

Joel Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

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BECOMING SINNERS is an ethnographically rich and theoretically sophisticated account of competing moral orders in a situation of rapid cultural change. Over the past few decades, the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea have experienced dramatic cultural transformations. Living in a remote area, they lacked development opportunities and were without direct missionary influence. However, in the 1960s they began sending young men to study with Baptist missionaries who lived in nearby communities. By the late 1970s the Urapmin experienced an intense Christian revival focused on sin, ecstatic spiritual experience, and millenarian expectation. But their adopted Christian beliefs did not integrate well with the values that previously underpinned their lives, and today the Urapmin wrestle with the moral problem of how they are to live as good people. Robbins's analysis of the Urapmin's dilemma takes a fresh and intellectually rich approach to the study of cultural change.

His story of the Urapmin's conversion and present moral struggles is engaging and poignant. It begins with an account of a 1991 Christmas season in which the Urapmin were very troubled. As they planned holiday church services and other communal rituals, it became increasingly clear that their community was deeply divided. A multinational mining company's prospecting had resulted in unequal employment opportunities that had caused friction between two village sections. The Urapmin interpreted these conflicts as resulting from their own depravity and sinfulness. Because they believed that the Second Coming was imminent and that only those who were morally ready would be saved, there seemed little chance of avoiding an impending crisis until a local leader devised an ingenious plan. In an extension of a traditional practice, the two feuding sections of the village exchanged equivalent goods to "buy the anger or shame" of the other party. But what

resolved one crisis led to another. In honoring the indigenous system, Urapmin simultaneously failed its devout Christians, creating further moral difficulties.

How did these contrasting cultural models come to coexist in the same society? Indigenous models of exchange relationships were adequate for interpreting the few contacts with Europeans that occurred before the imposition of colonial authority. During the colonial era, the Urapmin successfully fit new circumstances into traditional modes of understanding; i.e., the colonial notion of "law" seemed to equate with the indigenous category of "taboo," and the Urapmin were determined to be "lawful." After a series of development failures and increasing marginalization within the region, many Urapmin, believing that the church would better their lives, converted to an evangelical Christianity. There soon followed a "second-stage" conversion with a Christian revival that included ecstatic experiences, spirit possession, glossolalia, healing, prophetic dreams, and visions. According to Robbins, the dominant narrative of contemporary Urapmin life is the imminent return of Jesus and the "rapture" it will trigger, together with an "overwhelming concern with personal and communal moral self-regulation."

The first part of the book explains how this new Christian culture rapidly assumed centrality in Urapmin life, while the second part explores how the Urapmin retain older cultural notions along with the new. Although Christianity has replaced most traditional Urapmin religious belief and practice, it has not fundamentally changed how people live and relate to one another. Although the Urapmin fully appreciate the individualist nature of Christian personal salvation, at the same time they view their community-oriented daily activities (including their church) in traditional, social relational terms. Robbins delves into Christian and persisting Urapmin notions of space, time, morality, and sociality to show how traditional moral thinking and social norms make achieving the ideal Christian life impossible, while at the same time Christianity condemns many traditional acts as sinful. Although the Urapmin frequently struggle with this contradiction, the two systems have not formed any stable synthesis.

To account for the Urapmin case in theoretical terms, Robbins employs three models of cultural transformation from Sahlins's work to show how the Urapmin did not assimilate Christianity by adjusting it to older categories of understanding, nor did they transform the relationship among old categories to accommodate their conversion. In short, they adopted Christianity on its own terms, without any attempt at cultural integration. Robbins calls this model "adoption," since it implies accepting something new without prejudging the consequences for what was there before. To this framework, Robbins adds Dumont's concern with the paramount values of a culture and

how they are (re)configured, thereby seamlessly integrating structural and moral approaches to cultural transformations. Robbins's model is a brilliant analysis of how the Urapmin have fashioned a hybrid culture with disparate elements brought together but not reconciled, a situation accounting for their moral dilemmas.

In this rapidly shrinking world, why do Melanesianists persist in studying small, remote, and seemingly insulated peoples like the Urapmin? This ethnography shows why. It offers theoretically interesting ways to think about how cultures are intertwined and how they change, and demonstrates how much can be learned from societies that seem far removed from the centers of modernity but are still affected by them.

In sum, this volume is a major contribution to Melanesian ethnography, religious experience, and culture change. It is one of a very small group of detailed anthropological studies that report on Christianity as a lived religion, and gives insight into how people cope with the effects of globalization, and the moral struggles they experience in its wake. While theoretically sophisticated, the book is clearly written and suitable for students. It is highly recommended.