PERLA researchers developed a skin color rating assessment used by the surveyor and as a prompt for self-identification. The authors justify skin color measurement based on their hypothesis that pigmentocracy links skin color to worth. The goal of the assessment is to separate out ethnoracial categories from skin color, reduce the subjective classification of race, and “fix” color. While it is true that race and discrimination involves the gaze of others, anthropologists have argued for more than a half-century that race is a complex historical and contemporary process—racialization—dependent on structural constraints and privileges as well as unequal relationships of power, in short, subjectivity. The authors note tensions between PERLA researchers over using the assessment; however, the differing views are not discussed, and I suspect they are of great importance. The authors ask, “Why not use a measure of skin color if that is what humans notice when they encounter others and decide how to treat them?” (p. 12). For anthropologists, race is situational, fluid, and subjective even from the moment of encounter. This cannot be captured by a survey.

The major findings of the research project are that (1) race is multidimensional; (2) skin color is more determinant of inequality than self-identification; (3) racial discrimination is common; and (4) there is widespread support for multiculturalism. For anthropologists, the first three findings are more or less agreeable and not in need of quantitative validation. While we may disagree with the social determinist thrust, in general these findings have emerged from face-to-face ethnographic engagement with communities of color in Latin America. The final observation that mestizaje is progressive for its time and that multiculturalism is a “promising new stage of race thinking” (p. 22) is highly problematic. This ignores critiques made by anthropological scholarship regarding mestizaje as a form of white supremacy and multiculturalism as a neoliberal strategy of tolerance and as a way to dissuade political challenges.

The second part of their overarching argument is that skin color is “often ignored” (p. 3). We must ask by whom? When? The quantitative data do not provide for this sort of everyday finding. Furthermore, the historiography we often use to frame our ethnographic examination of race does not bear out this phenomenon. Indeed, the book’s tendency to reinforce rather than intervene in a theory of social determinism makes skin color a predictor for inequality. The authors argue that racial self-identification is the standard method for collecting quantitative data because of an emerging rights perspective—the right to identify as one wishes. However, anthropological research links racial self-identification to the work of race-based social movements that challenge quantitative data and demand social, political, and economic rights beyond official representation. The authors express an interest in what “normal Colombians, Brazilians, Mexicans, and Peruvians think about indigenous people and Afrodescendants” (p. 14)—specifically in terms of poverty, incidence of intermarriage and other interracial social relations, affirmative action, and race-based social movement demands. However, it is strikingly clear in the text and widely known among anthropologists that attitudes about race and experiences of racism are not well captured by a survey.

The book succeeds on two levels that have little to do with the research findings. First, it demonstrates the value of a comparative approach for understanding the social fields that shape certain structural constraints and subjective processes. Second, the book is an excellent source of scholarly and official ethnoracial histories and contexts, including census design, for each country.

The Bioarchaeology of Artificial Cranial Modifications: New Approaches to Head Shaping and Its Meaning in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and Beyond by Vera Tiesler.


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Danielle S. Kurin
University of California, Santa Barbara

In The Bioarchaeology of Artificial Cranial Modifications, Vera Tiesler—one of the foremost scholars on the topic—has synthesized an impressive swath of ethnohistoric accounts, artifactual and iconographic referents, clinical studies of ontogeny and anatomy, and data on more than 2,000 Mesoamerican crania to address one of the most ancient and enigmatic forms of body modification practiced by humans. The complexity of artificial cranial modification is well suited to book-length treatment. In this format, Tiesler is able to comprehensively reconstruct phenomenological perspectives on cranial remodeling within a framework largely centered on embodiment and identity. She convincingly demonstrates that evaluating cranial modification requires emic understandings of ideological systems and the roles and meanings ascribed to the body and its parts. Head remodeling reflects on—and is influenced by—basic aspects of social permanence or change.
HEAD SHAPING AND SOCIAL LIFE

Heads don’t artificially reshape themselves. Remodeling was achieved by cradle boarding—swaddling a squirming infant to a rigid, portable crib or by using head splints and turban-like bindings. As Tiesler points out, heads were reshaped by mothers or other members of the nuclear family, and perhaps even midwives and priests—all integral actors in cultural reproduction and ethnogenesis. Cranial modification was a crucial part of the Mesoamerican child-rearing process and a conduit for establishing personhood and social integration within the family and community.

Tiesler suggests that, while visual outcome was considered, enactment was ever more important. With modification, assimilation to a desirable cultural form was reified through the daily performance of deeply emblematic head-binding traditions. Moreover, the organoplastic character of the cranium attached a protective function to head reshaping: a prominent occiput was viewed as dangerous, while the crown was auspicious. Modification was thus necessary to fortify child development, protect and “seal” or “ensoul” the body, and prepare a youngster for future rites of passage.

MODIFICATION MEANINGS

One of Tiesler’s most important contributions is demonstrating how the meaning of a remodeled head and its constituent parts are contingent on temporal, geographic, and cultural factors. The Maya used modification to identify family and community traditions, reify local ideologies of social roles and belonging, and signal broad ethnic affiliations based on the geopolitical landscape of the time.

Supernatural emulation is another possible motivator, as some gods are portrayed with elongated or squat heads. Maya elites may have used cranial modification as a means of self-aggrandizement through symbolic transposition with deities, yet there is no evidence of aristocratic exclusivity. Tiesler suggests that emulating protector-god head shapes would have propelled social cohesion writ large.

Regionally, particular head shapes were associated with inland or coastal residence, and with the Petén jungle in the east versus lands west of the Usumacinta River. Cranial modification also coincides with trade routes and may denote an emergent merchant sector. While head shapes in urban areas were largely homogeneous, linguistic and ethnic boundaries—locales on the fringes of contact and exchange—demonstrate the most variability in cranial morphology.

HISTORY OF MESOAMERICAN CRADLE BOARDING

Keen to the lasting impact of previous cranial modification studies, Tiesler provides a thorough historiographic assessment of research on the subject, as well as her own synthetic summary of trends concerning head remodeling in Mesoamerica over the past 7,000 years.

It was during the Early Pre-Classic that skull compression devices were first invented; significant regional diversity in head shapes emerged by the Late Pre-Classic. In the Classic Period, rates of modification reach their apogee; almost all heads were remodeled. Some groups even employed anachronic pear-shaped Olmecoid heads, which Tiesler interprets as a sign of syncretism and reinterpretation, not social memory or imposition. Maya collapse eventually led to homogenization as head shapes across the region embodied a new international social order associated with Kukulkan–Quetzalcoatl. Finally, by the Colonial Era, the now-rare and restricted reshaping tradition came to signal mere “otherness.”

Of note, chapter 3 provides one of the most comprehensive explanations in the extant literature of pre-and postnatal cranial ontogeny and the impacts of artificial remodeling. Chapter 4 is equally strong, as Tiesler masterfully addresses the vagaries of head classification systems. This volume will inform and inspire bioarchaeologists and skeletal biologists, as well as scholars of material culture and embodiment in Latin America and beyond.

Anthropology in the Making: Research in Health and Development by Laurent Vidal.


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Karin Friederic
Wake Forest University

In Anthropology in the Making, Laurent Vidal draws from his extensive experience working in health and development projects in Africa to explore the production of anthropological knowledge in multidisciplinary research contexts. He uses rich ethnographic detail from four case studies, including an HIV/AIDS evaluation, a study on health workers, a tuberculosis intervention, and a project on emergency obstetric care, all based in Senegal or Côte d’Ivoire.

The questions he addresses are at once pragmatic and epistemological. Vidal argues that anthropology’s epistemology rests on the assumption that anthropology is a solitary research endeavor, yet anthropology is increasingly practiced in collaborative, interdisciplinary environments. As