

# On Conversion from the Global to the Local: Going Beyond One's Best Understanding in Sepik Initiation

Patrick F. Gesch

Early in my engagement with Sepik cultures, it was impressed upon me that initiation had a central role to play in culture and the religious character of the society. This was true not only where initiation rituals were actively practised, but even where rituals had ceased being performed and existed largely in memory<sup>1</sup>. My earliest residence in the Sepik region was in the role of a Catholic parish priest in the eastern Negrie half of the Yangoru District, from 1973 to 1983. During this time I heard many accounts of Yangoru initiation rituals for men, but found it difficult to sort out the essentials of the undertaking. In this period of time two initiation rituals for men were performed, having something of the character of revivals<sup>2</sup>. I was given a written account by an informant who participated in the Hanyak ritual, which indicated that it was a rather brief set of rituals. At the same time, however, women's initiation, the *telek hrie*, was celebrated frequently during the ten years of my residence in the area<sup>3</sup>. Since it was a major mobilisation in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Roscoe has drawn up an oral historical account of the traditional Yangoru initiation: Paul Roscoe, 'Male Initiation among the Yangoru Boiken', in Nancy Lutkehaus *et al.* (eds), *Sepik Heritage. Tradition and Change in Papua New Guinea*, pp. 402-13, Durham, North Carolina, 1990. I had previously given the accounts that I ran across in Patrick F. Gesch, *Initiative and Initiation. A Cargo Cult-Type Movement in the Sepik Against its Background in Traditional Village Religion*, St Augustin, 1985, pp. 255-57. Roscoe went on with Scaglione to ask the question why initiation survives or dies in various areas of the Sepik, in Paul Roscoe and Richard Scaglione, 'Male Initiation and European Intrusion in the Sepik: A Preliminary Analysis', in Lutkehaus *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 414-23.

<sup>2</sup> One enclosure was constructed in Nimpihu in West Yangoru in 1974. I visited it and went inside on one occasion. Another enclosure was made beside the highway in Hanyak in 1975, but I did no more than walk around it, and observe its rise with my every fortnightly trip to Wewak. For this enclosure a description by a participant has been published in Carl Wallison, 'Initiation Rites for Boys in Sassoaya,' *Grassroots Research Bulletin*, Madang, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 15-18.

<sup>3</sup> For descriptions of this see Cheryl Camp, 'A Female Initiation Rite of the Negrie Area', in Norman C. Habel (ed.), *Powers, Plumes and Piglets*, Adelaide, 1979, pp. 68-83, and also Gesch, *op.cit.*, pp. 260-62.

*The End of Religions? Religion in an Age of Globalisation*

Negrie area, I observed this event some ten times or more. The one village of the Negrie area which did have active rituals for men was Kiniambu. It was not an easy matter for me to gain access to observe the Kiniambu ceremonies. I was told I should not go because it involved nakedness and a penis operation, which were unfitting items for me to observe. Later it was also revealed that a predecessor of mine, a priest of the parish, had condemned the practices roundly. He had demonstrated his opposition to the performance of ceremonies to the extent of smashing a Marian statue against the leg of a big man, and had stalked off to Negrie leaving such a curse as resulted in the death of three little children the following week. I was eventually able to persuade people of my more collaborative point of view, and observed five ceremonies which were nominated initiation ceremonies or had the structure of the initiation rituals<sup>1</sup>. The events in Kiniambu, some five hours walking distance away in the Kunai plains, aroused the interest of the Negrie people in their own initiation tradition. It was said that the Negrie rituals for men were put aside because of the coming of the new times. Men felt they had not been granted the competency required in the new world as it came over Mount Rurun from the coastal areas. There was secondarily the matter of condemnation of initiation on the grounds of religious enlightenment, by the priests and church leaders who were instrumental in bringing this new world.

Traditional village religions are thought to be subjects for conversion, but not themselves proselytising. Trompf once supplied the dictum: nobody converts to a primal religion<sup>2</sup>. The reality would be rather: village religions do not proselytise, but they do universalise<sup>3</sup>. That is, they presume everybody thinks and operates the way they do, and do not really imagine that anyone could do anything from a different perspective. The village might occasionally be pictured as bulldozed aside by the coming of Christianity, but my characterisation would be that the members of the village tradition work intensively to absorb the new realities into their own scheme of operating.

Out of this background in Negrie, I made a move to Madang, where I found myself in charge of Sisiak Parish. Sisiak has a large proportion of migrants from the Sepik River villages, and many of

---

<sup>1</sup> Gesch, *op. cit.* pp. 225-55.

<sup>2</sup> Garry Trompf, personal communication.

<sup>3</sup> Gesch, 'Miracles, Bibles and World Domination', in Patrick F. Gesch (ed.), *Gospel Transformations. Inculturation and Dialogue in Traditional Village Religion*, pp. 53-58, Madang, 1994, p. 53.

## *On Conversion from the Global to the Local*

them exhibit the scars of the demonstrative River initiations. It was my pre-judgement, fed with journal articles, magazine accounts and television articles about the colourful cultural practices of the River, that made me feel I had at last come to the core of Sepik initiation when I was in contact with the Sepik River people of Sisiak. Yet in fact it would be hard to put the number of people in the home villages practising this demonstrative initiation as more than 10,000 out of a Provincial population of 250,000. From 1983 until the present I have tried to gain an understanding of what happens to people who go through such a ceremony.

I made frequent field trips to the villages of my best informants about the skin cutting tradition. These were mostly from the Torembi Parish area, from the villages of Yanket and Yamuk, in what is generally termed the Sawos area in opposition to the Iatmul area<sup>1</sup>. The distinction Sawos – Iatmul is not held in high regard by the urban villagers themselves, but these days both sides can be led to indulge in telling stories of their superiority to the other and how terribly, and even viciously, they exploit the other side<sup>2</sup>. Sawos has the overtones of ‘the poor bush people whom we exploit.’ In a friendlier spirit, both sides will say they speak the same language and have the same culture. Most of the initiation ceremonies that I have observed since 1984 have been done from a residential base in Kempiem Village of Yamuk. When I visited the area in 1994 there were no less than ten initiation ceremonies taking place within an hour’s travel from Yamuk, during the course of the Christmas holiday period. For one of those villages, Yen Chamangua, there is a glossy pictorial report in the Air Niugini magazine *Paradise* for the month of July 1999 describing a ceremony apparently conducted

---

<sup>1</sup> The distinction can be further explored in Philip Staalsen, ‘The Languages of the Sawos Region (New Guinea),’ *Anthropos*, Vol. 70, pp. 6-16, 1975, and Markus Schindlbeck, *Sago bei den Sawos (Mittelsepik, Papua New Guinea: Untersuchungen über die Bedeutung von Sago in Wirtschaft, Sozialordnung und Religion)*, Basel, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> The Sepik River village, Korogo, lies at the entrance of the road leading to Yamuk village. One Yamuk tradition tells of how they ambushed and slaughtered most of the Korogo who trusted so foolishly as to come to a market situation in the area between their villages. The young men wanted to wipe out the whole population, but the big men cooled them down saying, ‘Whenever you want to put black paint on your faces for a dance, you will only have to go nearby to Korogo to kill somebody, and then you can have the decoration of a homicide’ (OT: Mariambon-Kempiem, July 1999). Now the young men regret allowing that decision, because the Korogo in peace time have multiplied greatly.

## *The End of Religions? Religion in an Age of Globalisation*

earlier in that year<sup>1</sup>. There are oral reports of initiations held in the area at the end of 1999.

When I attend the initiation ceremonies, I am usually admitted on the recognition that I am functioning as a Catholic priest, coming from Sisiak back to the East Sepik Province. I am usually hosted by catechists or church workers who are taking part in the ceremonies. On one occasion I was invited to hold a Catholic Mass on the mound next to an initiation enclosure so that the celebration was both for the boys in the enclosure and the men, women and children outside the enclosure. I was struck with the unusual circumstance that half the communicants were naked, and the other half were not. However, it was regularly said to me in tones varying from severe to joking, that I should have my skin cut to enter the enclosure. No one should be admitted to the enclosure without the crocodile marks on his skin, but there were some exceptions beside myself. Some older men who feel the time for becoming a novice is long past for them do enter the enclosure with impunity (but other older men without marks stay away from the whole ritual). Surprisingly, considering the great amount of rhetoric about separation from women at this time, some older women walk into the enclosure to comfort the naked boys being cut.

At one of the ceremonies I visited in 1994, I was weighing up very seriously the necessity of my being cut if I were to pursue my research in this matter. When a friend of mine told me that he had let blood from his penis in preparation for the ceremonies, I was disconcerted to find how far this thinking was from my own attitude, and wanted to pursue the matter no further<sup>2</sup>. During that ceremony, however, a younger man from a distant village expressed outright hostility that I was being allowed into the ceremony: 'This is not your culture! I will take your clothes off you and cut your skin right now.' He sought to arouse feeling against my presence in the enclosure, but since I was sufficiently known to other people, no action resulted. It was against this background of invitations to have my skin cut, and even threats that cutting would forcefully be applied to me, that I decided it was appropriate to enter a Sepik initiation enclosure and have my skin cut with the two thousand or so marks of the crocodile, as set down by the tradition<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Constant, 'The Call of the Pukpuk,' *Paradise*, Port Moresby, No. 134 July – August 1999, pp. 43-46.

<sup>2</sup> See Gesch, 'There Can Be Neither Black Nor White,' *Verbum SVD*, Vol. 37, No. 1-2, pp. 93-118, p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> A similar demand was recounted by Tony Swain (personal communication 3rd Oct 1999) who had intended to observe initiation in Australian Aboriginal

## *On Conversion from the Global to the Local*

The sociological observer can be subject to the charge of voyeurism. Initiation ceremonies involve pain and nakedness. To be a detached observer at this time is to run the risk of missing the humanity of the subject under review. How long and how many times can a person calmly observe skin being cut and pain being endured, while the subject is exposed to the gaze of those around, and still harbour the feeling that this could never happen to the observer?

The occasion for my participation arose in April 1999 when the town dwellers from Marap Village next to Kempiem decided that they would generate an initiation in their Wagol settlement in Madang. The site was only twenty minutes' walking from my house, and an equal distance from the town hospital - two considerations which I thought were important. I entered the ceremony and had my skin cut, and the following is an account of the values that I find represented in that activity. In accordance with a report that I published in 1996, my focus remains on the incredible difference which is experienced when entering another culture, even one that had become familiar over some years of inquiry<sup>1</sup>. Before entering the ceremony I reported to an Ethics Committee of the University concerning the questions of whether I was simply going native or was exploiting the culture.

---

custom. When he began to decline the invitation to have his skin cut, it was impressed on him that he had a short period of time to submit or to remove himself.

Previously published accounts of the initiation include Gesch, 'Miracles' and 'Black nor White'; Jürg Schmid and Christin Kocher Schmid, *Söhne des Krokodils. Männerhausrituale und Initiation in Yensan, Zentral-Iatmul, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea*, Basel, 1992; Jürg Wassmann, 'Der Biß des Krokodils: Die ordnungsstiftende Funktion der Namen in der Beziehung zwischen Mensch und Umwelt am Beispiel der Initiation, Nyaura, Mittel-Sepik', in *Neuguinea. Nutzung und Deutung der Umwelt*, 2 Vol. Frankfurt am Main, 1987, pp. 511-57; Jürg Wassmann, 'The Nyaura Concepts of Space and Time', in Nancy Lutkehaus (ed.), *Sepik Heritage*, Durham, North Carolina, 1990. See also the film documentaries of H. Schlenker, 'Tod der Novizen', 'Novizen in der Urzeit', 'Neugeburt der Novizen', in *Iatmul (Neuguinea, Mittlerer Sepik) – Männerinitiation in Japanaut*, Filme E 2812-14, Göttingen, 1984.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gesch, 'Black Nor White', p. 115 quoting Margaret Mead's autobiography: 'When Ruth Benedict sent us a first draft of *Patterns of Culture*, Reo [Fortune] commented that it was not enough to say that cultures are different; the point was that they are "incredibly different"', *Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years*, New York, 1972, p. 195.

## *The End of Religions? Religion in an Age of Globalisation*

The explanation I give of my entering this event of a different culture is built around the abiding difference from my own North Queensland culture. The cultural boundaries between peoples cannot be removed, but the boundary markers can be moved closer to each other. Put more dynamically, there are few more exhilarating challenges than trying to find understandings of a world which is continually presenting values that challenge my own. In the light of this I wish to set down my understanding of the event I undertook in terms of five antinomies, five sets of polarities which express difference but engagement:

- 1) searching for understanding by social anthropological method in the matter of participation or observation;
- 2) the political questions of citizenship and belonging, of understanding between black and white;
- 3) the polarities of microcosmic and macrocosmic religion, of replacing tribal religion and its own transformation;
- 4) the missiological questions of converting and being converted, of local belonging and of moving on; and
- 5) the antinomy of village life in the national and urban contexts.

I do not intend to write of these antinomies in such a way as to remove the conflicts. This is more a matter of renewing the questioning process. Michael Carrithers rightly objects to the portrayal of cultures by Ruth Benedict as delicate shells which are shattered when brought into conflict with each other:

Benedict says only that '[Ramon] straddled two cultures whose values and ways of thought were incommensurable.' On the sea-shell theory of mutually exclusive and frangible cultures, they are perhaps incommensurable, perhaps even mutually unintelligible. Yet somehow Ramon was managing to get along living according to some form or other. And Benedict herself was managing to talk to him, managing to learn something from him, managing even to participate to some degree in his life.'<sup>1</sup>

All of us, as loci of mixed cultural contact, manage to get by negotiating our way through a range of conflicts. The fact that these

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Carrithers, *Why Humans Have Cultures: Explaining Anthropology and Social Diversity*, Oxford, 1992, p. 20.

## *On Conversion from the Global to the Local*

antinomies cannot be resolved neatly means that there is much to be lost and won on each side, and the answers have to satisfy whole social groups, not just one individual who is involved.

### **1. When the Observer Participates**

The time honoured method of participant observation in the social sciences has been written about extensively<sup>1</sup> and a bulletin board exists on the Internet for current discussion. Generally it would be stressed that there is a problem with the method when the observer participates too much. Necessary perspective is lost in the pursuit of objective accounting.

It has been my experience of the method that observation makes clear a lot of things that you have been told about but cannot quite follow from an oral account because you are too far out of the context. At the same time, once you have participated in an event, it needs a lot of verbal explanation to catch up on the significance of what you have participated in. Without participation, there is often the feeling in a description that 'the words are right, but the music is wrong.' A fine example of this is to be found in the event of *rabim as long lek* (to rub your buttocks on someone's shin) in Sepik initiation. Bateson's analysis of cryptic homosexuality here is not without relevance, as Herdt assembles the material<sup>2</sup>, but in observing this at the best of times, there is a tragic, devoted element, which moves the participants to tears. An uncle grimly lines himself up on his nephew's leg, and slides down into the mud in a display of helpless devotion. The nephew reels away weeping. It basically means that a mother and her brother do everything for a son or nephew, and this total dedication is just the order of things, an order of self-sacrifice. Morgenthaler is another who found the same difficulty in analysis of this ritual when he was presented with both views without having been an observer<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> See for example, Peter D. Ashworth, 'The Meaning of "Participation" in Participant Observation', *Qualitative Health Research*, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 366-87. There is a range of other Sage publications also on field research.

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert H. Herdt, *Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia*, Berkeley, 1984, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> In an interview with his informant after a feast to end an initiation: 'Kwandemi: "Mein *wau*, der Abran von Kanganamun, der gestern auch in Palimbei war, ist mir nach dem Fest mit seinem nackten Arsch das Schienbein hinuntergerutscht. Ich habe mich so geschämt für ihn und bin ganz traurig geworden, weil alle im Männerhaus zugeschaut haben."

'Seitdem ich mich mit der latmul-Kultur beschäftige, ist mir, wie auch allen

## *The End of Religions? Religion in an Age of Globalisation*

When the present writer moved from detached observer to participant, one of the first realities to come into question was the idea given in a recent popular magazine article: 'The repetition of the dance until dusk will slowly drive the already initiated men into a deep trance' and the candidates chew herbs as 'a narcotic to sustain the pain and the stress.'<sup>1</sup> In reality the remote unfeeling attitude of the leaders is more like a theatrical or liturgical role, and the pain of the victims was all that could be endured voluntarily. Four aspirin tablets would have made a dramatically improved contribution to endurance with equanimity. A deaf-mute friend of the writer delights in recounting to anyone who will pay attention that the writer squirmed like a worm, while he himself lay still as a crocodile. If there was any beneficial narcotic effect to be had, it was not through simple participation in the rituals and the night of dancing.

Not surprisingly, the most troublesome aspects of the rituals turn out to be the political and economic ones. The initiates are treated like 'baby crocodiles coming out of their eggs', and part of this is to be treated as of no account and humiliated. The initiates, not in much mood for joining in the banter of the village, are subject to continued harassment which is meant to pass the time for everyone. *Bilong wanem dispela waitman em i kam? Em i kam bilong stil tasol. Em i no wanpela pata, em i save kokim ol meri long Univesiti.* (Why did this white man come? He came only as a thief to steal our things. He is not much of a priest; he fornicates with the girls at the

---

Ethnologen, die die Bräuche dieses Volkes studiert haben, diese Handlung, die der *wau* am Ende eines *naven* an seinem *lawa* vornimmt, wegen ihrer Rätselhaftigkeit besonders aufgefallen.

'Kwandemi: "Abran hat mich gehalten, als sie mir in Yindabu das Krokodilmuster in die Haut geschnitten haben. Diese Art und Weise, in den Arsch zu vögeln! Das machen die Männer, die es im Versteckten miteinander treiben. Immer nur im Versteckten! Der *lawa* kann das mit seinem *wau* nicht machen. Das kann der Mann nur mit anderen Männern tun."

'Ich: "Bei allen *naven* rutschen die *wau* den *lawa* am Schluß mit nacktem Arsch das Schienbein hinunter. Das hat wenig Ähnlichkeit mit dem Arschvögeln."

'Kwandemi: "Ich weiß nicht, wie es ist. Wenn ich es zu hören bekomme, werde ich es dir sagen."

'Ich: "Gestern hat Abran den Brauch bloß als Hülle verwendet. Er ist als Mann auf dich zugekommen und wollte dich verführen, die Rolle des Mannes einzunehmen, der ihn in den Arsch vögelt." Fritz Morgenthaler, Florence Weiss and Marco Morgenthaler, *Gespräche am sterbenden Fluß. Ethnopschoanalyse bei den latmul in Papua Neuguinea*, Frankfurt am Main, 1986, pp. 154-56.

<sup>1</sup> Constant, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

## *On Conversion from the Global to the Local*

University.) Other participants were subjected to mocking activities such as having a bow tied around the penis, or being made to perform silly drama. These things are said to be in exchange for what was done to a member of the older generation. Obviously these were little humiliations that were felt strongly enough to want to pay them back after ten years or so.

The assembly of men went ahead with all kinds of economic decision making without any regard for the initiates lying nearby. At first it was decided every outsider should pay the leaders of the ceremony K50 and a carton of beer. Rather whimsically this went up to K100 and a carton of beer. In the event it was decided after the ceremonies had finished that there had never been any tradition of paying the leaders of the ceremony. The only payments known traditionally were those made by an initiate to his own particular cutters. All the discussions about money and control, however, were the dominant realities during the weeks of the ceremonies.

A couple of groups of already initiated men caused disturbance in the surrounding camp during the ceremonies. The outrage in reaction to this drunken rowdiness overrode every other matter. The 'Enclosure' was being insulted; payment should be K100 on the spot; the alternative was to go and break down the offender's house. A couple of such events appeared to be breaking out into open village civil war, but I believe it was the heightened sense of politics and economics which made these events such displays of passion.

Presumably a group of Australian participants would have a range of perceptions of such a ceremony. It is a reality of participant observation, however, that it is hard to know what is dominant, and what is strongly felt, until you play a role in the middle of the political situation. The other side of the antinomy is that much objectivity is lost, and ceremonies which encroach on the observer's sense of self are hard to put back into their own cultural context.

## **2. Citizenship and Belonging**

One of the first questions asked by many people after the writer emerged from the enclosure was the simple-hearted question, 'Are you a Papua New Guinean now?' The writer's reaction is usually a feeling of some alarm, and a quick 'No' for an answer. However, if the question comes in the form, 'Are you a Sepik now?' there is more of a readiness to say 'Yes' in the belief that it is more appropriate to claim a belonging at least to the cultural institution of the Haus Tambaran (spirit house). This reaction strikes me as rather

## *The End of Religions? Religion in an Age of Globalisation*

instructive about the nature of black and white relations in Papua New Guinea, and about the meaning of citizenship in particular.

There can be no doubt that naturalised citizenship in PNG does not have a very good reputation. It seems to some PNGans that a last bastion of native independence is being invaded when a white person insists on his rights as a naturalised PNG citizen. Peter Barter, the generally admired, white, ex-Fijian hotel proprietor of Madang, who was elected to Parliament and held with distinction a number of Cabinet positions, was nevertheless repulsed in a large public meeting in Madang that the writer attended. 'No white, naturalised citizen is going to tell us we can't have poker machines in town', shouted a local political figure in reference to Peter Barter to considerable applause. It has been the generally reported experience of missionaries who took out local citizenship, that the step does little to build fellow feeling with black PNGans. A private businessman is expected to feel, however, that he should take out citizenship if he is not to be viewed as an exploitative fly-by-nighter. Even such a businessman's relatives are expected to take on citizenship to prove that the man does not have one foot in either camp, ready to take the money and run, or to use his wife as a conduit for the flight of capital. It was in this light that the writer was hesitant to claim any PNGan citizenship by a ritual backdoor.

In PNG there is a certain simplicity about talking of 'whiteskins and blackskins'. If anything, 'whiteskin' has far more of an economic connotation than a racial one. There are all kinds of things that belong to the appellation 'whiteskin', but they have to do with housing, travel, income and possessions more than with traits of personality or in-built aptitude or distinguishing racial characteristics. Economic distinctions do not seem so hopeless to overcome.

The question of citizenship in this case is foremost one of belonging. There is a rapidly extending awareness that a lot of foreigners are experts or visitors who will be seen for a while and then never again. Such an awareness undermines the ability to be taken seriously; or to initiate a change that might elicit cooperation in any but a randomly experimental way. In the Office of Higher Education of PNG, there has been a series of 68 experts who have come and written up reports as part of a Higher Education Project. The rationalisation of these reports has led to a total of 84 reports. It goes without saying that most of those reports have not been read, some cannot even be located when requested, and all kinds of marvellous ideas have remained at the 'good idea' stage. This is

## *On Conversion from the Global to the Local*

more the pity because many of the consultants were dedicated people wanting to move things along.

It becomes hard to believe that you can initiate real change, or that you are not doing harm, if there is not some long term commitment in PNG. This includes a knowledge of the complexity of feelings abroad in the country, and a feel for the way things get done in terms of political cooperation. Most of all though, it implies some sort of notion of shared ownership, at least to the extent that the change agent is going to bear some of the costs that will be incurred when a risk fails. For a mix of reasons, the writer is not a citizen of PNG, even though his residence in the country began in 1949. Nor does there seem to be the strong moral obligation to become a citizen as there is in Australia, which is trying to weld itself together as a nation of migrants. Even the identity as 'Sepik' is much too encompassing, and it would be rash to claim on the basis of Sawos initiation that there was identity with the Sepik community of, say, Yangoru. The fact of a shared identity with Sawos and Iatmul, on the other hand, becomes hard to deny. It is carved into the writer's skin. This, of course, does not save him from the feeling that he is being continually challenged by sets of values shared in the Sawos world which conflict with his own; and a feeling of mystification about why Sawos people adapt to modern circumstances in ways that he would never advise.

### **3. Microcosmic and Macrocosmic Religion**

Without doubt one of the most serious questions for this writer about entering an initiation enclosure is that concerning the religious tradition he represents and with which he has identified himself, and its own history of reacting to tribal religion. The conflict between Christianity and tribal religion has usually begun with the Commandment: 'You shall have no other gods before me' (Exodus 20:3). If the Haus Tambaran runs under the patronage of other gods, then it would seem to be seriously in conflict with the commandment, and to represent a conflict for a person holding the Christian tradition. This is not the place for a theological debate about the position of Exodus 20:3, but I should give some brief indications of my position on this. The 'Ten Commandments' are amongst the leading achievements of the catechetical movement made urgent by the exile of the Jews from Jerusalem to Babylon after 586 BC. Because of the critical selection of leading Jews for exile and residence in Babylon, the identity of the Jewish people was felt to be under alarming threat. The religious leaders called for a

*The End of Religions? Religion in an Age of Globalisation*

more portable, spiritual worship now that the identity of the Jews was no longer able to be focused on the temple in Jerusalem. They also demanded separation from the other nations, even while living amongst them, 'Do not learn the ways of the nations' (Jeremiah 10:2). The mood was one of intolerance, which was explicitly focused on the other gods as represented by idols. These idols were the very opposite of history, and therefore the very opposite of the Jewish hope that Yahweh would intervene in history to save his people. The gods are therefore given no sympathetic understanding. Little effort is made to understand how the gods function amongst their own peoples. They are ridiculed for being of no historical value to the Jews. That they do not exist is not a thorough-going metaphysical position taken by any prophet.

Even into the times of Christian scriptures, there is some ambivalence about whether other spirits are to be taken seriously or not, whether the best tactic is to ignore them or condemn them. St Paul muses, 'We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords") yet for us there is but one God' (I Corinthians 8: 4-6).

It is a fact of life in Papua New Guinea today that Christians happily renounce much to do with spirits in the name of their professed Christianity, while at the same time feeling that there are some actions in honour of spirits which simply cannot be dispensed with. A fine example came from a catechist working with the writer, who was urging him to attend the opening of a traditional type spirit house. This building had been supported by the local level government as a place to sell carvings to tourists. When the event passed without the writer being properly notified, the explanation was, 'The big men thought it was essential that we do the opening properly, and this entailed killing a chicken at every carved house post. We thought you would not like that, so we did not tell you.' Such apparent conflicts can be multiplied at great length for Christian villagers, especially those living in town.

For the writer, the basic outlines of an understanding of this ambivalence on the part of village Christians are presented by Robin Horton, who talks about the non-conflicting nature of the values of microcosmic and macrocosmic religions<sup>1</sup>. His suggestion is that the larger perspective of the world beyond the village was not missing

---

<sup>1</sup> 'African Conversion,' *Africa*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 1971, pp. 85-108, and 'On the Rationality of Conversion,' *Africa*, Vol. 45, No. 3, 1975, pp. 219-35 and pp. 373-99.

## *On Conversion from the Global to the Local*

from village and tribal religions, but that it was weakly developed because of the immediacy of daily religious needs. When the strongly universal religions Islam and Christianity appeared amongst the tribes in Africa, they were able to supplant the less well developed macrocosmic aspects of the village. The intimate personal needs of everyday were not so well served by the world religions, and so local level village belief and ritual continued barely opposed. There is no doubt, of course, that the world religions insist on their role in the intimate lives and very hearts of their converts, but they cannot supplant at once the religious beliefs that are interwoven in culture, property and family. The world religions have generally been content to work with the proposition that the village 'had no religion but the fear of evil spirits and a few magical practices.' It remains a puzzle how a believing Christian in Papua New Guinea or in many tribal cultures could actually give up relationship to a local spirit and still see his way clear to claiming land rights. In a similar manner, belief in the gods of myths who have instituted cultural performance can only be wiped off the scene by deliberate acts of forgetting or ignoring tradition, which is not the direction the Catholic variety of Christianity appears to wish for.

Sometimes religious conversion comes down to a matter of time and motion efficiency. Many missionaries approve of the idea of cultural preservation in one form or another. When a ceremony extends over weeks and months and excludes things such as council work, school and health centre committees, and other reasonable commercial activities, then the ceremony begins to gather the tinge of idolatry. The writer has been accused of removing anything the new Christians had to hold onto in their faith merely by asking what traditional religious culture involved. This orientation of interest does, of course, speak of divided loyalties. My questions to the Christian community would be about the strength and nature of their orientation to the person of the Christian God<sup>1</sup>, and whether it was at the same time possible to be loyal to other ancestral connections.

---

<sup>1</sup> I suspect that the question about the Christian belief existing in the community is inevitably tied up with the question of the success of the missionary herself. The baptismal renunciation of Satan makes a clear night and day division between Christian belief and other ways of life. There exists a smear in all the churches which would like to identify traditional religion with Satan, but this can only be defended in a biblically literal and fundamentalist way.

## *The End of Religions? Religion in an Age of Globalisation*

Here is room for inter-religious dialogue. As much as the notion of dialogue with a village religious tradition might seem a cause whose time has passed, or a pandering to a poor scientific attitude, cultural studies have long been inviting us to consider some of the visions of a unified life such as the villages have to offer. For the moment, the fact that microcosmic and macrocosmic religions can slide past each other with little abrasion for most villagers is a source of hope that the dialogue might some day be taken up on a broad scale.

### **4. Converting and Being Converted**

For the writer, lying on his belly with a hard piece of styrofoam causing distortions to his sternum, the missionary question was another perspective that presented itself in an antinomic way. On the one hand a missionary must keep on moving. On the other hand, a Christian missionary must thoroughly integrate the message into the culture. This means making sure that the meaning of the proclaimed gospel has ramifications in as many areas of daily life as possible. To be a missionary is built on the presupposition that Christianity is global. Sepik initiation is local to the point of being eccentric.

To be a missionary means to me: representing an institution which has a global interest and placing oneself in a position of being subject to authority in this matter. The missionary thus is ready to move on, as directed by the authority. There is an irresistible challenge of good sense for a Christian missionary in the books of Roland Allen, an Anglican missionary of some ninety years ago.<sup>1</sup> The book of this title spends time dismissing every reasonable objection on the part of missionaries who would say they could not operate in the ways of Paul of Tarsus today. His methods were to preach the gospel, see to the social organisation of the church in a wide variety of cultural forms, and then leave the communities, perhaps for good. Paul retained some rights of direction in those church communities, but only by way of chastisement and encouragement by letter from a distance. Actual direction was left to the local leadership, as were all matters of finance and internal liturgy. In recent times Vincent Donovan tried to issue Allen's challenge to missionaries anew in describing his unusual style of work as a missionary to the Masai.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See *Missionary Methods: St Paul's or Ours?*, Grand Rapids, 1972 [1912].

<sup>2</sup> *Christianity Rediscovered. An Epistle from the Masai*, London, 1985.

## *On Conversion from the Global to the Local*

Such a marvellous view of independent empowerment of local communities by a visiting missionary cannot fail to strike a chord. A missionary is in obvious danger when she makes the new community dependent on her, when she tries to tell the local community how to deal with conflicts that arise between gospel and culture, or when she tries to tell them how to raise and spend money. A missionary has a global perspective on the relevance of the Gospel, but this coexists with the belief in self-reliance, self-governance and self-discipline, whereby the missionary does not remain as a foreign body and dominating presence. Sensitivity is demanded to see that a complex and well run set of institutions on a mission station, which is dependent on imported capital and financing, is likely to be an excluding wall for local abilities and leadership forms. At the same time, any given missionary is likely to say that she works by invitation, and to ask the question of how the global message has been made local if it is truly likely to die away without her leadership.

The writer's initiation into the Sepik tradition goes against my best understanding in this missionary question. It is something that urges me as needing to be done. What will happen, however, when the writer is told with authority to move on to, say, Taiwan, with the marks of Sepik strongly on him? Will the voluntary initiative in Sepik be anything but a limitation in Taiwan? What is called the 'incarnation' of the Christian Gospel in local cultures stands in conflict with the global Church, and this is usually solved in the Catholic tradition by the often heavy handed exercise of a centralising authority.

From the writer's own point of view, the further missionary dilemma of converting or being converted between social groups in the initiation event is a fairly trivial one. Illumination plays a central role in the biblical and ecclesial tradition as a genuine interpretation of conversion. The idea of moving from one sociologically determined body to another is a rapidly declining notion of conversion. I would see the adoption of initiation marks as entry into a certain discipline, perhaps somewhat in the line of joining in the fast of Ramadan, or sitting in meditation with a Buddhist community. These things, done in the name of religious dialogue, are not without their peril for the participating sociological institutions, but they seem to many to be a good way to go. The arguments in search of understanding might go on endlessly, but beyond the limits of the intellect there is a place for a legitimate step of the will to engage with another tradition beyond the best understandings of the moment. There is an antinomy between

## *The End of Religions? Religion in an Age of Globalisation*

getting closer to one local religious culture, and proclaiming a universal Gospel.

### **5. Village and Nation**

The fifth antimony is the more common political version of what has gone before. What does the nation of PNG mean in the face of its 856<sup>1</sup> or so language groups, and perhaps its greater number of culturally distinct groups? PNG is a newborn nation state of twenty-five years. On the larger political level it is rent by regional interests; on the local level '*wantok*-ism' (here: a case of 'whom you know') is believed in on the one hand and causes much pain on the other. The intensity of group division still actively breaks out in murderous tribal warfare. The national newspapers have been full of the outrage felt that the recently removed Government had stacked Departments with regional applicants for jobs, and that certain regions were barred from those jobs. On a local level the *wantok* connection is used by almost everybody, and resented in almost everybody else. If you want a job and see it is given to someone else on the basis of regional relationship, this is felt as keenly in PNG as anywhere else. If someone is being beaten or robbed on the streets of PNG, the chances are that he will be left to his fate unless a real *wantok* is nearby. When greater wrongs are reported such as robberies, the judgement passed, and the extent to which the money is dispersed will depend less on achieved moral standards than on the *wantok* connection. It is a good feeling when you have a *wantok* to promote your cause in the bureaucracy. It is a cause for national hope when things go right just because regulations are followed.

Villagers in the Sepik region say, 'Government is for the people in town. It has nothing to do with us.' Even Lady Carol Kidu MP relies on the observation that, if the entire national economy collapses, the social network of the villages of PNG will remain intact to provide a livelihood for all. Government is at once irrelevant to many, and grossly overestimated in the services it is expected to render.

On the level of the nation of PNG then, Sepik initiation is one of the 'noble traditions [of our ancestors]' which are celebrated in the Preamble to the National Constitution. It is unlikely, however, that

---

<sup>1</sup> The Summer Institute of Linguistics based in Ukarumpa, EHP, has an ongoing research project for the matter of counting the languages of the country, and have their own precise criteria for determining when languages are to be counted as separate from one another.

## *On Conversion from the Global to the Local*

anybody in the Government would like to see taken seriously the right granted everyone in the Constitution to freely propagate one's religion. Initiation enclosures on the Sepik River these days take about three months, during which time the ceremony absorbs the whole village effort. This would seem to be against national ideals of progress, industriousness, and economic rationalisation. If someone should try to make national this local celebration, his chances would be slim<sup>1</sup>.

The local traditions can only serve to distinguish one group from another. They build up loyalty to other members of the in-group, and callousness towards those outside. To play the stock market, to use a computer, to see an international exchange of tourists, to see videos run on portable generators, to drink Coca Cola - these are obviously the global ways everybody wants to follow. They represent leading values for the nation of PNG. However, it is an open question how many initiated Sepik men would advise their children not to cheat business or the State because of national goals<sup>2</sup>. I expect they would be more likely to internalise an ethic from the initiation ceremony, or from their Christian belief.

### **Conclusion**

One of the remarkable things about Sepik initiation is that it is hard to go back on it. Here are carved marks on the skin which must remain forever, granted more or less success in the raising of the welts. It is distinctively local to the Sepik, irreversible, and subject to evaluation under the five antinomies raised above. The writer would assure you that these five antinomies were felt quite spontaneously while his skin was in pain. There is no doubt he has other choices:

---

<sup>1</sup> A recent newspaper article by the Editor of *The National* newspaper underscores this view, 'Now, I ask you: Did our ancestors care for a Constitution? Did they desire a united nation of the kind we have today? Does a Sepik want to pay homage to the memory of a Chimbu's ancestor? Does an Engan want to acknowledge as worthy the customs and traditional wisdom of a Kaveing and pass them on to his sons? Would a Buka islander pledge himself to guard and pass on to the future generations the noble traditions of a Tari? A negative answer will be in the majority. I sense that many of the problems faced by PNG today lie in how Papua New Guineans treat and relate to each other.' Frank Senge Kolma, 'The problem with PNG', *The National Weekender*, Friday January 14, 2000, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> I do have a counter-indication. I lived with a family in village Malimbanja (Yangoru) for three months, and we delighted regularly to have the two year son of the household clap his hands and shout, 'Papua Niugini. Kristen kantri.'

*The End of Religions? Religion in an Age of Globalisation*

he can escape to somewhere else; he can make sure he never appears in public except as a man in a grey flannel suit; he can read papers about his experience in overseas conferences. My advice would be, no one should undertake Sepik initiation as a citizen of another nation, and a representative of a world religion, until you are fifty-four years old, with twenty-six years of studying the initiation culture, and deeply inclined to endorse the way of life in the Sepik. This move from the global to the local goes beyond my best understandings in the matter, but it is high time for symbol making in this area. I consider the matter to be primarily one of religious dialogue between Christianity and Sepik traditional village religion.