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MISSIONARIES AND MOURNING: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE DEATH CEREMONIES OF A MELANESIAN PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION

This article is concerned with the study of the death rituals of a Christian people in Papua New Guinea. I examine in particular the part played by missionaries and Christian values in the formation and transformation of these rituals. Christianity is a fact of most Melanesians' experience, yet it has almost never been regarded as a reputable object of study by ethnographers (but see Burridge 1969a). It is, however, central to the present day religious and moral systems of many Melanesian societies. Christian ideas and values become apparent in village church services, in millenarian movements, in national elections, in independent churches, and on countless informal and ritual occasions (see Barr and Trompf 1983, Trompf 1981). Impressions of Christianity may also be found deep within the domains of kinship, politics, and economics.

The assessment of the place of Christian elements in a particular cultural institution requires a broader approach than the kind usually found in ethnographic descriptions. In this article I examine Maisin death rituals within both historical and anthropological frameworks. I first discuss early missionary opposition to the rites, villagers' responses to this opposition, and some more recent changes. In the second part of the paper, I analyze the cultural significance of these various changes in terms of three themes integral to the mourning ceremonies: revaluation, transformation, and renewal.

SETTING

The Maisin people live in a series of beach villages along the southern shores of Collingwood Bay in Oro Province, Papua New Guinea. One of several small socio-linguistic groups living in Tufi District, Maisin today have a rural population of about 1200; 400 to 500 more live in urban centers. The Maisin are traditionally hunters, fishermen, gardeners and gatherers who for some time now have supplemented these subsistence activities with cash earned from sales of beautifully designed tapa cloth and remittances sent home by working relatives.

The first recorded outside contacts with the Maisin took place in the 1890's when Government officers, missionaries, prospectors and traders began to make their way up the northeast coast of Papua. In 1898 the New Guinea Mission of the Anglican Church of Australia established a district station at Wanigela, a village a few miles to the north of the Maisin. Two years later the Government located its district headquarters some 25 miles further to the north at Tufi on Cape Nelson. Beginning with the largest village of Uiaku in 1901, the Anglicans soon introduced schools and churches into the Maisin communities. Regular baptisms began in 1911. Today almost all adult Maisin have been baptized, most when they were infants.

Except for a brief period between 1917 and 1921 when a European priest was stationed at Uiaku, all of the missionaries who lived in Maisin villages were

Pacific Islanders - first Solomon Islanders and later Papuans (see Wetherell 1977). These teacher-evangelists, as they were called, were supervised by European priests residing at Wanigela until 1963, when the Maisin received their own Papuan priest. Today the Anglican Church is an independent Christian organization in Papua New Guinea; its staff has been almost entirely localized. As was the former Mission, the Anglican Church is an episcopacy, but much of the power previously held by bishops and district priests has devolved to parish priests and village church councils. In the older parishes, such as that of the Maisin, local people provide most if not all of the material and monetary support for the upkeep of Church property and the clergy. Through the activities of village church councils and women's organizations, local people have a much larger say than they used to in Church affairs.

Such introduced institutions as the church council, Mothers Union, and village council have undeniably become influential in Maisin community life since the end of the Second World War. But their roles are still somewhat limited to those concerns deemed by villagers to belong legitimately to the Government or the Church. On the other hand, as in most parts of Melanesia, kinship and exchange are of central importance to Maisin society and exchange are of central importance to Maisin society as a whole. Relatives work together, share food freely with each other and, at times of formal exchanges, pitch in to help with money, food or traditional wealth items. There are no universally recognized "big men", although a man who is generous, cooperative and articulate will command the respect of his neighbors. Generally speaking, Maisin live in a society which prizes egalitarian principles.

In spite of more than 80 years experience of the pressures and opportunities heralded by the arrival of the first European missionaries, Government officers and businessmen, the Maisin villages retain a pristine "South Pacific" charm, perhaps in part because of their relative isolation from urban centers and roads. Maisin are very proud of their cultural traditions and have retained many in oral and ritual forms. Modern forces, notably the Mission, have colored these traditions just as - but to a much lesser extent - the local cultural

environment has influenced the shape of Christian activities in Maisin villages.

MAISIN DEATH OBSERVANCES, PAST AND PRESENT

Traditional mourning rites

Melanesian mortuary rituals display a richness and diversity that is sometimes daunting to the student of these cultures. Traditional Maisin death rites shared a number of elements with many seaboard Melanesian cultures: burials within villages, destruction of some of the property of the deceased, self-mutilation by mourners, and severe restrictions upon widows and widowers (Codrington 1891, Fortune 1932, Hau'ofa 1981, Landtman 1927, Seligmann 1910). Of well-studied societies, the Orokaiva of central Oro Province display the largest number of common elements with the Maisin, notably the elaborate mourning costumes made of white and tawny "Job's Tears" seeds (Coix lachrimae) that were donned in the past by widows and widowers (Williams 1930). However, Maisin mortuary rituals combine these common elements in ways that distinguish the rites from those of even the closest neighbors in Collingwood Bay.[1] The configuration of mourning customs and ideas found in Maisin communities at the time of European contact would appear to have been the outcome of tribesmen's historical adjustments of locally evolved and borrowed elements to the local social organization (cf. Young 1971:232-33). The rituals have always been undergoing change, but for the purposes of this discussion the "traditional" death rites are described as they were performed during the first decade of extensive contact with Europeans between 1900 and 1910.

The traditional death observances of the Maisin can be conveniently divided into overlapping public and individual sequences. The following account by Percy John Money, the founder of the Uiaku mission station, describes the beginnings of the public phase of mourning.

> Upon the death of a person the conch-shell is blown to recall any of the tribe who may have gone to the gardens or away hunting. The relatives and friends go into the house and set up an indescribable wailing; all the village women assemble and join in the deafening din, whilst the men gather round and sit in little groups near the house. The women, when weeping, gash their temples with flakes of obsidian or pieces of shell, keeping time to the lament in this way; occasionally they leave off to beat their breasts or to go and cast themselves in the sea returning when almost exhausted to again take up the wail. The men talk of sorcery and debate as to who bewitched the deceased. The crying goes on for from 18 to 36 hours until the body is carried away to be buried. The relatives follow in its train and remain crying at the grave until nightfall, when they return home and continue the wailing, only in a more subdued tone (Money 1905).

Following the burial, the village men continued to gather in groups around the house of the deceased for two to four more days. They and their wives put aside all but the most basic needs for survival during this period. Early in the final day of public mourning, the village emptied as people dispersed into the bush and out to sea to gather food. At this time, a decorated warrior accompanied by a band of children took a small pot of food to the grave of the deceased. Dancing three times around the grave, the warrior then pointed his spear to show the dead person's ghost its "road", bidding it to take its food and leave the villagers and their gardens in good health. That afternoon, the village "put up the smoke" by cooking and sharing food, thus signalling the end of the first stage of public mourning. For a week to a month after this, rubbish was allowed to accumulate on the hamlet grounds around the deceased's house. On an appointed day, the women swept up this refuse and a second feast was held, ending the sequence of public mourning observances.

Turning now to individual observances, we find that any villager could mourn for a dead kinsman, but parents of a deceased unmarried child and widowed spouses had to conform to a number of mandatory restrictions.

These took their most extreme form in the case of widows (cf. Williams 1930:215ff.).

> The widow's mourning in New Guinea is very severe. When after the first paroxsyms of grief she comes outside the house where her husband lies buried (sic), she will be so exhausted by fasting and mourning, that a woman is needed on each side of her for support. She will suddenly throw up her hands and fall flat on the ground, or dash herself with great violence against a tree, or gash her cheeks with shells. She will also plaster herself with mud. Then when the first stage of her mourning is over, she will retire inside the house and begin to make her widow's jacket of threaded seeds, "Job's Tears," and only emerge to view again when it is completed and put on (Money 1901).

In the initial stages of their mourning, widows could be subjected to brutal beatings at the hands of their sisters-in-law on top of their self-inflicted punishments; they were then made to remain in silence isolated within an affine's house, in a darkened corner partitioned off with blankets of bark cloth (cf. Hau'ofa 1981:233). Most importantly at this early stage, the widow was deprived of most of her property, especially that shared by her husband. Declared dauvan - "dead person's things" - the possessions and garden food of the deceased were claimed and shared by his kin amongst themselves. At the time the dauvan was shared, relatives also saw to the destruction of the more personal possessions of the deceased as well as his house and gardens.

The widow's seclusion lasted at least a month. Her kin prepared a feast at the end of this period at which the in-laws dressed the widow in her heavy costume of Job's Tears and placed her on a platform under the house. This was her usual home for much of the second period of mourning. Without property of her own, the widow was considered to be like a child. The duty of her affines during this period was to reintroduce her to the tasks of adult life, one at a time: going to the garden, weeding, carrying firewood, cooking. The

ceremony to release the widow from her mourning took place on a date set by the affines in consultation with the widow and her kin. Another feast was prepared by the widow's relatives. As the feast was prepared the affines bathed the widow, cut and combed her hair (which she had allowed to grow long and tangled), and then decorated her in the finery of a young single woman ready for the dance. In addition, they gave her gifts of tapa cloth, clay pots, shell necklaces, and other forms of wealth. These were seen as return gifts (vina) for the dauvan acquired by the affines. This ceremony, called ro-babasi,[2] closely resembles the kisevi, the puberty rite of passage for first-born boys and girls. Like a newly initiated girl, the widow - now made beautiful - could marry.[3]

The traditional death rites of the Maisin combined destructive and regenerative themes in a sometimes spectacular way. As anthropologists from the time of Frazer have shown, these themes are common to mortuary ceremonies in most times and places (Bloch and Parry 1982). The two aspects of the death observances were considered essential and proper by Maisin in that they made it possible to deal with and recover from a death. But in the strained relations that existed between groups of affines following a death, the kin of the deceased were probably suspected from time to time of succumbing to the temptation to use their authority over a widow or widower to punish them (cf. Hau'ofa 1981:232). People were no doubt ambivalent about this vindictive aspect of the rites, and this factor may have contributed to the changes that followed contact with Europeans.

The missionary campaign to modify the death rites

Opposition to certain of the death customs came hard on the heels of pacification at the turn of the century. In the interest of improving village hygiene, Government officers ordered Maisin to exhume all recently buried corpses located within village areas and to bury them in newly designated cemeteries. Following the establishment of a mission station in Uiaku in 1901, missionaries sometimes requested villagers to suspend or shorten mourning ceremonies, especially when these

fell at the time of Sunday worship. When the Mission began to win converts, requests turned into demands. Christians were forbidden from participating in the extended wailing accompanying a death and from blackening their bodies as a sign of mourning. About the same time, the missionaries began to criticize the harsh treatment meted out to widows. By the early 1930's Government officers had joined the chorus, and also urged Maisin to end the "incarcerating" of widows. The Mission reserved its greatest reforming efforts for the young. Village teachers punished any school boy or girl they discovered to have participated in the banned ceremonies.[4] More positively, the Mission provided a simple Christian burial service, sometimes in the church, for Christian Maisin.

European missionaries found the more violent elements in Maisin death rites to be both intrinsically wrong and incompatible with Christianity. After witnessing one funeral Money was moved to comment, "they are truly without hope of a better life in the future and one is very fully convinced of their knowledge of this by the bitter hopelessness of their wails" (Money 1905). The missionaries suspected that some of the objectionable customs arose out of spirit worship, a practice they condemned in no uncertain terms. They sought to introduce a new teaching: the soul released at the time of death will eventually be united with God in Heaven; it will not return to haunt its relatives on earth. Death therefore should not be a time of unrelenting sadness and anger. People should give up "excessive" mourning practices and instead lend sympathetic support to those saddened by personal loss.[5] I have already suggested that Maisin may have been concerned about the punitive aspects of traditional death practices. Such concerns overlapped with those of the missionaries. Thus when large numbers of young Maisin joined the Church after 1916, the legitimacy of the more violent customs was further undermined.

Young villagers flocked to the Mission in the years following 1916 - apparently with the encouragement of their parents - but the mortuary rites did not undergo any immediate modification despite the missionaries criticisms.[6] In fact many of the condemned practices,

such as the "death dance" at which women lacerated their temples, continued into the 1940's, often with the participation of Christians. There is also evidence that committed Christians made attempts to withdraw from such rites or to modify them. Some Christians had church funerals upon their deaths; all Christians were buried apart from pagans, further encouraging separate ceremonies; during some village meetings (for which records remain) Christian leaders urged villagers to cease such practices as "punishing widows"; and, in the 1930's, members of village church councils began to police late night mourning ceremonies and send home school children. That the more violent paroxysms of the traditional death rites persisted so long attests, on the one hand, to the integrity of these observances in the mourning ritual complex as a whole.

On the other hand, one can point to certain ambiguities and weaknesses in the missionary campaign itself which in part account for the slowness of the changes. Anglican missionaries held ambiguous attitudes towards Papuan traditions. From the time of its founding in Papua in 1891, the Anglican Mission promoted a very romanticized view of the villager. With the exception of certain practices such as cannibalism and warfare, the lifestyle of the Papuan was regarded as good, and Europeans could be reminded of many of their own lost virtues by studying the simple graces of village life (Wetherell 1977). Anglican leaders argued that the Mission should forbid "bad" customs which were destructive or contrary to Christian teachings, but "good" customs had to be left in place. Above all, the tranquility of village life had to be preserved. Separate Christian communities were not to be formed. The Mission leaders "wanted the convert to live beside his neighbours, differing from them in nothing but his religion" (Wetherell 1977:131). This was a basically liberal policy in which the only rules enjoined upon new Christians were those seen as absolutely necessary to their moral and spiritual well-being. The onus of adjusting to the rules in mixed societies of Christians and pagans fell squarely upon the converts (and their neighbors). Unlike many Evangelical missionaries of this period, the Anglicans rarely proposed viable alternatives to the customs they opposed.[7]

Change in the death ceremonies may still have come sooner had the missionaries been able to lead a more concerted campaign either to ban the criticized customs outright or to back Christians in resisting them. But the authority of missionaries in the villages was built upon a very insecure economic base. By far the poorest mission in Papua in the pre-War period, the Anglicans were often dependent on the good will of local people for their physical survival. Moreover, white missionaries were always few in number and usually responsible for very large districts. Some missionaries on the strength of their personalities were able to bring about rapid changes in traditional customs.[8] But such direct interventions had to be handled with care. The one European missionary to live in Uiaku, for example, often displayed a heavy-handed approach to death rites as well as some other "non-Christian" customs. At one time he threatened wailing women with a stick if they did not cease their "noise". The Maisin eventually retaliated by denying him food and he was forced to leave Uiaku. The Solomon Island and Papuan teachers who carried out most of the Mission's work in the villages were in an even weaker position. To the chagrin of their superiors, they tended to avoid confrontations whenever possible.

Missionaries were obviously able to exert more pressure on converts than on pagans. Christians who yielded to pressures from their elders and participated in traditional death rites might be banished from village church congregations for a time or threatened with excommunication. In communities where single households might include pagan and Christian members, such tactics forced the people to seek compromises between traditional and pagan notions of acceptable funerals. Inevitably, these compromises tended further and further towards the Christian position as the converted population grew and matured. One of my Uiaku informants described this process:

> When the missionaries came, the people didn't understand why they tried to stop these things. It changed as people grew up as Christians. At first some were Christians and some were not, so some did it the Christian way and others the old way. This went on until all were Christian and the old things ended.

The death rites that emerged in the 1950's were free of several traditional elements: "death dances", extended wailing, seclusion of widows and widowers (and, with this, the traditional mourning costume), and the ritual to dispatch the spirit of the deceased. Mortuary observances now included a short Christian burial service. But the rites were by no means Westernized. They still followed the basic format laid down by tradition: sequences of public and individual mourning observances; a series of exchanges of food, dauvan and wealth objects; and the reinitiation of mourners into society. Thus the death rites could be legitimized both in terms of tradition and Christianity.

Recent challenges

In the late 1970's certain elements in the death observances again came under attack as contrary to Christian principles. This time the protest originated from within the Maisin community. Following the death of a teenaged boy in Ganjiga, the village closest to Uiaku, a very large number of people observed mourning restrictions for almost two years. A huge feast was held at which all were together released from mourning. Some village leaders complained that mourning on such a scale was detrimental to the welfare of the community; mourners did not participate as much as they should in public projects such as cash crop gardens and maintaining the mission station grounds. The Uiaku church deacon - himself a Maisin - went further and stated at a meeting that long periods of mourning were contrary to Church teachings. People should make an effort to resume normal lives quickly in order that they may be helpful to each other and not dwell upon their sadness or anger. Soon after this, the deacon also began to criticize the custom of kinsmen taking the dauvan of the deceased to share amongst themselves. He pointed out that instead of doing this they should be helping the bereaved spouse or parent. People were only interested in getting the dauvan for themselves and always gave small return gifts at the ro-babasi ending the mourning period.

These complaints fell upon some receptive ears and soon other villagers - especially committed Christians - were voicing them. When a little boy died in Ganjiga in September 1982, the deacon (who was related to the mother of the boy) and some other men urged the people not to take away the parents' possessions. No dauvan was removed and the parents were released from mourning three days after the death. About a month later a middle aged woman died in Uiaku. Her relatives blamed her husband for the death, claiming that he had not taken sufficient care of her during a long sickness. They also chose not to take any dauvan - and to leave the widower in possession of his house and garden. They released the widower from his mourning restrictions at the end of the public mourning observances. When I asked the affines why they did this they explained that the husband was the last of his clan and had no brothers to care for himself and his children in their bereavement; as Christians it was their duty to ease the widower's burden.

The criticism of long mourning periods is partly related to certain opposed wishes of mourners and those who must support them. Generally speaking, more status adheres to those persons who undergo mourning privations for several years. Widows in particular tend to compete with each other, and may remain in mourning for as long as seven years. It is obviously in the interest of those who must care for a mourner and provide for his or her reinitiation into society to get the business over with fairly promptly; they tend to push for expedient ro-babasi's. On the other hand, the attack on the dauvan exchange is new. The ending of the custom of taking the dauvan has a serious structural consequence as the above instances show, for without dauvan the kin of the deceased are under no obligation to provide for the eventual ro-babasi of the mourner. In these two cases very abbreviated ro-babasi's were given at the end of public mourning. In effect, the aims of shortening the individual mourning sequence and of ending the dauvan exchange are complementary.

These modifications have not been easy for the community as a whole to accept. The expedient ro-babasi leaves mourners uncertain as to how they should reintegrate themselves within the village. The widower, for

instance, was convinced that his affines were shaming him by depriving him of the means to publicly show his grief for the loss of his wife. He sent his younger children to stay with some relatives and spent a month secluded in his house. At the end of this period he decorated himself and came out from his private mourning. Although he kept his house, he abandoned his old garden and started a new one. There were bad feelings in the community about the way in which this death had been handled. At the next major death in Uiaku dauvan was distributed and mourning restrictions observed. But talk against this custom and long mourning periods continues, and it is difficult to predict at this time what kind of adjustments Maisin will eventually make.

TRADITIONAL THEMES AND CHRISTIAN VALUES

> Perhaps the most significant confrontation with truth and reality among traditional or preindustrial societies, Subsistence or Complex, is death. Experiencing the death of another or thinking about one's own death invite, first, repugnance and opposition, then acceptance of given rationalizations. These are etched in the mind, construct purposes in living and, ultimately, vindicate the traditional order. Nevertheless, in that initial repugnance and opposition lie the seeds of that which may change the traditional order. Death predicates life as often as it follows. . . . each death is an invitation to think again, attempt to pierce the screens of tradition and rerationalize (Burridge 1979:151).

In the preceding section of the paper I presented a schematic outline of the history of traditional Maisin death customs since the early part of the twentieth century. I suggested that there were indigenous and exogenous pressures in opposition to the more violent elements of the traditional death rites. White missionaries were by far the most important protangonists of change, but they were not able simply to ban the death customs that they disagreed with. It was left up to

converts and pagans to work out their own accommodation between the received rites and the introduced rules of Christian living. A more recent campaign to change the mourning rituals resembles the earlier efforts of the missionaries in that specific aspects of the ceremonies are being characterized as intrinsically bad and inconsistent with Christian values. But this second wave of reform appears to be an internal development within the Maisin community.

I now wish to consider the cultural significance of these changes. To what degree do the death rites continue to embody the relevances of the older tradition? Are Christian values compatible with the mortuary rituals as they are now practiced?

To answer these and related questions, we must leave behind the foregoing schematic model of customary behavior and peer into the actualities of particular deaths: the contingencies that have to be addressed at any funeral; the rationalizations that draw people towards certain types of responses to death; and the socio-economic contexts in which given rationalizations are reasserted and novel ones take shape. Three themes will structure the analysis. Universally present in mourning ceremonies, they are best denoted by the words revaluation, transformation, and renewal.

Revaluation

Most ethnographic descriptions of mourning customs leave the impression that members of different cultural traditions treat every death in much the same way. But in any society there may be much variation between funerals. Some differences follow predictably from the status of the deceased; the burial rites for the Shilluk kings of the Sudan are a familiar anthropological example (Evans-Pritchard 1948). Less predictable, but often as important, are those divergences which come about in response to contingencies or from the activities of factions trying to work mourning observances to their own advantage (cf. Metcalf 1981).

My initial research into Maisin death customs was fraught with frustration. Participants would tell me how the ceremonies were going to appear and then they would happily proceed to do something different. Of the ten deaths that occurred in Uiaku during my fieldwork, no two were treated exactly alike.

Maisin acknowledge most deaths along the lines of the format of activities described earlier. But within this format there can be a great deal of variation. Standard elements of the death rites may be shortened or lengthened, simplified or elaborated. The funeral of an old person, for example, is often a brief affair of perhaps two days. The death of a younger person - a more serious occurrence - demands extended and elaborated sequences of public and individual mourning. More people attend the funeral; there are more violent displays of emotion; and, as we saw in the case in Ganjiga, the culminating ro-babasi may be huge. Death rites may be further complicated by the addition of numerous optional observances. These include a community ban on coconuts from the deceased's hamlet, a ban on fishing if the deceased drowned, and the avoidance of places frequented by the dead person in the past; individuals may also chop down coconut palms, allow their hair to grow into tangles, and fast from certain foods to demonstrate respect for the deceased. Finally, in the emotionally charged atmosphere of a death, relatives of the deceased may try to punish or shame a miscreant widow or widower, or they may try to smoke out a sorcerer. Others in the community, on the other hand, will try in such situations to smooth out troubles between groups and ease the way back to a tolerable state of social relations.

Traditional mourning customs are not, therefore, simply recipes which are unthinkingly followed when deaths occur. As we shall see, the death rites do symbolize an ongoing social order; but "individuality and unrepeatable time are problems which must be overcome if the social order is to be represented as eternal" (Bloch and Parry 1982:15). Any death occasions intensive discussions, interpretations, and transactions which, in turn, generate a particular configuration of responses.

As Burridge suggests in the passage that opens this section, most people facing death soon turn to familiar rationalizations. The social order tends to be reproduced. But within the revaluations of the persons of the deceased, of ego, and of others which necessarily follow a death, there are seeds of change. At the simplest level, a people may borrow new elements of mourning behavior and drop others from one death to the next. Something like this appears to have happened throughout the prehistory of Melanesia, and has accelerated since European contact (Chowning 1969). Secondly, members of a community must adapt given death customs to reflect differences in the status of participants. If the status of a faction within the society starts to change, the death rites must reflect this alteration. This modality of change seems to have facilitated the smooth transformation of the rites following the conversion of younger Maisin to Christianity.

Finally, at the most general level, the social and intellectual contexts in which rationalizations take shape may change. What seemed an appropriate response to a death in the past may strike today's mourner as somehow beside the point.[9] There can be little doubt that Maisin today have more choice in how they acknowledge a death than did their ancestors. For example, in the more open conditions of the present society, a villager can escape his obligation to mourn a death by leaving his community to live with a relative in town; appeals to the economic welfare of the village can be used to support arguments to modify certain death customs; households with lines to working relatives can choose to adorn the graves of loved one with expensive gravestones. The almost universal acceptance of simple Christian principles also implies a growing openness in the way people respond to a death. Above all else, for committed Christians, are the injunctions that the death rites both acknowledge the supremacy of God and the principle of Christian love as the guiding force in the community. When taken seriously such injunctions cannot help but initiate a dynamic of change, for there is no cultural or moral order anywhere that could be described as perfectly Christian (Burridge 1979).

Transformation

The revaluations that take place after any death are the stuff of history. But the death rites also contain certain ritualized moments of transformation that speak to eternal truths. In his essay, "A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death" (1907), Hertz made the important observation that "at whatever stage of religious evolution we place ourselves, the notion of death is linked with that of resurrection; exclusion is always followed by a new integration" (Hertz 1960:79). Death is the ultimate initiation (ibid.:80). Especially in tribal societies, we see the rite of passage as both a theme emerging out of mourning ceremonies and as a structure that orders the observances.

The two internal rites of passage within the Maisin complex of death rituals appear to have been among the customs most affected by the adoption of Christianity. The traditional rite to show the soul of the deceased its road out of the village has become a memory,[10] and today bereaved spouses and parents no longer endure the harsh privations that were once an essential part of their rite of passage.

But there are actually many continuities with the past. Turning first to the transformation of the deceased, we find that many ancient ideas are still current in Maisin villages despite the demise of the traditional ceremony. As in the past, Maisin say, the spirits of the recent dead remain close to the village unless enticed or directed to leave. The ghosts of young people or those who have died suddenly are especially dangerous; angry about their untimely demise, these ghosts may cause sickness to women and children or afflict crops. The problem now, as in the past, is to move the soul of the deceased through its liminal period as quickly as possible. Once reaggregated with fellow spirits in the "spirit place" (waa ei wa'ki) the ghost will no longer attack the living.

My older informants told me that the clergy accomplish essentially the same end in today's funerals as traditionally did the decorated warrior in his spear dance around

the grave. The clergyman comes and begins to read the burial rites over the corpse while it is still in the house. Villagers then form into a procession led by a man bearing a cross and carry the body to the cemetery for more prayers and the burial. Encouraged and informed by these activities, the soul now begins its journey along the road to Paradise. Elders view this newer ceremony as a distinct improvement over the old one. They remember how in the old days heathen ghosts would often stay on to molest people in the village no matter what was done; today most Christian souls obediently follow the instructions of the priest and depart on their journey to Paradise without any fuss.

The rites of passage for individual mourners have not been replaced by any such "functional substitute", but here too there have been important changes within an enduring ritual framework. Once again we will take the widow as our exemplar. It will be recalled that after her initial torments, the widow was confined to a shrouded corner in a darkened house for a period of at least a month. Upon her emergence from her seclusion, the widow began a lengthy reinitiation into the community. These practices suggest two transformations of the widow: from a symbolic death in her initial sufferings to a rebirth upon emergence from the dark place of seclusion; and from infancy upon emergence to maturity at the ro-babasi releasing the widow from her mourning restrictions. The early reforms urged by missionaries led to the almost complete disappearance of the first transition along with an increased stress upon the nurture and re-education of the widow in the second. This change in emphasis accounts in part for a trend towards larger and more festive ro-babasi's over the past 20 years. Some recent end of mourning celebrations are said to have rivalled the puberty rites for first- born children in splendor - something never heard of in the past.

In the discussion of revaluations I argued that every death is in some ways unique, touching upon contingencies and the inevitable ambiguities of social relationships. Similarly, every soul that is removed from the world of the living to the world of the dead, every widow who is transformed in the process of moving from a symbolic death to social initiation, is in some ways unique. But the

rituals of transformation also speak of something essential and eternal. It is significant that in these rituals we witness such a complex interweaving of indigenous and Christian elements. The old truths are not forsaken, the new Christian truths are not denied or betrayed. Some of my informants told me of how God had shown Himself in various guises to their ancestors; but the ancestors were toton tamatari, "ignorant men", who did not comprehend all that they experienced. Conversion, then, did not entail the total rejection of old truths. Instead it brought a new understanding to the old truths. In the same way, the rites of passage within the mourning ceremonies are not evidence of a sharp break with the past. The Maisin are seeking new answers to very old problems.

The rediscovery of old truths and the search for new ones continues at all times. But there are moments when the need to establish authenticity is not so pressing. I suggested earlier that the Maisin death rites entered such a period in the 1950's. In recent years, however, the rituals have begun to appear to some Maisin as contrary to Christian values. The reasons for this obviously do not lie simply with the criticized customs. We must, therefore, turn to a more general level of analysis and look at the death rites in their entirety within a changing socio-economic context.

Renewal

When discussing the traditional death rites Maisin sometimes told me, "The dead person is not a pig or dog. We do not throw him into the bush." Unlike an animal, which having no society dies alone and unacknowledged, each person grows into and develops a web of relationships within which he finds challenges, respect and affection. For those who are left behind, the loss of a relative momentarily rents a hole in the social fabric; each mourner feels a sadness - literally "inner emotions that hurt" (marawa vita) - which is debilitating and isolating. Death engenders division. There may be suspicions of sorcery; the kinsmen of the deceased may feel anger towards their affines; the ghost of the deceased may be lurking on the edge of the village, ready to steal a child's life. The series of general and

individual observances, exchanges and feasts initiated by a death are the means by which various people in the community acknowledge their ties to each other. It is only through participating in the rites, Maisin say, that the separate sadness and worries each person feels may be transformed into a collective sense of well-being and happiness. Maisin call such a state marawa-wawe, "inner emotions given out."[11]

Taken in their entirety, then, Maisin death rites have the form of a rite of passage. The community is transformed from a state of division to one of unity and the social order is renewed.

The renewal of the social order turns also on the revaluations made of it and themselves by participants. For a short time, the death ceremonies symbolically create the social order as "an apparently external force" (Bloch and Parry 1982:6). Weiner has drawn out some of the implications of this phenomenon in a sophisticated analysis of Trobriand mortuary rites.

> . . . the rituals of mourning visually and symbolically diagram the social categories basic to the cultural system. Throughout one's life, social interaction is mediated through the dynamics of exchange, but often it is very difficult to observe the basic categories out of which people work to expand their own social networks. Mortuary ceremonies are moments of spectacular visual communication. They serve as a vehicle for the financial and political assessment of each participant, and for an instant, through the use of such visual qualities as style, color, and space, they frame the oppositional nature of relationships (Weiner 1976:61).

In other words, mortuary rites are a type of social drama in which are expressed both the lineaments and internal contradictions of a social order.

As in the Trobriands, the "dynamic of exchange" mediates most social interaction between Maisin individuals and groups. Death rites are structured around a

series of exchanges: cooked food from hamlet owners to visiting mourners; dauvan used in part to pay off the exchange debts of the deceased; gifts of cooked and raw food from kin of bereaved spouses or parents to affines; wealth items from affines to widowed spouses and bereaved parents. Ideally these exchanges should all balance out, forming a material analogue to the notion of shared inner emotions (marawa-wawe).

Given its importance, we need to examine the notion of marawa-wawe closely. The concept of exchange is built into the expression. One "gives" marawa when one pays compensation, celebrates a death or a marriage, or simply helps a friend. Most exchanges contain an element of competition, but marawa-wawe implies relationships of equality, unobligedness, and friendship.[12] Maisin also speak of the notion of altruistic Christian love that is taught by the Church as marawa-wawe, although the traditional meaning with its emphasis on exchange is still dominant.[12]

We may now return to the earlier discussion of the recent criticisms of some traditional death customs. The key points to keep in mind are: first, the principle that mortuary exchanges should in the end balance out, leaving all exchange partners in a state of equality and marawa-wawe; secondly, as will be recalled, the strongest complaints aired were against extended mourning periods and the dauvan exchange.

The objective of maintaining balanced reciprocity between parties in a society is possible only when all members have more or less equal access to resources and wealth objects. Such conditions are most likely to obtain where a people's livelihood is based upon subsistence activities. In the horticultural societies of Melanesia, both formal and informal exchanges are important organizational principles for distinguishing and relating groups. Futhermore, success at exchange is the main way individuals establish credibility and gain status in these largely egalitarian social orders (Burridge 1969a, Weiner 1976).

The values expressed in Maisin death ceremonies are rooted deeply in the subsistence soil. But since

the grandfathers of the present generation of villagers first signed on as plantation laborers, Maisin have been steadily drawn into the modern world economy. A third or more of the total population now lives and works in urban areas of the nation - mostly as doctors, teachers, civil servants, and businessmen. Forming an elite labor force, many employed Maisin are able to send considerable amounts of money and commodities home to relatives in the villages. This has the double effect of encouraging rural Maisin to become dependent upon a variety of store goods (as they now are) and of introducing inequalities into the villages. Families with working relatives tend to have more things, but the strongly egalitarian ideology of the villages compels relatively wealthy households to help kin and affines with steady gifts of money and goods. This mechanism tends to balance out disparities (cf. Carrier 1981).

Nevertheless, unequal access to cash and Western goods creates an underlying tension in Maisin communities that is exposed from time to time. The recent criticisms of the death rites can be related directly to this tension. The first complaints were aired, it will be recalled, after a huge feast was held in Ganjiga village to release a large number of mourners. This was one of several such elaborate ro-babasi's to be hosted by "rich" households in recent years. Some Maisin object to celebrations on this scale because they inject a strong element of competition into the death rites. The gifts of the hosts cannot easily be matched by "poor" households with few close relatives in towns. Sponsors justify these large feasts in terms of the numbers of mourners and the time spent in mourning after a death. One solution that would return the mourning celebrations to an equal basis, therefore, would be to severely restrict individual mourning observances.

The criticism against the taking and exchange of dauvan can be traced even more exactly. In 1980, a young man who had been working on an oil palm project returned home to Ganjiga to care for his aging father. He and his wife brought with them all of the accoutrements of several years of urban living: china plates, steel pots, cutlery, radios, new clothing. Several months

after they arrived, one of their sons died. Most of their property became dauvan and was taken away. Under Normal circumstances those who receive dauvan are supposed to help the mourners and eventually make a return gift of equal value. This was clearly impossible for villagers to do in this case and, consequently, the young couple suffered a substantial loss in their worldly wealth. The village deacon took note of this and began to speak out against dauvan soon after. The custom was first put aside for a man who had also just returned from outside employment. At the next funeral that took place, however, an ordinary village man was released from his obligation to surrender dauvan to his wife's kin.

The inequalities revealed in some mortuary exchanges betray the subsistence values of marawa-wawe; balanced reciprocity cannot be obtained, some villagers are shown to be inferior to others, and the renewal of the social order is threatened. Through their necessary participation in recent death rites, Maisin have become uncomfortably aware of a dissonance between their traditional values and those of an individualistic moneyed economy. Some would resolve this tension by reasserting the values of exchange: those who take dauvan should give an equal amount back; affines should work hard to release mourners early so that obligations do not build up.

The deacon and his supporters have made these arguments and they take them much further. Identifying marawa-wawe with altruistic Christian love, they insist that a state of social amity should characterize the death rites as a whole, not just the final moments. The Church teaches that all people are children of God, so too in witnessing the death of one of their members Christians should be reminded of their unity in God. In the changing socio-economic conditions of the present, the exchanges at the heart of Maisin death ceremonies appear to these critics to be obstructions to this unity. Based upon an irrelevant loyalty to tradition or motives of selfishness - in the eyes of the staunch Christians - the exchanges seem to inhibit the flowering of marawa-wawe as Christian fellowship.

Maisin experimented for a brief time with a prohibition of the dauvan exchange. But for the moment this

appears to be too radical a change for the community to accept. Exchange remains integral to the modulation of social relationships. Seen in perspective, the Christian critique of the death rites and attempted resolution are indications that Maisin are moving towards a more open and individualized social order. As in the past, there is every indication that they will continue to meet the challenges of the present through the creative interpretation and application of Christian principles and values to the death ceremonies.

CONCLUSION

A major stumbling block in the development of studies of religious change in Melanesia has been the almost total identification of religion with social structure. Given this assumption, missionary influence on indigenous religions must be seen either as necessarily destructive - a view put forward by early anthropologists (e.g., Malinowski 1922, Williams 1928) - or as necessarily ineffectual. This second version of the all-or-nothing view of religious change is common in many recent ethnographies. It is argued that as long as the subsistence base of a society remains in place only the more superficial aspects of the indigenous religion change with the acceptance of missionaries (Lawrence and Meggitt 1965:21; cf. McSwain 1977, Weiner 1980). In recent years anthropologists have come under attack for this tendency to attribute a questionable degree of orderliness to Melanesian religions (Brunton 1980). While not ignoring the structural features of religion, some analysts now argue that we must also attend to the positive political and creative aspects of religious processes (Burridge 1969b, Wagner 1972).

This study of Maisin death rites takes its cue from these current analyses. I have discussed the death observances as creative expressions which indicate the significance of death in general and of particular deaths within a cultural tradition (Wagner 1975:93). This cultural tradition exists in history and is subject to the push and pull of both internal and external forces. I have identified and distinguished some of these forces in the case of Maisin death rituals:

external pressures from missionaries, the ongoing process of political revaluations, and the socio-economic contexts within which the social order must be generated. In responding to these forces, Maisin have not simply exchanged one set of death customs for another or continued with the old observances in a new guise. The mortuary ceremonies are ever-changing expressions of a more essential religious process which grapples with the real problems of men and women living together in community (cf. Burridge 1969b:6ff.).

Maisin have neither renounced the past nor rejected the conditions of the present. Instead they appear to be caught up in a creative endeavor to approach death authentically in light of a shared morality, the traditions received from the ancestors, and a developing understanding of Christianity within a context of socio-economic change.

NOTES

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[1]The Ubir people of Wanigela did not destroy the dead person's house, but in most other respects their mourning customs were identical to those of the Maisin (Stephens 1974:160). As we shall see below in the discussion of dauvan, however, this difference is important. More noticeable dissimilarities could be seen in the traditional death rites of the Onjob, a group a few miles inland from Wanigela. There the women used to dress themselves as warriors and dance at the burial feasts of important men (Chignell 1911:216).

[2]Ro-babasi translates as "face pushed back." This refers to the enhancement of the appearance of the mourner which is at the heart of the ceremony. While in mourning, individuals allowed themselves to become "dirty" by not washing, wearing no decorations other than the mourning costume, and allowing their hair to become long and knotted and, in the case of men, their beard to grow. In the ro-babasi the liminal state of "dirtiness" is thrown off when the mourner is once again made beautiful.

[3]Maisin traditionally dealt with widowers and the parents of dead single children in much the same way but, particularly in the case of bereaved parents, the mourning

customs were rarely as extreme and onerous as they were for widows. It is widows who are continually mentioned in contemporary missionary denouncements of the death rites.

[4]Tales of the punishments that teachers used to hand out have no doubt grown in the telling. Nevertheless, school children were regularly caned, forced to pull up grass from the grounds of the mission station as punishment for a variety of misdemeanors. Beyond the occasional sharp cuff, Maisin parents seem not to have taken such an intense interest in disciplining their children. There were occasional rows when teachers became overly zealous in their use of the rod and were confronted by angry parents.

[5]This version of the missionaries' teaching on death is derived mostly from interviews with elderly Maisin informants.

[6]Some baptismal registers have been lost. Those that survive record some 282 Maisin baptisms between 1916 and 1926, mostly of young adults. At this time the Maisin population stood at about 1200.

[7]Charles Abel of Kwato Island, in contrast, deliberately set out to provide alternatives. Writing of the death customs in the Milne Bay area he noted, "Probably everything the people were doing had some heathen significance, and it was my work for Christ to get to understand it, and reverently, piece by piece, to break down their superstition, and replace it by a right way of thinking upon death and the life hereafter" (Abel 1902:93-94; see also Wetherell 1973).

[8]A notable example was the Rev. J.E.J. Fisher of Wanigela who fancied himself the "warden of the coast". For a brief time Fisher established a theocracy at Wanigela in which dancing, women's facial tattooing, and traditional death ceremonies were outlawed. His reforms did not outlast his stay (Fisher 1915, Wetherell 1977:146-47).

[9]In the recent past, for example, unmarried Maisin women used to burn a series of spots from their shoulders to their breasts during funerals to enhance their beauty.

I was told that the missionaries did not speak out against this custom, it just went out of fashion.

[10]The old custom sometimes reappears in an attenuated form. Before the corpse is removed from the house for burial, a relative may call out to its spirit and beg it not to bring sickness upon the village.

[11]Marawa is a key word in the Maisin language that is combined with a number of verbs, adjectives and suffixes to produce a wide range of meanings. By itself the word refers to those "things inside" that motivate actions, responses, and emotions.

[12]Young people sometimes also refer to the romantic Western notion of love - picked up mostly from songs on the radio - as marawa-wawe.

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MISSIONARY DOCUMENTS AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH

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I. INTRODUCTION

The eclectic nature of this symposium on "Missionaries, Anthropologists and Cultural Change" is sufficiently broad to encompass a chapter on ethnohistorical method. This approach in anthropological research is particularly useful in studying missionaries as agents of cultural change. Ethnohistorical method is essential in any diachronic analysis of cultural change and is particularly applicable in the area of acculturation studies (cf. Keesing 1939, Stipe 1968, Welbourn 1971, Urbanowicz 1972, Tippett 1973, Beidelman 1974, 1982).

Ethnohistory, as an approach to anthropological research, is not a separate discipline with a set of theories independent of other theories in social and cultural anthropology. As Carmack (1972:232) notes,

> Ethnohistory is a special set of techniques and methods for studying culture through the