

Religion

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2013

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What is "Oceanic religion"? Until recently many scholars restricted the term to the religions of Pacific Islanders as they existed before extensive European contact. They wrote of mission Christianity as an intrusive force and sought to explain a variety of postcontact religious movements as indigenous responses to colonialism. Today, with Christianity entrenched across the region, a sharp distinction between indigenous and foreign religions is no longer viable.

For most Pacific Islanders, the religion of the present is a complex and ever-changing mix of local and imported elements. In some cases, especially where missionaries have only recently been at work, the "traditional" and "Christian" may be readily distinguished (Knauff 2002; Robbins 2004). More often one encounters situations such as on Ujelang in the Marshall Islands (Carucci 1997). The people of this isolated atoll dedicate four months each year to competitive singing, dances and games, and feasts. The ritual season climaxes on December 25 and the first Sunday of the new year. On these days the community lavishes food upon their minister, whom they expect, as with the chiefs of old, to keep some for his own use and redistribute the rest among the congregation. Laurence Carucci shows that the Ujelang way of celebrating Christmas parallels pre-Christian rituals meant to assure prosperity. But this Christmas celebration also incorporates and speaks to the Ujelang people's experience of successive colonial regimes, of displacements during the Second World War and nuclear testing years, of a commitment to Congregational Christianity, and of a desire to be culturally distinct within Micronesia. Christmas on Ujelang turns out to be about a lot of things.

Such mixings and fusions are common across the Pacific Islands (Figure 18.1). On the surface at least they reflect the inroads made by Western ideas and practices upon Oceanic cultures. At a deeper level, however, they are the living productions of a profoundly experiential and flexible appreciation of the spiritual that long predates the exploration and conquest of the region by Europeans. Spectacular instances of religious transformation in indigenous religious practices are well known. Many New Guinea people, for instance, traded magic, mythologies, and even whole ritual complexes with their neighbors (Harrison 1993). From premissionary Hawai'i we have the fascinating example of Queen Ka'ahumanu, who in 1819 instigated the overthrow of the elaborate system of ritual prohibitions that had previously separated men from women, nobles from commoners (Howe 1984: 163–168).

Early observers often portrayed islanders as slaves to unchanging customs. This stereotype suited the colonial project (see Thomas 1994). More careful historical and ethnographic work, however, has revealed the highly innovative, often performative quality of Oceanic religions (e.g., Schieffelin 1976; Wagner 1972). Paradoxically, this very openness has allowed many aspects of older indigenous religions to continue into the present, insinuated into Christian forms and more visibly syncretic religious movements such as the famed Melanesian "cargo cults."

There is no aspect of Oceania more difficult to generalize about than religion. In part, this has to do with the cultural diversity, the mix of historical influences, and the inventiveness of local religious expressions across the region. But it also has to do with the extraordinary attention outsiders have paid to Oceanic religion over the years. Turn to any standard regional bibliography and you will find hundreds of articles and books dealing with religion (e.g., Fry and Maurico 1987; Haynes and Wuerch 1995; Taylor 1965). There is a staggering amount of detailed information on virtually every aspect of religion from every corner of this vast region, yet there have been few published overviews of religion in Oceania. The most comprehensive is an essay by Garry Trompf, the pre-eminent scholar of Oceanic religions today, which surveys traditional religions, "cults of intrusion," and Christianity and provides a useful annotated bibliography (Swain and Trompf 1995). Excellent entries on Micronesian, Melanesian, Polynesian, and Oceanic religions, as well as a historic overview of religious scholarship in the region, can be found in Mircea Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Eliade 1987). John Garrett (1982, 1992, 1997) has written the most comprehensive history of missionary efforts and the establishment of national churches. Manfred Ernst (1994,



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Figure 18.1. Atlu island woman, dancing in church during New Year celebration (photo MR).

2006) and his colleagues have provided comprehensive surveys of organized religion on a country-by-country basis. Several fine surveys of millenarian movements exist, mostly focused upon Melanesian cargo cults (Burrige 1969; Worsley 1968). Finally, mention should be made of Trompf's important surveys of Melanesian religion in general (1991) and the theme of moral retribution ("pay-back") in particular (1994). Such studies are extremely helpful. Still, given the enormous richness of the materials available, the paucity of studies of religion above the level of local culture is striking.

I do not attempt a comprehensive account of Oceanic religion here. Instead, I confine myself to some general observations and themes, although along different lines than those pursued by Trompf (Swain and Trompf 1995). For convenience, I define three roughly distinguished historical contexts: indigenous religions as they existed around the time of contact with Europeans; religious practices and beliefs after contact, particularly as influenced by Christian missionaries and indigenous religious leaders; and the contemporary situation, simultaneously marked by a renewal of ancient religious forms and a new wave of Christian missionary efforts. Readers should be aware that this is at best a useful fiction. Oceanic peoples experienced European contact in vastly different circumstances over a time period ranging from the sixteenth century to the late 1960s. Further, indigenous peoples in settler colonies like New Zealand, Hawai'i, and New Caledonia had a markedly different and generally more brutal experience of colonialism than people elsewhere who remained majorities in possession of their own lands. Finally, the religious expressions described here under the three "periods" may all be witnessed today, often in the same places.

Oceanic Religions at Contact

In this section and the next I use the "ethnographic past" voice to indicate that much of what I'm describing is based upon studies of pre-Christian societies. As I have already noted, however, many aspects of "traditional" religions continue into the present.

Different as the religious systems were, most elaborated a few basic themes:

Intimacy of the Spiritual World

Everywhere in Oceania people lived in intimate proximity to spiritual influences and entities (Figure 18.2). No one has described the "enchantment" of the Oceanic landscape with greater elegance than the missionary-ethnographer Maurice Leenhardt, who studied the relationships between myth and the land in New Caledonia (Leenhardt 1979). His observations are broadly applicable. The Maisin people of Oro Province in Papua New Guinea, with whom I have worked, sacrificed to the ancestors whenever they started new gardens; walked quietly around certain pools, glades, and swamps, the continuing residences of the heroes of their myths; told of encounters with monsters in the deep forest; and manipulated certain foods and materials to attain or avoid spiritual powers (Barker 2007). This is not to say that Maisin, any more than other Oceanic people, walked in fear of ghosts, sprites, and things that go bump in the night. The numinous was an expected part of everyday life—*not good or bad, but simply an unavoidable reality.* One day when

walking to a remote garden, I observed to a Maisin friend that we had come a long way from other people. He replied flatly that we were hardly alone; we were entirely surrounded by spirits. And so we were.



Figure 18.2. In the Tuamotus, interatoll voyages always begin with a prayer (photo MR).

In Polynesia and eastern Melanesia spiritual intimacy was conveyed most powerfully in the related concepts of *mana* and *tabu*. *Mana* can be understood as the manifestation of godly power in this life. Entities that generate or that order may be described as having or enacting *mana*. In Polynesia, *mana* proclaimed itself in images of abundance, of which perhaps the most spectacular were the chiefs themselves, whose "beauty" was marked by bright costumes, brilliant rituals, generous gifts to the people, and often marked corpulence (Shore 1989: 138–139). People throughout the region associated "chiefly" with agricultural fecundity in a wide variety of ways. In Tikopia, as elsewhere, a chief received the first fruits of gardens in community ceremonies and enjoyed precedence in eating as he was "terrestrial agent for the god—bestowing food, and hence 'owner' of all resources" (Firth 1936: 482). A person, thing, or place manifesting *mana* was surrounded and constrained by ritual prohibitions (*tabu*), meant to prevent contagion from (and to) less sacred entities. By virtue of their godly *mana*, chiefs not only proclaimed *tabus* over resources, such as coconuts, but they also were *tabu* themselves to less sacred persons. Hawaiian chiefs, for instance, maintained an elaborate system of food and etiquette restrictions meant to protect their *mana* from the deleterious effects of commoners and members of the other gender.

There was no clear line between the spiritual and human in indigenous religions. Those engaging or encountering spiritual powers took on aspects of the spiritual themselves. In Melanesian

societies, those wishing to use magic for hunting, gardening, healing, or attacking enemies had to prepare by avoiding foods and substances that might "cool" their bodies and undergoing disciplines to "heat" themselves up. Once prepared, they themselves became spiritually dangerous to others. Since serious illness or accidents in most places were understood to have spiritual causes, humans—acting as sorcerers and witches—were widely believed to have the ability to bring illness, accidents, and death to others (Fortune 1932). The sorcerer's power, however, was not entirely willful. In the southern Papuan society of Mekeo and elsewhere, one could get very sick merely by approaching a sorcerer without proper precautions. The sorcerer, witch, shaman, and magician acted as visible entry points for spiritual power in human society: power that as humans they could influence but not completely control. The greatest sorcerers/healers in Mekeo were called "men of sadness," in part because of the toll that constant engagement in the spiritual took upon their social relations and their bodies. They were simultaneously terrifying and tragic (Stephen 1995; cf. Young 1983).

The Autonomy of Spirits

Early missionaries sometimes accused Oceanic peoples of "worshipping" spirits and gods. Everywhere, however, attitudes toward spiritual beings were far more ambivalent than this would suggest. On the Micronesian atoll of Ifaluk, people openly spoke of their hate for and fear of the ghosts that bedeviled their lives (Spiro 1952). In communities on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, "Sir Ghost," the spirit of a recently departed father, maintained a brooding watch over the economic activities of every household (Fortune 1936). In Hawai'i, commoners welcomed the annual return of Lono with orgiastic rites, only to witness the slaying of the god by their human king (Sahlins 1985). In these different cases we witness a desire to influence spiritual entities that are recognized as having powers beyond human understanding or control.

Students of Oceanic religion distinguish between varieties of spiritual entities. We can roughly arrange these into a continuum ranging from those closest to those furthest away from living humans roughly as follows: ghosts, ancestral spirits, nonhuman spirits, culture heroes, gods. In many places, ghosts would hang around villages following a death, both helping and hurting individuals and households. Among the Maisin, for instance, a recently deceased father might visit a daughter in a dream to advise her of a good place to plant a garden or to request a certain name for a baby, but the same ghost feeling lonely might just as easily take the soul of a newborn. Ancestral spirits or gods could be just as capricious and unpredictable, but because they had far greater power than ghosts, they had to be appealed to in larger communal ceremonies. Given the common experiences of violence and uncertainty of health and food in many areas, many communal rituals were directed at the fickle deities influencing war and fertility (Mageo and Howard 1996).

Scholars have long noticed the general correspondence between social organization and cosmology. In the hierarchically organized societies of Polynesia, religious worldviews were "vertically" oriented, focused upon deities who created the world and founded the chiefly lines of descent (Swain and Trompf 1995). Trompf cautions us not to draw too strong a contrast with the

small-scale societies elsewhere in the Pacific, noting the presence of high gods in several Melanesian and Micronesian communities. Still, in general, Melanesian cosmologies tended to have a more "lateral" emphasis, in which ancestral and nonhuman spiritual forces occupied the near landscape rather than the sky or distant horizon.

The Transformative Power of Ritual

Ritual can be defined as a set of formalized behaviors that, when used properly, harness spiritual power in such a way as to bring about a transformation in the empirical world. Ritual is thus often provisional—open to modification and experimentation.

Magic and sacrifices were probably the most common rituals carried out in daily life. Islanders gathered special substances and chanted incantations to aid the growth of food in the gardens, to strengthen the abilities of dogs to track game, to attract fish into nets, and to undertake a wide variety of other necessary subsistence activities (Malinowski 1954). In most places, people also made use of magic to deal with the uncertainties of romances and conflicts. In colonial times, Melanesians adapted magic to aid and protect their teams during soccer or cricket matches. Everywhere, islanders made sacrifices of food and wealth to spirits and gods, mirroring the exchanges that guided human morality. In giving tribute to their chiefs, Polynesians gave to the gods. In turn, the gods, through the chief, ideally redistributed the blessings of the land and sea back to the people, thus assuring bounty in the coming months (Firth 1970; Williamson 1933).

The most common communal rituals in villages centered on transformations in the life cycle: birth, sexual maturity, marriage, and death. Such occasions were often marked by massive feasts and exchanges as well as spectacular ceremonials (Figure 18.3). Weddings between aristocratic families in Tonga, for instance, occasioned huge celebrations during which meters upon meters of decorated bark cloths (*tapa*) were presented as gifts. In Melanesia, life transition ceremonies called for years of careful planning on the part of ambitious leaders: the planting of special gardens, the raising of suitably fat village pigs, the careful cultivation of allies who might be induced to make contributions. The elaborate male initiation ceremonies among the Iahita Arapesh in the Sepik region, to take one example, thus also presented an opportunity for not-so-covert competition between political rivals (Tuzin 1980). The "secular" politics of ritual, however, should not blind us to their religious aspects. The beautiful mourning and memorial ceremonies performed for years after the death of important women and men in parts of New Britain and New Ireland, for instance, served to revitalize the people's connections with the ancestors by giving them a physical form among the living (Küchler 2002). One would first hear the unearthly "voices" of the ancestors from the bush before their eruption into the village clearing in the form of elaborate masked dancers. The death feasts were a communal sacrifice to the ancestors, assuring not only the safe passage of the recently deceased into the spiritual world but also the continuing reproduction and prosperity of human society (Errington 1974).

The work of spiritual transformation was often hard and dangerous. Public rituals could require huge outlays of labor, food, and wealth; last for weeks or months at a time; and impress observers



Figure 18.3. Traditional dancing by Malsin youth, Papua New Guinea. The distinctive decorations worn by the dancers are believed to have been set at the time of creation. Each clan has its own distinct tapa cloth designs and arrangements of shells and feathers. As they dance, the Malsin see and merge with their ancestors, bringing mythic memory to life (photo JB).

and participants alike with spectacular art and performances. Much of the Oceanic art in museums today provides exquisite testimony to the creative forces of island rituals. What such art cannot reveal is how islanders themselves became physically transformed in the larger public spectacles, particularly initiations and rites connected to the fostering of male aggressiveness and warfare. In various parts of Melanesia, young boys underwent terrifying hazing; permanently incised their bodies with exquisite tattoos and raised lacerations; ingested the semen of senior males to promote growth; or, most notoriously, consumed portions of the bodies of diseased relations or murdered enemies, seeking to imbibe something of their spiritual essence (Bateson 1958; Herdt 1984; Zegwaard 1959). The stakes involved in rituals of fertility, manhood, or warfare could be extraordinarily high. Failure could bring the wrath of gods and ancestral spirits upon a people, leading to famine, dissension, or massacre at the hands of enemies (e.g., Keesing 1992).

Rituals are the most visible and ordered of religious phenomena. For that reason, scholars have long been interested in their more general social functions in traditional societies. In the Trobriand Islands of Papua New Guinea, to take a well-studied example, Annette Weiner (1976) has argued that the elaborate exchanges of male and female wealth in mortuary ceremonies served to reproduce kin groups and gender distinctions over time, giving that society a marked cultural stability. In ancient Tahiti, on the other hand, virtually every kin, occupational, and political group "had its own more or less distinctive set of spirit tutelars, and a specific place, a *marae*, for interacting with them" (Oliver 1989: 907). In effect, Tahitian commoners typically owed allegiance both to the spirits of their natal kin groups and to the gods of their chief. The ornate rituals at chiefly *maraes* secured a chief's following while virtually guaranteeing conflict as he fought to gain other chiefs' congregations. Such contests were thus at once secular and religious. Priests and others who had special knowledge of the invisible world of the spirits and gods wielded extraordinary power.

Some students have looked for even wider functions. One of the best-known studies of ritual from Oceania is Roy Rappaport's (1984) *Pigs for the Ancestors*. Drawing on meticulous ethnographic detail, Rappaport argued that warfare and peacemaking rituals among the Maring of Papua New Guinea, at which large numbers of pigs were slaughtered and eaten, formed a cycle that kept the human population in balance with the carrying capacity of their mountain environment. The argument was provocative and remains controversial. Still, no one would disagree with Rappaport's primary insight: religion, including ritual, formed part of the fabric of traditional Oceanic societies. As such, it should be viewed as an integral component of a total ecological system.

Power and Knowledge

Religious attitudes are fostered not only in practices but also through what people know and imagine (Herdt and Stephen 1989). Knowledge of the spiritual was stored and passed on to new generations in a variety of forms and media. These included narratives (mythologies, legends, entertaining tales), songs and chants, magical incantations, and prayers. Corresponding to Western notions of literature, such forms were relatively easy to record and thus occupy a large part of the published works on Oceanic religions. In recent years, scholars have worked hard to understand this material in terms of the cultures that produced it (e.g., LeRoy 1985; Valeri 1985). But many religious narratives, such as the powerful Maori creation stories of Rangī (heaven) and Papa (earth), have a universal appeal and through the work of popular writers like Joseph Campbell have become widely known. The Papua New Guinea scholar John Waiko (1981) reminds us that knowledge of the spiritual was not confined to linear forms in traditional societies, but conveyed through all the senses (Gell 1993). It became manifest in material culture, in rituals, in the experience of mishaps, and in the very geography of one's surroundings. Some of the most innovative work on Oceanic religion today explores the myriad ways such knowledge was created, communicated, and remembered (Barth 1975; Battaglia 1990; Biersack 1996).

In a classic article on the Baloma spirits of the Trobriand Islands, Bronislaw Malinowski (1954) observed that knowledge of the spiritual was not distributed evenly. People differed in what they knew. Just as important, only a few people developed specialized esoteric knowledge. As Lamont Lindstrom (1990) shows in an important study of the Tanna Islanders of Vanuatu, the lineaments of knowledge and power often run in parallel courses. The small-scale societies of Melanesia are famed for the relative weakness of leaders, particularly compared with the ranked and sometimes stratified societies that formed in parts of Micronesia and Polynesia. Melanesians almost universally embraced ethics based upon the common practice of reciprocal exchange (Mauss 1990 [1925]). Anthropologists have sometimes called Melanesian societies "egalitarian," a confusing description that obscures the fierce competitive spirit and resulting inequalities that characterized much of the region. In the never-ending game of exchanges, the man or woman who gardens better, gives away more food, speaks eloquently, fights fiercely, or, especially, possesses esoteric knowledge gains important advantages. At the same time, he or she becomes vulnerable to the attacks of competitors. Sorcerers and witches were the great

levelers in Melanesian societies, since they tended to attack individuals who stood out from others in possessions or abilities (Fortune 1932). In some places, however, leaders known to be sorcerers achieved almost despotic power through terror (Young 1983).

The elaborate male initiation rites carried out in many Melanesian societies also often involved secret knowledge, sometimes revealed to initiates only after they had passed through six or seven stages and had become old men themselves (Barth 1975; Tuzin 1980). The male cults ordered members into ranks based on their degree of initiation. They also articulated a sharp distinction between male and female. There has been much discussion among scholars, however, as to whether the gender distinction is best understood as a straightforward expression of male domination or of gender complementarity (Bonnemère 2004; Errington and Gewertz 1987). The lineaments of power were even more overt in the ranked societies of Polynesia and high-island Micronesia. Here priestly specialization, which reached its climax in the temple complexes of Tahiti and Hawai'i, reinforced an essentialized difference between the aristocratic elite and everyone else (Goldman 1970).

Religious assumptions did not merely reinforce political structures in Oceania; they formed one set of elements in ever-shifting political arrangements, constantly subject to modification. Not only might the whims of the gods change during a war, new gods or spiritual forces might reveal themselves. This explains why the arrival of Europeans in the Pacific Islands simultaneously posed a political and a religious challenge to Oceanic peoples. The Hawaiians identified Captain Cook with their god Lono, but in a new guise signaling unpredictable consequences (Sahlins 1985). Some interior peoples of New Guinea had myths warning of spirits that would enter the land from the south and bring about the destruction of the world; when the first colonial patrol emerged out of the rain forest in the 1930s, these people faced the stark choice of beating back these harbingers of doom or fleeing (Schieffelin and Crittenden 1991). For their part, a large contingent of Europeans—the Christian missionaries—were indeed committed to bringing a new religious "truth" to the islanders, one they hoped would displace indigenous understandings of the spiritual. They did not entirely succeed, but their efforts changed the religious lives of Oceanic peoples forever.

Mission Christianity and Postcontact Religious Movements

Apart from early Spanish missionary efforts in Guam and some of the Carolines, the mission era began in 1797 when the newly formed London Missionary Society sent a shipload of lay missionaries to Tahiti (Gunson 1978). Over the course of the next century, virtually all the major denominations of Western Europe and its settler colonies staked claims in the Pacific Islands. Roman Catholic and Protestant orders competed to win souls, but for the most part the Protestants respected each other's zones of influence, resulting in a geography of denominational affiliations that is reflected in the national churches of today. Missionaries were among the first whites to settle in the islands, often years before colonial powers took control.

As they became familiar with local political alignments and learned the vernacular, missionaries became brokers manipulated

by the factions struggling to control the islands. In Tahiti, Tonga, and Fiji, newly converted chiefs found their alliances with the newcomers useful in conquering their rivals and unifying the islands for the first time (Barker 2005). After the colonial powers took over, the missionaries continued to play the role of broker. In most places, they provided the basic social services of schooling and medicine. Colonial administrators, always stretched for resources, regarded missions as a necessary if not always entirely reliable part of the apparatus needed to control and "civilize" native populations (Thomas 1994). And, indeed, missions were instrumental not only in teaching native populations the "three Rs" but, at a more fundamental level, familiarizing them with Western notions of time, space, and authority (Knauff 2002; Smith 1982).

A small number of Europeans directed and consolidated mission work in most places. The main bearers of the new religion, however, were almost always Pacific Island converts. In 1821, John Williams of the London Missionary Society began the "native agency," a small group of trusted converts who were sent out to settle in non-Christian areas, often at great risk to their own lives. Over the succeeding decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Tongans preached the gospel to Fijians, Samoans found converts in Tuvalu, and Hawaiians spread American Congregationalism across central Micronesia (Lange 2005). In a massive effort, hundreds of Polynesian and eastern Melanesian missionaries introduced Christianity in the small coastal communities of Papua New Guinea under the banners of a half-dozen denominations. Many of these dedicated men and women were buried there, victims of disease, poor nutrition, and sometimes violence (Croccombe and Crocombe 1982).

As each new mission base was consolidated, another army of indigenous teachers, evangelists, and clergy set out for the next village, valley, or island. Most New Guinea Highlanders thus heard of Christianity from coastal converts who settled among them (Radford 1987). The ever-growing mission networks created a conduit for the diffusion of plants, domesticated animals, technologies, and cultural practices from the central Pacific to the peripheries (Latakefu 1978). It is not correct, then, to see conversion in Oceania simply as an encounter between indigenous and Western cultures. Almost everywhere, islanders acted as mediators, reinterpreting Christianity according to local cultural orientations and values (Brock 2005). The type of Christianity taught by hierarchically oriented Polynesian missionaries in Papua New Guinea thus differed profoundly from the styles adopted by their Melanesian brethren and often clashed with the wishes of their European supervisors (Wetherell 1978, 1980, 1989).

Compared with other mission fields, Christianity spread across Oceania with amazing rapidity. This is not to say, however, that the path of conversion was necessarily easy or smooth. Depending upon their theological and cultural backgrounds, missionaries found much to object to. There was universal condemnation of cannibalism, head-hunting, human sacrifice, and other ritual expressions of warrior cultures. Missionaries also frowned upon polygyny, sorcery, and many of the more elaborate rituals that they tended to see as expressions of "idolatry." Particularly before the establishment of colonial control over the islands, however, missionaries had limited abilities to do much more than condemn. The effective agents of change were often the core group of first

converts. In many parts of Polynesia, the arrival of missionaries coincided with massive social and political turmoil, wars, and loss of population through introduced diseases. Such disasters weakened faith in the traditional deities while strengthening the position of those chiefs who aligned themselves with the new Christian god (Barker 2005).

In many places converts used their intimate knowledge of local beliefs to stage power encounters to demonstrate the superior power of the Christian god over ancestral spirits (Tippett 1967; Tuzin 1997). Converts desecrated ancestral shrines in parts of Solomon Islands, gathered and destroyed magical materials in public bonfires in Papuan villages, and broke into men's cult houses to reveal sacred masks and carvings to uninitiated boys and women (Burt 1994). The extraordinary firsthand account of the conversion of the Cook Islands written by the evangelist Maretu in 1871 reveals the importance of confrontation, coercion, and fear in the missionary campaign (Crocombe 1983). One should not paint too negative a picture, however. Missionaries also found much to admire in Oceanic cultures, which they compared favorably to the social ills of Europe (Thomas 1994); the early island proselytizers won over many converts through persuasion and dedication and are remembered fondly today; and, finally, for many, Christianity presented some protection from the more oppressive demands of indigenous religion and the disruptions of colonial change.

Even where new Christians cast off the visible signs of the old religion, there were continuities as they translated their new faith into culturally familiar terms. Thus Samoans and Tongans transformed the theologically egalitarian Congregationalist and Methodist missions into vehicles of hierarchy in which the pastor assumed the exalted place of the old chiefs and priests. Congregations showered their pastors with lavish gifts as a visible token of their devotion to God (Roach 1987). In Melanesia and Micronesia, people identified local sacred sites with biblical events—as Eden, the site of Christ's crucifixion, or Jerusalem. The old ancestral and bush spirits lived on in the guise of "devils"; Mary and other Christian figures come to people in dreams to warn of future events and to heal sickness; and even God could be reconfigured as a kind of super sorcerer (Barker 1990, 1992; Boutilier, Hughes, and Tiffany 1978).

On the mission and colonial frontiers, and often beyond them, indigenous prophets inspired independent religious movements that often merged aspects of indigenous religions with elements of Christianity and Western practices in response to the various crises brought on by contact. In New Zealand, conflicts between Maori and the growing white population, especially over the expropriation of land, led certain prophets to reject missionary readings of the Bible in favor of interpretations more in accord with their own epistemology and experience. Te Ua Haumene gained the first large following. Inspired by the angel Gabriel, Te Ua taught that the Maori were the true chosen people of Jehovah, whom they could call upon to defeat the Europeans. Many of his followers believed that the prophet's rituals and spells would grant them immunity from European bullets, a belief they put into practice (with disastrous results in the Maori Wars of 1864–1865). Te Ua's Pai Marire ("good and peaceful") movement inspired the later King movement and the Ringatu Church (Clark 1975). Since Te Ua's day, Maori prophets have continued to inspire new movements and churches, the most

important being the Ratana church, begun in the 1920s. Strongly separatist, such movements and churches have drawn upon Maori culture and distinct readings of the Bible, framing the political and social challenges Maori face in religious terms (Sinclair 1990).

Similar if less enduring religious movements occurred in Tahiti, Samoa, Fiji, and elsewhere. They were almost always countered by colonialist reprisals. Missionaries and government officials usually regarded independent religious movements as retrograde descents into "superstition," as forms of collective "madness" and, worst, serious challenges to their own authority. In an important study of the Fijian prophet Navosavakadua, of the 1880s "Tuka Cult," Martha Kaplan (1995) directs our attention to the roles colonialists played in the shaping of religious movements. In the case of the Tuka movement, the prophet and his followers developed their message and actions partly in the face of unrelenting hostility on the part of the colonial authorities and their chiefly allies. More important over the long term, the authorities committed their reified understanding of the Tuka cult to the official record. The definition served to legitimize the temporary removal of Navosavakadua's followers to a distant island and close surveillance of their activities after their return. It also led scholars to misread the Tuka as an early form of a cargo cult.

The reality that religious movements emerged and dissolved along the colonial frontier, pushed and pulled by a multitude of different influences, challenges any easy interpretation. At the same time, it adds to their exotic and dramatic appeal. This is especially apparent with the famed "cargo cults" of Melanesia. Early in the twentieth century, colonial observers reported strange ritual movements among some coastal New Guineans. The best known was the "Vailala Madness," so described by the Papuan government anthropologist F. E. Williams (1923), who investigated several religious movements in the region. In the Gulf of Papua, prophets convinced large numbers of people that their ancestors could be induced to return to life if the proper preparations were made. They would come in ships bearing vast quantities of the material goods—"cargo"—enjoyed by European colonialists. To hasten the event, villagers performed rituals mimicking European actions. They held marching drills, erected "radio masts" to receive messages from the ancestors, and constructed wharves. Williams attributed such behavior to an awe of the "superior" culture of the Europeans. He was far more concerned that adherents fell into ecstatic trances, writhing on the ground and shouting out apparently meaningless words. In his view, this was nothing less than mass psychosis.

The "Madness" was suppressed, but reports of apparently similar "cults" continued to be filed in succeeding years. Cargo figured in only a minor way in several of these, notably the "Taro cult" in Papua and Maasina Rule in Solomon Islands (Laracy 1983; Williams 1928). With the end of World War II and the expulsion of Japanese forces from northern Melanesia, religious movements like that at Vailala broke out in several widespread regions and on a much greater scale. It was around this time that some unknown resident invented the memorable phrase "cargo cult," which quickly entered into common parlance (Lindstrom 1993). The most important movements centered on the prophets Yali in Madang, Paliu on Manus Island, and Yaliwan in the East Sepik—all in Papua New Guinea—and the mysterious figure of Jon Frum on Tanna Island in Vanuatu. These and other movements received considerable

attention, not least from the postwar generation of anthropologists who made them into their special study.

No subject in Oceanic religion has attracted as much attention and exercised as many intellectual muscles as the cargo cults. Most administrators thought that the cults reflected an ignorance of the workings of the capitalist economy and would fade as education and experience improved. Anthropologists detected in the patterns of the movements deeper inherent rationalities. Peter Worsley (1968) saw the cults as, in part, protests against European hegemony that in some cases, notably Maasina Rule, functioned to draw people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds into emergent nationalist movements. In a superbly detailed study of Yali, Peter Lawrence (1964) argued that the cults should be understood as modern expressions of a traditional ideology that would remain convincing to Melanesians until the rural economy underwent serious change. Kenelm Burridge (1960), writing about the same area, understood cargoism in more religious terms, as a redemptive quest to re-establish the moral reciprocities between white men and Melanesians that, according to indigenous myths, existed at the beginning of time. Developing an earlier line of argument advanced by V. Lanternari (1963), Andrew Lattas (1998) has analyzed cargo narratives as symbolic representations of the experience of oppression, while Trompf (1994) has argued that the movements should be understood as native reprisals against colonial domination.

Even as cargo cult studies proliferated at a pace with the "cults" themselves, scholars began to express some doubt about the concept. Some worry about its empirical fitness: many different kinds of religious movements, some of which have little explicitly to do with cargo, get lumped into the category; there is also a tendency to see every local economic endeavor, from trade stores to regional cooperative societies, as a nascent cargo cult. Others consider the term itself a slander demeaning Melanesian peoples. The most serious challenge to cargo cult studies comes from a book by Lamont Lindstrom (1993), which convincingly illustrates the ways Western obsessions and desires about commodities, mixed with assumptions about cultural "others," have insinuated themselves into discussions about cargoism. Whatever we might choose to call them, religious movements continue to emerge in Melanesia. Cargo cults and other variants of indigenous religious movements will continue to challenge understanding for the foreseeable future (e.g., Harkin 2004; Jebens 2004).

Oceanic Religion Today

By 1960, when the Pacific Islands were in the early stages of decolonization, Christianity had become the "traditional" religion of most islanders. In Polynesia and the longer-contacted areas of Micronesia and Melanesia, churches formed the social and often political center of village life, while in many places missions operated most of the schools and medical facilities. The Protestant churches were in an advanced stage of localization as islander clergy rose through the ranks and metropolitan mission societies devolved authority to the emerging national churches (Figure 18.4). Localization of the Roman Catholic Church has proceeded much more slowly due to the difficulty of finding clergy willing to dedicate themselves to lifelong celibacy and the authority structure of the church itself. Even here, however, the ranks of indigenous clergy



Figure 18.4. Minister of Congregationalist Church, Atiu, Cook Islands (photos MR).

have gradually increased and those of religious orders even faster. By the early 1960s, the attitudes of the mission churches toward indigenous culture had softened markedly from the early days. This was mainly a long-term local evolution, the product of a century or more of accommodations to indigenous customs and orientations. A change was more dramatically signaled by policies adopted by the international missions and churches, most notably the embrace of the doctrine of "inculturation" by the Roman Catholic Church in the wake of the Vatican II Council. Experiments incorporating indigenous art, music, and architectural forms into Christian worship began, while students at island theological colleges were encouraged to seek out the resonances between Pacific and Christian religious ideas in their theses. The more daring clergy even talked about reviving pre-Christian rituals that had been banned by their predecessors as "heathenish," much to the confusion of their older parishioners (Arbuckle 1978).

In terms of church membership, the Pacific Islands today are among the most thoroughly Christianized regions of the world. The surveys conducted by Manfred Ernst (1994, 2006) and his colleagues suggest that well over 90 percent of indigenous Pacific Island populations formally belong to a church. Even in Papua New Guinea, long considered the stronghold of traditional religion given its remarkable cultural diversity and remoteness of many of its communities, the official rate of church membership according to the 2000 census is a staggering 96 percent (Gibbs 2006: 98). The religious scene today, however, is far more diverse than it was forty years ago. While a solid majority of islanders belong to one or another of the "mainline" churches—the descendants of the early missions—a growing number have been joining a diverse group of rival denominations. Some of the most popular have had a long history in the region but only recently enjoyed exponential growth, notably the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the Assemblies of God. They have been joined by a large assortment of mainly conservative Evangelical, Fundamentalist, and Pentecostal sects, most of them very small, which have swept through the region, forming a new wave of missionary outreach. The theological particulars of these groups vary immensely, but they mostly share a strongly

individualist ethic, a personal commitment to their faith and church, and an abiding suspicion if not outright hostility toward a wide array of indigenous customs deemed "un-Christian" (Jebens 2005; Jorgensen 2005; Robbins 2004).

Alternatives to institutional Christianity exist, although they occupy a tiny part of the religious spectrum among indigenous islanders. Small populations of traditionalists as yet unreached by or resistant to missionaries continue to exist in remote parts of Melanesia (Keesing 1992). A few local religious movements in Melanesia have evolved into more stable associations, which along with the much larger Maori churches form some of the few stable indigenous religious organizations in the region. By far the most internationally famous is the John Frum Movement—a long-lasting "cargo cult" with about eight thousand adherents on the island of Tanna in Vanuatu. It is regularly visited by tourists and journalists and was recently featured in a tongue-in-cheek documentary in which several members visit Britain, commenting upon strange customs of its natives, and meet with Prince Phillip, whom they regard as a son of God (Adams 2007). Small congregations of the Bahá'í faith exist in most Pacific countries. Despite the presence of large numbers of Muslim migrants in the Indonesian province of West Papua and Hindu and Muslim Indians in Fiji (descendants of laborers brought to that country during the colonial period), the indigenous populations remain overwhelmingly Christian. Mosques have recently been built in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, although to date they draw most of their followers from the immigrant Asian population.

Secularism has also made inroads on Christianity across the region, reflected not so much in the numbers of declared atheists and agnostics as shifting government policies and public attitudes. With the significant exception of Indonesia—which recognizes six official religions (including Protestantism and Catholicism but not indigenous "animist" religions)—Pacific Island nations officially accept the principle of freedom of religion. Some leaders of the mainline churches have called for restrictions on the activities of their "Third Wave" rivals, but most islanders appear to have become tolerant of growing denominational diversity, and such proposals have not gotten far. The scope of church involvement in public life has also become more restricted over time. Where they don't run schools outright, governments set most of the educational curricula and have assumed much of the responsibility for health care, areas largely left to the missions during the colonial period. Perhaps most important, islanders are becoming increasingly exposed to people holding different religious views or no religion at all. This has long been the case in places like Hawai'i or New Zealand, but is also true for the massive numbers of islanders who have migrated to urban centers or abroad in recent decades and even for rural populations as radio, television, and Internet networks expand. The same globalizing forces that have enabled "Third Wave" evangelism in the region may also work to undermine the overall force of religion in people's lives simply by presenting them with more options and, as important, a means to escape the hold of long-established local churches.

Despite such changes, Christianity has a much more profound presence and influence than in most Western countries. In many rural areas, church services and offices are closely aligned with customary leadership and associated rituals (Toren 2006). In Samoa,

for instance, ministers of the mainline churches receive similar formal greetings and regular gifts from villagers as traditional chiefs. The authority of Anglican priests and bishops in Solomon Islands rests as much on their embodiment of *mana* as on their knowledge of the Scriptures (White 1991). In rural and urban areas alike, churches provide for much of civil society in Pacific Island nations. Beyond generally well-attended church services, the larger public festivals tend to occur on the major days of the church calendar such as Christmas, Easter, or the anniversary of the arrival of the first missionaries (Errington and Gewertz 1994). The churches have spawned a huge number of voluntary organizations, devoted to both devotional and social causes. The most popular are church women's associations, which engage in activities such as organizing church festivals, fundraising in support of local church and social projects, and campaigns against alcohol and drug abuse (Douglas 2003). At the national and regional levels, the churches have also sponsored a wide range of nongovernmental organizations focused upon a variety of social and political causes including social justice, sustainable development and environmental conservation, and health policies in the areas of sexually transmitted diseases. Finally, at the regional and global level, churches often provide a link to the home islands for the massive numbers of islanders who have left their homes and settled permanently in New Zealand, Hawai'i and the U.S. mainland, and elsewhere (Allen 2001).

Not surprising in this environment, political appeals to Christian identity are common. Long God Yumi Stanap ("In God we stand") is the official motto of Vanuatu, matching Samoa's Fa'avae i le Atua Samoa ("God be the foundation of Samoa"), and Papua New Guinea's constitutional recognition of "Christian principles that are ours now." Indigenous clergy have frequently played prominent roles in nationalist struggles. Walter Lini, the first prime minister of Vanuatu, was an Anglican priest; Jean-Marie Tjibaou, a charismatic leader of the Kanak independence movement in New Caledonia before his assassination in 1989, was a former Catholic priest; and church leaders in the Indonesian province of West Papua play a delicate but key role mediating between the state and a largely resistant indigenous population (Rutherford 2006). In Melanesian countries especially, Christian values along with promises of economic development provide politicians with a means to appeal across multiple linguistic and cultural boundaries. Such appeals, however, can be as divisive as unifying. Church authorities occasionally intrude directly into politics, but sectarian rivalries mainly take shape in contests between political candidates during elections and in debates on legislation and policies. In recent elections in Papua New Guinea, for instance, many candidates have appealed to "Christian" values to advance positions reflecting the preferences of their own denominations such as laws banning missionaries from rival groups, state funding of approved churches, and restrictions on the distribution of birth control devices and education (Gibbs 2004).

While open sectarian conflict is rare, religious loyalties may inflame ethnic, nationalist, and other tensions. Thus the long-established minority community of Muslim Papuans on the far west coast of Indonesian New Guinea find themselves squeezed between loyalty to their religion and the increasingly Christian identity of the nationalist movement in West Papua (Jaap Timmer, personal communication). In Fiji, the churches have become

entangled in often bitter struggles between indigenous nationalists and the descendants of Indian indentured laborers, most of whom are Hindu, Sikh, or Muslim. Given the strong association of Christianity with indigenous Fijian culture and identity, it is not surprising that many—probably most—indigenous Fijians conflate their religious identity with a desire to remain the dominant political force in the country. At the extreme edge of opinion, one finds nationalists who regard Fiji as a Christian nation and call for the expulsion of Indo-Fijians. In the face of such sentiments, however, prominent religious leaders from both ethnic communities have called for understanding and reconciliation, and this is also the official stance of the government (Hock 2006; Newland 2006).

From the time of earliest human settlement, Oceania has been a meeting place for cultures. As this chapter demonstrates, religious insights and experiences formed an essential part of indigenous life in the past and will continue to form a key lens through which Pacific peoples understand and shape their destiny for the foreseeable future. Research on religion has always held a fundamental priority in Oceanic studies, resulting in a massive database of ethnographic, historical, literary, and artistic productions. Oceanic religious experience has been too complex and diverse to be accommodated within a single academic discipline. Anthropology, history, psychology, missiology, religious studies, and geography, among others, have all made their contributions. Much of this material, in the form of books, films, and recordings, has made its way back into Pacific communities, where it is adding yet another dimension to religious understandings and creativity. Ironically, the work of outside scholars has dominated discussions of Oceanic religions, often drowning out the voices of the people themselves. As Pacific Islanders, scholars and laypeople alike, reappropriate their religious traditions, we can look forward to the emergence of new insights into the spiritual dimensions of human existence. The literature on Oceanic religion has reached that point of richness where one can begin to appreciate how much more there is to learn.

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