

DEMIAN , MELISSA . In memory of times to come:ironies of history in southeastern Papua NewGuinea. xii, 228 pp., map, table, figs, illus.,bibliogr. Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books,2021. £99.00 (cloth)

James Chalmers was a well-known Scottish missionary who converted large numbers of peoples along the Papuan coast in the late nineteenth century before meeting a grisly demise at the western edge of Papua. The Suau people who reside on the eastern side of Papua were among the first of his converts. Chalmers and other missionaries figure centrally in Melissa Demian's insightful and engaging ethnography. Earlier on in her book, she observes that people all along the Suau coast celebrate annually the arrival of Chalmers to their lands. At the same time, she notes, if one travelled to Chalmers' home village in Scotland, it is likely no one would know where the Suau coast is. Demian highlights this fact because it speaks volumes to a central theme in her book: namely the unrequited nature of relations the Suau people had with a host of foreigners over the decades.

For over 140 years, Suau people have participated in and embraced the different forms and phases of European expansion that have arrived in their region, whether religious, economic, or political. By the time Demian arrived to conduct her research in the mid-1990s, the myriad connections created by this European expansion had all but disappeared. Her hosts told her that many of their meaningful conventions that they glossed as *kastom* had been lost. This loss, they acknowledged, was of their own making and was the outcome of the hospitality they had shown to 'colonial others'. Demian suggests that new people on the Suau social horizon had to be accommodated by their cosmology. This was accomplished by a form of 'replacement': ancestors were replaced by 'new heroes', including figures such as Chalmers. Suau people initiated these transformations to benefit from the new relations. All of those wide-ranging relations and connections – involving education and infrastructure – that made Suau people mobile and 'modern' have created for them what Demian refers to as 'ironic nostalgia'. They long for that past they well remember – hence the title of her monograph, *In memory of times to come* –but acknowledge that the hospitality shown to foreign outsiders was not reciprocated. Their

previous success in fostering relations and connections hinged on their capacity to find elements of themselves in the many white people who affected their social lives. This was especially true with Chalmers, who, according to a well-known Suau narrative, was recognized as 'kin-like' by one Suau woman and who Chalmers, in turn, recognized as being the ancestress of a prosperous lineage.

Demian's analysis is especially original as it situates Suau mortuary ritual towards the beginning of her argument, whereas other notable studies from Austronesian-speaking peoples have placed this event as the culmination of their inquiry. She organizes her ethnography in this way to highlight the analogy between what occurs in mortuary ritual and how Suau people dealt with foreigners who entered their world. Death is a rupture that needs to be contained. Only at death can the person become complete –'finished' – and thus forgotten so they do not subsequently create troubles for the living. In mortuary ritual, relationships are realigned so that appropriate relations are sustained, which enable Suau people effectively to reproduce their social world.

Demian suggests that 'the rupture of loss is made into the very thing that propels human agency over time' (p. 78). If loss is understood this way, then Suau people's encounters with missionaries, patrol officers, and capitalists, among other outsiders, correspond to another way of discarding old relations so as to refashion the Suau world.

Although Suau people are explicit about what they used to know but have forgotten, such as magic, dances, and totems associated with exogamous matriclans (sulu), two practices that persist are sorcery and witchcraft. These aspects of the 'nonmodern' still pervade Suau social life, and in order to keep these in check evidence of Christian faith and acts of worship must be continually performed. Attempts to reject the past and the troubling practices associated with that past have the effect of constantly reminding Suau people why forgetting is so significant.

This is a well-crafted, rich ethnography. Demian's argument about change and transformation in this context (and most likely in Melanesia more generally) is persuasive. Rupture has always been an intrinsic feature of Suau social life, and the arrival of missionaries and other foreigners did not create rupture. Rather, these outsiders were new sources of connections and capacities and Suau people were well placed to deal with and accommodate the rupture the outsiders instigated. In so doing, Suau people created new relations, new forms of loss, and anew world that ironically is no longer present but which they remember and whose return they desire.

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