
REVIEWS

Michael French Smith, *Hard Times on Kairiru Island: Poverty, Development, and Morality in a Papua New Guinea Village*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994. Pp. 278, map, illus., glossary, bibliography, index. US\$39 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

Reviewed by David Lipset, University of Minnesota

THIS BOOK ANALYZES ideological ruptures that are forborne by the people of Kragur village, who live on an island located just offshore of Wewak, the provincial capital of the East Sepik Province. With eloquence and an austere simplicity that belies the complexity of the context he successfully describes, Smith examines the contrapuntal cultural environment in which Kragur men and women think through and construct notions of community, work, and exchange. His accomplishment, in my view, is the most telling account of local-level change that has yet been written about any society in the Sepik region. And not since Ian Hogbin's classic 1930s ethnography of neighboring Wogeo has a Schouten Island culture benefited from such a deft hand.

One could say, summarizing Smith's argument, that the Kragur are Durkheimians: they believe that collective order--in which they invest magico-religious agency--must constrain profane individualism. Success in work depends on the inhibition of conflict and the comprehensive participation of the community together with its attendant congeries of ghosts and spirits. Grievances, illness, sorcery, and the like are understood to interfere with or reduce material prosperity. The Kragur view themselves as upholding "the Good Way"; they are generous and hospitable people who seek to help one another, work hard for each other, and are devoted Catholics. The contra-

diction between "the Good Way" and the demands of petty capitalism, with its emphasis on accumulation of resources, could hardly be more stark; and villagers continually engage in an ambivalent debate about it.

Politically isolated and economically marginalized, the Kragur see themselves as living in poverty. They long for progress and play an active role in creating change. But progress, as they construe it, casts doubt upon "the Good Way." They garden taro, process sago, hunt a little, and fish on a seasonal basis. The productivity or success of these enterprises is facilitated by hereditary magicians of each patriclan in the village and by petitions to the ghosts of kin. Crop failure, they believe, is the result of antisocial behavior, for example, infighting among their leaders.

Catholicism, which the Kragur adopted seventy-five years ago, is a strong and visible force in the community. But its doctrines and cosmogony have been given a local flavor appropriated to accord with indigenous notions of magical agency and mythic spirits. The Virgin's celibacy, for example, fits with the sex tabus to which magicians should adhere to preserve the efficacy of their spells. Her gender accords with indigenous associations of fertility and material prosperity to the feminine. If anything, Smith concludes, the adoption of Catholicism has increased the presumed connection between moral relations and prosperity in the thinking of the Kragur.

In a superbly realized extended case study, Kragur men are shown responding to and constructing a syncretic series of conflicts to explain the nonappearance of an annual run of fish offshore of their village. But after months of debate in which all of the purported grievances so nominated are resolved through various remedies still fail to produce the fish, Kragur women, skeptical and irritated, begin to complain. The men ought to return to work and resign themselves to the possibility that they may not discover the specific cause of the disastrous fishing season, accept that it must have arisen from a secret, unresolved conflict of one sort or another.

Given their piety and ethic of hospitality, Kragur people view themselves as possessing a special virtue. Surrounded by and embedded in white, Western values to which moral standard they compare themselves, they also see themselves as failures: whites, after all, don't practice sorcery, whites don't favor kin, whites don't fight over women. Smith's arrival presented the Kragur with another opportunity to argue about the moral value of "the Good Way." How should Smith be treated? How should his house be built? Should foodstuffs be given freely to him or sold? Their dialogue is rendered vivid and poignant. According to "the Good Way" and the Catholic model of exchange, both of which stress generalized reciprocity and devalue the material world, services and food should be given freely. But the values of individualism and the world of commodities in town are overwhelming and

propose that money be charged. The Kragur puzzle over the claims of these contradictory logics and contrasting moral standards without resolution. Other examples of changing notions of work, time, and prestige bum through this monograph giving voice to and elucidating the perplexities in terms of which the people live the prosaic drama that they create and that is created for them on the periphery of capitalism.

This book could be profitably included with Taussig's *Devil and Commodity Fetishism* and Ong's *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline* in middle-level undergraduate courses on change. It could be included in regional courses on Pacific peoples and cultures. Such is Smith's singular achievement, it could also be used in graduate seminars on culture, history and agency, economic development, and the like.