

Mary Taylor Huber, *The Bishops' Progress: A Historical Ethnography of Catholic Missionary Experience on the Sepik Frontier*. Smithsonian Series on Ethnographic Inquiry. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988. Pp. xii, 264, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. US\$29.95 cloth.

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In Papua New Guinea, no European presence has been more continuous or, in many areas, of longer duration than that of missionaries. It is doubtful whether any anthropologist has not benefited directly from this presence in terms of logistical support, and many are indebted to missionaries for the latter's linguistic and ethnographic studies. Yet, as Huber points out, anthropologists seldom publicly express sympathetic views of missionaries, more often revealing "skepticism about the hopes and aspirations on which mission work is founded and about the very nature of the mission project itself" (p. 5). Apart from the occasional

citation of published works by missionaries, anthropologists have largely limited their interest to the relationships they may have with individuals while in the field.

Huber is surely correct in arguing that scholarly studies of missions (and sometimes of individual missionaries) can have considerable “extrinsic value” (pp. 210-212), enhancing our understanding of regional histories and the roles played by missionaries in both historical and contemporary events. In the past two decades, a spate of books by anthropologists and historians (e.g., Boutilier et al. 1978; Langmore 1989; Laracy 1976; Wetherell 1977; Whiteman 1983) has removed any doubts of the riches to be gained from detailed analysis of the often-sizable published and archival records of particular missions.

In this examination of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) in the “Sepik region” (but especially the north coast), Huber has chosen a geographical area and mission previously neglected (although anthropologists are well aware of the SVD’s journal, *Anthropos*, and numerous ethnographic studies) as most recent studies have focused on Papua and the islands. Apart from offering another demonstration of the “extrinsic value” of such studies, she hopes to convince us of the “intrinsic value” of missions as subjects of research by addressing such questions as “how people encounter the exotic, how they tolerate ambiguity in the different regions of their lives, and how they manage the contradictions that arise from living and working in an unfamiliar world” (p. 213). Thus she is less concerned here with the people who were missionized than with the SVD missionaries themselves, and especially the three leaders from 1896 to the 1970s of what became the Sepik Diocese. The “progress” at issue is not that of success as measured by numbers of conversions or baptisms, but the SVD’s unintended historical movement “towards the constitution of a distinctive regional church” (p. 199).

Huber’s descriptive and analytic focus is on “aspects of mission practice that have emerged in response to the locale, and on ‘prosaic’ images . . . in which missionaries have reconciled locally effective practice with ecclesiastical ideals” (p. 2), viewing such reconciliations as inescapable given the “missionary’s dilemma . . . that responding effectively to local conditions often means compromising the project’s ideals” (p. 21). Throughout the eighty-year history of the SVD in the area, some “local conditions” have been more or less constant, such as the enervating climate, scattered populations with a domestic mode of production, egalitarian ideologies and political fragmentation, and staggering linguistic and cultural diversity. But other conditions with which the mission had to contend were related to more transient events

and circumstances, or what Huber calls "frontiers," defined as "historically specific situations in which the mission's efficacy has been placed in question" (p. 144), with compromising responses crystallizing in distinctive "images" of the mission, personified by its respective leaders.

Thus, Fr. Eberhard Limbrock (leader, but not a bishop, from 1896 to 1913) faced an "empty frontier" deriving from the region's economic poverty and underdevelopment. Forced to create and maintain sources of finance and supply, Limbrock's activities gave rise to a "plantation image" for the mission, which became "the most active economic agent in the region" (p. 48). The SVD had been founded in 1875 as a mission society with a rigid hierarchical organization (emanating from the Vatican), and its plans for (then German) New Guinea presumed permanent establishment with a conventional division of labor: priests as administrators and supervisors, brothers as servants, and sisters doing "women's work" (p. 59). But the development of plantations, transportation networks, and other infrastructure--necessarily a first priority--soon "grew too large to be contained within the Society's division of spiritual and material labor between priests and brothers" (p. 56). Limbrock himself eventually appreciated the fact that the "spiritual and material aims of pioneer work were proving contradictory rather than complementary" (p. 71), and for other colonists in the region the "occupational code" was becoming "distorted." As World War I approached, the very nationality of the missionaries became a source of tension as Australians grew anxious about the "excessive German influence on the natives" (p. 46). Limbrock finally resigned in 1913 to live out his life as a regular priest elsewhere in New Guinea.

Following the war, the infrastructure established by Limbrock did not in itself resolve all of the mission's problems. The Vatican's ideal of centralization had not been attained through scattered outstations among culturally diverse, small-scale, and politically fragmented native populations. The next leader, Fr. Joseph Loerks, who took over in 1928 and became the Sepik's first bishop in 1931, was to provide the "unifying principle" (p. 92) on this "rustic frontier." But while Loerks, plying the mission's ship Gabriel up and down the coast, may have responded with a "ship image" for the mission, he "eschewed conventional expressions of hierarchy that would set him apart" (p. 106), and called himself "the servant of the servants of God" (p. 104), thereby inverting the hierarchy desired by the Vatican. By the mid-1930s, the SVD priests, still largely isolated in the interior, manifested great individual differences in evangelical strategies, and these were probably not unrelated to a wave of "cargo cults," perceived by some Australians as "cases of mis-

fired missionization" (p. 129). With another war now impending, again the Germans found themselves faced with a "general climate of suspicion" (p. 130), and soon suffered more tangible assaults, being interned in Australia if not imprisoned or executed by the Japanese (as was the case with Loerks).

The north coast after World War II had changed irreversibly for the SVD missionaries, who were allowed to return in 1946. The Australian administration was stronger than ever before, ending the mission's former hegemony; losses in personnel and stations had considerably weakened the mission in any case; and now a "cultural frontier" loomed, with native leaders more sophisticated than previously and more determined to deal with a European presence. The "new frontier" faced by Fr. Leo Arkfeld, bishop of the Sepik from 1948 to the late 1970s, was "a 'cultural gap' that appeared to limit the people's capacity to participate fully in the church and in the modern world" (p. 138). A new image arose, of "technical ministries," focused on aviation with Arkfeld (a former British pilot) becoming known as "the flying bishop." Now the old problem of isolation and the lack of a visible central authority could be ameliorated as mission stations and airstrips became synonymous, and the postwar economic boom of Wewak--fostered by a growing Australian commitment to "native welfare" and local development--meant that the mission no longer had to be economically self-sufficient. Changes back home in views of the mission's role also occurred and under Arkfeld mission stations became "minicenters for local services and economic development" (p. 157).

From the mid-1960s, with Vatican II encouraging "dialogue with other religions and cultures" (p. 169) and the Australian government providing an impetus toward rapid political change, the Sepik has represented an "ecclesiastical frontier" (p. 168). The continuing insistence on an established hierarchy of dioceses and bishops has proven difficult to implement and the challenge has been whether "localization" or "indigenization" of the church would prevail. Recent changes, including the use of pidgin in the Mass and "the introduction of indigenous elements into church ceremonies" (p. 185) have only served to raise anew fundamental questions about the mission's purposes and how they can be achieved under local conditions. Of course, this has been the issue since 1896 when the SVD first arrived on the north coast, according to Huber's argument.

The book is well-, if densely-, written and its mainly chronological ordering makes the key events fairly easy to follow. Yet Huber's organizing framework--a counterpoint of "frontiers" and "images"--some-

times seems forced, and the initial tripartite division corresponding to the three SVD leaders' terms quickly dissolves into a more complex reality. "Frontiers" proliferate as the book proceeds--"empty," "rustic," "cultural," "postwar," "economic," "ecclesiastical"--with usages of the term alternating (without special notice) between Huber's special meaning (see above) and more conventional ones, such as when she refers (p. 25) to the Sepik region as a "colonial frontier" in the sense that few Europeans settled there in the late nineteenth century and that it continued to serve as little more than a source of labor until after World War II. Nor do these frontiers really correspond neatly with the historical periods or leaders presented as if they were benchmarks.

As for the compromises called forth by these "frontiers," it is not always clear what was being compromised and how the church's agenda was thereby altered. The "progress" of the book's title, as Huber makes clear, was that "towards the constitution of a distinctive regional church," which was "less a goal of missionary activity than its unanticipated result" (pp. 199-200). What would be helpful is a more explicit statement in the book of what the mission's own goals were and exactly how these were compromised or contradicted by the "local conditions." One gets a clear sense of the continuing problem of maintaining a rigid hierarchy of leadership and division of labor under "frontier" circumstances (however defined). But conventional notions of "progress" also seem applicable in the face of figures provided throughout the book that indicate historical growth (despite disruptions from two world wars) in numbers of personnel, stations, and converts. (Huber reports that by 1966, 70 percent of the population of East Sepik Province was identified as Catholic [p. 266, n. 4], and in 1976, the SVD constituted the largest single subgroup in the Wewak diocese [p. 184].)

Also helpful here would be a fuller description of the "distinctive regional church" that is said to have eventuated. We are promised that the book "is about how, through missionaries' accommodations to frontier conditions, the Catholic Church in the Sepik acquired some of its locally specific forms" (p. xi). But--especially noticeable in a "historical ethnography"--we learn very little about the forms of the church in the Sepik or of the "indigenous elements" said to have been introduced into church ceremonies (p. 185).

Perhaps because she is an anthropologist rather than a historian, Huber is most thought-provoking when she examines some of the real cultural conflicts between indigenous and missionaries' worldviews, as in her extended discussion of "cargo cults" and their relationship to the missionization of the region (pp. 118-130). But there are also unrealized

opportunities for such analysis. "Big-man" models of leadership are interestingly identified as a continuing source of difficulties as the church moves toward localization, given that the development of lay leadership at the village level is a crucial step in the process, and Huber cites the official concern that Papua New Guineans must, but do not yet, understand "precisely the separation of the person from his ministry" (p. 198). Yet, ironically, the whole book is organized in terms of charismatic leaders who, in their personifications of the "images" of the mission, are difficult to separate from their ministries. She has chosen the "bishops" as her focus since, for the missionaries, "their bishop is the guarantor of their project's authenticity, and its most direct link to the authoritative center of the Roman Catholic Church" (p. 20). If they appear to the reader as something like "culture heroes," how were they perceived by villagers?

Huber is well aware of important dimensions not included in this study, acknowledging, for example, that "Catholicism in the Sepik cannot be fully understood without careful attention to the village world" (p. 204). But she rightly stresses that "an understanding of missionary culture and society" is necessary as well (p. 204), and it is this towards which her book makes an important, if inevitably partial, contribution (based, as it is, largely upon a relatively few published sources). With the addition of this region and mission to a growing number of such studies in Papua New Guinea, the major tasks of comparison and generalization remain.

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