role of language group exogamy, more than anything else, dooms the concept of tribe from the start.

The last distinction, which assumes relative cultural uniformity within tribes and sharp cultural differences between them, runs up against the homogeneity of Tukanoan culture pointed out earlier. Settlements and language groups do differ culturally, and I will spend a good deal of time describing and accounting for such differences, but they do not produce tribes. Many of the most obvious and frequently mentioned differences are emblematic and superficial; they fulfill the need for social markers differentiating the units in the regional system, and as such they point toward social and cultural integration and underlying homogeneity rather than heterogeneity. This is not to say that true cultural differences cannot be found in so vast an area, variations that can be ascribed to disparate origins, to cultural drift in different directions, to the effects of diffusion from neighbors outside the system, and to different degrees of acculturation. None of this variation, however, coincides in any simple fashion with the language-affiliated units traditionally called tribes.²

Fluidity

One of the central theoretical concerns in this book is the interplay between fluidity and apparent rigidity found in many Tukanoan social institutions. The effects of choice and manipulation show themselves in household composition, political organization, and almost every situation in which seemingly inelastic and unchanging principles assign people to groups and categories. I argue that this paradoxical juxtaposition is inherent in many small-scale societies. Variability and invariance, operating at different levels, support and play off each other, and in the long run probably allow societies to adapt to fluctuations in their ecological and demographic bases.

General conclusions on this interplay must wait until the concluding chapter, after the material showing its importance has emerged. At this juncture I need only point out that the issue of fluidity and rigidity cannot be separated from others already introduced: the nature of Tukanoan social identity and the utility of a regional perspective on the Vaupés.

Fluidity also applies to the issue of the boundaries of a system like the Vaupés. I have stated that the Vaupés is regionally organized into an open-ended system that cannot properly be called a society in the sense of a bounded social unit (C. Hugh-Jones, 1979, pp. xv, xvi). I am not merely saying that at places the boundaries are fuzzy or even nonexistent but that the system presupposes no boundaries except single-dimensional, and therefore quite arbitrary, ones (for example, at times Tukanoans use the criterion of language exogamy to exclude the Cubeo but clearly include them – and properly so – in the system most of the time).

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A big challenge I faced in writing this book was to describe the fluidity of the system comprehensively and yet also to account for why the Vaupés, as a system, works. And work it does: Its social structure “does” things such as assign roles, get people married properly (or show why they have married improperly), and point out the way to each generation on its journey to full-fledged adult status. This is accomplished with varying combinations of the opposites of fluidity and rigidity and difference and equivalence, but this is very difficult to describe. Tukanoans share many cultural and social traits: related languages and speaking patterns, intermarrying settlements, basic subsistence patterns, similar kinship terminologies (as well as virtually all other semantic domains), a common mythology, and so forth. Some features, moreover, normally associated with cultural and social cleavages are not to be so viewed in the Vaupés case; examples are territorial dispersal and language differences. Finding out what these differences, equivalences, and identities “really” are is not only a problem, it is *the* problem. Confusion seems to reign at times, not all of which is trivial and easily cleared up by acquiring more information or by increasing one’s awareness of one’s anthropological or ethnocentric assumptions or by some other similar scholarly operation. Confusion, when explained, is of course no longer confusion, but I do not believe that the Vaupés system – capable though it is of being described, explained, and formulated into models – can ever be reduced to a coherent, logical, unitary system. Confusion gives way to paradox, and this paradox, along with the dynamism existing between levels in the model (i.e., fluidity and manipulability) remain. The process of discovering the Tukanoan system, incidentally, teaches us much about our firmly built-in epistemological constraints, in both language and modes of conceptualization, which will become more apparent when examples of such fluidity in action are given.

Ideal and real

The polarity between rigidity and fluidity resembles and sometimes overlaps another dichotomy, one between ideal models of society and culture on the one hand and so-called on-the-ground reality on the other. Although ethnographers and informants deal in both commodities, and almost every interpretation or piece of data inevitably mixes the two together, cultural accounts tend to emphasize one or another. According to an anecdote narrated by Napoleon Chagnon,³ Lévi-Strauss likened society to a chambered nautilus. This mollusk combines a beautiful structure – its shell – with a singularly ugly and slimy creature inside. Some choose to study the shell, whereas others prefer to examine its inhabitant. The trick is to keep oneself aware of one’s preferences and of the reality of both parts of the animal, without deluding oneself into thinking that only one part is real or important. Seeing the two together, so interconnected and yet so contradictory, is not always easy. The ugly little creature inside is responsible for the

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existence of the sublime shell, yet the shell far outlasts its creator and has a logic and structure – an identity – of its own, separate from its occupant's.

As little as we may like seeing ourselves as mollusks, the societies and cultures created by human beings embody the same duality. Structures, abstracted at one level or another of analysis from the behavior that generates them, deserve the absorbed attention given them by many anthropologists (including, of course, Lévi-Strauss himself). Yet social structures do not create themselves nor myths think themselves, any more than shells generate spontaneously; it is individuals and individuals in collectivities, by engaging in discrete bits of behavior that often are so seemingly lacking in logical structure, who do. When formalized into descriptive or explanatory models, some of the empirical validity of these behaviors is lost. That the sublime structures created are separable from and outlive their creators, be they cephalopods, Tukanoans, or anthropologists, may be our pleasure or our sorrow, but it is always our frustration to some extent, because some of the richness and detail of the reality that produced the structures is lost.

Chambered nautilus, however, cannot, so far as I know, have false consciousness; they create their shells, each one distinct from all others in some minor respects but all of them basically to type, because that is what they are genetically programmed to make. Human beings, on the other hand, create various kinds of structures that can be hidden by conscious models, models that tell us little about the structures because they are intended to perpetuate certain phenomena rather than explain them (Lévi-Strauss, 1962, p. 324). The Vaupés illustrates the problems encountered in this regard par excellence. We might prefer to study the equivalent of the shell *or* of its occupant; but the two are far more interconnected than those of the chambered nautilus, and we perforce must study both when encountering Tukanoans. For example, the fact that structures outlive the individuals creating them, be they mollusks or human beings, is extremely important: If the word *dialectic*, surely the most overused word at present, applies at all to this problem, it does so in terms of the way in which individuals and structures influence and even create behavior and idealization (both native and ethnological). Paradoxically, whatever exists and can be found on the ground is impermanent, whereas what is unreal in this sense – what is structure or idealization and derived from the real – is permanent, or at least more enduring. Here we run the risk of falling into a positivist (perhaps the second most overused word) trap, because we are not looking at shells or organisms but at behavior that has no meaning without explanation. The trap is a trap because it assumes that somewhere there is reality without idealization. Still, idealized structure continually influences the behavioral system (which is why we cannot talk about “reality” versus idealized expressions of that reality even when we use the most precise of measuring instruments or statistical tests), a system that is always both being and becoming.

In addition to the relative permanence of structures and behavior, the ideal-