SOCIETY OF OTHERS: Kinship and Mourning in a West Papuan Place.

This is an ethnographically rich, tightly constructed, exceptionally well-argued and creative descriptive analysis of Korowai concepts of social relations based on “otherness.” The Korowai of West Papua live in houses perched some 5m high in the forest, usually some distance from one another. The Korowai “experience society as a field of otherness” and “imagine their social world as consisting of a population of strangers” (38). Given that anthropology has long assumed society to be based on shared commonalities built upon day-to-day, face-to-face interactions among people who live in relatively close proximity to one another in communities, villages and hamlets, this pronouncement comes as a kind of shock. Stasch presents a remarkably detailed analysis of how the Korowai construct their universe of otherness spatially and temporally through concepts of geographical belonging; linguistics; kinship, marriage and childbearing; and the living, the dead, monsters and demons. Topic by topic, chapter by chapter, Stasch builds a compelling picture of Korowai culture and society that is impossible to summarize in this short space.

What is really intellectually and theoretically stimulating is the concept of “other,” and “otherness” and “boundaries of otherness that are at once separative and connective” (73). Boundaries separate—be they boundaries denoting landownership (non-owners), kin (nonkin), living (dead), linguistic dyads—and organize “social experience in otherness-charged terms” (47). Thus, people “experience each other as mutually strange” but this strangeness is also a point of relatedness (63). Social bonds are created (or undone) through action across those boundaries of otherness. Verbs such as disruption, impingement and violation describe social bonds as a consequence of “events of disrupting separateness with closeness, or disrupting close belonging with acts of estrangement” (174). Marriage is a violation of boundaries understood to be a “problem of relating across boundaries of nonbelonging” (195). Death is estrangement creating “margins of separation and strangeness” (210). Thus, kinship and especially marriage are disruptive creations of attachment; “mourning is disruptive undoing [in space and time] of attachment” (212). The ethnographic details of Korowai relations of otherness are richly complex and immensely satisfying. There is much here to think about in terms of an anthropology of place and the negativity associated with Other/ing in theorizing today. The concept of Cartesian dualism is an implacably othering system of thought where boundaries cannot be disrupted to create relations based on difference, and dyads stand like pillars, unbreachable without negative consequences. Unlike the Korowai, who breach dyadic boundaries of otherness despite fear, tension and possible catastrophe, we are immobilized by our otherness.
We have much to learn from the Korowai, whose “otherness-focused culture of social relations is a culture of action” (275, original emphasis). This is an ethnography not to be missed: beautifully written, dense with detail, theoretically innovative. I would highly recommend it to all anthropologists, especially students of Melanesian ethnography, senior undergraduates and graduate students.

The University of British Columbia, Okanagan, Canada

NAOMI M. MCPHERSON