



BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS

ELIZABETH FLORENCE COLSON

June 15, 1917–August 3, 2016

Elected to the NAS, 1977

*A Biographical Memoir by Joyce Marcus and
Judith Justice*

ELIZABETH COLSON WAS an anthropologist of international stature and a transatlantic bridge linking the intellectual traditions of American anthropology to British anthropology. She is best known for her wide-ranging longitudinal studies of the peoples of Central Africa, most notably her seven decades of fieldwork to document the effects of forced resettlement on the indigenous populations.

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Elizabeth Colson was born in Hewitt, Minnesota, on June 15, 1917. She grew up in nearby Wadena, a community named after a leader of the indigenous Ojibwe. Early in life she learned that her town was located near the Ojibwe, the Native Americans whose lands had been largely resettled by farmers, and it was this growing awareness of the dispossession of Ojibwe land by European-American settlers that made a strong impression on her. Indeed, her earliest fieldwork on the west coast of the United States tackled this topic. She began to analyze indigenous groups that had been displaced from their lands and to study the interplay between indigenous groups and the settlers now occupying those lands. These topics—the consequences of forced relocation and the repercussions of relocation in the lives of refugees—were to become Colson's lifelong interests and those themes are woven into the very fabric of her many publications.

Elizabeth's father, Louis Henry Colson, met his wife, Metta Louis Damon, in Minnesota when he was the superintendent of schools and she was the high school principal.



Elizabeth Colson in the Outer Hebrides, Scotland, in October 2000.

Given their careers as educators, it is not surprising that they filled their home with books. Elizabeth's mother was appropriately nicknamed "Nose-in-the-Book." At an early age, Elizabeth, the second of four children, was reading lots of books and becoming a fan of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and the authors of detective stories.

In high school Elizabeth initially wanted to become an astronomer but thought she was not strong enough in math; then she thought about becoming a naturalist. She finally settled on becoming an archaeologist after reading articles describing Tutankhamun's royal tomb in the pages of *National Geographic*.



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To pursue her interest in archaeology, Elizabeth went to the University of Minnesota, only to discover that they would not allow women to participate in excavations. She nevertheless wrote her senior honors thesis on “The Stone Ages of Africa” (1938), finishing her bachelor’s degree in three years. She completed her first master’s degree from the University of Minnesota in 1940 and her second from Radcliffe College in 1941. She earned a Ph.D. from Radcliffe in 1944.

FIELDWORK IN NORTH AMERICA

Her first fieldwork was with indigenous North American groups, whose life histories she set out to record. She initially attended a field school in northern California that was run by New York University’s Field Laboratory for Research in the Social Sciences. There, just north of San Francisco Bay, she interviewed Pomo women about their lives with the goal of discovering how acculturation was affecting them. This fieldwork resulted in three books: *A Study of Acculturation among Pomo Women* (1940), *Life Histories of Pomo Women* (1967), and *Autobiographies of Three Pomo Women* (1974).

Her next opportunity to conduct fieldwork was for her doctoral dissertation. She studied the indigenous Makah of Neah Bay in the state of Washington from 1941 to 1942, during World War II. Colson witnessed the changes wrought when construction of a naval base in Makah territory began and U.S. soldiers arrived to guard the northwest coast of the United States against possible Japanese attack. Her 1944 dissertation, *The Makah Indians: A Study of An Indian Tribe in Modern American Society*, is still recognized as a brilliant and classic ethnography. Maurice Freedman called it “the best book in anthropology in several years” and Max Gluckman in writing to Colson said: “I consider your book on them [the Makah] one of the greatest books in anthropology.”⁴

Colson herself said that working with the Makah was a revelation because they were fighting for their economic independence; they were not passive like some groups, but rather confident and resilient, refusing to be controlled and subordinated to white Americans. Indeed, unlike some of her predecessors and contemporaries who emphasized “culture” as a unified entity and characterized whole groups of people as static, Colson saw societies as transient and ever-changing. So, rather than seeing people as passively tied to tradition, she saw them as capable of a high degree of agency and freedom of action with some constraints on their future actions, especially when access to power was unequal.

Her fieldwork among the Pomo sought to understand “the interplay among townspeople, ranchers, migrant agricultural workers, and Pomo” inhabitants.⁵ She shed light on how their lives had been adversely affected by those who took their lands. Her study of the Makah shows Colson’s increasing interest in land and land ownership. She also showed how

the Makah were using the courts to thwart the efforts of others to remove them from their lands.

A third opportunity to study people displaced from their homes presented itself shortly thereafter. Colson went to Poston, an internment camp in southwest Arizona that was established after the attack on Pearl Harbor. There, on the Colorado River Indian Reservation, the U.S. government was forcibly interning those of Japanese descent. Their civil rights had been taken away because of the anti-Japanese hysteria brought on by the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

After these fieldwork experiences with the Pomo, Makah, and people of Japanese descent at the Poston War Relocation Camp, Colson was well positioned to compare and contrast these three case studies, and she did so by focusing on their loss of homes, belongings, civil rights, identity, dignity, and much more.

FIELDWORK IN AFRICA

By the end of World War II, Colson was eager for additional fieldwork. Although she enjoyed her fieldwork experiences in North America, she longed to go somewhere where people had not been as assimilated and acculturated as the indigenous North Americans. She wanted to work “where people could be themselves.” Thus, she sailed in 1946 on a cargo ship from San Francisco to Cape Town (South Africa) where Max Gluckman, the second director of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Zambia, met her ship. He had accepted her application for a position at the institute and was happy to have her. Colson stayed with the Gluckman family for a month and then moved to a hotel when the Gluckman family left town. Later, she departed the hotel to stay with Monica Wilson, a prominent South African anthropologist. When Gluckman left his post as director of the institute in 1947 to take a position at the University of Oxford, he appointed Colson as the next director, a position she held from 1947 to 1951.

Beginning in 1946 Colson set to work observing the behavior of the Plateau Tonga, focusing on their social organization, court system, clans, land use, beer production, and rain shrines. While doing fieldwork in Africa she once remarked that it actually helped being a woman, because she was not considered to be a part of the colonial administration or an official of the government; she said she could talk more easily to everybody—women, children, young men, and elderly men. Regarding her work there, eminent social anthropologist Victor Turner once commented, “The amoebiform Tonga polity is hard to describe, but Dr. Colson succeeds in this task by combining quantitative methods with the analysis of joking relationships between the only perduring groups, the dispersed, exogamous, matrilineal clans, to which the ultimate values of Tonga society are attached.”⁶

Colson returned to the United States in 1953 and initially took a job in Maryland at Goucher College, at the time an all-women's school. Later, she held faculty positions at Boston University, Brandeis University, Northwestern University, and the University of California, Berkeley. Colson arrived at Berkeley in 1964 and stayed for twenty years. There, she established several "firsts." She became the first woman to head the campus budget committee and the first woman to deliver the Faculty Research Lecture (1983).

After thirty years of teaching in the United States, she returned to teach in Africa. In 1987, she assumed the position of visiting professor at the University of Zambia. And from 1987 to 1988, she was a visiting senior research fellow at the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford.

Colson once compared being an ethnographer to an avid birdwatcher. She was both. While birdwatching from the veranda of the house that she built in Monze, Zambia, she suffered a stroke and passed away, some ten months short of her 100th birthday.

HONORS AND AWARDS

Elizabeth Colson was invited to deliver many distinguished lectures during her long career. They include the Lewis Henry Morgan Lecture at the University of Rochester, New York, in 1973; the Distinguished Lecture at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in 1975; the Bernard Moses Lecture at the University of California in 1981; and the Malinowski Distinguished Lecture at the Society for Applied Anthropology in 1985.

In 1982, she was awarded the prestigious Rivers Memorial Medal by the Royal Anthropological Institute (United Kingdom) and the Outstanding Achievement Award from the Society of Women Geographers. In 1985, she received the highest honor awarded by the University of California, Berkeley: the Berkeley Citation. She has also received an honorary Ph.D. from the University of Rochester. In 1988, she was awarded the Distinguished Africanist Award from the American Association for African Studies.

The University of Oxford has, since 1996, hosted an annual public lecture named the Elizabeth Colson Lecture at the Refugee Studies Centre, and Oxford established a professorship in forced migration, also named in her honor.

Colson was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1977 and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1978.

THE LEGACY OF ELIZABETH COLSON

Colson's amazing commitment to fieldwork spanned seventy-three years and covered key issues of social, political, and economic significance. She is best known for the bright light she shined on forced relocation. She documented

how people lost their lands and rights. She started her career by studying the life histories of Pomo women in California, the Makah Indians in the state of Washington, and the World War II internment camp in Arizona that housed people of Japanese descent. Nevertheless, she is best known for her many decades of research in Africa among the Tonga-speaking peoples. Her studies of migration, land dispossession, resettlement, and the effects of modern technologies on indigenous groups continue to offer insights and many lessons to today's administrators and politicians. Colson had a real gift of building bridges between scholars in different disciplines and always showed tremendous generosity and encouragement to junior colleagues and students. Colson was a voracious reader, a generous scholar who mentored students and young collaborators, and an original thinker who empathized with the plights of the displaced peoples she met and studied. We found her to be unassuming, witty, helpful, and able to call up facts and data to support her position while making cogent arguments.

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