

‘A Death in the Rainforest’ Review: To Hear a Dying Tongue

The first words uttered by a Gapun child, we learn, are not typically ‘mama’ and ‘papa’ but some variation on the phrase ‘I’m sick of it, I’m leaving.’

By *Wade Davis*

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As a young anthropologist, in 1985, Don Kulick traveled to the most remote reaches of Papua New Guinea to study how a language dies. Motivating his quest was a haunting consensus then emerging among linguists that fully half of the world’s 7,000 languages are teetering on the brink of extinction. As he made his way across the vast mangrove lagoon at the mouth of the Sepik River, wading through malarial swamps to reach a narrow slit in the jungle that would be his home for many months, he was acutely aware that every fortnight, somewhere in the world, some elder carries into the grave the last syllables of an ancient tongue, and another language is lost. His destination was the village of Gapun, home to just 130 people, 90 of whom were fluent in Tayap, one of 600 extant languages kept alive by fewer than 100 speakers.

Papua New Guinea, a nation the size of California with a population of 8 million, has more than a thousand distinct languages—not dialects, but actual languages, 350 of which have never been spoken by more than 500 people. In a mountainous land of dense jungles where neighboring peoples share common myths and religious beliefs, agricultural practices and hunting technologies, language alone allows for differentiation. Isolation is not a factor; the highest linguistic diversity in PNG is found in areas where people readily get around by river. Language permits people to self-identify as distinct cultural entities. Thus the study of language, as Mr. Kulick discovers, provides the ideal conduit to culture.

A DEATH IN THE RAINFOREST

By Don Kulick

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Altogether, Mr. Kulick would spend three years in the village, returning time and again over nearly 30 years, his departures rivaled only by his arrivals for pure drama, intrigue, danger and wonder. The result is perhaps the finest and most profound account of ethnographic fieldwork and discovery that has ever entered the

anthropological literature. To his immense credit, Mr. Kulick refuses to embrace the postmodern conceit that anthropology is part of the colonial agenda, yet another way of subjugating a people by recording their knowledge, and that the very presence of the Western scholar in the field is an exercise in power, a tool of oppression. Such thinking regrettably provoked the “wave of recriminations,” as Mr. Kulick writes, “that paralyzed a whole generation of my younger colleagues and drove them to stay at home and study only people like themselves,” or even worse, ruminate incessantly over the practice and fate of their discipline. The entire purpose of anthropology, as Ruth Benedict wrote, is to make the world safe for human differences. At a time when the voice of anthropology has never been more essential, it has been rendered largely mute by ideological contortions, self-flagellation and identity politics that academic institutions today indulge to their shame.

As an ethnographic fieldworker, Mr. Kulick has no qualms about asking the Gapun people about their lives or expressing his interests in their origin myths and folk tales, ritual practices abandoned in the time of their grandparents, or the syntactic intricacies of Tayap, a language they are in the process of abandoning. His account of learning an unwritten language from scratch leaves the reader dazzled by the wizardry of linguistic scholarship. Tayap turns out to be an elaborate synthetic language combining different morphemes, words fused to words to

create new words of extravagant complexity. Just finding someone in the village willing to sit with him for hours, tolerating his ignorance, sharing the names for objects that any child would know, was a challenge. The language itself proved exceedingly difficult; after 30 years of study Mr. Kulick could not fully understand Tayap yet still failed to speak it beyond a few stock phrases. That he even tried to do so speaks of a reserve of personal discipline, commitment and courage that would be tested every day in the field. Writing with verve and simple elegance, without a hint of bravado, he describes the ritual humiliations of fieldwork, including a regular diet of grubs and palm starch the consistency of “gummy mucous.” (The first words uttered by a Gapun child, we learn, are not “mama” and “papa” but some variation on the phrase “I’m sick of it, I’m leaving.”)

Within the village Mr. Kulick becomes a master at overstaying his welcome, hanging about until no longer a presence, at which point the real life of the people unfolds. His goal is to learn not why a language dies but *how* it dies. Language death is not a natural event. What, he asks, transpires in a community that causes parents to stop teaching their mother tongue? His task as an ethnographer is to see what lies beneath the surface of things, even as the people all around him are equally engaged in taking his measure. Within days, he is designated “Saraki,” the name of a founding ancestor, and told that he has returned from death to open a road for them allowing their black skin to crack open like a crab’s shell that they might step out soft, white and rich, with immediate access to all the money and goods that white people have. A ceaseless cycle of giving is the glue that ultimately binds him to the community. He provides rice and betel. They ask for a submarine, even while telling of tunnels running beneath graveyards allowing local people in death (and even in life) to travel to Rome and become white.

Within days of arriving in Gapun, Mr. Kulick is swept into a millenarian fantasy of reciprocity and exchange that will color his every experience in the village. When Europeans first penetrated New Guinea, they were as exotic as extraterrestrials, with clothes that locals took to be skin, out of which they drew precious objects, magical and rare. Who were these creatures? Why have they come? What can they give us? They sought explanations in myth, later finding correlations with biblical accounts, creating portraits of a land where all goods originate, where people go in death, where everything is white and heaven and earth come together in a celestial realm of power, glory and wealth. Out of this came the “cargo cults,” the notion that if believers perform certain actions in the proper way the heavens will open and a world of abundance will unfold. Bizarre as they appear, cargo cults reflect, as Mr. Kulick writes, an undeniable truth, a “rock-hard realization that white people have too much stuff. And because they have so much, they have an obligation to share.”

Before the colonial era, all socially valued knowledge was encoded in the traditional language, Tayap. Tok Pisin, a pidgin spoken throughout PNG, arrived in Gapun in 1916. Associated with the power of the white colonial regime, and all things bountiful and desirable, it was seen as the language of modernity, even as traditional life was shattered by the arrival of Christian missionaries, the violence of war, the growth of a plantation economy that lured men to the coast where Tok Pisin was the language of choice. Parents over time unconsciously favored Tok Pisin, even as they criticized their children for not speaking their native tongue, and then mocked them when they tried to do so. In 1985, when Mr. Kulick arrives in Gapun, no child under 10 speaks Tayap. By 1991, teenagers switch from Tok Pisin to Tayap just for laughs. “A language dies,” Mr. Kulick concludes, “by contracting, by having its layers of complexity peeled off like an onion skin, getting smaller and smaller until there is finally nothing left.” Long before Tayap began to wane, he writes, “the twentieth century crushed the life out of everything that people in Gapun”—and most everywhere else in PNG—“had ever believed or accomplished.” Languages, like cultures, are not destined to fade away, as if by natural law. In every instance they are driven out of existence by identifiable forces. This is, in fact, an optimistic observation, for if human beings are indeed the agents of cultural destruction, then surely we can be the facilitators of cultural survival. It is upon this positive note that Mr. Kulick concludes his astonishing account.

—*Mr. Davis is a professor of anthropology at the University of British Columbia.*