

# Reversing Anthropology



*Reverse Anthropology: Indigenous Analysis of Social and Environmental Relations in New Guinea*  
by Stuart Kirsch  
(Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006). 296 pp., 24 illus., paper, \$21.95, ISBN 0-804-75342-3, cloth, \$55.00, ISBN 0-804-75341-5.

REVIEWED BY MATT TOMLINSON, *Lecturer in Anthropology, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.*

This is an ethnography of rare moral force. Stuart Kirsch works with the Yonggom, a people who face daunting dilemmas from both sides of the border that divides their homeland and separates the country of Indonesia from Papua New Guinea. In Indonesia the Yonggom sympathize with pro-independence rebels. In the mid-1980s government retaliation pushed 6,000 of them into Papua New Guinea as refugees. In Papua New Guinea, however, the Yonggom are confronted by a different threat, the massive pollution of their lands by the Ok Tedi gold and copper mining facility.

This context multiplies and intensifies the usual problems of ethnographic self-positioning—the ways that an anthropologist claims to speak for other people and the moral and political entanglements that result. Kirsch's solution to *his* dilemma is to ask how Yonggom people's own social analyses take shape and gain force. He approaches this by describing how various myths, rituals, and exchange practices are critical reflections on what he calls "unrequited reciprocity"—an anxiety about the consequences of failing to engage in reciprocal social relations. In one myth, for example, an aunt who neglects her nieces and nephews sees them turn into bats and fly away, thus losing their humanity. Furthermore, in sorcery inquests, Kirsch notes that "speakers identify those circumstances in which the sorcery victim and his or her kin may have failed to fulfill exchange obligations, making them vulnerable to sorcery."

Haunted by the potential death of reciprocity in their society, the Yonggom analyze their unfolding social situation along these lines. In one of the most compelling parts of his book Kirsch shows how local analyses of sorcery have shaped Yonggom encounters with the Ok Tedi mining corporation. He argues that legal compensation claims made by the Yonggom against the corporation "follow the logic of sorcery accusations."

Yonggom legal efforts to understand and shape their destiny in their own terms have had some success. In 1996 Yonggom landowners won a settlement of \$500 million from the Ok Tedi mine to compensate for its environmental devastation. More intimately, the Yonggom's efforts have also helped shape Kirsch's career. During their legal campaign he assisted them, and he presents this ethnography as a political testament, arguing that "anthropologists can amplify indigenous forms of political expression, bringing the resources of the discipline and the moral weight of the academy to bear on injustice."

One concern I had, however, is that Kirsch does not always illuminate the interconnections between analysis, interpretation, and experience. For example, he writes of myths that "are regarded as powerful even when their meaning remains unclear." This raises a provocative question—how does one analyze texts whose significance lies in their very suspension of meaning? Kirsch does not always provide a lucid answer. In places, the book needs an analysis of what "analysis" is.

Despite this concern, Kirsch's ethnographic passages sing with the immediacy of deep and vibrant experience. His description of the intensity of his own initiation into a men's cult is thrillingly evocative, with the bullroarer whirring overhead as he is marched through an arch of palm fronds, with "hands pushing me forward, the passageway crowded with strange and tangled bodies." Because of its rich detail and moral clarity, *Reverse Anthropology* is a productive contribution to anthropological understandings of indigenous social analysis, and it deserves a wide readership.