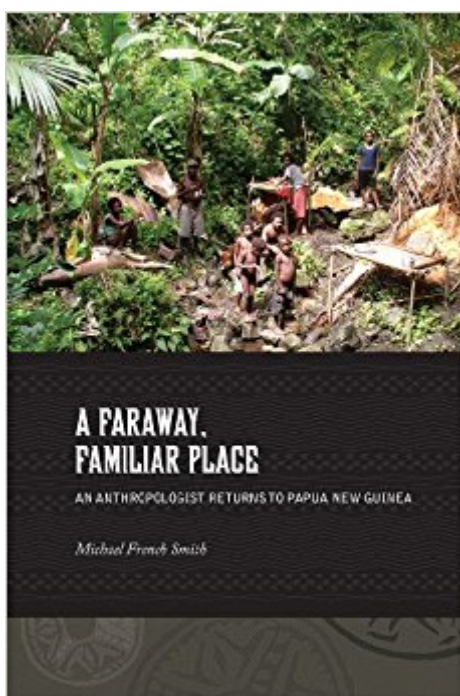


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# A Faraway, Familiar Place: An Anthropologist Returns To Papua New Guinea



## Synopsis

*A Faraway Familiar Place: An Anthropologist Returns to Papua New Guinea* is for readers seeking an excursion deep into little-known terrain but allergic to the wide-eyed superficiality of ordinary travel literature. Author Michael French Smith savors the sometimes gritty romance of his travels to an island village far from roads, electricity, telephone service, and the Internet, but puts to rest the cliché of “Stone Age” Papua New Guinea. He also gives the lie to stereotypes of anthropologists as either machete-wielding swashbucklers or detached observers turning real people into abstractions. Smith uses his anthropological expertise subtly, to illuminate Papua New Guinean lives, to nudge readers to look more closely at ideas they take for granted, and to take a wry look at his own experiences as an anthropologist. Although Smith first went to Papua New Guinea in 1973, in 2008 it had been ten years since he had been back to Kragur Village, Kairiru Island, where he was an honorary “citizen.” He went back not only to see people he had known for decades, but also to find out if his desire to return was more than an urge to flee the bureaucracy and recycled indoor air of his job in a large American city. Smith finds in Kragur many things he remembered fondly, including a life immersed in nature and freedom from 9-5 tyranny. And he again encounters the stifling midday heat, the wet tropical sores, and the sometimes excruciating intensity of village social life that he had somehow managed to forget. Through practicing Taoist “not doing” Smith continues to learn about villagers’ difficult transition from an older world based on giving to one in which money rules and the potent mix of devotion and innovation that animates Kragur’s pervasive religious life. Becoming entangled in local political events, he gets a closer look at how ancestral loyalties and fear of sorcery influence hotly disputed contemporary elections. In turn, Kragur people practice their own form of anthropology on Smith, questioning him about American work, family, religion, and politics, including Barack Obama’s campaign for president. They ask for help with their financial problems—accounting lessons and advice on attracting tourists—but, poor as they are, they also offer sympathy for the Americans they hear are beset by economic crisis. By the end of the book Smith returns to Kragur again—in 2011—to complete projects begun in 2008, see Kragur’s chief for the last time (he died later that year), and bring Kragur’s story up to date. *A Faraway Familiar Place* provides practical wisdom for anyone leaving well-traveled roads for muddy forest tracks and landings on obscure beaches, as well as asking important questions about wealth and poverty, democracy, and being “modern.”

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

If only all social scientists wrote this clearly! This account of a return visit to a village in Papua New Guinea reads like a memoir, but through it you gain a vivid and affectionate picture of a way of life and the changes--economic, political, and religious--that have occurred over half a century, in a way that will make every reader respond with greater understanding to reports of the gains and vicissitudes of development around the world. I really enjoyed it. --Mary Catherine Bateson, cultural anthropologist and author of *Peripheral Visions: Learning along the Way* and *Composing a Life* Smith is an academic grandchild of Margaret Mead--a student of her student Theodore Schwartz--and he emulates Mead's skills in writing well for general readers. Anyone interested in . . . faraway places grappling with global modernity will find the book both readable and informative. --Choice (51:4, December 2013) In a fascinating and entertaining account, anthropologist Michael French Smith unpacks the meanings and riddles of village life on the Papua New Guinea island of Kairiru. His storytelling is compelling, his insights profound and frequent. --Rowan McKinnon, writer and editor of the Lonely Planet guides to Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands; South Pacific; Australia; and others.

Michael French Smith is a senior research associate with LTG Associates, Inc., a consulting firm that applies the methods of cultural anthropology to health and human services policy and management issues. He is the author of *Hard Times on Kairiru Island*

From the first sentence to the last, this book is a gem. Michael Smith has written a lively account of his decades-long evolving relationship with the people of Kragur, a town on an isolated mountainous island off the coast of mainland Papua-New Guinea. He details changes that have taken place in the town of Kragur since his first extended visit in 1975, and importantly, in his own understanding of the people of Kragur. Smith is a gifted writer and a keen observer of human behavior, himself included. There are many laugh-out-loud moments as he recounts mishaps and absurd situations he has found himself in. His self-deprecating humor is probably one reason the people of Kragur have come to accept him as one of their own. This book opens a window into the many physical, emotional and intellectual challenges anthropologists face in the field. It traces how western-style politics have been adapted to a more collective-minded society. And it also answers the perplexing question of how people who lack electricity can keep their cellphones charged. A thoroughly enjoyable read.

This slim volume (229 pages) is a wonderful, plain-speaking introduction to anthropology, and could also stand alone as an engaging piece of lively travel writing. *A FARAWAY, FAMILIAR PLACE* is an account of anthropologist Michael Smith's two follow-up journeys to New Guinea's Kairiru Island, where he had done much early research. These more recent trips were motivated purely by personal passion, which makes his observations all the more compelling. Along the way, he courageously reveals a brew of eccentricities and foibles which compare interestingly with those of the people he is studying. Of course, they are studying him too, in their own way, which is part of the fun of the book. Smith has a light touch, and a fine sense of humor. On his preference for paper over computers: "No matter how thorough your notes, you always leave something out, but paper notebooks contain a lot more information than is written in them. I could, for example, chart the increase in the quantity of betel nut I was chewing over the course of my 1975-1976 stay in Kragur by measuring the amount of bright pink saliva stain on the pages of my notes and journals from that year." Anyone with even a passing interest in the study of culture, in the strange and twisted road of "economic development," or in exotic travel will find this an absorbing read.

I don't always give gushing five star reviews to products, but I'm going to give one to this book, because it deserves it. As a professor whose speciality is the people and cultures of Papua New Guinea (PNG), I'm often asked what visitors to PNG for reading recommendations. In the past, I've recommended Sean Dorney's "Papua New Guinea: People, Politics, and History Since 1975". Having just finished "A Faraway, Familiar Place" I now think that this is the one book you should

read before visiting the country. Smith's book is a rare achievement: a readable, personal memoir that also provides a picture of Papua New Guinea that is accurate, nuanced, up to date, and a joy to read. Don't be fooled by the fact that this book was published by a university press -- it can (and ought) to be read by everyone. On the surface, the book tells of the story of Smith's trip to Kragur village, which Smith has been visiting since the 1970s. But really the book is about his decades-long relationship with that village: how it has grown and changed, and how he has aged and become more frail over the years that he visited it. Because he has a lifetime of experience visiting the village, Smith can take us beneath the surface of daily life to explore the deeper realms of kinship and mythology that more novice researchers would miss. The picture we get of Kragur is everything an anthropologist could want it to be: historically informed, deeply contextualized, and holistic. What is really important about the book is the way that Smith uses Kragur to explain Papua New Guinea as a whole. Anthropologists like myself often end up answering the same questions about PNG over and over again: Are they poor? Are they really Christian? Are they backwards or modern? Smith's book moves systematically through the 'PNG FAQ', explaining for readers the truth about this remarkable country. You get religion, politics, mobile phones -- the mix of customary beliefs and modern lifestyle that is typical of PNG, all explained with a clarity and precision that no other author has managed, at least for the past decade. This is for me the most valuable part of the book, and the reason I recommend it to anyone who wants to learn what PNG is like today. Best of all, the book is easy to read and is well written, full of wonderful one-liners ("nostalgia is delicious, but it is a meal, not a snack"). Smith keeps the tone light and isn't afraid to make fun of himself. In sum, Smith has succeeded in writing a wonderfully accessible and deeply accurate depiction of Papua New Guinea today. This book deserves to be read widely by students, by people travelling to Papua New Guinea, and by Papua New Guineans themselves. I can only hope there is a kindle version coming soon, since this would make a perfect book for any college course on Pacific island cultures.

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