

# 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: Algonquin Books, 2020, 217 pages.**

Eric Henry  
*Saint Mary's University*

Anthropologists tend to write in dribs and drabs: a journal article here, a book chapter there, maybe a book-length treatment that ties our observations together with an overarching theoretical frame. We build up a picture of places and people bit by bit as our experiences and understandings deepen. At some point, however, a scholar may lean back and ponder what it all meant. What can years of research in, say, a small village near the mouth of the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea tell us—not just anthropologists but all of us—about human meaning? Don Kulick's *A Death in the Rainforest* is in many ways a straightforward book. There are no citations, few references to the scholarly literature or to academic debates. It is a memoir based on fieldwork in that small village, called Gapun, conducted over the course of nearly thirty years, beginning in the mid-1980s. The narrative is organized around topics that Kulick has written about more extensively in his scholarly work: language shift, cultural change, religion, and gender, to name a few. But the focus here is more holistic and cohesive. It is a portrait, painterly in its execution, of everyday life in a world that to the people of Gapun is rapidly changing around them, even as they are left inexorably behind. The stories he tells offer an intimate, insightful, and occasionally even disturbing picture of a few hundred people living in a mangrove swamp, hours distant from any other human contact.

Perhaps the best compliment that can be paid to this book is that, several weeks after finishing it, I am still thinking about it. I am thinking about old Raya, who spends his days correcting Kulick's many apparent misconceptions about the Whiteman's world while teaching him the Tayap language; Moses, just returned from a development project presentation, drunk on dreams of modernization; little Amani, who appoints himself Kulick's security guard

and escorts him through the village at night. While in other writings these characters might show up to reinforce a point about globalization or language socialization, here they feel like people. Many a linguistic anthropology student has learned about a speech event called a *kros*, a virtuoso display of invective and swearing performed by Gapun women. But whereas Kulick's previous works have used the *kros* as a means to explore the dynamics of gendered communication, here we just get a chance to watch Sake, one of the most prolific Tayap *krosers*, swear. We learn about her family and background, her marriage, her relations with other villagers, and the events that could set off one of her tirades. I could read a whole book just about her.

This is not to say that the book is devoid of theory or analysis. Kulick challenges, for instance, the biological metaphor frequently used in analyses of language death that treats the extinction of a language much like the extinction of a species. "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... Languages die because people stop speaking them" (25–26). He therefore contests the popular notion that each language is irreplaceable, a unique treasure in the trove of human heritage. Discussing languages this way, he argues, separates the death of a language from the social pressures people experience and the decisions—sometimes even willfully conscious decisions—to stop speaking a language. Kulick also provides a solid introduction to Tayap grammar, child language socialization, and emerging literacy strategies (particularly in the composition of love letters).

Honestly, though, do you not want to know more about the trials of rainforest fieldwork? About eating boiled maggots and sago jelly? About the incessant requests Kulick received for "little favors" like rubber bands or kerosene? About the heat and the death adders and plants with spikes and all the other myriad things conspiring to kill him? I suspect this will become one of those books assigned to introductory classes and gifted by mentors to their graduate students, one that lets people know what "real" field research is like. In that sense there might be a little too much on language for cultural anthropologists, and a little too much on the quotidian drudgery of village life for linguistic anthropologists. But the questions Kulick poses are ones we should all be asking ourselves. What are the terms and limits of an outsider's responsibility? When the villagers are being swindled out of their meagre

wealth by yet another purveyor of development and change, do we step in? What about when old Monei laid dying slowly of malaria and his relatives refused to take him to the medical station because so few sick people come back? How do the patterns of global commodity production and consumption we all engage in affect a small place in the rainforest? And what do we owe a language that is slowly disappearing from the world, pared back in each generation by people who no longer see the point in using it?

There are no easy answers here, and I will leave the reader to discover Kulick's own take on each of these questions. In the end, we learn that Kulick will not be going back to this village that has captivated his interest for so long. As the reader slowly learns over the course of the book, an anthropologist is not just an objective outsider watching the interactions of others from a distance. He or she gets caught up in those lives in ways that are sometimes unpredictable and even violent; the word "death" in the title here is both metaphorical and literal. But there is hope as well that Gapun and its people will come out alright, despite all the forces, both nearby and far away, lined up against them.