“Revival Is Our Church”

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This book is an immediately canonical contribution to the anthropology of cultural change and of Christianity. In the early 1960s, the Urapmin of highland Papua New Guinea were a completely Christian population of 390. All adults were daily preoccupied with their sinfulness and Jesus’ imminent coming. Yet no foreign missionary had ever lived in Urapmin villages, and only in the early 1960s had some first Urapmin youths studied Christian doctrine while living elsewhere. Becoming Sinners examines how this rapid cultural transformation occurred and what it now means for Urapmin to practice and evaluate their lives in Christian terms.

Robbins’s book is unusual for being rigorously culturalist and at the same time dealing centrally with people’s involvement in cultural disparity. The first half of the book, covering 50 years of cultural change preceding the author’s fieldwork, elucidates how people living by one cultural order can genuinely engage with a foreign one, even reshaping their lives in its terms. Throughout Becoming Sinners, Robbins defines his categories clearly and makes those categories mesh artfully with Urapmin ethnography. In dialogue with Sahlin’s, he develops a typology of three modes of cultural change under conditions of intercultural engagement. Assimilation involves people’s fitting new cultural materials into existing configurations of categories and values without changing the basic configurations. In transformation, existing cultural categories are applied to new circumstances with the result of shifting the configuration of categories. In adop- tion, “people take on an entirely new culture on its own terms” (p. 10). We might say that assimilation is new wine in old bottles, transformation is new wine that gives old bottles new shapes, and adoption is new wine in new bottles. While Urapmin have enacted all three kinds of change, their Christianization has overall been a process of adoption. They have effected genuine cultural change in their lives but at each step in ways that made sense to them, guided by the values and methods of their historic cultural order or by government or Christian cultural principles that they have incipiently made their own. In showing that Urapmin have adopted a charismatic variety of Christianity very much on that Christianity’s terms, Becoming Sinners itself brings about cultural change in the anthropology of Melanesia and the anthropology of Christianity, literatures which have not consistently engaged with Christian people as Christians.

Robbins divides the ethnohistory of Urapmin Christianity into three phases. First, erratic exchange-focused involvements with colonial travelers stabilized into Urapmin acceptance from Australian patrol officers of government law as a moral system comparable to prior Urapmin models of taboo. Second, by the early 1960s Urapmin perceived their likely permanent peripherality to economic development, and at the same time some young men began studying at new Baptist missionary schools a day’s travel from Urapmin lands. Over the next 15 years a sizable Urapmin pastorate emerged, teaching and ministering not only among the Urapmin population but also professionally among neighboring Min peoples. Analyzing these events, Robbins emphasizes Urapmin people’s high regional status in precolonial religious affairs and their sensitivity to material exchange as a measure of social worth. It was humiliating let-downs in these arenas that disposed Urapmin to experimentation with Christianity and then to the embrace of ministry as a community occupation. Third, in 1977–78 Urapmin were engaged by an ecstatic revival movement during which many persons were possessed by the Holy Spirit and all unbaptized community members converted. Robbins underscores how reception of revival events as sure evidence of God’s existence was guided by traditional Urapmin religion’s knowledge-centeredness and by an epistemology of the senses valuing sight and disparaging language.

Asked when the revival had ended, one Urapmin man told Robbins that it never had. “Revival is our church,” he said. The second half of Becoming Sinners is a vivid ethnography of what it means for Urapmin to build their ongoing communal lives around constant monitoring and ritual meditation of sinfulness, regular ecstatic experience of the Holy Spirit’s communicative gifts, and millennial expectations of Jesus’ return and judgment. Here too the book traces a main problematic of cultural disparity. Robbins shows that Urapmin’s experience of their own sinfulness is impelled by the mismatch between two moralities that they live by at the same time. Their Christian morality construes all willful action as sinful, while their traditional social morality construes willful action as an integral part of social relations by which social contexts of lawful living are created in the first place. Traditional morality prompts Urapmin to per-
form acts that are sinful when evaluated in Christian terms.

By Robbins’s account, the deepest disparities between Urapmin Christian and traditional moralities lie not in the behaviors that they enjoin or prohibit but in their visions of what Foucault variously calls “forms of subjectivation,” a subject’s “relation to oneself,” or “ethics.” Foucault’s further division of ethics into four components (what part of a person is relevant to moral conduct, ways people are led to recognize their obligations, work a person must do to be moral, and the kind of being one is trying to become) supplies a grid by which Robbins specifies Christianity’s qualitative differences from traditional Urapmin morality (pp. 216–17). The sharpest differences lie in the kind of ethical work or “self-forming activity” one is supposed to perform. Above all, as we learn through close readings of sermons, confessions, and other practices, Urapmin Christianity enjoins subjects to renounce will as entirely negative. It is even a sin of willfulness to take possession of an object that someone else has designated as a gift but not physically handed over (pp. 241–42).

Besides analyzing church services and other rituals by which Urapmin seek to live with their heavy sinfulness and repent for it, Robbins examines millennial expectations through which they situate themselves in a global drama and imagine the possibility of an existence different from their current troubled state of sinfulness. Even in their concern with future salvation, Urapmin struggle to reconcile incompatible moral principles: Christian salvation’s focus on individual conviction versus traditional Urapmin morality’s focus on relationship-making as the measure of people’s actions. Robbins draws on Dumont [and, broadly, Weber] for characterization of Christianity’s individualism and for the notion that cultural orders contrast in the “paramount values” they are organized around.

An ethnography this carefully constructed enables readers to pose many further questions informed by the clarifications that it sets in place. One theme substantially developed in Becoming Sinners that deserves even more exploration is reflexive cultural consciousness, including reflexive choice of one’s own cultural condition. Another such theme is the temporality of culture or the disparity between a cultural order and itself in the form of its pasts and futures. Robbins avows structuralist debts, and he is unapologetic in generalizing about Urapmin cultural logics. Yet his Foucault-informed discussion of morality is only one of many levels at which his culturalist sensibility is deeply attentive to the mediation of cultural order through situations of acting, knowing, choosing, and feeling subjects. Similarly, Becoming Sinners deals seriously with radical cultural discontinuity as itself a cultural project, whether located in a past of conversion or in a future of salvation. This remarkable book makes clear the intense linkages between issues of cultural hybridity, cultural reflexivity, and cultural temporality. It also demonstrates the importance of approaching these interlinked issues with skills for taking culture seriously.

Stories of the Life

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Hustling Is Not Stealing consists of a long introduction written by John Chernoff and 72 short stories told to him by a Burkinabe woman in 1977 and 1979. Under the pseudonym Hawa, the storyteller recounts events from her life as an ashawo (translated in the title as “bar girl”) in Ghana and Togo. Chernoff recorded, transcribed, and arranged the stories, but the words are Hawa’s. In that sense, this book is an autobiography. In another sense, it is more like a collection of Latin American testimonies, a genre in which the first person singular sometimes refers to individual, private experience and sometimes to collective, public experience. And in still a third sense, it may be an example of what Swidler and Watkins (2005) call “hearsay ethnography” or what Chernoff himself calls “ethnography to the second power.” Not fitting neatly into any available genre, Hustling Is Not Stealing is difficult to evaluate. Should we read the narrated events as plainly true, in the way we would expect fieldnotes or historical descriptions to be? By switching around place-names and deleting potentially identifying details, Chernoff resists that kind of literality. Should we instead read the stories as cultural products, strongly generic in their structure, cadence, and narrative style or even recounting events that occurred to many women or to no woman in particular? By emphasizing Hawa’s objectivity and memory for detail, Chernoff partially resists this reading as well. Yet he notes that Hawa “provided a broader vision that encompassed the whole text of her life as an ethnography and as a critique of her society” (p. 95). Perhaps we should read Hawa as a self-trained ethnographer, as well as a particularly eloquent informant. Related to the question of genre is one of authorship. Why is Hawa not the author of this book? Or at least a coauthor? Much of the charm of this unusual book lies in the sensation that we are reading Hawa unmediated by an ethnographer, but of course we are not, as Chernoff rather brutally reminds us by listing himself as sole author. Although nonfiction, Hustling Is Not Stealing relies on a trope of fiction: the narrator is not the author, and we are never sure whose story is being told.

Hustling Is Not Stealing is both a delightful and a frustrating book. Vivid, evocative, and rich in both detail and digressions, Hawa’s stories offer a rare perspective...
on the lives of women in urban West Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. Raised by various relatives when her mother died, Hawa was married at 16 and left her husband soon after. She went to Accra and learned to make a living accompanying men. Some she lived with, some she visited. While the topics in many of her stories—such as transactional sex, witchcraft, and marriage—also appear often in ethnographic work by Westerners, Hawa presents these topics from an intensely proximal viewpoint. Reading her stories feels a little like studying landscape on your hands and knees, learning the habit of each rounded rock and tuft of grass. It is novel, fascinating, dizzying. As readers, we learn her perspective by working closely through dozens of examples; Hawa offers only rare generalizations and the rarest of analytic claims. It took me several hundred pages to give up wanting commentary or analysis, but that is just not what this book is about. You should read this book for the colorful use of language and for the richness of the stories. If you are interested in how people make do when money is short, how love, desire, and transactional sex can coexist, or the kinds of life courses that were possible for unmarried women in West Africa in the decades following independence, you should read this book. If you want rigorous anthropological analysis, you should read something else.

That is not to say that Hustling Is Not Stealing does not offer any analysis or interpretation of Hawa’s stories. To the contrary, Chernoff’s hundred-odd-page introduction discusses not only how he came to know Hawa and to record the stories but also a variety of ways in which we might interpret them. Compared with recent books concerning women in sub-Saharan Africa by Bledsoe (2002), Lindsay (2003), Thomas (2003), and others, Chernoff’s social analysis appears unsophisticated, his theoretical claims somewhat careless. Many readers will skim the introduction to focus on Hawa’s stories. Nonetheless, Chernoff does make several important points. Perhaps the most compelling concerns social change, economic uncertainty, and its consequences (p. 41):

"Making do" under radical uncertainty remains a central component of life in contemporary West Africa (although my own impression is that people do indeed “give a damn” about it). In 1998, Cameroonian women explained this unpredictability as the result of the economic crisis in their country at that time; women in Ouagadougou in 2003 and 2004 described it as part of life in a city whose population was growing faster than its infrastructure. Either way, it is striking that a full generation has grown up with the sense of being in flux, in transit, in between. Somehow our models of means-ends rational action seem out of place here. Hawa proceeds, as do many others, not by choosing a specific course of action and pursuing it at all costs but rather by recognizing promising chances and capitalizing on them—what I have elsewhere called “judicious opportunism.” Hustling Is Not Stealing provides provocative, even captivating, stories of a woman’s life in twentieth-century West Africa, tales of hardship and endurance, of innovation and good humor. It will be widely appreciated by scholars of Africa, of gender, and of autobiography.

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On the Road: Northeast Brazil

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Nicholas Arons’s Waiting for Rain is, as the preface by Nancy Scheper-Hughes suggests, several books in one. Above all, it is a travel narrative in which a young social activist ventures forth to discover the people and the rich, if parched, geography of Northeast Brazil. In addition, it is an attempt to examine drought in the Northeast from a political and human rights perspective and to show that both folk and erudite literature are inseparable from politics.

The book is most successful as a voyage of discovery (p. 13):
My goal was to understand the impact of the drought, not by reading scientific articles, geographic statistics, or historical records, but instead by listening to the people who suffered from its effects. I wanted to see drought the way they saw it, which is why I had to read their literature and poetry, for the reality that they described to me was based more on fictional accounts than on their own memories and experiences.

Arons’s gift for words and concern for the plight of the often painfully poor people whom he meets in the Northeast, a region which represents close to a fifth of a country equivalent in size to the United States, are obvious. He can be wonderfully mordant, his ear for dialogue is excellent, and his often lyrical descriptions—thin clouds are compared to “a few frivolous tucks in a robin’s-egg blue sky” (p. 27)—make the book a pleasure to read. His main argument—that droughts in the Northeast are a result as much of political decisions as they are of climatic or topographic factors—has already been made by writers such as Kempton Webb (1974), whose detailed study should have found its way into his bibliography. *Waiting for Rain*’s major contribution thus resides mainly in the vividness with which it brings home the human consequences of political machinations that have gone on for centuries.

The book’s attempts to weave oral histories and classic literary texts into a sociopolitical analysis are laudable and the assertion that politics and literature are wedded in a special way in the Northeast unquestionably true. “Is there any other place on earth where humans, nature, and art are essentially one, defined by a natural disaster that is shaped by and into a myth? Is there any other country where one can pick up a newspaper, a poem, or a music lyric and literally read the same thing?” Arons asks at one juncture (p. 58). While the answer may well be yes—one thinks of India, for starters—the rhetorical question underscores an important point. And yet references to Euclides da Cunha’s classic *Os sertões* as a novel, to the great novelist and short-story writer João Guimarães Rosa as a poet, and to João Cabral de Melo Neto’s *Morte e vida severina* as a play “written entirely in *cordel* verse” make one wonder how closely he has read the works he cites.

These errors, however, do not undermine the book’s larger purpose in the same way as do a number of his statements regarding the popular stories in verse known as the *literatura de cordel*. Arons’s lack of clarity concerning crucial similarities and differences between oral improvisers and “book” poets keeps him from locating specific *cordel* texts and authors within a larger and constantly shifting creative terrain. Then too, in his eagerness to make the case for the *cordel* as a response to all-too-real injustices, he tends to reduce it to “drought poetry” produced by “illiterate troubadours and bards.”

Although the arid Northeastern backlands have often been a setting for these stories as well as one of their chief markets, the *cordel*’s themes have always been multiple and its practitioners’ approaches varied. Moreover, though some poets have been completely illiterate, many more have been semiliterate and a few—such as the hugely prolific Leandro Gomes de Barros and João Martins de Ataíde—have had a far more than rudimentary command of the written language. Likewise, while many poets remained extremely poor, a number of the more successful managed to achieve a relatively comfortable existence—often in the lush coastal cities which, as essential publication and distribution centers, were every bit as important as the backlands to the *cordel* trade.

As for politics, *cordel* authors, while no strangers to injustice, have varied in their responses to it. The more oblique approach that some have adopted clearly has something to do with fear. [Poets, for instance, appear to have suffered considerable repression during the military dictatorship of the 1960s and 1970s.] This approach, however, also reflects a tradition in which protest has just as often taken the form of subversive humor as it has outright criticism or lament. As a result, writers such as Patativa do Assaré stand out precisely because of the unusual and sustained directness of their denunciations. Moreover, it would be a mistake to see all popular poets as clear-eyed champions of the poor or to overlook the *cordel*’s often deeply conservative, sometimes downright intolerant attitudes toward minorities and women.

Perhaps most important, Arons seems largely unaware of the enormous changes through which *cordel* poetry has gone in the last half century. Only a handful of writers resemble the itinerant poet whom he vividly describes near the beginning of his book. The great majority are at least semieducated, and a sizable number are either students or university graduates. Tellingly, not one of the three Juazeiro-based poets whom Arons interviews is uneducated.

Old-style troubadours are few and far between today in part because, while the *cordel* formerly offered its practitioners an alternative to subsistence agriculture and menial jobs, despite support from a variety of state and regional institutions it no longer provides a livelihood. Because very few present-day *cordel* authors perform their verses in the open-air markets in which potential buyers once congregated, the close interaction between poet and public and the element of oral improvisation that was so important to the traditional *cordel* are largely absent from today’s narratives.

In addition, a number of persons who might once have been *cordel* authors have turned to the graphic arts. José Lourenço, one of whose illustrations Arons reproduces in his book, is an excellent example of the latter. Although he has recently begun to compose *cordel* stories, it is not they but the exquisitely detailed block prints which he sells to tourists that provide an important supplement to his modest salary. No mere detail, this increasing reliance on the graphic arts by individuals who might formerly have sought to make their mark as poets suggests that observers interested in contemporary political expression need to look at least as much at present-day visual creations linked to an older imaginative universe as at actual *cordel* texts.
A deeper, more carefully researched understanding of the literary traditions whose importance Arons rightly stresses and of the rich popular culture that infuses them would have made *Waiting for Rain* a more nuanced and ultimately truer portrait of Northeast Brazil. As it stands, the book remains an often striking travelogue by a young writer whose heart goes out to the inhabitants of a world very different from his own. One hopes to see new work that will combine the compassion and unquestioned energy that he displays here with a fuller command of facts and existing sources in order to do justice to the creative and resilient people whom he so rightly admires.

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**Understanding the Intimacy ofAmazonian Sociality**

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The *Anthropology of Love and Anger* focuses on the ethnography of everyday communal life in Native Amazonia and other related Amerindian societies. The editors and contributors are concerned with exploring the relationship between ethics and affect and how these are intertwined in an “aesthetics of community” that is distinctly Amazonian. They are interested in doing this in ways that get at indigenous understandings of sociality. They term this distinctive aesthetic “conviviality,” which is meant to convey that element of sociability that is concerned with the—sometimes fraught—day-to-day maintenance of “amicable social relations.” The hope is that by focusing on the aesthetics of community, particularly through the lens of “conviviality,” we can better understand the emotive and aesthetic forces that shape society. These forces, it is argued, are often ignored by structural-functionalist analyses that relegate the affective domain of the quotidian outside of the realm of the social, the political, and the economic.

The 15 essays in this volume are organized in three sections and are preceded by an introduction written by the editors. The introduction highlights the importance of understanding the aesthetic aspects of Amazonian sociality and seeks to situate Amazonian conviviality more broadly within anthropology as a discipline. Regarding this latter concern I was left with some questions regarding the analytical status of conviviality. It is not clear whether it is meant as an analytical tool for getting at understudied elements of sociality in general or whether it is a form of sociality that is distinctly Amazonian. If the second is true, what makes “achieving a comfortable affective life with those with whom they live, work, eat and raise children” [p. 2] a uniquely Amazonian goal? Furthermore, are Amazonian societies any more convivial than other small societies subject to the challenge of maintaining community under the same exigencies of scale? If Amazonian societies are uniquely convivial, what are the factors that have contributed to this phenomenon?

The introduction offers conviviality as part of a critique of what the editors see as the excessive formalism of structural-functionalist approaches to sociality. However laudable, this will not come as new to a North American anthropological community steeped in Boasian-inspired approaches such as the culture-and-personality school, interpretive anthropology, and the ethnography of speaking. All of these have long had as their focus elements that the editors highlight as central to this volume—namely, the study of everyday life, the individual, and the emotive and an interest in local meanings, especially as these are revealed through language.

The individual chapters are less concerned with the analytical status of conviviality. Instead, they offer rich ethnographic coverage of the intimate relations of Amerindian sociability. It is with this attention to the ethnography of intimate sociability and the ways in which the editors have encouraged the authors to draw ethnological insight from comparison with the chapters of others that this volume is poised to make its most lasting contribution.

The chapters in the first section, “Conviviality as Creative Process,” focus on the affective construction of conviviality. Echeverri writes on Uitoto understandings of the emotive forces that give rise to sociability and those that threaten it, especially regarding the need to regulate and channel desire in order to negotiate successfully with outside economic and developmental forces. This is followed by an article by Gow on Piro understandings of helplessness and the compassion it inspires as the affective precondition for sociability. Overing’s contribution is concerned with examining the role of shared laughter as a fundamental tool that the Piaroa use to establish conviviality. Jamieson shows for the Nicaraguan Miskitu how conviviality is threatened by the sorcery accusations that often follow a death and describes mortuary laments as a kind of civic work performed to protect the community against these threats. Passes shows that the construction of society among the Pa’ikwene grows out of engagement in productive activities and this is why such activities are undertaken com-
munally. Kidd’s article on the Paraguayan Enxet focuses on the connections of love and hatred, which are central to proper social relations with kin and enemies, respectively, to knowledge. Ales’s contribution on the Yanomami examines the ethics of care and the aesthetics of conviviality as essential parts of politics. She is particularly interested in the maintenance of peace and trust and the concern for the happiness of kin, which, she argues, form the context in which the Yanomami’s well-known reputation for bellicosity must be understood. Lagrou’s chapter shows that among the Cashinahua what makes someone a “true” person rather than a wandering spirit is the sense of belonging to kin and that the cultivation of feelings of homesickness is central to this sense. Finally, Londoño-Sulkin’s article on the Muinane examines the importance of proper social relations in the propagation of society.

The second section, “Conquest and Contact,” is concerned with the breakdown of conviviality following European colonialism. It consists of a single chapter, by Mason, which examines the European interpretive frameworks that made conviviality between whites and indigenous peoples impossible.

The final section, entitled “The Delicacy of Amazonian Society,” focuses on the fragility of conviviality. It begins with Belaunde’s article on the Airo-Pai, which discusses the tremendous work that goes into creating seemingly effortless social harmony. Key to this is the recognition of anger as a powerful, dangerous transformational state and therefore something to be carefully avoided. Rosengren’s article on the Matsigenka also examines anger, its cosmological importance, and the need to conceal it in public. Gonçalves’s article on the Paresi of the Brazilian Mato Grosso treats jealousy and the way it threatens harmonious living. Rivière’s article on the Trio tracks the fit between local explanations of individual behavior as emotionally motivated and changes in social organization—especially those associated with moments of tranquility, increased raucous conviviality, and hostility. The volume closes with an essay by Santos-Granero on the Yanesha that reflects on the question of conviviality in a scholarly context that often emphasizes Amazonian conflict. Santos-Granero notes that Amazonianists are often divided between those who stress the inherent conflict associated with affinal relations in the societies they study and those who highlight the consubstantiality of consanguinial ones. Adopting a temporal perspective, he argues, allows one to see the continuous process by which ever-tenuous states of conviviality are created only to be inevitably disrupted by strife and village fission.

The sections work well together despite a great degree of thematic overlap between the first and the final one. The middle section, although providing an important historical context, would have benefited from an additional chapter. I was left wondering what an ethnographically informed historical eye, sensitive to the concerns of the contributors, might have discovered in examining the times and places in which some kind of conviviality must have been cobbled together as new social forms—with their own intimacies and affective valences—emerged that came to encompass natives as well as outsiders. After all, the vast majority of Amazonian inhabitants today are neither distinctly Amerindian nor European.

One final minor point: given its comparative focus, the volume would have been greatly enhanced by a regional map.

Such quibbles aside, this volume is an extremely rich compendium, spanning a wide range of indigenous Amazonian societies, concerning how to get along, how to avoid tension, how to engender trust, and how to care. It is a must-have for all scholars concerned with indigenous Amazonia, as well as those interested more generally in the comparative anthropology of sociality.

The Invention of Death

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Tim Taylor’s ambitious The Buried Soul attempts to unravel the ways in which death emerged as a human concept and practice. Through nine chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion, Taylor spreads his argument wide. The chronological, geographic, and cultural range is overwhelming, encompassing George W. Bush, Robert Mugabe, and the Zimbabwean army as well as the Taung child, Bronze Age Nitriansky Hradok, and Iron Age Ulski Aul. Throughout, Taylor applies the general, pan-human approach born of a broad comparative method. This is a brave strategy. Most cutting-edge archaeological thinking rejects such attempts, preferring the much more difficult though ultimately more rewarding investigation of the particular and [pre]historically specific contexts of past human events. Though the broad approach is excellent for a popular audience that needs to be entertained with a variety of examples, the lack of more indepth discussion of the contexts of the ethnographic examples is frustrating. While Taylor provides glimpses of behavior well beyond what a more standard academic approach would attempt, he is less successful at showing how each titbit of evidence fits into his larger argument.

The book claims to be about the soul and the invention of death, it is disappointing not to find more explicit definitions of these terms or a discussion of how other archaeologists have approached them in the material record. While there is a brief mention that the concept of formal burial began after humans could speak but before
they could write (i.e., in the Upper Palaeolithic), most of the examples are either snatched from ethnographies or accounts of modern sensational deaths (e.g., child murders). The best part of the book is the section on bog bodies: well-written, detailed, and showing innovative activities. Again, it is unclear how these evocative examples fit into a broader argument about the soul and death.

There are two exceptions to the general sweep of evidence, both lengthy treatments: the first is the discussion in chapter 4 of the tenth-century AD Arab writer Ibn Fadlân’s description of a Viking burial on the banks of the Volga, and the other is the many references to the writings of Herodotus (especially his Histories) on Scythian and Thracian death ceremonies. If, as Taylor argues, archaeology’s attention to the material record makes it an excellent method for studying death and the soul, then why are his major discussions grounded in two pieces of historical text? Many archaeologists will criticize his unquestioning and unqualified use of these texts and call for more discussion of the potential pitfalls of taking ancient literary records at face value as he appears to do.

Missing from the book are discussions of the study of ancient diet and health based on the analysis of carbon isotopes or the exploitation of ancient DNA. In a standard volume on the archaeology of burial one would also expect a clear historiography of the study of mortuary archaeology. If Taylor is going to rely so heavily on Van Gennep’s 1909 Rites of Passage, then a fuller positioning of Van Gennep in the development of anthropology would have been appreciated. The best current works on the archaeologies of death and mortuary activities are investigating the role of the body in society and in the ways people think about being-in-the-world, identities, performances, corporeality, and the politics of being.

Clearly, Taylor’s book moves in other directions and will make archaeologists think about death in ways other than the traditional ones. It is most exciting in the passages that academics will find least appealing, the accounts of Taylor’s own experiences. The writing in these sections is good and well-paced, indeed, this may be the type of output that the author should aim for in future efforts. Many will cringe at his account in chapter 10 of his cutting himself with his Swiss Army knife when he was a student. Some of this flirts with the sadomasochistic and as a rhetorical device is no bad thing. Similar value is found in Taylor’s accounts of his own near-death experiences, his guilt over the death of his grandfather, and his viewing of the corpse of a young family friend. Some readers will feel that much of this is self-serving (indeed, a few will condemn it as an exhibitionist ego-trip); they will claim that the book is more about Taylor and his personal journey than about an archaeology of the soul.

Many of Taylor’s references to modern death activities follow a similar sensationalist vein: the 2001 discovery in the River Thames of the torso of a six-year-old boy or the 1984 unauthorized removal of the brain of a victim of sudden infant death syndrome. Linked to this is Taylor’s defense of cannibalism as a common human practice (though I am left unconvinced that cut marks on bones are “signatures” of cannibalism and not of defleshing). A more thorough discussion of the detailed work that has been carried out by others on bone taphonomy and on animal butchery practices might have made the point more authoritatively. Taylor wants us to face up to the unpleasant side of death or at least to think about why we find some versions of death unpalatable; this is a worthwhile aim.

For whom was this book written? For archaeologists, anthropologists, philosophers, forensic scientists? Perhaps it is better for the interested general reader. Ultimately the book may best satisfy Taylor himself in his personal attempts to understand death and his own relationship to it. It is unfortunate that many academics will dismiss this book as self-centered and aimless. In truth, it is an important alternative to the way that we (as archaeologists) think about death. For this reason alone, it is a book worth reading.

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