

Book Review

Money Games: Gambling in a Papua New Guinea Town. By **Anthony J. Pickles**. New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books. 2019 Pp: xi + 203 Price: US\$120

In his new book, *Money Games*, Anthony Pickles explores gambling in Goroka, a town of 23,000 in Papua New Guinea's Highlands. Across six chapters, he moves from game to game—from cards to pokies to bets on rugby league—showing how each offers a view into how we might understand money, value, and the nature of transactions. He argues that close attention to gambling illuminates socio-economic life in Goroka and leads to a more sophisticated account of economic activity generally. *Money Games* will surely be of interest to readers of *Oceania* and scholars thinking about money. It is essential reading for any anthropologist interested in gambling.

Across *Money Games*, Pickles argues for the value of studying gambling both in its own right, as 'the world's most accessible form of capital manipulation' (1), and as a 'reflective vantage point on money as a measure of value' (174). After surveying the local history of gambling in the first chapter, he dives into the apparently mundane features of different scenes of it, juicing each for insight. Chapter 2 details the rules, tactics, and pace of two popular card games and reflects on how they implicate ideas about change, 'the Melanesian way,' and what it means to have an 'open mind.' Chapter 3 traces how different denominations of currency alter the patterns of play and the 'effective value of money' in games (90). Chapter 4 juxtaposes street vending and a gambling game called 'challenge.' Chapter 5 describes the world of 'big-men' and electronic machine gambling. And, chapter 6 compares bride-wealth payments and gambling on the State of Origin series of rugby league games.

Throughout the book, Pickles writes about the banalities of gambling life in Goroka crisply, authoritatively, and with wit. As he traces the way a pokie player jams his 'gnarled toothpick' into the machine to keep it running (136), or describes the roadside, littered with Mermaid High Quality playing cards—kings, queens, and aces 'smeared with dried betel nut spittle and parched mud' (36)—his writing makes his research feel immediate.

As Pickles picks Gorokan scenes apart, he alternates between theory and ethnography, drawing out how the details of gambling implicate broader anthropological concerns. He focuses on two literatures in particular: the anthropology of the Pacific, especially Papua New Guinea, and the anthropology of gambling. The former focus fits cleanly into the book's venue of publication; it is the tenth volume in the Association for

Social Anthropology in Oceania's series, *Studies in Pacific Anthropology*. The latter focus dovetails with Pickles's earlier published work, especially his theorization of 'gambling as an analytic' (see Pickles, Anthony J. 'Introduction: Gambling as Analytic in Melanesia'. *Oceania* 84, no. 3 (November 2014): 207–21).

Pickles weaves these two literatures into his materials at every opportunity. The way he does this weaving makes for a book dense in small and large insights. It also gives the book an idiosyncratic texture, as Pickles frequently attends as much to the details of the ethnographic scenes he borrows as to his own materials. In moments, this gives the book a sense of bifurcation, a split between carefully traced scenes of gambling in Goroka, on the one side, and equally carefully recounted ethnographic examples from the anthropological record, on the other. While Pickles contends that this ethic of comparison helps him 'highlight the particularity' (175) of Goroka, it also, at times, obscures the shimmer of his Gorokan materials.

The payoff of Pickles's ethic of comparison, however, is that it makes plain how similar gambling is to other forms of economy. In his push to think about gambling alongside *moka*, *kula*, and *Wok Meri* savings groups, among other transfers inside and outside of Goroka, Pickles shows how senseless it would be to cordon gambling off as somehow less culturally laden or susceptible to productive comparative work than other forms of transfer. Take, for example, the passage in which he juxtaposes the marketing of betel in Goroka, where sellers stack money in a pile in front of them to attract customers, with the form of gambling called *chalinj* (i.e., 'challenge'), where gamblers similarly pile wagered money between themselves, pulling in those around them, luring passersby to bet. The difference between the two piles of money—one displayed and one wagered—Pickles reflects, is small but important: in gambling, the pile might just be yours (115).

But while the piles might share features, throughout *Money Games*, Pickles is more interested in understanding the latter pile of wagered money, filled with bills up for grabs. This is clear from another of the book's central proofs, which sits in a slight, productive tension with the emphasis that gambling is similar enough to other forms of exchange to be compared with them. Gambling, Pickles writes, is also unique—exceptional, in fact—insofar as it allows us to see something more general about how all transfers work. Pickles offers an assortment of reasons for why this is the case: gambling confounds the discreteness of production, exchange, and consumption, "churning" them into one another (172); it 'distill[s] everyday, messy transactions into ideal-type pragmatics because games replicate situations over and over again, creating a frame

for playful action with limited variations' (174); it 'prioritizes subjective forms of valuation rather than comparative forms...[and] therefore appears to formalize actions into rules in a very particular way' (174); it, as a playful economic activity, allows us to see 'the frontiers between economic registers in the clearest possible form...' (177); and, finally, it, by 'repetitively reinforce[ing] certain types of transaction...[,] offer[s] players a way to think imaginatively about those transactions and their relation to the wider world' (177).

I will leave it to you readers to decide whether all of these features are as unique to gambling as

Pickles contends. You might even waffle on your answer as you read through his array of vivid materials, each case contrasting with the others. But as you do so and consider the issue, you will also surely learn much about Goroka, money, and the anthropology of Oceania, and enjoy the read along the way.

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