

# Reviews

## Comparison's Chimeras

Sandra Bamford. *Biology Unmoored: Melanesian Reflections on Life and Biotechnology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. 230 pp.

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Is biotechnology turning everyone into Melanesians? The question occurred to me as I finished Sandra Bamford's *Biology Unmoored*, a text that is something of a chimera. The book pairs paradoxes of postmodern parentage and other zeitgeist-capturing reproductive oddities with detailed analysis of the sociocultural concepts of the Kamea people of interior Papua New Guinea. Biotechnological enterprise has both unsettled and reinscribed key premises that underwrite Euro-American ideas, especially those premises that Bamford labels "biological," such as the bodily integrity of persons, the forward temporality of life processes, the discreteness of distinct species, and the boundary between the human and the nonhuman. Bamford suggests that Kamea concepts reverse these grounding presuppositions, hinting that Euro-American ideas, prodded by new technologies, may in a sense "catch up" to Melanesian ones. Bamford has thus contrived an imaginative, interspecies text, one that will appeal to multiple audiences, including those interested in science studies, medicine, kinship, gender, and Melanesia.

Each chapter in the volume opens with a vignette describing Euro-American controversies regarding biotechnology, and then segues into ethnographic analysis of Kamea social life. Chapter 1 concerns the development of genetically modified organisms and popular fears that these might lead to the inadvertent mixture of genetic material from different species. Kamea, in contrast, construct intergenerational continuity through relations between people explicitly mediated by the land and especially by its trees and plants. Human being and human bodies are not constructed in contrast to "nature" but, rather, through relations cultivated with it. Chapter 2 discusses mix-ups in the use of new reproductive technologies that lead to legal aporias, as when a white mother gives birth unexpectedly to black children because of an error in a fertility clinic. Kamea, again in contrast to biological thinking, do not hold that parents share any heritable substance with their children. In a complex discussion of the

social structural implications of this (cultural) fact, Bamford elaborates a key set of terms for understanding Kamea sociality: male lineality mediated by per-during ties through land is complemented by female laterality characterized by cycles of what Bamford calls "containment" and "decontainment." Thus, Chapter 3 examines ways in which boys are detached ("decontained") from their mothers through the ritual practices of male initiation. Analysis of the symbolic identity of boys and mothers and their subsequent separation is framed by discussion of debates about the moral status of the fetus and liberalism's equation of the human person with the individual body.

Chapter 4 takes up cloning and problems of personal integrity and immortality when "copies" of persons may be created, comparing Kamea mortuary practices and the cyclical complementarity of sibling and affinal relations (as mediated by intervening cross-cousin relations). Bamford's final fascinating chapter dissects the rhetoric of "biodiversity" as it affects indigenous peoples through conservation projects and human genome mapping enterprises. Simultaneous efforts to conserve nature and to preserve native cultures reveal ways in which nature has come to be understood as culturally constituted even as cultural difference attains value principally as a sign of genetic (natural) diversity.

The book thus explores fascinating terrain with clarity and originality. Nonetheless, not all of the topics that Bamford touches on receive equal attention. Although Kamea concepts are carefully contextualized in terms of social practice, the putative "biological" paradigm of Euro-American culture is explored almost exclusively through analysis of discourse alone, such as newspaper articles, court decisions, policy statements, and so on. This asymmetry is especially apparent when Bamford criticizes the online statements of Conservation International, an organization working to conserve endangered ecologies, without much attention to their practical and institutional contexts. This sacrifice of contextual symmetry yields a book that is cogent and concise, yet perhaps deliberately incomplete. Its imaginativeness merits further contemplation.

Bamford makes important and significant contributions both to Melanesian ethnography and to studies of kinship. Kamea concepts appear unique: according to Bamford, Kamea intergenerational continuity never assumes shared substance. Recent works that emphasize diverse substances and processes that comprise kin relations therefore appear to Bamford to reproduce aspects of the biological or genealogical paradigm even as they critique it. Moreover, Kamea appear to differ in important respects from their Angan neighbors of the eastern highlands of New Guinea, and Bamford's impressive ethnographic fieldwork makes a crucial contribution to the areal literature.

These strengths are sometimes in tension with the author's attention to headlines in biotechnology. Juxtapositions of, say, sheep cloning and Kamea mortuary rites create a text of chimeric assemblage, especially insofar as the analyses of Euro-American discourse and Melanesian practice occupy discrete portions of the narrative and the reader is left to ponder the implications of their being brought together. One's lasting impression is of technological innovation speeding past the biological conceptual apparatus that Euro-Americans use to understand both themselves and other peoples. Bamford frequently implies that "biological" thinking impoverishes the Western moral imagination.

Melanesian constructs thus provide a comparative foil. Moreover, displacement of Euro-American ideas about biological relatedness enables a more refined portrait of Kamea social process. If Bamford does not simply follow in their path, Marilyn Strathern's footprints nevertheless pitter-pat through these pages. In many ways this book provides an update of Strathern's earlier analyses of kinship and new reproductive technologies. Bamford's comparative strategy seems epistemologically to privilege Melanesian ideas while critiquing the Euro-American ones. Although "biological" thinking is held to be a constitutive component of a Western worldview, such thinking is nevertheless understood as erroneous, especially when new technologies belie its shortcomings. A fuller understanding of the culture of "biology" might require contextualizations that Bamford's asymmetrical juxtapositions foreclose, because her discussion of biological thinking is mostly confined to analysis of discourse, whether popular or expert, without ethnographic description. Still, Bamford's text captivatingly exemplifies anthropology's unique ability to bring together radically different conceptual worlds in ways that illuminate the contours of contemporary cultural difference.

### **Can Anthropology Show the Path to Peace?**

Douglas P. Fry. *Beyond War: The Human Potential for Peace*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. xii + 331 pp.

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Douglas Fry has written a biased book, and all the power to him. For he has chosen to take on the so-often expressed Western cultural bias that human beings are by nature warlike. Beginning with Hobbes's dictum that "the life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," he debates the so-called evidence of "man the warrior" as expressed in the scholarly literature, pointing out the failure of man critically to distinguish between human aggression and warfare, the latter being essentially a societal manifestation. Then turning to the archaeological and ethnographic evidence, he points out that warfare occurs relatively rarely in human societies and that the incidence of warfare is a function of increased social complexity.

Fry then examines in great detail the lifeways of hunting and gathering societies. Here, he is careful to distinguish between "simple or nomadic hunters and gatherers" who are essentially nonwarlike, and the more warlike "complex or sedentary hunters and gatherers" where one finds the presence of food storage (i.e., real property), greater population density, and the beginnings of social heredity and hierarchy. From here he explores how "nonwarring" societies seek peacefully to resolve conflicts through such means as song