G. W. Trompf

Man Facing Death and After-Life in Melanesia*

Introduction

One can be easily over-awed by the mass of ethnographic data related to this topic, but at least I am left with something to say, and I am happy to take up a challenge. As a non-Melanesian, I feel somewhat presumptious in handling so sensitive a subject, but the very cultural diversity in Papua New Guinea and in other Melanesian contexts gives me courage, for scholars, of whatever nationality, often find themselves in a reasonably good position to range over the great wealth of material at hand, drawing threads together, exercising other's minds in comparative analysis or the evaluation of evidence, and, hopefully, displaying the kind of sensitivity necessary for the study of the most difficult and controversial of all subjects—mankind's religion.

I must begin by explaining, first, the kind of enterprise I am undertaking in this paper and, second, how I propose to order such a diversity of materials. As to the nature of this enterprise, it ought to be remembered that there are numerous ways of doing anthropology, and that some anthropological approaches do not do justice to religious questions. Putting it simply, to describe the outward ritual life of a culture would be to cover but a fraction of its spiritual life. Not only is it feasible to argue, moreover, that most so-called economic and political activity in Melanesia could be aptly described as religious (so dispelling all thoughts that religion can be compartmentalized or boxed away) but it also remains true that the spiritual life of man consists of complex emotional responses, sentiments, mental associations and intricate reasoning which often elude the observer, especially the observer who has no personal or reflective interest in the profound depths of *homo religiosus*.

In this contribution, I wish to reflect on Melanesian men and women as spiritual beings, not merely as the objects of social scientific investigation, frozen by the historical contingency of the fieldworker's sabbatical. Second, I will structure this paper around

the human *life cycle*, man's adventure from birth to the grave—and beyond. If I can be forgiven for being rather mischievously Marxist, however, I will make use of the rather arbitrary distinction between traditional, transitional and modern expressions of religious life. Although my attention largely centres on so-called 'traditional' Melanesia, at the end I will try, very cursorily, to account for important shifts in post-contact times; shifts often neglected by those who simply want to re-construct 'the Melanesia that used to be'.

The ancient Chinese philosopher Hui Shih once said that 'man begins to die from his birth',[1] and this is a proverb better suited to the subsistence, survivalist cultures of Melanesia than is the classical Greek biological model of genesis, growth, acme, decay and death. It is better suited not only because of what appears to be a very high infant mortality rate in pre-contact Melanesia, but also because young people were expected to fulfill adult tasks of food production and childbearing as early as possible, and because an individual's life had a good chance of being cut short—by a spear, or through sickness, or by something as terrible as the crocodile. Reflecting on pre-contact or 'traditional' Melanesian societies, one has to appreciate how death was an ever-present reality, and much more intensely so than for those of us who have the time and security to read this article, and who put off all thought of dying (and its implications) as long as possible. We are therefore dealing with the problem of describing and empathizing with a consciousness or a species of awareness, and one whose depths are only rarely glimpsed—when symbols are grasped, for example, or when occasional articulations of religious feeling are made and understood.

Growth

First, since I am structuring my thoughts around the human life cycle, what of Melanesian children? Young boys and girls faced death from the first: it was common and occurred in the open, not behind hospital walls. Corpses were on public display, not in mortuaries. Man's mortality was not only a public spectacle: it was also mimicked in the war games of children, and it was explained to the young in story and myth. Explanations as to why man must experience death are obviously fascinating and important. They are also highly varied. In order to illustrate the mood and intonations we might expect from mythic aetiologies of death, I will retell an interesting myth told among the Daribi (Chimbu Province, Central Highlands of Papua New Guinea).

> At a place called Sawo-Hwiau where the Pio river joins the Tua, two women were making sago. At noon Sau arrived [he is a kind of cult hero]

> and the woman with pendulous breasts heard the call of a *kaueri* bird; she wanted to go and see what the bird had sighted, but instead the girl with upright breasts went. She saw Sau sitting in the sun; he had white hair. He told her to look for lice in his hair. She stood behind him and searched through his hair; as she did so, he had an erection, and his penis went behind him and entered the woman's vagina. She cried out and ran away; Sau was shamed *and to get even he cursed mankind with fighting and with death*. Sau's skin was getting old, and to get rid of it he sloughed it off; the gura snakes, sago grubs and eels took it. Man, for his part, received the *clay of mourning* (or lamentation) body shields, arrows, etc, whereas the snakes settled down to a quiet existence.[2]

Here man loses immortality: he is banished from an Eden of uninhibited sexuality and generative prowess, and has to bear the burden of life's termination. The snake, that 'most subtle beast of the field', lives a quiet existence, but men and women have to relate to each other in a restrained (and to that extent more troublesome) way[3] and men must fight and die on the field of battle.

Mortality and the human condition, then, is something of a blight. Yet, if we reflect on this myth still further, we see that this condition has its generative aspects as well, for children arise from the 'social' mediation between men and women, and it is by war that the group defends its very existence and takes vengeance. Death, moreover, is not the end; no 'traditional' Melanesian, I suspect, would have said that! Nothing is more endemic to 'archaic' or 'primal' consciousness than that life is stronger than death, that audacity, courage, vitality, strength, power, breath, soul-substance, spirit, will forever replace lifelessness. The universe is alive with all these energies, the signals of ultimate survival: the noise in the dark, the cry of a bird, the howl of dogs, florescent fungus, fire flies, surfacing fish, snails, the silence of sacred stones, the evocative designs on a *gope* (carved board which represented the family ancestor) and the atmosphere of the cemetery. The world is alive with the manifestations of immortality. The Melanesian child came to feel and interact with this environment because others felt and related to it that way. He came to sense all this in his bones, not by reflection nor by being schooled in the objectification of phenomena.

Let us move to a further stage in the life cycle, to initiation. When its moment arrived, initiation was much more an emotional than an intellectual experience. In those coastal and island societies in which initiation ceremonies were both colourful and highly significant, one could be forced to face death by facing the dead head-on, that is by meeting the ancestors, in the form of skulls, or carved representations, or other emblems.[4] When young Melanesians entered the community, it was a community of both the living and the dead, of men, women and *ancestors*. For most Melanesian societies, the ancestors or dead relatives were an integral, supportive part of the whole company of souls, so that

ordinary humans were dependent on their aid, their more-than-human power, and at the very least, on their satisfaction.

In some cases, initiation itself was a form of ritual 'death', the passing from one order into another (more decidedly onerous) one. Such a ritual death is vividly enacted by groups in the eastern Torricelli Mountains (Sepik). When the initiates enter the cult house or *haus tambaran,* the first in line falls to the ground as if dead, and the others crawl in over him. Once they are all inside, they disappear from public sight for three months. In a special sense they die in their seclusion until, after having been fed carefully by the elders, they return as proud, healthy warriors for the final and colourful ceremony. I have been assured, however, that the participants in these events—including the initiators—do not reflect on the symbolism involved with any exercise of the intellect—they just *do* it, and it is simply part of their time-honoured eco-system.[5]

Death, I should add here, was far less the object of speculation and far more a common event in one's environment and one which induced *action* (usually a set pattern of actions, and sometimes virtually automatic responses). There is no better illustration of this than Melanesian wailing, which to an outsider may seem contrived and artificial, but which is in fact a natural, inbred—even if sometimes gameful—response.

Acme

But we have already come to the subject of young adulthood. When Melanesian man was recognized for his manhood and woman for her womanhood, they were not only expected to cope with the passing away of their own relatives and others, but also to face the real possibility of their own deaths: the man as a warrior, the woman as a child-bearer.

The motives for engaging in a fight form a complex subject in itself. What we are interested in here is how the warrior thinks about the possibility of death when he joins his fellows with his weapons. In the absence of helpful evidence, much is left to our creative imagination. I once talked with a highland warrior who claimed to have killed or wounded over twenty enemies before the Middle Wahgi Valley was 'pacified' in 1947. He was unhappy to talk about any of his personal fears, for the very articulation of them would be an act of weakness. It is unfortunate, furthermore, that Melanesia as yet lacks its Sholokhov to relate what it might feel like in the heat of battle,[6] although the young author, Wauru Degoba, in his story 'The Night Warrior', has written quite arrestingly of such matters. Dawagaima, his people's chief, lies wounded, isolated at night in enemy country. He

> 'was waiting and thinking. He thought of his three wives, he thought of his

> far distant country. How would he get home again? He listened to the night birds calling "They are warning me", he thought. The moon was right on his forehead; no warning noise came to him. "If I do not take my revenge, will I be the great father of the warriors of Kalgunua?".'[7]

Here we have a hint of the doubting moment, but it is only a hint. For Melanesians fear was often considered a disease, a real sickness, which could mean death.

It is useful to note the general differences between the ancient Greek or Roman attitude toward death on the field of battle and most Melanesian approaches to this matter. For Greeks and Romans, to die honourably on the battleground meant proud remembrance among the living, and a direct passage to the choicest things offered by the other world.[8] For most Melanesians, to die fighting was to fail. The object was to get your skull, your man. You would be honoured if you remained alive and died older. To die in battle, admittedly, was not the death of a useless fellow, and for most groups such a victim would inherit a choice dwelling place among the spirits. The warrior, however, had to drive death from his mind, to fight for his life with utter—some might say brutish—fearlessness. Those who fought, moreover, sometimes refused to sleep in the reclining position of death. The Motuan warriors of Tubusereia, it is reported, slept sitting up, never sure when an invasion might come.[9]

A woman, for her part, was expected to face the possibility of death in child-bearing, and yet avoid it as she would avoid a spear. There were ways by which women comforted each other before the moment of ordeal. In the Murik Lakes area on the Sepik coast, for instance, there is a long story recounted about the goddess Jari; a story very much cherished by those initiated into the female cult. It is said that Jari left her first husband and travelled along the Sepik coast in an easterly direction, creating rivers with a broken paddle and her own urine. At the first village she visited, however, she came upon a group of women surrounding a very expectant mother. 'What are you doing?' she asked. 'We are going to cut the mother open to save the baby.' 'Don't do that!' Jari exclaimed, 'fetch me some *mangas* bark and a coconut bowl full of water.' These were brought and she rubbed the woman's waist with both the water and bark juices. When the woman delivered successfully, Jari then passed on the magical formulae for childbirth. 'Thank goodness you came!' shouted the villagers, 'we have lost many a good woman that way!' And so Jari went further along the coast to other villagers and the same incident was repeated numerous times.[10]

From Manam Island to near Wewak, at least during the first thirty years of this century, most women relied on Jari for uncomplicated deliveries, secure in the realization that an old order of things, when childbirth meant inevitable death, had passed away. And the naming of a new-born child in Melanesia, incidentally, often affirmed new life in the face of death, since a child was commonly

named after a grandparent. The birth marks the beginning of a new cycle, for the grandparents will soon leave the land of the living, or will deal kindly with namesakes once they have departed to the spirit world.[11]

There is more to observe about adulthood, or the prime of life. In the 'normal course of events', Melanesians had to face death in the form of malevolent forces and sickness. The world was more than often inhabited by evil spirits and not just beneficient ones. Kelfene is such a spirit for the Wape people (south of the Torricelli Mountains, Sepik hinterland).

> He lives in all pools of water, lakes, rivers and creeks, not being bound to any one particular place. Kelfene, on smelling a menstruating woman as she approaches a pool of water, causes the woman to have a large haemorrhage, following which the pool of water gushes up, enveloping and killing her. Just nothing can be done for the hapless victim. The only safe places for menstruating women are in their villages. All women are terrified of this spirit.
>
> Children, while in the bush, must not complain of being hungry and ask to eat, for if they do, there is the probability that Kelfene will come and kill them all, especially if they are near water.[12]

Women and children often had the fear of death instilled into them with such belief, although, in the case just cited, the fears have a social, albeit very male-chauvinist function, viz., to prevent wandering by unclean (and therefore highly dangerous) females, and to put children in their place.

But it is not unusual for male adults to be afraid of encountering a deadly force. This was a fearfulness distinct from that despicable fear toward one's enemy or prey. It was a sense of awe, uncertainty, obligation, and sometimes plain terror, in the face of unknown powers.[13] It is a sobering thought that the extraordinary lifestyle of many southern Koiari of Papua, with their houses built high in the trees, was determined by fear of Vata, a deadly spirit.[14] And ghosts, as well as place spirits or other supernaturals, could be encountered by the Melanesian. The Lakalai of West New Britain are among those who fear meeting a ghost, expecially a 'man from the bush', who is a spirit in human form.

> 'Even daylight encounters near the village may be dangerous', writes Ann Chowning of these people, 'especially if they end in sexual intercourse. There are a few clues to the non-human nature of these shape-shifters, and a man who is suspicious will apply the tests of asking the person to name a common object or spreading nettle leaves for the woman to lie on.'[15]

Sickness, as is well attested in literature, was often ascribed to the supernaturals, to malevolent spirits or to displeased dead relatives, especially those relatives cross for being disposed of at the funeral in an improper or careless manner. Infirmity, too, could be the work of a sorcerer, who could control malevolent forces or who

could work the magical techniques necessary for murder. Melanesians had various ways of dealing with the possibility of death presented by sickness. The most common practice was to consult the person who would either know what had happened or was going to happen. The manner of diagnosing certain death varies from culture to culture. A Middle Wahgi magician, for example, may choose to pierce a series of sweet potatoes with a sharp stick, posing a series of alternatives before each prod, and deciding on the answers by the softness or toughness of a given tuber.[16]

A Roro diviner—usually female—will first fast from meat, pray quickly over the sick body, and then after passing a banana leaf around the person's face, will sleep with the leaf under her head. The dead relatives, who are trying their hardest to take the person's spirit away with them are expected to explain the whole matter to her.[17] Such figures would tell if the ailment would be fatal or not, although whether they would also prescribe the cure, depended on the social structure and the nature of its specializations. The judgement of death was taken with the utmost seriousness. Still today, a man without any recourse against sorcery (or against sickness supposedly brought by a malevolent spirit) will surely die, so real to him are the powers of destruction which overshadow his existence.[18]

I could go on describing the perils of Melanesian life. Famine, epidemics, come to mind. Mention may be made, for instance, of those who dared to brave the sea along the coasts. We must not forget that when the Motu or the Elema set out on their long Hiri expeditions in impressive trading canoes, they realized that 'their bones and flesh could well become the manure of a distant land or meat for the sharks'.[19] The Hiri traders, for example, found security for the journey by making an offering to Kaeva Kuku, a female deity shared by both trading groups.[20] They certainly needed that security: in 1876, we note 177 Hiri traders were massacred by enemies as they were plying their way along the Papuan coast.[21]

Decay

The life cycle we are considering has passed its acme, however. To be an elder in Melanesian societies—and I think mainly of males—was usually to be in a privileged, responsible position. Having survived this far, having made sure that one's own skull was not displayed on an enemy's rack, and in some cases having undergone further initiations into the deeper mysteries of the cult,[22] an elder often found himself in more sheltered, more secure circumstances. But in his life's journey, he was now closer to the ancestors, and that realization was firmly imbedded in his consciousness by the way younger people related to him, and sought advice on matters of

ritual, lore and custom.[23] Some societies went so far as to celebrate the onset of old age. Among the eastern Fuyughe, for instance, the major feasts conform to stages in man's life. First comes the initiation ceremony, and eventually two important festivities, one to celebrate with those men who have their first grey hairs *(anukevadad),* and then one to salute those elders with loosening teeth *(usiadad),* before the last feast of all, the funeral to honour the recent dead. These particular ceremonies were usually for groups of males, and they also provided the opportunity for making peace and new alliances, since visitors from other Fuyughe-speaking areas were invited to attend. The elders being honoured usually sat back in the men's house (or *emu*), while the young danced through both day and night.[24] The approach of death, in various cultures, suggested to the aged that they must settle certain obligations or put things in order. A Manus islander, for example, might have lived long enough to have had the privilege of actually seeing his daughter-in-law, and to complete the payments for his son's wife.

> 'This is one of the few situations which the Manus feel as romantic', writes Margaret Mead, 'the adventure of looking upon the face of a loved son's wife. "Should I die", says an old man, "and never see the wife whom I have purchased for my son?" So the old father, tottering towards death, beyond the age when disrespect could lurk in his glance, is allowed to make a feast for his daughter-in-law. After thus publicly showing his respect for her, the taboo is removed forever and father, son and daughter-in-law live as one household.'[25]

More's the pity, however, that Manus life was so exacting that such a situation seldom occurred. We have to correct our rather inappropriate picture of the biological cycle, then, and now that we have come to consider the event of death itself, one ought to recall the Chinese saying quoted earlier, to remember how many people died before they could open their eyes, grow a beard, breast-feed a child, let alone see old age.

Disposal

It is safe to generalize that death is taken by Melanesians as the most important event in any person's career. For those of us who prefer to relegate death to an hour's funeral service, or to 'let the dead bury the dead', we would be as astounded as Malinowski was to discover 'the immense social and economic upheaval which occurs after each death', as he puts it, and which 'is one of the most salient features of the culture of these natives',[26] and his statement here is generally true of Melanesia, not just of Trobriand Island societies. What is very difficult to generalize about, however, is the manner in which funerals are conducted, the way corpses are disposed of, and the various attitudes people have toward the recent

dead. At this point, I am in real danger of selecting those examples which are most unusual and interesting, and thus not necessarily representative. Here, too, if one were wishing to advertise the horrific and cadaverous side to Melanesian life, one could have a field-day—and not just by talking about cannibalism or bloated bodies floating down highland rivers.[27] Motuan mourners, for instance, used to smear their bodies with the decaying flesh of their dead.[28] The Lemakot widows of north New Ireland would be strangled and then thrown on the funeral pyres of their departed husbands in a Melanesian version of *suttee*—though they could avoid such a hideous fate if they were still suckling a child.[29] The bodies of dead females often received bad treatment. Among the Kuma, women were literally thrown into the grave face downwards, to lessen the likelihood of their ghostly vengefulness—especially against husbands who took another wife.[30] Very common in Melanesia was the raised wooden burial platform rather than the pyre or the pit. The corpse was exposed in the open air to facilitate its putrefaction, so that the skull could be preserved, or a bone hung *in memoriam* around the mourner's neck. In some areas the hands and feet of the dead were treated and dried for pendants (as within the Purari watershed), and techniques of uncased mummification have been found, unevenly distributed, from the Torres St. to Yapen Island.[31] This was a feature of Melanesian culture which was bound to be destroyed by the colonials, and much more commonly by representatives of the Administration than by the missionaries.

The *kiaps* could not put up with the odour of decaying flesh and the dripping pits—and besides, it was unhealthy.[32] Some of these patrollers at least made it their business to describe burial customs, though, or make sketches. C. A. W. Monckton has bequeathed us with an impressive line drawing of an eastern Fuyughe burial platform (1906), and the presence of infant bones in an adjacent tray probably indicates that it was the burial shrine for a mother and child.[33] Among the Fuyughe the platforms were raised high (*ca.*3½ metres) because the spirit of a dead person was expected to depart to the heights of Mount Albert Edward, the spirit being prone to remain around as a nuisance if the body was not handled in this way.[34]

Generally, the manner of treating the recent dead is symbolically, though not necessarily consciously, related to assumptions about the dead person's immediate and future whereabouts. By piecing together a swathe of oral historical information, for example, I managed to establish that, around 1860, all the ten and a half clans on the northern side of the Middle Wahgi Valley buried their dead high on the mountain sides in fenced enclosures and under sacred trees. The dead were reckoned to inhabit the highest terrain.

By 1930, however, following the continued presence of an

eleventh, immigrant Chimbu group from the east, the Middle Wahgi peoples were burying their dead in quite a different fashion and in different places. Their bodies were placed under little houses in large cemetries adjacent to long *singsing* (or ceremonial) grounds. The departed were expected to inhabit these houses, receiving food from their live kin. They dwelt there together, waiting for the community of the living to perform a ceremony of such colour and spectacle that it made their previous customs pale into insignificance. I am referring to the Middle Wahgi *Kongar* ceremony, a great pig-killing festival which has its counterparts in the Chimbu, among the Metlpa, the Enga and other groups in the central highlands of New Guinea.

In focusing on the *Kongar,* we pass, rather unobtrusively—and perhaps too quickly—from talk about the funerals of individuals, to periodic ceremonies which involve *the collective dead,* the whole group of those clan members who have died in recent times or over the last few generations. Every part of the Kongar ceremony must be carried out in correct order—otherwise, as I was told, the ancestors will bring disaster on the clan by their displeasure.[35] The ancestors are involved in the decision as to when the ceremony should be performed. A functionary most important in arriving at this decision—the tabooed man *(mapilie)*—has the onerous task of keeping contact with the 'spirits of the fighting dead' from one *Kongar* to another, and he must be fed from his wife's hand alone to ensure the best communication. When the day of the festival arrives, dancing warriors burst into the long *singsing* ground, with armed men pushing back the crowds and displaying their might and their beauty. But it is not only the visitors who see and marvel; so do the company of dead relatives. The scene is acted out before the community of men *and* spirits. In the very centre of the activities, where the women sit chanting their entrancing song, the ancestors are provided with a tiny grandstand, a Melanesian 'doll's house' (called *bolimgar*), with pig-jaws strewn around it for their appetites and vigour all around for their delight. It is the ancestors who will determine the future fertility of the clan for another cycle. Impressed by the dance and the song, by the mass killing of hundreds of pigs on the following day, and by the clan's generosity, it is the clan ancestors who will fatten the pigs for the next long period, bless the soil for yams and the wombs for children. Without the living dead, the community as a whole would die; with them it will undergo rebirth.[36]

It is hardly my present purpose to offer an exhaustive catalogue of ethnographic data. The details of mortuary rites, feasts and processions, careful accounts of the various precautions taken in handling the corpse, of self-decorations for mourning, of the way food is exchanged after a death, and so forth, would fill more than one thick volume.[37]

Access

Many groups believed (and still do) that the dead are never far away. Some who believe this affirm that they can be called upon for help; others, however, are fearful of their anger. Many believe, by contrast, that the dead dwell in some far-off place, although their departure may not be immediate, and in any case their super-human power allows them to return for food or communication at a moment's notice or when they choose. Integrally related to the question of a dead person's whereabouts, though, is the question as to *why* the person died. I will use a few illustrations to clarify the issues. According to the eastern Toaripi (Coastal Papua), every individual death was the result of sorcery. Irrespective of the kind of death, moreover, every Toaripi spirit eventually crossed the ocean to the land of the setting sun. But the soul did not journey to its far-off place immediately; it waited in the bush to tell its living relatives who performed the sorcery. The bereaved family would remain in their house quietly for several days after the funeral. At night one of them would get up and proceed into the bush, looking for the ghost or any sign which would indicate the person (or in some cases the group) responsible for the sorcery. If one of the family failed to make contact, others would try until there was an appropriate encounter. As with Motuans, the eastern Toaripi believe that people are 'blind', so that they cannot see the spirits, whereas the spirits can see everything. Whether, like the Motuans, they used to eat certain leaves to remove their blindness, remains uncertain.[38] Once contact would be made, the spirit would be free, and the family would take revenge or else precautionary measures for the future, depending on whether the dead person was young or old. The logic involved here has further implications, but I have said enough for working purposes.[39]

I will take a second illustration from among the Bena Bena, a highlands culture near Goroka, in the highlands of New Guinea, a culture remarkable for its intriguing '*pay-back* runners'. In 1973, I interviewed such a runner, a woman called Aubo, who upon returning from her gardens was informed that her husband had died. Her husband's relatives had gathered at his village for the mourning. Aubo slept with them, but early the next day, as she described it, a special wind *(bunemeha'a)* entered her body and she began to shiver. Her dead husband had taken control of her. She was not frightened, so she said, but she was not herself. Friends of her own vintage secured a special bark called *yahuba*, yet a young man, biting it, spat it on her back as she sat trembling. In an instant she began running and everybody was after her. It was the implicit belief that if the man's death had been effected by an enemy sorcerer, the spirit would eventually find its way to the culprit. On many occasions the runner, after such meandering, would reach an enemy village and a pay-back killing, quite indiscriminately, would be effected.

On many other occasions the runner would run in a circuitous, quite directionless way, up hill, down dale, until the party was exhausted, and although the runner might have more energy, they would perform an extraordinary act to stop the whole thing: they would cut or run across his or her shadow, and then the running would stop and the spirit be released. Aubo told me that, in her case, her husband's spirit took her through the bush in a most haphazard way, and at one point she sank down because all sense of direction had gone. But she knew that her husband's strength was in her, and when more bark juice was splattered on her back, she was away again. This forty year old woman was found some six miles from home sprinting along the highlands highway, with a sizeable crowd behind her—and then the police moved in, and her shadow was crossed in the ensuing *melee.*[40] The recent dead, then, often have very important functions to perform before they go to their final resting place or general area of habitation.

'Heavens'

What of rewards and punishments in the after-life, and what kinds of mental pictures do Melanesians have of those places eventually reached by the dead? Again, there is a diversity of opinion, and some explanations for the spirits' whereabouts are not tied to any conception of a moral order in the universe. Asking a Roro (of coastal Papua), for example, he would have told you that some spirits have the joy of proceeding to Cape Possession at the far western limits of Roro country, and this is because they had died a 'normal' kind of death or one in relatively pleasant, unexceptional circumstances. As for those who had met a hideous fate—being speared in the back or devoured by a crocodile—they were doomed to a protracted, if not permanent existence in the bush. Asking a Motuan, on the other hand, he would probably have told you what certain Motuans told the famous missionary James Chalmers in 1880.

> At Port Moresby the natives say that the spirit as soon as it leaves the body proceeds to Elema (the Gulf) where the dead person forever dwells in the midst of food and betel nuts and spends the days and nights in endless enjoyment, eating, chewing ... and dancing. Most *worthless fellows* (however) are sent back to Poava and Udia, small islands near Boera, there to remain until the goddess (Kaeva Kuku) sees fit to send them.[41]

Note how the eschatology implicit here differs from the Roro model. One's fate depended on one's moral virtues, not simply on historical contingency.

Now it is time to treat of the journey into the other world or order, which in itself is an aspect of rebirth. The dead person had to

be made comfortable for this journey; pots and utensils were commonly laid beside the corpse to prevent loneliness and despair, and food prepared for the dead who sets off (as much as for the living who remain behind to wish him well). As for the images of the other world, they vary considerably. In the earliest known systematic ethnographic study of a Melanesian people, by the neglected Italian savant Pier Ambrogio Curti, writing in 1861, we find described the extraordinary journey of the Woodlark Islander's soul as it heads toward its beautiful goal.

> When one dies, the soul, the islanders say, travels to *Tum,* a brutish paradise which they imagine to be a place of delight situated on an island to the west of Woodlark. ... The journey is carried out on the back of the great serpent *Motetutau.* He who does not freely stand on the serpent and falls into the sea is changed into a fish or shell; but whoever stands firm finds at the entrance of *Tum* an inexorable old woman, who has the task of not allowing further anyone who does not carry two lines of tattooing on his arm, and whoever does not have this distinctive mark is rejected and thrown into the sea. Once having entered *Tum,* one enjoys all material pleasures, and has copious supplies of everything; one lives, one dies again and yet revives, as does the drunken alcoholic who kills his reason with liquor, yet after a dream receives it back again.[42]

For the highlander Daribi, by comparison, the road to the dead was the Tua river, which ran to a lake they had never seen, somewhere in the west. There the dead supposedly live in caves[43]—like the earliest men in the womb of mother Earth.

The living often considered it vital for some part of the old body, or some effigy or emblem, to remain behind. Bones of the dead were frequently worn as personal adornments and reminders among Melanesians. The skull of the departed could be particularly treasured. The skull of a dead chief among the Roviana people of the western Solomons, for instance, was highly prized as a source of *mana.*[44] In the western Papuan Gulf, by comparison, the skulls of dead foes would be arranged meticulously on a rack of the *gope* boards who still remained ravenous in their desire for enemy flesh.[45] Among the Iatmul on the Sepik River, by contrast, an effigy of a recently dead man was propped up by a complex of poles, while the real body was transported miles off to a place where the earth was not soggy.[46] All such phenomena, it may be argued, indicate that there was regenerative power in each death. The group of ordinary mortals received some of that power, and after the point at which the dead was severed from its companions, after the interval of time when the mourning was absolute, when love was mingled with fear, the bereaved men and women could return to their normal affairs and live again.[47]

Return

A crucial question might now be asked: were the dead expected to return? Such a query, of course, can be quite misleading. For most Melanesians, ghosts or ancestors were quite capable of making their presence felt among the living whenever they chose. The real question is, did Melanesians expect the dead to be reborn in any tangible form on this earth? There are, to be sure, a few instances of belief in the transmigration of souls—roughly parallel to the Hindu notion of *samsara*. A. W. Murray, in fact, believed that he detected such a belief among the Motuans—at least in 1874. Although the soul was supposed to remain 'for an indefinite time at Erema', he reports, 'it returns to the place from whence it came and becomes the occupant of some other body.'[48]

Murray was only an amateur at anthropology and his conclusions remain questionable, yet the fact remains that beliefs about reincarnation are scattered throughout Melanesia, and have been analysed in more recent literature.[49] At a Bena village, I vividly remember, an old woman wept before me for half an hour, believing that one of my little daughters was the reborn soul of a child she had lost years ago. A more important issue in the study of Melanesian religion, however, concerns myths or beliefs about the return of the dead collectively, not just in individual reincarnations. Here we have reached a highly interesting aspect of Melanesian religious life—the so-called cargo cults.

In his important book *The Trumpet Shall Sound,* Peter Worsley has ably argued that most of those cult movements of the twentieth century which expected the coming of European cargo, also expected the *ancestors* to come as the bearers of that cargo. Cargo cultists usually supposed that the ancestors, so crucial for the economic security of the group, were in fact the real manufacturers of the new, marvellous items handled by Europeans.[50] It was through reflecting on these Melanesian beliefs in the collective return of the dead which induced Mircea Eliade to write of cargo cultism as belief in the coming of cosmic regeneration or rebirth.[51] I have taken issue with some of Eliade's arguments in another context,[52] yet, I wish to conclude this paper with a few pertinent comments about these matters, matters which concern 'transitional' religious movements of Melanesia.

Conclusion

Let it be clear that too little fieldwork has been done to demonstrate that cult movements expecting the return of the dead were affected by *longstanding,* traditional beliefs about such a return. It may well be that in most cases the startling new circumstances brought about by 'the white man phenomenon' *produced* and *diffused* such beliefs.

As I said, little careful investigation has been carried out on this particular issue: I can only go on what I have learned myself.

In 1973, I started to plot the intellectual biography of an impressive prophet figure among the eastern Fuyughe of the Papuan highlands. His name was Ona Asi or Bilalaf. What emerged from the bits and pieces of evidence intrigued me greatly. In the 1920's, for instance, when the missionaries were settling in, the prophet's beliefs about the dead were much the same as those held by everybody else in Fuyughe country. The dead were placed on raised high platforms (as mentioned before) and they were expected to rise to Mt. Albert Edward, never to bother the living any more. The important spiritual powers which the eastern Fuyughe often sought to appropriate were *not* the ancestors, but the *sila,* protector place spirits which guarded each cluster of hamlets, and which could even be called up in séances.[53]

By the 1930's, however, the prophet Ona Asi began to hold séances with the *dead,* and in his meetings he sought to make contact with 'the other side' as they do in the spiritualist churches of the West. What was the object of these séances? One of them was to find out who enemy sorcerers and murderers were. Another, most interestingly, was to bring wealth and *susum* or 'goods' (very generally conceived) to his people. Now in 1942 the prophet was arrested as a trouble-maker, and was detained on Yule Island, on the coast. There, among other things, he came into contact with ideas about how the ancestors would return bringing European cargo. These were ideas, incidentally, held by certain Roro and Mekeo people on the coast who had set their hopes on a young prophetess by the name of Philo, and a young black priest by the name of Louis Vangeke. To cut a long story short, however, the prophet had returned to his home country by 1945; and what do we find him preaching in the early fifties? That the ancestors—collectively—will return.[54] Here in one lifetime, then, we have a shift in ideas, which represents an adjustment to changing circumstances. This is only one example, and many others could be discussed.

A more contemporary version of this general theme, for instance, may be found at the headquarters of the Peli Association near Yangoru in the Sepik. There we would find an artificial cemetery, built especially so that the ancestors can manufacture hard cash.[55] Reflecting not only on these brief points, however, but on the available evidence as a whole, I have been led to the working conclusion that the remarkable circumstances and changes of the twentieth century *demanded an eschatology from the Melanesian.* Melanesian groups may have had incipient beliefs about the end of the known order, but they *needed* the myth of the returning dead, they needed the Christian doctrine of resurrection, the Last Judgement, and related notions, because, in their own special way, the events, the drastic changes they faced, *were* eschatological, for

these changes drew to a rounded conclusion the hard, lithic, relentless order of existence which had lasted for thousands of years.[56] The Melanesian had to cope with a brand new world, and if some chose the baptism or the new birth offered by the churches, others were baptized by the fire of the 'Vailala Madness'.[57]

Now we are left with emergent 'modern' Melanesia, the infant colossus issuing from the womb of an ancient mother, youthful unities arising from the time-honoured diversities. Despite modernization, however, today's Melanesian will have to go on facing the ancient, inexorable fact of death. Christianity which is now the most powerful religious force among us in Melanesia, may whittle away 'the worship of the dead', as some people choose to call it,[58] but far from destroying the importance of the funeral, or the tribute to the departed, or the strong sense of a community between the living and the dead, or anticipations of life beyond death and beyond history, I think, in the end, Christianity will reinforce these things, and so foster what is already on the way—a distinctly Melanesian brand of the Christian faith, a distinctly Melanesian way of facing death and the resurrection.