

Book Review

Kulick, Don. *A Death in the Rainforest: How a Language and a Way of Life Came to an End in Papua New Guinea*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 2020, 277 pages.

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“**W**hy does a language die”? This question is at the center of Don Kulick’s ethnography based on his long term fieldwork in a small rainforest village in the famously multilingual nation of Papua New Guinea (PNG). By the mid-1980s when Kulick first arrived in the village of Gapun as a young anthropologist, the children were no longer learning their ancestral language of Tayap as their first language (85). The author’s analysis of the gradual ascendancy of *Tok Pisin*, the new language forged at colonial plantations, and the abandonment of the ancient Tayap language is compelling. Kulick eschews ecological comparisons between disappearing languages and disappearing species, arguing, “By encouraging us to think in terms of ecosystems rather than political systems, comparisons of endangered languages to endangered species obscure the simple realization that language death is anything but a natural phenomenon. It is, on the contrary, a profoundly social phenomenon” (25-26).

While written for a wide range of readers, it is a book about “doing” anthropology and its preoccupation with difference, sociality, power, and the effects of social and cultural change wrought over the past century by colonialism, Christianity, and capitalism. This book engages all of these issues and more by drawing on the author’s experience and thinking over thirty years. He captures the complicated states of affection and disaffection, and engagement and estrangement that are an indubitable part of human relations and, of course, fieldwork. The author’s account of his everyday life in Gapun is remarkably personal and unsparing of himself, written with humour and warmth; it is by turns melancholic and laugh-out-loud funny. In his depictions, men, women, youth and children emerge as multidimensional, interestingly imperfect and irrepressibly full of life despite the difficulties of daily life and

their longing for “development” and the benefits of modern services and infrastructure that continue to elude them. He presents villagers who contend with the postcolonial state’s failure to provide material improvements in their lives by continuing to provide for themselves through gardening and hunting (116). Kulick’s vivid narrative carries the reader along with him to the village on his four research trips spanning three decades.

“Languages die because people stop speaking them” (26). This insight sparks Kulick’s relentless search to understand why and how people stopped speaking their ancient language. He spent time with elders learning the language; with village men in the longhouse where Tayap was no longer spoken; attending the Catholic church where Tayap was never spoken; accompanying people to sago gardens and the forest; spending long days in kitchens with women and their young children; visiting new mothers in maternity huts; typing love letters for young men (in their preferred French script); and hanging out with young people and playing with children. He left no demographic group out of his quest and was fascinated by all kinds of language expression and narratives, including love letters, swearing, lies that mothers tell their toddlers, dreams, rumours, sermons, stories of the past and traditional practices, and the various pitches of conniving politicians. He did a lot of listening, demonstrating that most people respond when given a chance to talk about themselves and to tell their stories. Kulick found that in the village nobody was asking Elders about the old initiation practices that were abandoned before World War II, the *tambaran* song cycles, or the language (79-80). Nobody else was asking young people why they did not speak Tayap even when they could speak it. The answers provided insight into inter-generational relations, and how Elders failed to enlist young people to maintain their ancestral language and knowledge.

The subtitle of the book, “How a Language and a Way of Life Came to an End in Papua New Guinea,” underlines how the ancestral language, the knowledge, and the way of life are entangled. One of the most important changes that came with colonialism was the way in which “White people changed what counted as knowledge” (116). Knowledge embedded and transmitted in and through rituals, stories, myths, magical chants, and funerary feasts became attenuated and disappeared as the language was disappearing. Kulick argues that the “traditional ways of being in and knowing the world” were uprooted by the new ways of life that white colonialists introduced, including Christianity, growing cash crops, and the desire for new commodities. There was also “the

desire to change into something other than what villagers were” (117). Signifying modernity, *Tok Pisin* became valued, along with the steel axes and the cloth that the indentured plantation workers carried home to their villages, such as Gapun. In this way *Tok Pisin*, spread “like rhizomes from the plantation to the villages” (31) starting with men and gradually seeping into the everyday until parents signalled to children that they should favour the new language. “*Tok Pisin* came to symbolize all of the desirable goals in the good life while Tayap increasingly came to represent the irrational, negative qualities—qualities that villagers agree they needed to suppress so that they might all change” (118). *Tok Pisin* displaced not only Tayap but the multiple languages spoken in Gapun that facilitated communication with nearby villagers, all of whom had their own languages. The language of the plantation reduced the villagers to monolingualism, just as the plantation reduced the diversity of plants to monoculture. Ecological frameworks are not just natural, as Kulick contended, but they too, are political.

The people of Gapun drew the author into “their circuits of exchange, responsibility, and accountability” (xvii). The author is cogent and straightforward in his account of the dilemmas of fieldwork such as reciprocity which, as Kulick notes, anthropologists often gloss over in their ethnographies. He writes: “in Gapun, like it is everywhere else, the burden of the gift is double-edged... and the ceaseless cycle of gift giving was the glue that bound us together” (85). The author compels us to think about how we are “indebted” to the people upon whom we depend for material wellbeing and for material for our various research projects. Kulick’s own responsibilities to the people and the village were made clear during a violent encounter with thieves who planned to steal from the author during a celebratory evening and the situation that resulted in the tragic killing of a respected villager. The violence opened wounds that never fully healed. The author was anguished about how his presence and “his white privilege” precipitated the violence that resulted in death. Different kinds of violence and rumours of violence on subsequent trips to the village contributed to his decision to end his fieldwork there. The book is haunted by endings and death. Kulick was identified by villagers as the ghost of a dead child when he arrived in the village to study their dying language

Kulick shores up the anthropological project and its respectful engagement with difference. “If Anthropology as a way of approaching the world has a single message, it is that we learn from difference. Difference enriches, it disquiets,

it expands, it amplifies, it transforms.”(xvii) At the same time, engaging with difference necessitates risk-taking and responsibilities. The risks are many: political, epistemological, representational and personal (Xviii). These risks can also incite criticisms, for example, about how the people, the village, the country are represented. At the outset, Kulick promised a different kind of book that would not “accentuate the positive” or “airbrush” the rough edges of daily life (xviii). He delivered on this promise: in his encounter with difference in Gapun he does not simply reduce differences. One of the remarkable achievements of *A Death in the Rainforest* is that it generates affective engagement with difference, prompting the reader to care deeply about the people of Gapun, the death of their language, their irretrievably altered lives, and uncertain futures. His book, like difference itself, “enriches” and “disquiets.”