This article examines the impact of a Charismatic youth fellowship movement among the Maisin people of Oro Province, Papua New Guinea, in the late 1990s. Drawing upon ethnographic and archival sources, I show that the response conforms to a pattern repeated periodically over a century of regional religious movements focused upon eradicating sorcery and promoting health. Over several generations, Maisin have experienced and interpreted Christianity in ways that at once confirm a basic belief in sorcery while prodding the faithful towards increasingly individualistic notions of morality and, thus, new collectivist responses to misfortunes like life-threatening illnesses. Thus, while the main intent of religious movements among the Maisin has remained remarkably consistent, the underlying conception of the links between morality, sickness, and healing has shifted markedly over the years. The article thus demonstrates that Christianity in this Melanesian community has had both conservative and transformational effects upon everyday conceptions of morality, sickness, healing, and redemption. More generally, the article advocates moving the study of religious change in longer contacted regions of Melanesia from a dualistic model that opposes Western and indigenous cultures to one that examines the complex historical development of vernacular Christianity.

Incidents of Christian revivalism, often intermixed with “cargoist” elements, have long been reported from various corners of Papua New Guinea. Yet it is apparent that by the mid-1970s a new and much more extensive regional revivalism was taking place. In the early stages at least, the revival movements that swept across the rural countryside appear to have originated from two sources. In the first place, a wide assortment of mostly Fundamentalist and Pentecostal missions arrived, beginning in the late 1960s. The most effective missions set up worship and training centres in the towns, providing bases from which young Papua New Guineans fanned out to spread the “Good News” back

Christian bodies

into their own language areas. At the same time, local peoples exhibited a marked receptivity to Christian revivalism, independent of the foreign incursion. There are numerous reports from the Mountain Ok region near the Indonesian border, for instance, of spontaneous revivals led mostly by female prophets and of several cases in which isolated communities initiated their own conversions. Elsewhere in the country, traditionalists — both members of long-established churches and the guardians of the few remaining indigenous cults — found themselves under sharp and effective attack from members of their own communities. By the 1990s, the two tendencies had become deeply enmeshed. Imported images and scenarios drawn from the Book of Revelation and popular texts on the Apocalypse had diffused to the most remote areas, where they intermixed with local mythologies, aspirations, rumours, and speculations. To some observers in the months leading up to January 2000, it appeared that most of the country was gripped by the fever of millennial expectation.

To date, most scholars writing about Christian revival movements in Papua New Guinea have resisted the temptation to portray them merely as the most recent variant of the classic “cargo cult,” for which Melanesia is famous. Scholars have preferred instead to focus on contemporary contexts within which revivalist movements are occurring. They have generally been sensitive to the fact that Christian revivalism is occurring across much of the formerly colonized world and that, within these diverse settings, revivalist Christianity tends to retain its global shape while allowing for the expression of local concerns and aspirations. Still, the example of the cargo cult lurks in the background of many of these studies and some of the parallels between what is known about


5. Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, eds. Millennial Markers (Townsville, Australia: Centre for Pacific Studies, James Cook University of North Queensland, 1997).


7. Joel Robbins, “Introduction: Global Religions, Pacific Island Transformations,” Journal of Ritual Studies 15, no. 2 (2001): 7–12. The general category of revival Christianity includes Fundamentalist and Pentecostal churches and interdenominational organizations, as well as Charismatic movements within mainstream Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. Ernst provides a helpful primer on the differences between these groups.
cargoism and the more recent studies of Christian revivalism provide this paper with its point of departure. The growing collection of case studies suggests two commonalities in particular. The first lies in the fact that, while the influences of Christian millenarianism are widespread, full-blown instances of Christian apocalyptic revivalism, like cargo cults earlier, tend to be concentrated in certain regions. Moreover, the thrust of concerns expressed in revivalist activities may be quite distinct across districts — a focus on the end times in one place, for instance, and upon the eradication of sorcery in another. The second, related observation is that local assumptions about the role that spiritual forces play in everyday life condition Christian revivalism, much as they do cargo cults. To get at such local trajectories, we must inquire not only into the immediate causes and shape of moments of religious fervor, but of the more extended periods of “everyday” interactions with the spiritual that lie between such outbreaks.

In this paper I provide an account of an area that avoided the excesses of cargoism during the colonial period and seems to be doing the same in the case of revivalism in the years since Papua New Guinea’s independence in 1975. Collingwood Bay, on the south-eastern border of Oro Province, however, has a long and well-documented history of religious movements focused on the eradication of sorcery and promotion of health and prosperity dating back to the early colonial period. The best known of these — the so-called Baigona and Taro Cults — occurred at a time that the Anglican mission was winning converts across the region. Sorcery eradication movements have continued to occur periodically, long after the population converted to Anglican Christianity. In recent years, young Maisin in particular have taken a keen interest in revivalist Christianity. A handful of families have joined a Pentecostal sect but the main action has taken place within the local Anglican Church itself, in the form of a youth fellowship movement with strong Charismatic overtones. Maisin revivalists, however, have shown little interest in typical millenarian concerns such as the end times, the return of Christ, and so forth. Instead, they have channelled their religious fervor into healing and the eradication of sorcery, thus conforming to a long-held local preoccupation.

This paper opens with background information on the Maisin people, followed by a description of healing movements in southern Collingwood Bay from the time of the Baigona Cult (around 1920) to the present. I next turn to the question of accounting for the continuity of a focus on sorcery and healing. Drawing upon Joel Robbin’s recent discussion of “everyday millenarianism”, I explore the assumptions lying behind several typical narrative forms in Maisin society — myths, sermons, and life histories — to show how they presume a moral dynamic that, in turn, sets up the conditions for religious movement concerned with the eradication of sorcery.

The final part of the paper shifts the focus 180 degrees to examine how Anglican and more recent Charismatic assumptions about the nature of the

person, body, and salvation have influenced Maisin understandings. Maisin remain today as concerned as ever with the connections between morality, the spiritual, and health. However, one can detect in the shifting mix of local and imported religious belief and activities a discernable shift towards more individualized conception of the person.

**Background: The Maisin Since 1890**

The Maisin are a small linguistic group, numbering approximately 3500 in all, most of whom live in eight villages along the southern shores of Collingwood Bay in Oro Province, near the border with Milne Bay Province. Maisin warriors were greatly feared throughout the region, but they were brought forcibly under government control in 1900. Two years later, Anglican missionaries built a church and school in the largest village of Uiaku. The European presence in Collingwood Bay remained thin throughout the colonial period. Government officers and missionaries alike tended to regard the Maisin as a recalcitrant people; but the archival record and oral traditions suggest that the people were remarkably receptive to the possibilities opened by the colonial presence. Although they learned Christianity primarily from Solomon Island and Papua mission teachers — the mission being too poor to provide a white missionary — the Maisin encouraged their children to attend school and church. By the early 1920s, younger people had accepted baptism. Young men by this time routinely signed on for stints of labour at distant plantations and mines and several had joined the colonial police force or become mission teachers themselves.

The Second World War marked a watershed for the Maisin, as it did for so many Melanesians. Most able-bodied Maisin men served as labourers during the bloody Kokoda and Buna campaigns in 1942. They returned to the villages, determined to secure the material wealth of the white man for their own people. The Anglican mission played a key if indirect role in attempts to realize this ambition, first by introducing the idea of cooperatives to the region — an idea that the Maisin took up eagerly. The village cooperatives were not very successful economically, but they served to cement the place of the church at the centre of village society. The Anglican expansion and improvement of the school system had a far more profound impact upon the local economy.

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Like other long-converted coastal populations, Maisin had early access to the new secondary schooling. The early graduates quickly found relatively well-paying jobs, particularly when the Australian Government made the decision in the early 1960s to accelerate the movement of Papua New Guinea towards independence. In the early years after Independence in 1975, almost one-quarter of the total Maisin population had completed higher education in mission and government institutions and found professional work in the civil service, school system, medical system, and private business.

Six years after Independence, when my wife and I first arrived in Uiaku, this colonial history was clearly inscribed in the Maisin villages. The villages had an attractive traditional atmosphere. Far from roads and shipping lanes, the houses were built from bush materials and people still relied primarily upon traditional outrigger canoes for transportation. The daily rhythm of activities centred on the subsistence activities of gardening, gathering, hunting, and fishing. At the same time, village public life revolved around the school and church, still known as the “mission station,” although true missionaries (and pagans) had long vanished from the area. Most adults had lived, often for extended periods, with relatives working in the urban areas and had come to rely upon their remittances of money and goods for survival. Everywhere we looked, we found an amalgam of local and introduced forms. Maisin, for instance, still lived in hamlets named for founding patrilineages but also participated in a wide variety of introduced committees — including government and church councils and an Anglican women’s group — to determine community goals and projects.

In 1997, I returned to Uiaku after a 10-year absence. The village looked much the same, but there had been several important developments. First, and most obviously, the population of the Maisin villages had swollen. Many Maisin had returned from the towns, some to retire and others after failing to find work or being laid-off. But the majority was made up of Maisin youths who were no longer able to secure a coveted place in the mission or government high school after completing primary school in the village. Second, I soon became aware that, whereas the villages remained isolated from the towns with little local economic development, the Maisin as a whole were clearly far more integrated into the larger Papua New Guinea state than was the case earlier. Many people now spoke fluent English and Neo-Melanesian (Pidgin English), and locally manufactured items such as clay cooking pots and seagoing outrigger canoes had become less common; replaced by steel utensils and motorized dinghies. The Maisin had also become deeply involved with several prominent national and international environmental organizations, which were assisting them in a campaign to prevent industrial logging of the surrounding rain forest. The religious situation had also become more complex, with the Anglican Church losing its monopoly. There was now a small Pentecostal chapel in Uiaku and several other families now

worshipped privately as Jehovah Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, and Mormons.

A large majority of Maisin continued to belong to the Anglican Church, but it too was changing. The regular congregations for Sunday worship were much larger and younger than a decade earlier and, with the encouragement of a relatively young Maisin priest, they had introduced more youth-orientated elements to the rather staid High Church Anglican service, most notably gospel singing with guitars and electronic keyboards. Maisin seem to have abandoned any attempt, beyond tapa cloth decorations, to “indigenize” Christian worship. In the early 1980s, Easter mass was celebrated with traditional drumming with the congregation in bark cloth and feathers. But, on Easter 1997, everyone wore Western clothing. The most important innovation was a youth fellowship group. Similar groups had been established across the Anglican diocese and many of the Maisin participants had attended church youth rallies at Popondetta, the provincial capital and seat of the bishop. Locally, the youth fellowship worked to assist the parish priest when on patrol outside of Uiaku, organized sports events, and conducted periodic evangelistic tours through the Collingwood Bay villages (both Maisin and other language groups). The youth worked for villagers to help construct houses, work in gardens, and assist with other projects in order to raise money to support their activities.

**Healing Movements among the Maisin, Present and Past**

On Easter 1997, I attended services at St. Thomas Church in Uiaku for the first time in over a decade. The church had been rebuilt but largely resembled the older one — a large barn-like structure with a dirt floor, logs for pews, and sago-frond walls, topped by a rusting (and leaky) iron roof. As I sat uncomfortably at a place of honour on the front pew, I tallied up the more obvious changes and continuities. The liturgy, I saw, was identical to that of a decade earlier — following a booklet in simplified English published by the Anglican Church of Papua New Guinea. The service itself remained, despite the rustic setting, rather ornate and formal, reflecting its historical roots in an Anglo-Catholic (“high church”) mission. All the same, I was struck by the changes. The church was very crowded, even for Easter, and the crowd was heavily dominated by children and adolescents; a reflection of a local population explosion, which itself reflected the fact that few Maisin were leaving the villages for jobs in town. In the 1980s, with the encouragement of the bishop, the Maisin had celebrated the Church’s high days with a vernacular liturgy chanted with drumming, the congregation decorated in traditional dress. Nobody in 1997 appeared wearing tapa cloth or shells. Instead people wore clean Sunday day clothes and sang mostly gospel-style songs led by a youth group playing guitars and an electronic keyboard. The sermon seemed more drawn out than I remembered. Communion certainly was. In the past, only confirmed church members had gone forward to receive Communion. Now everyone in the church stepped up to kneel before the altar, the unconfirmed receiving a blessing as the (Maisin) priest laid hands upon each offered head
and shoulder. This took a long time. Suddenly the back of a young woman’s head landed solidly on the hard packed earth less than a metre from my feet. I pulled back as several more adolescent girls in the line fell over backwards, like so many tin soldiers.

I had just witnessed the phenomenon of persons “slain in the spirit,” although the Maisin themselves were not aware of the term (nor were they aware that in churches where this regularly occurs there are people assigned to catch the swooning faithful to keep them from hurting themselves). The father of the young woman whose head narrowly missed my foot told me with pride that this was the third time within a week that the Holy Spirit had overcome his daughter. The other two occasions had occurred in the early hours of the morning, following hours of singing, dancing and testimonials during a youth fellowship crusade that had been touring through the villages of St. Thomas Parish. All of the young women who had collapsed in the church had also attended these meetings with a similar result. It turned out that all had suffered long-term illness from which they now declared they were cured. The young Maisin priest who laid hands on them confirmed this. He reminded me that God had given everyone his or her own special gift. He himself had received the “gift of healing.”

There was a palpable air of religious excitement that March in Uiaaku, especially among young people. I heard no talk of the Apocalypse, despite the upcoming turn of the Millennium and the Sandline crisis, which reached its climax during my visit. Instead, people who gave testimonials during the youth fellowship gatherings focused upon personal behaviour: on how faith in Christ gave a person the power and confidence to turn from “sinful” behaviours such as indulging in alcohol or acting violently against a neighbour. The priest wanted me to know that, whereas the workings of the Holy Spirit might come directly to the people, the Charismatic movement itself had only started with the blessings of a new bishop and, he insisted, at the urging of the Archbishop of Canterbury himself. Thus, the movement did not seem to challenge the local authority of either church or village leadership. All the same, it did have one obvious reforming edge. In January 1997, the priest and a group of youth, accompanied by visiting members of an indigenous religious order — the Melanesian Brothers — had gone from house to house in the village

13. In February 1997, Australian newspapers revealed that Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan had secretly contracted with a British firm, Sandline International, to supply foreign mercenaries to fight against rebels in Bougainville Province. The startling news erupted into a full political crisis when the head of the Papua New Guinea army, Brigadier-General Jerry Singirok, publicly criticized the government and was subsequently fired from his position, setting up a confrontation between the army and the ruling political faction in Parliament. By the beginning of April, the Prime Minister had been forced to resign. These events are described in Henry Ivarature, “The Sandline International Controversy in Papua New Guinea,” in Governance and Reform in the South Pacific, edited by Peter Larmour (Canberra: National Centre for Development Studies, Australian National University, 1998), 200–52. At the time, the crisis energized several Christian organizations around the country, who, in newspaper, radio, and billboard advertisements called for prayer meetings for national reconciliation.

14. This is not to claim that the movement did not challenge common moral assumptions, particularly in its stress upon individual responsibility rather than community solidarity. This is a point I take up in the final section of the present paper.
demanding that the occupants bring out “old things,” in particular lime pots and spatulas, oddly shaped rocks used in various kinds of magic, and other materials popularly believed to be used in sorcery. The surrendered objects were taken away by the Brothers and, according to several accounts, thrown into the ocean.

Although the events of 1997 reflect the contingencies of the time, particularly the growing popularity of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Papua New Guinea, they bear some striking similarities to earlier moments of religious excitement among the Maisin and, indeed, in much of lowlands Oro Province. Reports of sorcery purges and healing movements date back to almost the beginning of the colonial record for the Maisin. In March 1903, a group of villagers in Uiaku surrendered a large collection of “charms” after the Solomon Islands teacher, Willie Pattawa, declared them to be both “useless” and evil. The district missionary came down from Wanigela to burn these things in a large public bonfire, taking the purge as heartening evidence of the power of God working in the hearts of people who, at this early date, “do not make any profession of Christianity.” However, sorcery and a related concern with healing were not vanquished, even after villagers began to be baptized after 1911. In 1920, the people were reported to be heavily engaged in a “strange species of snake worship,” likely an off-shoot of the better-known Baigona Cult, first reported from Tufi in 1911. Once again, missionaries intervened at the request of the Maisin, destroying scores of lime pots believed to be used for sorcery. The missionaries recorded similar purges in 1916, 1932, 1936, and the late 1940s. There were certainly others not reported and some occurred after the 1940s, when the mission stopped keeping detailed records. In the early 1980s Maisin had recalled a sorcery purge in the early to mid-1950s and another as recently as the late 1970s.

The missionaries interpreted such actions as encouraging evidence that the Maisin were abandoning their old beliefs for Christianity. Maisin certainly understood things differently. Their aim was primarily to control sickness, which they perceived was out of control. Those working to rid the villages of sorcery often performed innovative rituals to heal the sick. According to Maisin elders, the purges were usually accompanied by extended healing rituals.


19. This was a healing and fertility movement first reported in 1911 on Cape Nelson to the north of the Maisin that had begun with a visitation by a supernatural python. See F. E. Williams, *Orokaiva Magic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928) and Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of “Cargo Cults” in Melanesia* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

ceremonies involving much all-night drumming, sometimes lasting weeks. The best documented of the sorcery purges occurred in 1932–1933, under the leadership of Maikin, better known to the Europeans as Kitore. Maikin received a vision from the Christian God that allowed him to sense the presence of sorcery materials hidden in houses. Followed by a large retinue, he moved through the Maisin villages and then Wanigela, exposing the sorcerers and forcing them to destroy their magic. The missionaries recorded these events with approval.21 Elderly Maisin in the early 1980s, however, remembered Maikin mostly as an expert practitioner of sevaseva, a form of healing through the use of spirit familiars and trances at all-night séances. The form of sevaseva that developed in Collingwood Bay almost certainly incorporated elements of the widespread Baigona and Taro Cults of the 1920s and 1930s — which were also focused upon healing, as well as improving the fertility of gardens. One of the sevaseva practitioners I knew well in the early 1980s claimed Maikin as one of his spirit familiars.

Enough has been said to establish two basic points that will provide the focus for the remainder of this article. The first and most obvious has to do with continuity. It is clear from this record that, at moments of heightened religious excitement, the Maisin have tended to channel their energies into healing rituals and sorcery purges. The sorcery purge of 1997 was energized by revivalist Christianity but it nevertheless conformed to a well-established and familiar pattern, thus reinforcing long-standing assumptions about the relationship between health and collective morality. But the sketch given above also indicates significant change. The Maisin have been engaged in a long and complex dialogue with Christianity dating back to the founding of the local mission in 1902. The revivalists of 1997 did not confront traditionalists but a form of vernacular Christianity. The revival of 1997 in general, and the sorcery purge in particular, could be seen as a dramatic step in a long-term assimilation of Christian morality that has been leading Maisin gradually from a collectivist moral sensitivity towards one based upon a modernist sense of the individual.

These are complementary processes, facets of what Jean and John Comaroff call the “long conversation” in their masterful study of Protestant missions among the Tswana of southern Africa.22 There is heuristic value, however, in considering them separately. The next section thus examines the basic assumptions that Maisin make about sorcery, healing, and morality, as revealed in common narratives shared in everyday life. These, I argue, form the framework for moments of religious excitement marked by healing rites and sorcery purges. The final section of the paper, explores how such assumptions have been modified over the years as Maisin have internalized church

teachings concerning redemption. We shall see that, while Maisin continue to perceive serious bodily afflictions as signs of moral decay, they are increasingly likely to perceive the causes and appropriate responses to sickness in individual terms — as a matter between the believer and God — rather than in terms of the social whole. Moments of religious excitement, such as the sorcery purge of 1997, at once dramatize the shift in moral sensibilities and push it along.

Continuities: Everyday Sorcery

In an important recent review, Joel Robbins noted that Western analysts tend to assume that millenarianism is not “normal,” but rather signals a withdrawal from and sometimes abandonment of everyday life. He questions this. Drawing from his own ethnographic research amongst the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, as well as observations of Western Christian fundamentalists, Robbins argues that participants in millenarian movements often do not perceive themselves as so much departing from everyday life as taking its spiritual aspects far more seriously. At such moments, people elaborate upon familiar ritual forms and encounter an intense sense of the spiritual. They often feel a strong sense of anticipation that change is around the corner, but the terrain they operate within conditions the form that a religious movement actually assumes. Millenarian movements, such as cargo cults, tend to emerge from and be sustained by situations of “everyday millenarianism.” Robbins suggests that anthropologists have tended to downplay or ignore the existence of everyday millenarianism because of an assumption that mundane life depends upon a commonsense experience of time as linear and continuous. The evidence suggests, however, that people living in prolonged millenarian situations may conceptualize time differently, living out the rhythms of everyday life in the full awareness that a cosmic-altering force may intervene at any moment. In this kind of ambience, “the millenarian stream is always there, and it makes for a continuity between everyday life and periods that take on the qualities of millenarian movements.”

Most of the religious movements that have swept through the lowlands areas of Oro Province since contact have been more focused on healing than millenarian concerns, yet Robbins’ observations are quite applicable. It is true here, as in the study of cargo cults, that observers have tended to label and regard the movements as moments of rupture from everyday life. In fact several writers, of whom Worsley is the most prominent, have assumed that they are best understood as early versions of cargo cults. Yet what impressed me most when listening to elderly Maisin speak about extraordinary events such as Maikin’s purge of sorcery materials in the early 1930s, was how they contextualized such stories in terms of everyday concerns about, and understandings of, sorcery and healing. In the historical records, Maikin appears as the leader of the “Asisi cult.” Neither “Asisi” nor “cult” meant anything to the Maisin in the

25. Worsley.
They remembered Maikin instead as a remarkably powerful practitioner of *sevaseva*, the art of healing through spiritual forces. They strongly suggested that he was at the same time a powerful sorcerer — *sevaseva* men, they told me, “always are.”

Unlike “everyday millenarianism,” “everyday sorcery” has received considerable attention from anthropologists, even if they have rarely connected such beliefs and practices to religious movements. Belief in sorcery is extremely widespread in the indigenous societies of Papua New Guinea and it is also remarkably adaptable to challenge and changing circumstances. Sorcery beliefs have been recorded among the Maisin from the earliest period of contact and it is still the case today that most people suspect that sorcery is to blame when a person falls seriously ill or suffers a life-threatening accident. Much of the time, talk about sorcery remains at the level of gossip. A variety of circumstances can bring talk out into the open, pushing the degree of concern to a higher level: the sudden death of a young adult; a prolonged illness of a middle-aged person; a spate of deaths. Heightened concerns entail increasing overt resorts to curtail the action of sorcerers. These include sponsoring healing séances, making large gifts of food and money to the families of suspected sorcerers, community meetings to discuss illnesses that are perceived as threatening to everyone, and, in extreme circumstances, sorcery purges. Maisin do not, in other words, make a sharp distinction between normal life and periods when life is threatened by sorcerers; this is all part of a single continuum, based upon a common set of moral and religious assumptions.

The mechanical details of sorcery practice in Maisin — real or imagined — need not detain us here; nor the social and political functions of sorcery fears and accusations. Maisin notions of how sorcerers carry out their work resemble those found elsewhere in lowlands Papua New Guinea. My concern

27. One elderly man I interviewed recognized “Asisi” as an Orokaivan word meaning “spirit” but did not recall Maisin having used the term. Erik Schwimmer describes the Orokaivan concept of *ahihi* more accurately as “soul,” in *Exchange in the Social Structure of the Orokaiva* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1973), 91. Missionary observers in the 1930s referred to Maikin and his followers as “Asisi men,” suggesting that this was a local manifestation of a wider regional movement, probably disseminated along the same paths as the better known Taro Cult.


30. This is not to suggest that there are no skeptics. Better-educated Maisin tend to dismiss the likelihood of certain types of sorcery, but not sorcery in general. A retired dentist in Uiaku, for instance, told me that he strongly doubted the reality of *yawu* sorcery and believed that most attacks used “poisons.” For more details on sorcery among the Maisin see John Barker, “Western Medicine and the Continuity of Belief: The Maisin of Collingwood Bay, Oro Province,” in *A Continuing Trial of Treatment: Medical Pluralism in Papua New Guinea*, edited by Stephen Frankel and Gilbert Lewis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), 69–93; Barker, “Encounters with Evil”; Barker, “Missionaries and Sorcerers.”

is with the way that Maisin assumptions of illness and healing form a matrix of moral belief that, in turn, conditions their understandings of novel situations as much as everyday life. One way to get at such assumptions, again following Robbins, is to focus on common narratives — stories that Maisin tell each other concerning reality. For the remainder of this section, I examine three narratives, all recorded during fieldwork between 1981 and 1983: (i) a myth; (ii) a life-history; and (iii) a sermon.

In the course of my initial fieldwork, I had eagerly sought out Maisin elders to record traditional narratives — both “histories” and stories told for entertainment. In June 1983, a month before I was scheduled to leave, Naomi Vatava Sakai, a vivacious widow and one of the most talented tapa designers and tattooists in Uiaku, summoned my tape recorder and me to her house. The story she recorded that day was familiar — a variation on a “true history” of the Maisin’s origin from a cave located in the Musa swamps about 100 kilometres to the west of Collingwood Bay. It was also unique in its immediacy. For Naomi stated that she had been taken to the cave herself, in the company of her deceased husband, and had witnessed the emergence of the Maisin people, clan by clan, from under the ground.

In her dream or vision, Naomi watches as her husband joins other men tying a rope ladder leading to the surface while women cook food for the journey. One by one, members of each clan separately climb the rope. As they approach the top, a leading man (kavo) calls out: “What are you bringing?” Each clan announces its special privilege (evovi) before proceeding to the top: the right to hold fire in both hands; the right to wear large cowry shells on the ankles; and so forth. When the Dadumu people near the top and are challenged, they announce that they are bringing “poisons” that will allow them to retaliate against those who incur the anger of others by acting selfishly. This form of sorcery is also allowed to pass. Then comes the next group.

After they reached the top, they called for the fourth clan to climb out. So those people got their things and began climbing up. As they climbed, the people on top called out, “What are you people bringing up?” They said, “If we come out and you people hit our children or do something wrong with us, we won’t use our hands or sorcery (wea), but we will kill you with our eyes.” So the people on top said, “Oh, we don’t want them up here! Use the knife to cut the ladder off.” When they cut the ladder, those people fell down and landed at the bottom. They made a noise like thunder. The wife asked, “What is that noise like thunder?” The husband said, “It is those people hitting the bottom. We don’t want them to come up because if they do the community living conditions (tauk ramara) will be no good. So we cut the ladder.”

Those people live there still.

Such stories convey an ambiguous truth to Maisin listeners. Sorcery is in itself wrong, but inevitable, as long as people do wrong to one another. Maisin conceive of sorcery as a form of righteous anger usually brought on

32. Maisin make a common distinction found in many non-literate cultures between stories told for entertainment and instruction (kikiki) and “true” stories (kikiki moturan) relating founding events in the past.
by the inappropriate actions of the victim. These include the kinds of actions detailed by Naomi, but more frequently sorcerers are angered by breaches of moral equivalency: the victim failed to share food or tobacco or provoked the envy of the sorcerer by possessing too many desirable things (such as attractive ornaments, money, good looks, and so forth). Sorcery is thus an inevitable, if not always legitimate, form of retaliation for which the victim often shares at least part of the blame. The greater fear, expressed in the story, is that the sorcerers themselves will be uncontrollable. Sorcery may be provoked by a breach of morality, and thus a form of justice; but it may itself be a wrong that calls for retaliation. The Maisin are keenly aware that a community may be destroyed if it allows itself to slip into an endless cycle of sorcery attacks.

The second type of narrative I wish to examine reveals this ambiguity at a personal level. Frank Davis Dodi was one of several elders who told me their life histories. These stories almost always included an incident in which the narrative recalled an attack by a sorcerer, usually in retaliation for a major accomplishment that had caused “jealousy.” Frank Davis’ story was unusual because he provoked the sorcerer by speaking out against the practice itself. He recalled that, at that time, a sorcerer had been causing a great deal of sickness in the village. As head of the church council, Frank Davis spoke out against sevaseva, believing (along with most people) that healers were usually also sorcerers. Soon after, he became sick.

When I went to bed at night, my body was sweating. I was burning like fire. I slept and in my dream I saw that sevaseva man. So I woke up my wife and then walked to his house. I told him, “You are the one I have been dreaming about. All of those evil spirits are yours. I want you to make me better.” I kept going back. Other nights I went with Max and sometimes with Mervyn. So that sevaseva man stopped and I got better. I spoke in front of him and he stopped. If I had not spoken out, I might have died. God helps those who believe. He sent me this dream and so I knew the truth.

Personal narratives of sorcery attack like this one imply an underlying theodicy. Sorcery — visible in physical ailments and misfortunes — is a response to evil in the form of breaches of moral behaviour that anger the sorcerer. However, sorcery is in itself a type of evil. As long as the sorcerer’s power lies outside moral control, there is nothing to prevent him from using it to threaten or attack people for non-legitimate purposes. Those who are attacked by sorcerers usually have no problem coming up with possible reasons for attack. If they go to a healer, the séance inevitably reveals several incidents in which the victim annoyed someone who, in turn, may have hired a sorcerer or turned to retaliatory magic himself. Personal narratives also insist upon the relative innocence of the afflicted. Narrators present themselves as victims of an evil. Indeed, stories like this one convey another level of truth: that those who take leadership positions can expect to be attacked by “jealous”

33. Unlike many Melanesian societies, Maisin tend to see sorcery as deriving from within their own communities. I was often surprised when Maisin attributed sorcery attacks to actions that struck me as quite trivial and petty. One elder in Uiaku, for instance, was widely believed to have ensorcelled and murdered his sister after she refused to share a cigarette with him. Such stories convey vividly the sense that sorcerers are both evil and predictable.
Withstanding a sorcery attack indicates the moral uprightness of the narrator. In this, as in many other narratives I recorded, Frank Davis’ Christian faith makes him the inevitable target for sorcery while assuring his survival. The narrative is a testimony not only to presence of sorcery but also to the ability of the moral person to withstand it.

Taken at face value, narratives of sorcery may imply generalized fears and even paranoia about mystical attacks. In general, however, beliefs in sorcery are part of a set of commonsense assumptions concerning proper moral behaviour. Hardly a day passed during my fieldwork when I didn’t hear some mention of sorcery in connection with a very sick person. At the same time, séances rarely happened and community meetings to address sorcery attacks were even less common. In large part this was because sorcery beliefs formed only a small portion of a much wider set of moral prescriptions — a “code of conduct” guiding everyday life. Church sermons provided a common vehicle for expressing the commonsense nature of good community living. Consider the following excerpt from a sermon delivered by Deacon Russell Maikin in St. Thomas Church in July 1982:

If we get cross with our brothers — hate, fight them, and live separately — how will we come back and make social amity (marawa-wawe)? Jesus was involved in a big conflict, but he did not think of that. Jesus died so that we would not do such things. And it is good that he died for us . . . We are living with our brothers and we must live in social amity. We must take care of each other. That is why the Lord came down. We were in the darkness and he came to bring us out. We must be with him in the big fight, when they bury him he rises again. When we get up we will be in the light and in social amity. In our union with Jesus Christ, we will live in a good way. For Christians, Christ is like an elder brother. God takes care of us and we stay together. He made everything on earth, so must know and think upon these things.

According to Deacon Russell, God wishes His people to live together in a condition of social amity. The key word here — marawa-wawe — is significant. It translates literally as a sharing of one’s innermost self, a state that is only obtained when people live together in a nurturing environment of generalized reciprocity marked by the continual sharing of gifts. Such a condition cannot be created through the initiatives of individuals. A state of social amity must be created and maintained between groups (“brothers”). Further, it can only be brought about when people listen to the advice of superiors — elder brothers, clan leaders, and the like — who “care for” them. A state of social amity, in sum, depends upon a spirit of collective generosity guided by respected elders. In his sermon, Deacon Russell imagines Jesus as providing the key guiding role as an elder brother bringing together a permanent state of social amity. Echoing a motif of the first narrative we considered, he alludes to the “time of darkness,” a period of chaos in which people acted only for themselves. Selfishness and individualism, as much as the ability to merely look at a person and kill them, undermines the possibility of a moral order and results in “bad community living” (tauk ramara sii).

In everyday life, of course, things are rarely so clear as in these narratives. As is the case in other societies where sorcery beliefs are common, Maisin tend to interpret incidents of illness as indices of the moral condition of their community and *vice versa*. When there is sickness, Maisin do what they can to repair damaged social relationships that might have contributed to a sorcery attack. When there is tension and anger in the community, people expect that sickness will surely follow. People carry out their daily work, always taking care to make small presents of food and labour to relatives and friends and to avoid behaviour that appears self-centred and proud, that puts them above others. When things go wrong, people must interpret the situation from their own position and decide whether to get angry and retaliate, or to seek to mend social relationships. The latter course, favoured by Maisin when they tell narratives to one another, entails a mutual healing of bodies and a healing of community. These enjoined actions are referred to as “*jebuga,*” which also happens to be the Maisin word for the Christian concept of “salvation.”

**Change: Christian Bodies**

It should be clear from what has been said so far that the Maisin’s century-long engagement with Christianity has done little to challenge their pervasive belief in sorcery. In fact, by aiding in sorcery purges, the missionaries confirmed both the reality of sorcery in the eyes of the Maisin, and its lasting power — for the purges, as we have seen, brought only temporary relief. To acknowledge such continuities, however, is not to discount the influence of Christianity. The long engagement with Christianity has had discernible effects on the ways that Maisin conceptualize and deal with sorcery, even if it has failed to rid their communities of its scourge. Within these shifts, we can detect a gradual transformation in the ways that Maisin tend to think about their bodies, sickness, and healing.

I have written elsewhere about historical changes in the typical forms of sorcery among the Maisin. To sum up here: In the early 1980s, Maisin elders uniformly believed that sorcery practices had changed considerably during their lifetime; a transformation that they credited primarily to Christianity. During their youth, they said, sorcerers had been well-known. Most were members of the Dadumu clan, which, as indicated in the myth related earlier, had emerged from underground with the right to perform a certain type of sorcery. Although greatly feared, these men were thought to wield their powers in the service of clan leaders (*kawo*) and thus helped maintain the social and political order. With conversion to Christianity, the Maisin came to recognize that all sorcery was evil. The old-time sorcerers made a

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35. Such tensions may be revealed by misfortunes other than sickness. In 1982, many villages interpreted the failing fortunes of the local cooperative store as a reflection of tensions within the community. At one meeting, Deacon Russell reminded the assembled that the store would only be “healed” (*jebuga*) when people ceased gossiping about those attempting to run it. See John Barker, “We Are ‘Ekelesia’: Conversion in Uíaku, Papua New Guinea,” in *Christian Conversion: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*, edited by Robert Hefner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 199–230.

36. Barker, “Missionaries and Sorcerers.”
Christian bodies

Relatively visible target for eradication because of the nature of their sorcery practice. They relied on the use of substances (wea) which were kept in large lime pots that they did not share with others. In addition, the sorcerers had to keep their bodies “hot” by eating appropriate foods and avoiding sexual relations. The early sorcery purges were thus focused on destroying lime pots and getting suspected sorcerers to share “cold” foods, such as squash. Elders, including members of the Dadumu clan, insisted that the old sorcery had been mostly eradicated. Unfortunately, some of the forms of destroying wea sorcery gave rise to new problems. Maikin had used spirit familiars (yawu (“breath”)) to detect sorcery materials in the 1930s. The same familiars could also be used to cause illness and other misfortunes. This new kind of sorcery was much harder to detect and control. Only practitioners of sevaseva could see spirits causing illness; but Maisin believed that the sevaseva “healers” were themselves often sorcerers. In more recent years, younger Maisin men visiting outside areas have returned home with even more lethal and secretive forms of sorcery.

Such statements suggest that sorcery practices have become more individualized and stigmatized over the years. There is some truth to this, but the matter is far from a straightforward case of an emergent sense of “modernity” among the Maisin (a shift from collective notions of the person in community to the notion of the individual that is so central to Western and the global culture). Part of the problem is simply empirical. Sorcery, if it is practised at all, is secretive, and what people know about it is a matter of shared assumptions, gossip, and speculation. It is possible that the social representations of sorcery have shifted over the years, however no one can really know about actual practices. The fact that most Maisin continue to entertain the possibility that substance forms of sorcery are still practised by some elderly men is one indication of the ambiguities that surround all statements on the history of sorcery. A second problem is interpretive. Maisin statements about sorcery are made in the context of a field of cultural assumptions that inflect their meaning. Burridge’s interpretation of sorcery as a form of traditional “individuality” in small-scale societies which stress a collectivist ethos is relevant here. Burridge suggests that figures like sorcerers and healers gain their symbolic power by personally bridging the moral domain, marked by reciprocal exchanges between humans in community; and the divine, populated by amoral spiritual forces that can be enticed but not compelled to help humans. Like ancestral spirits, they are capable of self-willed actions that may cut in two ways. On the one hand, sorcerers draw upon external supernatural powers in a way that constrains and maintains the social order and keeps people in line. On the other hand, as we have already seen, sorcerers themselves are not easily subject to constraint and thus may inflict and damage the moral order. Not surprisingly, Maisin elders viewed sorcerers with considerable ambivalence. Their sense that sorcery was out of hand cannot be taken at face value.

Maisin statements about sorcery are better understood in the context of a long engagement between local concerns and assumptions and introduced ideas and institutions, particularly Christianity and the church. It is critical to consider the exact nature of that introduction. On the outside, Maisin appear to have adopted virtually wholesale the introduced form of high church Anglican Christianity. There is little in the liturgy practised in Maisin churches to distinguish it from Anglican services in Australia or Canada (including the language, apart from sermons). Elsewhere I have referred to this wholesale importation of elements of Christianity as “external conversion.”

It can be contrasted to a parallel process of “internal conversion” whereby Maisin reinterpret Christian teachings in light of local cultural assumptions, practical contingencies and aspirations. Both processes contribute to local Christianity. In consciously accepting the authority of the church as an institution, the Maisin imagine themselves as part of a larger worldwide community.

In the past, the mission provided them with a key mode of access to that larger world through the provision of schooling and jobs. At the same time, the Maisin have enjoyed considerable liberty in the ways that they interpret Christian teachings and church dogmas in no small part because of the historical poverty of the Anglican mission. Most Maisin have learned their Christianity from other Pacific islanders and most often from other Maisin. In the past and still today, church leaders focus their efforts to impose orthodoxy mostly upon the handful of villagers who attend theological college to prepare for the priesthood and, to a lesser extent, upon high school students. Prevailing attitudes towards the commonsense matters of social relations, morality, sickness, and healing are largely set during childhood in the villages, far from the supervision of well-trained church authorities.

The result is a form of vernacular Christianity, well illustrated by Frank Davis’s story and Deacon Russell’s sermon, related earlier. The Maisin have long incorporated God, Jesus, Mary, and other biblical notions into a universe that also includes ancestral spirits, ghosts, and sorcerers. This kind of syncretism, which is very common in rural Papua New Guinea, should not be dismissed as an indication of a superficial grasp of Christianity or incomplete conversion, as many missionaries and anthropologists tend to do. As they seek to make the right choices for their own lives and to deal with the challenges and tragedies that inevitably befall them, Christian Maisin have over the years

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38. Barker, “We Are ‘Ekelesia.’”
40. For a critique, see John Barker, “Christianity in Western Melanesian Ethnography,” in History and Tradition in Melanesian Anthropology, edited by James Carrier (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 144–73.
brought local assumptions into dialogue with Christian teachings. This has led not to the displacement of local culture with an introduced religion but an ongoing local transformation of both; a transformation that has, if anything, become more significant and intense as core Christian symbols and ideas have become part of the commonsense world, something every Maisin “knows.”

I now return to the matter of sorcery, sickness, and healing. Every Maisin knows that sorcerers cause most major misfortunes. Sorcerers are local men who use spiritual force to harm, usually in a fit of retaliatory anger; but, as flesh and blood men, they may be approached, given gifts to cool their anger, or attacked either physically or through magic. Every Maisin also knows that there is a universal God with the power to intervene in his or her life. When I interviewed Maisin concerning their ideas about the ways God intervenes in their lives, I found a considerable range of ideas. Some people thought that God acted as a kind of super-sorcerer. For instance, they interpreted large-scale disasters such as the Mount Lamington volcanic eruption of 1951, which killed more than 3000 people, as a kind of payback from an angered God.41 Others suggested that because God “made everything,” He must have put sorcerers on earth for a purpose. Far more people, however, believed that God did not approve of sorcery; instead, sorcery should be understood as a “sin,” akin to lying, stealing, and adultery — a bad but not entirely surprising foible to which many humans were vulnerable.

There were many other suggestions as well, many no doubt provoked by my questions. Yet everyone I interviewed insisted that trust in God (or Jesus) gave a person the power to withstand or recover from a sorcery attack. Some people insisted that this was the only means to fight a sorcerer. Many volunteered personal stories or stories of near relatives in which they had recovered from a seemingly fatal disease following a visitation from Jesus, Mary, or God Himself. The message that faith in God trumps the sorcerer was often repeated in church and in community meetings. “Heathen” bodies might be subject to sorcery attack, but Christian bodies, already in a state of salvation (jebuga), were safe.

This idea has far more profound implications for transforming local understandings of misfortune than more direct attacks upon sorcery practice. As long as sorcery is seen as a form of retaliation against some social wrong, the stricken body becomes the symbolic site of community division. Healing the body entails collective actions meant to simultaneously heal the breech in the moral community by sending gifts to those who might have been aggrieved by the victim, and by holding community meetings to air disagreements and conflicts. The idea of the Christian body, protected by faith in the higher power of God, breaks the internal relationship between the body and the moral community. Healing becomes a matter of expressing a strong personal commitment to a distant deity rather than of making amends within the community. The sorcerer, by attacking one of God’s faithful servants, loses all

41. This has been a popular explanation for the disaster throughout Oro Province for many years. For an Orokaivan version, see Erik Schwimmer, “Cultural Consequences of a Volcanic Eruption Experienced by the Mount Lamington Orokaiva.” [Mimeo] (Eugene: Department of Anthropology, University of Oregon, 1969).
legitimacy to become a symbol of pure evil, an act of the Devil. The typical narrative frame, in other words, shifts dramatically.

I saw numerous signs of such a shift in the early 1980s. When people gathered after a death, for instance, leaders often reminded them that “now we are Christians” people needed to “forget” their anger and have faith in God to overcome their own fears of further attacks. Several people told me that they had decided not to go to the healers or to attempt to seek the reasons behind a close relative’s sickness, preferring to leave the matter in the “hands of God.” Perhaps a more telling indicator of change has been the use of local sevaseva healers. In 1982, six elderly men and women continued to practise the craft in the Maisin villages. All of them claimed to have acquired their powers from both spirit familiars and the blessing of God (one of the most powerful was, in fact, an upstanding member of the Anglican Mother’s Union). Fifteen years later, only one man was said to still carry out séances.

As the 1990s progressed, a serious decline in the already skimpy medical services available in the Collingwood Bay area left the Maisin with little more than faith when dealing with sickness. The two village aid posts went for months without medicine or personnel until finally closing down, and the district medical centre at Wanigela was often lacking medicines or electricity. Some Maisin with working relatives are able to go to the hospitals in town, but this is very expensive and out of reach for many. In any case, few Maisin believe that Western medicine can deal adequately with “village sickness” caused by sorcery. The Charismatic revival in the local Anglican church thus found a receptive audience in 1997. Like former religious movements in the region, this one confirmed the reality of sorcery through a concerted act to purge its practitioners. The late-night ceremonies and possessions of the afflicted — in the form of being “slain in the spirit” — bore a resemblance to earlier versions of sevaseva. Still, charismatic forms of worship and celebration move decisively towards more personal and individualist conceptions of Christianity. The dramatic moment of healing, with the laying on of hands, symbolizes the direct gift of the Christian God without reference to the moral community. The same message is conveyed in the central ritual act of the youth fellowship meetings, when individuals stand up and testify to their personal sins and their restoring faith in God. Sorcery is still a central concern in Maisin communities and a major gauge of community cohesion. Yet it is not hard to imagine a time in the future, as the notion of the Christian body takes firmer hold of the imagination and sorcery is seen more and more as an individual criminal act, that the older community-centred understandings of illness and healing will give way to an individualized conception.

Conclusion
Maisin live each day with the knowledge that the sorcerer might attack. This is usually tolerable, although if you ask, most people will readily admit that they wish sorcery could be stopped. I imagine that this generalized wish has turned into action at times when sorcery seemed particularly oppressive; for instance, in the midst of several epidemics that swept through the region in
the early twentieth century. All the same, I suspect that religious movements have more often been opportunistic rather than reactive. That is to say, the villages have been swept up in moments of religious activity and excitement when some new force that seems to offer the chance of a permanent solution to the age-old problem of sorcery presents itself; whether this is in the form of a missionary, a seer, or a healer. In August 1982, for example, a man from an interior tribe came to visit friends in Uiaku. Word circulated that he possessed a powerful new magic that allowed him to detect sorcery. Relatives of a woman who had suffered a long illness and had just returned, sicker than ever, from the provincial hospital, sought his aid. Whatever short-term hope he might have provided to the relatives, his presence added to a growing concern with the lasting presence of sorcery in the community. While local healers had attended this woman in small nightly séances, the visitor’s involvement quickly led to the enlargement of the scope of the issue to the point that villagers held a series of well-attended meetings at which people aired their suspicions of sorcery attacks past and present. It was far from obvious that these meetings did anything to ease fears of sorcery; in fact, they appeared to elevate them. Soon after, however, the healer returned to his home and the woman died. People slipped back into “normal” times.

However, the “normalcy” that people return to is never quite what it was. Key assumptions are challenged, often subtly, in a process that leaves them both reinforced and modified. Christianity has played an essential part of this process. As Maisin have engaged with Christian ideas, they have both domesticated them by linking their relevance to local concerns, and come to see these local concerns in new ways. Maisin perceive Christianity as having transformed the ways that sorcery is practised in their communities without eradicating it. On another register, Christian ideas appear to be transforming the ways that Maisin conceptualize healing, moving the symbolic locus of the afflicted body from moral breeches in community to the relationship between an individual and God. If this new understanding continues to develop, Maisin will likely still continue to be concerned with matters of sickness and healing but will be less likely to seek communal remedies.

Like other local communities in Papua New Guinea, the Maisin have had a complex interaction with the global agencies of modernity. Their response has been unique in its particulars, conditioned as much by enduring cultural orientations as by the historical contingencies of their experiences in colonial and postcolonial Papua New Guinea; but at a more general level, it has been more typical than not of the long-contacted coastal areas of the country. Christianity has played a central but paradoxical role. On the one hand, mission and postmission forms of Christianity have been agencies of modernity. They have provided local connections to the wider networks of the emergent state and international order, while introducing generations of children to the basic tools (i.e. reading and writing) and cultural orientations to time, authority, and

42. Barker, “Western Medicine and the Continuity of Belief.”
personal responsibility that permit their participation in the wider society. On the other hand, Christianity has also been a potent conservative force. Compared to most Western communities, the rural societies of Papua New Guinea remain profoundly “enchanted” in the Weberian sense. Compared to most Western communities, the rural societies of Papua New Guinea remain profoundly “enchanted” in the Weberian sense.44 Virtually everyone assumes that ancestral spirits, ghosts, sorcerers, and magicians live in their midst. Christianity has greatly enlarged the sense of cosmology and, through sectarianism, introduced a nascent religious pluralism. But no one in a place like Uiaku believes that he or she can opt out of certain basic religious beliefs — such as the notion of the Christian God — let alone out of religion altogether. A century after Anglican missionaries erected a church and school in Uiaku, the religious imagination of most Maisin remains fixated on matters of sickness and healing centred on the figure of the sorcerer. While encouraging Maisin to modify the particulars of their belief, Christianity has served to reinforce the perception that sorcerers really exist and that, in turn, their activities reflect the state of moral relationships.

The conservative aspect of Melanesian Christianity has often been remarked upon but rarely taken seriously in studies of religious change. In general, students of Melanesia (who are by and large anthropologists) tend to regard Christianity as a foreign religion; an expression of Western culture that Melanesians either subvert or succumb to. Unlike Africa or Latin America, good historical studies of local religion are few and far between. They are needed. Maisin, like most Melanesians, regard Christianity not as a foreign religion but as part and parcel of the traditions they have grown up with. An historical perspective would reveal, I suspect, that the regional patterns of the religious movements outlined in the opening paragraphs of this essay exist as much because of Christianity as indigenous cultural preoccupations. It would also caution us against regarding revivalist Christianity as merely the latest in the series of missionary invasions. The majority of the recent studies, while very good, deal with relatively remote groups only recently introduced to Christianity. But in most areas of Melanesia, revivalists encounter people for whom Christianity is as much part of their tradition as indigenous mortuary rituals. In places like Uiaku, revivalists, who are mostly younger members of the community, may challenge some basic assumptions, however they are by no means introducing a new religion. Instead, their notion of the relationship between believer and God enters into, and is inevitably conditioned by, a long-established vernacular Christianity which has, as its central theme, the dialectical relationship between personal salvation and the experience of misfortune. The local religion is sensitive to global tendencies and opportunities, but it remains largely informed by local historical experience.