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Lina Pranaitytė. **The Coffin in the Attic: Gifts, Debts and the Catholic Church in Rural Lithuania.** Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia 41. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2020. 203 p.: illustr.

*The Coffin in the Attic* is based on Lina Pranaitytė's anthropological fieldwork carried out in the Dzūkija region in 2008 and 2009. The book focuses on the Catholic Church and exchange practices among Catholics in rural Lithuania. Based on detailed ethnographic descriptions from her field site, Pranaitytė explores the parishioners' relationship to the Church, to the priest, to each other, and to the dead.

Pranaitytė analyses the importance of ritualised gift-giving among Catholics from a Maussian perspective. She wishes to demonstrate that conducting an analysis of Catholic practices through a focus on exchange can bring new insights into the ways we perceive Catholicism, as the Church is held together through the act of gifts and debts. This angle emphasises how tight the priest/Church/parish are bound together by the constant exchange of gifts and services, without which the Church would not be able to function.

She goes on to analyse the local perception of these exchanges, which is embedded in the Lithuanian term *auka*. *Auka* encompasses the three English words: donation, sacrifice and offering. It is not, as such, a new theological angle on exchange practices in the Roman Catholic Church, but an emphasis on the particular Lithuanian phrasing. As in the perception of Mauss, an *auka* given to the priest is not without obligation, but is returned in terms of, for example, a requested Mass. Pranaitytė emphasises that it is not the item given which is of importance, but the act of giving. This is a truth with certain modifications, as priests in Lithuania do

not receive a salary, but depend on charity, a point she elaborates later in the book. Through the *aukos* given by parishioners to the priest, and thereby to the Church, the interrelatedness in the parish is constantly reproduced. These donations are not limited to the living, but play a central importance in the case of deaths and funerals.

With reference to Block and Parry's long and short-term cycles of exchange, the author argues that short-term gifts and donations to the Church/priest/deceased are part of a more significant long-term exchange. Short-term exchange reinforces long-term goals and the cosmic order. The exchange of gifts becomes central in supporting parish clergy and churches, but it is likewise important in maintaining relationships between the people in the parish. That this exchange is not only relevant in life but also in death, appears from the title of the book. Having 'a coffin in the attic' is a practical arrangement, one of several pre-arrangements for death which villagers make in order to ease the burden on their relatives. However, it also speaks of the importance of death in the community, as beliefs and religious practices become particularly visible at times of deaths and funerals.

The book is divided into seven chapters, chronologically following the progress of Pranaitytė's fieldwork.

The introductory chapter is based on the main points in the book, her fieldwork, and reflections on whether it is appropriate to conduct fieldwork in one's home country.

The second chapter offers her theoretical reflections on the exchange of gifts and gift theories, and how exchange is embedded in Catholic beliefs and practices in terms of the believers' relationship with the priest and the surrounding community. Giving and receiving become important features in upholding practices,

just as they bind the community together through the prism of the Church.

The third chapter takes a historical approach. The author elaborates on the history of religion in Lithuania and the influence the socialist period had on religious practices. In terms of the continuation of religious belief, she emphasises the role of 'grandmothers' (*močiutės*) in passing on religious beliefs.

The fourth chapter focuses on understanding the institution of the Church in terms of a household governed by a master (the priest) and his house (the Church), and how this institution is linked to the surrounding parish through the idea of an extended family. An interesting point is that women play a crucial part in keeping the 'household'. Their additional work in preparing meals for festive events, decorating the church, cleaning the church buildings, and in general setting the stage for the priest, resemble more traditional gender roles in the family. This chapter thereby also demonstrates how dependent both the Church and the priest are on the parishioners. The women's efforts in maintaining the church reinforce the priest's role as the master of the house.

The fifth chapter continues with an elaboration of people's ritual practices connected with their belief. Some parishioners stress the importance of what Pranaitytė refers to as spatio-temporality, that is, that praying should take place at a certain time in a certain place (on Sundays at church). Others, however, economise on time and calculate how much time the sermons take up every week. This became a point of conflictual expectations, as the priest in this parish was inclined to give very long sermons, which annoyed many of the local people. The priest, on the other hand, felt he was giving them a special gift through his elaborate sermons. People who did not attend

the services felt perfectly comfortable praying at home. Pranaitytė takes this as an illustration of the fact that the number of churchgoers does not (necessarily) resemble the parishioners' relationship with God.

In the sixth chapter, the author turns to the issue of death. This part of the book deals with the various forms of exchange surrounding death and funerals. Death is a central part of the parishioners' reflections on their beliefs, just as funerals become central settings for various forms of exchange, that both confirm existing relationships and give space for the development of new ones, just as they establish new roles in the family following the loss of a family member. This was so both in terms of material exchange, but likewise in the realm of the afterlife. Some parishioners hope to receive a visit from a deceased relative in their dreams, so that she or he can tell them about their experiences after death.

In the final chapter, the author summarises her argument on the importance of exchange, *auka* and debt, which are all central features both to believers and their role in short and long-term spheres of exchange, but also confirming their long-term moral obligations to both the living and the dead.

The strength of the book lies in the detailed ethnographic accounts, which flow gracefully together with the author's theoretical reflections. With her familiarity of the field and her close relationship with her informants, she makes a convincing case of explaining how different forms of gifts and exchange serve as the backbone both in upholding beliefs and also in supporting the Church as an institution. Statements are supported by voices from the field. In this sense, this is not only Pranaitytė's account but also an account by country dwellers, who are given the opportunity to elaborate and reflect on

belief and exchange. The reading never becomes an abstract text, but rather develops in interaction with the informants.

Another strength of the book is the benefit of doing fieldwork at home. In Pranaitytė's case, it is obvious why it was a good choice to conduct fieldwork in Lithuania, and not, for example, in neighbouring Catholic Poland: language, access and familiarity. For example, her detailed linguistic analysis of various terms, both in standard Lithuanian, but also with a sensitivity to the local dialect, refers the reader to the very details of language and meaning. To take one central term of the book, namely a gift, she is able to detect closely a difference between a gift and *auka*, which is important in the further understanding of the analysis. When one looks through the list of literature, the many entries on local ethnologists, historical documents and Lithuanian articles demonstrate the great access she has had to important local material. The whole section called 'Anthropology at Home?', where the author explains, or rather justifies, her reason for doing fieldwork in her home country, therefore becomes redundant, and appears like a self-inflicted conflict over whether or not one can be an anthropologist 'at home'. I have yet to see an American anthropologist conducting fieldwork in the US going through the same exercise of excusing herself or himself.

Pranaitytė's work is based on her PhD dissertation from Martin Luther University, which she defended in 2016 and

later reworked into the current volume, published in 2020. While this is common practice among scholars, one could have wished for greater attention to the manuscript when reworking the dissertation as a book. It does not seem to develop beyond being a dissertation. For example, the latest literature referred to is from 2014. The author meanwhile has had an opportunity to incorporate newer writing into her work, and to rework the dissertation more thoroughly, consciously reflecting on the time lapse between fieldwork and PhD and book, and referring to newer studies in the field. One likewise gets this feeling when references are made to other dissertations, disregarding the fact that books have meanwhile been published on the material. Or when in 2020, a volume from 2012 is referred to as a 'recent publication' (p. 47), the reader is left a bit baffled. While it is not in itself a flaw that a substantial period of time passes between fieldwork and dissertation and book, the author ought to keep up to date with the scholarly field in the meantime, or at the very least refer the reader to why she has chosen to limit herself to a particular period. As it now stands, it appears as if little reworking of the dissertation has been done.

The book is in general a pleasant read, and takes you far and wide into the complexities of village life, the Church, belief and struggles in great ethnographic detail. It is also one of few ethnographies of Lithuania, and fills a gap in the field of religious practices in the countryside.

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