

Book Review

R. Daniel Shaw, *Singing Samo Songs: From Shaman to Pastor: An Ethnohistorical Approach to Socio-Religious Expressions among the Samo of Papua New Guinea*

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During the 2022 American Anthropological Association meetings in Seattle, Washington, Daniel Shaw, a Senior Professor of Anthropology and Translation at the Fuller Graduate School of Mission and Theology, handed me his book with a suggestion: “You should read this.” Before delving into this review, it is important to acknowledge a potential bias: Dan and I have been colleagues for many years, both serving as International Anthropology Consultants with SIL International. With this disclosed bias, it is also worth noting that I may possess a somewhat unique perspective on the subject matter, being one of the relatively few individuals qualified to address this topic from both a professional anthropological and Christian missionary standpoint.

Dividing the review into two sections, catering to anthropologists and missionaries respectively, seems appropriate given the dual audience of Shaw’s work. For anthropologists, Shaw’s book offers a profound ethnographic exploration reminiscent of the deep descriptions crafted by Clifford Geertz. Drawing from five decades of fieldwork among the Samo people in Papua New Guinea’s Western Province, Shaw’s rich data and emic analysis provide invaluable insights into Samo rituals and their symbolic significance. Edited by renowned anthropologists Pamela J. Steward and Andrew Strathern, the book, part of Carolina Academic Press’s Ritual Studies Monograph Series, promises to enhance researchers’ understanding of religious change and innovation in traditional cultures, particularly those in the Pacific region.

Even for non-specialists in Oceania, Shaw’s treatise remains accessible and engaging. He seamlessly integrates the ideas of major anthropological theorists into the Samo context, making the book highly readable. Cognitive anthropologists, in particular, will find Shaw’s application of schema theory fascinating, while his extensive discussion of kinship systems will appeal to anyone interested in the topic of kinship.

At the heart of Shaw’s anthropological description lies the three-day long Samo initiation ceremony known as *Kandila*. Through detailed descriptions and helpful illustrations, Shaw navigates the intricate nuances of Samo cosmology, ritual form, and the evolving nature of religious experience over decades. By structuring the book around the *Kandila* ceremony, Shaw not only provides a comprehensive analysis of Samo cultural evolution but also demonstrates a reflexive approach to ethnography that acknowledges the researcher’s presence and biases—a model that could inspire future ethnographers.

From a missionary perspective, Shaw’s work presents a wealth of insights into mission praxis and missiology. One concept likely to provoke controversy among readers is “syncretism.” Shaw

challenges the notion of a monolithic Christianity, arguing that indigenous peoples often develop their own versions of faith in response to their cultural context and understanding of scripture. Shaw's approach contrasts with what he terms "mission Christianity" propagated by Western missionaries, which can inadvertently foster syncretism by imposing foreign forms of faith onto indigenous cultures.

Shaw's discussion of "hybridity" versus syncretism, contextualization, and the sociological functions of shamanism offers a paradigm-shifting perspective for missionaries. He contends that embracing indigenous forms of Christianity, rooted in orthodox beliefs yet expressed through culturally relevant practices, can guard against syncretism and foster a deeper, more authentic understanding of faith. This understanding challenges missionaries to reconsider their approach and recognize the value of indigenous expressions of Christianity, even if they diverge from traditional mission church forms.

In conclusion, Shaw's book serves as a compelling case for the relevance of anthropology in contemporary mission praxis. By bridging the gap between these disciplines, Shaw encourages a more nuanced understanding of cultural dynamics and the importance of contextualized approaches to mission work. Mission leaders would do well to heed Shaw's insights and consider how anthropology can enrich and inform their strategies in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.