

**Warwick Anderson, *The Collectors of Lost Souls: Turning Kuru Scientists into Whitemen*  
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Warwick Anderson has written an admirably readable book that weaves together bio-prospecting, cannibalism, colonialism, and globalization and remarkably manages to put the complexity of human relationships at the very center of the story.

*The Collectors of Lost Souls* recounts the transformation of *kuru* from a psychosomatic disorder caused by sorcery and studied by anthropologists into a degenerative neurological disease caused by infectious prions and studied by microbiologists and biochemists. This transformation largely comes into focus through the community of medical field workers, scientists, and Fore informants who ultimately formed a network of *kuru* research that extended from the New Guinea highlands to the National Institute of Health in Bethesda, MD, USA. The coproduction of *kuru* and this global research network is fleshed out through the very personal intrigues and foibles of the main protagonists of the historical drama: district medical officers, anthropologists, and adventurist biomedical researchers, of whom Carleton Gajdusek takes center stage.

Anderson's description of the colonial encounter as a transformative experience renders this book a unique contribution to the colonial studies literature. Anderson attends to the changes the ostensible colonizers are undergoing as much as the changes experienced by the colonized. For example, he describes the transformation of "Carliti," the lonely young man writing letters to his mother, into "Kaoten," the individualist adventurer scientist braving the rugged highlands of New Guinea. As Anderson characterizes it:

The passage from Carliti to Kaoten, through the avatars of Carl and Carleton, was almost complete. Similar transformations of names and identities and

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places were occurring rapidly around him, drawing him into the future.... Soon sorcery poison would be refigured and condensed into putative genes, toxins, and infectious agents. Nothing was stable anymore; everything was shifting form and density, altering its meaning (58).

Anderson wants us to understand that the transformations that occurred through the colonial encounter occurred less as a uniform imposition of the state over existing ways of life than through the idiosyncratic activities of adventurers and thrill seekers. Again, to use Anderson's own words:

Like the beginnings of most colonial ventures, this research project was improvised and chancy, prompted more by enthusiasm and persistence of the man on the ground than by any administrative design.... Medical science and colonialism came together at Okapa, but their arrival in the field was messy and contentious, and it was by no means structured or hegemonic (88).

Most interesting is the way that Anderson attempts to capture technoscientific practice from the perspective of the local participants as an elaborate and negotiated system of exchange that included autopsied bodies, blood and brain specimens, money, and storytelling, as well as moral negotiations of scientists who voraciously collected specimens and samples but also understood that they needed to maintain relations with local inhabitants in order to continue to carry out their studies. As Anderson characterizes it, the tropical research field is a trading and contact zone, "a place where persons previously separated geographically and historically come together and elaborate a means of communicating" (112). Through these mixes and creoles, that trading zone was likewise a "confusion of relations in which Gajdusek became entangled—a confusion allowing no simple assertion of dominance and control" (112–113). The characters in this story are ethnographic in their sensibilities—understanding the need for rapport and good social relations to collect their data—as much as they are bio-pirates who carry away body parts from the family members of their informants in vials and tubes in a way that could not be more dehumanizing. It is the contradictions of practices that are at once humanizing and dehumanizing that Anderson has worked hard to capture here. In doing so, he has masterfully succeeded in complicating simplistic notions about power and domination in the colonial technoscientific enterprise.

In the science studies literature, histories of colonial medicine tend to be dark and brooding as the reader is led through the obsessive, degrading, and often singularly mechanistic technoscientific practices of the state. Anderson has avoided taking such a morally heavy-handed tone by rigorously situating his account within the view points of the actors involved. We know what these actors know at any one time, and we are given the feeling of medical detective work as the characters work to unravel the mysteries of an exotic disease and unfamiliar environment. This perspective-taking approach ultimately tempers what could easily have been a quite morbid and tragic tale. Whatever else history might make of these encounters between Australian and American scientists and New Guinean highlanders, the sense Anderson leaves us with is that even while they were earnestly endeavoring to improve their own careers in medical science, these scientists became attached to the Fore themselves—as individuals with names, families, and even faces. It is not new for histories of colonialism to address the role of a

missionary ethos in motivating foreign adventurism, of course, but it is rare for a scholar to assess the role of this ethos in structuring the very experience of the colonial encounter. In that sense, Anderson's narrative constantly leads us back to the basic humanity of the colonial encounter—as an experience that is at once alienating and revelatory about one's identity and sense of self. In many respects, the theme of Fore cannibalism, the ritual practice of eating the body of one's loved one upon death as a sign of care and respect, is the metaphor that replaces the more mechanistic images that are often used to describe colonial medical practice in science studies. Anderson has replaced trite notions of primal innocence tainted by contact with the "outside" world with a story about the collision of worlds, about the passage of those worlds through one another via elaborate and shifting systems of exchanges, and ultimately about the mutual transformation of those worlds and the individuals within them. Throughout, Anderson presents a picture of thorough social change—not just change of indigenous beliefs and practices but also change of the beliefs and practices of Western scientists as well.

The cost of telling the tale in this deeply personal way is a minimization of the role of the colonial state in the account. After completing the book, I did not better understand the relationship between Australia and New Guinea which put the research scientists on the island in the first place. I would have liked to have known a little more about the censuses or the medical cordons of the district medical officers, for example. What did those practices entail, and why was this the lens through which New Guinea was mapped and known? Anderson describes the social dramas of the research scientists at the mission stations in Okapa and Port Mosby but little about their routine medical or missionary practice on the island. Without that, we do not sense the way in which Fore and other island inhabitants were being enrolled into the other power structures that came with colonial extension and later globalization. What of language training or education, more generally? The missionary work of Catholic and evangelical groups? The building of roads or electrification networks? Or even the transformation of agricultural and other economies on the island? As such, the reader has little understanding of the broader context within which *kuru* was changing from an illness caused by sorcery to an object of Western biomedical science. Of course, there would have been tradeoffs if the story had been told through a more Foucauldian lens, but for those who are not specialists of this part of the world, or who want to compare this account with other tales of colonial medicine, it is a challenge to appreciate the full technopolitical scope of the *kuru* story. A broader context might also have illuminated shifts in Fore gender identity over this time period, something that could have enriched our understanding of how Fore related to *kuru* as well as how they related to Western scientists and to other Fore.

This lack of context about changes in Fore gender identity is highlighted by what turns out to be a tragic and disturbing ending—in which we are led to understand that Gajdusek brought home young boys in order to continue to engage in New Guinean-style ritualized pedastry. It seems that Anderson intended to avoid making the scandalous and titillating part of Gajdusek's life the focus of the entire story of *kuru*. (It occupies less than ten pages of the last chapter of the book.) Still, it is not clear how we are to interpret the statement that:

some libidinal element inspired [Gajdusek's] collecting of 'primitive' boys, as it did his attempted appropriation of Fore body parts. But this does not mean

that he must have had sex with the boys, any more than his constant yearning for specimens implies he really loved the Fore. Then again, both such dénouements are possible (226).

In the end, Gajdusek is cast as a collector of body parts, as much from live young boys as from autopsied *kuru* victims. Yet, without some greater context for understanding the history of New Guinean sexuality, anthropological or otherwise, it is very hard for the reader to know what to make of this part of the story. How is this pederasty tied to the overall primitivization of the Fore; how does it relate to Gajdusek's desire to lose himself in the world of the Fore; and how did Fore beliefs and practices about ritualized pederasty change over time? As it stands, we are shocked by the scientist's seeming desire to merge himself so thoroughly into what he understands to be the Fore life-world, to an extent that he has abandoned his own moral compass; we are horrified by the bastardized hybridity that the collision of those worlds seems to have ultimately created. This effect may have been what Anderson intended. It would have been easier, however, to make sense of this ending if the reader had been supplied with interpretations of shifting New Guinean sexuality throughout the story.

Ultimately, the lessons for science studies in this book far outweigh any of these potential shortcomings. The book is especially valuable to the field for what it demonstrates about the possibility of writing a compelling narrative about postcolonial and postmodern complexity in a way that is both straightforward and engaging. It should be read as a venerable model for how to bring the insights of science studies to a broader audience.