

# Not by Word Alone: Cross-cultural Communication between Highlanders and Missionaries (SVD) in the Jimi Valley, Western Highlands, Papua New Guinea

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'You are Peter, the Rock. And on this rock, I will build my church.'  
Matthew 16:18

Is communication (especially of complex religious ideas!) between peoples of different cultures possible and if it is, then under what conditions? This is a vexing question in these post-colonial, post-totalitarian times when peoples in various parts of the world express their ethnic, religious and cultural identities in an atmosphere freed from the politics bent on fabrication of the fiction of consensus and unity extending over social borders.<sup>1</sup> The issue of cross-cultural communication has of course been around for a long time.

Looking at it, however, as a two-directional process is a new phenomenon. Speaking generally, until recently Western civilisation and its specialised economic-political and religious institutions wished to 'be understood' by indigenous cultures so that they could join the 'global village'-like division of labour. Anthropologists, on the other hand, following in Malinowski's footsteps, strove to 'understand' the 'other' with little concern for the possibility of reciprocity, i.e. that the local people would 'understand' the nature of the anthropologist's project.

There has been no clear agenda for the process of bi-partisan 'communication', not least for want of ideas for devising such a project. While the colonial governments occasionally sought the advice of anthropologists (e.g. in New Guinea), confusion reigned on both sides, the administration and the colonial subjects, about each other's identities and

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<sup>1</sup> A. Strathern, 'Let the Bow Go Down', in *War in the Tribal Zone*, ed. R. B. Ferguson and N. L. Whitehead, Santa Fe, 1992, pp. 229-50.

expectations.<sup>2</sup> The institution of 'kiaps', the government officers in New Guinea with their knowledge of grass-root issues gained from regular visits to the villages, was one of the more outstanding attempts to facilitate two-directional communication.

The diffusion of Western culture among indigenous peoples has been one of the salient features of colonial projects the world over. The indigenous peoples were the ones expected to make the effort to meet the Western culture on its own terms through 'assimilating' themselves, 'syncretising it' with their own culture or by appropriating it in either form. The cultural transformation of the indigenous peoples was to take place via the introduction of the Western educational system, the moral teaching of Christianity and the basics of the democratic political system.

Those who traditionally stood apart from these one-directional communication projects, whether of a governmental or an anthropological kind, were the missionaries in the field. The missionaries, while living among the people they attempted to convert, tried to communicate their message (to be understood and to 'understand' the people in order to reach them).<sup>3</sup> These processes of communication often set in on the level of 'semblances' of communication taken for the 'real thing'. Whether these attempts were the 'real thing' or 'semblances' of communication, in the context of this paper they will be seen as ingredients of communication.

Communication between any individuals and different groups is fraught with political agendas and tactics of coercion, deception and seduction which favour the strong and resourceful. However, notwithstanding the above, the possibility of understanding, i.e. the collective, culturally-specific effort to give meaning to the foreign institutions, practices, values and objects (i.e. cultural artefacts<sup>4</sup>) in the given culture's own terms, hence producing an 'understanding' of a foreign formation, has to be considered.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The colonial administration occasionally sought anthropologists' advice while draughting its policies, with the noted examples of Malinowski advising on Melanesia and Evans-Pritchard on Africa.

<sup>3</sup> J. Bartoszek, *Z Kraju Kamiennej Sikiery*, ed. T. Dworecki, Warsaw, 1975.

<sup>4</sup> All objects, events and institutions in a given cultural system are to be regarded as 'cultural artefacts' with the meaning prescribed to them by the consciousness structures of a given cultural system, which have also been shaped by those cultural artefacts (G. Simmel, *Sociology of Georg Simmel*, Glencoe, 1950).

<sup>5</sup> N. Thomas, *Entangled Objects*, Harvard University Press, 1991.

In fact, such a partisan, partial and limited, though ever expanding 'understanding' of the other, evolved through verbal and non-verbal interactions, seems to be a precondition for any successful manouvering and interaction. These partisan understandings of each other, expressed initially by each side in its own, culture-specific idioms, show a tendency to converge which promotes the emergence of an informed, cross-cultural dialogue conducted from the differing perspectives and political orientations.

### **The Temporal and Structural Elements of Communication: a Tri-partite model**

The logic of any response is not only an outcome of the indigenous internal cultural dynamics which informs the nature of the cross-cultural appeal of given artefacts. It is also the subject of the historically accumulated experience of contact, the strategy of colonisation (i.e. the degree of direct interaction at grass-root level), the identity and culture of the colonisers, the artefact's capacity for surplus meaning, the period of colonisation, and the forms of coercion adopted by the administration.<sup>6</sup> Having this presupposition in mind, that communication is qualified by pre-ordained elements on both sides, I intend to propose a basic model which includes essential, necessary (if insufficient) conditions for cross-cultural communication. This model is based on mission contact with the Hageners in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea.

Conditions for cross-cultural communication can be reduced for the purpose of the model-based analysis to a triadic form constituted by

1. surplus of meaning and displaced meaning inherent in all cultural artefacts,
2. elements of direct physical encounters and
3. 'play' as the condition of transformation from one form of understanding into another.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. R. M. Keesing, 'Colonial and Counter-Colonial Discourse in Melanesia', *Critique of Anthropology*, vol. 14 (1), 1994, pp. 41-58.

This model is inspired by the Peircean linguistic model of communication based on three elements (signifier, signified and signification)<sup>7</sup> and anthropological works from various parts of the world which treat cultural communication as a process based on triadic elements<sup>8</sup> rather than on polar opposition on which the dialectical approach is predicated.

1. The idea of 'surplus of meaning' and 'displaced meaning' of cultural artefacts

Two concepts, utilising the symbolic propensity of cultural artefacts, the 'surplus of meaning'<sup>9</sup> and 'displaced meaning',<sup>10</sup> provide a theoretical construct which helps to identify the mechanisms which facilitate cross-cultural communication. Both 'surplus of meaning' and 'displaced meaning' relate to the communicative propensity of cultural artefacts. They point to the fact that the number of applications and possible interpretations of the role of cultural artefacts in any given culture is inexhaustible. This act of interpretation gives rise to new forms of artefacts and at the same time transforms the meaning of old ones.

The process is possible because although 'objects take their expressive character from their functions in the perceptual whole their meaning is not limited to their function'.<sup>11</sup> Free from the limitation of their function the cultural artefacts could be viewed in their symbolic propensity; hence

... symbols give rise to an endless exegesis. If no concept can exhaust the requirements of further thinking borne by symbols, this idea signifies

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<sup>7</sup> C. S. Peirce, *Processus interpretatif*, ed. N. Everaert-Desmedt, Liège, 1990; C. S. Peirce, *Essential Peirce: selected philosophical writings*, ed. N. Houser and C. Kloesel, Indiana University Press, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> Vivienne Kondos, 'The Triple Goddess and the Processual Approach to the World: the Paratya Case', in *Women in India and Nepal*, ed. M. Allen, Canberra, 1982, pp. 242-286; R. M. Keesing, 'Killers, Big Men and Priests on Malaita: Reflections on a Melanesian Troika System', *Ethnology*, 24, 1985, pp. 237-52.

<sup>9</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Fort Worth, 1976; P. Ricoeur, *Main Trends in Philosophy*, New York, 1979.

<sup>10</sup> G. D. McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: new approaches to the symbolic character of consumer goods and activities*, Indiana University Press, 1988.

<sup>11</sup> S. Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, Baltimore, 1967, p. 84. This is true of all objects, not only 'objects of art'.

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only that no given categorization can embrace all the semantic possibilities of a symbol. But it is the work of the concept alone that can testify to this surplus of meaning.<sup>12</sup>

This 'surplus of meaning', inherent in all cultural artefacts, albeit not in equal amounts, is the condition for all social interaction. The artefacts' surplus of meaning, though never ultimately fixed in its interpretation, provides for the possibility of inter-human relations.

Since no two individuals are identical, similarly no two interpretations will be identical. The surplus of meaning of the artefact provides for the perception of shared understanding of the meaning of the object, since it (the surplus of meaning) is capable of absorbing the multi-denotation of any object. Thus individuals whose reading of artefacts falls within the interpretation absorbable (within the society's defined criteria) by the artefacts' surplus of meaning share the sense of affinity, of sociability, of understanding and communication.

The cultural artefacts transcend and go beyond the perception delineated by a given cultural epoch. This in turn implies the possibility of an evolution of this perception through the process of interaction with cultural artefacts. This interaction 'reveals' hidden properties of the cultural artefacts, hence stimulating and enhancing perception. The same phenomenon appears in cross-cultural contact when the new artefact, after crossing cultural borders, challenges the perception and enforces its evolution.

It is by means of the perception they attract to themselves that the artefacts from another culture could be absorbed in an alien environment and the meaning they have had in the original context be renegotiated (i.e. the tribal artefacts in metropolitan museums<sup>13</sup>). In the same manner, it is via the mechanism of 'partisan/partial/impressionistic understanding' that the people of non-Occidental cultures perceive the artefacts of the Occidental world.<sup>14</sup> This is the mode in which the New Guinea Highlanders initially viewed the missions.

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<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, p. 57.

<sup>13</sup> J. Clifford, *Predicament of Culture: twentieth-century ethnography*, Harvard University Press, 1988.

<sup>14</sup> R. Connolly and R. Anderson, *First Contact. New Guinea Highlanders Encounter the Outside World*, Viking, 1987.

The concept of 'displaced meaning' illuminates the mechanism whereby cultural artefacts pertaining to social rituals are particularly richly endowed with surplus meaning. Displaced meaning sees the cultural artefacts as bridges between the humdrum reality of everyday communal life and the shared sentiments, moral values and collective fantasies. Seeing the failure of the dreams of social wholeness (the social scope of such wholeness varies from society to society) to live up to the reality they knew around them, the people removed these dreams from ordinary life and relocated them in the context of ritual and ceremony. There they are sheltered from the confrontation with reality which would prove time and again their futility and incompatibility with the requirements of everyday life.<sup>15</sup> They are kept there within reach but away from the danger of exposure to the ridicule and devaluation which would be meted out to them by everyday mundanity. Within the ceremonial or ritualistic context they acquire a sort of empirical demonstration and practical dimension<sup>16</sup> or at least the status of 'probability'.<sup>17</sup>

What is otherwise unsubstantiated and potentially improbable in the present world [sentiments, collective fantasies and moral values without a practical reference] is now validated, somehow proven by its existence in another [ceremonial], distant one.<sup>18</sup>

Displaced meaning is culturally specific. Nevertheless the artefacts, like the 'mission', which deal with ceremonial activity are likely candidates for the practice of 'displacement' on either side of the cultural border. This accounts for the richness of meaning accumulated in the mission-as-artefact and its propensity to stimulate and enhance the perception of those who interact with it. The vast scope of the surplus of meaning inherent in this artefact gives ample space for the sense of shared sociality in which multi-denoted meaning remains absorbed within an illusory oneness of a singular artefact, the mission. Hence, membership of a given parish, following the

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<sup>15</sup> M. Douglas and B. Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, New York, 1978.

<sup>16</sup> M. Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Naming of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

<sup>17</sup> C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, 1973.

<sup>18</sup> McCracken, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

'mission law' (*bihainim pasin bilong misin*), constitutes the identity which is often stressed above the identity with Christianity at large.<sup>19</sup>

The mission, by participating in the development of infrastructure (roads, schools, clinics), by organising and participating in communal works during weekdays and by assuming a ceremonial role on Sundays, lent itself to the process of double-denoting. Its utilitarian function enhanced the status of the tribal neighbourhood associated with the mission presence, and its ceremonial role was loaded with 'displaced meaning'. In this way the mission served as a bridge between everyday life and religious, ceremonial life. 'Goods [cultural artefacts] are one of the devices that can be used to help in the recovery of this "displaced meaning".'<sup>20</sup> Because of its capacity the mission could also serve as a bridge between the cultures in their quests for mutual understanding.

The ability of the artefacts not only to transform their meaning from the utilitarian to the ceremonial context but from one culture to another testifies to the richness of the 'surplus of meaning' contained in them. In the process of appropriation of the artefacts from one cultural context to another, some of the meaning the artefacts have had in their original context remains as well.<sup>21</sup> However, the likelihood that the original meaning will be retained over the cultural border is greatest when the communicating parties become directly involved in a common action/experience with each other through the shared medium of a given artefact.

In order that physical, direct interaction should produce for both sides some insight into the meaning of the mediating artefact the existence of parity (respect) on the part of both partners is required. In other words neither partner should feel coerced into economic, emotional or any other form of direct dependency, for such dependency could impede the process of communication. This brings us to the next part of the model.

## 2. Physical engagement: the Hageners' encounter with the missionaries

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<sup>19</sup> As if realising the partiality of their exposure to Christianity, the Highlanders refer to it as 'mission law', whatever the relationship such a law may have to Christianity at large. By contrast, the missionaries view themselves in a broader, Christian, though denominationally-divided, manner.

<sup>20</sup> McCracken, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Clifford, *op. cit.*, 1988.

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In the Western Highlands, the moral standards normally operative only within the close-knit patrilineal clan<sup>22</sup> are extended to all participants in shared work. The meaning of shared work goes beyond the work's practical ramification. Common experience within the project delineates the scope of moral-relatedness for the duration of the project. The individualities of the co-workers are subsumed into the identity of the project. The leading and following which takes place within the project does not constitute a hierarchy and this is reflected in the behaviour of the participants towards each other. The special moral attitude of all involved creates for a limited time a bond of 'respect' in which a hierarchy is seen rather as 'differentiation'.

The physical presence of the mission within a foreign culture and the personal characteristics of the missionaries provide the parishioners with the mediating experience which they need in order to guess at the missionaries' motives for their involvement in mission work. This gives further space for insight into the content of Occidental ontology and spirituality which has given rise to the mission as an institution. Understanding, as constructed on perception and memory, is always mediated by experience:

The facts of perception and memory maintain themselves only in so far as they are mediated, and thus given significance beyond their mere isolated existence. ... What falls in any way within experience partakes of the rational form of the mind. As mental content, any part of experience is something more than a particular impression having only the attributes of existence. As already baptized into the life of the mind, it partakes of its logical nature and moves on the plane of universality ...<sup>23</sup>

The Hageners and the Whites used limited coercion and enticement in order to ensure the success of their respective projects. The Whites wanted the Hageners' labour while the Hageners wanted shells and steel tools as well as to engage the newcomers in the relationships of exchange. In other

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<sup>22</sup> W. Dabrowski, 'A Line to Heaven: Gamagai Religious Imagination', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, 1991, pp. 43-74.

<sup>23</sup> J. E. Creighton, 'Reason and Feeling', *Philosophical Review*, 30, 1921, p. 469.



words they both constructed the condition of 'respect' which was abstracting from the intrinsic inequality which stood tacitly behind them. Levinas analyses the situation thus:

To show respect cannot mean to subject oneself; yet the other does command me. I am commanded, that is recognised as someone capable of realizing a work. To show respect is to bow down not before the laws, but before a being who commands a work from me. But for this command to not involve humiliation - which would take from me the very possibility of showing respect - the command I receive must also be a command to command him who commands me. It consists in commanding a being to command me. This reference from a command to a command is the fact of saying 'we', of constituting a party. By reason of this reference of one command to another, 'we' is not the plural of 'I'.<sup>24</sup>

As far as this process of the elimination of hierarchy, hence coercion and discipline, was concerned, the Hageners and missionaries were equal, subsumed under the morality of the communal project (building up the parish), and remained in a relationship of 'respect'.

Through the direct proximity of the interaction with the missionaries the Hageners were bestowing on the mission the moral conditions of communal work. This allowed both parties to behave in a spontaneous manner, unhampered by the etiquette conventionally followed which preserves social hierarchies. Such unfettered freedom of reaction was in tune with the Hageners' spontaneous, often playful way of living yielding a glimmer of meaning to the respective parties as to the involvement of the other.<sup>25</sup>

Direct action, because it has an emotional dimension, is able to expand the interaction. The 'mood-signs'<sup>26</sup> give meaning to the artefact (e.g. in this case the mission) by deconstructing it to comprehensible, experiential components, and then reconstructing it in the form of a prevailing

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<sup>24</sup> E. Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, ed. A. Lingis, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1987, p. 43.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. A. Vetlesen, 'Why Does Proximity Make a Moral Difference?', *Praxis International*, 12, January, 1993, pp. 371-86.

<sup>26</sup> G. Bateson, 'A Theory of Play and Fantasy', in *Semiotics, An Introductory Anthology*, ed. Robert E. Innis, Indiana University Press, 1985, pp.129-144.

interpretation of the meaning of the artefact. In the case under discussion, the direct interaction allowed the mission to be perceived through a myriad of particular moments of common action, which because of their binding effects presented the historical process as a constellation of mood-charged events. The cultural artefact (mission) was largely identified with the missionaries and their personal styles and beliefs, not always endorsed by the official institution which they served (e.g. dissenting attitudes on birth control, baptising of polygamists, etc.).

To bestow a partisan meaning on the cultural artefact and to subject this meaning to the ongoing process of transformation, in relation to the evolving perception and insights gleaned through interpersonal interaction, requires that the subjects operate within changing conceptual conditions. In other words he/she retains the agency of interpretation and the ability to give this interpretation some form of phenomenal manifestation. The domain of play as a social activity provides a good paradigm for such conditions.

### 3. Play, fantasies and symbolic communication

Play and fantasies are the context in which consciousness becomes reorganised, hence providing for the possibility of seeing the cultural artefacts in a slightly modified, de-centred perspective.<sup>27</sup> Play and fantasies, like ritual activity and various forms of art, belong to the realm of symbolic activity through which people explore and modify their relationship with the living environment delineated by the set of cultural artefacts in which they live and act.

Play involves a process of 'double denotation' in which the play-action, understood as a virtual utterance, is equivocal to the statement, these actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand would denote.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> G. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, New York, 1972; M. Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. D. F. Bouchard and S. Simon, Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 208.

<sup>28</sup> Bateson, 'A Theory' p. 125.

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This 'virtual utterance' and its psychosomatic implication have the power to influence the consciousness of perception and assimilation of the alien cultural artefact into its own cultural milieu. This is a crucial condition which provides for the interpretation of the phenomenon of conversion.<sup>29</sup>

I will illustrate the dynamics of communication and the role of 'triadic' structures in this communication on the basis of Hageners' experiences with the Whites. Particular instances of the missionary-Hagener encounter will be presented later in this paper.

### **Introducing the Hageners**

The inhabitants of the Wahgi River Valley of the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea, speakers of the Melpa language, and the white, English-speaking Australians, the Leahy brothers, met for the first time in 1933. The former had not been in contact with the societies dwelling over the surrounding mountain ranges and indeed had no knowledge of the existence of populations other than their own. This isolation of the Melpa speakers, known subsequently as the Hageners after the name of main town, Mt Hagen, founded by the newcomers on their territory, was the reason why the expedition did not have interpreters with them since among the populations contacted on the way nobody knew Melpa. Communication between the members of the Leahys' expedition and the Hageners was conducted by means of gestures and images. Shotguns, steel tools, phonograph music, and aeroplanes became forms through which the Hageners viewed and evaluated the newcomers. They themselves were more available for the newcomers' scrutiny with their houses, gardens, weapons and decoration as well as some aspects of social life, e.g. warfare, being visible. Since 'seeing is looking through tradition' (Boas), each side evaluated the other by means of images generated by the objects, the physical appearance and the gestures they observed in each other.

To explain the attraction goods have to a given people one should learn about the value of respective items in the given population, their functional

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<sup>29</sup> Peter G. Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation. A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

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appeal, in utilitarian and Langerian terms,<sup>30</sup> and their place in the overall social and moral organisation. For Hageners, a cultural theme or 'cultural artefact'<sup>31</sup> providing the perspective for 'seeing' foreign items and converting them to 'presentational symbols' is the *moka* exchange with its inherent criteria which determine whether or not the presentation is successful. Rich decoration in the form of plumage, shells and body painting displayed by a wealth-giving party is designed to impress the viewers with its opulence, power of imagination and resourcefulness. The presenters hide their bodies but at the same time display the hidden powers of mental agility, political will and moral rectitude within the clan they belong to. Pigs, shells and money, the basic stock of exchanges, are always enhanced by some rare, unexpected gift included in a timely manner for maximum effect. A pig of enormous size obtained from some government-run farm, a python, an albino marsupial given in a 'surprise *moka*' occupy a similar categorical position to phonographs, shotguns and now, increasingly, cars, trucks, and videos. They are testimony to group strength, resourcefulness and viability as potential political and military allies. 'Objects of power' (*samting i gat pawa*), the Hageners call them, since having hold of them gives power, good feeling and political clout in the area.

The Hageners derive a similar sense of well-being and success from attracting to their territory an infrastructure (roads, airstrips), services (medical clinic, shops, workshops) as well as missions themselves. Though both goods and services and religious institutions could be seen as belonging to the same category of 'cultural power objects' there is a marked difference among the elements of the category since the Hageners do 'different things' with each item of the category. In the process of acting the people transform the meaning that the cultural artefacts originally held for them. At the same time they gain a new awareness, derived from the perceived difference between the initial meaning and the one they eventually arrive at through their actions. Different objects have a different capacity for generating the transformation in awareness and this capacity depends upon the depth of moral issues involved.

Soon after 1933 both the administration and the missionaries reported great successes in their work among the Highlanders. Within 30 years, even

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. n. 11 above.

<sup>31</sup> Simmel, *op. cit.*

with the interruption caused by World War II, most of the Highlands came under administration control and adopted Christianity, predominantly Lutheran and Catholic. The population refrained from warfare, adopted a limited form of cash economy, and developed chains of *moka* exchanges on an unprecedented scale.

While government success at pacification has been presented in the literature as being due to the Hageners' fear of repression at the hands of the police and court officials, the missionaries' success was explained in terms of the 'prestige' their presence bestowed on the hosting group. It has been argued that the competitive and volatile character of the Hageners' polity led each of the political units (tribes, clans) to get a competitive edge over their neighbours by obtaining items of power which included both European material means as well as mission stations. It was a matter of 'keeping up with the Joneses' or risking marginalisation and defeat.<sup>32</sup> The missionaries themselves, surprised at the rate of conversion in the Western Highlands (more than 70 percent of population claimed to be Christians by 1980), explained the phenomenon by citing the timely intervention of the Holy Spirit on their behalf.<sup>33</sup>

Although the way Christianity was viewed in the Western Highlands could not be separated from its image already embedded in the Occidental powers, the opening of relationships with the missions and a positive response to them did not necessarily imply capitulation to these powers. The Hageners' interest in the mission was not just their attempt to 'romance those powers'. It was also a response to the mission as cultural artefact. For the Highlanders, any interaction with such a cultural artefact would yield a gradual understanding of the political, economic and moral aspects of the colonial project as a whole, and might possibly reveal 'something in it for me'. They viewed the mission as a chain in a 'line of power' which would unfold for them the source of Occidental powers. The mission's readiness

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<sup>32</sup> J. Watson, 'Pigs, Fodder and the Jones Effect in Postpomean New Guinea', *Ethnology*, vol. 16, no. 1, Jan., 1977, pp. 57-70.

<sup>33</sup> W. A. Ross, 'Ethnological Notes on Mt. Hagen Tribes (Mandated Territory of New Guinea)', *Anthropos*, 31, 1936, pp. 341-63; W. A. Ross, 'The Catholic Mission in the Western Highlands', in *The History of Melanesia*, Second Waigani Seminar, University of Papua and New Guinea with the Australian National University, Port Moresby and Canberra, 1969, pp. 319-27.

to set up dwellings in the countryside was seen as an actual opportunity to gain an understanding of the newcomers.<sup>34</sup>

The Hageners' eagerness to gain a competitive edge over their neighbours on the one hand and to retain parity on the other is a constant feature present in the logic of warfare, *moka* exchanges and compensation policy. While the goods attracted by the tribesmen are valued as the objects of presentations given away in *moka*, the infrastructure like roads and institutions such as mission, schools and clinics remain on the hosts' territories. The symbolic value which underlies both goods and infrastructure is that they embody the ingenuity of those who manage to get hold of them. It is the process of acquisition and deployment of the objects and infrastructure that engages the self and transforms it into an ever higher level of awareness. The transformative power it entails is not known a priori, hence the persistent openness to experimentation provoking the ubiquitous quests for some advantage and insight with the 'I am only trying now' (*traim tasol*) heard so often in the Highlands. The Hageners consider themselves the 'owners of the mission' and the mission presence on their territory is a trophy for their collective moral strength and insightfulness. The self, transformed through the relationship with the objects and institutions and with the other people with whom it interacts by means of these objects and institutions, expands its own awareness.

### **Encountering the Gamagai of the Jimi Valley**

I will elaborate on the issue of conversion as a continuous process of gaining individual and social awareness by citing the case of the interaction of a Melpa-speaking tribe in the Jimi Valley, north of the Wahgi Valley,<sup>35</sup> with the mission and its teaching among the Gamagai. First, however, I

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<sup>34</sup> The different responses by the New Guinea Highlanders to the early patrol visits to their territories indicate that the response in favour or against such interaction is culturally specific. While the Western Highlanders eagerly opened communications (M. Leahy and M. Crain, *The Land that Time Forgot; adventures and discoveries in New Guinea*, Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1937; Connolly and Anderson, *op. cit.*), the Southern Highlanders rejected outright such contact (E. L. Schieffelin and R. Crittenden, *Like People You See in a Dream: first contact in six Papuan societies*, Stanford University Press, 1991) and almost starved the explorers to death.

<sup>35</sup> Dabrowski, *op. cit.*

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will briefly introduce the socio-cultural set-up of the Gamagai tribe and the main cultural issues which were explored by them in relation to their engagement with the mission.

The Gamagai as a tribe comprises 6 clans. There are 4 tribes in the area. The Gamagai and Mabuge accepted a Catholic mission while the Tipuka and Palke accepted a Lutheran mission. Clans, comprising about 30-40 adults, are patrilineal with the most senior males usually having moral authority over the clan members. It means they are likely to be consulted on political and moral issues but they do not wield any formally institutionalised power over the lives of younger members. Clans are exogamous. The members of the clan are bound together by strong feelings of empathy which guide them towards unconditional mutual assistance in times of need. Theft, killing or malfeelings are claimed not to have a place among the male clan members. They objectify this experience of interconnectedness by means of the spiritual power of *mughlamp* which resides in each clan member and is a constitutive part of their feeling of oneness. At the death of any clan member the *mughlamp* residing in him is transferred to other clan members, so the clan's overall potency is not diminished by an individual's death. Each individual is endowed with the animating force called *min* which leaves the body at the time of death and is transformed into a clan-spirit, *tipokai*. The clan-spirits play an active role in the clan's life, supporting the clan's projects and punishing any intra-clan misdemeanours. Such misdemeanours, which mainly consist of illicit sex with one's brother's wife, have been accommodated within the clan's all-embracing affinity by the introduction of the notion of wicked bush-spirits, *tipokit*, which occasionally enter the heads of clansmen to confuse their sense of non-negotiable commitment to each other. The knowledge of the moral conduct within the clan is acquired spontaneously by virtue of being born and raised by the clan. There is no initiation.

This contrasts sharply with all other forms of social organisation, to which belonging has to be negotiated. The Gamagai tribe is an association of clans based on the will to coordinate political actions publicly expressed in the form of 'promises'. The 'promise' taken by each individual clan extends some aspects of moral conduct from the clan to the tribe. Though killing within the tribe is inadmissible, stealing and seduction are seen not as misdemeanours but rather as risky actions needing great skill and ingenuity to avoid detection by the wronged party which would then claim compensation in return.

### *Not by Word Alone*

All clans constituting the Gamagai tribe entertain a mythical notion of originating from common ancestors without this having any moral significance. The clan-spirits have power only over their own clan people and this power is not extended to members of other clans within the tribe. The relationship with the members of other tribes is not given a priori and is the space of moral wilderness unless organised otherwise. The chain of *moka* exchange linking different tribes together is a form of moral organisation of the social space. Marriage contracts are another similar form of integrating uncharted social relationships with the moral standards of intra-clan relationships.

The mission in Rulna addressed itself primarily to the whole Gamagai tribe. The Gamagai as a whole congratulated themselves with the feat of having attracted the mission to their combined territory and soon after they started to be seen as the collective 'owners' of the mission, a notion that they eventually assumed, using it in their exploration of their own awareness of the moral nature of their social formations.

Because of its rugged terrain and remote location, the Gamagai territory was not contacted by the Europeans until the late 50s. The Catholic mission was established in Rulna in 1965 by a Polish missionary, Fr Bartoszek. In this time the area was missionised by both Lutherans and Catholics but Bartoszek assured the Catholic influence among the Gamagai for succeeding generations by arriving in Rulna on horseback rather than on foot, as did the Lutheran pastor. The Gamagai preferred the image of a horseman since in their opinion it had 'more power' and therefore an association with him seemed more promising. Soon after extensive works were conducted under the auspices of the mission. Roads, bridges, an airstrip, a clinic, a school, mission households, and carpentry workshops were established with the mass and spontaneous participation of the Gamagai men and women. The Catholics conducted their infrastructural works on a much bigger scale than the Lutherans, and so this situation in the early days placed the Gamagai, as Catholics, in an advantageous position vis à vis their neighbours (Palke) who opted for the Lutherans.

### **The Willi Conversion**

The Catholic Gamagai had little trouble in convincing the Mabuge, a tribe dwelling deeper in the forest to join them in their new faith. Then the eyes



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of the ambitious young missionary and the Gamagai turned towards the Willi as a yet unmissionised tribe dwelling in the rugged area of the Jimi Valley. A delegation of ten Gamagai church leaders, headed by Fr Bartoszek visited the Willi by foot and convinced them to throw in their lot with the Catholic mission. The Willi soon after built an airstrip and some suitable dwellings so that the missionary and his Gamagai assistants could arrive by plane and teach the Willi the catechism. In 1968 the first plane arrived at the Willi's airstrip welcomed by the enthusiastic and festively decorated Willi population. The occasion however was marred by the sudden appearance of loose pigs running on the landing strip which almost caused an accident. Fr Bartoszek instructed the Willi to take precautions against the pigs straying onto the airstrip. However the Willi seemed either unable or unwilling to restrict the roaming pigs from entering the landing field and this irritated the missionary so much that when on one of his scheduled arrivals he encountered nine pigs grazing on the airfield he shot them. When the plane attempted to land after the pig slaughter it was shot at by the Willi so Fr Bartoszek aborted the visit altogether.<sup>36</sup>

The Willi demanded compensation for the pigs but Fr Bartoszek refused. He sent a report about the incident to the Bishop in Mt Hagen and awaited his decision on the matter. Not being prepared to wait for the official response, they turned their demands on the Gamagai whom they saw as the 'owners' of the mission. Tense negotiations lasting almost a year managed to avert a war between the Willi and the Gamagai who in the end succumbed to pressure and gave pigs and money. The incident resulted in the Willi severing all contacts with the Catholic mission while the Gamagai were reaffirmed in their position as proprietors of the mission with all its benefits but also its liabilities. This had a significant repercussion on the Gamagai's perception of themselves, an issue I will arrive at shortly.

The Willi's action should be seen as an example of the assertiveness with which the Highlanders related to the Catholic mission. Fr Bartoszek's action, far from being seen as an impassioned deed committed under provocation, invited an instantaneous forthright reaction conducted subsequently through the dealings with the Gamagai until parity was

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<sup>36</sup> There are conflicting accounts of how many pigs and where the shooting took place. Fr Bartoszek claims he killed one roaming pig and not at the Willi's place but in Rulna (personal communication, 1994).

regained and compensation paid. The Highlanders responded forcefully if challenged either by neighbours, the mission or spirits.<sup>37</sup>

Failure to engage or respond when challenged would show a lack of 'respect' to the assailants, treating them as if they were a 'spent' force not even worthy of engagement. Such an insult would generate further destructive action from the assailants which would be in neither the Gamagai's nor the Willi's interest. The involvement of a prescribed mode of reaction within the concept of 'respect' was naturalised to the point of spontaneous reaction preceding any verbal justification.

### **The Dutch Figurines Incident and Exploration of Identity**

The engagement with other people as well as with objects and events has a moral component to it, hence the power to transform the relationship of the self with its social milieu.

In the middle 70s the Dutch Catholics who played the role of occasional sponsors and benefactors to the Rulna mission decided to donate to the mission a load full of mass-produced plaster statues of their own Dutch saints. The erstwhile missionary in Rulna, Fr Joseph, a Pole like his predecessor, did not have any emotional association with these particular saints and what was more, he felt bitterly disappointed that the gift did not represent something more pragmatic and useful for his mission. In a fit of passion he rejected the gift refusing to take delivery of it. He was, he claimed, also motivated by his reluctance to confuse his Gamagai parishioners with a host of human figures not essential to the Christian issues which he tried to convey.

The Gamagai, however, having no traditional notion of any Supreme Being, did know the value of clan-spirit support and therefore had a keen interest in the notion of saints and the ways in which they could be induced to intercede on behalf of humans with God. The rejection of the statues was interpreted by the Gamagai as the mission's attempt to deprive them of the

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<sup>37</sup> If the Spirit of the Sky *Tei* killed pigs or people in a storm the Gamagai would stage a ritual of defiance, shooting arrows into the sky and threatening further action if the incident ever recurred. They say emphatically that had they failed to respond to *Tei*'s aggression they would be regarded as 'rubbish people' by the spirit, and likely singled out for further aggression. Their counteraction shows 'respect' to the spirit and sets the relationship on a parity basis.

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power they felt they would have had access to, had the statues been placed in their local church. They thought that Fr Joseph's decision was motivated by his concern that they would misuse the sudden influx of power which would come to them once the line to heaven was established through the saints.

Deprived of the support of the Dutch saints, they went on to develop their own line of communication with heaven. They drew from memory the list of their own deceased who, chosen by what seemed to be the Christian criteria of selection, that is their congenial personalities while alive, were elevated by them to the ranks of saints. As a result an indigenous cult developed of home-grown 'saints'. Their memorabilia were housed in a specially constructed chapel and they were appealed to in times of need. This indigenous initiative ran parallel and amicably with the mainstream church activity, with the same people participating in both church and 'chapel' activities.

The Gamagai 'saints' soon came to represent a generalisation on the quality of the individual clan-spirits. Unlike the clan-spirits they were believed to have power over the whole Gamagai tribe which became unified around its affiliation with the Catholic mission in Rulna. Instances of sickness became interpreted in a manner which gave an experiential dimension to the innovation. The instances of sickness were interpreted by the ritual specialists as the results of the saints' punishment for misbehaviour.

These relationships within the Gamagai tribe were declared to be identical in their moral condition to the relationships once reserved for the clan. In this way they not only got the tribe aligned, by means of installing the overarching figures of the tribal saints, in an analogous manner to what was for the clan a group of clan-spirits, they also aligned the clan morality with the Christian morality over the social body of the tribe. This was a cultural and political innovation with huge ramifications, since if it were solidified and turned into a lasting entity, it would render the tribe indissoluble in similar manner to the solidity and indissolubility of the clan. This innovation was not imposed from above by any political or religious authority but developed as a result of an active approach to the mission and its teaching as a cultural artefact open to manipulation and scrutiny in order to render some new self-understanding about their socio-moral conditions. In the course of their actions they developed an awareness which allowed them to 'see' things previously hidden to them. What they

saw, in terms of moral development extensive both on a social scale and in the depth of its concern, would be likely to correspond with the directions of moral considerations with which the Christian mission would like to be associated.

## **Conclusions**

Far from mechanical syncretism or the religious bricolage in which elements of cultures were arranged in a tentative manner, the Hageners engaged the objects, institutions and events in a face-to-face reciprocal manner. This involvement expanded the awareness towards universalism through the expansion of the moral category of clan with the relationship of blood affiliation to the religio-political category of tribe-parish. It produced the effect of limited universalism, one which, though encouraged by Christian teaching, evolved from within the local cultural discourse rather than being imposed by the colonial and nation-building projects.

In conclusion, conversion for the Gamagai entailed the acceptance of the mission as the cultural artefact with which they became actively engaged in an on-going process of self-reformulation in terms of their own evolving socio-moral identities and sensibilities. By comparing the Christian liturgy and practices to their own, by being confronted by external hostility directed towards the mission, the hostility which helped them see their own basic identity as a tribe-parish rather than a clan, by questioning the mission's goodwill towards them in relation to the Dutch saints' figurines, the Gamagai remained constantly engaged with the mission and continued to be transformed by this engagement. It is to the credit of both their moral imagination and the mission's capacity to be a cultural artefact for 'surplus meaning' that this engagement has continued to yield transformative inspiration. In the same way, through the practice of 'displaced meaning' within their own culture, the indigenous cultural artefacts (e.g. pigs, dance and decoration) displace meaning from the mundane and functional to the ceremonial and back again.

It was the Hageners' propensity to act, as if tentatively without depending on any prior conceptual elaboration, that provided for them the ambiance of play through which their conceptual categories could be rearranged. Similarly it was due to the physical proximity between the Hageners and the missionaries, and the ability to take assertive action in

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mutual dealings (challenging of missionary pig-killing by Willi) that the relationship of 'respect' was forged.

It was in such conditions that the full moral, political and utilitarian capacity of the mission and their own capacity to engage it was gradually revealed to the Highlanders. They began to extrapolate and adjust such knowledge to the relationship with the wider context of the mission, the national and the global socio-cultural-political context. What started as an involvement, initiated by the attraction of the images which the mission represented to them, was with each transformation gaining a moral and cognitive component, thus making each consecutive stage richer in revelation about their own social and individual identity and the ways and strategies to deal with the powers of the Occident.