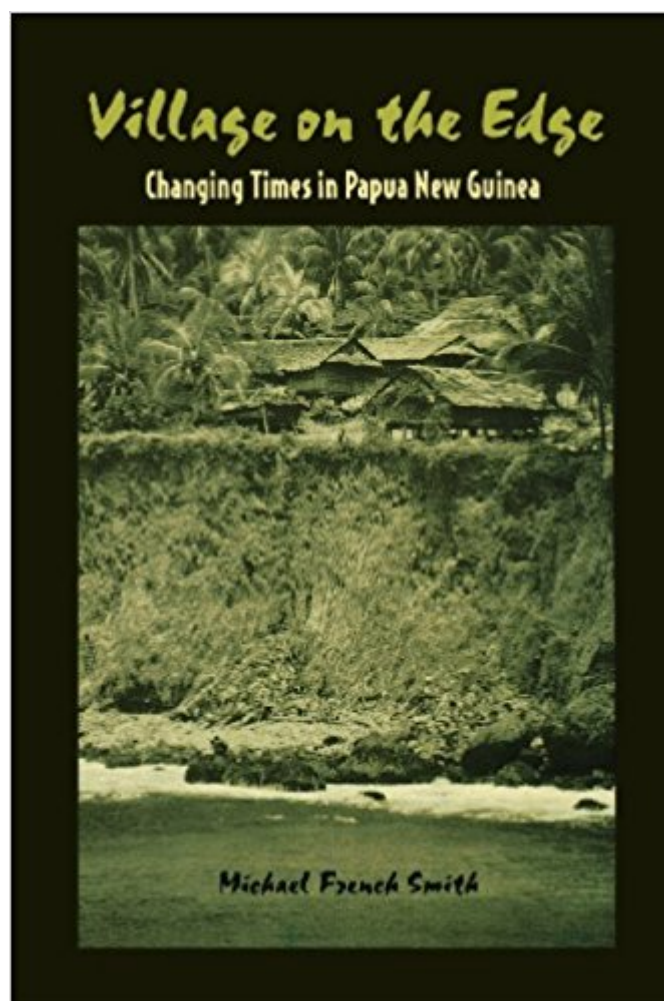


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Village On The Edge: Changing Times In Papua New Guinea



Synopsis

Kragur village lies on the rugged north shore of Kairiru, a steep volcanic island just off the north coast of Papua New Guinea. In 1998 the village looked much as it had some twenty-two years earlier when author Michael French Smith first visited. But he soon found that changing circumstances were shaking things up. *Village on the Edge* weaves together the story of Kragur villagers' struggle to find their own path toward the future with the story of Papua New Guinea's travails in the post-independence era. Smith writes of his own experiences as well, living and working in Papua New Guinea and trying to understand the complexities of an unfamiliar way of life. To tell all these stories, he delves into ghosts, magic, myths, ancestors, bookkeeping, tourism, the World Bank, the Holy Spirits, and the meaning of progress and development. *Village on the Edge* draws on the insights of cultural anthropology but is written for anyone interested in Papua New Guinea.

Book Information

Paperback: 232 pages

Publisher: University of Hawaii Press (June 30, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0824826094

ISBN-13: 978-0824826093

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.5 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.6 out of 5 stars 2 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #2,010,293 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #56 in [Books > History > Australia & Oceania > Papua New Guinea](#) #576 in [Books > History > Australia & Oceania > Oceania](#) #2188 in [Books > History > Asia > Southeast Asia](#)

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toujours une agreable et fecondante distance critique.... Notons enfin que l'auteur n'est pas denue d'humour et que le livre se lit facilement, ce qui n'est pas le moindres des ses merites.-- "L'homme"

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little slow at first, then it speed up in the middle, but slows down in the end. standard ethnography

After almost a century of modern-style research, the world is not exactly short of ethnographies. You can find works on everybody from Indiana town dwellers to Sri Lankan fishermen. Papua New Guinea, as an area where a wide variety of cultures, some with Stone Age technologies, endured well into the 20th century, attracted the attention of anthropologists right from the start. There are a very large number of books on the country, starting with Malinowski's seminal works on the Trobriand Islands during and after WW I. Most, but not all, of them concentrated on investigations of what are often referred to as traditional cultures, if not primitive. Anthropologists, not unlike Western tourists, have often been lured by the exotic parts of the world where cultures extremely different from their own could be found. Bateson, Burridge, Glasse, Heider, Hogbin, Mead, Pospisil, Rappaport, Reay, Schieffelin, and Wagner to name a few, gravitated to Papua New Guinea, drawn perhaps by the chance to study people whose cultures were

untouched by the West.

Untouched is no doubt a relative word. A few others, especially Lawrence and Worsley, delved into the cargo cults, an aspect of Melanesian religion that sprang up in the wake of colonial pressures on traditional beliefs. Modern Papua New Guinea, with its Christianity, bureaucracy, development projects, education, corruption, urban crime, and population explosion, has not received so much attention. Until now. Michael French Smith's

VILLAGE ON THE EDGE is a delightful new ethnography based on work in the same village in the mid-1970s and then in the late 1980s. Based on the idea of observing change, because Kragur village, on Kairiru island, off the north coast of the country, has been changing rapidly for many decades, Smith succeeds brilliantly. To my taste, he strikes just the right note between popular writing and professional investigation. In a clear, jargon-less style, he covers many areas usually found in ethnographies, such as village structure, family structure, the economic and political system, and religious beliefs, but focusses on how all these things have changed. It is a down-to-earth, non-exotic picture of present dilemmas for the Kragur villagers who still, after over twenty years of independence, remain poised between a sharing, cooperative society based on personal ties and the money-based, more individualistic one introduced as a correct model by the West and emulated by educated, town-dwelling locals. Smith puts himself into the picture, admits to his predilections and difficulties. Refreshingly, he does not hide behind some false objectivity, but shows how he accepted certain privileges (and dealt with some problems) that came with being a whiteman. This honesty, coupled with a sense of humor and nice introduction of the flavor of Pidgin English or Tok Pisin, a national language in the country, made the book all the more appealing. Melanesian societies often believed that knowledge of magic or ritual held the key to success in any endeavor, would be the best guarantee of prosperity. Those who had the best knowledge grew the best crops, caught the most fish, or had the most successful trading relationships. But, if many people in the village had that knowledge, then the whole village would be prosperous and successful. Thus, Kragur villagers, like most Melanesians, saw Western education as the way to go if they wanted to raise their standard of living, to obtain money and an easier life. Get Western education, prosper like the Westerners. In a way, Smith points out in the heart of the book, they have been proven right, but the results challenge the whole belief system that underlay their society. For them, if individuals prosper, but the village does not, the new knowledge has failed to produce the desired result. But as time goes by, as more individuals prosper, will not the old ideals completely fade, will not the old cooperative society vanish? The village is on the edge. I urge everyone interested in knowing what Papua New Guinea is like today to read this book. It should be on every reading list dealing with the modern Pacific, modern Melanesia, or dilemmas of development. If you are trying to attract students to the field of anthropology or to draw their attention to the process of writing ethnographies, you can hardly go wrong with VILLAGE ON THE EDGE.

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