

THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF THE KOROBA HULI

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INTRODUCTION

Phenomenologists of religion have paid inadequate attention to the study of religious change. In attempting to explore the variety of religious forms, and account for their origins and development, students of religion have, by and large, so strongly emphasised respect and sensitivity for the various religious traditions that they have felt reticent, it seems, to examine the dynamics of the confrontation and challenge of competing religious systems. Furthermore, they have almost universally been critical of advocates of religious change, who have worked cross-culturally, believing that the missionary enterprise, itself, is based on a fundamental disrespect for the religious beliefs of others.

This paper, then, is, in part, an investigation into an example of religious change and its dynamics. Through we will frequently refer to documentary sources, it is grounded in personal experience, both as a research student, and, more recently, as a cross-cultural missionary advocate within Melanesia over the past 22 years. The subject matter is provocative, but I hope that, by the end, we may have some clues as to how so-called “exclusivist” beliefs may mesh with respect for the religious traditions of others.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I propose to examine the religious experience over the past 30 years, or so, of the Koroba Huli. Our sketch must, of necessity, be in broad strokes, but we attempt more than mere description. We will focus our discussion within two major theoretical frameworks – those

of W. Cantwell Smith,¹ and of Harold Turner.² Their perspectives will give us insight into the specific situation we will examine.

Professor Cantwell Smith's approach has been to distinguish between the "cumulative tradition", and "faith", in any religious system. He defines faith as "an inner religious experience, or involvement, of a particular person; the impingement on him of the transcendent, putative, or real". By "cumulative tradition", he means "the entire mass of overt objective data that constitute the historical deposit, as it were, of the past religious life of the community in question . . . anything that can be transmitted from one person, one generation, to another, and that a historian can observe".³

The strength of Cantwell Smith's approach lies in his careful analysis of a variety of cumulative traditions, though he has little to say about primal religions. His discussion allows us to see and respect the distinctiveness and variety, both between and within each religious system.

For the purposes of our study, we must distinguish four main "traditions". These are: the Huli primal religious tradition, the Western secular tradition, as brought and advocated by Australian government, and expatriate business, personnel, and two major Christian traditions – the Christian Brethren churches, whose missionary arm is known as Christian Missions in Many Lands, and the Roman Catholic church, whose mission in the Southern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea is entrusted to the Capuchin Franciscan Order (OFM Cap). One other minor tradition was that of the Seventh-day Adventists, who entered the valley a little later than the other two Christian missions.

One weakness of Cantwell Smith's analysis is his failure to put significant content into the term "faith". In his book, *The Meaning*

¹ W. Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, London UK: SPCK, 1978.

² Harold W. Turner, "Primal Religions and Their Study", in Victor C. Hayes, ed., *Australian Essays in World Religions*, Bedford Park SA: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1977, pp. 27-37.

³ Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, pp. 156-157.

and End of Religion, he describes the “expressions of faith” in art, community, and its social institutions, character, ritual, and morality, and so forth,⁴ but, in fact, these are indistinguishable from what he has already defined as “cumulative tradition”.

To be able to make use of Cantwell Smith, I believe we must attempt to put content into the category of “faith”. As a minimum definition, I want to suggest that faith, as distinguished from the expressions of that faith, is allegiance, loyalty, or devotion to the supernatural beings, who have manifested themselves to the religious person. In this allegiance, we may focus on two particular features, namely, the direction to certain specific supernatural beings, and the strength of the allegiance.⁵

Once this minimum content of faith, as an attitude or commitment on the part of the devotee (which, in primal and Christian traditions, is recognised as entering into a relationship with those supernatural beings) is accepted, it immediately illuminates the situation of religious conversion. I hope to show that religious conversion can take place on two levels. It can be on the level of “cumulative tradition”, that is, the replacing of one set of rituals, insights, and theology, by another, with the same basic content of the “faith” unchanged. Or, alternatively, conversion can occur on the level of “faith”, and, therefore, involves a shift of allegiance and loyalties from certain supernatural beings to others.

Furthermore, different missionary advocates use alternative approaches. Some seek a shift in the area of cumulative tradition, as a primary goal, believing that, given time, a shift in faith will occur later. Others seek a change in the faith orientation of people as primary, allowing that changes in cumulative tradition will follow. This latter is much the more difficult approach, since a faith shift is at

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 152ff.

⁵ Because this is a definition using personal terms, it will not be satisfactory for some religious systems. For these, we may have to substitute terms such as “states” or “orders of existence” for the term “being”. However, these alternatives are unsatisfactory for the primal/Christian situation, we are here examining, in that they are too impersonal for these religious systems.

a much-deeper level of personality than a cumulative tradition shift. Our study will elucidate these alternatives.

The second framework we will use is that of Professor Harold Turner. Turner has specialised in the study of the development of new religious movements in the interface between Christianity and primal religions. In the process, he has provided us with valuable insights into the definition of primal religions, and the dynamics of religious change. In his article “Primal Religions and Their Study”⁶, Turner has provided us with a six-feature typology of primal religions,⁷ which will serve as a useful basis to analyse the religious life of the Koroba Huli. Turner admits that the model, on which this typology is based, might be written off by some as “too Christian”, but he goes on to make the important statement that “any model has to be capable of at least including, and doing justice to, the Christian religion”.⁸

I want to develop Turner’s definition to show that the Christian tradition also has important primal elements to it – as do probably all “universal” religions – and that these provide a basis for understanding the elements of continuity of “faith” in the conversion process, as seen from the point of view of the Huli themselves. It was precisely because the Christian faith confronted them in meaningful terms that they accepted it.

In the phenomenological study of religion, much attention has been paid to the philosophical, doctrinal, and ethical aspects of the religious systems examined. Relatively little attention, however, seems to have been given to the primal elements, which display concern for, and interaction with, nature, power, and the spirit world. Yet, it is these elements which are often the most significant to the participants, in the religious conversion process.

Within these two frameworks, our aim will be to examine the dynamics of this process of religious change. I hope we will be able

⁶ Turner, “Primal Religions and Their Study”.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30-32.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

to see that the primary actors and decision-makers are not the missionary advocates – although they are frequently given both the credit and the blame!⁹ The significant culture-formers are the receptors themselves. It was the Huli converts, themselves, who deliberately decided to adopt the Christian faith, and to reformulate it as meaningful to themselves. In fact, I believe they took the Christian faith more seriously, and more radically, than the advocates expected. They made reformulations, which were sometimes resisted, or even rejected, by the advocates,¹⁰ but which were consistent with the Huli worldview, which arose out of the foundation of traditional religious beliefs.

THE KOROBA HULI

The Koroba Huli are located in the north-western portion of the roughly triangular-shaped Huli language area, and comprise about 10,000 people. Centred in the Nagia valley, it also includes the south-eastern headwaters of the Paru River, and intervening limestone country, both north and south. The Tagari River forms a significant boundary on the east, and, to the west, the mission stations of Tanggi and Pori lie just beyond the boundary in the Duna (Yuna) language area, where there is considerable bilingualism. Since our study focuses largely on the Christian Brethren denomination, we will disregard the Fugwa and Levani valleys to the west and south-west of Koroba, since a comity agreement between the Brethren and the Wesleyan missions is still happily observed today.

The Koroba Huli are subsistence agriculturalist, based on sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*), and living in a dispersed settlement pattern between altitudes of 1,500 and 2,300 metres. They have a clan-structured society, with a cognatic descent system.¹¹

⁹ See the argument of Lamin Sanneh, “Christian Mission in the Pluralist Milieu: The African Experience”, in *Missiology* 12-4 (October, 1984), pp. 421-433.

¹⁰ Examples from Koroba are: (1) the burning of *gamu* objects; (2) the permanent excommunication of Christians who became polygynous; (3) the strong corporate fellowship among the Koroba Brethren churches, which seemed to cut across local church autonomy.

¹¹ Robert M. Glasse, *The Huli of Papua*, Canberra ACT: ANU Press, 1962.

The Tari valley, east of Koroba, is the centre of the Huli language area. The Tari Huli, in the early years of contact, called any people, living west of the Tagari River, “Duna”, despite the fact that the Koroba peoples speak Huli with only very minor vocabulary and dialectal differences from the Tari Huli.¹² As a result of this confusion of terminology, the Koroba District was originally called the Duna Sub-district, and Glasse¹³ frequently refers to the Duna in his description to the religious beliefs of the Tari Huli, when it would be more accurate refer to the Koroba Huli (or even the Burani Huli, since Burani was an important source of magical stones and *gamu* objects for the Tari Huli, and others).

The religious experience of the Koroba Huli can be divided into the following phases:

1. Pre-1961: Huli Primal Religion and the Western Contact Period.
(Initial contact by government patrols led by European officers took place in 1954, and a patrol post was established in 1955)
2. 1961-1963: Confrontation and Conversion: a Shift in Faith
(Missionaries and other Europeans were allowed to enter the Koroba Valley in 1961; first group movement to Christianity 1963)
3. 1964-1974: Reformulation of the Cumulative Tradition: Phase 1
(Primal and Christian cumulative tradition combine, but are dominated by missionary models)

¹² James Sinclair, *Wigmen of Papua*, Milton Qld: Jacaranda Press, 1973, pp. 51-52

¹³ Robert M. Glasse, “The Huli of the Southern Highlands”, in Peter Lawrence, and M. J. Meggitt, eds, *Gods, Ghosts, and Men in Melanesia*, Melbourne Vic: Oxford University Press, 1965, pp. 27-49.

4. 1975-1976: Revival: The “Primalisation” of Christianity
(An indigenous revival begins among the Koroba Huli, and spreads out from there)
5. 1976-1985: Reformulation of the Cumulative Tradition:
Phase 2
(The cumulative tradition is dominated by indigenous models)

By dividing up the 30-year period in this way, the Koroba Huli religious experience can be seen to have undergone two phases of emerging tension. The first of these was in confrontation with the Western secular system in the latter half of the 1950s; the second was the decade 1964-1974, when missionary models were introduced into the emerging church life. Each of these periods was followed by a “crisis experience”, when a significant restructuring at the level of “faith” took place, and this resulted in a reformulation of the cumulative tradition in the following period.

Let us now examine these five phases in more detail.

1. PRE-1961: HULI PRIMAL RELIGION AND THE WESTERN CONTACT PERIOD

For information on the pre-1961 period, besides personal conversations of the writer with the Koroba Huli themselves, we rely on the descriptions of Robert M. Glasse,¹⁴ an anthropologist, who researched the Huli in the Hoiebia area of the central Tari Basin, and James Sinclair,¹⁵ the first resident government officer in the Koroba area. Glasse was not only the first, but, in many respects, the most important of the anthropologists who have studied in the Huli area. His description is accurate for the Koroba Huli in its broad outlines. However, certain variations, some quite significant, will lead us to modify his analysis. The variations can be accounted for, partly by the distinctive local features of the religious life of the Koroba Huli,

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Sinclair, *Wigmen of Papua*; James Sinclair, *Behind the Ranges*, Melbourne Vic: Melbourne University Press, 1966

partly by the fact that the Huli orthography had not been standardised at the time of Glasse's study, and partly, it would seem, by inaccuracies in the recording and interpreting of detail.¹⁶

Glasse describes¹⁷ four main concepts underlying Huli religious behaviour – *dinini*, *dama*, *gamu*, and *Datagaliwabe*. Only three of these, however, are “spiritual beings”, that is *dinini*, *dama*, and *Datagaliwabe*. *Gamu* refers broadly to the aspects of magic, sorcery, and ritual. It is, therefore, the means by which power can be obtained, whether that power is from personal or impersonal resources. *Gamu* can be used for a wide variety of purposes, including divination, retaliation, placation, protection, and oblation. This distinction between the spiritual beings, and the means, is important for our discussion later.

Dinini is the “immaterial essence of human personality, which survives bodily death, and persists indefinitely thereafter as a ghost”.¹⁸ It is also a person's *dinini* that leaves the body during sleep, and causes one to dream.

On the death of the body, the Huli seem somewhat vague about what happens to a person's *dinini*. Certainly, warriors killed in battle, and perhaps other good people, departed to a place Glasse calls *Dalugeli*. The more common term is *Dahulianda* (the residents of it being called *Dahuliali*).¹⁹ The alternative commonly-believed place of the departed is *Humbirinanda* (Glasse: *Humbinianda*). At death, informants have told me they have seen a light, like a small flame, moving from the grave site to the south-east. This is the departing *dinini* on its journey to *Humbirinanda*. Glasse reports this place as being down a black hole,²⁰ a “hot, waterless place”. In description to

¹⁶ The writer was able to verify and compare much religious material during the eight years he was a member of the Huli New Testament Checking Committee, which met regularly, and included Huli checkers and informants from the whole Huli area.

¹⁷ Glasse, “The Huli of the Southern Highlands”, pp. 29-37.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁹ Perhaps Glasse has confused this term, and slightly amended *Dahulial* to read *Dalugeli*; alternatively it is a local Hoiobia variation.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

the writer, informants have described it as a place of shadows, of half-life, and drowsiness (rather more like the Hebrew concept of Sheol than the more furnace-like Hades).

Until such time as the *dinini* of the deceased departs, it remains near the grave of the departed, and may wreak vengeance on the person who has caused death or broken taboos, as the following incident reveals.

My wife and I, with Professor Charles Kraft, were attending the burial of a young Gunu village man in 1983. The man had been subject to epileptic fits, and had died while eating, presumably by choking (i.e., an unusual death). Another young man came up to us while we were watching, and explaining the process of burial to Professor Kraft, he said, "We are all being very careful not to criticise the grave-house maker, or say anything bad about what he is doing. If anyone does so, someone else will die."

The *dinini* of the departed also continue to take an interest in the affairs of their immediate family and clan. The traditional antagonism between male and female in the community is reflected in beliefs about the *dinini*, for male *dinini* are benevolent and protective about the affairs of their descendants. However, with the exception of the *dinini* of one's mother, female *dinini* are covetous and malicious, and liable to attack their relatives. For this reason, suicide by women, still not uncommon, is the ultimate form of retribution against a husband in an estranged marriage; men hardly ever commit suicide.

The more distant an ancestor is, especially a male ancestor, the more powerful he becomes. Long-dead ancestors, however, are no longer thought of as *dinini*, but as *damagali* (Glasse: *dama agali duo*). It is perhaps significant for our later discussion that the first Europeans that came to Koroba were known as *damagali*.

Dama are referred to by Glasse as deities. At a recent seminar on Christianity and Southern Highland cultures, Huli representatives considered *dama* to include both "divinities" and "spirits", and

referred to them collectively as “clan spirits”.²¹ However, it seems fair to distinguish between localised *dama* (Pidgin *masalai*) and non-localised beings, who are associated with creation myths, such as the myth of the female deity, *Honabe*, who was seduced by *Timbu*, and subsequently gave birth to *Korimogo*, *Heyolabe* (Glasse: *Helabe*), *Piandela*, *Ni* (= the sun), and *Hela* (Glasse: *Helahuli*).²² Many Huli regard all of these as very powerful beings, but *Heyolabe* as being the most-dangerously evil of them all.

The Huli generally agree that *Hela* bore four sons, *Huli*, *Duna*, *Duguba*, and *Obena*, and descendants of these latter three are the main tribal groups with whom the Huli established trading links (i.e., between the Huli and the Duna, the Porgera Enga (*Obena*) to the north, and the Bosavi people to the south (*Duguba*).

Datagaliwabe must be regarded as a distinctive “high god”. He is the guardian of community mores, and, according to Glasse, is solely concerned with breaches of kinship rules,²³ although many Huli nowadays seem to interpret his guardianship more widely than this. He tends to be thought of as a great person, living astride the mountains, and almost omniscient in his knowledge. He was never placated with pigs, as sacrificed to lesser *dama*, nor is the term *dama* applied to him.

These then, are beings, to whom the Huli give allegiance and loyalty. If we use Cantwell Smith’s framework, and apply it to the Huli, the beings we have described are the objects of Huli “faith”. They are the spiritual realities, to whom they relate. However, all forms of *gamu* must be placed in the category of cumulative tradition,

²¹ Bernie Collins, ed., *Not to Destroy, but to Fulfil: Report on the Workshop on Southern Highlands’ Cultures and Christian Faith, Held in Mendi, Papua New Guinea, July 23-August 3, 1980*, Mendi PNG: United Church Highlands Region, 1983.

²² Glasse, “The Huli of the Southern Highlands”, p. 33.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

since they are the expressions of that faith, and the ritual acts and objects, which can be transmitted from one person to another.²⁴

Turning now to Harold Turner's analysis, we find that he lists six features of primal religions. As we shall see, these are all applicable to Huli religion.

1. Kinship with Nature

Although the Huli are not strongly totemic,²⁵ their kinship with nature can be seen in "the way the environment is used realistically and unsentimentally, but with profound respect and reverence, and without exploitation".²⁶ A good example of this respect is Gayalu's description of the Gebeanda.²⁷

2. Human Weakness

This is the sense that "man is finite, weak, and impure, or sinful, and stands in need of a power not his own".²⁸ Many Huli have related to me the burdensome sense of obligation, and even bondage, they experienced in the demanding round of placation of the various *dama*, who seemed to cause so many of the ills and injuries of life – sickness, death, infertility, drought or flood, defeat in battle, sorcery, and so on.

3. Man is Not Alone

We have already described the other beings, many so much more powerful than himself, that the Huli believed inhabited the universe along with him.

²⁴ I disagree with Glasse in his use of the term *mana* in reference to myths: *Mana* are mores, teachings, and obligations; myths should be called *mamali te* in Huli.

²⁵ A Koroba man counted for me his generations of ancestors. He knew 11 generations, but the 11th was a totemic animal.

²⁶ Turner, "Primal Religions and Their Study", p. 30.

²⁷ Benjamin S. Gayalu, "The Gebeanda: A Sacred Cave Ritual", in Norman C. Habel, ed., *Powers, Plumes and Piglets: Phenomena of Melanesian Religion*, Bedford Park SA: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1979, pp. 19-24.

²⁸ Turner, "Primal Religions and Their Study", p 31.

4. Relations with Transcendent Powers

Through the rituals of *gamu*, the Huli entered into relationship with the transcendent power who guarded him, interceded for him, strengthened and endowed him with skill in battle, in oratory, in mediation, and supplied him with wealth and fertility.

5. Man's After-life

Again, our description of Huli beliefs about a person's *dinini* show that he has a strong belief in the continuation of life after death, and of the "living-dead", who maintain relations with the "living-living" for their well-being.

6. The Physical as Sacramental of the Spiritual

The Huli, like other primal peoples, believed that the physical was a vehicle of spiritual power. Finger bones of deceased relatives, for example, could be used for divination. Charms and magical rituals were employed for a variety of ends.

In addition, even in the social sphere, the pattern of human relationships, for example, the relationships between men and women, are replicated in the realm of the spirit world – *dama* have the male or female characteristics that are expected of them in the physical world.

I have taken the time to describe, in some detail, Huli religion, so that we can see more clearly the factors that brought about religious change, once the Europeans arrived.

CONTACT WITH EUROPEAN POLITICAL POWER

The coming of government authority to Koroba, under the Australian administration, has been graphically described by Sinclair.²⁹ In *Wigmen of Papua*, Sinclair displays a typically colonial administrative mix of paternalism and cynicism toward Huli relations with the government. He describes the Koroba Huli as "proud, independent, emotional, infuriating, loveable people",³⁰ and as

²⁹ See note 15.

³⁰ Sinclair, *Wigmen of Papua*, p. 51.

“perhaps the most vital, mercurial people I have ever known”.³¹ Even so, his description reveals something of the underlying tensions in this initial period of contact. The reserve and suspicion about motives, the displays of power (the administration was forced to use arms three times in defence, once killing a man, and losing one of its own), and the disruption to normal living, by the demand of establishing a government post, and the building of roads, were part of these tensions.

For our purposes, however, three important features of this contact period must be noted.

1. The Contrast in Religious Outlook

Turner’s six-fold characterisation, which we have applied to the Huli, provides us with the basis for seeing the extent of this contrast.

- (a) *Kinship with nature.* The government officers arrived with seemingly supernatural power. They bore sharp and efficient, even deadly, weapons (steel axes and rifles); they communicated with unseen beings by radio; they came amply supplied with valuable items of wealth. But, even more outstandingly, these *damagali*, “ancestor” men”, white with age [?], planted no gardens, built no houses (that work was done largely by locals and “native” police). Indeed, they did no “real work”. Furthermore, with complete immunity, they accepted food from either men or women (unheard of before), and with seeming abandon, ordered the felling of trees, and the digging and levelling of land for roads.
- (b) *Human weakness.* This, the Huli felt, but not, apparently, the European government officer, for the white man represented the epitome of power.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

- (c) *Man is not alone.* The white man came very largely devoid of the concept of the existence of supernatural beings. He might, and did, pour contempt on “time-wasting rituals”, such as the two-year long initiation. The Koroba Huli blame the government, and their demand for labour, as being the main cause for the abandonment of initiation ceremonies. For secular government officers, man was indeed alone in the world, and vested with “all power”.
- (d) *Relations with transcendent powers.* Despite the potential for misunderstanding about the government officers, and their activities, with such things as radios, to feed cargo cult ideas, these did not develop. Space forbids us to speculate why. Perhaps the characteristic Huli outlook of independence, combined with the flurry of activity in developing one of the last parts of the country to be “pacified”, were factors. The point we wish to make here is that few of the government officers, it would seem, had much sympathy with the primal religious need to maintain such relationships with spiritual beings, as Huli people felt.
- (e) *Man’s afterlife.* The this-worldly concerns of government did not leave much room for concern with the after-life either. The government forced changes in local burial procedures, as traditional practices were labelled unhygienic. On the other hand, if Huli people speculated on the nature of Europeans, they never saw them die, and rarely saw one sick.
- (f) *The physical as sacramental of the spiritual.* If the coming of the external government authority involved a practical denial of the category of the spiritual, it follows that the physical was not treated as sacramental either.

Thus we are led to see, not merely that the contrast in life-style is striking, but that the far-more-profound contrast of basic outlook on life is even more significant. In this regard, Theodor Ahrens says:

Many Westerners do not share such notions about power, as a concealed dimension of reality. They do not see flames on graves. They are not aware of the power potential of a particular stone, nor do they feel the threat of a *ples masalai*, let alone expect to receive a message from it. They would rather describe such sensations as irrational or hallucinatory. Their notion of power is not based on epiphanies and religious rites, but on economic and technological strength, as well as scientific knowledge, which may help an individual, or a group, to force their will on other individuals, or groups. Westerners have not learned to conceptualise the world around them, in terms of personal relationships and obligations.³²

2. **The Undermining of the Huli Worldview**

In another paper, I have elaborated my conviction that:

the pattern of contact in Papua New Guinea, where the government came in first, and pacified an area, before allowing the missionaries to come in, plus the various events that accompanied the entry of missionaries, including the coming of a whole range of goods from the outside world, led to the shattering of old beliefs, securities, and worldview. This experience was so intense, psychologically, that it forced the community to look for a new integrating force and worldview, that would help them comprehend the bewildering changes going on around them. This was provided for them in Christianity. I believe it was this factor, which led, more than

³² Theodor Ahrens, "Concepts of Power in a Melanesian and Biblical Perspective", in James Knight, ed., *Christ in Melanesia: Exploring Theological Issues*, Point (1&2/1977), p. 63.

anything else, to the widespread adoption of the Christian faith.³³

With regard to the Koroba Huli, I do not believe the worldview was anything like totally destroyed, but certainly doubts about the efficacy of the spiritual beings, believed in, up to this point, must have been raised.

3. The Power Encounter of Pacification

Thirdly, Ahrens has pointed out that “administration officials, traders, and planters, . . . unlike the local people, did not interpret the colonial situation as a power encounter, to be described in religious terms”.³⁴ However, I believe it is valid, especially from the Koroba Huli point of view, to see it as just that. The European administration came with a strong determination to see that its authority (power) would succeed, and that fighting would be stopped, and a new order be ushered in.

It is my contention that the disruption of those early years of contact was a power encounter, which had two profound effects. Firstly, it predisposed the community towards making a major shift at the level of “faith”, not merely in “cumulative tradition”. Secondly, it exposed the community, and, in the long run, strongly attracted a considerable proportion of the youth in it, to an alternative worldview – that life can be lived within a secularised world, especially outside one’s own community. But this came later, and is not part of our study at present.

2. 1961-1963: CONFRONTATION AND CONVERSION: A SHIFT AN FAITH

In 1961, the Koroba valley was “derestricted”, and missionaries and traders were allowed to enter. For an intimate description of the dynamics of the situation, I have access to the

³³ O. C. Fountain, “The Christian Faith and the Melanesian Economy”, mimeographed paper for the APCM Conference at Tari, May, 1977.

³⁴ Ahrens, “Concepts of Power in a Melanesian and Biblical Perspective”, pp. 71-72.

“New Guinea Diary” of Mr Kay W. Liddle,³⁵ pioneer missionary with Christian Missions in Many Lands (the missionary arm of the Christian Brethren churches).

Kay Liddle was not merely a pioneer, evangelising and trekking first in the Lumi area (1952-1953), then in Green River (1954-1961), and finally, at Koroba (1961-1970). He was a missionary who, although holding firm evangelical convictions, was culturally sensitive, adaptable in methods, and with a deep concern about personal relationships. He worked with missionary colleagues, some of whom were less sensitive to culture, and less widely read, and all of whom came from staunchly-independent ecclesiastical backgrounds. Yet he was, to a very large extent, the man who developed mission policy, held the team together, and had a listening ear, and a serving attitude, for his national brothers and sisters.

In 1961, Liddle and Ivor Pethybridge moved into the Koroba area. Their mission had been invited to take over the mission station at Guala, commenced by national pastors of the Methodist Overseas Mission, who, at that time, did not have expatriate staff to move to Guala. Then followed two years of strenuous effort, firstly, in building residences, undertaking language study, and commencing literacy and medical work, but also long hours of trekking or motor-cycling over roughly-formed roads, engaged in preaching to the various clans in the valley.

On derestriction, several missions moved into the area at the same time. We need concern ourselves with only three: CMMML, the Roman Catholic Mission, and the Seventh-day Adventists. In the initial stages, there was strong competition to stake out parishes among the different missions. However, because of the clan structure of Huli society, the strong personal leadership patterns, and group decision-making process, the pattern that emerged allowed, to a considerable extent, both the Catholics and the Brethren to restrict their activities to particular parts of the district. Few clans were split between the two denominations. In the final analysis, the Christian

³⁵ Kay W. Liddle, “New Guinea Diary: October 3, 1961-October 3, 1965”, mimeographed (private circulation only).

Brethren comprised about 50-55 percent of the people, the Roman Catholics about 40-45 percent, and the SDAs, who came in a little later, up to five percent.

The missionaries, from whatever mission, came with considerable personal prestige and power: prestige, because they were people from the outside, and yet clearly distinct from government; and power, represented in their apparent material wealth, and access to communications systems and transport. Thus, in some respects, they were like the government personnel, and yet, they were different. Certainly they were different in methods, since their influence depended on the power of persuasion (in that respect they were like the Huli, who relied heavily on oratory rather than arms), whereas the government officers could demand compliance by the rule of law and the threat of imprisonment.

Despite their status, however, the missionaries did not come as representatives of “major world religions”. If they had, this would have meant little to the Huli anyway. They came, rather, as individuals; their national and international structures were largely unseen. By the Huli, they were evaluated on the basis of their personal qualities, and their message was interpreted in the light of the Huli’s own conceptions.

DIFFERING MISSIONARY METHODS

No detailed analysis of the methods of evangelism in the Koroba area, at this initial stage, particularly of the Roman Catholic missionary advocates, is available to the writer. What can be gleaned from the diary of Liddle must be evaluated with caution. Even so, significant differences between the methods of Liddle and the Brethren, and the Catholic mission seem discernable.

Both missionary groups aimed for a shift in “faith”, rather than merely replacing a primal “cumulative tradition” with a Christian one. It was in the means of achieving this goal that they primarily differed. It seems possible that the Catholic missionaries placed emphasis on the replacement of traditional Huli rituals with Christian ceremonies, for such things as the protection of gardens from

malicious *dama*, or for personal health and safety. An example, observed by the writer, is the placement of crosses in gardens, to symbolise the protection of God's Spirit there against the *gamu* of enemies. No doubt, the missionaries would employ catechetical instruction later to ensure that the Christian ritual accompanied intelligent comprehension. Of course, the growth of the garden would witness to, and strengthen, the faith allegiance of the convert.

This was not the approach of the Christian Brethren. Certainly, they had a cluster of rituals of their own; it is interesting that the literal translations of the names the Huli gave to the two denominational groups was "the shut eyes" (Brethren) and "the open eyes" (Catholics)! But the Brethren were concerned to explain to potential converts the basic doctrines, on which an intelligent faith shift must rest. Liddle records that this emphasis on teaching was a difference perceived by the Huli people between the two groups.

However, even more than this, was the concern that a faith shift would involve a meaningful "power encounter". This meaningful "power encounter" came about in 1963. It centred on the family of one of the most influential fight leaders in the valley, Elara Alendo. Elara narrated the experience to me in the following way:

"When the missionaries, came many people gathered for church services, because they wanted to hear what they had to say. But I was not involved. I remained outside when the people went into church. I was determined to follow the way of the *dama* (*damanga mana*).³⁶

"Then, one day, one of my children became sick, so I sacrificed pigs to the *dama*, first to one, and then another, but my child did not get better. Soon he died. Then one of my wives got sick, so I sacrificed pigs again, but she did not get better. So I went to the missionary and said, "Liddle, I want you to pray to your God for my wife, because she is sick.

³⁶ See note 24.

“Mr Liddle said to me, “Elara, you follow the way of the *dama*. You go and sacrifice to them. I worship the Great Spirit of Jesus. If you want His help, you must give up the way of the *dama*, and follow the way of God’s Spirit” (*Ngode Dinininaga mana*).

“So I went away, and thought about it very much. I sacrificed to the *dama*, but still my wife did not get better. Then I went back to Liddle, and said, “I am ready to follow your God’s Great Spirit, but please pray for my wife.” So Liddle agreed to pray for her. We prayed together, and my wife got better. Then I knew God’s Spirit was more powerful than the *dama*. So I talked to my people, and we all agreed that we would give up the way of the *dama* and follow Jesus.

“In order to do this, we agreed to have a big feast to mark the end of the old way, and the beginning of the new one. Up till that time no one had ever killed pigs without pouring out the blood to the *dama*. If anyone did that, they would get sick and die. But I persuaded my people that we would have a feast, and we would not offer the blood to the spirits. So we had a very large feast of over 150 pigs. All the people were watching me. They said, ‘If Elara gets sick or dies, we will know that God’s Spirit is not strong enough to protect him from the anger of the *dama*.’ But I did not get sick, so at that time, all the people in this valley became Christians.

“Even though the missionaries did not want us to do so, we burned our *gamu* things at this time. The missionaries tried to stop us, but we knew we had to do this.”

Liddle, in a personal communication, adds the following detail:

“Elara subsequently became ill at a pig feast near Fugwa, and was carried to Guala on a stretcher, and thought to have ‘pig bel’. The Christians gathered, and we prayed for him, and arranged for a government plane to take him to Mendi hospital. They found nothing wrong with him. He recovered, and his

healing was attributed to God, in answer to prayer, and that confirmed Elara's and the people's faith."

This is a very significant story, for a number of reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates that the significant actors in religious change are not the missionary advocates, but the receptors of the message. In the African context, Professor Lamin Sanneh of Harvard has recently argued a similar case, very cogently.³⁷

Secondly, it demonstrates that religious change took place as a power encounter. Indeed, the message itself was understood in the framework of indigenous Huli concepts (access to power, through the mediation of a person rightly related to the supernatural being). Further, it met the need of the receptors, not in terms of, say, eternal life but on the level of consciousness of personal and corporate (family) wholeness, that is, salvation, seen as physical well-being.

In fact, if we evaluate again Turner's criteria of primal religions, we can see that the message, brought by the Christina advocates, was consistent with these six phenomena.

We should note, also, that the terminology, used for the basic concepts of the message of he advocates, was meaningful within the Huli frame of reference, and was, therefore, conducive to change at the level of faith, rather than merely cumulative tradition.

Examples of this are:

"God's Spirit" being referred to as *Dinini*

"Satan" being referred to as the chief of malicious *dama*

"heaven" being referred to as *dahulianda*

"angels" being referred to a *dahuliali*

"prayer" being referred to as *Ngodehondo bi la* (to talk to God), rather than *bi pupu wia* (to whisper spells, or call to the spirits).

³⁷ Sanneh, "Christian Mission in the Pluralist Milieu", refer note 9.

Some early missionaries, I believe, misunderstood the true significance of *Datagaliwabe* (some felt *Datagaliwabe* was thought to be like a gnome or elf, resident in the rafters of houses – a view no Koroba Huli has substantiated to me). They, therefore, chose the non-content transliteration *Ngode* for God. But there is no doubt that Huli Christians reworked this, and other concepts, within their own framework, so that *Ngode* was identified with *Datagaliwabe*,³⁸ and in the Huli New Testament,³⁹ *Dama Heyolabe* was adopted as the name for Satan, instead of the non-content term *Dama Tadani*.

A third deduction from Elara's story, is that conversion involved a basic change on the level of faith – seen as a change in allegiance – rather than in the cumulative tradition followed later, as we shall see.

The change in faith was seen as a change of loyalties from one set of beings (*damanaga mana*) to another (*Ngodenaga mana*). The effect of this change was to open the developing culture to tremendous plasticity. New rituals would be necessary for the new loyalty.

It is, therefore, to the great credit of Liddle, and the other missionaries, that the church practice that developed was not more Western than it became. The missionaries felt oppressed by the dependence of the new converts on the advocates for instruction and guidance. They were determined from the beginning to make the Huli Christian Brethren congregations independent from their formation.³⁹

Fourthly, the decision-making process, leading up to the point of conversion, followed traditional lines. The “big man”, (*agali homogo*) Elara, had a personal experience of spiritual power, and his influence led to a group response, which was definitive. This pattern was repeated in other clan areas. Furthermore, most of the “big men”

³⁸ Collins, *Not to Destroy, but to Fulfil*, p. 9.

³⁹ CMMML, “Special Conference Held at Koroba: May 31-June 3, to Discuss the Organisation and Ministry of Churches in the Highlands”, mimeographed, no date, p. 1.

were polygynists, but they were allowed entry into church membership without the necessity of becoming monogamous. Later, a number of them were appointed as church elders (the highest office in the Brethren).⁴⁰

3. 1964-1974: REFORMATION OF THE CUMULATIVE TRADITION: PHASE 1

We have already referred to the openness to reworking of the cumulative tradition that the faith shift of conversion produced. Little's diary, newsletters, and a particularly interesting document entitled "Special Conference Held at Koroba: May 31-June 3, to Discuss the Organisation and Ministry of Churches in the Highlands" (no year), are our main sources for this period.

A period of intensive teaching, involving strenuous trekking to various chapels, daily instruction classes for selected Huli "preachers", and literacy programmes, followed conversion. Teaching basic Bible stories, Christian doctrine, and instruction in church order, were given.

Group conversion was followed by a period of intensive small-group instruction and counselling for those desiring baptism. For those who demonstrated, by changed behaviour (i.e., a personal "power encounter") that they were now Christians, this instruction led to baptism, communion, and church membership. The training of pastors began in 1967, using the Unevangelised Fields Mission Bible School at Tari.

The appointment of elders was delayed until the early 1970s, after Little had left. He, and others, were hesitant about apparently abandoning biblical teaching on monogamy (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6) for mature, but polygynous, men, or the appointment of younger, less-responsible men. Instead, the matter was delayed, and the "big men", who had become Christians, were accepted informally as the effective spiritual leaders of the congregations.

⁴⁰ O. C. Fountain, "Polygyny and the Churches", in *Missiology* 2-1 (1974), pp. 111-120.

The Conference Report, mentioned above, is a fascinating document. It covered general principles and guidelines adopted by the Brethren, and guidelines for baptism, communion, church government, ministry, inter-church (i.e., inter-congregational) fellowship and cooperation, worship and services, and church discipline.

Here, the general principles are of particular interest. They agreed that:

1. there was no rigid church pattern “to be followed in every age and culture”, but that New Testament teaching regarding the church should be applied to the Huli-Duna situation;
2. agreement on broad patterns of church order and conduct would be beneficial;
3. “national brethren” should share in the adoption of this pattern;
4. the church should not be over-organised, to the stifling of the Spirit;
5. the church should be “indigenous”, self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting, and not under the domination and direction of the foreign missionary;
6. cultural factors should be taken into consideration in applying New Testament teaching to this situation.

Nine cultural factors were spelled out as being important: the corporate nature of Huli-Duna society, leadership patterns, the place of women, different standards of modesty and dress, local marriage customs, legalistic outlook, local patterns of discipline, reliance on the European, and avoidance of paternalism, and attitudes to the spirit world, and their effect on every aspect of daily life.

To a very considerable extent, then, the missionary advocates attempted to be both sensitive to local culture and religion, and to free national Christians to have a large share in structuring church life in a

way compatible with local culture. Even so, church patterns reflected strongly the Western traditions the missionaries brought. Perhaps, one could hardly expect it to be otherwise. The congregational structure, liturgical patterns, and hymnology, for example, were heavily indebted to Western models. The advocates were frequently asked, "In your country, how do you do such and such?" Fortunately, most were also often reluctant to answer!

In this period, then, a cumulative tradition developed, despite the missionary concern that it be otherwise, which was not fully in harmony with the primal religious faith of the Huli Christians. It is my belief that this was a major factor, which progressively built up tension within the emerging congregations, and which contributed to the eruption of the 1975-1976 revival movement.

4. 1975-1976: REVIVAL: THE "PRIMALISATION" OF CHRISTIANITY

A variety of factors also contributed to triggering revival phenomena, which emerged in 1975. Some of these can be deduced from published documentary sources.⁴¹ Much of what is recorded here is from personal observation.

FACTORS TRIGGERING THE KOROKA REVIVAL

1. On the national level, Papua New Guinea was going through the process of becoming an independent nation. The government was laying stress on the ability of Melanesians to run their own affairs. Self-government in 1974 was followed by Independence in 1975.
2. A pattern of revival phenomena was beginning to emerge in different parts of Melanesia: in the Solomon Islands among the South Seas Evangelical church; among the Enga Baptists, and among the United church

⁴¹ Aruru Matiabe, "Revival Movements 'Beyond the Ranges': Southern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea", paper presented at a Seminar on "New and On-going Religious Movements in Melanesia", Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, November 1980; John Barr, "A Survey of Ecstatic Phenomena and 'Holy Spirit Movements' in Melanesia", in *Oceania* 54-2 (December, 1983), pp. 109-132.

in the Mendi area; and the Evangelical church of Papua (related to the Asia Pacific Christian Mission) in the Komo and Kutube areas.

There was little evidence of direct stimulation of the Koroba revival by these other movements, though reports must have filtered through. The only clear exception to this was the visit of two Solomon Islands SSEC pastors, who came to conduct meetings for several days at Guala in 1973. Key church leaders spent time questioning them about their experience.

When revival did break out, the Koroba Christians did relate their experiences to these others, as they had heard of them, both positively and negatively. Even so, as Whiteman states,⁴² every revival takes on the distinctive forms of the local culture.

3. The visit of Maori evangelist, John Komene, in 1974, sparked interest. Here was a non-European, who preached with charisma, and in meaningful terms.
4. The departure of Kay Liddle, in 1970, ushered in a new era of independency. The churches were freed from the “*mana*” of their founding missionary.
5. An upsurge in church life took place in the months prior to the overt commencement of the revival. An increasing number of individual conversions and baptisms over the previous two years reflected an increasing desire to “come close to God”. One congregation started daily evening prayer meetings. A small group of men, who became key leaders in the revival, held regular late-night Bible studies with their missionary, which proved to be very significant to them.

⁴² Darrell L. Whiteman, “The Cultural Dynamics of Religious Movements”, in Wendy Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (3), Point 4, (1984), p. 59.

6. The construction of their own Bible School building, with their own financial resources, by national Christians themselves, drew all the congregations of Brethren in the valley together into a single project. It was the opening of this Bible School that triggered the overt manifestation of revival in July, 1975.
7. Before and during the revival, Bible stories were paralleled with Huli legends, to the extent that some became convinced that their ancestors had somehow received the biblical message before even the missionaries came, which resulted in many questions about church history.

The revival phenomena included night meetings every night of the week. Previously, all church meetings were held in the daytime. These meetings assumed a free-flowing liturgical structure, involving singing, corporate prayer, Bible teaching, prophecies, glossolalia, visions, and dreams. They continued for several hours, occasionally much of the night.

A new spirit of unity characterised the community. Land disputes, and court hearings about land, ceased for a time. Mass turnouts at public baptisms took place, with crowds from different congregations converging, singing, and waving bunches of flowers and branches. A new hymnology emerged, with tunes following traditional tone patterns. Someone would be “given” a new song in a dream, and share it with the congregation the next day. It would be learned, and then shared with other congregations, and, thus, spread through the revival area. Healings occurred, a few quite dramatic.

Women, young people, and elderly, illiterate men discovered new roles in church life. There was a great joy in the community, and the revival became known by the Huli word for joy, *туру*.

Interestingly, the missionary advocates were largely on the sidelines of this creative wave, and rather critical of it. They came from a strongly non-charismatic, denominational background, and

were apprehensive. Their security and financial support depended on acceptance “back home”. As well as this, they were frequently involved in counselling cases of excess, and the government officers blamed them for allowing these excesses, fearing a cargo cult was developing. This tended to reinforce a negative outlook.

In terms of Cantwell Smith’s framework, the revival was, in part, at least, a shift or restructuring at the faith level. Formally, the object of faith remained the same. But the emphasis placed on the Holy Spirit was new. There was a change in terminology from referring to God in the singular to referring to the Godhead in the plural. Of course, for a number of individuals, they did “discover” God at this time.

The revival also uncovered the fact that many Christians had resorted back to the use of charms and magical objects for success in such things as land disputes, health, and other problem areas. Perhaps the new faith had left a void in this area. Here again, some restructuring of faith took place.

The most significant aspect of the revival was the discovery, on a widespread scale, of the conviction that God talks directly to Huli Christians. He not only speaks the Huli language (which the majority of missionaries failed to learn adequately), but He can by-pass the missionary altogether. Further, He speaks in Huli forms: by dreams, visions, prophecies, and special insight. No longer do non-literate Huli have to depend on missionaries and pastors to read God’s word, and interpret it to them. God can speak directly to them. He also speaks to Huli needs, in terms of the good life: salvation now, and power for living.

A particular emphasis (deliberately under-played by the missionaries, in the past), was the doctrine of the second coming of Christ. But, even here, biblical teaching was seen to parallel a number of “last days” prophecies that the ancestors had spoken about.

The revival, then, was a time of rapid religious development and elaboration, whereby the cumulative traditions of the Christian

faith were restructured, and brought into line with their underlying beliefs, as perceived by the Huli Christians. This involved a release of tensions that had built up between Huli “faith”, and its expressions, drawn largely from Western sources.

Bearing in mind Turner’s typology of primal religions, the revival can be seen as a “primalisation” of Huli religious experience. It is a return to the consciousness of the presence of, and involvement with, supernatural beings. Man becomes conscious of his weakness and dependence, but enjoys the release of forgiveness and nearness to God. Thus, it is a reentering into relationship with these beings, and the experience of their power. Further, the manifestations of the revival, the ways it expressed itself, were all indigenous to the Huli culture in pre-Christian times. Divination, glossolalia, trance, visions, dreams, were all parts of traditional culture, although, clearly, there were new accretions, such as, the role of women in the revival.

5. 1976-1985: REFORMATION OF THE CUMULATIVE TRADITION: PHASE 2

When my wife and I returned to Koroba, from leave, in mid-1976, the revival was subsiding. A common saying was, “The Holy Spirit has left us.” Whiteman has pointed out⁴³ that all revival phenomena do, in fact, eventually pass away. In fact, while he claims that “religious movements are a normal, healthy sign that a society is dynamic and alive”,⁴⁴ he also shows that a revitalisation movement begins with a steady state, passes through periods of increased individual stress, cultural distortion, revitalisation, routinisation, and finally back to a new steady state.⁴⁵

Although, at Koroba, the widespread euphoria had gone, the new “steady state” was different from before. Energies were able to be channelled into new directions. Huli Christians undertook evangelisation tours of other rural and distant urban areas. The Huli New Testament was completed, and beautifully dedicated in an

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 57.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 60-64.

ecumenical service. Huli Christians became more confidently independent, and outspoken about missionary policies.

Two other interesting developments occurred in the post-revival phase. A marked division occurred between many Bible School-trained, literate pastors and some older, non-literate church members, who actively sought to revive and continue to reproduce the phenomena of revival, even when the “joy” had largely gone. The current name for the revival had quietly changed from *туру* (joy) to *gini* (play), unconsciously marking a significant shift. The literate pastors had had, by and large, a “watch-dog” function, even during the revival, to see that what was done and said was “in line” with scripture. Even so, the split was not so marked as to divide the denomination, although it had the potential to do so. Much energy was expended in maintaining unity.

Finally, at the end of 1984, the Fountains left, and were not replaced by other missionary staff. The national Christians, while sad, were determined that things would not be allowed to slip back, and recent reports indicate that revival phenomena are increasing again, along with other signs of progress. One may surmise that the prospect of the departure of their missionaries again increased the tension felt in the religious community, and a new revitalisation cycle may have begun.

CONCLUSION

We have seen how Cantwell Smith’s distinction between “faith” and the “cumulative tradition” can be helpfully applied to a dynamic religious situation like that of the Koroba Huli, providing we are prepared to do what Cantwell Smith seemed reluctant to do, namely, to put content into the term “faith”. This content has perhaps two aspects: direction and strength (or devotion). That is, faith, seen as allegiance or loyalty to supernatural beings, has direction toward these beings. A “faith shift” is a redirection to alternative beings. “Faith” also increases or decreases in strength of devotion, and the restructuring of faith in the Koroba revival can be seen to be of this latter form, rather than redirecting it.

We are also helped to understand the expressions of that “faith” in the “cumulative tradition” of the dynamic situation of the Koroba Huli. We have seen that, when the “cumulative tradition” becomes, in tension with the “faith” it expresses, unsatisfying, and, as tension mounts, a revitalisation movement, in either its “conversion” or “revival” form, is generated.

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