

Book Review

Schram, Ryan. *Harvests, Feasts and Graves: Postcultural Consciousness in Contemporary Papua New Guinea*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2018, 253 pages.

Giorgio Scalici
University Lisbon

Ryan Schram explores how the life of the Auhelawa, in Papua New Guinea, has been impacted by the arrival of Christianity. The focus is on cultural change, how to model it, and how to review it. The argument is that it is impossible to have a smooth and neat passage from an Indigenous culture to the Christian one, showing us how old and new traditions live together in an uneven and ambiguous cultural reality that moves back and forth between past and present traditions. To do this, contradictions present in Auhelawa's everyday life—funerals, markets and celebrations—are central. There emerges no clear division between the pre-existent Auhelawa's culture and the new Christian traditions, and the two live and mix together. Due to an unstable identity, the Auhelawa share ideas of the future they will have as a community. With the analysis of the funeral rituals, Schram tries, and succeeds, in understanding the selfhood “produced collectively through the ritual of feast and exchange” (74) happening in funerals. But funerals are not the only cultural element taken into consideration. He adds a discussion exploring the local concept of kinship and how it relates to the geography of the place. Funerals and kinship are linked by the fact that the death of an individual provides the occasion for renewing the formal relations between various categories of kin, and the cultural regulations through these and the public performance of the emotions. In the past, gifts were exchanged during the funeral. Nowadays, these gifts are still given, but Auhelawa people may instead engage within the Christianised practice of *masele* (mortuary feasting), stopping the debt-repayment cycle of that gifting. There is no agreement today about mortuary practices: actual mortuary practices may blend or mix newer with older practices in an attempt to find a middle ground, one that honours the values of the past and the present.

The economy related to the funerals recalls an entire conception of moral economy and poverty that plays an important role in Auhelawa culture. The past is perceived as rich and in contraposition to the poor present that forces people to sell the products of their gardens at the market. An action considered immoral because it is related to cash, or the need for money, or one's inability to provide for their own family. Yet, Auhelawa people also strive to elevate the morality of market transactions and money use. For instance, storekeepers extend credit to their customers, without always demanding repayment, effectively sharing wealth beyond the household.

Although Christianity brought uncertainty to the local equilibrium on the one hand, on the other it offers new ways to create unity. The Auhelawa's is no superficial or nominal faith, as communal worship, and therefore the integration of Christian observances, permeate all facets of life. Schram describes many ways in which people consciously manage the tensions between notions of Christian individuality and community and people related to the cultural order created through various sorts of relational interaction and exchange. In his conclusion, Schram presents a succinct argument about the character of those tensions and therefore the incontrovertible fact that the people in this community grapple with, and accommodate, the novel alterity of recent life inflected by Christian ideals and people who are intrinsic to ideologies of kinship, reciprocity, and identity grounded in situ. He notes the ways in which people view these as *mikisi* (mixed), instead of distinct or opposing, and presents this as a "tenuous compromise." Solutions to the present dilemma are achieved through a sort of improvised hybrid form. This hybridity is tolerated, even expected.

Schram's approach to cultural change is novel, both in terms of its theory and methodology. He doesn't argue that introduced institutions, beliefs, and schemas are Indigenised, emphasising continuity. Instead, he shows contemporary Auhelawa life as irreducibly irregular: both modern and traditional. Despite his cogent theoretical arguments about the concept of the 'Postcultural' within the Introduction, the circumstances of the people he represents appeared to me to be better seen as 'intercultural.' *Harvests, Feasts, and Graves* offers an active account of the nation handling a seductive modernity that nevertheless, as Schram puts it, offers a compelling alternative to accounts that emphasise a decisive rupture with the past or that misrecognized change as stasis. His interactional ('ecological') methodology resists teleological assumptions and is neat for investigating 'Postcultural' societies in their moments of becoming.

In the end, the book tries, and often succeeds, in touching, describing and analysing a series of topics (personhood, ontology, and modernity, to name a few), engaging with the term “postcultural” and its use, while offering fascinating insights on Auhelawa’s culture. Of course, this wide interest offers the side to some criticism about the lack of a deeper engagement with some topics. Personally, beyond its offer of valuable discussion points, this work might have had more in-depth ethnographic description, but I am aware of the space limits authors often have and asking more from this egregious work would be unfair. Still, the book is engaging, and will offer food for thought to researchers in many fields and the starting point for new discussions on how cultural identity is formed.

Thanks to its wide interest and great ability in linking different elements of the cultural life of this population from Papua New Guineans, the book will be of interest to those studying the identity of traditional communities impacted by external forces, such as Christianity and capitalism, but not only. Indeed, I would suggest this book to scholars interested in indigenous studies, death studies, personhood, economy and South-East Asian studies.