Rituals of revolution: are subaltern perspectives silenced in posthumanist decolonial theory?

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Much recent anthropological theory demonstrates a concern to defend indigenous ontologies against allegedly singular and oppressive colonial or modernist settlements. These Western settlements are said to rely upon rigid conceptual separations such as that between nature and culture or humans and non-humans which are held to be at the heart of the malign effects that Western modernity is relentlessly imposing upon non-Western indigenous peoples.

Moves to legally protect the tubuan, a ritual non-human actor held to be of great importance by many Tolai people in Papua New Guinea’s East New Britain Province could easily be read through this framing as an indigenous resistance to a modern Western ontology. Whilst this framing looks very much like the perspective taken by some Tolai at some points, it is not the only perspective that can be advanced. In fact, this framing tends to most often be rejected by those who are most critical of the emerging postcolonial indigenous elite in PNG. In simply advancing a framing that celebrates non-human agency, anthropology risks flattening out the ethnographic richness of the perspectives of the people that we work with and silencing subaltern perspectives in a world of rapidly increasing socio-economic inequality.

Keir Martin is Associate Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo and was formerly a permanent lecturer at the University of Manchester. He conducted fieldwork on post-disaster reconstruction and emerging socio-economic stratification in Papua New Guinea from 2002-2005. His resulting book, The Death of the Big Men and the Rise of the Big Shots, was described in the American Anthropologist as, ‘a fascinating, plainspoken, new ethnography... the start of a new Melanesian sociology’. He is editor of a forthcoming collection on the relationship between anthropology and psychotherapy to appear with Karnac Books in November 2018, and he is a full practitioner member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy.

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