A bird's eye view of the Bird's Head Peninsula

Antropologist Jolle Miedema and linguist Ger Reesink were key participants in the Irian Jaya studies programme ISIR, an interdisciplinary research project that aimed to increase and integrate our knowledge of the Bird's Head Peninsula on the westernmost end of New Guinea. Recently Miedema and Reesink synthesized the results of seven years' work in the book *Many Faces: New Perspectives on the Bird's Head Peninsula of New Guinea*. Time therefore to introduce the book and talk about the complexities of doing interdisciplinary research in a difficult environment.

Flip van Helden

One head, many faces

Synthesizing the social and linguistic knowledge on the bio-geographically and culturally diverse Bird's Head Peninsula is no mean feat. At some 200 by 300 kilometres, the diverse Bird's Head, the role of Islam among its Papuan groups compared to the pre-dominantly Christian Bird's Head, and politico-economic developments emerging from the presence of a number of large resource development projects.

FvH: Why a project on the Bird's Head?

JM: In the beginning of the 1990s a group of people led by Wim Stinkels of the Department of Languages and Culture of Southeast Asia and Oceania at Leiden University developed an Irian Jaya education and development programme. It began in 1991 but ended abruptly in March 1992 when Indonesia terminated all Dutch development aid following a political row with Minister Prins. Our Indonesian colleagues continued with the education component of the project and we decided to develop a proposal to study the languages and cultures of New Guinea. When the proposal turned into a more interdisciplinary programme we decided that we should confine ourselves to a particular area. Earlier, between 1975 and 1981, I worked in the Bird's Head Peninsula for a local church organization, so when I became coordinator of the ISIR programme, I said, well I at least know a bit about the Bird's Head from my earlier work there...

CR: That's right, you knew enough to know that we basically knew nothing!

FvH: How did cooperation evolve after this breakdown in Dutch-Indonesian development relations?

JM: Relations with our Indonesian colleagues were actually very good. We were allowed to do our work even though it would take time to get visas and research permits. Unfortunately we did not manage to involve graduates from the earlier education project. People have families and jobs and cannot easily run off to do research on the Bird's Head. Moreover, doing research in such a remote area was not easy. Some of our people fell ill and a number of us were not allowed into the field for a bout of yellow fever, so that we had to take the potential health risks that we could envisage.

FvH: One cannot help note that for an interdisciplinary project that includes both social and natural scientists, the emphasis on linguistics and anthropology is somewhat overwhelming.

CR: This is true, there is certainly an imbalance, but you have to realise that we started off as a linguistic and anthropological programme. It was expanded to include other disciplines.

JM: Moreover, the impact of the hostage-taking incident in 1996 was variable between the disciplines. Linguists and anthropologists who had already started in 1991 were much less affected than researchers wanting to work on demograpy, public administration, geology, and environmental protection. We started much later and were advised to wait until security had improved. The anthropologists and linguists were generally able to finish their research while others did not have enough time.

FvH: Did the various disciplines discuss each other's proposals?

CR: We certainly did in the beginning. Later it was the steering committee that emphasised the need to integrate the various findings. But how do you integrate the work of a geologist taking soil samples and that of a linguist looking into local use of the noun-phrase?

FvH: You didn't exactly make things easy, by taking disciplines as dormant as geology and linguistics? You could have sought the integration between more related social and natural sciences, for example by studying local resource use?

JM: At the time, donors were into interdisciplinary research, and linking up with the natural sciences was a precondition for funding. We looked at it as a chain of disciplines: linguistics has connections with anthropology, anthropology with ethnobotany. Unfortunatley the chain was broken. We have no results yet on ethnobotany, but hope that these may still be forthcoming. In addition, interdisciplinary work takes extra time and energy. At the senior level there was interest in trying to make it work, but PhD students, for example, are under pressure to produce results in the disciplines they study.

CR: If I were to do it again, I would try to narrow the range of disciplines or themes somewhat.

FvH: Reading the book, I almost forgot that it dealt with a rapidly changing region subject to considerable demographic, social and political turmoil. There is a lot of work done on indigenous groups, but not even a reference to the equally numerous Javanese transmigrants in the area. One third of all trading activities in Irian Jaya takes place in the Sorong region but the analysis of local trading networks focuses on the traditional kain timur system.

JM: I don't agree with you at all. First of all, at the start of the project there were hardly any Javanese transmigrants in the area. Second, many ISIR contributors have looked at the way in which cultural imports are modified and used in the present. Look, for instance, at the work that Jaap Timmer and I did on witchcraft. That did not stop in the 1990s, or at the look at the work of Leontine Visser on the changing notions of adat.

CR: Work on present-day trade relations, public administration or demography was indeed limited to one or two case studies due to a number of reasons already mentioned, but for this book we had no choice but to make do with available material.

JM: In the initial project proposal we wanted to take on board some of the issues you mention. However, once in the field, researchers make practical choices as to where they live and what they work on. There were certainly areas...along the south coast where it would have been logical to look at the influence of transmigrants, but the researchers preferred to work on other themes. The result was the sum of such personal choices and circumstances.

FvH: Is there not an element of ‘salvage anthropology’ in your work, in the same that many of your contributing scientists would like to describe a group of people before their culture changes for good?

CR: For the languages of the Bird’s Head that is certainly the case. These languages are fast disappearing. But I don’t think it is necessarily the nature of anthropology to look back; it largely depends on the questions that the individual anthropologist poses.

JM: It could, however, very well be that a younger generation of anthropologists is more interested in certain themes rather than a specific group of people and their culture. That means that detailed ethnographies receive less emphasis.

FvH: Talking of younger generations, will you be succeeded?

CR: There is little scope for a second phase of the project. Maybe Marian Klamer and her colleagues who are working on the Papuan languages of Aler would be able to further develop work on East Indonesian languages. I am personally interested in combining the results of linguistic and genetic research to connect ancient migration and settlement patterns. There is so much work to do. We have just touched on things...