

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

STUART KIRSCH, Reverse Anthropology: Indigenous Analysis of Social and Environmental Relations in New Guinea. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006, xix + 261 p., index.

Kirsch's fascinating ethnography of the Yonggom people of Papua New Guinea turns anthropology inside out. Traditional ethnographies of Melanesia focus on kinship, ritual and exchange and neglect the role of indigenous people as subjects of their own history. As a scholar-activist who has done extensive ethnographic fieldwork among the Yonggom, Kirsch wanted his readers to see the world through the eyes of the Yonggom, "especially the interpretive capacities of Yonggom myth, ritual, magic and exchange" (222) to shape their contemporary political struggles with a large mining company and the state.

Kirsch demonstrates how Yonggom modes of analysis have shaped their response to two contemporary political struggles. The first is the political campaign and legal action of the communities affected by the environmental devastation of the Ok Tedi copper and gold mine in Papua New Guinea. Every day for the past twenty-two years the mine has been dumping 80,000 tons of mine waste (tailings) containing copper, zinc, cadmium and lead into the Ok Tedi and Fly Rivers. Pollution from the mine has destroyed the Yonggom subsistence economy by contaminating the rivers and forests downstream where they live. The second case involves the movement of 6,000 Yonggom refugees from the Indonesian territory of West Papua into Papua New Guinea in 1984. The refugees were fleeing violent repression by Indonesia, which had earlier invaded and annexed the former Dutch colony. Indonesia has imposed ecologically destructive mining and logging projects on indigenous lands and committed extensive human rights violations, including torture, sexual violence and thousands of extrajudicial killings.

While Kirsch provides background information that allows the reader to understand the main outlines of these political struggles, the heart of the analysis is devoted to indigenous interpretations of these struggles. At the same time, Kirsch does not limit his discussion to indigenous modes of analysis. He compares Yonggom interpretations of history and political events with more familiar forms of analysis from the social sciences.

The richest case study comes out of Kirsch's advocacy work with Yonggom activists in their campaign against the Ok Tedi mine. In 1994, an

Australia-based law firm, acting on behalf of 30,000 villager landholders downstream from the mine, sued Broken Hill Proprietary Ltd. (BHP), the majority shareholder and managing partner of the Ok Tedi mine, in Australian and Papuan courts. They claimed that environmental damage from the Ok Tedi mine had polluted rivers and damaged their way of life. Kirsch advised the Yonggom's lawyers, and facilitated collaboration between the Yonggom and nongovernmental (NGO) environmental organizations. Those experiences were critical in allowing Kirsch to observe how indigenous analyses of social exchange relations provided the basis for the compensation claims made against BHP.

The indigenous analysis of the mine's destructive impact was quite different from the environmental impact assessments produced by the mining company. Whereas the mining company framed the impact of the mine exclusively on scientific evidence of environmental damages, the Yonggom compensation claims encompassed a complex web of social and environmental relationships which challenged the limited focus of corporate science. In Yonggom society, for example, explanations for sickness, injury or death frequently involve accusations of sorcery. This same discourse is used to explain the harmful impact of the Ok Tedi mine on their environment. "They view the mining company as a corporate individual and accuse it of acting irresponsibly like a sorcerer. The mine has forced them to 'live in fear' because of the unknown risks associated with the tailings and other waste material that it releases into their river system, a sentiment previously associated with the fear of reprisal after a sorcery killing" (108).

While sorcery is the ultimate antisocial act, the Yonggom attempt to shame the sorcerer into giving up his or her murderous activities. At the heart of this process is a restoration of social exchange relationships through social pressure. The way that the Yonggom understand sorcery behavior in terms of social relations has also been applied to their relationship with the mining company that has damaged their environment. "Like a sorcerer, the mining company refuses to take responsibility for its actions, including the social consequences of environmental impacts" (120). The Yonggom framing of the compensation case in moral terms is an attempt, based upon the logic of sorcery accusations, to pressure the mining company to take responsibility for the consequences of the mine waste on the lives of those living downstream.

Yonggom analysis of the mine's impact also provides insight into the relationship between place and memory. The Yonggom are continually altering their landscape as they maintain a network of trails, camping places, gardens and catchments for water. "Over time, their life histories are inscribed onto the landscape" (11). When the mine destroyed that landscape it also threatened their sense of history. However, the challenges posed by lost "senses of place" were offset by new forms of mapmaking which allowed the Yonggom to mount an international campaign against the Ok Tedi mine. In the same way that the Yonggom are used to tracing the productive connections between trading partners, hunting grounds and

potential marriage alliances, their narratives also map the connections between widely dispersed locations of capital and power. During their legal action and political campaign against the mine, “new global lines of power connected the Yonggom to their lawyers and the courts in Melbourne, to environmental and mining NGOs in Australia, Europe and the United States and to other indigenous peoples from around the world with whom they have many concerns in common” (205). By tracking the global landscape of corporate power the Yonggom were able to pressure one of the world’s largest mining companies to acknowledge its responsibility for the problems downstream from the mine and promise an effective response.

Kirsch’s ethnography is compelling on several levels. It is an excellent example of using indigenous frames of reference for understanding contemporary issues of globalization, colonialism and modernization. It is also a groundbreaking approach to the study of indigenous movements that yields alternative interpretations of political relationships and historical events going back to the first contact between European explorers and Melanesian indigenous groups. Finally, for students of anthropology, it is a highly personal account of the multiple roles of the anthropologist as analyst, participant and advocate for an indigenous group in a precedent-setting legal case against a powerful multinational mining corporation.

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