
Book Review

The Unseen City, Anthropological Perspectives on Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, by Michael Goddard (2005), Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra.

It is one of the most endearing tasks of anthropology to offer explanations for that which is near at hand but still strange and problematic. Michael Goddard performs this service in a very satisfying way in this book about the unseen life of Port Moresby.

Goddard takes a number of topics which are of daily concern to people in urban Papua New Guinea and tries to give a viewpoint or an interpretation which is sufficiently nuanced and well described so as to bring the topic from the remote, hostile cold into the perspective of shared human experience. He does this for the troublesome topics of gangs, money-lending, squatter settlements, alcohol related community problems, village courts and the intentions of big men in politics. In almost every chapter I had the feeling of relief that at last someone was trying to account for all the facts, as they really are on the ground.

It is easy to get carried away with the topic of gangs in Port Moresby. The brutality, the violent sexual humiliation and the robberies wrought on innocent citizens are bad enough. Bruce Harris¹ gave us reports of the concrete realities and disturbing possibilities of gangs in Port Moresby. But this is all the more reason to seek a clear picture of gangs in Papua New Guinea that fits in with the egregious sociality of the community at large. It does not help to impose ideas of gangs taken from Jamaica or California and to presume these are the Moresby realities. Goddard makes it clear that over years he has walked the threatened communities; he has interviewed gang members in gaol; and he has done extensive research into the Village Court system in Port Moresby and elsewhere.

From this experience he would like to typify gangs less by the facts of entrance rituals, climbing hierarchies of ruthless leadership, and the stability of gangs and territories², but rather he suggests 'that the concept of the Melanesian big-man, incorporating the qualities of industry, generosity, grandiloquence and cunning, is central to an understanding of the gang crime phenomenon'. (p. 95) The concept of Big Man has been over-worked in PNG, and Goddard specifies his use of the term 'through a spectrum of social behaviour, including crime,

¹ Bruce Harris. 1988. *The Rise of Rascalism: Action and Reaction in the Evolution of Rascal Gangs*. Discussion Paper No.24. Port Moresby: Institute of Applied Social and Economic Research.

² Cf. Harris p.26.

where the proceeds are consumed or shared (often at the same time, as orgiastic beer drinking is a popular sequel to a successful operation) to enhance prestige, repay previous gift-giving and engender future obligation'. (p. 110) Gang membership is much more derived from 'a problematic encounter between a cash economy and a generalised gift economy ... stubbornly rooted in kin-ordered modes of production'. (p. 118) Goddard admits that his analysis might not be a great help to eliminating crime, but clearly it pays to start with a right understanding of the reality at hand.

In the same way, he combats the view of squatter settlements as hotbeds of crime, refuges of criminals, and containing all the elements needed to breed oncoming generations of criminals who come out to work havoc on the law-abiding citizens of Moresby. In the first place, many of the 'squatters' are second and third generation urbanised city-dwellers, and many of the shantytown areas are designated as residential with various levels of administrative authorisation and utilities. The greater part of these settlements is composed of households with wage earners: labourers, tradesmen, teachers and even Members of Parliament have been shown to live in these settlements. This view is supported in a hollow rhetorical fashion by the Parliamentarians themselves, and I quote a report from Nick Kuman MP: 'Mr Kuman said most of the MP's are living in settlements and vehicle allowance provided to all MP's was well below the minimum for the leaders of this nation'.³ Gang members themselves suggest that a life of crime makes a good case for unemployment, rather than the other way round. (p. 42) It is becoming a truism that gang leaders come from all neighbourhoods of Port Moresby, and that the people who suffer most from criminals are those in the settlements. Goddard succeeds in making all these reversals of conventional wisdom by offering accounts of daily life based on what he knows from firsthand observation.

The writer tackles his other topics in the same way. Money lending in the settlements is a prevailing reality. Goddard gives a wide variety of strategies in which this matter is handled by those concerned and eventually by the Village Courts. The shocking statistic that lending rates go as high as 750% p.a. (and in my calculations as high as 1500% p.a.) is modified by the understanding that these loans can only be taken as short term arrangements. Some of the implicit understandings can barely stand the light of day: if you accumulate too much interest, then you can forget about repaying it. The predominant reality is not that loan sharks defend their interest with bashings, because the lenders are of much the same economic and community status as the loan-givers. The system survives because what you are buying with the loan is a little bit of time until you get your next income. Those who don't repay, find no loans in future. In this sense I found Goddard's excursion into the history and morality of European usury to be a little irrelevant. If someone is badgering you incessantly and ominously for a return of money, then it makes simple sense to take another loan to get rid of the first persecutor. Still, Goddard's account is

³ 'More increases sought for MPs', *The National*, Wednesday May 4, 2005 p.5.

full of reports about this social reality of the settlements, and he delivers good illustrative data from the Village Courts.

The book delivers a full range of friendly, neighbourly insights into the 'unseen city'. His story of the Erima magistrate, Andrew Kadeullo, and the efficiency of an ethical approach (pp. 161-172) is a remarkable PNG story of the complex negotiation involved in a virtuous life. Some points are a little trite, as he tries to make a case for the avoidance of sorcery as the S-word in a settlement concerned about its law-abiding reputation, and the occasional swipe at the wealthy as the real criminals. When he used the unfamiliar expression of youths, 'playing crime' (p. 80), I wondered how this was to be translated into Tok Pisin, and whether the book was meant for PNG readers. A favourite word of Goddard reviews the 'gaze' of the outside Moresby into the settlements (pp. 74, 150, 174). It is true that the outside world ought to gaze longer for a better description of the realities.

The biggest drawback of the book, however, is the dated character of some of the chapters. Two chapters derive from the early 90s. Although Goddard tells us that he has paid continuing visits to Port Moresby, there remains the knowledge that he has removed his gaze from some developing realities. Three of his snapshots get an Epilogue to bring things up to date, but even then we hear of the effect of the new cross-town freeway in Port Moresby (p. 74), and can be impressed with how long ago that was considered a novelty. In presenting a set of such intimate portraits of the Unseen City which provoke a feeling of recognition of little acknowledged features of daily life, it comes as a concern that the writer might not feel that these features have gone on developing without his gaze.

By Patrick F. Gesch
Divine Word University
Email: pgesch@dwu.ac.pg