an outcome of happenings and relationships. It is these relationships, ancestral (or cosmological) and familial (or social), which, following a broad contextual history of the Balgo region in chapter 1, occupy her general attention in the weighty and revealing second and third chapters of the book.

While the first part of the book is an excellent historical and ethnographic account, it is somewhat standard fare in its descriptions of dreamings and social groups. For me, it is the second half of "A World of Relationships" (chapters 4–6) which really captures the imagination. These chapters concern dreams (or, as Poirier calls them, dream "narratives") and associated stories which frame knowledge of daily events; the sociological and communicative framing of these accounts; and the dynamic negotiability and exchange of ceremonies. It is here that one sees most clearly the nature of Poirier's break with overly prescriptive modelling. Much of what she describes in these chapters is not in general terms novel; while the ethnography is original, the descriptions are highly redolent of other historically minded ethnographic accounts by authors such as Myers, Françoise Dussart, Eric Kolig, and more than a few others from the last few decades of Aboriginal ethnography. But Poirier's account is also unique. Most particularly, her rich and insightful accounts of the character of Kukatja dreams go further than all others published to date and take us deep into the dynamic mindsets which structure Aboriginal cosmologies in the Western Desert and elsewhere in Australia.

This is an excellent ethnography; but it is not a "flash" one. One sees no heavy burden of theory articulating the pages of "A World of Relationships" and Poirier's prose is refreshingly free of heavy-handed academicism. There are no axes to grind; there is no bibliographic "packing"; and there are no loudly shouted allegiances beyond a somewhat informal commitment to a kind of phenomenology and to a classical tradition of ethnographic description and analysis. On all these counts, the book is an outstanding read.

On the other hand, "A World of Relationship" suffers from one particular and common ethnographic fault – it is an ethnography which assumes and privileges difference. For Poirier, the Kukatja are fundamentally "not-us." While "we" have a dualistic approach to "nature" and "culture," the Kukatja do not and are therefore "non-modern" (9f.). While "we" are Cartesian in outlook, the Kukatja are characterised as having an "ontology of dwelling" (10f.); while "we" are individualistic, the Kukatja persons are characterised as "dividual" (13). These contrasts, I think, should be read primarily as rhetorical devices reminding us that Balgo is not London, Paris, New York, or Toronto – anti-ethnocentric warnings symptomatic of an age of postmodern pluralism. I am not so sure they should be read as solid theoretical pronouncements.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that Poirier ends "A World of Relationships" with a brief consideration of the place the Kukatja might have as citizens in "modern" and "multicultural" Australia, and with a sideswipe against the superficiality of "tolerance" in multicultural Australia. Unfortunately, however, there is no serious comparison at this point; only a sense that an alternative way of life is in danger of disappearing before the dualistic, Cartesian, individualistic juggernaut of late modernity. This is the ethnographer's lament. But how could it be otherwise when "we" and "they" appear to dwell in such hermetically sealed and radically asymmetric worlds?

John Morton

Rack, Mary: Ethnic Distinctions, Local Meanings. Negotiating Cultural Identities in China. London: Pluto Press, 2005. 166 pp. ISBN 0-7453-1938-6. Price: £ 16.99

This book by British anthropologist Mary Rack provides an interesting study of local culture in the context of the postreform Chinese state. Rack recounts – in a highly readable language – how a temple of the Celestial Kings in Hunan Province turns into an arena where official state discourses on ethnic identity and historical orthodoxy clash with villagers' religious beliefs. Although of different ethnic ancestry, villagers pray and offer to the same local gods in order to obtain their assistance in coping with the many challenges of living in rural China today. At the same time the representatives of the Chinese state in the guise of the local Minority Affairs Bureau attempt to appropriate the temple by defining it as a relic of ethnic minority culture; thereby denying its role as a place of worship. In spite of the villagers' religious concerns, the Bureau builds a new temple hall, has new statues made of the Celestial Kings and walls in the compound in order to collect entrance fee. Events similar to these are happening all over China today. What makes the conflict described by Rack fascinating is the ensuing reaction by the villagers: believing that, under these conditions, the Celestial Kings will not want to reside at the temple anymore, the villagers construct a new temple in flagrant opposition to the designs of the Minority Affairs Bureau.

Rack's field site is situated in the Xiangxi Tujia and Miao Nationalities Prefecture in West Hunan. The Miao and the Tujia are two of China's fifty-five officially recognised ethnic minorities. These "minority nationalities," as they are called in Chinese, make up almost 10% of the Chinese population; the other 90% is made up by the default ethnic category, the so-called "Han nationality." As Rack rightly points out, these state sanctioned categories are often disconnected from people's own perceptions of ethnic identity. The official label of Miao in China includes several different linguistic groups such as Kho Xiong, Hmou, and Hmong, some of whom are culturally related to the Southeast Asian Hmong. After entering her field site Rack discovers how preconceived ideas of ethnic identity based on the official Chinese scheme of ethnic classification can obscure a clear understanding of local identity and cultural praxis. This is an experience she shares with many other Western anthropologists engaged in so-called "minority studies" in China (this reviewer included). In order to approach the issues of ethnic identity in the local context of West Hunan, Rack rejects the

Han/Miao dichotomy upheld by the representatives of the state and the local elites. Instead she proposes the concept of a "middle ground" and in order to avoid the Han/Miao categories she uses different alternatives, such as incomer/"bendi" (local), highlander/lowlander, highlander/people of Kho Xiong ancestry, Han/people of Kho Xiong ancestry, Chinese speakers/Kho Xiong speakers.

Many anthropologists will agree with the author that the Chinese nationality categories, such as Miao, should not be the primary point of departure for the study of local culture and ethnic identity. I do, however, think Rack is overstating her case when she accuses social sciences in general for being too preoccupied with ethnicity when addressing local culture. While ethnicity is maybe blurring a full understanding of "middle ground" culture, Rack's recurring mentioning of clearly sociocultural categories such as highlanders or Kho Xiong speakers cannot dispel my feeling that ethnicity's role in understanding local culture is perhaps too easily dispensed of. Kho Xiong speakers probably distinguish themselves from their neighbours by more than the language they speak, and speaking a different language than one's neighbours is certainly not something which preoccupies the elites only.

Although left with a feeling that some stones have been left unturned by Rack in the "Han/Miao middle ground" of West Hunan, her book constitutes an engaging contribution to our understanding of local culture in ethnically diverse areas of China. Moreover, her detailed empirical data on religious practice present an exciting and underresearched aspect of state-community relations in postreform China. I can therefore recommend "Ethnic Distinctions, Local Meaning" to both China specialists and social scientist interested in issues of ethnicity more generally.   Koen Wellens

Richards, Paul (ed.): No Peace, No War. An Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflicts. In Memoriam Bernhard Helander. Athens: Ohio University Press; Oxford: James Currey, 2005. 214 pp. ISBN 978-0-8214-1576-4; ISBN 978-0-85255-935-2. Price: £ 16.95

This work is an excellent study of current conflicts, wars, and intractably violent contexts. The authors are clearly theoretically informed and deeply ethnographically engaged with the regions and peoples they study; and this is the point of the volume – that too many otherwise intelligent and well-intentioned depictions of "war" fail to realize the highly uncertain nature of that notion and how it is a culturally produced social relationship amongst warriors, civilians, refugees, NGOs, the media, and by proxy the global audience for "news." To call certain armed conflicts war necessarily invokes, not just certain styles of military behavior, but also a whole series of images, ideas, and subjective feelings that are quite often deeply embedded in the process of growing up in a given cultural context and the intractable, or indefatigable nature of many armed insurgencies, rebellions, national struggles, and ethnic antipathies thus has to be understood against an appropriate historical and ethnographic backdrop if the reasons and causes of such conflicts are to be understood.

For a long time anthropology struggled to understand human armed conflict as an aspect of biology, or ecology, or even social structural contradictions. In such debates the idea that finding the origins of warfare or identifying its determining cause would somehow unlock its meaning. While such approaches may have produced forms of explanation that were "meaningful" for some anthropologists the history of armed conflict since at least WW II, the era of small wars and insurgencies, heralded not only the emergence of the "terrorist" but also the phenomena of chronic conflict in the post-colony. These more recent events cannot be adequately interpreted as resulting from resource conflicts, or the absence of liberal democratic political and social structures, as many try to do and so this forceful demonstration of what engaged ethnographic study can achieve is most welcome.

The volume is edited by Paul Richards and the authors display a convincing coherence in establishing some key points about the ethnography of armed conflict in particular the way in which ethnographic engagement with fighters and their victims belies the kinds of analysis proffered by security experts and international relations scholars. The key point here is to challenge the idea that armed conflict in postcolonial states and also more diffuse terrorists somehow responsible for global political instability rather than resulting form the inherently destabilizing affects of the global order imposed by the West. The paradox indicated in the book's title – "No Peace, No War" – thus alludes to the way in which such sociocultural conditions are established through political process and the cultural interpretation of the meanings of conflict and killing. When a conflict is lethal or politically significant enough to be called "war" or when it is sufficiently ignored or represented as mere insurgency or terrorism is, therefore, at the heart of the insight this volume offers.

The individual chapters cover a lot of ground and all evince this kind of analysis. Sten Hagberg's treatment of the interethnic "peace" in Burkina Faso focuses on the role of local government and how local bureaucracy dampens down civil unrest in the country. This chapter then nicely fits with Sverker Finnström's discussion of armed conflict in Northern Uganda which stresses the mutual interpretation and counter-interpretation of conflict by the protagonists and how such emergent meanings come to give shape and form to the course of war and the idea of peace. Caspar Fithen's and Paul Richards's study of the conflict in Sierra Leone likewise emphasizes the collapse of existing means of conflict-solving mechanism rooted in more traditional social relationships. This situation also leads to the creation of new kinds of war culture and associated forms of social organization.

So, too, in the former Yugoslavia Ivana Maček relates the pattern of violence to the collapse of certain kinds of social structures, a point reiterated by Mats Utas who discusses the attempts at reintegration of Liberia's "child-soldiers." Björn Lindgren complements these insights in his chapter on Zimbabwe by pointing out that there is