

Judith Farquhar and D. Carleton Gajdusek, eds., *Kuru: Early Letters and Field Notes from the Collection of D. Carleton Gajdusek*. New York: Raven Press, 1981. Pp. xxviii, 338, maps, illustrations, bibliography, index, appendices. \$40.00.

*Kuru* is an inevitably fatal degenerative nervous disease afflicting the people of a limited region of the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Its spectacular clinical nature has assured considerable attention in the popular press since its "discovery" in the 1950s, with general interest in it revived recently when D. C. Gajdusek was awarded the 1976 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. His work established a place for *kuru* in medical history as the "first chronic disease of man proved to be a slow virus infection" (p. xv) and set the stage for investigations of possible infectious etiologies for other central nervous system diseases. *Kuru* has also become

a standard and unparalleled “case study” in medical anthropology, illustrating the complex interaction of environmental, cultural, and (possibly) genetic factors in the etiology and epidemiology of a disease whose mysteries were solved only after two decades of intensive work involving researchers from many disciplines.

The literature on *kuru* is enormous; however, there is still an unfilled need for a book-length history and overview of the disease. In addition, the fascinating story of its investigation needs to be told. The book under review is not such a work but a compilation of extracts from Gajdusek’s field journals and selections from his correspondence during the first year of *kuru* research, from December 1956 to January 1958. Such a collection, in Gajdusek’s view (pp. xxi-xxii), “allows the reader to trace the diverse origins and meandering paths of ideas, recording something of the personality conflicts and compatibilities and the varied and divergent devotions that led to the discovery and first investigations of *kuru*.”

In addition to contributing to the history of medicine in this way, the records included are intended to “dispel any misconceptions about who did what—as well as answer many questions about how, when, and why the early field and laboratory work was undertaken” (p. xxii). Thus there is a self-serving aspect of publication of this material, but Gajdusek is also concerned to acknowledge the assistance he and Vincent Zigas, his earliest collaborator, received from others and “perhaps to repay some of those old debts by giving credit where credit is due” (p. xxvii). Nevertheless, the reader is likely to gain the impression that at least the early days of *kuru* research were a “one-man show” as Gajdusek shares with us detailed (almost daily) records of what he was doing in the field, sometimes in the face of intense opposition from Australian government officials and researchers (pp. 24-55). Complementing the sometimes dry correspondence are extracts from field journals kept by Gajdusek during his extensive patrolling in the Eastern Highlands as he tried to ascertain and document the geographical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries of the disease. Vivid and candid, these extracts convey a good sense of the “high adventure” that characterized this early period (p. xv) and give us valuable and intriguing tidbits of information on the peoples contacted, as do fifty-seven plates, most of which contain very useful visual information on the region and its diverse peoples in 1957.

Apart from these plates and the appendices (which include an important early report on sorcery among the South Fore, written by Charles Julius, government anthropologist at the time), almost all of the material in this book has been published before, albeit in somewhat obscure sources. Most of the correspondence was published in 1975 by the Nation-

al Institutes of Health, and the field journal extracts are from Gajdusek's 1957 *Kuru Epidemiological Patrols*, published in 1963 by the same agency. One must ask, then, what the value is of this particular compilation.

Those who are interested in the story of *kuru* research from a historical point of view will find the book a handy, reasonably compact, and handsomely produced overview, although limited to the first year. Anthropologists and other scholars who are more interested in the peoples of the region will find much of value in the observations scattered throughout the journal extracts, but these whet, rather than satisfy, one's appetite, and do not (nor are they intended to) present an integrated overall picture such as that contained in Shirley Lindenbaum's recent book, *Kuru Sorcery* (reviewed in this journal in 1981, Vol. 4, pp. 193-195). One important function of these tidbits, however, is in directing the reader to the vast resource represented by Gajdusek's field journals which these extracts typify.

Since 1957, Gajdusek has done extensive field research in many parts of the Pacific and has kept detailed journals. Beginning in 1959, these journals have been published by the National Institutes of Health, and most have been reprinted. At least nineteen journals cover field research in New Guinea, fourteen in various island groups of Melanesia, and seven in Micronesia. While the research itself has focused on medical problems, Gajdusek's curiosity and interests are boundless, and the journals (especially the earlier ones such as the one extracted in the volume under review) contain an absolute wealth of invaluable information on the many peoples he has visited, often in the early days of European contact in Papua New Guinea. These journals, candid and diary-like, make fascinating reading as the extracts published here will testify. More important, however, the journals constitute a resource which is, regrettably, almost never tapped or cited by scholars.

Anthropologists in particular often show little inclination to use "non-scholarly" sources for whatever information and insights they may contain. Both are plentiful in Gajdusek's field journals as is also true of the almost uncountable photographs and cinema records which he has produced (largely with the aid of E. Richard Sorenson) and meticulously documented over the years. Gajdusek has been more than generous in making all of this available to researchers, and if the present volume does no more than draw attention to the existence of these unparalleled resources, it will have been worth the effort.

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