

**Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation and Shirleen Smith**, *People of the Lakes: Stories of Our Van Tat Gwich'in Elders*, Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2009, 456 pages.

Reviewer: *Anna de Aguayo*  
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*People of the Lakes* is the result of ten consecutive years of work from a community of less than 300 Gwich'in Dene from Old Crow, Yukon. Building on research begun in 1995, the First Nation Heritage Committee work was initially tied to the establishment of a national park on the southwestern part of their traditional lands. It has won nine prizes since publication, including a 2010 Canadian Historical Association Northern Clio and the Wheeler-Voegelin Prize from the American Society of Ethnohistory. It was designed to be the first official transcript of Old Crow history, the last village without road access in the Yukon. It is a 391-page distillation of over 350 transcripts, organized into three sections: The First Generation, those born in the 19th century; The Second Generation, those born in the early 1900s; and, those now in their 40s and 50s. The organization was meant to emphasize the people, their relationships, the land and the major changes in hunting and economics they have faced. The excerpted direct translations are interspersed with more academic historical and anthropological explanations by Edmonton-based anthropologist, Shirleen Smith. A span of 150 years of archived transcripts, audio recordings, photographs and film stills were also pulled together to add to the project. Then a University of Alberta Press editorial team took another year to carefully edit and polish, printing it in a glossy large format at the Friesens presses of Altona, Manitoba. Over a 130 mainly colour photographs, all carefully labelled and attributed, full colour maps of land use, and historic prints expensively grace every second page or so, it became as lovely as an illuminated manuscript. It is finished with a long well cross-referenced index as well as glossaries of Gwich'in to English and back.

To ensure that readers differentiate between direct interviews and academic interpretation—important for courts—different fonts and colours are used. While the majority of those interviewed only spoke Gwich'in, interviews were deliberately translated into English to make sure as many visitors and future generations would benefit as possible. For those wishing to listen to the original interviews, the entire Oral History Collection, the most precious product, is now housed in the village museum. It was as if everyone involved wanted the history to survive and the project to succeed.

There is a political economy to be written about the transformation of oral history collection in Canada's indigenous communities. With Section 35 of the Constitution Act (1982) stating that only proven "existing" Aboriginal rights would be recognized and the courts' use of the Van der Peet test that a practice to be protected had to be proven to be "integral," oral history collecting has become serious political practice. Used in courts as a powerful tool in land and development battles

with large corporations and governments, rules of oral history collection were tightened. Following the *Delgamuukw* court case, similar rules now govern protocols for mining surveys, road development and oil and gas exploration, as each required formal Traditional Environmental Knowledge reports as part of government-mandated environmental assessments. This was often the only way that heritage or traditional usage spots could be protected.

In this context, the long development and community control demonstrated in *People of the Lakes* is quite remarkable and even unusual. Only short-term funds are usually available to communities, through governments or corporations, to collect and record state-mandated oral histories. At times, working to tight deadlines and narrow topic lists, the results can be cursory and hard to integrate with academic or local needs—particularly for use in pedagogical materials for local schools. Issues of copyright, publication and dissemination are at times problematic.

The book's copyrighted authors, the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation of Old Crow, had finalized their land claims in 1995. But they have had to deal with pressure for oil and mining exploration, as well as gas development threats to the Alaskan calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou herd upon which they have traditionally relied. The format of the book, with clear references to land use, toponyms and protection and with a concerted effort to arrive at a community consensus of their own history, is deliberate and pointed. This oral history is meant to be legally impregnable. The smart selection of a University of Alberta anthropology doctoral student, now Dr. Shirleen Smith, who had worked on the history of Treaties 11 and 8 negotiations among the Dene of the Deh Cho (MacKenzie Valley) and a student of long-time Dene expert witness and specialist, Michael Asch, also proved to be a highly forward thinking collaboration. She continues to work with them on land usage.

Academically, the book can be used in sections—using the analytical sections or oral history extracts alone or together—to illustrate specific historical transformations in modes of production and specific practices. There were some particularly strong sections tracing the impact of the 1911 demarcation of the Alaska border, the rise of free traders, wage labour and the role of the Anglican Church. Anthropologically, there are some very intriguing discussions on gender, hunting partnerships and marriage. The descriptions of the importance of "prize" or "smart women" (p. 48) and the use of caribou fences are particularly interesting.

The book might be useful in upper-level courses on Native History or Oral History Studies. One might want to supplement it with readings from Bruce Miller's *Oral History on Trial* (2011) or the oral history collections of Cruikshank (1998) and Goulet (1998) on other Yukon Dene groups. Shirleen Smith also co-wrote, with Michael Asch, an article on the Slavey Dene for *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunter and Gatherers* (Asch and Smith 1999). The National Film Board production, *The Challenge in Old Crow* (Payrastré 2006), might also prove useful.

## References

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**Astrid Anderson**, *Landscapes of Relations and Belonging: Body, Place and Politics in Wogeo, Papua New Guinea*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011, 262 pages.

Reviewer: *Dan Jorgensen*  
*University of Western Ontario*

Wogeo is a smallish island off Papua New Guinea's north coast and is well known to Melanesianists through Ian Hogbin's publications from the 1930s to the 1970s. Hogbin is also a large presence in island memory, and Anderson is acutely conscious of working in his shadow: islanders understood her task to be filling in Hogbin's account in recording *kastom*—traditional culture as locally conceived. Much of Hogbin's record survives scrutiny, and where there are discrepancies, islanders are often tempted to defer to his version. In other cases, however, Anderson is in a position to offer important correctives, as in her discovery of (rarely acknowledged) matrilineages.

The general picture of Wogeo *kastom* that emerges is both clarified and complicated by Anderson's treatment. Hogbin struggled for years with several different approaches to understanding Wogeo society. Many of his difficulties stemmed from an attempt to identify descent rules defining groupings and processes of succession. Anderson tackles these questions with the benefit of more recent approaches to Melanesian sociality, concluding that key processes are organized through diverse pathways of claims whose deployment is a matter of tactics and debate. Although she invokes Wagner and Strathern's ideas of composite persons with multiple identities ("dividuals"), it is not hard to see anthropology's more general shift to a focus on agency at work here.

Hogbin was tempted to see Wogeo flexibility as tantamount to the absence of a system, whereas Anderson shows that, if anything, it is the system's elaboration that enables

intricate political maneuvering. Claims to land or title, for example, can be argued on the basis of patrilineage, residence, ritual participation, histories of use, matrilineal descent or affinity. The fact that genealogical ties are in play only multiplies the options: individuals bear the names of deceased villagers, and a combination of astute naming, strategic adoptions and advantageous marriages ensures that there is no shortage of genealogically plausible candidates for any particular claim.

Anderson is at her best when describing the politics of rebuilding named houses, in which the full panoply of arguments is mobilized to lay claim to individually named roof rafters. Traditionally carved and painted, these rafters are the material register of rights to specific tracts of land, while the thatch contributed by supporters secures their subsidiary rights. Establishing prerogatives in house-building is one of the high points of Wogeo politics, and Anderson's material provides a rich catalogue of moves that effectively anchor selective local histories in place.

Anderson notes that this system is a far better match for Levi-Strauss' notion of "house societies" than any scheme of descent groupings, an observation that she develops with reference to parallels from Yap and Belau. In fact, one strength of her analysis is that she relates traditional Wogeo culture not only to the neighbouring islands of Kairiru and Manam, but also to the wider Austronesian world, ranging from eastern Indonesia through Micronesia to eastern Melanesia. Within this comparative frame, the Wogeo emphasis on replication in linking spatial and social identities over time—complete with recycled names, houses, estates and titles—begins to look less anomalous and more consistent with a widespread and possibly ancient pattern in which place is an important principle in its own right.

A strong point of Anderson's analysis is her demonstration of how perceived permanence accommodates an almost bewildering flexibility in social arrangements. Ironically, Anderson may herself have succumbed to the spell of permanence in her account of Wogeo culture as *kastom*. Having Hogbin as a forerunner and facing local expectations that anthropologists document *kastom*, Anderson seems—despite periodic disclaimers—to have taken tradition as her special brief. As a consequence, much of what we learn is couched in terms of *memory culture*—the recollections and emendations of elderly experts concerning the way things had been done in the past.

For example, there is a lengthy treatment of Wogeo initiations, which were abandoned well over a generation ago, as well as an account of obsolete ritual competences. But although we learn that people attend multiple prayer meetings each week, or that women speak in tongues and deliver messages that leaders parse, these receive little attention and there is no description of Wogeo churches comparable to that of the details of now-discontinued named houses. There are repeated references to prominent islanders who are living in various towns off-island, but little discussion of what their absence means