Reticulations of Biography and Colonial History: The Life of a Local Leader in Papua New Guinea

The reticulations of biography and colonial history, including their political dynamics, form the analytic backdrop for John Kikang’s reminiscences about his life. Kikang was a local leader who, in the aftermath of World War II, was instrumental in establishing both cash crop and Roman Catholicism in the Rai Coast hinterland. Early departure from his home village, socialization in the capitalist and Christian milieu of the colonial settlements, fighting on the Allied side in World War II – such were the touchstones of his local power base and authority. These he was then able to expand, upon returning to his home village, with the assistance of government officers and missionaries in (especially) the postwar decades of Australian colonial rule. At an advanced age, John Kikang sought to shore up his status – this he chiefly did by narrating his dream experiences enacted in an urban Christian beyond of whiteness, knowledge, and prosperity, but also by encouraging missionary projects in the ambient region. This contribution retraces the road taken by this local leader with close reference to his dreams and visions; it also examines how mobility and the appropriation of knowledge and power play out in terms of personal identity and agency in a colonized terrain.