

MARTIN, KEIR. *The Death of the Big Men and Rise of the Big Shots: Custom and Conflict in East New Britain*. New York, Berghahn Books 2013. 256 p. ISBN: 978-0-85745-872-8 (hardback); 978-0-85745-873-5 (e-book).

Keir Martin's *The Death of the Big Men and Rise of the Big Shots* is a study of negotiations and conflicts regarding the extent of reciprocity among the Tolai living in Matupit village in East New Britain, Papua New Guinea. It deals with classic topics in Melanesian ethnography—land, *kastom* and morality of exchanges—in a changing situation. On the surface this looks like a study of village life in Melanesia, studies of which there is certainly no shortage. Martin's ethnographic setting is, however, unusual: Matupit village is part of Rabaul, one of the oldest cities of Papua New Guinea. The Matupi and Tolai in general have been long since engaged in commodity production and exchanges, and have been wealthy in comparison to other areas of PNG. Yet in 1994 the life of the Matupi changed dramatically as a volcano eruption levelled Rabaul and Matupit—destroying the homes and life-time investments of many Matupi.

The setting of the book is an 'after-the' theme so common in Melanesian literature. But unlike many of the 'after-the' studies which focus on the rupture created by the commodification of rural life for instance, Martin studies an unusual setting where relatively well-off Papua New Guineans have lost their access to urban life, wage labour and commodities. The Gazelle Peninsula, the area around Rabaul and Matupit, is also exceptional in terms of land: whereas on average only 3% of land in Papua New Guinea has been alienated, for the Gazelle the figure is 40%. This, combined with the rapid population growth in the Gazelle and Matupit, has also created pressure on land. If access to, and holding of, land are central and 'hot' issues throughout Melanesia, they are more so in Matupit. As a part of the restoration, inhabitants of Matupit have been resettled in Sikut, in the rural areas of the Gazelle.

This setting offers interesting and new ethnographic material for the themes in which Martin is interested, namely the negotiations, disputes and conflicts around landholding, the extent of reciprocity and the conflicting ways in which people value each other's actions. Important as the change created by the volcano eruption is, Martin notes how the transformations in the Tolai society have to be seen in relation to longer historical processes and tendencies. Martin focuses on these questions in the chapters which deal with individual, but related, topics such as customary land in Matupit, non-customary land in the resettlement areas, the performance of *kastom* for tourists and conflicts between the well-off urban Tolai and their 'grassroot' kin among others. In all chapters Martin offers the reader fresh analyses of these classic themes. For example, regarding land he shows how the line between customary, communally held land, and individually held land in the resettlement areas is blurry, and how customary claims resurface on individually held land. Martin shows convincingly that underlying many of the conflicts and controversies heightened by the volcano eruption is a 'fundamental tension in the Tolai society' (p. 3), namely the ongoing and many-sided conflicts over the appropriate limits of reciprocity.

In his analysis Martin draws very much on Valentin Volosinov's studies of language use and critiques of ahistorical models to analyze how language is used, for example, to

reaffirm or destabilize different moral orders or how kin groups are subtly redefined in land dispute cases. Here the Melanesian concept *kastom* is of central importance. Martin shows how *kastom* is an unstable and shifting signifier that people use in different contexts for different purposes. Urban and well-off Tolai, for example, seek to narrow the meaning of *kastom* to ceremonial exchanges, in order to delimit their rural kin's claims to their wealth through allusions to the wider reciprocal connotations of *kastom*. Conversely, rural people may note that ceremonial exchanges and rituals performed by well-off relatives are not true *kastom*, even though complying with the formal rules, because the well-off relatives do not take part in wider reciprocal relations.

The conflicts around extent of reciprocity, tensions between families and wider kin-groups, as well as contradictions of the capitalist economy in East New Britain, are well exemplified in the figure of the 'big shot'. It is a derogatory label applied to those Tolai who are claimed to have 'forgotten' their moral obligations to others and have ascended to an 'emergent socio-economic elite' (p. 3, 141). The big shot, even though a highly novel term, is explicitly contrasted to that of the big man, and serves as a point of reflection on the historical changes and especially on the limits of reciprocity. Martin shows how the accusations against big shots are not so much about the moral character of individuals, but about their position in an ever-changing network of social relations. The big shots on the other hand, in order to retain their position, have to delimit the claims of their kin. During my own fieldwork in the rural areas of New Britain, I heard the term big shot being used very much in the same ways as in Matupit and in the urban areas. Martin's lucid analysis of the context in which it appears and the wider social tendencies it exemplifies makes sure that the term assumes a similar position as big man in Melanesianist literature. (As far as I know, Martin is the first to analyze the category of big shot.)

The Death of the Big Men and Rise of the Big Shots is composed of ten chapters that stand alone as complete entities in themselves. Each presents a clear argument related to the main theme of the book by examining a specific case. This makes it possible for the reader to approach the book in a non-linear way and pick out the most relevant sections for his or her interests. As is often the case, this advantage is also the book's greatest disadvantage: many of the chapters have been published previously as articles and readers preferring the structure of a monograph might be disappointed as the book does not present a single narrative. However, all the chapters are well connected by the common themes of debates about the extent of reciprocity, the role of *kastom* and the moral evaluations of exchange. Because of this, the self-standing chapters certainly deserve to be published in a single volume—a decision for which Berghahn should be applauded.

Keir Martin's book is written in an extremely clear and unpretentious language and the reader is never left to wonder what the author is arguing. This does not mean that the arguments or ethnographic cases of the book are simple. On the contrary, Martin's nuanced study of language and exchanges grounded in the solid ethnographic study of the social reality of the inhabitants of Matupit and Sikut shed light on very complex issues. For example, the conflicts between well-off urban people and their rural kin are not played out explicitly, but via allusions and subtle statements and actions. Martin analyzes these subtleties in an elegant fashion and manages to bring to the fore the underlying issues, while doing justice to the complex and shifting nature of the debates and the social life of the Matupi in general.

BOOK REVIEWS

On the surface, Martin's study seems to be an ethnography for specialists of Papua New Guinea and Island Melanesia—and a very good one at that. His use of Volosinov's linguistic analysis and discussions on debates and conflicts regarding exchanges—ultimately the pursuit of different values—should allow for a much wider readership, however. Martin's work is an exemplary case of how to study complex and long term political-economic trends as they unfold in concrete social settings often in less than obvious ways. It should be a model to anyone doing research on similar issues.

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