



Society of Others: Kinship and Mourning in a West Papuan Place. Rupert Stasch. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2009. 336 pp.

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Every good ethnography operates on at least two levels: as an account of a particular case, and as a contribution to broader theoretical debates. A truly great ethnography, however, dissolves or reinvents that very distinction. Rupert Stasch's book *Society of Others* undoubtedly belongs to the latter category. The book provides a richly evocative account of sociality among the Korowai of West Papua, and this ethnographic account grounds a far-reaching reconsideration of two keystones of contemporary anthropological thinking: otherness and the relation. Yet, in an elegant twist, this theoretical argument is precisely an invitation to treat otherness and relations . . . ethnographically.

In the introduction, Stasch outlines the genealogies of two major theoretical alternatives in contemporary anthropology: on the one hand, the focus on "social relations of pure identification" (pp. 7ff) with roots in Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft*; on the other hand, the concern with "disjunctive social connection" (p. 13) most prominently associated with recent Melanesian and Amerindian ethnography, which the author connects back to sociological precursors such as Georg Simmel. Although the present book is set squarely within the latter tradition, it also takes it forward in a particularly sophisticated fashion in three main ways.

The first is through the book's particularly keen attention to the content of specific relations of otherness, beyond the general conceptual algebra of self and other, connection and disjunction, and distance and proximity. This involves attending to what Stasch calls the "media" of which such relations are built: the times, places, memories, foods, actions, and words that one finds on opening the anthropological black box, namely the relation.

In this vein, chapter one highlights the coimplication of belonging and otherness, both in Korowai relations to their land itself (through a careful account of patterns of ownership, residence, and exploitation), and in land-focused relations between people, such as travel, hospitality, or enmity. The second chapter turns to language and particularly naming as a medium for relational separation. The discussion weaves in and out of grammar, sociolinguistics, and cosmology to show both the logic and the experiential effect of different forms of linguistic pairing, avoidance, and substitution. The chapter shows the complex coimplication of Korowai personhood, cosmology, and a distinctive Korowai "culture of semiosis," in which words impinge on the properties of things, and the signified are both present and not present in their signifiers (p. 103).

The following three chapters form a core analysis of kinship, focusing respectively on uncles, grandparents, and the general category of "relatives" (ch. 3), on children, temporality, and the contingent making and breaking of attachment through feeding, caring, or conversely, infanticide (ch. 4) and finally, on marriage as disruption and creation of belonging (ch. 5). These three chapters continue to evidence the mutual implication of closeness and distance at the heart of Korowai sociality, through a attention to the often-abstract combinatorial logics of kinship, associated with a thick, detailed, and evocative account of substances, metaphors, practices, and emotions through which these relations are lived, made, and reflected on.

Finally, chapter 7 discusses death and mourning as an extension and culmination of this account of kinship, and simultaneously as the context for an indigenous reflection on the internal multiplicity of individual relations between people. Through death and mourning (and associated practices of renouncing food or requesting indemnity payments from coresidents of the deceased) relations are most starkly revealed—not only to the reader but also to the Korowai themselves—as made up of different strands etched in different media, which are not always in alignment: social copresence, geographic closeness, memory, commensality, or shared time. This discussion, which draws together the thematics of the five

previous chapters, evidences the value and richness of an ethnographic focus on relations themselves.

It is by definition impossible to do justice in such a brief review, to an account whose main achievement is its ability to convey sophisticated theoretical points through the richness and thickness of ethnography. All one can do is point to instances. Thus, for example, the discussion of the distinctive elevated Korowai houses as a physical conjunction of connection and separation (pp. 54–63) is an outstanding set piece of ethnographic analysis. It deftly interweaves, in the space of a few pages, materiality, temporality, food, demons, and political autonomy, in a way that is both analytically insightful and thoroughly evocative: the visually dramatic experience of a visitor's head emerging suddenly over the threshold of a house that stands 15 feet or so off the ground (p. 57) materializes in an incontrovertible way the otherwise abstract notion of relational separation.

Another such instance is the careful progression of the argument in chapter 3, which leads the reader from conjoined distance and closeness in specific kin relations (such as those between grandparents and grandchildren) toward an account of the ambivalent contextual proprieties of describing someone as a "relative." This can index a polite recognition of the relatedness that is forged by interactional copresence even among strangers. Alternatively, it can be a socially pejorative way of highlighting distance, indexing (by contrast to specified kin terms) a "mere" relatedness that verges on not being related at all. Once again, an otherwise abstract point about the coimplication of kinship and strangeness comes to life through a specific and convincing ethnographic account.

The second particularly powerful feature of Stasch's book is its thorough engagement with the Korowai's reflexivity on all of the subjects outlined above. The Korowai are not simply presented here as enacting a particular mode of relating, outlined by the anthropologist, but as ethnographers of their own relationality, actively reflecting on the power and limits of relationship (see, esp., pp. 99–104, 272–275). This point is made in various ways throughout the book, but it stands out with particular force when it allows the author to read his own reflexivity alongside that of the people he worked with. Geographic dispersion, for instance, means that "the society" is only ever partially present to the ethnographer—but this realization in turn echoes "the ways in which separation-based uncertainty and partiality of knowledge are a routine concern of people's lives and an integral feature of social bonds" (p. 42). Elsewhere, Stasch notes that the Korowai use the words *lambil* (relative) to do similar functional work to his own use of "relation,"

“link,” or “belonging” in the book, namely as “reflexive terminology for making and knowing their society” (p. 105).

However, for this reader at least, one of the most thought-provoking features of Stasch’s account takes the form of an absence: the absence of a particular kind of us–them contrast. Some influential contemporary accounts of the contrast between “social relations of pure identification” and “disjunctive social relations,” map this contrast, at least heuristically,¹ onto a distinction between Euroamerican and non-Euroamerican modes of relating. Roughly speaking, in these accounts, “our” problem is relating things that are assumed to be discrete, whereas “their” problem is cutting things that are assumed to be related (see, e.g., Strathern 2011; Viveiros de Castro 2004). Stasch’s account, by contrast, does not explicitly invoke such a metadistinction. Although, as we have seen, the description of disjunctive social relations is located very specifically in the ethnography of Korowai speakers, with comparative links drawn to other locations in Melanesia and beyond, the *gemeinschaft* alternative is not similarly located as a Euroamerican or Western ethnographic reality. The onus of Stasch’s argument is, rather, on demonstrating that people living in “small-scale, kinship-based communities” are no closer to the model of *gemeinschaft* than we are—and that more broadly, such a model of social bonds based on pure identification is unconvincing “as a human reality” (pp. 255, 272).

In other words, the contrast between social relations of pure identification and disjunctive social relations is presented here, not as an alternative between “our” sociality and “theirs,” but as a choice of analytical framework internal to (Euroamerican) social science. This allows the author to draw both on Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism (an ethnographically derived argument about Amerindian sociality) and on the general sociological arguments of Simmel or Schutz (see, esp., pp. 47–48).

On the one hand, this strategy affords a particularly powerful retort to post-modern concerns about “exoticism,” “primitivism,” or cultural essentialism. Stasch neatly identifies the extent to which classic denunciations of “Othering” in anthropology misrecognized not only the extent to which intersubjectivity always-already requires alterity, but also and more profoundly, the extent to which “others” are already “other to themselves” (following Schutz and Santner pp. 10–11). Making this internal alterity the focus of ethnographic exegesis means that the specificity of Korowai practices is recognized, but this defers a homogeneous totalization, because it includes precisely the ability to be other to oneself (p. 23). The same point (inside-out, as it were) applies to the description of Korowai relations with non-Korowai people and ways of life: for instance, in discussing the Korowai’s ambivalence

toward village settlements initiated by Dutch missionaries in the 1970s, Stasch points out that “village living is the antithesis of Korowai people’s historical system, but being involved with one’s antithesis *was* Korowai people’s system” (p. 68).

This is very closely related to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s elegant point that “others are ‘other’ precisely because they have other ‘others’” (Viveiros de Castro in Bird-David 1999, p. S80), which similarly breaks with postmodern critiques of “Othering.” But the two authors take a different analytical turn at one crucial juncture, which illuminates the subtle, yet profound difference between their approaches: whereas Viveiros de Castro attributes such postmodern concerns to “the guilty supposition that others conceive otherness as we do” (Viveiros de Castro in Bird-David 1999, p. S80), Stasch’s reference to Schutz and Santner ultimately subordinates distinctions between “our” otherness and “theirs” to a broader commonality of self-difference. If the one thing we all share is this ability (expressed differently in each particular case) to be other to ourselves, then the twin pitfalls of anthropological exegesis—respectively undue “Othering” (Fabian 1983) and undue “Saming” (Viveiros de Castro 2003)—could be seen to cancel each other out.

The flip side of this strategy, however, is that it becomes more difficult to characterize the specificity of the Korowai in the terms of a particularly heightened concern with otherness-focused relations. The strength of the book, however, lies precisely in this constant double move: although its detailed ethnography drives home the specificity and alterity of Korowai practices in no uncertain terms, the reference to the general problematic of “relations of otherness” simultaneously elicits in the reader a sense of familiarity, of potential comparison, and not only with Amerindian examples but also with ones closer to home: was, say, the “historical system” of 19th-century Europeans not also premised on an involvement with its antithesis (Said 1979)? Is the English term *relative* not also one whose ambivalence can contextually index closeness or distance (cf. Edwards and Strathern 2000)? And so forth.

In sum, the beauty and the danger of Simmel’s dictum about the coimplication of separation and connection is that, if one stares at it for too long, it has a dizzying effect: boundaries connect, relations separate, kin are strangers, enmity lays the ground for relationships, birth evokes death, and death cements as much as it undoes relations. In sum, every difference is also a relation, every relation implies difference—not just “among the Korowai,” but in a sense, everywhere. At this point, the inattentive reader might wonder why the author still needs to demonstrate in a series of specific instances, what almost sounds like a sociological

syllogism. But our inattentive reader would be putting the cart before the horse. The book is not, I think, attempting to derive a general philosophical conclusion from specific ethnography. Rather, the generality of the theoretical concerns is precisely what makes space for their ethnographic specification.

Thus, by highlighting the mutual implication of two already huge concepts (otherness and the relation), Stasch opens up space for a specific ethnographic account of the texture, feeling and materiality of Korowai sociality. One might say that “relations of otherness” become an instance of what Bruno Latour (2005:30) calls “infralanguage”: a concept that does not curtail or replace description but, rather, gets out of the way and opens up a space for the ethnography of particular instances—and informants’ own reflexive work—to proceed. This is a theoretical despecification that requires otherness and the relation to be respecified ethnographically, in all their vibrant materiality and internal multiplicity.² The important insight that there are fundamental differences in people’s very definition of a relation (p. 266), is far from lost. But it becomes something to be demonstrated ethnographically in each particular case.

Although I hope in this review to have done justice to Rupert Stasch’s work on something at least approaching its own terms, there is always some mismatch between the concerns that animate the writing of a book and those that create enthusiasm in the reader. For me, at least, the book brings to mind a question that the author of the work himself does not pose in these terms, but that others have been posing in recent years: where does anthropology go after it has extended “the relation” to the point at which it includes even its opposite—after the relation, in other words, has reached the limits of its analytical power to specify (Humphrey 2008; Venkatesan 2012; see also www.detachmentslaboratory.org)? Stasch’s book suggests one particularly powerful answer: toward an ethnography of relations themselves.

NOTES

1. Some proponents of such metadistinctions explicitly mark them out as primarily a heuristic anthropological device, not be taken literally as a description of contrastive bounded “cultures” or “ontologies”—a “tactical quintessentialism” (Viveiros de Castro 2011) or a “binary license” (Strathern 2011).
2. This explains, for instance, the seeming paradox that, in response to the perceived homogenizing nature of the notion of the “other” (which can mean everything and, thus, nothing), Stasch proposes “a more expanded definition of *other*” (p. 15).

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