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Book review : Kirsch, Stuart 2006: Reverse Anthropology:
Indigenous Analysis of Social and Environmental Relations in
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STUART KIRSCH. *Reverse Anthropology: Indigenous Analysis of Social and Environmental Relations in New Guinea*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006. Pp. 296, 2 figures, 20 illustrations, 2 maps. ISBN-10 0804753415; ISBN-13 9780804753418.

In *Reverse Anthropology*, Stuart Kirsch focuses on the ways in which the Yonggom of Papua New Guinea—or the Muyu, as the Yonggom people living in Indonesia’s West Papua are called—interpret issues raised by global politics and economy. Kirsch approaches indigenous analyses by focusing on two major political struggles: first, the situation of the 6,000 Muyu refugees who fled from West Papua to Papua New Guinea in 1984 who, despite of hardship and the threat of political violence, remain committed to their pursuit of political independence. The other case is the political and legal campaign the Yonggom have initiated in response to the environmental devastation caused by the Ok Tedi mine. Interestingly, as the Yonggom pursued their case against the mining company in Australia, the issue received substantial positive media attention. In the end, the court recognized the existence of local subsistence rights under common law and the dispute was settled out of court in 1996 with a compensation package for the people who were negatively affected by the mine. However, this ruling did not lead to an improvement in the environmental situation. This led to new court cases, which were finally settled in 2004, but which, again, did not reduce the mine’s environmental impact.

Through “reverse anthropology” Kirsch seeks to understand and recognize indigenous analyses of situations which resemble the cases mentioned above, and to show how these analyses might be valuable in understanding the “political and economic forces that connect our lives” (p. 5). Thus, Kirsch also has an admittedly political goal: to explain the rationale behind indigenous interpretations and claims. This goal is important as “the outcome of these struggles depends in part whose narrative structures prevail” (p. 4). In the book, modernity and indigenous analyses are not seen as opposites, but instead Kirsch wants to show how the Yonggom are able to comprehend and learn from their contacts with capital, the state, and so on.

A good example of the relevance of indigenous analyses is the Yonggom animistic view of the relationships between different species. Through magical association with different species the Yonggom are able to analyze the world from the point of view of these animals. According to Kirsch, this is an alternative way of thinking about human-environmental relations (p. 218). And indeed, with its comprehensive focus on the relationships between humans, other species, and the environment, the Yonggom analysis is actually remarkably similar to the relatively new perspective of ecology, which likewise focuses precisely on these interrelationships and approaches the environment as a system that includes different species. This view is important when thinking about the consequences of environmental destruction or conservation. For example, the indigenous analysis shows that pollution is not only a technical problem, but also a social relation between the polluters and the people affected.

When discussing environmental destruction, Kirsch introduces the concept “scenes of loss” (p. 190). For the Yonggom, the environment holds important information about the history of individuals and the society. More specifically, history is inscribed *into* the environment in the form of paths, gardens and other signs of human work. When these

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signs are erased, by environmental destruction or “development” projects, this history is also lost. Kirsch notes that this aspect is often forgotten when thinking about the “costs of capitalism and globalization”. Another consequence—one not mentioned by Kirsch—are the legal implications that environmental destruction might have: in Papua New Guinea, landownership is not registered and landowning groups must often witness their rights to the land. Physical marks are part of this evidence (see for example Westermark 1997: 223).

Reverse Anthropology will be interesting to those working either on Melanesia or on environmental anthropology and social movements. The book has also wider significance in terms of anthropological involvement in large political questions and ethics: it aims to help give a voice to the Yonggom claims and interpretations—an intention reflecting Stuart Kirsch’s long-ongoing participation in the Yonggom campaign against the Ok Tedi mine. In addition to describing his involvement in the campaign, in *Reverse Anthropology* Kirsch also addresses the issue of what the anthropologist is supposed (and able) to do when encountering political violence.

How to involve or distance oneself from the political questions that affect the people one does research with are difficult questions. Yet, these questions must be addressed and it is challenging to envision a topic or an area where the anthropologist would not encounter ethically complex situations, caused by different actors. Kirsch’s open discussion about his involvement is thus an important contribution to a conversation that should have more participants.

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