# BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY: CHANGING GENDER ROLES AMONG THE BRIBRI AND BORUCA WOMEN OF COSTA RICA

*Daisy Stevens Rojas* [*]

## ABSTRACT

*This work discusses the changing social roles of women from the Bribri and Boruca indigenous people located in the Central Valley region of Costa Rica. Ethnographic data collected over several years from women who have left indigenous villages as well as those who have remained reveals how roles, relationships and representation among the groups have been affected.*
*Keywords: Indigenous women, Bribri, Boruca, Costa Rica.*

## RESUMEN

*Este trabajo discute los roles sociales cambiantes de las mujeres en las comunidades indígenas Bribri y Boruca localizadas en la región del Valle Central de Costa Rica. Los datos etnográficos recolectados a través de los años a partir de mujeres que han dejado aldeas indígenas, así como de las que han permanecido en las mismas, revela cómo los roles, las relaciones y la representación entre estos grupos se han visto afectadas.*
*Palabras claves: Mujeres indígenas, Bribri, Boruca, Costa Rica.*

---

[*]     Daisy Stevens Rojas. Estadounidense. Bachelor of Arts, Departments of Anthropology and Latin American Studies, University of Virginia. Correo electronico: ds3bg@virginia.edu

## Introduction

Living among the Bribri and Boruca indigenous people of Costa Rica, who live in and around the town of Buenos Aires, Costa Rica, I have set forth some conclusions and theories regarding social organization, women's participation in and contribution to indigenous life, as well as their changing responsibilities in the face of modernity. Initially I find it necessary to identify what indigenous means in local terms. First there is the issue of residency. The identified indigenous territories included in this study are the villages of Boruca, Térraba, Turrialba (Boruca) and Salitre (Bribri). Another indigenous people, the Cabécar, were not included in this study because I did not have the opportunity to talk with anyone from this group; but among all three groups there is intermarriage and mutual acceptance (Bo-

zzoli, 1975). We must recognize that outside categorization does not often match what people think of themselves. In my experience as an American woman raised in western culture, my understanding was limited at first. "In the U.S., to be 'indigenous' is to have a genealogical heritage linking offspring to a tribal group. This can extend several generations with a descendant never having lived on a reservation or in a traditionally 'Indian way'" (Rojas, 2008). In my own culture the definition of indigenous has more to do with bloodlines than lifestyle. This is different among the people who live in indigenous villages in the Central Valley region, for whom 'indianness' has links to kinship organization and the manner in which one lives. It may be a social category as well where upper class and city dwelling groups characterize those who live in poor rural areas as indigenous. Among people identified as indigenous by state categorizations and

even by anthropologists at the University of Costa Rica, I had difficulty meeting individuals who considered themselves to be indigenous. This conundrum was hard to overcome as an outsider to the communities until I came to understand what the determinants were from the people living within them. Among these are: living away from others in forested areas, relying almost entirely upon 'natural resources' and limited agriculture, few modern conveniences, and kinship based networks. As an outside observer from the United States, I myself relied on these kinship networks to perform observation and research among my interlocutors. Over the course of 4 years I lived with and visited friends and family members of my husband. A born native of Buenos Aries, he assisted in gaining me access to the intimate lives of these women which otherwise would not have been possible to me. Over time I was welcomed to the homes of eleven women with various familial relatedness from each of the mentioned villages. With their permission, no names were withheld. I have tried to treat their generous information with discretion and respect.

## Traditional Roles of Women

Once it had been discovered what indigenous meant in local terms, I was finally able to investigate women's roles within the indigenous community. Daily and regular activities among women in the village are part of the way in which their roles in the community are manifested. Not only does their labor reinforce participation and membership, it also has much to do with the continuance of the particular indigenous social system. These duties include: meal preparation, tending to their own domestic animals (men keep theirs' separately), gathering and storing food staples, processing male-provided supplements, caring for young children, educating young women, and keeping house and laundry clean. Additionally women regularly aid other women in the community with these same tasks. And always, the very important task of cooking continues on a raised hearth for most of the day. One midday meal which I enjoyed included harvested vegetables, rice and some crayfish contributed by the men.

These activities are vital to the community and equally important as men's activities. Individual families help each other, men and women sharing tasks, food, and shelter as needed. Not a barter system, but certainly a system of interdependency and mutual obligation. Kinship relationships are based on matrilocal residence and women tend to have 'ownership' over the home. In one residence the 'doña' of the home, Rosa, cared for her elderly mother, her husband and child, her sister and sister's husband (who had a disability), and her two brothers who came for frequent visits (to use the words "care for" is a bit misleading and implies that the subjected individuals required aid without exchange. In fact the sister and elderly mother did not live in the same house, but had smaller residences of their own located nearby.). They participated in labor communally with Rosa, and contributed vegetables, housekeeping, child care and other helpful tasks/items if available and as the tasks presented themselves. In contrast, the male family members did not perform any 'women's work' in exchange for the food that they received from Rosa's kitchen, but frequently they brought goods

from town, or items sent by their wives. Although the gender roles are traditionally completely segregated, there seems to be an equal measure of respect for each gender. I did not investigate men's particular activities except those which intercepted with women's, but neither group seemed to devalue the other or place themselves higher than the other. In other words, there did not seem to be a status competition between genders. Because of this phenomenon and the differently organized labor roles with these indigenous groups, a conclusion can be made that the social organization within indigenous culture is not similar to the hierarchical western social structure with which I, as an American, am most familiar. In contrast, an equal value seems to be placed on different within-group categories.

## Between Worlds

The two categories of men and women are not the only categories which are vital to group organization. Others may include healers, children, teachers, etc. But for purposes of explanation, and because I am limited to what my research revealed, gender categories are the only ones which I will use to demonstrate the dynamics of indigenous social structure. Women's participation in the group through communal labor activities verifies their membership and justifies their representation within the group to the same degree as does the communal labor of men. However the structure fails when these aspects are not in place. If members leave the village to work or seek an education, they can no longer participate in communal labor and thus lose their representation within the community.

This problem leads to a conflict between national identity and local identity. While my research focuses on women's experiences, it is important to note that every member seemed to struggle with this problem. To gain representation through the state system, an individual must participate in the system through education and working for wages (paying taxes, engaging in consumerism, etc). Acquiring property (either business or land), justifies one's position within the system, and gains them eligibility to represent the community they live in at the state level. In contrast, within the Bribri and Boruca groups communal labor and communal property are imperatives for group representation; further, individual competition is seen as destructive to group dynamics. I have used a diagram to explain the difference in as simple terms as possible.



Stratified state organization based on individual competition



Indigenous community organization
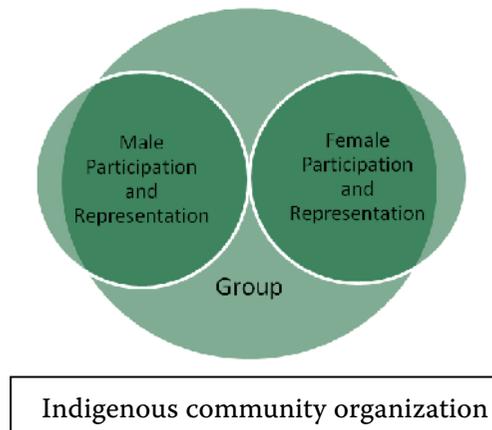
Additionally, members of the respective indigenous communities only have representation while they remain involved in the daily life of the community and through collective voice. This representation does not transfer to single individuals who leave the community. Thus at the state level, the manner of gaining representation is in direct conflict with the type of acceptable indigenous within-group representation. An example of this occurred at the 2nd Congress of Latin American Anthropology held in San Jose Costa Rica in July 2008. An individual from the Boruca community spoke up regarding the lack of available state-sponsored resources for the indigenous community. While he may have been recognized as an acceptable representative of his group from the outsider's point of view because he had both state-sponsored education as a degreed sociologist and affiliation through kinship and blood ties, he was no longer considered an inside member of the group from an indigenous perspective because he was speaking as an individual on *behalf* of the group rather than with the group, and he was not participating in daily communal work/life (ALA, 2008). Another example of within-group discrimination due to outside living by a member occurred when my husband attended a village meeting regarding a water shortage. His suggestion to move the collection cistern further down the side of the mountain to collect water more efficiently was ignored. In conversation with his mother, Rosa, it was revealed that his participation in the meeting was resented by other villagers because he no longer lives or works in the community (Acuña-Agüero, 2008).

## Conflicting Gender Roles

Indigenous female youth are experiencing this identity conflict in very intimate ways. Opportunities for education and paid labor outside of the indigenous communities require women to redefine themselves. The added responsibilities for women who choose to seek employment and education off the reservations mean that they have less time for traditional roles and less support from community members. For many it is almost impossible to remain living with the community while pursuing outside interests. Not only is it difficult due to transportation problems (most of the territories do not have adequate roads and are far from urban areas), but the requirements of outside pursuits are difficult to balance with community requirements. For this reason young women may leave the village as they become more engaged in outside activities. Without being able to contribute to or interact with the group, they lose membership and may eventually be disqualified from claiming indigenous status among other members. And as out-migration becomes more and more popular, it also becomes necessary. In this paradoxical circumstance, the Bribri and Boruca groups are beginning to lose the ability to maintain resources and acceptable living conditions due to the loss of renewable labor from the younger generations. Among the Bribri in Salitre, one family sent their two daughters to the town of Buenos Aires to work and get an education so they could aid the family household in maintaining basic needs (Acuña-Agüero, 2007). But once outside the territory, even if leaving for reasons intended to be beneficial to the community, many women find the focus on individual

performance and possibility for status elevation along with modern conveniences unavailable in the village, attractive lures. The two daughters do not want to return to village life now that they have lived in the township. One even resents returning for visits because she says she gets "trapped" there (Acuña-Torres, 2007). The 'modern woman' persona has created a shift in the responsibilities of young women as they pursue lives outside the territory.

> *New roles require more focus on individual needs and long-term goals. Women rely more and more heavily on outside income, most specifically their own. But despite this added requirement of drawing an income, the role of food preparation and child rearing is not removed from women's duties. This is in many cases an added stress which may cause the younger generation to put off marriage and childbearing due to the conflicting roles and responsibility.* (Rojas, 2008)

## Ethnic Choices

A problem many young indigenous women face is the dual 'stigma' of ethnic categorization and poverty. Outside village life, the status associated with indigenous affiliation is often not favorable. For this reason many women living away from the territory will reject their indigenous identification for their own purposes while seeking integration in the majority population. Local characterizations of indigenous peoples include: drunk, sneaky, lazy and dishonest (Rojas Morales 2007). Conversely, government programs to aid indigenous peoples are prevalent in certain

areas and offer possibilities for stipends, low interest loans, and the purchase of territory land for qualified individuals (Rojas Acuña, Geiner, 2007). Choosing ethnicity on a case by case basis is a personal decision faced by many as they negotiate life in the state structure separately from their life in the indigenous community.

## World in Transition

Following the lives of four of the women who have left the indigenous territories, I was able to observe whether they had completely abandoned any associations with the communities in which they had been raised or if they were able to incorporate some aspects of indigenous principles into their 'modern' lives. On my family trips to Villa Hermosa, I visited and talked with the two sisters originally from Salitre who had moved to Buenos Aries. Along with these, another two sisters, Gisselle and Shirley, originally living past Boruca in the mountainous area near Buenos Aires, each left their homes to pursue education beyond elementary instruction. Initially they also moved to the township of Buenos Aires to attend secondary school. In some ways they continued the indigenous practice of participation in, and benefits from, shared resources on a smaller scale. For the older sister Gisselle, living with her older brother during her teenage years, had provided a transitional arrangement where aspects of the older community life were woven together with new responsibilities. The brother, who had also left the community to attend secondary school, worked during the day to contribute to the small household through monetary support (Rojas Acuña, Gisselle, 2009). Town living did not allow for lives-

tock or extensive crop growing, but money could be substituted to purchase the goods normally provided through these avenues. Likewise for the household, Gisselle provided food preparation, laundry and cleaning responsibilities before attending day classes. In this way, some of the roles normally attributed to women were not erased from her daily life. Subsequently moving to the United States after graduating from secondary school, Gisselle currently works 2 jobs and maintains her own apartment without monetary contributions from other family members. Instead she sends money to her mother's home and to her sister Shirley who stayed behind.  However she has continued to pattern the behaviors of previous generations of women and those who still remain living in the indigenous territory. I am able to visit her often and see that she contributes household cleaning, laundry and cooking responsibilities for the household of her boyfriend even while she maintains her own residence. Her sister Shirley, who has remained living in the township of Buenos Aires, finished her education and took on temporary outside employment. She has continued to benefit from monetary contributions and assistance from Gisselle and their older brother as she attempts to find secure employment. Shirley visits the original family home on a regular basis as her schedule allows and contributes labor of a similar nature to Gisselle on behalf of, and together with, her mother, grandmother and youngest sister (Rojas Acuña, S., 2009). These sisters, similarly to the two from Salitre, have devised ways of integrating the roles and responsibilities of indigenous women as well as the responsibilities of their chosen life directions. However it should be no-

ted that other aspects of community experiences, responsibilities and representation vary depending on the proximity to other group members and the personal interest of the individual women.

Whether living within the Bribri and Boruca communities or having moved out of the villages completely, some labor associated with women's roles has not disappeared. Regardless of the affiliation, women in both situations are still primarily responsible for: meal preparation, caring for young children, household cleanliness and laundry. But their representation through this labor outside of the indigenous community is almost nonexistent. Additionally, the experience of *communitas* described by Victor Turner as "...an intense community spirit, the feeling of great social equality, solidarity, and togetherness" is not lost among those who have ventured away from traditional indigenous female social roles (Turner, 2005). Although the experience of *communitas* and the subsequent validation of membership present in within-group communal labor activities among women from the Bribri and Boruca groups is difficult to find in daily activities of those who do not live in the indigenous territories, opportunities for *communitas* through organized ritual experiences do present themselves. As women gather together in food preparation for rites of passage, religious occasions and at organizational meetings the experience is again enjoyed. Just as in traditional practice, these experiences generally take place among female based kinship networks. On my last visit, three generations of women had an opportunity for *communitas* in preparation for lunch. They worked together in the kitchen separately from the men, and also from me.

Speaking Bribri, they communicated minimally, but laughed and moved through their labor in choreographed steps preparing a meal for others to enjoy.



*Mother and daughter work together in the kitchen*

## Conclusions

Defining Boruca and Bribri indigenous women in the modern world is a slippery endeavor. Not only are there differing definitions of what indigenous means, but also the subject's desire to claim affiliation is at issue. Additionally the rapid rate of change as individuals negotiate their life in a fluctuating environment poses a significant challenge to an investigation. The conclusions drawn herein are applicable only within the moment and among the specific individuals studied. With this disclaimer, some generalities can be acknowledged. Certainly a conflict exists for these women as they attempt to merge traditional roles with acceptable roles defined by the state. Some concessions which have been made through this compromise are the tradition of educating school-age female children, planting and harvesting crops, caring for livestock, and in many cases, living among

family and group members. But experiences such as *communitas* in the kitchen during festival times is still maintained along with cooking, housekeeping and childrearing duties which are understood to be included in majority population ideas of modern femininity. While some may say that traditional indigenous roles are becoming obsolete, this study reveals that despite the subtraction of certain labor activities, and an issue with the labeling of 'indigenous', vital characteristics remain intact and continue to support the female social roles attributed to the Boruca and Bribri communities as they navigate through continual change. Observing the decisions made by these women as they navigate between tradition and modernity and between the differing cultural requirements of their "inside" home society and the "outside" world, I recognize the way they are being shaped by, and shaping their own culture. It occurs to me that they are necessarily merging indigenous ways of being with lifestyles of the outside world which allows aspects of tradition to remain intact for future generations.

## Bibliography

Acuña-Agüero, C. (2007). *Personal interview with male family member living in Rio Azul Salitre Costa Rica*, conducted January 2007.

Acuña-Agüero, R. (2008). *Personal interview with a female family member living in Villa Hermosa Costa Ric*a, conducted January 2008.

Acuña-Torres, J. (2007). *Personal interview with female family member living*

*in Buenos Aires Costa Rica*, conducted January 2007.

Congreso Latinoamericano de Antropología. (ALA). (2008). *Conferencia Inaugural del II Congreso Latinoamericano de Antropología*. San José, C.R.: Universidad de Costa Rica.

Bozzoli de Wille, M. E. (1975). Localidades indígenas costarricenses. San José, C.R.: EDUCA.

Bozzoli de Wille, M. E. (1982). "Symbolic Aspects of Bribri Roles on the Occasions of Birth and Death." Loveland, C.; Loveland, F. (eds) *Sex Roles and Social Change in Native Lower Central American Societies*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Collins, J. (2008). "But What if I Should Need to Defacate in Your Neighborhood, Madame?": Empire, Redemption, and the "Tradition of the Oppresed" in a Brazilian World Heritage Site." *Journal of the Society for Cultural Anthropology*, May, 279-328.

Harris, M. (1974). "The Organization of Production and Exchange". Emerick, R. *Readings in Introductory Anthropology* Volume 2. Berkeley: McCutchen Publishing Corporation.

Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres. (2006). *Las Mujeres Indigenas: Estadisticas de la Exclusion*. San Jose: Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres.

Kerns, V. (1982). "Structural Continuity in the Division of Men's and Women's Work among the Black Carib (Guari-

funa)." Loveland, C.; Loveland, F. eds. S*ex Roles and Social Change in Native Lower Central American Societies*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Mead, M. (1997). "The Changing Significance of Food." Counihan, C.; Van Esterik, P. eds. *Food and Culture: A Reader.* New York: Routledge.

Rojas, D. S, (2008). «Observaciones Sobre los Roles Femeninos en las ComunidadeObservaciones Sobre los Roles Sociales Femeninos en la Cultura Indígena de los Grupos Bribri y Boruca de Costa Rica.» *II Congreso Latinoamericano de Antropología 2008, Symposio #6, Temas y variaciones en la antropología del trabajo: propósitos, marcos teóricos, aproximaciones metodológicos, y resultados.* San Jose, C.R.

Rojas-Acuña, G. (2006-2009). *Personal interviews conducted with male family member living in Charlottesville Virginia* from Jan 2006-2009.

Rojas-Acuña, G. (2006-2009). *Personal interviews conducted with female family member living in Charlottesville Virginia* from Jan 2006-2009.

Rojas-Acuña, S.(2006-2009). *Personal interviews with female family member conducted while visiting in subjects in Buenos Aires and Villa Hermosa Costa Rica,* Jan 2006, 2007, 2008.

Rojas-Morales, J. (2007). *Personal interview conducted with male family member living in Villa Hermosa Costa Rica*, Jan 2007.

Stocker, K. (2007). "Identity as Work: Changing Job Opportunities an Indigenous Identity in the Transition to a Tourist Economy." *Anthropology of Work Review*, 28(2), 18-21.

Turner, T. (2002). "The Sacred as Alienated Social Consciousness: Ritual and Cosmology among the Kyapó." Sullivan L. E. (ed). *Native Relgions and Cultures of Central and South America*. New York: Continuum International.

Turner, V. (2008). *The Ritual Process Structure and Anti-Structure*. New-Brunswick, U.S.A. and London, U.K.: Aldine Transaction, a Division of Transaction Publishing.

Universidad de Costa Rica. (1982). *Tradicion Oral Indigena Costarricense*, 3(3-4). San Jose, C.R.: Universidad de Costa Rica.

Van der Loo, P. L. (2002). "Ritual and Myth in Tlapanec Life." Sullivan L. E. (ed.). *Native Relgions and Cultures of Central and South America*. New York: Continuum International.

Weil, J. (2001). "Toward a Model of Changing Social Roles in a Costa Rican Ceramic Artisan Industry." *Anthropology of Work*. 22(3), 27-31.