
SOCIAL THOUGHT & COMMENTARY SPECIAL SECTION:
Anthropology and the Opacity of Other Minds

Knowing Minds is a Matter of Authority: Political Dimensions of Opacity Statements in Korowai Moral Psychology

Rupert Stasch
Reed College

In this essay, I want to set forth briefly the hypothesis that New Guinea people's statements about the opacity of other minds are often statements not only about knowledge and meaning but also about authority. Melanesian sensitivity about not presuming to know others' minds is intertwined with sensitivity about not presuming to impinge on each other's self-determination. Reflexive models of the possibilities and problems of knowing other minds are also models of the political terms of people's coexistence.

I make this suggestion based on patterns of talk about minds among Korowai people of the southern lowlands of West Papua. There are about four thousand speakers of Korowai dialects, who live dispersed on clan-owned lands across five hundred square miles of forest, as well as increasingly in centralized villages along the region's major waterways (van Enk and de Vries 1997; Stasch In press). It is a feature of the generally egalitarian, fractious tenor of Korowai collective life that people overtly represent otherness of thoughts as a matter of politics, and politics as a matter of otherness of thoughts. The central item of talk illustrating this point is the com-

monly-heard verbal formula *yepa yexulmelun*, literally “Herself her thoughts,” or “Himself his thoughts,” an expression closely parallel to canonical statements about opacity of other minds reported from many other New Guinea communities. The word I translate as “thoughts” here, *xulmelun*, could also be glossed as “thinking,” “mind,” “intention,” “will,” “plans,” “consciousness,” “awareness,” “feelings,” or “reasoning.” The word *xulmelun* also means “guts” or “viscera.” Korowai like many other people identify cognitive and emotional deliberation with spaces of bodily interiority, specifically the internal cavity of a person’s torso, and the organs there.¹ The statement “Herself her thoughts” or “Himself his thoughts” juxtaposes two noun phrases, which add up to the proposition: “She herself has her own guts,” “She thinks for herself,” or “She decides for herself.”

One kind of situation in which I repeatedly heard this statement and variants on it during my fieldwork with Korowai was in reply to my own questions about why some third person had performed a certain action, or about whether a third person would perform a certain action in the future. When I asked interviewees to discuss the motives or future actions of other people in these kinds of ways, my interlocutors routinely replied by disavowing knowledge of other people’s thoughts. The assertion “She has her own thoughts” is an argument against an opposite idea people took to be implied in my questions, an idea of mind-reading. In fact, one common variant of the statement that people sometimes put to me means literally “It’s not as though our minds are unitary” (*xulmelun lelipfano*).

Plenty of times, though, interviewees did answer my questions about reasons for others’ actions with statements of those people’s motives, and they answered questions about others’ future actions with outright predictions of what those others would do. It seems also that disavowal of telepathy is topic-specific. Korowai persons are highly influenced in their actions by “shame, embarrassment” (*xatax*) or other feelings of being disparaged by other people. I was often struck by the contrast between people’s prominent disavowals of the ability to know others’ thoughts on most subjects, and their readiness to attribute to others thoughts of ill-regard *toward my interlocutors themselves*, without any expressive evidence of such thoughts. For example, interviewees would tell me about being “mocked” (*xulmo-*) by other people, but then when I questioned them closely it would frequently turn out that this mockery was a mental state attributed to the other persons but not concretely signaled by those persons. It might be fine to claim quasi-telepathic knowledge of someone else’s thoughts about one’s own

worth, even when it is not fine to presume to know or impinge on that person's own plans and hopes for him- or herself.

In this and many other respects, claims to knowledge of other people's motives and intentions are a focus of sensitivity and instability, rather than absolute embargo. It is symptomatic of the fact that Korowai *do* understand it to be possible and reasonable to represent other people's thoughts in their own speech that they routinely use the main verb for framing reported speech, *di-* "say," to represent a quotation of thought, not audible speech. This verb is also used to frame quotations of non-verbal gestures. There is a kind of unity to speaking, thinking, and acting, in this frame, and other people can "quote" all of them.

While my clumsiness elicited the formula "She has her own thoughts" with particular frequency, the statement also occurs routinely in talk between Korowai themselves.² For example, I once overheard a young man ask an older relative if certain invitees to their feast were going to perform a dance at the feast event, rather than merely attending. The older man replied that "They have their own thoughts," and then elaborated that the visitors would perform if they wanted to, and they would not if they did not want to. Usually, though, conversationalists on all sides share the anti-telepathic understanding, and do not put interlocutors in a position of being answerable to overly strong calls to speculate about others' motives or future actions.

The main point I want to observe about the formula "He has his own mind" and variations of it is that in many of their contexts of utterance, these formulas are not only anti-telepathy but also pro-autonomy. Making these statements, speakers affirm a principle that people's actions are determined by their thoughts, not something outside their thoughts. The anti-telepathy statements are assertions of the reality and consequentiality of other people's thinking. This is a clear part of people's meaning when they use the formula "Herself her own mind" to forswear ability to predict what someone else will do, such as perform at a feast, travel to some place on a given day, give a relative some sago, work on a new house, or carry out some other common but contingent life activity. What the other person is going to do will be determined by the person's processes of thought leading to an action, not by conditions that are already known.

In reading into anti-telepathy statements a presupposed model that people's actions are caused by their thought, I am influenced by ways that Korowai assertions of the opacity of other people's minds appear closely

interconnected with a wider fabric of forms of Korowai talk about thoughts. One notable pattern in this talk is that the category “thought” is often directly identified with an idea of freedom, personal initiative, and the underdetermination of actors’ behavior by surrounding social conditions. One typical context in which Korowai see “thoughts” as something free rather than determined is in interpreting unexpected and unsolicited gifts. Here people often use the expression “himself his thoughts” or “herself her thoughts” as a *positive* interpretation of why something happened, rather than a negative assertion of limits to what a speaker can know or predict. The explanation for a gift is the giver’s own initiative in thinking of giving the object to the recipient. So too “thought” often occurs as an all-purpose explanation of why agents do what they do, when their actions differ from well-known conventions, when the actions follow a pattern but there is not some obvious agent-external reason for the pattern, or when there are multiple conventional possibilities of action but a person chooses one course among them. A married man living at his wife’s place rather than his own land might be doing so due to “his own thoughts,” people who made up some rumor or item of cultural lore without basis can be accused of having done so “by their own thoughts,” feast work helpers choose to sleep in the feast building or build a separate structure of their own depending on “their own thoughts,” and so on. Sometimes speakers explain nonhuman environmental patterns by playfully or seriously attributing these patterns to the “thought” of personified environmental objects. For example, one speaker suggested to me that the sun’s straight, orderly path through the sky might be due to the celestial body having its own thoughts. In wishing to make sense of assertions of other people’s mental opacity, we are squarely into a bigger problem of an overall reflexive ideology of what actors are.

One indication of the anti-telepathy formula’s links to a much wider understanding of action is that these statements closely inform people’s stances toward a type of representation that is paradigmatic of the very condition of being an actor in a social world, namely mythological narratives (*waxatum*). Very often when I interrupted someone’s narration of a myth in order to ask why a character was doing something, the answer would be “He has his own thoughts” or “She has her own thoughts.” Often I would be told to “wait”: the myth character’s “thoughts” amount to a plan that the character knows will unfold, however odd the sequiturs of the elaborate narrated plot might be to me or other listeners. It is listeners’ place to await the revelation of protagonists’ intended logic. I also

overheard narrators and listeners assert the opacity and autonomy of myth protagonists' thought in reply to interruptions from audience members other than myself. The notion that protagonists are engaged in projects of elaborate planning of how events will unfold is a basic, close-to-the-surface feature of this genre of talk. Myth narration is a form of speaking in which there is a particularly strong emphasis on the break between the social world that is narrated and the social world in which narration takes place, and narrators' disavowal of responsibility for the motives of the myth characters fits in this broader pattern. At the same time, the strong understanding that the central myth characters, who prevail in the end, are *thinkers* resonates well with Korowai understanding of their own social lives. One culturally-valued Korowai understanding of what organizes human action is a model of persons forming specific goals and acting deliberately to bring them about.

Often speakers appeal to the distinctness of persons' thoughts specifically to explain or justify social conflict. Here statements about people having their "own thinking" are overtly not about difficulties of *knowing* the consciousness of others, but refer instead to plainly apparent disparities of will. For example, an advocate of aggregation in a centralized village disparaged residents of one village lane for their limited participation in village affairs by telling me "their thoughts are other" (*yexenep xulmelun yani*). Another man appealed to a thought idiom in narrating his own unresponsiveness to his elders' suggestions that he invest his substantial cash earnings from tourism work in buying bridewealth valuables to support his own eventual marriage. He reported to me, "I said, '[people have their] own respective thoughts.'" This was his way of describing himself as unmoved by the relatives' wishes.

People's talk about thought does not stop at commenting on specific persons and their conduct. "Thinking" also figures prominently in imaginings of the overall polity. For example, people often describe their polity by lamenting that the population is heterogeneous in its thoughts rather than unified. "We Korowai, our thoughts are like smoke," one man said. Explaining this common image, Korowai focus on smoke's billowing diffuseness more than its opacity. The thoughts of different people go in all different directions, and in their totality these billowing thoughts are impossible for any one person to grasp or shepherd.³

What people are talking about when they say the population's thoughts are heterogeneous can be appreciated from one friend's response to my

attempt to query whether Korowai think of themselves as having interior subjective lives markedly separate from acts of expression. I asked, "Do Korowai people think silently, without speaking?" Not missing a beat, he answered, "Very true. People think of shooting somebody, of having sex with someone's wife, or of killing someone's pig." In other words, Korowai stereotypically associate silent contemplation with deception, bad intentions, violation, and awareness that one's desires are at odds with what other people want.

Describing their thoughts as like smoke, what Korowai lament is that different people want different things and plan different actions, such that they readily fall into conflicts over marriages, food resources, deaths, and any number of other aspects of people's presence to each other. Inverting Western social theory's portrayal of urban modernity as a social condition of heightened differentiation of consciousness, Korowai often contrast their own lack of unified consciousness with the obviously undifferentiated consciousness of people who live in towns and cities. Korowai themselves have numerous thoughts, whereas town-dwelling people plainly are unified in their thoughts. How else could they be living on top of each other in such numbers, and yet act with such thorough coordination, doing what their social others want them to do rather than just fighting physically from morning to night?

Like denials of the ability to know someone else's intentions, these laments about the fractious polity do not accurately summarize the total sweep of Korowai understandings of mind, so much as they indicate where major cultural sensitivities lie. The patterns of talk about "thought" I have been outlining need to be constantly located in the broader dynamics of Korowai political culture. One way of characterizing the broad lines of this overall field of Korowai social relations is to say that people's conduct of these relations revolves around a major unresolved contradiction between valuing transparent expression and enactment of social harmony, and valuing self-determination. A major form in which Korowai live out this contradiction is in ambivalent practices of space. On the one hand, people reside far apart on separate clan-owned lands, and they do so explicitly in the name of freedom from each other's surveillance, desires, and claims to property. On the other hand, people travel fairly constantly across ownership boundaries to visit one another, participate in collective projects, and share each other's company. Korowai also live out the unresolved contradiction between values of

cooperation and self-determination by widely praising visible, audible transparency of action, but then experiencing enormous vulnerability to furtive thoughts and furtive actions contrary to visible appearances. The stereotype that actors go about in their private thoughts silently desiring to violate other people's well-being is typical here. So too, statements denying telepathic access to others' thoughts are intertextual with further levels of Korowai experience of social relations as opaque. These other levels include socially-involved people's physical separateness from each other most of the time, and the possibility that persons who appear amicable in face-to-face copresence are upholding interactional values of cooperative unity, but that these people are not all that caring or optimistic about a relation in their silent thoughts and offstage actions.

In conceptualizing how Korowai assertions of the opacity of other minds are also statements about the terms of people's political coexistence, I find useful philosopher Richard Moran's 2001 book *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Moran 2001). Moran's central question is whether there is anything special about how a person may know his or her own mind, by comparison to how people know the minds of others. Moran accepts much post-Cartesian thought to the effect that acting subjects' knowledge of themselves is opaque, fallible, and partial, from which it would seem to follow that first person knowledge is nothing special. Yet Moran argues there *are* asymmetries between first-person and third-person knowledge. He does so by rejecting a "perceptual" model of self-knowledge as an inward glance. On this commonly-held view, self-knowledge is itself a privileged form of telepathy: a self has insider-access to observing his or her consciousness. Moran finds the asymmetry between self-knowledge and other-knowledge to lie on an altogether different axis than that of accuracy and evidence. Self-knowledge's difference is a difference of deliberative authority. In having self-knowledge, one does not represent an independent object. Rather one's representation affects and becomes part of that object. A person might not know best his or her own thought, but he or she is the person whose *business* it is to *avow* one thought or another. Other people can be deeply concerned with what somebody else avows. They can *attribute* certain avowals to another person, but they cannot directly avow something on the other person's behalf. A person speaks his or her mind not purely from an epistemic position, and perhaps not from a special epistemic position. Rather, a person speaks his or her mind from a position of authority.

What I appreciate about this model is that it helps us grasp that when Korowai talk about thought, they are not using “thought” as a funny word for politics instead of just talking about politics directly. Rather, in this understanding, for a person to “think” or to talk about “thought” is already a political condition. It is already a matter of claiming authority to know or determine one’s own actions and one’s reasons for them—or claiming authority to impinge on others’ relation of knowledge and authority vis-à-vis their own actions and reasoning. A distinctive culture of thought is also a distinctive culture of politics. Even if we only take Moran’s account as one folk model among others, there is an affinity between his folk model and Korowai ones. The difference between self-knowledge and other-knowledge is foundationally epistemic *and political*.

The question quickly arises what Moran means by terms like “avow” or “deliberative,” and whether he merely reproduces the possessive individualism and intentionalism of speech act theory at a more pernicious level. A great deal of his book is actually concerned with forms of self-alienation and ambiguity of consciousness endemic to the structure of self-knowledge his model describes (see also Shoemaker 2003 and Moran 2003 for direct comments on the speech act theory comparison). But rather than ending this brief essay by saying more about Moran, I want to end by indicating schematically some patterns of *Korowai* portrayal of first-person knowledge as alien and ambiguous, to complement the account I have already given of Korowai talk about *other* people’s thought.

I have cited evidence that Korowai interpret actions as effects and signs of thoughts. But this does not mean that “thoughts” are the unmoved mover at the bottom of things. In discourse on thought as a first-person condition, there is a notable pattern of emphasis on *self*-opacity, along the lines of Montaigne’s (1965:244) assertion that “there is as much difference between us and ourselves as between us and others.” One of Korowai people’s most common day-to-day statements about their thoughts is that they are of “two minds” about possible courses of action (or literally their “guts are two”): single persons’ internal lives, not just the lives of the social population, are characterized by plural thinking. Another notable pattern is that “thought” tends to stand out at all to people, as something they are engaged with, when they are in a condition of social and emotional hardship: people say “I am with thoughts” (*xulmelunmanxa*) or “my thoughts are numerous” as a way of describing a state of grief, anger, hope, or other intense preoccupation with an unresolved state of social

affairs. Korowai are also prominently concerned with various conditions of radical alienation from one's own thoughts, such as being a victim of love-magic, losing consciousness, or acquiring a witchcraft pathology that turns one's thinking upside down. If people "have their own thoughts," this does not mean that the first-person experience of thought is predominantly a matter of transparent, contemplative self-possession. Korowai understand themselves as the persons with the authority to know, sort out, and act on their "thoughts," but these thoughts are often portrayed as states of self-alienation of one kind or another, or as springing from alien circumstances or alterity-marked objects.

A related pattern of self-distance in Korowai first-person talk about thought is people's overt reflexivity about the temporality of thinking. For example, entering into complex sequences of possible demand and payment around deaths or marriages, or learning about possible marital matches, people often say explicitly that they do not know what their future thinking will be, in much the same terms that speakers disavow access to the thoughts of another person. The overall point is loosely akin to Bourdieu's (1990:98–111) well-known argument that tempo, delay, and uncertainty are the content and value-source in exchange acts, not mere incidentals to those acts. The art of "thinking" for Korowai, whatever else it is, often consists centrally of cagey, open-ended reflexivity about time as the terrain across which one will develop new, currently unpredictable certainties or dispense with old ones.

Finally, another major thread of Korowai discourses on reasoning lies in the ways that people frequently expect "thought" to be socially actionable and transactable. For example, in situations such as bereavement, persons burdened with thoughts explicitly tell others that it is only by receiving gifts or payments from those others that their thoughts will disappear, or become "clear." Often, too, Korowai *would like* to know what other people are thinking, and they take steps to find out through speech. Conversely, wary in advance what others will infer or speculate about their own intentions, people take great pains to report their intentions aloud and head off particular inferences about their thoughts that others might form.

Themes of self-opacity, the temporality of thinking, and the social actionability of thoughts are some main lines of Korowai talk about reasoning that would have to be traced in detail if I were to follow up on this essay's basic suggestion: namely, that we can get to people's culturally-distinctive understandings of political coexistence through their understandings of their

access to minds, both their own minds and the minds of others. Here I only hope to have developed this point far enough with reference to Korowai materials to suggest that it deserves further exploration in work on talk about other minds elsewhere in Melanesia and beyond.

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ENDNOTES

¹More specifically, *xulmelun* “viscera” is a *dvandva* compound or “pairing compound” (Rumsey 2002), composed of *xul* “intestine” and *melun* “gall bladder, bile.” In many Korowai uses, it is clear that *xulmelun* synecdochically designates the viscera at large, not intestines and gall bladder alone. The “viscera” meaning is semantically active (rather than frozen) when people use *xulmelun* to mean “thought”: speakers use other synonymous words for viscera to speak of “thought” interchangeably with the main term (e.g. *xulüm* “viscera, intestines-and-liver,” and *fimelun* “viscera, guts-and-gall”).

²One opacity-skeptic, Laurence Goldman, argues that reports of anti-telepathy statements among Mendi, Gahuku-Gama, Orokaiva, Melpa, Kuma, Maring, Iatmul, and Dani people of New Guinea are artifacts of the conversational situation of ethnographers asking people about subjects they don’t want to talk about in the ways the ethnographers want them to (Goldman 1993:281ff). Goldman’s suspicion is based partly on anthropologists’ own reports that they heard the anti-telepathy statements most frequently in response to their own fieldwork inquiries about others’ motives, as is true of my own experience. But when a large sample of consultants consistently use a certain verbal formula in response to a culturally-obtuse ethnographer, it is unlikely that the form of this formula is determined mainly by the exogenous interactional style of the ethnographer. The consistency of the Korowai formula as people used it in conversation with me is evidence that the formula is a compelling cliché in the verbal repertoires of people I was speaking with.

³Another usage of the “thought” category I encountered that converges with the category “consciousness” in Western social theory occurs in people’s accounts of the human population’s relation of separateness with a parallel population of powerful, occult “invisible people” (*xananop*) also thought to live on the land. Korowai mostly describe this standoffish relation in terms of prescribed perceptual and spatial segregation, but the relation is also sometimes described by statements like “[our and their] thoughts are not unitary, but respectively different” (*xulmelun lelipda, xaifosaifo*).

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