
Reverse Anthropology is an ethnographically rich and analytically sharp examination of the contemporary social world of the Yonggom, also called Muyu, peoples of south-central New Guinea, an ethnolinguistic group that holds land on both the east and west sides of the international border that bisects the island. Three main things make this book unique in its ethnographic and analytic focus. First, in the Indonesian territory of West Papua, on the western side of the boarder, the Muyu, as Yonggom are called there, have faced unbelievable hardships at the hands of the Indonesian government, and because of this, 6,000 of them migrated into Papua New Guinea in 1984. They currently reside in refugee camps there. Second, on the eastern side of the border Yonggom have been locked in a political struggle over the environmental devastation caused by the Ok Tedi copper and gold mine since the early 1990s. Third, the substantive theoretical contribution of the book is a masterful expansion of the idea that by using indigenous analyses and interpretations of actions, events, and processes we can understand social worlds in ways that move us past the problems which arise when Western anthropological categories are naturalized and then elide indigenous categories and when indigenous categories are used in ways that soften analytic rigor. Taken together these three things provide the opening for a novel examination of indigenous social movements and political struggles, and Reverse Anthropology gives us just that.

In the very clearly written Introduction the author explains the history of the Muyu refugees in the context of the Dutch colonial history of West Papua, Indonesian transmigration policies, and military reprisals by Indonesia against indigenous people thought to be involved in political struggle and social critique. He then recounts the history of the Ok Tedi copper and gold mine within the larger context of mining in Papua New Guinea and describes the environmental ruin caused by the dumping of more than one billion tons of tailings into the Ok Tedi River. Next, he describes the legal and political struggles in which the Yonggom have been involved in their attempts to have their grievances against the mine heard and to access compensation for the losses they have suffered. With this the reader gets a sense of the radical social and ecological changes that the Yonggom/Muyu have faced over the past thirty years. What is masterful about this Introduction, and the remainder of the book, is that the author, all the while telling the stories of these contemporary environmental and political struggles, contextualizes them in deeply indigenous ways of knowing and understanding history and the natural and social world.

In terms of the history of Yonggom/Muyu peoples and their struggles, the author shows how places and people came to be known by colonial agents and explorers through material objects like birds of paradise, ritually important skulls, and locally made artifacts. With this he shows links between the conceptual creation of natives through materiality and the conceptual creation of outsiders and whites by Yonggom/Muyu through their encounters with naturalists and ethnographic

curio seekers. This tension between how people in New Guinea are seen and how they see others works to destabilize any reading that might see indigenous peoples as receivers of external stimulus and not as active historic agents.

In terms of the natural world, the book beautifully conveys the staggeringly alive social landscape that is the Yonggom forest and details how people, plants, animals, and biotic processes are locked in exchange relations in ways that bring the world into being and shows that even while living their contemporary political struggles people come into being through their relationships with their surroundings and through particular kinds of practices.

In terms of the social world, even in a contemporary world of anthropology in which many people wrongly think of examinations of exchange, sorcery, and initiation as anachronistic, the book shows us that people’s beliefs and practices are always analytic and epistemological. For Muyu, exchange is not only about creating and maintaining social connections with other Muyu, it is also about understanding the possibilities for interacting with Yonggom upon whose land you must now live as a refugee and for interacting with agents of the Indonesian and Papua New Guinean states. Sorcery is not simply a way of working out social upheaval; it is one way in which Yonggom can understand the Ok Tedi mine as an actor that can be struggled against. And male initiation is not only about making men. It is a way of extending mythological roles and the analyses that myths afford to living persons and contemporary events. People’s social lives and their understandings of them are shown to be a way of analysis, of understanding the past, the present, and the possible futures.

In sum, Reverse Anthropology takes a radical step anthropologically by saying that we should treat indigenous modes of practice and analysis not only as more than emic, but also as possibly opening up new ways of participating in political struggles.

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Early on in Conservation Is Our Government Now, Paige West describes a fight that broke out in the midst of a 1998 gathering of foreign and Papua New Guinean conservation practitioners and biologists near the remote New Guinea Highlands community of Maimafu. It was not, as those familiar with recent critiques of conservation might anticipate, a fight between the indigenous Gimi inhabitants of this community and representatives of the powerful conservation organizations who had taken an interest in the region’s biodiversity, nor did it involve differently