

Christianity and Culture Change among the Oksapmin of Papua New Guinea

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Declaration

Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is the result of original work carried out by the author.

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Abstract

This is an account of the Oksapmin relationship with Christianity. Through telling it I seek to illuminate three main issues, namely, who the Oksapmin were before they were evangelised, how they were introduced to Christianity, and, thirdly, how they have handled the encounter between the indigenous and Christian religions. While all of these topics are important to the thesis, it is the last that I investigate most rigorously. Through a close examination of various spheres of Oksapmin society and culture, I demonstrate how local people have integrated the two religious systems through a process of what I call fusion. In essence, the Christianity introduced by the mission and the parts of the indigenous religion that survived missionisation have been remade in terms of each other, thereby collapsing difference in the construction of a single composite religion. The indigenous is made to look Christian at the same time that the Christian is made to look indigenous. In so doing the Oksapmin construct historical, ontological, and cosmological unity in the midst of social change. While from the etic anthropological perspective this hybrid situation is the result of fusing two initially separate entities, from the local, emic view there has been no mixing; the current synthesis is treated as a single, fundamental truth and worldview that has always been there. The Oksapmin claim that their traditions and history were really always Christian and also that Christianity in no way fundamentally differs from their indigenous religious schemas and technologies. I set this model of fusion against two opposing anthropological accounts of indigenous Christianity that have recently emerged from the area, one arguing for duality and the other for superposition. In the final instance I show that while these two accounts significantly differ from my own, a careful critique and reappraisal suggests that the difference is principally one of interpretation rather than the result of empirical differences among the three field areas.

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1. Introduction

This thesis is about the encounter and interaction of two religions. The first was that of a Christian mission, namely, the Australian Baptist Missionary Society (ABMS). The other was that of the Oksapmin, a group of people living in the mountainous highlands of West Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea (PNG). The encounter between the two occurred within the context of missionisation, in which the ABMS tried to negate the indigenous Oksapmin religious system and institute Christianity in its place. The missionaries believed that they had successfully achieved this goal. The old ritual houses collapsed, Christian churches were established in nearly every village, and most Oksapmin people were happily calling themselves Christians.

But the Oksapmin already had their own religious beliefs and practices. This is important for two main reasons. One is that the process of missionisation, irrespective of how it was perceived by the ABMS, only partially abolished this existing system. Yes, the cult houses fell into disrepair and eventually vanished but a good deal of Oksapmin religion persisted. The second is that the Oksapmin necessarily understood Christianity in terms of the total suite of beliefs and practices that they already had. Why Christianity was accepted, what parts of it were incorporated, which ideas and actions were valued and which were ignored, and, most importantly, the form of its relationship with those extant dimensions of the indigenous religion, were all decisions negotiated by the Oksapmin with reference to their existing cultural frameworks.

These, then, are the main questions to which this research is addressed. How and why did the Oksapmin incorporate Christianity? Further, how did they manage its encounter with their existing cosmology and rituals? These kinds of analytic concerns are, of course, well known to anthropologists of religion, particularly those looking at the localisation of Christianity across the Pacific and in PNG more specifically. Indeed, the negotiation of the tensions and oppositions, as well as the synergies and convergences, between Christian and indigenous models of religious thought and action has emerged as the defining problematic of this area of enquiry. Efforts by anthropologists to understand and appreciate how indigenous people living throughout the Pacific have negotiated this cultural encounter have produced some highly valuable and interesting scholarship. Scott (2005) has recently explored how the Arosi of Solomon Islands have dealt with what he calls a ‘fundamental contradiction’

between Christian and indigenous ontologies (2005:107). Similarly, Taylor (2010) employs the metaphor of religious ‘crossing’ to conceptualise the dynamic relationship between Anglican Christianity and the cosmology of Sia Raga people in Vanuatu. Joel Robbins, too, in his much lauded monograph *Becoming Sinners* (2004:320) takes as his main object of study the ‘highly fraught moral conflicts between old and new traditions’ among the Urapmin of PNG, something that I will discuss in greater detail below. In essence, these studies and many more that address the topic of indigenous Pacific Christianity all ultimately revolve around the issue of how local people use the cultural resources at their disposal to negotiate the encounter of two different ways of establishing meaning and truth.

This thesis adds to those existing studies both by addressing that issue from another ethnographic setting and by trying to develop a new way of thinking about it. It is my contention that the Oksapmin have handled the encounter of the indigenous and Christian worlds through a process of what I call fusion. I take fusion to mean the ongoing process whereby two initially separate entities are brought together and exchange substance in the creation of a new singular entity. In this thesis I show how through various creative procedures the Oksapmin merge Christianity and the surviving aspects of their indigenous religion. This has been done, I argue, to collapse religious and cosmological difference and in its place to construct commonality and coherence. Through missionisation the Oksapmin were presented with the encounter of two different ways of explaining the universe and life within it. Their answer to that problem has been to bring the two together, to establish commonality between them.

In the thesis I attempt to do justice to both the etic, anthropological perspective presently mentioned, but also the emic, local one. This means that in my own analyses I construe Oksapmin religion as the meeting and interaction of two initially separate entities, but I also show how, from the emic perspective, local people elide such considerations in favour of emphasising a singular, total, and compelling truth and worldview. For many Oksapmin the current religious situation has not been brought about through the processes and mechanisms I describe but has always been there; they claim through their acts and utterances that they have always been Christian and that there has been no historical rupture from one way of rendering sacred truth to another. From this ‘native point of view,’ missionisation has illuminated a Christian essence that was part of Oksapmin culture all along.

My arguments on this score are presaged in the work of other anthropologists. For example, Taylor claims that the Sia Raga posited Christianity ‘as latent or implicit in ancestral religion and sociality, insisting evangelists had merely brought this fact to light’ (2010:432; see also Scott 2007). Among the Catholic Chambri of East Sepik Province, PNG, too, Gewertz and Errington describe a local belief in the ‘essential identity’ (1991:158) and ‘fundamental compatibility between ancestral and Christian ways’ (1991:157), although the claims made by the Chambri in this respect are far more extensive than those advanced by the Oksapmin. Similarly, Reithofer remarks how ‘the ancestral and Christian religious traditions were found compatible and interwoven’ by Somaip Christians living in the Western Highlands Province, PNG (2006:345). In this thesis I highlight the creative nature of this interconnection; the Oksapmin have not simply identified or observed synergies between the two worlds but have skilfully constructed them. Another product of this fusion has been to create a religion composed of elements of both systems. As will be seen, as they are brought together Christianity and indigeneity often mix and produce novel cultural forms. While these anthropologists have identified similar religious convergences, however, their theoretical outlooks are diverse and not always compatible with my own.

At the heart of the process of fusion is the reciprocal transformation of cultural material. What can be seen is the mutual adjustment and transformation of the two systems. On the one hand, the Oksapmin have adapted Christianity to their existing lives by taking what the ABMS revealed to them and making it fit existing indigenous structures of thought and action. On the other hand, however, the existing Oksapmin culture is being modified in such a way as to make it consistent with the Baptist version of Christianity. Another way of putting this is to say that Christianity is being indigenised at the same time that indigeneity is being Christianised. This echoes Rumsey’s observation that cross-cultural articulation in the Highlands region of PNG has often meant ‘not simply to indigenise the exogenous, but also to exogenise the endogenous’ (2006:62). The two religions are being simultaneously remade in terms of each other as part of an overall trajectory toward fusion. As earlier mentioned, for local Oksapmin people this process is not perceived as mixing but rather the gradual revelation of a singular, fundamental truth and worldview.

Syncretism and culture change

Is my theory of fusion a theory of syncretism? In some ways it is and in other ways it is not. In the introduction to their edited volume on the use of the terms syncretism and anti-syncretism within anthropology, Stewart and Shaw (1994) define syncretism as the synthesis of different religious forms. What this means is that material derived from two different religious traditions meet, combine, and interact. Many ethnographic examples that I present and examine in this thesis can thus be called syncretic: church services that have had indigenous elements incorporated into them, traditional myths that have been interspersed with Christian and Biblical content, and so forth. This thesis, then, is an attempted explanation of syncretic religious forms. Moreover, it supports the observation made by Magowon and Gordon (2001:253–254) that

With the current frequency of global traffic among cultures, indigenous adherents of world religions are continually reshaping their religious practices to express new forms of worship. In this highly mobile arena, in which beliefs collide, merge and reproduce, degrees of variation within world religions have increased. Fragmentation and recombination in a myriad of disparate cosmological and theological mosaics are contemporary features of indigenous expressions of world religions.

As stated above, however, the thesis is not simply a description of synthesised cultural products but is also concerned with the identification and explanation of the many and varied processes and mechanisms through which such forms are generated; not only what is fused but the modes of fusion. This is an important distinction orienting my research. For example, Stewart and Shaw (1994:7) argue that:

Simply identifying a ritual or tradition as ‘syncretic’ tells us very little and gets us practically nowhere, since all religions have composite origins and are continually reconstructed through ongoing processes of synthesis and erasure. Thus rather than treating syncretism as a category – an ‘ism’ – we wish to focus upon *processes* of religious synthesis and upon *discourses* of syncretism.

That ‘syncretism’ is often used too descriptively is a concern shared by Robbins (2004). Like Stewart and Shaw, he argues that the metaphors of mixing and syncretism are sometimes flat and there exists a need to move beyond their limitations and ‘develop a theory that both accounts for the causes of [cultural] change and specifies the mechanisms by which it occurs’

(Robbins 2004:5). As I show below, however, the model developed by Robbins, while intended to explain how different religious traditions relate to each other, does not identify any mixing or combination.

How are traditions synthesised and how are such syntheses discussed and rationalised by local people? These issues are right at the core of this thesis. I attempt to contribute to this field of literature by specifying and elucidating a particular process through which syncretic forms, namely those that arose from the meeting of Christianity and indigenous Oksapmin religion, are produced. So, my model can be considered syncretistic in the sense that it examines ethnographic data that shows clear evidence of synthesis, but, following Stewart and Shaw's directive, it moves beyond mere description and offers a demonstration of the mechanisms through which such a situation comes about.

Of the models devised by anthropologists to explain the emergence of complex syncretic cultural situations in the Pacific, the one elaborated by Sahlins (1985) is among the most well-known and influential. To Sahlins, culture change occurs in a variety of ways, sometimes mild, sometimes extreme, but it is always mediated by 'the structure of the conjuncture (1985:xiv). This concept was devised by Sahlins to conceptualise the meeting point of culture and social reality; it is the interface between the structures of human life and their instantiation in the world (1985:144).

For Sahlins, culture is primarily made up of categories (themselves comprising values) and categorical relations. These are the things 'at risk,' so to speak, in any situation of culture change. When the social world conforms to the culture by which that world has been constructed, culture tends to reproduce itself without changing significantly. When the cultural categories encounter novel realities, however, they undergo transformation. This may be change in the content of the categories without a concomitant change in their relations to each other, such as in Sahlins's account of Captain Cook being perceived by native Hawaiians as the god Lono (1985:104–135). In other cases, change is deeper, affecting both the content and the relationships of categories, which Sahlins calls 'structural transformation' (1985:143). It is important to note that each of these kinds of change entail both a reproduction and a transformation of the existing culture. The culture is necessarily utilised to interpret the novel situation and is thereby reproduced, but the accommodation of the new circumstances also forces it to change. Mosko (2001) has demonstrated this process in a recent paper dealing with agency and personhood in the charismatic ritual practices of the

North Mekeo of PNG. He argues that the incorporation of Christianity ‘involves discernible elements of the pre-existing religion’ and also that this reproduction has involved ‘considerable change and transformation’ (2001:271).

My model of fusion incorporates Sahlins’s insights. As I show in the thesis, the novel content of Christianity was made sense of in terms of the existing Oksapmin culture and worldview. Further, the reproduction of this culture also subjected it to significant change in terms of what was being taken on. However, my thesis pushes Sahlins’s model considerably further. The most important way that I do this relates to the role played by the ‘novel circumstances’ with which the existing culture comes into contact, in this case Baptist Christianity. In Sahlins’s approach, considerable weight is given to the ability of culture to reproduce itself under new circumstances. It may require expansion but the culture ultimately continues, framing and informing whatever it encounters. As I show throughout the thesis, but especially in the chapter that deals with missionisation and conversion (Chapter 4), the force with which Christianity was introduced into Oksapmin society overwhelmed and considerably exceeded the ability of the existing culture to reproduce itself and assimilate the new cultural material. Whole and crucial sections of Oksapmin society and culture were wiped out and were therefore not able to be adjusted in ways that accommodated the new religious forms. In this sense, even if Christian rituals are said to resemble former indigenous rituals by local people, it seems misguided to claim that ‘every practical change is also a reproduction’ (Sahlins 1985:144), since the thing that people are comparing to Christianity was actually obliterated. I show in this thesis how contemporary Christianity explicitly does reproduce aspects of indigenous Oksapmin culture, but the point here is that the bias Sahlins imputes to the robustness of culture to reproduce itself under conditions of change is not helpful for my purposes.

The syncretic religious forms that I examine in this thesis, then, are the result of a ‘structure of the conjuncture,’ culture’s meeting with a new reality, but not one that can be adequately conceptualised in terms of assimilation of novel content and expansion or transformation of cultural categories. The change precipitated by missionisation was simply too great for this language to be applicable. The contact between the new and the preexisting resulted in the explosion and disturbance of indigenous culture as much as in its utilisation to assimilate Christianity.

As will be seen, I consequently approach the theorisation of syncretic cultural realities using my own model which incorporates these profound disruptions as well as the distinct mutuality of the interaction between the Christian and indigenous worlds. I draw on many of Sahlins's insights, particularly when it comes to understanding why the Oksapmin converted to Christianity and also the eventual shape and form that the new religion took, but I move outside his framework when examining the widespread changes generated by Christianity.

As well as speaking to the literature on syncretism and culture change, my thesis also contributes to the anthropology of Christianity at three levels: anthropological studies of Christianity globally; those undertaken within the Pacific and Melanesia more specifically; and, lastly, research conducted within the Mountain Ok or Min area, within which the Oksapmin and several other related groups live.

The Anthropology of Christianity

My thesis is part of the growing body of research known as the anthropology of Christianity. While the interests and concerns of contributors to this field are diverse, most take as their central topic how Christianity is made meaningful in particular ethnographic contexts across the world. In many cases, Christianity has been present in the societies studied by anthropologists for as long as their discipline has existed, yet it is interesting to note the considerable time lag involved in the emergence of this area of enquiry, only beginning in the early 1980s. Various possible reasons for this that have been discussed in the literature include: Western Christian fundamentalists have been viewed by anthropologists as a repugnant cultural 'other' (Harding 1991); Christianity has been seen as somehow too redolent of Western society itself and thus not different enough to constitute a worthwhile topic of anthropological study (Robbins 2004:29); and, lastly, that anthropologists have failed to comprehend Christianity as indigenous and rather have treated it as an external imposition leading to cultural loss (Barker 1990, 1992).

By the 1980s, the topic of Christianity was already being discussed by many anthropologists (e.g. Comaroff 1985; Fernandez 1982; Harding 1987; Jolly and Macintyre 1989). But it wasn't until the 1990s that the anthropology of Christianity fully came into its own. At the beginning of that decade a handful of influential books were published that firmly established Christianity as a visible object of study within anthropology. One of these

was *Christianity in Oceania* (1990), a volume edited by John Barker dealing with the indigenisation of Christianity throughout the Pacific region, but mainly focussed on Papua New Guinea. The central thrust of the book is to argue against the treatment of Christianity as ‘something less than cultural’ (Robbins 2004:30), that is, not as a really significant component of indigenous social life, and to appreciate and understand its centrality to people across the region. A year later, Jean and John Comaroff published their richly detailed study of the encounter between the London Missionary Society (LMS) and the Tswana of South Africa, entitled *Of Revelation and Revolution* (1991). Their account of the Tswana engagement with Christianity is deeply politicised, emphasising the mission’s oppressive nature and how the Tswana were compelled, albeit unsuccessfully, to resist it. Then, in 1994, Burt’s *Tradition and Christianity* (1994) appeared, a richly detailed appraisal of the intense, dynamic yet often fraught relationship between ancestral custom, colonialism and Christianity among the Kwara’ae of the Solomon Islands

Continuing refinement of and interest in anthropological studies of Christianity over subsequent years have seen this field of research flourish to the point where it now occupies an important place on the disciplinary agenda (Cannell 2006). Several recent publications that have helped importantly to define the shape of this burgeoning corpus have been provided by Robbins (2004), Cannell (2006), Engelke (2007), Engelke and Tomlinson (2006), and Keane (2007). It is of interest to note that the Pacific, and Melanesia more specifically, has proved a particularly fertile ground for the anthropological study of Christianity. While Robbins (2004:34) contended a few years ago that because of a lack of full length monographs the study of Christianity in Melanesia had ‘not yet arrived,’ now it definitely has. To Robbins’s path breaking effort has been added monographs from Jebens (2005), Reithofer (2006), Scott (2007) and Tomlinson (2009). Jebens’s *Pathways to Heaven* (2005), the original version of which was published in German in 1995, examines the conflict and competition that has taken place between the Catholic and Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Churches, which he respectively characterises as mainline and fundamentalist Christianities, among the Pairundu of Southern Highlands Province, PNG. Reithofer (2006:261) notes how the Somaip have developed a ‘strong and pervasive perception of a great divide separating the pre-Christian past from the Christian present’ and that they ‘overwhelmingly claim to have turned their backs on, and left behind, that ancestral past and entered a new, modern era.’ Notwithstanding this local discourse of radical change, Reithofer (2006:270) observes how local people have constructed various ‘symbolic bridges between the ancestral past and the

Christian present' across the realms of cosmology, sacred geography, and eschatology (2006:261–330). Scott has approached the indigenisation of Christianity among the Arosi of Solomon Islands primarily from the perspective of competing ontologies (2007). In *The Severed Snake* he considers how local people negotiate the 'difference between the human mono-ontology inscribed in the Bible and the poly-ontology inscribed in the socio-spatial order they idealise and aspire to as customary' (2007:301). The solutions devised to this problem are manifold, but it is of interest for me that one entails the establishment of congruence between the ancestral and Christian cosmologies. Tomlinson examines what he calls the 'metaculture' of Fijian Christianity (2009a), and describes a situation 'wherein Christianity creates irresolvable tensions while holding out the promise of recuperation' (2009:15; see also Tomlinson 2004, 2009b).

In addition to these books there have been many insightful articles about local Christianity across the Pacific. Scott (2005) has underlined an Arosi concern to understand who they were 'in relation to God before they became Christians and where they belong in God's plan for humanity' (2005:102), a concern very much shared by the Oksapmin. McDougall too has offered interesting insights into the Christian beliefs and practices of people living in the Western Solomons (2009). Taylor's work among the Sia Raga of Vanuatu (2010, 2008) examines the ways in which local people have managed and reconciled the co-existence of opposing ontologies. Several of his insights are of relevance to my own research and shall be discussed further in the thesis.

Of the regions mentioned above, Papua New Guinea has received perhaps the most attention from anthropologists studying Christianity. At the forefront of this group is Joel Robbins, who worked among the Urapmin, neighbours of the Oksapmin. I will deal with his work in more detail below when dealing with the literature on the Mountain Ok/Min culture area. John Barker's work among the Maisin of Oro Province (1990, 1992, 1993) in many ways opened the door for anthropologists to study Christianity in PNG and as noted above was among the vanguard of anthropological studies of Christianity more generally. Other noteworthy studies of Christianity in PNG have been made by Eric Hirsch (1994, 2008) among the Fuyuge of Central Province. Like many of the authors already mentioned, Hirsch presents a picture of the Fuyuge wrestling with the encounter of two distinct cosmologies. In particular he shows how they struggle to reconcile the presence of the Christian God with the indigenous Tidibe, who is described as 'a creative force that 'laid down' the ways of the Fuyuge,' in essence a kind of cosmogonic actor (2008:146). Richard Eves, too, has

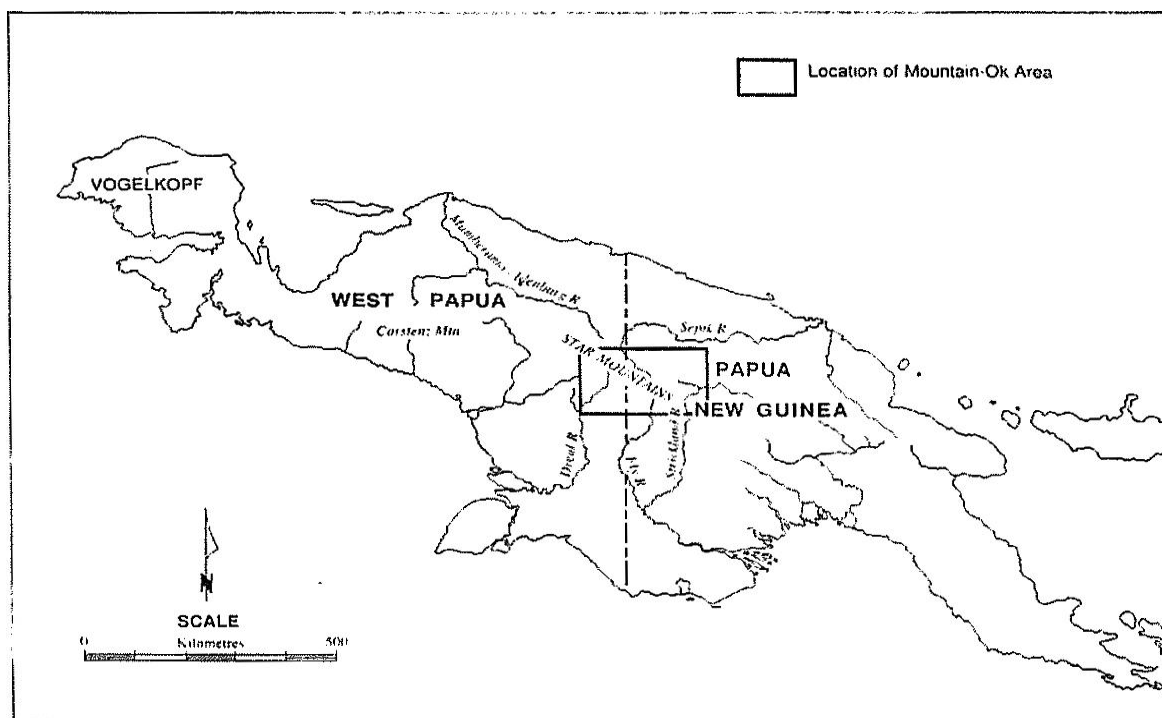
undertaken some interesting work among the Lelet of New Ireland (2010, 2000). In a recent article he shows how the establishment of Christianity has unsettled and transformed existing bodily techniques, most importantly the gendered aspect of dancing (2010). Whereas before the Lelet danced for various traditional occasions now they are ‘dancing for Jesus’ (2010:12). The Jebens (2005) and Reithofer (2006) monographs discussed above are also important contributions to the study of Christianity in PNG.

These are just some of the many books, articles, and chapters that have been written on the subject of Christianity in Melanesian societies and indicate the rich and varied character of this expanding field of literature. As a study of the incorporation of Christianity into Oksapmin society my thesis will directly contribute to this corpus of work.

The view from Mountain Ok

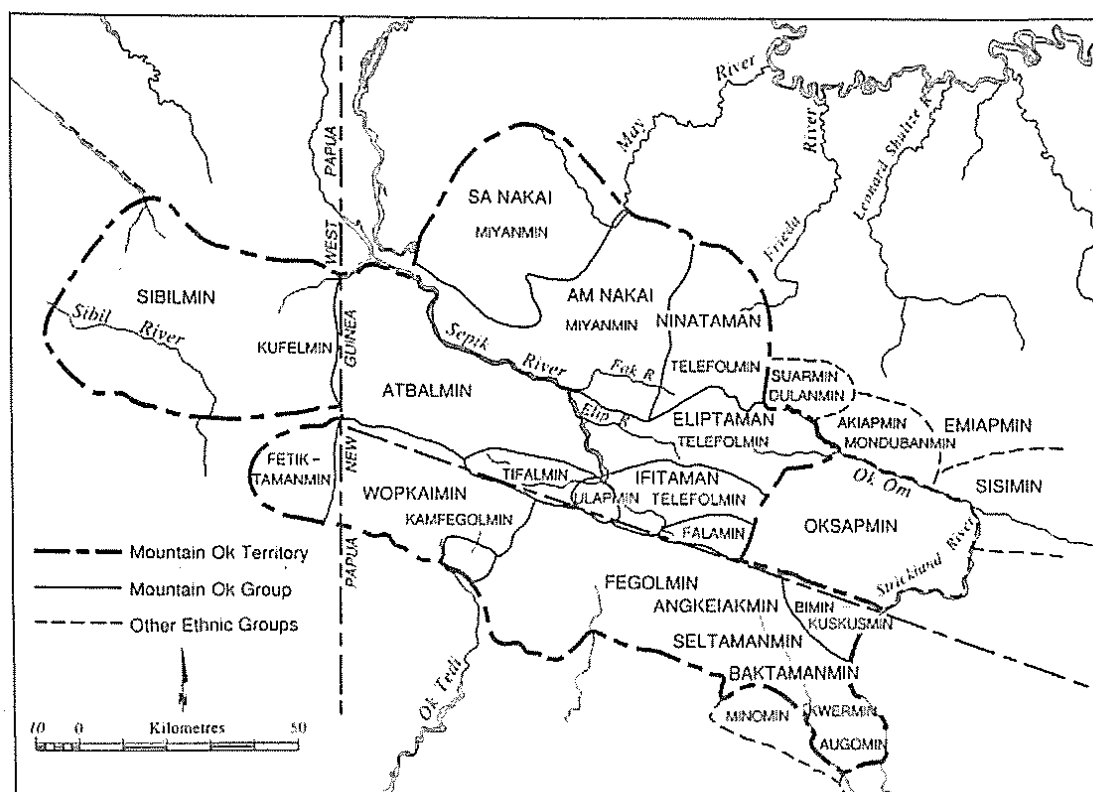
Especially relevant to my work are the studies that have been conducted on Christianity among the Min or Mountain Ok peoples to which the Oksapmin belong. It is to this specific field of literature, and a certain theoretical tension in these texts, that my study is directly aimed. The Mountain Ok area, so called by Healey (1964), contains several linguistically, culturally, and materially interrelated ethnic groups whose names all share the *-min* suffix, which is a Telefol designation and serves also to indicate that group’s regional political dominance over the past couple of generations (see Map 1 and Map 2 following page).¹ Anthropologists started working among the Min from the late 1960s onwards, subsequently producing several detailed accounts of traditional religious life, particularly the graded men’s initiation cult. Among the groups studied were the Baktaman (Barth 1975, 1987), Tifalmin (Wheatcroft 1975), Bimin-Kuskusmin (Poole 1976), Wopkaimin (Hyndman 1979), Mianmin (Gardner 1981; Morren 1986), Telefolmin (Jorgensen 1981a), and the Oksapmin (Perey 1973). While Christianity was already visible and influential in many, if not all, of the societies these anthropologists studied, trends within the discipline dictated that endogenous institutions receive ethnographic preference over any imposed ‘from the outside.’ As Douglas has stated (2001:617) these works are ‘rich and evocative but tend to essentialize exotic, “traditional” ritual complexes, especially men’s cults.’ Furthermore, they ‘routinely elide or

¹ Throughout this thesis, words in the Oksapmin language are italicized and ones in Tok Pisin are underlined.



Map 1. Mountain Ok/Min area within Papua New Guinea

(taken from Craig and Hyndman 1990:211. Drawn by Aub Chandica. Used with permission)



Map 2. Oksapmin and neighbouring Min groups

(taken from Craig and Hyndman 1990:211. Drawn by Aub Chandica. Used with permission)

play down...both history and colonialism and with them the less dramatic, mobile religious practices and agency of the expanding legion of Melanesians who called themselves Christians but whose appropriated Christianity was ignored or dismissed by most anthropologists as an externally imposed veneer.’

In the wake of Barker’s seminal *Christianity in Oceania* (1990), however, Christianity was established as a viable topic of anthropological study. Although most anthropologists of the Min remained committed to the study of ‘traditional’ cultural forms, several followed this shift and began to include Christianity within the scope of their research. The uptake was slow but by the late 1990s and early 2000s anthropologists working in the area began to publish their findings. Understandably, much of this work focussed on the emergence and consequences of a charismatic revival movement that swept through the Min area in the late 1970s (Jorgensen 1996; Lohmann 2000a; Robbins 2004). Although the ABMS had been established in the area since the early 1950s, many Min groups had only a tenuous relationship with Christianity, owing either to circumspection (Jorgensen 1981b), physical isolation (Lohmann 2000a), or socio-religious marginalisation (Robbins 2004). The revival movement, spearheaded by a Telefolmin man Diyos Wapnok, catalysed popular conversion among almost all of these previously distanced groups and acted to entrench Christianity within society at the same time as it precipitated the fervent destruction of indigenous ritual paraphernalia, procedures, and structures (Lohmann 2007b). Since the revival was less pronounced among the Oksapmin and conversion occurred there several years before the movement appeared, it does not constitute the focus of my work. However, like the authors noted above, I share an overarching concern with what happened to the indigenous people of the Min area as a result of incorporating Christianity into their lives.

The Min groups that been included in studies of Christianity include the Telefolmin (Jorgensen 1981b, 1996, 2005, 2007), the Asabano or Duranmin (Lohmann 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2010a), the Urapmin (Robbins 1995, 1998, 2001, 2004), as well as the Oksapmin (Brutti 1997, 1999, 2000). The authors of each of those studies have approached the topic of indigenous Christianity in a different way. Some have positioned it centrally in their work, others peripherally; some have considered how Christianity operates in particular spheres of social life while others have systematically theorised its interaction with indigenous cosmology on a more general level.

Dan Jorgensen was among the first generation of anthropologists to study social life in the Min area, focussing his attention on the Telefolmin religious system (1981a). Later in

his career, though, he has begun to consider the role of Christianity in Telefolmin social life. In two early articles (1981b, 1996) Jorgensen considers Christianity within a broader history of social change within the region but more recently he has considered the said revival movement (2007), third wave evangelism (2005), as well as the genealogy of myth as shaped through contact with Christianity (2001). The first of these demonstrates how ‘the appearance of the Holy Spirit in Rebaibal innovated upon pre-existing ideas,’ namely, patterns of hysteria and mediumship, ‘by specifically manifesting the active intervention of God in one’s life’ (2007:127). Jorgensen also notes how the movement was innovative in establishing female leaders, known as spirit meri, as ‘midwives to a new morality in an active search for new ways of being’ (2007:129). Jorgensen’s other article also deals with the effects of charismatic Christianity on Telefolmin society, but this time a subsequent ‘third wave’ evangelical movement named Operation Joshua. Its American leader argued that ‘if the people of Telefip [the principal Telefolmin village] wanted material development, spiritual development had to come first, and he maintained that development in Telefip had been blocked by Satan’s power operating through traditional spirits. This power had first to be broken before other benefits could be realised’ (2005:452). This was achieved through an apparatus of ‘spiritual warfare.’ Another very interesting article (2001) explores the creation and revision of myth in response to various incursions into the Telefolmin social world by colonial and mission influences. This article contains an analysis of how components of the indigenous mythic corpus were generated and transformed through local people’s encounter with Baptist Christianity, but I save a detailed discussion of these findings for my own chapter dealing with the same topic (Chapter 7: Stories, People, and Places)

Among the main traditional enemies of the Telefolmin are the Asabano, referred to by the Telefolmin as the Duranmin, who live over a mountain range separating them from the Telefol speaking people living in the Eliptamin Valley. As with other Min groups, until the mid-1970s the Asabano ‘were familiar with the existence of missions, but were unclear of the content of their message’ (Lohmann 2000a:190). The establishment of the Sepik Baptist College by Diyos at Duranmin in 1974 and the subsequent revival three years later, however, produced what Lohmann calls the ‘sudden and complete Asabano conversion to Christianity’ (2000b:97). Lohmann’s analysis of Christianity in Asabano society has centred around the concept of cultural reception, that is, how local people there evaluated what the missionary (Diyos) told them and how they assigned it truth-value. In various articles, Lohmann has considered the impact of the revival upon gender roles and traditional performance techniques (2007a), as well as Asabano relationships with, and understandings of, the

deceased (2005). He has also reflected upon the central role played by dreams in the conversion of the Asabano, stating that: 'In Asabano thinking, dream encounters with the angels, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and God provide direct evidence for the existence and power of these supernatural beings' (2005:77). As he states (2005:76), for the Asabano 'seeing is believing.' Lohmann's fullest consideration of the influence of Christianity upon the Asabano appears in his Ph.D thesis (2000a:182–269). There he provides an excellent, richly detailed description of Asabano conversion to Christianity, highlighting the role played by Diyos and his wife Mandi in instituting charismatic worship. He then moves to discuss contemporary Asabano religion within the spheres of mythology; church services; magic, prayer, and offering; religious experience; and cosmology more generally.

Lohmann's thesis reveals many different kinds of relationship between indigenous and Christian material. In the sphere of myth, Lohmann describes (2000a:239) a 'layering of mythology' that includes both 'matching' and 'mixing' (2000a:242–243) of indigenous and Christian stories. In church it seems the Asabano adhere closely to mission Christianity but have injected their own 'millenarian' and 'cargoistic' elements (2000a:251). Magic, prayer, and offering are all 'technologies of the sacred' (2000a:258) that co-exist in Asabano society, with prayer the most prominent. Witchcraft has persisted very strongly despite conversion to Christianity but is now under the new management of Satan (2000a:266–268). On the cosmological level, which presumably includes all of the previous categories, Lohmann claims that 'the traditional cosmology has not been abandoned and replaced with Christian cosmology. Rather, it has been couched within what Asabano understand to be the broader, deeper, universal truth of Christianity' (2000a:230). In particular, local people find most compelling the 'exotic notion that the universe is a unity under God, and that Christianity is ultimately and absolutely "true"' (2000a:230).

From the above it can be seen that Lohmann's main aim is to describe the changes that have taken place in Asabano society and locate them within a broader context of historical change and cultural reception. His study of the relationship between the Christian and indigenous religious systems has been primarily in terms of evidential experiences, including how indigenous dream theories that attribute reality to dream images have influenced conversion by providing apparent evidence for Christian beliefs (see also Lohmann 2000b, 2010a). The closest he comes to theorising the systemic relationship between the two is through saying that 'the cosmological-mythological corpus, while providing a sense of stability, is continually subject to elaboration and transformation through the introduction of new ideas' (2000a:285). Taken together with the statement above, then, it

can be seen that the Asabano possess a very flexible attitude toward cosmological innovation and that as a result of this approach they have incorporated Christianity into their society and integrated it in a variety of ways with existing Asabano religion (see also Lohmann 2003b for a description of his theory of religion and the supernatural more generally). However, the tone of Lohmann's work both in the thesis and more generally underscores his perception of a 'profound rupture and restructuring' (2000a:231) of the traditional Asabano religion. While he describes the persistence of certain indigenous forms and their being 'couched' within Christianity, the reader is left with an impression of cultural deterioration as a direct result of colonial and mission influence. This sense of moving from one religious epoch to the next by means of denouncing indigenous cultural forms was something indelibly etched on the minds of both local Asabano people as well as Lohmann.

More systematic attempts to theorise the relationship of indigenous and Christian religion can be found in the work of Brutti and Robbins and it is these authors, particularly a divergence in their respective explanations of indigenous Christianity, to which my work directly speaks. First there is Robbins, whose research focussed on the way in which the Urapmin, another Min group living west of Oksapmin, have engaged with Christianity. Robbins claims that the Urapmin have 'adopted' Christianity into their society without mixing it with, or interpreting it in terms of, their existing cultural framework (2004): it constitutes a religious rupture. The relationship between the Christian and indigenous religions, therefore, is not syncretic but rather one of 'unsynthesised duality' (2004:332) meaning that the two systems co-exist side by side without exchanging substance. The two systems are said to clash, most pointedly in the realm of morality and ethics; Christian morality is premised on lawfulness while Urapmin morality is based on wilfulness and the two constantly work against each other. As Robbins puts it (2004:225–226), 'the Urapmin now construct themselves as ethical subjects under a Christian moral system that condemns the will while at the same time they continue to live in a world that demands they create their social life through wilful action.' The relationship of cosmological and moral duality troubles the Urapmin in everyday life. Despite their efforts to bring the contradictions under control through charismatic ritual technologies (2004:253–289), the Urapmin are 'mired in conflict' and trapped in an existence 'fraught with a sense of moral failure' (2004:333).

This view of the Urapmin differs greatly from the one I have formed of the Oksapmin, namely, that they have fused their existing indigenous religion with the imported Christian one. The disparity becomes even greater when we consider that Robbins argues not only that the two were not in any way integrated but, in fact, that they cannot be, since 'the logics of

the two cultures contradict each other and repel synthesis in predictable ways' (2004:332). In this thesis I argue that while there may be tensions and incompatibilities between Christian and indigenous religion, these can and are overcome through the creative manoeuvres of local people. It is a broader aim of mine to interrogate to what extent this difference is the result of either (a) empirical difference produced by historical and ethnographic variation or (b) theoretical difference produced by emphases and biases in explanation.

A quite different view from either Robbins's or mine is taken by Lorenzo Brutti, whose work focuses on the Oksapmin, though a group living in the Trangap Valley, a three or four hour walk from the Tekin Valley where I was based and the site of the ABMS mission. Rather than argue for duality as does Robbins, he instead claims that the Oksapmin case is one of 'ecocosmological superposition' (1997:109). As with Robbins, Brutti argues that the relationship between the indigenous Oksapmin and Christian religions is not syncretic (1997:113). However, he differs from Robbins in terms of how he characterises the relationship between the indigenous and Christian realms. Brutti views the incorporation of Christianity as the latest in a series of cosmological adjustments made by the Oksapmin to marshal flows of material wealth. He claims that just as the Oksapmin changed their religious system in response to the 'Ipomoean revolution' (the introduction of the sweet potato) (1997:101; see also Bayliss-Smith 1985), so too have they converted to Christianity in order to gain access to the material wealth of the missionaries. As he states (1997:109): 'The important thing in the process of conversion of Oksapmin people to Christianity was the "thing" in the strict sense of the term and not the idea, the tangible good and not the theoretical inspiration, the pragmatic exigency and not the metaphysical adherence.' What we have is thus a succession of changing frames of reference underneath which thrives an indigenous religious logic promoting observable increase in the natural and human environment. Brutti puts it as follows: 'Consequently, to each of these main dramatic cultural and economic transformations, the Oksapmin society has found a cultural response to integrate change in the frame of its original cosmology – sometimes by denying it, sometimes by restoring it, always through a plastic operation of redefinition of cultural models and cosmological explanations' (2000:109).

This thesis supports much of what Brutti has to say. I show how the Oksapmin living in one area in the Tekin Valley also maintain certain of their indigenous religious motivations and impulses within their contemporary Christian worship. But while this is the case, my work seeks to build upon Brutti's through showing, firstly, the mutuality of the relationship between Christianity and indigenous Oksapmin religion. Brutti is right when he says that

Christianity has been incorporated into an existing cosmological frame, but my work expands upon that insight to show the exchange and interaction that has taken place between the two systems, not only showing how Christianity has been moulded around existing outlooks and logics. I also build upon his rather utilitarian account of conversion to Christianity. While surely the acquisition of material gains was important for the Oksapmin, their conversion to Christianity cannot be reduced to a 'millenaristic collective illusion' (1997:109). Indeed I show how, for the people among whom I lived, conversion was a total process shaped by an indigenous worldview, the spiritual and material components of which are not discrete but thoroughly interwoven. To consider the material independently of the spiritual, as Brutti does, is problematic, and I seek to provide a more rounded account of this religious transformation.

From this consideration of Robbins and Brutti we can draw a set of clear dimensions of contrast on which to position my study. I argue against Robbins's claim that there has been no mixing of Christianity with indigenous Urapmin culture and religion and that local people therefore live torn between two opposed moralities and ontologies. I do this not only on the basis of the obvious divergence in our respective theoretical approaches but, more importantly, by questioning the extent to which his model conforms to the ethnographic reality it purports to explain. Furthermore, my work expands on that of Brutti first by showing the interactive, mutualistic relationship between Oksapmin and Christian religion and second by drawing attention to the imaginative, conceptual dimensions of local people's engagement with Christianity as well as its material aspects. Again, as with Robbins, my main point is not that my theoretical position is more intellectually sophisticated but only that it can help to explain the ethnographic facts of both cases, even though they are historically and ethnographically different from my own, in a more illuminating and accurate manner. Between the arguments of duality and superposition I offer as a middle ground my own concept of fusion, a creative process of mutually adapting and transforming the Christian and indigenous worlds in the formation of a single, composite religion. In so doing, I argue, the Oksapmin have averted the kind of existential crises faced by the Urapmin and secured ontological and moral stability in the face of considerable social change.

Structure of the thesis

The structure of the thesis generally reflects the chronology of the Oksapmin engagement with Christianity. In the next chapter (Chapter 2: The Oksapmin) I provide a broad overview of the Oksapmin people and also how I came to live and work among them. Following that I describe Oksapmin society at the time it came into contact with colonial and mission influence in the early 1960s (Chapter 3: Traditional Oksapmin Culture and Society). I provide an overview of social organisation, economics, and politics before giving a detailed account of traditional Oksapmin religion. This is used as a benchmark against which to assess and understand later transformations in the Oksapmin world. After that I describe the evangelisation and subsequent conversion of the Oksapmin by the Australian Baptist Missionary Society (ABMS) (Chapter 4: Oksapmin Conversion to Christianity). In that chapter I do three main things. First I give a background of the evangelisation of the Oksapmin by the ABMS and highlight key junctures in the history of conversion. Second, I explain the reasons why I think the Oksapmin made the decision to convert to Christianity, arguing that the incorporation of Christianity can only be understood in relation to the existing Oksapmin culture and society. The third aspect of that chapter is to outline what impacts the ABMS produced on the Oksapmin way of life. Yes, the Oksapmin had converted, but how did the texture of their lives change?

The remainder of the thesis considers how the Oksapmin have fused parts of the indigenous and Christian religions. I show how fusion has occurred across a range of contexts, which I treat in separate chapters. First I investigate contemporary Oksapmin Christianity (Chapter 5: Contemporary Oksapmin Christianity) and demonstrate the reciprocal transformations that have played out within church services, private worship, and collective religious excursions known locally as ‘retreats.’ Throughout this chapter I illustrate how the indigenous world simultaneously accommodates and is remade by the Christianity introduced by the ABMS. I then move on to show how these kinds of two way cultural exchanges and modifications have played out in the Oksapmin spirit world (Chapter 6: Souls, Spirits, and Witches). In particular, I describe how the process of fusion has operated in the contexts of beliefs in death and the afterlife; nature spirits; and those relating to witchcraft. I conduct a similar analysis in the subsequent chapter on Oksapmin myth (Chapter 7: Stories, People, and Places). There I take two of the main stories within the Oksapmin mythological corpus and demonstrate the ways they have been creatively reconfigured by the Oksapmin so as to render them consistent with Christian cosmology, thereby effectively uniting the two

systems within a single cultural frame. I then conclude the thesis with some remarks about its significance to cultural and social anthropology and how it has contributed to furthering understandings of indigenous Christianity in this part of the world.

2. The Oksapmin

This chapter is primarily concerned to describe the Oksapmin people: their society, their economy, their history. But before doing that I would like to offer a reflexive account of the conditions of my research and fieldwork. Here I would like to cover, firstly, how I became interested in the topic of indigenous Christianity and how I chose the Oksapmin as a group among which to investigate it. I would also like to describe the practical conditions of my fieldwork, including my arrival and departure from the field, my living situation while there, as well as how I went about collecting and analysing data.

Finding a topic, finding a fieldsite

Deciding to research indigenous Christianity among the Oksapmin living in the Tekin Valley was fairly straightforward. Throughout my undergraduate and postgraduate university career at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand, I had developed a strong theoretical interest in ritual and religion, inspired mainly by the outstanding work of Rappaport (1999) and Turner (1957) both of whom were introduced to me by Patrick McAllister. At the same time I was also beginning to develop an interest in both Melanesia and sub-Saharan Africa as places within which to carry out ethnographic fieldwork, a curiosity piqued mainly by the colourful illustrations and films shown throughout my undergraduate career.

My theoretical interests I had managed to partially satisfy through an honours research project into the return and reburial of an unknown World War One soldier, performed in the nation's capital, Wellington, in 2004. But still I had yet to conduct the kind of deep research into religion that I really hoped for. My ethnographic interests I had been fortunate enough to half fulfil by conducting fieldwork for four months in eastern Nigeria as part of my Masters research. However, the theme of this research concerned the social effects of biodiversity conservation upon indigenous peoples, which, while interesting in its own right, did not truly satisfy me as an anthropologist. By the end of my Masters degree I had already strongly committed in my own mind to undertaking doctoral research. Turning towards this goal I thus had two academic interests only incompletely satisfied: full length research into religion and field research in Melanesia.

The conceptualisation of my PhD was determined by these objectives. I had an abiding interest in religion and also wished to work in Melanesia, ideally within Papua New Guinea. It should also be noted that at this time I felt personally ready to leave the shores of New Zealand and experience living and studying elsewhere in the world. The most logical step was to move to Australia. Since a few University of Canterbury students before me had made a similar move to the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra, I decided to investigate such an avenue. I subsequently made contact with the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (RSPAS), since absorbed within the School of Culture, History, and Languages (SCHL) in the ANU College of Asia and the Pacific (CAP), and sought out researchers with similar theoretical and ethnographic interests as my own who might be interested in helping me to formulate a research proposal. Alan Rumsey was the faculty member that showed the greatest interest in my ideas and decided to support my application to the university.

Early on in our correspondence it was decided that it would be feasible to undertake research on religion in Papua New Guinea. Alan suggested to me that, since it was a burgeoning and interesting topic, I should consider indigenous Christianity as the particular religious expression I would investigate. This sounded fine to me and I assented. In terms of ethnographic focus, Alan allowed me considerable autonomy. Not knowing Papua New Guinea at all, I inevitably returned the enquiry back onto him, seeking his advice as to where might be a suitable location to carry out my research. He told me of the research of Robyn Loughnane, a linguist based at the University of Melbourne who had undertaken her field research among the Oksapmin and who had lived at the Tekin Station (Loughnane 2007; Loughnane and Fedden 2011). After consulting her, Alan was told that this same locale would be an appropriate location for my own field research, since the people were strongly Christian and also very hospitable. Alan presented this option to me and, because it sounded quite promising and exciting, I agreed.

The topic and location of my research now settled, it was time to construct a research proposal as part of my application to the university. At the time I was very interested in the performative analyses of Turner (1986), Schechner (1990), Schieffelin (1985, 1998), and others, as a means of understanding cultures. I was greatly attracted to these approaches since they argued that in order to understand how a culture works one must train attention upon the point at which it is performatively manifested as social reality; one must focus on the expressive interface where culture actually meets the world. Religions are constituted

crucially through their rituals and performances, so I thought this would be a good lens through which to investigate Christianity among the Oksapmin, consequently constructing my research proposal around these perspectives and ideas.

After being accepted to the university and relocating to Canberra, I began my research in earnest. The structure of the anthropology PhD was a neat tripartite one whose simplicity appealed to me: a year of reading and preparation; another year or so of ethnographic fieldwork; and then hopefully no longer than two years of writing up the thesis. The first year entailed a rigorous grounding in anthropological theory, both generally and in religion more specifically, as well as extensive reading on my own topic. Towards the end of the year I had to give increasing thought to the organisation of my fieldwork.

The methodology I configured was centred on the observation, recording, and analysis of church services, since I assumed these events would be the cultural nodes where Oksapmin Christianity would be most vividly condensed. As well as examining how Christianity was constituted in organised, framed performances, I would also consider how it was expressively manifested in the flow of everyday life, in how people spoke, moved, dressed, and so forth, in their quotidian activity. To gain the people's own perspectives on what they did and the influence of Christianity upon their lives both historically and in the present, I would conduct semi-structured interviews on relevant topics. With this well rounded approach in mind, I set out to Papua New Guinea in December 2008.

Entering Oksapmin

It was my aim to notify the Oksapmin people several months in advance of my intention to live and work among them for 12 months. But due both to their remoteness and also certain bureaucratic difficulties, I was unable to contact them prior to my arrival in the country. They thus regrettably had no forewarning of my forthcoming visit.

After staying in Port Moresby a couple of nights arranging logistics, I then flew up to Tabubil, the township of the Ok Tedi Mine. From here I had hoped to take a direct Missionary Aviation Fellowship (MAF) flight on a Twin Otter aircraft directly to Oksapmin but the best they could manage on this particular day was to get me as far as Telefomin, where the two pilots were based. Due to bad weather the plane couldn't fly the next day so I was forced to stay an extra night at the Baptist Mission guest house. The next day was

sufficiently clear and we set off early for Oksapmin Station, in the Trangap Valley, a few hours walk from Tekin. Curious passengers enquired as to where I was going and, upon learning of my intention to travel to Tekin, immediately volunteered their services as carriers once we landed. Flying over the Victor Emmanuel Range from Telefomon over Feranmin and the intervening mountains toward Oksapmin was truly spectacular. Green valleys and exposed peaks rose and fell in such dramatic, steep forms, and the air, sunlight, and colours all seemed particularly clear and vibrant. As the little Twin Otter made its final turns into the Trangap Valley, the reality and immediacy of the situation dawned upon me. This was it; after many months of careful preparation and study, I was about to finally commence my fieldwork.

The plane touched down on the rough grass airstrip at the Oksapmin Station and we disembarked. As I alighted from the small plane I had a quick exchange with one of the pilots. After learning of my anthropological objectives he offered a small piece of advice, which could easily have come from Levi-Strauss himself: ‘if you want to understand the people you have to understand how they think.’ With this nugget of wisdom safely stored, I went to collect my bags. Waiting at the small wooden building where our bags had been deposited were a couple of my travelling companions who wished to accompany me on the walk up to the Tekin Valley. My Tok Pisin at this time was still very rudimentary and I knew nothing of the local language, so communication was sparse, yet nonetheless cordial. For several hours we walked the meandering track in the hot sunshine. My bags were not light either, which made the trek even more arduous for me, but not so much for my friends who were well used to making such journeys. All I knew and all I told them was that I wanted to go to Tekin.

Later in the afternoon we arrived at the station, the site of a health centre, community radio station, church, elementary, primary and high schools, as well as several residential buildings built by the missionaries in the 1960s and 1970s. I was led up to ‘the brown house’ (all of the houses were simply named by their respective colour) and shown inside by Pastor Dasiel, one of the senior figures in the local Baptist administration and caretaker of the mission’s buildings. He informed me of the rate, which I blindly agreed upon, simply needing a place to rest and get my bearings. That night a few of the local lads hanging around the radio station casually wandered over to greet their new and, to them, exotic visitor. They proved remarkably friendly and for several hours we chatted and smoked, the defining social pastimes of Oksapmin men. I explained to them how I wanted to find a community in the

Tekin area where I could live for a year and carry out my fieldwork. One of the group, Benny Mahpul, a very friendly and jovial chap, volunteered to show me around a few of the nearby hamlets and villages. I had no idea at that time that this would be the start of a great friendship between the two of us.

Over the next few days, Benny and I travelled around several communities within an hour radius of the station, allowing me the opportunity to assess these places suitability for my fieldwork, but also to meet some locals and inform them of who I was and what I was doing in the area. After the first couple of days I wasn't really satisfied that I had found a place where I felt I would be comfortable living for a whole year. Either the accommodation I didn't think would be adequate or I just generally didn't feel like 'this was the place' I envisaged myself living. Then, when I had almost decided to settle on one of the communities already visited, one cool morning I strolled with Benny into the community of Sambate, a small cluster of hamlets in the lower Tekin Valley about 30mins walk from the station. But not only Sambate; actually right into the hamlet where Benny's immediate patrilineal kin lived. It was in this hamlet that a small house had been lying vacant for some while and was available for me to rent should I wish (see Figure 1, following page). From the hamlet could be seen the Tekin River and the gardens through which it meandered, a very pleasing perspective. To me also the place just 'felt right,' whatever factors had combined to produce this feeling. So based on these positive inklings alone I told Benny I would like to stay here, to which he agreed. It was only after I had made the decision that I learned Benny's family lived there too, which came as quite a surprise!

Once the house had been cleaned and a bed made inside, I moved in. I managed to find a desk to work on too, which was a real bonus. I met with Benny shortly thereafter and we came to some arrangements regarding certain domestic duties that I would require during my stay, such as laundry, cooking, the collection of firewood, and so forth. I would pay Benny's wife, Joanna, and his brother, Andrew, to perform these tasks, and Benny would help out wherever he could. This seemed mutually beneficial, since Joanna and Andrew would get money that they desired by not working much harder than they already did, while I would have my time freed from conducting these tasks to focus exclusively on my fieldwork. This arrangement worked effectively and without any problem for the entirety of my stay in Sambate.



Figure 1. The anthropologist's house, Sambate.

Fieldwork among the Oksapmin

My living arrangements now settled, I could get on with the business of doing ethnography. The best way for me to start acquiring information about the influence of Christianity in Oksapmin society as well as to introduce myself to the community, was through attending church services. The many introductions to the congregation over several weeks did prove slightly embarrassing but were a necessary and very beneficial part of the process. As a result, my name, face, identity, and purpose became known, and there were other positive consequences such as people bringing garden produce to my house as a means of greeting and welcoming me to the area.

I continued going to church services very regularly for the entire year I was there. I alternated between all of the denominations in the area and tried to attend services during the week if I could. Once I became familiar with the people of Sambate I decided I would start doing interviews to gain more personal perspectives on how Christianity operated in their lives as well as to explore other topics of relevance to my research. Since English was almost

non-existent and many people, usually elderly, had only a cursory grasp of Tok Pisin, it would be necessary to employ an assistant to facilitate interviews. They could also act as a crucial sounding board for my own nascent theories and analyses of Oksapmin life. While many young men volunteered for the position, I thought it would be advisable to select an older individual, since their knowledge would be more extensive and they would be more reliable. So I chose John Manden, a former local councillor from the small community of Mangede, just down the road from Sambate.

Over the course of the year I interviewed around 30 different individuals on a wide range of topics. Due to my mentioned linguistic limitations, interviews were conducted either by myself in Tok Pisin or with John's assistance in Tok Peles (*Oksap meng*).² A significant proportion of the interviews were conducted with individuals actively involved in church life: pastors, deacons, youth leaders, women's leaders, and even simply committed Christians. But it was also important that I canvass the opinion of those whose relationship to the church was more distant, so I also ended up recording some conversations usually with groups of young men and women about the reasons why they cared less or differently about the role of Christianity in the community. Of course not all of my interviews were about Christianity. I often recorded individuals narrating myths and traditional anecdotes and also conducted protracted interviews about aspects of indigenous history and culture such as initiation, witchcraft and so forth.

As well as going to church and doing interviews, I was also concerned to discover how Christianity influenced and interacted with indigeneity in everyday life. This entailed remaining vigilant whenever out and about as to how religion was shaping people's regular activities. Perhaps before sleeping a family would sing Christian songs together; a sick man's wife might ask a pastor to come and pray for him; a village court case might be tacitly framed in terms of tradition against Christianity; when hunting or crossing a dangerous river men may combine age old incantations with Christian prayer; or people might privately express suspicions that pastors were, in fact, witches in disguise. These kinds of acts and utterances all had to be recorded and scrutinised for their cultural significance.

But sometimes it was nice to not think about work and to simply move through the society as a normal person, even though I may be a foreigner. Going to the market, playing

² Unless otherwise noted, all texts or extended quotes attributed to Oksapmin people are my translations from the original Tok Pisin and Tok Peles.

basketball or volleyball, socialising at the trade store, or playing cards in my haus kuk (cooking house/kitchen) with friends were some of the activities that I took pleasure in often without thinking about them in terms of my research objectives. Further, it was through participating in their lives in this casual and spontaneous manner that local people came to properly know and understand me as a person.

My research activities were carried out principally in Sambate, since it was there that I lived. But during my time there I made an effort to visit all parts of the Oksapmin territory, not a minor task considering the Oksapmin live in five highland valleys as well as a few scattered hamlets lying beyond. These journeys were sometimes made in order to acquire certain pieces of information, such as the time I travelled to the farthest reaches of the Oksapmin territory to acquire portions of the myth of Dahaplän, which I discuss later in the thesis (Chapter 7). But the main purpose of my treks was to gain an overall picture of Oksapmin social life. So while the majority of my informants and information came from Sambate and the Tekin Valley, the observations made during my travels to other Oksapmin confirmed to me that what was happening in Sambate was representative of the wider Oksapmin population.

As Robbins remarks (2004:40) when describing his own time among the Urapmin, ‘like many male fieldworkers in Papua New Guinea, my contact with women was never as regular or sustained as it was with the men with whom I was most close.’ The same applied for me and I managed to partially overcome this asymmetry in various ways. First, most of the social activities I describe in the thesis were participated in by both men and women. Second, in my interviewing I attempted to include as many women as possible. Third, I often had interaction with Oksapmin women, either those with whom I lived in the hamlet or that I met at the market or on the basketball court. Insofar as possible the views of both genders are combined in this thesis, and where this was unnecessary or impossible I make explicit references.

Exit, return, and the start of writing

I was quite ambivalent about leaving Oksapmin and Papua New Guinea. On the one hand, I had made many great friends and close acquaintances during my time in Sambate and everyone knew, myself included, that it was going to be a while before we would meet again.

I would surely miss them all and, I assume, they would miss me too. On the other hand, it had been a whole year since I had seen my friends and family, an absence made to feel much greater because of the cultural difference. I would be returning to my native New Zealand for Christmas, where I would be able to relax in a familiar atmosphere and take stock of my experiences before returning to Australia and starting the write up.

The residents of Sambate made quite a fuss about my imminent departure. Many gave to me mementos so that I wouldn't forget the giver, my relationship with them, as well as my time spent in the area more generally. From the ladies came mainly bilum, some of which even had personalised messages woven into them, while the men gave to me items such as arrow heads, drums, and penis gourds. A few nights before I left, the community decided to hold a feast in my honour. A pig was acquired, killed, and cooked, and we all gathered to eat in my haus kuk. There were about 20 to 30 people assembled for the occasion, but we managed to squeeze in. During the brief speeches made by one of my friends I came to learn an interesting fact about how local people had perceived me and thereby gained further insight into Oksapmin culture. He said how, observing how well I had integrated into the community, many people had thought that I was the spirit of a dead man from Sambate who had returned incarnated as a white man. This was both a surprise and an honour for me to hear. It was comforting for me to know that they felt positively about my presence there and it was interesting to know that they considered me in this spiritual way.

As is often the case when travelling by aircraft in rural Papua New Guinea, the passenger must be ready to depart at a moment's notice and not necessarily from the location or on the day they expect or desire. So it was with my departure from Sambate. I had been waiting unsuccessfully for several days in inclement weather for a plane to arrive in Tekin when very early one morning an announcement came to me at my house in Sambate that an MAF plane to Telefomin would be coming in a few hours, but would be landing not in Tekin but in Trangap (Oksapmin) and that if I wanted to get on it I had best get moving promptly indeed. So me, Benny, and Andrew (both of which I had promised a trip to Tabubil in return for their enormous help during my year living with them) immediately grabbed our bags and, without time to say proper goodbyes, hastily departed the hamlet and began making our way down the valley. We arrived at Oksapmin mid-morning, thankfully before the plane had arrived. After only a rather short wait by Melanesian standards we all heard the steady drone of the Twin Otter approaching from a distance, a sound almost unrivalled in its ability to

produce excitement amongst the locals. We climbed on board and, once seated, took off for Telefomin, leaving the rugged Oksapmin valleys behind.

We stayed with Benny and Andrew's sister in Telefomin for two nights before taking a late afternoon flight to Tabubil. I stayed there only a couple of days and then took the Air Niugini Dash 8 to Port Moresby. Leaving Benny, Andrew, and all my other Oksapmin friends living in Tabubil who had come to see me off, at the airport, was emotional but something we knew was coming for a while. I overnighted in Port Moresby and then flew to Australia and then New Zealand.

The return to urban life in the western world was not at all characterised by that kind of culture shock and despair that I had been led to expect. Quite the opposite. I had just had the most amazing experience of my life living in rural PNG and now I was reunited with my friends and family again. To me there wasn't much to be unhappy or even feel disorientated about. All was good.

Once back at the university it was time to begin conceptualising the thesis. My experiences in the field had forced me to reconsider the theoretical framework I had taken with me into it. While certainly the performative lens was useful in terms of explaining how Christianity and indigeneity merged within events such as church services, it had limited value explaining the other dimensions of society that I was including in my enquiry, especially those things that existed either as belief or were practised surreptitiously as well as the broader sweep of historical change. I had discerned patterns running throughout all of these parts of the culture and I began to feel that to bring them together into one powerful and meaningful explanation I was going to have to change my approach and adopt a different, theoretical approach that looked not only at the expressive moments and processes of social life but about ontology, cosmology, and religious change more broadly. It wasn't just the performative aspects of Oksapmin culture where Christianity and indigeneity had met and interacted but also in people's beliefs, ideas, stories, and so forth. I needed to make sense of this total cultural encounter using a more macro perspective. It was through this process of reflection, helped by discussions with my supervisory panel, that I came to develop the model of fusion I advance in this thesis.

The writing of the thesis was largely unproblematic. I had a fairly clear vision of what I wanted to say and how I wished to structure the thesis from the beginning. Aside from a few mandatory adjustments and alterations, it was mostly a matter of writing it out. During the

writing phase I was afforded the opportunity to undertake a few pieces of consultancy work in different parts of PNG and the Solomon Islands. This slowed the writing process somewhat, yet I felt enriched the insights gained while in Oksapmin and also gave me much needed professional experience. Sending out drafts of each chapter as well as the thesis as a whole to both my supervisory panel and also other academics with an interest in my work greatly helped to strengthen my work and to fill in any lacunae I had overlooked.

Now with this detailed account about the genesis, context, and conduct of my research in its practical and academic perspectives, I will go on to describe who the Oksapmin are as well as important junctures in their history.

The Oksapmin

The Oksapmin are a group of approximately 10, 000 individuals living high in the mountains of Sandaun (formerly West Sepik) Province.³ ‘Oksapmin’ is, in fact, a name given by their Telefolmin neighbours that means ‘foreigner’ (Boram 1977), ‘place of the foreigners’ (Weeks 1981), or ‘bush people of the water’ (Loughnane 2009).⁴ The boundaries of the Oksapmin territory are the Strickland River to the east and immediate south; a steep limestone cliff separating the Bäk Oksapmin from their Bimin neighbours to the southeast; a large area of mostly uninhabited and extremely cold mountainous bush lying between the Oksapmin at the upper end of the Tekin Valley and the Feranmin and Telefolmin to the west; and, lastly, the Om River to the north, which separates the Oksapmin from the Akiapmin (Tomware), Duranmin (Asabano), and Sisimin (Hewa). Most Oksapmin are permanently settled in village and hamlet groups within the Tekin, Trangap (Oksapmin), Kwiva, Bäk, Kunanäp/Umanäp and Gaua Valleys.⁵ In addition, there are many people who live in small, scattered bush camps and hamlets at the peripheries of the Oksapmin territory, most notably within the Om River Valley. The altitudinal positioning of all Oksapmin settlements ranges from 1400 to 2200 metres above sea level.

³ The 2000 census recorded a total 12,288 individuals living within the Oksapmin LLG, but this area includes several non-Oksapmin groups such as the Bimin and Tomware., that together amount to approximately 2,000 people. It must also be noted here that many Oksapmin currently reside, permanently and semi-permanently, elsewhere in PNG, particularly in Tabubil, Western Province, the home of the Ok Tedi Mine.

⁴ Local people also often refer to themselves simply as ‘Oksap.’

⁵ The ‘ä’ symbol is used to denote a long ‘a’ sound, as per Lawrence’s Oksapmin dictionary (2005).

Social organisation

Oksapmin society is divided into patriclans or *fuh*. In his thesis, Perey (1973) instead uses the more general term *igira*, or ‘social group,’ which ‘can be used to refer to a lineage, a clan, a kindred, or any fairly permanent group, even the group of friends and relatives one habitually spends time with’ (1973:77), although I never encountered this word during my fieldwork. Every member of the society belongs to a clan. Identity is primarily inherited through one’s father yet any individual will also have important connections to the relatives of one’s mother. But in terms of not only identity but residence, exchange, land, social relationships, and even sports, it is the father’s side that is more important. Nearly all patriclans live on, and control, certain areas of customary land. With regard to settlement patterns, clans tend to group together in clusters of hamlets. Combined with an exogamous, patrilocal marriage system this means that within a typical cluster of hamlets or ‘village’ (if we are to use the term loosely), there will be: firstly, a handful of elderly men (usually brothers or cousins) and their wives, who belong to different clans and who have married into the family from outside; the sons of these elderly men, together with their wives who have also married in from other clans; and, lastly, the sons of this second generation of men as well as any daughters who have yet to marry and thus settle with their husband’s clan.

The Oksapmin territory is roughly co-extensive with the Oksapmin Local Level Government area (LLG), which lies within Telefomin District, Sandaun Province. As with all LLGs in the country, the Oksapmin LLG is subdivided into wards, for example, Divanäp, Kusanäp, Tekäp, etc. Within the local language (*Oksap meng*) ‘äp’ usually means house, but can also be used in the same way as ‘äpti’ to denote ‘the place of’ or ‘the home of.’ Then we have the names of certain clans, such as Divan, Kusan, and Tek. Taken together, the wards that collectively constitute the Oksapmin LLG are areas of land primarily inhabited and controlled by members of a particular clan. Divanäp is thus ‘the place of the Divan clan’, and so forth. However, it would be a mistake to conceptualise any ward name as tantamount to a settlement, as is done on the maps of the area. The Oksapmin do not live in villages, *per se*, but tend to live in well dispersed clusters of hamlets, with each cluster having its own name. Thus, within Kusanäp ward there are the hamlet clusters of Babenda, Aminda, Sambate and Landslide (named for the frequency of these events in the area), not to mention the numerous houses constructed around the mission station. Further, it would also be erroneous to suggest that a ward is only inhabited by the clan after which it is named, a point that will emerge from the discussion below.

Within all wards there are well established, often numerically dominant, clans, after which the ward is usually named. Thus, the primary clan in Wauläp is Waul; in Kweptanäp it is Kweptan, and so forth. However, there are other patrilineal clans that will also inhabit and share land within the same ward. So within Kusanäp it is the Kusan who are dominant, but the Wetäp, Tek, Duplaranim, Tave, and Adave clans also live on, and have rights of access to, areas of land within the same ward. This state of affairs is complicated by the segmentary nature of clans. The majority of clans are subdivided into main patrilineages. For example, within the Kusan clan there are three divisions: Yaletam, Dasetam, and Bulatam; within Wetäp there are two: Dipul and Mongsup.⁶ So rather than simply saying that it is clans that inhabit hamlet clusters, it is more precise to state that a proportion of hamlets within the larger cluster will consist of a sub-clan grouping. So, Sambate is the customary land of the Wetäp, but within Sambate there are two main groupings of houses, one belonging to Wetäp Dipul, the other to Wetäp Mongsup.

More broadly, Oksapmin is one of several groups inhabiting the mountainous highlands of Sandaun and Western Provinces, referred to by linguists and anthropologists as the ‘Mountain Ok’ culture area (Craig and Hyndman 1990). ‘Mountain Ok’ is a term originally coined by Healey (1964) to describe a branch of the larger Ok family of languages. From a linguistic perspective, there has existed considerable doubt surrounding the classification of Oksapmin alongside other Min groups under the Mountain Ok umbrella. Linguists have historically treated the Oksapmin language as an isolate within the Trans-New Guinea Phylum and emphasised its distinctiveness from the Ok language family (Healey 1964; Wurm 1982). Recent research by Robyn Loughnane and Sebastian Fedden (Loughnane 2009; Loughnane and Fedden 2011) has challenged this assumption. In their paper “Is Oksapmin Ok?”, Loughnane and Fedden argue that the Oksapmin language is genetically related to the other Ok languages and that all developed out of ‘proto Ok-Oksapmin’ (Loughnane and Fedden 2009:1). The Oksapmin and Ok languages diverged from this proto language, thus producing the differences and variation that exist today and which were observed by Healey and Wurm. However, notwithstanding this debate, it is beyond question that the various Min or Mountain Ok groups share many important social and cultural characteristics. In this thesis the term Min will be used instead of Mountain Ok because, firstly, the latter has a primarily linguistic and not anthropological origin and, second,

⁶ Loughnane (2009:14) claims that ‘the word *tam* ‘fireplace’ is used to refer to a sub-clan’ yet this appears to not always be the case since the names of many sub-clans do not bear this suffix.

because, the former term is locally significant, whereas the term ‘Mountain Ok’ means nothing to the Oksapmin.

The Oksapmin maintain various sorts of relationships with their immediate neighbours, namely, the Bimin-Kuskusmin, Feranmin, Telefolmin, Duranmin (Asabano), Akiapmin (Tomware), Sisimin (Hewa), and, across the Strickland River, the Duna. Wives are frequently taken from these groups; their members will often occupy positions within schools or local government; trade relationships connect them to the Oksapmin; there are frequent, reciprocal visits by pastors and church leaders; and lastly, there is the occasional skirmish between the Oksapmin and their neighbours, especially when highlanders are passing through the area on their way to and from Tabubil. Since they inhabit an area immediately contiguous with the Bäk Valley, it is the Bimin who participate most regularly in these inter-ethnic linkages. This is corroborated by the fact that there is a considerable amount of linguistic material shared by the two groups, with Healey claiming that Oksapmin shows ‘17% possible cognates with Bimin,’ but only ‘an average of 7% with the other languages of the Mountain-Ok Sub-Family’ (Healey 1964:115; Moylan 1981).

While these inter-ethnic linkages have changed dramatically over time, especially since the Oksapmin and their neighbours were contacted by Europeans in the early 20th century, they nonetheless operate on the same axes. While the ideas, activities, and objects being exchanged by the groups have changed, it is still religion, economics, and politics that bind Min groups to each other. How the Oksapmin related to their neighbours prior to contact with Europeans thus warrants mention.

In terms of religion, the Oksapmin were linked in various ways to other Min groups through participation in a fertility cult that consisted of ritual performances directed toward an ancestral creator-goddess by the name of Afek (Craig and Hyndman 1990). I will not here concern myself with the precise details of the cult or with the ethnographic conundrums presented by the Oksapmin, both of which are more rigorously discussed later. Suffice to say all groups in the Min area were articulated to each other through participation in this cult and the exchanges of ritual knowledge and sacra that it entailed.

The Oksapmin were also economically linked to neighbouring ethnic groups. Trade ties were maintained between the Oksapmin and many groups both within and outside the Min area, with the following items habitually being transacted: salt, which after having originally been produced in Lake Kopiago, passed through Oksapmin up the Om River to the

Telefolmin living in the Eliptamin and Ifitaman Valleys; shells, which were obtained by the Telefolmin during their raids on the Oksapmin; drums, originally fashioned in Olsobip, were acquired from the Bimin; and also bows, made as far away as the Kiunga lowlands (Western Province), travelled through Faiwolmin before being acquired from the Bimin (Jackson 1981).

As evinced by the way the Telefolmin typically acquired shells from the Oksapmin, not all of the inter-ethnic relations traditionally engaged in by the Oksapmin were friendly. Aside from the fighting that regularly took place between Oksapmin clans, the Oksapmin were intermittently engaged in violent skirmishes with neighbouring groups. It appears that the Telefolmin were the Oksapmin's primary foe; according to Jackson (1981: 36), both groups 'claim to have raided each other constantly.' Furthermore, Perey (1973) writes of how the Oksapmin considered the Telefol 'terrible indeed. In one story, they ate an Oksapmin man part by part while he was still alive and looking on. In retaliation... Oksapmin fighters ate Telefolmin men with taro stolen from their gardens' (1973:312). Whether or not the story is true, it certainly supports the view that the Oksapmin and Telefol often acted with hostility towards each other. Jackson adds (*ibid.*) that 'both Telefols and Oksapmin made raids into the Om Valley,' which implies that the Duranmin, Akiapmin, Sisimin and even Mianmin probably had internecine relations with the Oksapmin as well. However it seems that most of these groups were probably on much better terms with the Oksapmin than the Telefol, for as Lohmann states (2000a:39), the Duranmin/Asabano, who often co-habited with their Tomware friends, traditionally considered the Oksapmin 'strong friends of the cold place.'

As well as trading, performing, and fighting with their neighbours, it is likely that the Oksapmin also regularly exchanged women with them. This, of course, continues today, but the dynamics by which such exchange is effected has significantly changed. I assume that in many instances the transfer of women between neighbouring groups such as the Telefolmin was amiable. However, as suggested by Jackson (1981), it often occurred within the context of warfare and aggressive raids. He states that 'a major result of a conclusive victory, or even of a minor raid, was the transference of people, women of child-bearing age and children, to the side of the victor.'

Linguistically, the Oksapmin language (*Oksap meng*) has two principal divisions, Upper and Lower (Lawrence 2005; Loughnane 2009). The upper division is primarily spoken by the inhabitants of the Kwiva, Bäk and upper Tekin (Divanäp upwards) Valleys, whilst the

lower is spoken by the rest of the Oksapmin population, namely, the inhabitants of the Trangap, Gaua, and lower Tekin Valleys. The difference between the two divisions is mainly a matter of pronunciation, most commonly of the 'r' and 'l' sounds; if a Bäk Oksapmin were to denote a 'whiteman' they would say 'täbrasep,' while a Trangap Oksapmin would say 'täblasep.' In other cases, different words may be used to denote the same object. For example in Upper Oksapmin the word for pig is 'imäh' while in Lower Oksapmin it is 'täp.' Loughnane has recently written a grammar of the Oksapmin language for her Ph.D thesis (2009), and any reader seeking more detailed information about this topic is encouraged to turn there.

Economy

The Oksapmin are primarily subsistence gardeners.⁷ Their staple crop is sweet potato (*tuän*), which is planted in mounded gardens along the fertile valley floors. Taro (*fä*) is also prominent and is planted in gardens located high on the steep valley walls. In addition to these primary crops, the Oksapmin regularly plant marita and karuka pandanus, sugar cane, and pitpit; an array of vegetables including cabbage, lettuce, onions, broccoli, carrots, beans, English potato, cucumber, pumpkin, and capsicum; some fruits, such as banana, tomato, orange, and avocado; and a mix of herbs, including ginger and parsley. Most daily garden work is undertaken by women. Men typically perform the more physically strenuous tasks involved in preparing or maintaining a garden, such as clearing and burning primary or secondary forest, digging drains, etc. They are also responsible for any other tasks requiring considerable physical strength, for example, cutting and transporting firewood, building houses or bridges, and so forth.

The Oksapmin are also regular and passionate hunters, any resulting kill making a much appreciated addition and departure from their regular garden diet. Women and small children often chase rodents and insects through long grass and scrub in the hope of a light meal. During the day, young boys, slingshots in hand, carefully survey the trees around the village and in nearby bush for birds. It is the adult men, however, who treat hunting most seriously, even reverentially. Late at night, long after the women and children have fallen asleep, they sally into the bush with bow, arrow, and, more recently, battery powered torch.

⁷ For a more detailed appraisal of the various agricultural 'subsystems' in the Oksapmin area, see Bourke *et al* (2002).

Whilst numerous animals are potential prey, it is the various species of possum that men prize most dearly. Wild pigs and cassowary, while prized foods, are rare, being found only in the warmest, lowest corners of the Oksapmin territory. These hunting excursions, undertaken both individually and collectively, normally last a single night, but are occasionally truncated to a few hours by bad weather, or lengthened by fine weather, hunting success and buoyant spirits to a few days. As well as a valuable source of food, hunting also provides the Oksapmin with a rich vein of material for elaborate and often humorous stories. As well as hunting and gardening, animal husbandry, particularly the raising of domestic pigs, is an important component of the Oksapmin mode of subsistence. This task falls principally to women and the ability to rear healthy pigs is highly valued in Oksapmin society. Much time and care is invested in caring for pigs as they constitute a source of delicious meat, desperately needed protein, and, whenever sold, a considerable amount of money. In the above respects the Oksapmin economy has changed very little from that observed by Perey in the late 1960s, later described his Ph.D thesis (1973:27–65).

These days, however, the Oksapmin also engage to a limited extent in the cash economy. This occurs most regularly through the selling of vegetables to both local and regional markets. Firstly, vegetables are sold, predominantly by women, in a variety of weekly markets held throughout the greater Oksapmin area. The money obtained from these local market sales is relatively small, mainly due to the low price at which the produce is sold. Larger amounts of cash are generated when vegetables are sold to regional markets, especially to Tabubil. Throughout the late 1980s and into the 1990s, Oksapmin was the main source of fresh vegetables to the Ok Tedi Mine. This economic relationship greatly benefited the Oksapmin. Well stocked trade stores complete with generator-powered lights and refrigeration suddenly appeared along the main tracks within the Oksapmin area, as well as in villages and hamlets. Motorbikes and the occasional four wheel drive vehicle regularly travelled the dirt road running from Oksapmin Station up the Tekin Valley and down into Bäk Valley. Further, at this time the Tekin and Oksapmin Stations were serviced daily by several airlines. In terms of socio-economic development, these were the ‘golden years’ for local people and they are definitely remembered as such. However, sometime in the mid to late-1990s Ok Tedi Mining Limited (OTML) reconfigured its supply chain by obtaining vegetables from the Western Highlands instead of Oksapmin. The salubrious conditions previously enjoyed by the Oksapmin quickly deteriorated. Today, the majority of trade stores constructed during the ‘boom’ period are abandoned, motorised transport is non-existent, and

the only airline servicing the Oksapmin is the Missionary Aviation Fellowship (MAF), which, due to pilot shortage, can only make a couple of flights into the area each week. This last point takes on greater significance when one considers the extreme remoteness of the Oksapmin. There are no roads that connect the Oksapmin to their neighbours or to urban centres. The closest paved road where cars regularly pass is in Tabubil, which is nearly a week's walk away.

Although the socio-economic circumstances of the Oksapmin have thus deteriorated, economic linkages with Tabubil have been maintained. Whenever flights are made by MAF to Tabubil, a significant proportion of the freight is often produce, especially sweet potato and cabbage. These vegetables are sold by relatives living in Tabubil, with a proportion of the resultant profit being remitted. While this kind of market activity constitutes a steady flow of revenue for those who participate in it, it is significantly smaller in scale to the earlier engagement with Ok Tedi. The Oksapmin are also connected to the Tabubil economy in another, more important way. Of the many Oksapmin people living in Tabubil, at least several hundred (possibly more), nearly all men, work for OTML in various capacities. These individuals constitute important nodes in a remittance economy, whereby various items are sent to family members back in the village. These transfers usually take the form of cash payments, which are used to pay school fees, construct houses, and so forth. In addition to cash, material items are regularly sent from Tabubil, such as soccer and work boots, torches, as well as the occasional food package, such as frozen chickens bought from the main Tabubil supermarket.

As mentioned earlier, pigs are also commodities in the local cash economy. Piglets are usually acquired as gifts. They are then fed and nurtured for several years before being sold as adults. The price at which an adult pig is sold depends on its health, size, and fatness, with most pigs fetching around K800–K1000. As this price is well beyond the reach of the average Oksapmin family, it is parts, and not wholes, of pigs that are most commonly bought (much more frequently a whole pig will be killed for festive or ceremonial occasions).

Other more culturally marginal economic activities in the area include gambling, marijuana dealing and prostitution, all of which figure significantly in the Oksapmin cash economy. Most villages have a space where gamblers regularly assemble to play card games such as Higher and Bomb, the former of which simply requires players to count the numerical values assigned to the three cards one is dealt. The amount of money bet on each hand is

minor, ranging from 50 toea to K2, which may compound as the game develops. On market days, gamblers from different communities congregate in a single location to play, and it is during these games that the stakes are raised, with winners potentially taking away up to K500.

The marijuana market also influences the amount of money circulating within Oksapmin at any given time. Marijuana is grown within Oksapmin, nearly always by young men, both married and unmarried. Within society it is mainly an item that is given and taken rather than bought or sold. However, it is sometimes taken to Western Province and sold in either Tabubil or Kiunga for money. Lastly, there is female prostitution. This is a surreptitious activity undertaken both day and night. I assume that prostitution is not sufficiently widespread to have a large impact on the cash economy, but it encourages the circulation of money nonetheless.

Contact with Europeans

The Oksapmin occupy a rugged and very remote valley system. But this does not mean that they are, or ever have been, socially isolated. Indeed, as described earlier, the Oksapmin have for many generations maintained strong religious, economic, warfare, and social relationships with their neighbours. However, and notwithstanding these important qualifications, prior to the early 20th century the Oksapmin engagement with the world beyond their own territory was limited to people who were culturally and physically very similar to themselves. This is not the place to enter into a comprehensive account of contact and post-contact Oksapmin history; rather, I offer a simple sketch of the events and institutions into which the Oksapmin were incorporated by Europeans.

The Oksapmin were first contacted by people of European descent on July 18th, 1938, when John Russell Black, an Australian Cadet Patrol Officer with the Administration of the Mandated Territory of New Guinea, crossed the Strickland Gorge into the lower Bäk Valley as part of the 1938–1939 Hagen-Sepik Patrol.⁸ Black had originally been accompanied by another officer, Jim Taylor, who led the expedition out of Mount Hagen. The pair remained together until June 13th, 1938, at which point they decided to separate. Moylan (1981:63)

⁸ The patrol has been incorrectly referred to as the 1938-1940 Hagen-Sepik Patrol (as by Moylan 1981:63), when in fact it lasted from March 9th, 1938 to June 19th, 1939.

contends that this decision was made ‘in order to find the best route to Telefomin,’ while according to brief notes accompanying Black’s papers in the National Library of Australia, it appears the pair split up in order for the Patrol to cover as much ground as possible. However, to the man who made the decision, namely, Taylor, it was principally about time and resources. At the time he stated that ‘It will be necessary to divide the line to ensure safety from food shortage and to enable the exploratory work to be done in a reasonable time’ (as cited in Gammage 1997:87). On June 13th the expedition separated, with Taylor initially heading west along the north bank of the Lagaip before being stymied and Black’s party heading south, past Lake Kapiago to the Tumbudu River, and then west to the beautiful Strickland Gorge, where they arrived on July 6th (Gammage 1998).

After several days of unsuccessfully searching for a way over or around the raging torrent, Black charged his men with constructing a cane bridge over the river. The enterprise was treacherous but successful, with the bridge being completed on July 14th. ‘Bamboo, sapling and vine, it spanned seventy-five yards: it was one of the patrol’s triumphs’ (Gammage 1998:96). The next day they crossed the river, camped on the western bank that night, and the following day, the 16th, commenced the titanic walk up the extremely steep walls of the Strickland Gorge. Black, a man well accustomed to arduous treks over demanding terrain, was nonetheless humbled, writing in his diary that ‘it chilled me to the marrow to take my eyes off the grass and rocks in front of me and steal a glance at the muddy ribbon of the river in the chasm below. My knees got that nervy jellied feel as if charged with some force of static fear. I was frightened’ (as cited in Gammage 1998:97). Commenting on Black’s experience, Gammage states that ‘the climb was the worst John ever made, and turned his veins to ice’ (*ibid.*). Having spent the 17th resting, on the morning of the 18th Black’s party broke camp and moved across the Kunanäp/Umanäp Valley. They eventually were confronted by a group of 150 Kunanäp Oksapmin men.

[The Oksapmin] stood tensely, each with a pig tusk through the nose, a dogs’ teeth necklace, a shoulder *bilum*, a penis gourd tied erect by a string waistband, a bobbing red parrot plume so startling that it seemed a splash of blood, a blackpalm bow and a handful of barbed and knife-blade arrows (Gammage 1998:100).

One can only imagine what such an extraordinary encounter must have been like for all involved. The early interactions were awkward, intense, and characterised, above all else, by fear. Black’s party, particularly Serak, a policeman from Madang, initially managed to

placate the prickly Oksapmin with gifts of cowrie shell. These measures failed to completely mollify the growing crowd of Oksapmin warriors, however, who now ‘chorused angrily and began taking up firing positions’ (Gammage 1998:101). Black’s party became aware that they were now in a deadly fix. Desperately seeking truce in a volatile situation, Serak offered one of the leading warriors a large cowrie, which the intended recipient defiantly spat on. An elderly Oksapmin man then appeared and proceeded to offer advice to his fellowmen, with the effect that a number of the Kunanäp tightened their bows in anticipation of threatening, possibly killing, Black and his men. Cognisant of this fact, Black promptly shot the lead warrior dead before an arrow could be fired. The Papua New Guinean police accompanying Black on the Patrol followed suit, and another two Oksapmin men were consequently slain.⁹ *Fait accompli*: the Oksapmin had been brutally incorporated into the world of the whiteman. ‘These people have the wild unkempt air of cannibals’ Black remarked. They pressed on.

It wasn’t long before the party again found themselves in strife. On their way up the Bäk Valley, Black’s line was fired on by a lone Bimin sentry. Arrows being no match for a rifle, the assailant was quickly murdered by a scout. Hungry and exhausted, that afternoon the group killed four Oksapmin pigs and set up camp for the night. On the morning of the 20th, Black’s party ascended the steep ridge separating the Bäk and Tekin Valleys, probably starting the climb somewhere around Yentanäp. At the summit, Black surveyed the densely populated Tekin Valley spread out before him, describing it as ‘a truly Arcadian valley of stoneage man’ (as cited in Gammage 1998:102). Any lofty conceptions of the Oksapmin soon dissipated, however. On a small hill situated a ‘few hundred yards’ below Black’s position had assembled a large group of Oksapmin men (most likely from the hamlet clusters of Kolsi and Sambate) prepared for battle. Intending to establish peaceful contact, Black selected three of his men and began to cautiously descend. As they progressed towards the Oksapmin they called ‘*mama*’, a word they presumably learned whilst in Kunanäp and which they believed to mean ‘friend’ in the local language. *Mamä* (not *mama*) is part of the Oksapmin language, but its meaning is ‘here’ or ‘that is.’ Shouting this to the belligerent Oksapmin would thus not have had the placatory effect Black desired. It seems more likely that the word they had hoped they were using was *mäm*, which men regularly use to cordially greet maternal uncles and sisters’ children (Lawrence 2005:137). Indeed, the failure of Black and his men to initially forge an amiable bond with this group was evinced by the behaviour of

⁹ During this initial skirmish Black’s party thus killed three Oksapmin men and not four as claimed by Moylan (1981:63).

the Oksapmin, who ‘jeered the foreign rituals and shook their bows’ (Gammage 1998:102). Notwithstanding this obvious evidence of hostility, Black continued to advance.

Now within close proximity of the assembled Oksapmin men, two of Black’s party grounded their rifles as a gesture of goodwill. An elderly Oksapmin man stepped forward and similarly grounded his bow. However, this single incident, while it could be construed as setting a peaceful tone for interaction, proved deeply misleading and, in light of what immediately followed, perhaps constituted an Oksapmin ruse. While the old man crept forward to perform his purportedly conciliatory act, Black and his men were encircled by Oksapmin men, who took up firing positions from within clumps of pitpit. Kenai, one of Black’s acquaintances on the patrol, offered a simple commentary: ‘Masta ol i laik sut nau’ (‘Boss, they are about to shoot’) (as cited in Gammage 1998:102). Black’s response to this information was to immediately open fire into one of the mentioned areas of pitpit where the Oksapmin were poised to attack. The Oksapmin promptly returned fire on the pair, yet failed, albeit narrowly, to produce injury; a shower of arrows fired by a group of Oksapmin to Black and Kenai’s right were ‘providentially caught in a gust of wind,’ flew across their flank to eventually rest in long grass to their left (*ibid.*).

Having successfully extricated themselves from yet another potentially fatal fight, Black’s line was forced by a rapidly spreading and unidentified illness to set up camp for a number of days. By July 24th, thirty men had fallen seriously ill, including himself. This left the line extremely vulnerable to attack. Aware of this fact, Black sent a couple of men to nearby settlements to distribute shells and hopefully quash any violent inclinations. The settlement closest to Black’s camp and therefore the first to be contacted on this particular mission was Sambate, the place at which my own fieldwork was based. Having secretly and attentively observed the foreigners hang their gifts to a nearby tree, two Sambate men emerged unarmed and seemingly willing to establish friendly relations. Gammage (1998:104) relates how Black’s men ‘Serak and Kwangu put down their rifles and went out. The brave pairs inched together, one fearful and uncertain, the other tense but reassuring. They reached, touched, grasped elbows, smiled.’ Then Black appeared, hoping to utilise this détente to secure his own safety. The Oksapmin pair started back in fright. However, probably thinking that, in light of recent events, any sudden or antagonistic move on their part might end fatally, they ‘paused, came back, and faced their first white man’ (*ibid.*). Formerly strained relations were, for the time being, eased.

Generally cordial interactions and transactions with the Oksapmin followed, but sickness continued to ravage the line. This continued for many days until delicately calculated measures of quinine brought the outbreak under control. Black henceforth turned his attention back to the larger objective of finding a route to Telefomin, a known locale that had already been contacted by earlier patrols. Joined by members of his team, for several days Black ventured westward up the Tekin Valley, where he solicited advice from various communities concerning how he might achieve his goal. Informed only that Telefomin was situated several days' walk to the west, between August 7th – 9th Black attempted to locate a track that might lead in that direction. His attempts were in vain. All potential routes lead to dense, uninhabited bush. His efforts frustrated, Black returned to the Tekin Valley on August 10th. He had given up hope of travelling to Telefomin the way he had initially wanted. 'There was no road west. They must try south' (Gammage 1998:108). However, the crucial point to hold in mind is that there was no road west to Telefomin that Black or any of his line knew of. For on August 15th, at the very moment that Black was about to abort his westward advance and head south, he was accosted by two Feranmin visitors. The pair told him that they knew where Telefomin was and were familiar with the westward road leading to it. However, they were not ready to go. Perceiving through these interactions what Black so keenly desired, three Oksapmin men (one each from Kweptanäp, Divanäp, and Tekäp) who knew the route offered to accompany the line. Thus, the following day, Black and his men, guided by the Oksapmin, departed the Tekin Valley and started out toward Feranmin and Telefomin. With that, the first contact between the Oksapmin and Europeans, an encounter lasting 29 days, was concluded.

Following this brief and bloody initial contact, Oksapmin engagement with the Australian administration effectively ceased for almost ten years. The relationship recommenced shortly after the establishment of the Telefomin government station in 1947/1948, when small numbers of western Oksapmin, who had various customary ties to the Feranmin and Telefomin, went to work on the airstrip there (Moylan 1982; Jackson 1982). Steel tools were among the novel and prized objects brought back from these excursions. Contact with the administration remained external until 1950, when a patrol led out of the newly constructed Telefomin station toured the Oksapmin territory, during which the Australian party 'distributed seeds of maize, bean and pumpkin and bought pigs for steel axes' (Moylan 1982:64). This year was significant for the added reason that it was then that the Australian Baptist Missionary Society (ABMS) first expressed interest in evangelising the

Min area, flying a chartered aircraft west from Wabag over Oksapmin to Telefomin as part of initial reconnaissance. With respect to the topic under discussion here, the penetration and entrenchment of the colonial government, according to Moylan (*ibid.*), the Oksapmin were contacted by exactly five further Telefomin based patrols throughout the 1950s. It wasn't until 1961 that the Australian administration permanently established themselves among the Oksapmin by building a patrol post in the Trangap Valley, thus making considerably easier the surveillance and continued pacification of the immediate social environment. From this time until national independence was granted in 1975, Oksapmin contact with Australian patrol and medical officers, as well as the wider cultural and material universe they represented, was continuous, albeit often indirect, since it was usually through fellow Papua New Guineans employed at the station as either police or teachers that insight into the life and thinking of these mysterious aliens was gleaned. It seems that for several years following independence a number of Europeans remained occupied in various capacities, yet their presence gradually diminished to the point where now the day-to-day administration of the station is entirely the responsibility of Papua New Guineans. But the administrative structures instituted by the Australian colonial regime were not, of course, the only institutions introduced to the Oksapmin by white-skinned outsiders. The other, of course, was Christianity, the introduction of which I discuss in Chapter 4. Before considering the influence of Christianity upon the Oksapmin lifeworld, as well as the ways in which the Oksapmin have negotiated this cosmological encounter, it will be useful to firstly outline the state of Oksapmin culture and society at the time it came into contact with the ABMS.

3. Traditional Oksapmin Culture and Society

Most broadly, this thesis examines from both an historical and contemporary ethnographic perspective the influence of Christianity upon the culture and society of the Oksapmin people. Precisely what changes Christianity has produced, how it was interpreted in terms of what came before, and how Christianity reshaped the indigenous lifeworld will all be dealt with in the chapters that follow. But before changes and adaptations can be considered we first need to know what Oksapmin society was like at the time the ABMS arrived, the background against and within which Christianisation occurred. That is the primary objective of the current chapter.

The discussion is broad in focus and takes in all main areas of human social life, including social organisation, economics, politics, and, of course, religion. From most anthropological perspectives the divisions between these realms is problematical, but for sake of exposition here I treat them separately. Some of what I say about traditional social organisation has already appeared in the previous chapter and where this is the case I provide only brief reiteration. My discussion refers frequently to, and draws regularly upon, Perey's Ph.D thesis (1973) to support and enhance the descriptions provided by my interlocutors, who were several elderly men and women from Sambate and neighbouring communities.

Social organisation

Much like today, Oksapmin society at the time the ABMS arrived was principally organised into patrilineal clans, each of which had rights of access over a given portion of land. These clans were exogamous, meaning that outside groups were both a source of wives as well as recipients of consanguineal female relatives, a system of exchange which served to forge reciprocal alliances. As with contemporary society, these groups were subdivided into named lineages, each of which had primary rights of use and access over a portion of the overall clan territory. Following Perey (1973), it would seem that clans and households were less territorial prior to the institution of government and mission, displaying greater social mobility and fluidity.

Given that the Oksapmin language region is not identified by any indigenous toponym, it seems the clan would traditionally have been the broadest social group with

which an individual identified. This is not to claim that the Oksapmin had no sense of the wider ethnic community to which they belonged, but only that this was probably only weakly elaborated. As the seat of collective identity, the clan would also have been the platform for most collective action, whether in commerce, religion, or war. It was, first and foremost, clans that socially entertained each other, exchanged wives, that organised religious ritual and also that fought with each other, activities which shall be discussed in more detail below.

Linguistically the area would have been largely homogeneous with the exception of the earlier mentioned distinction between upper and lower dialects. As a result of Australian colonial activities since first contact in 1938, yet especially the establishment of the government patrol post at Trangap in 1961, Tok Pisin would have begun to gain some currency among the Oksapmin, but it is safe to say that its influence would have been rather limited at the time the ABMS arrived in 1962.

The character of interaction between men and women ranged between open and relaxed, on the one hand, to restricted and dangerous, on the other. Daily life necessitated a considerable amount of cooperation between the sexes. Garden work (to be discussed in more detail below), for instance, was typically undertaken by groups comprising both men and women working together. But while they habitually combined in the execution of necessary tasks, men and women were by no means free to be in each other's physical presence whenever they wanted. Frequently gender relations were regulated by an elaborate system of cultural rules and taboos. Most basically, men and women spent considerable periods of time in separate dwellings. Men, specifically those that had been initiated, lived a good portion of their lives within the *hän äp* or men's house, while women and younger children lived in their respective household dwellings (*äp*). Food consumption was gender specific, with certain animals being taboo to eat or touch at various times throughout a person's life (Perey 1973:288). This is a pattern similar to that described by Whitehead for the Seltaman, another Min group to the south of the Oksapmin (Whitehead 2000). In certain contexts, women were considered by men to be impure and potentially defiling. They were traditionally prohibited from passing over or through gardens created by men without first performing a series of technical and magical procedures. Further, during menstruation women were considered particularly dangerous and were physically isolated from public life. Whenever travel was necessary during this time, a woman would have to audibly announce through various means her presence well in advance of becoming visible to others, thus giving them the opportunity to find a place of hiding. Handling food was also taboo during this time, lest her impurity

contaminate others. Should any of these cultural rules surrounding the interaction of men and women be ignored or transgressed, sickness and misfortune would be swiftly visited upon the community to which the offender belonged.

The marriage system permitted both monogamy and polygyny, the latter depending upon the husband's economic capacity and interpersonal management skills. Perey reported that at the time he conducted his fieldwork between 1967 and 1968, just a few years after the mission had established itself, 'marriage in Oksapmin is about eighty per cent monogamous, with about fifteen to twenty per cent of the marriages being polygamous' (1973:86). This indicates either that polygamous marriage was traditionally not widely practised or that only five years after the establishment of the mission Christian teachings against such arrangements were already taking effect in Oksapmin society. A marriage was formally effected through the payment of a bride wealth by the kin of the man to that of the woman. Before the incursion of the Western cash economy this payment would have comprised pigs, shell valuables, salt, and garden produce. As will be discussed in the chapter that follows, the Christianisation of the Oksapmin was to have far reaching impacts upon this and many other aspects of social organisation.

Economy

As with those parts of traditional Oksapmin life discussed above, my description of the pre-Christian Oksapmin economy leans on the information provided in Perey's thesis (1973). There he provides a richly detailed overview of all aspects of the Oksapmin economy at the time it encountered Western spheres of influence (1973:27–65) and the reader wishing to know more about this topic is encouraged to look there for further information. Here I present only the principal details of the traditional Oksapmin economy, based both on Perey's work and on the statements of my interlocutors alive at the time.

Like their descendants, Oksapmin people living at the time immediately prior to the arrival of the AMBS were subsistence agriculturalists whose main planted crops were taro and sweet potato. This central economic activity was supplemented by other more opportunistic endeavours such as hunting and gathering. Hunting for possum, tree kangaroo, and wild pig was undertaken solely by men. Arrows were crafted specifically for each kind of game and were propelled by wooden bows (Perey 1973:162–172). Hunting parties typically

ventured into the bush on clear, moonlit nights. Women also participated in the excitement of hunting, although in a form less perilous and closer to home. At night they too would venture out in groups in search of frogs, tadpoles, rats, and anything else that might make a tasty and nutritious meal. To this suite of economic activities must of course be added pig husbandry. Like most societies within Central New Guinea, the pig was an index of an individual's power, wealth, and influence, and had lavished upon it great attention (Perey 1973:46–47, 289–92). Indeed, many photographs and reports of the Oksapmin at the time of their first encounter with European spheres of influence record individuals, mainly men, gently caressing with hand and speech their favourite beast. Perey (1973) also makes the interesting point that Oksapmin pigs are more headstrong and obstinate than their Highland counterparts.

In terms of the division of garden labour, the heavy physical work involved in clearing land, transporting the trees thus felled, digging drainage trenches, and so forth, was mainly the responsibility of men, while the day-to-day maintenance of the garden, involving the planting, weeding, and harvesting of crops, was handled principally by women. An exception to this is taro, since this crop was and to an extent still is, closely associated with men and virility. Oksapmin men, young and old, often remarked to me that, historically at least, a large, ordered, and abundant taro garden was the mark of a true man, one who had proved his worth. In previous times, this was taken as a symbol of his having diligently obeyed the teachings of his male relatives both informally and within the context of initiation.

But while garden labour was arranged according to gender, it is unlikely either that the respective roles were totally exclusive or that men and women did not spend time together during work hours. After the morning meal, which consisted typically of a few pieces of sweet potato, and perhaps a brief period of subsequent relaxation, families would travel to their respective gardens to work. Married couples working together obviously had its economic advantages, but the garden also offered to men and women opportunities of another kind. Considering the fact that public interaction between the sexes was highly regulated and that each often retired to their own separate house at night, the garden, as a secluded, private space, provided the context within which couples could satisfy sexual desires otherwise frustrated.

I now turn momentarily from the technical and social aspects of garden work to the less tangible. Based on his work in the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski argued that wherever the outcome of human activity was uncertain or unpredictable one would typically find

magic. More specifically, he stated in *Argonauts* that ‘among the forces and beliefs which bear upon and regulate garden work, perhaps magic is the most important’ (1922:59). This observation I think applies to traditional Oksapmin economic activity. According to interviews with elder Oksapmin individuals, this area of life (as with many others, both economic and otherwise) was certainly replete with magical activity, whether verbal incantations, ritual practices, or a combination of the two. Further, not only the realm of garden work but each of its constituent phases, for example clearing, planting, harvesting, and so on, each had their own specific series of requisite procedures. This will be further elaborated upon below in the section that deals specifically with Oksapmin religious beliefs and practices.

Politics

As with many highland Melanesian societies that lived in small, mobile, and scattered hamlet units, the Oksapmin were traditionally a ‘non-hierarchical’ society (Perey 1973:67). Within everyday life there existed no positions of formal authority; the means and outputs of agricultural production were widely accessible and there obtained a broad ethos of sharing and cooperation, especially within clan and lineage segments. But to say that the Oksapmin were generally egalitarian in these respects is not to say that their society functioned independently of power, leadership, conflict, and control.

Decisions concerning the affairs of the clan, the group with which most Oksapmin primarily identified, were overseen by the male elders (*itanir/itäpir*). In a society lacking any pronounced hierarchical status system, this would not have taken the form of anything like a council of chiefs offering edicts but would rather have been realised through senior members of the community having their opinions heard, respected, and followed within the context of collective discussion. This is very much how the Oksapmin continue to operate today.

So, over what kind of issues and processes did senior clansmen mediate? While each community social crisis was of course unique in its own right, we can say that most fell under one of four main categories, namely, land, women, warfare, and religion. These headings are obviously broad and not in any way exhaustive, but, nonetheless, shed light upon certain of the principal concerns of the Oksapmin prior to missionisation. Further, while analytically distinguishable, they are of course inseparable in practice, since warfare may be undertaken

to find women, ritual may be performed to ensure the fertility of the land, and so forth. Here I discuss the first three headings, leaving the political role of the elders within religion to the section dealing specifically with that topic.

As mentioned apropos social organisation, the Oksapmin territory was subdivided into segments over which dominant clans presided. Within a given portion of the overall territory several clans may co-reside, yet it was and still is mainly one clan, through its senior representatives, that decides how and by whom the land is used. Perey devotes a whole chapter to the issue of land ownership and occupation in his thesis (1973:225–245) and I draw generously on it for my discussion here. In the event that an individual or household belonging to an outside clan group wished to establish themselves in the area they had to first gain the consent of the host group, who informed them as to where and how much land they would receive. Improving, modifying, or in any way changing the land belonging to another man without permission was, and continues to be, a serious offence resolved either through violence, compensation or both.

In addition to matters concerning the allocation and utilisation of land, the senior members of any given clan also exercised influence over the role of women within the group. It was they who facilitated the exchange of women through marriage between clans. Further, they played an important role in the associated payments of brideprice, both in its collection when a woman was marrying into the group and also in its reception and distribution whereupon a woman was married out (Perey 1973:100–103). Cases of adultery and divorce would also have been tended by the opinions and statements of senior male members of the community.

Prior to the arrival of Christianity an important component of Oksapmin social life was inter and intra-ethnic warfare, and the elders of the clan, owing both to their age and fighting experience, provided direction and advice regarding how and against whom it was to be carried out. As mentioned earlier, inter-ethnic fighting between the Oksapmin and surrounding groups was fierce and frequent. The Telefol appear to have been the group with which the Oksapmin (and probably most other Min groups) most regularly clashed, but violent skirmishes resulting in population displacement and territorial succession were also fought closer to home with the neighbouring Bimin. An important point is that fights, raids, and so forth, took place not only between the Oksapmin and their enemies but also between and within Oksapmin clans themselves. Indeed, Perey remarks that ‘most of the fights in

Oksapmin were not between communities, or even between groups in a community. They were between people of one blood...or between members of the same household' (1973:309). Because of the often hostile relations between clans, contact between them, aside from the warfare itself, was intermittent and perhaps limited to occasional social and economic exchanges. As suggested above, the reasons for warfare were diverse. It may have been undertaken to obtain women, usurp land, acquire prestige, or simply for the thrill and danger which violence afforded.

While the course and nature of warfare was to a significant extent shaped by the elders of the clan, it was also a sphere within which men of a younger age could forge, through skilled and successful combat, an identity as a leader or 'big man.' This social recognition of leadership attributes in war certainly gave to individuals a level of influence within the political system similar to that enjoyed by the elders. But excellence in warfare was not the only means through which such status was achieved. Indeed, the Oksapmin told me that historically one important mark of a 'true' man was an abundant, productive, and tidy taro garden. To these two culturally valuable activities might also be added the ability to provide for one's wife or wives and children, which can of course be connected to both gardening and combat skills. A last skill that may have elevated a man in his group's regard was oratory. In a culture where speech was valued as much for its rhetorical force as its verisimilitude, a man able to capture the attention of others within spheres of public discussion would surely have had his opinion respected. Thus the paragon of a 'big man' was a man of action, power, and persuasion, that is, one able to adeptly fight, provide, and speak.

This will suffice as a brief sketch of the main currents and roles within the Oksapmin political system prior to the institution of Christianity. But, in this realm as in others I have discussed so far, there was an additional layer of cultural value as yet unmentioned. Indeed, while undertakings such as warfare and gardening had their technical aspects, for in order to fight or grow food one had to have the right tools and know how to use them, they were also rich in cosmological and magical significance. As will be seen, although indigenous Oksapmin religion was principally generated and reproduced by certain key structures, rites and beliefs, at the same time it acted as a kind of sacred canopy underneath which all aspects of social life were arranged and given meaning.

Religion

The indigenous Oksapmin religion encountered by the first missionaries in 1962 was not a timeless structure but rather the contemporary expression of a fluid and malleable system. It was an ordered assemblage of sacred beliefs and practices with manifold social, temporal, and spatial origins. The rites, taboos, and myths that the locals practised and the missionaries beheld had not been there forever in some logically consistent homeostasis but were configured over a long period with material both internally devised and externally appropriated. These observations, namely, that what is called 'indigenous' by anthropologists is often a conglomeration of internal as well as external cultural elements and that religion, like any human creation, is inevitably shaped by the forces of history, are simply a reminder to the reader that what follows is not an attempt to capture essence but to describe a particular historical moment.

Indigenous Oksapmin religion prior to its disintegration and restructuring as a result of its contact with Christianity was a highly complex practical and ideological formation. There were many kinds of ritual systems, a plethora of mythological stories, a wide catalogue of taboos, several varieties of magic, different types of witchcraft and sorcery, and so forth. Because of such complexity, providing a complete account of the constituent layers of indigenous Oksapmin religion as well as their interconnection is impossible, especially considering historical distance and transformations. Here all I wish to do is identify and describe the central institutions within Oksapmin society which generated and reproduced sacred meaning.

While Perey's thesis contains abundant information about the traditional Oksapmin economic and political systems, his discussion of Oksapmin religion is relatively brief (1973:133–47) and as such I refer to it infrequently. I employ his work here not so much for supplementary detail but more as a point of reference for my own findings.

The male initiation cult

Of the institutions that made up Oksapmin religion, undoubtedly the most important was the men's initiation cult. Generally speaking, the cult functioned to turn boys into men by

providing them with a thorough education in all the skills and knowledge they needed to live productive and independent adult lives. I conducted several interviews specifically on this topic with three fully initiated elderly men; two from Sambate and one from a neighbouring hamlet known as Kolsi. For several hours at a time we sat together in my house and discussed the form and meaning of their experiences within this sacred social context. Having more than one man present at a time proved valuable, since each were able to verify the other's statements. If one said something that was vague or inaccurate, then the other would interject his own correction. This might then initiate a discussion yielding still more information. According to the men I interviewed, initiation was comprised of four main stages. Each stage lasted anywhere between one to several months, depending on the nature of the training being undertaken. In total the process unfolded over a 10–15 year period, the first stage being entered as a young boy or adolescent and the final stage being completed as the initiates entered their mid to late 20s. It appears the initiation process occurred within houses specially built for each stage. These structures were mainly temporary, being used for the duration of the initiation phase for which they were constructed, and then abandoned until the next initiation cycle commenced, whereupon they would be maintained. They were also built in secluded places far away from human settlement, so that whatever knowledge was disseminated therein would not be learned by ritually impure women and children. In recent years, the purported secrecy of this knowledge, basic as it was to Min epistemology, has been challenged by Crook (2007), who has argued that in the course of daily life the people formally excluded from initiation often learned of the sacred material circulated therein. Such a suggestion certainly requires anthropologists to carefully reconsider the so-called 'secrecy' of the men's cult in this culture area. But regardless of how effectively secrecy was maintained, men certainly had it in mind when selecting where to locate the initiation houses.

Nearly all phases of the Oksapmin initiation cycle took their name from the houses within which they occurred. To start with, the first phase of initiation was known as *hän äp tem*, an Oksapmin phrase which means 'temporary men's house.' Alternatively, this first stage was named *hän awäm äp*, which can be rendered as 'the house of secret men's knowledge.' Each *hän äp tem* was attended by over 100 boys belonging to a variety of clans. As with many other important junctures in Oksapmin society, proceedings were inaugurated by the killing and consumption of several pigs, an event that took place while the boys were still within the community. Immediately following this event the boys were led through the bush to the *hän äp tem*. There, elders bedecked in ceremonial dress received them with songs

and dance, a scene which men remember as being both terrifying and awe inspiring. Without delay the boys were divided into groups and taken by the elders into the bush to hunt, in particular, for possum. This activity constituted the main focus of the first phase of initiation and was undertaken by the boys 'systematically, day after day, with the permission and guidance of their elders' (Perey 1973:123). During their time with the elders, the boys were introduced not only to the technical side of hunting, such as how to prepare a bow, select the right kind of arrow, and so forth, but also to its magical aspects, including the use of certain incantations, charms, and devices. Once a specified number of possum had been captured, the entire group assembled at the *hän äp tem* to prepare and consume the fruits of their labour. One can imagine the fortifying character of these meals; taken from their families and placed into a hostile social and natural environment where they were scared and apprehensive, the boys sat down with each other for the first time within this context to share moral and physical substance. Such experiences surely forged strong bonds between the initiates.

During this first phase of the cycle the boys mainly ate, as well as learned how to foster and obtain, possum and taro. But while the nutritional and symbolic importance of food, particularly possum, was the primary topic of education within the *hän äp tem*, initiates also received instruction in other essential life skills and attitudes. For instance, boys were taught how to construct houses, bridges, and bush tracks. In addition, they were indoctrinated into Oksapmin morality. This included, firstly, learning of the responsibilities they would directly bear as adult men, such as caring and providing for their families, assisting clansmen in times of need, etc. It also entailed learning about the broader framework of norms and taboos within which their lives would now be structured and appraised. Rules governing the relations between men and women, men and land, as well as among men themselves, were all expounded. These often took the form of simple moral proscriptions, for example, a menstruating woman is impure and must therefore be avoided; one must never dishonestly appropriate the land, crops, or women belonging to another man, and so on.

Further, the consequences of either contravention or obedience were also made clear. On the one hand, should these cultural principles be regularly broken, an early death would certainly be visited upon the negligent individual. On the other hand, should the individual faithfully adhere to the laws explained to him by the elders then he could expect to live a long and happy existence. This kind of 'good life' resulting from the observance of normative frameworks was characterised by an existential, emotional state known as *bapkwei*. That is, a boy that listened attentively to, and meticulously implemented, all that was said to him within

the *hän äp tem*, would be *bapkwei*, in other words blessed, fortunate. His gardens would flourish, his children would be capable, and he would enjoy the respect of his peers and family.

The change effected by the completion of *hän äp tem* was not only manifested through the immaterial endowment of *bapkwei* but also physically signified on the initiates' bodies. In structural terms, the initiates had entered the ritual process as boys and left as partially initiated men. This advancement through the social system permitted them to adorn their bodies with items symbolically and practically associated with manhood. They had given to them, and could wear at their discretion, objects such as the penis gourd (*hamen*), hair net, feathered *bilum*, as well as armbands. All of these denoted to both the initiates and the community to which they belonged the transformations of social status that had been successfully achieved.

From a general perspective, then, we can say that during their three months' stay in the *hän äp tem* the initiates were given grounding in the fundamentals of Oksapmin culture and society, exposed through various means to the basic frameworks and processes according to which human life operated. They entered as novices but emerged as ritually transformed young men indoctrinated into the essentials of local morality, sociality, and cosmology. The knowledge and skills learned herein would then be deepened and enriched with each successive stage of the initiation process. The full extent of the sacred cult and clan mysteries had yet to be fully revealed.

The path toward full initiation into the men's cult continued with the next stage, known as *lät kāk ben*, which my interlocutors translated as 'the source/origin of fire.' Perey translates this as 'fire-bundle-ceremony' (1973:123). To my elderly interlocutors the identification and description of this stage occurred only as an afterthought. During the course of my interviews, initiation was portrayed to me by these men as a three stage process and it was only later that they recalled the existence of this particular segment (thus making a total of four). The remembered account was not particularly dense, consisting only of the general details I provide here.

This second stage of the Oksapmin men's cult was designed specifically to educate initiates about fire. According to my informants, although the boys had already completed the first stage of their sacred journey, they were still forbidden from handling and creating fire. To what extent this restriction obtained in everyday life is doubtful, since to me it seems

likely that boys below the age of initiation would have known how to make fire. But irrespective of what initiates knew about this natural element prior to initiation, the *lät kāk ben* would impress upon them in new and more meaningful ways its inherent power, danger, and worth.

It is interesting to note that fire also occupied an important place in the initiation ceremonies of other Min groups. Barth (1987:5) describes an analogy made by the Baktaman between ‘sacrificial smoke in the temples and the smoke of the swiddens in the gardens.’ Wheatcroft, too, describes how the Tifalmin employed fire and hot coals within several stages of male initiation (1975:443–698). As will be seen below, there are some interesting parallels between the Tifalmin and Oksapmin cases.

From the information given to me by my interlocutors, it appears that within the Oksapmin territory there were two *lät kāk ben*, one midway up the Tekin Valley at Tomianäp, the other at Kunanäp, near the bottom of the Bäk Valley. As with the *hän äp tem*, the initiates numbered roughly 100 and derived from a variety of clans. This stage of the initiation process apparently lasted but a single day, but, as will now be described, the ritual house was charged and busy with activity throughout.

The structures of leadership and instruction within the ritual operated according to known affinitive relationships between man and nature. Within Oksapmin society certain clans were closely associated with and believed to be able to control and manipulate particular dimensions of the biosphere. For instance, one clan had the ability to influence the growth of taro, another could induce or repel rain, and so forth. These capacities were often employed in times of collective crisis, such as drought or famine. As for fire, it was held under the authority of a clan living at the bottom of the Tekin Valley, near Kusanäp. Because of their intimate connection with this natural element, they figured prominently in the *lät kāk ben*. It was the elders of this clan who presided over the event, contributing knowledge, skills, and paraphernalia.

With the boys sitting down passively in a group, the elders commenced proceedings. Their first act was to make a fire. Yet this was no ordinary fire, since its fuel was not only wood but ancestral bones. This initial fire was allowed to burn out, at which point a song was performed. Subsequently, the still glowing ashes were collected and then used as the basis of another, larger fire, this time without the inclusion of human bone. Whether it was above this second fire or another lit afterwards, the elders then erected a long wooden pole, to which

they had fastened a specially chosen variety of possum (*kutin*). After a couple of suspenseful minutes the elders then suddenly and violently brought the pole and its contents crashing down onto the blaze below, sending burning sparks and embers onto the seated initiates. Into this fire was then placed a rare and magically prized stone found only in the Om River Valley.¹⁰ At the same time an initiate belonging to the same clan as the individual whose bones were burnt earlier in the ritual was laid prostrate on the floor, facing upwards. Once the stone had reached the desired temperature, it was removed from the coals and placed directly upon the boy's bare chest, which must have been immensely painful. On top of the stone the elders proceeded to light a small fire. Fortunately for the boy, once lit the fire was swiftly transported to the main hearth, where it was used as the platform for a bigger one.

Wheatcroft describes a very similar act among the Tifalmin. Within the third stage of initiation, called *Selban*, Tifalmin novices were, like their Oksapmin counterparts, also taught how to make and use fire. Furthermore, one of the means through which Tifalmin elders communicated this power was also to construct a fire on the chest of an initiate. Wheatcroft (1975:497) relates in detail how at one point in the ceremony:

The men send for the initiates. They arrive without fanfare at the clearing, led by two guardians. One of the older initiates is then asked to lie on his back in the clearing. The other boys sit in a line nearby and watch. Then several men approach the supine lad. One man carries *mogul* cane leaves, thoroughly dried, which he proceeds to crush in the palm of his hand and pile up on the chest of the initiate. Other tinder is added - the minute nest of a tiny *wabil* marsupial. Another man lays a dry piece of *bufan* wood on top of this little heap of dry tinder. Two other men now hold the wood horizontally across the boy's chest, while a senior man 'shows' the initiates how to start a fire using the cane-friction method. He passes a piece of very tough cane across the *bufan* wood and, while standing astride the boy facing him, begins to pull the cane rapidly back and forth on the soft wood. It soon begins to smoke and eventually ignites the tinder.

It is interesting to note, firstly, how this dramatic and painful performance occurs in both Oksapmin and Tifalmin initiation ceremonies and, secondly, how such commonality indicates a considerable sharing and imitation of ritual knowledge and techniques among related Min

¹⁰ The stone was round in shape and very heavy. I was told it was used in many ritual ceremonies and whoever possessed it would receive considerable material blessings.

groups as argued by Barth (1987; see also Lohmann 2000a:147–148 for description of a similar Asabano performance done in preparation for war).

No subsequent acts were described by my informants for this stage of initiation, suggesting that here the ritual concluded. A curious observation is that as these scheduled acts were being performed, the elders were regularly attempting to force morsels of decomposed possum into the initiates' mouths. This background activity must have strongly shaped the initiates' overall experience of the ritual. Indeed, my elderly interlocutors recounted to me with contorted faces the putrid smell and disgusting taste of the rotten meat rubbed about their faces. Quite understandably, as a result of this offensive act, any idea of eating was immediately dispelled, which is precisely what the elders had intended. Indeed, the motivation behind this practice was to 'stop the stomach from getting too big,' in other words to enhance the ability of the initiates to resist hunger and to make them physically resilient.

There is much about the *lät kāk ben* that I did not discover but now occasionally ponder. For instance, I cannot say whether or not the boys received any formal instruction in the construction of fire. Surely through the bodily and aesthetic mediums employed they would have learned, at least subconsciously, about the capacity of fire to heat, cook, injure or kill both humans and animals. But I do not know if this cryptic, heavily symbolic code was augmented by language or even basic imitative techniques. More generally speaking I would like to have spent longer speaking with my informants about what meaning the described events held for them. From our discussions, I gleaned that there was a pervasive sense of fear, wonder, and awe at all they beheld, but the deeper meaning of particular acts was not excavated.

The third and penultimate stage of initiation into the Oksapmin men's cult took its name from the house within which it was staged, that is, the *lät äp*, or 'fire house.' As its title denotes, this phase shared with the preceding one a concern with fire. In further parallel, *lät äp* were constructed in two locations within the Oksapmin territory, one at the top of the Bāk Valley at Kweptanäp, the other in deep bush midway between Mitianäp and the Om River. The latter's remote location likely reflects the importance placed upon secrecy by the organisers of the event.

Following the conclusion of the *lät kāk ben*, initiates remained cloistered away from their kin for a period of approximately two to three months. News then began to circulate

throughout the Oksapmin population that the *lät äp* was under construction and that the third initiatory phase would soon commence. This announcement catalysed a series of additional preparatory events. Firstly, elders of the participating clans ventured to the bush surrounding their villages to collect copious amounts of stinging nettle (*wän*) traditionally used to alleviate joint pain and stomach ache. At the same time, each clan killed a pig and harvested considerable quantities of taro. Once everything was in order, the clan set off for their respective *lät äp* location. I describe this procession from the perspective of the initiates and elders of the Wetäp clan, since it was individuals belonging to this group who, in this instance, were my informants.

Although positioned roughly equal distance between the two *lät äp*, initiates of the Wetäp clan customarily attended the event held on the rugged, densely forested land behind Mitianäp. Their route to this location passed through both Wauläp and Bitianäp, where initiates of each of these areas augmented the group as they travelled onwards to their destination. Prior to arrival at the *lät äp*, the composite group of perhaps 100 initiates and a dozen or so elders then briefly camped at the foot of a hill and prepared a large mumu (earth oven), within which was cooked the fresh produce and meat that each clan had brought with them. To the question of whether or not the party immediately consumed this cooked food or carried it with them to the *lät äp* I did not receive an answer. Yet, to my thinking, in light of the physically torturous ordeal the initiates were soon to undergo, and of which the elders of course had foreknowledge, I expect that they would have eaten most, if not all, of it in order to bolster their strength. This view is supported by the fact that my account of the events within the ritual house contains no mention of participants eating either pork or taro. Either way, following the mumu, the large group made their way directly to the *lät äp*, arriving late in the afternoon. The night ahead would be unforgettable.

On arriving at the *lät äp*, the cohort was met by a large group of elders who welcomed them with song. After this formality, the initiates were led into the inky gloom of the ritual house and seated. It must be held in mind that at this point the boys likely had scant idea of what awaited them and that their anxiety must have been considerable. Each individual novice was then paired up with an elder who would act both as their mentor and tormentor throughout the ritual. From here proceedings started upon a course which would not be deviated from until sunrise. Further, not only would activity be repetitive, but for the initiates it would also prove excruciating.

It will be recalled that in preparation for the *läit äp*, participating elders collected a very large quantity of stinging nettle (*wän*). The reason for doing so was now revealed to the unfortunate initiates. Without warning or explanation, each elder began to apply the stinging nettle to the naked body of the novice to which they had been entrusted. The process was both systematic and sustained. Firstly, excepting the genitals, application of the plant targeted the most sensitive parts of the body, namely, the flanks of the torso from the underarm down to the hip. Second, this activity did not cease until dawn the next day. For the novices there was simply no respite.

The experiential core of this ritual is quite obviously pain. Early in my fieldwork I started to take notice of individuals removing a leaf or two of the stinging nettle from their string bags and rub it with varying levels of vigour into their skin, usually the knee or stomach. After asking a few questions I discovered that the plant was used to alleviate pain. Intrigued, I asked if I might try some, if only to gauge in an informal way the plant's medicinal strength. My friends agreed, but further cautioned me that I could expect to feel some pain upon the plant touching my skin. Unperturbed by their words, I took a single leaf and rubbed it on my knee. The pain didn't arrive immediately, making me think quite arrogantly that these men had underestimated me. But around fifteen seconds later the pain arrived and with considerable force. It felt both hot and sharp, and pulsed incessantly for at least a minute or two before abating.

Although brief, this event provided first hand insight into the physiological effects caused by application of this stinging nettle to the human body. Much more importantly, it also made me realise how incomparable my discomfort was to that experienced by the initiates. They had this noxious leaf applied not to their joints but to some of the most sensitive regions of their bodies and not momentarily but continuously for seven or eight hours. The agony they experienced is truly difficult to imagine. Needless to say, many of the initiates reacted adversely to the treatment they received at the hands of the elders. My informants recalled to me their memories of boys writhing in pain, screaming, as well as vomiting blood during the ordeal.

What was the point of such torture? When asked this question my informants replied simply that it was done with a view to strongim skin, a Tok Pisin expression meaning to strengthen one's body, that is, to make the boys tough, able to endure and overcome physical and psychological adversity. Whether or not this was the only meaning communicated

through the harmful application of stinging nettle to the body, I cannot say. But since this is the indigenous interpretation and also the phenomenological core of the ritual then it can be assumed that such meaning is central. However, while pain was foremost, it was not the only thing being learned by the initiates.

As with the *lät kāk ben*, the possum also featured in the *lät äp*, yet this time in a much less invasive manner. Rather than having decomposed possum meat rammed into their mouths and aggressively rubbed about their faces, this time the applicants had the ash of deliberately burnt possum fur smeared on their faces. The particular species of possum used is known to the Oksapmin as *kutin*. As well as being the largest possum variety known to the Oksapmin, *kutin* possess a distinctive white patch of fur. It was this part of the creature's anatomy that was singed until black, with the ash so created being applied by the elders onto the face of each lad. But again, no interpretation was given for these acts, either during or subsequent to the performance. One can expect the appearance of the possum to be connected in some, probably important, way with its place in the system of traditional Oksapmin food taboos. In any case, the significance of the possum can again be noted.

An interval of three to four years obtained between the completion of the *lät äp* and entrance to the final stage of Oksapmin initiation. The latter took place within the *yewel äp*, the ancestral cult and magic house proper, and lasted for around two weeks. The two elderly Wetäp men I interviewed about initiation told me that most of today's wards had their own *yewel äp*, which equates to roughly one per every two or three clans. Wetäp initiates attended the *hohäp yewel*, which was overseen by the neighbouring Ränim clan. Outside, possibly attached to the house, were constructed many beds on which the boys would sleep. Its dark interior was elaborately furnished with skulls, other human bones, and a variety of ritual sacra.

The account of proceedings I received from my elderly informants was only partially sequential, yet still describes both the main events as well as the themes that underpinned them. The primary function of the *yewel äp* was to reveal to initiates and reaffirm for their mentors the sacred corpus of magical knowledge concerning taro. Like taro itself, this *raison d'être* may seem plain, yet the traditional significance of this vegetable within the Min area cannot be understated. Indeed, practically every anthropologist to have worked in this unique cultural world has remarked at some point upon the attention and value placed by these societies upon taro (see especially Jorgensen 1981a; Crook 1999). This is mainly because of

the intimate relationship between taro and masculinity (see Crook 1999:232 for an account of similar associations among the Angkaiyakmin of Bolivip). The social destiny of every man was inextricably bound to the fertility and growth of his taro garden. Abundance indicated blessing while a barren garden told of moral failure. With so much at stake in this economic morality it naturally made sense to teach young men as rigorously as possible the techniques required to ensure a healthy crop.

The *yewel äp* pursued this aim primarily through verbal instruction in garden magic. Once the initiates had entered the house they were seated in clan groups. Participating clans included the Wetäp, Ränim, Lamhei, Atän, and Kweptän, all of which contributed both initiates and instructors to the occasion. Of the multitude of tricks and skills they were taught was one that particularly impressed itself upon my informants. Members of the Atän and Kweptän clans explained to the initiates that if they wished for their taro to grow well they should, when planting, repeatedly chant ‘*God bopor, hul, hul,*’ which when translated means ‘God’s heart, make it hot.’ This seems to be a reference to the sun as deity or ‘God,’ a belief that appears in Oksapmin mythology too (see Chapter 7).¹¹ Such an opinion is further supported by the fact that the Atän clan takes its name from the sun and also that this particular belief was held most strongly by the Bäk Valley peoples, to which both the Atän and Kweptän belong.

Transmission of knowledge and status to the initiates in the *yewel äp* also occurred through the use of body symbolism. At some point during proceedings all participants were cut just below the elbow with a sharpened stone, which produced a small flow of blood. Initiates were told that this cut simultaneously facilitated the exit of their old selves and the entrance into their person of all they were being taught. It thus marked the physical interface between two ritually defined stages of identity. But what other messages were communicated to initiates within the *yewel äp*?

While the central topic of education was taro, other information was also conveyed to the initiates. But because most of it was expressed using material symbols and without the aid of language it remains unclear as to how it was locally interpreted. For instance, at one point the elders brought into the *yewel äp* a dead pig. To its nape they attached a bright bird of paradise plume while around its neck they fastened a length of bush rope. The rope was then

¹¹ Whether or not the word ‘God’ used here is an Oksap term or one loaned from English I did not discover, yet I expect the latter is the case.

pulled in such a way that the pig's resplendent head bobbed up and down as though alive, possibly for anthropomorphic effect, a process Guthrie (1995) considers essential to religion more generally. Another interesting act involved a possum, an animal which, as we have seen, figured prominently throughout all stages of initiation. During their time in the *yewel äp*, the initiates' consumption of water was tightly regulated, occurring only at specially appointed times and in specially designed ways. On one such occasion, apparently after not having had any water for five days, the elders instructed a handful of boys to one night hunt for possum. The fur of one of the captured animals was then singed on a fire, with the resultant ash being applied by the elders to the arms and face of each initiate. This act was explained as being undertaken to promote successful hunting. What came next was not subject to verbal explanation and, in any case, likely defied it. The same possum was disembowelled and through its carcass, from the mouth to an opening made in the tail, water was poured into the initiates' mouths.¹²

It was this act that concluded the final stage of initiation into the Oksapmin ancestral cult. After drinking the possum water they looked outside to see lined up on either side of the entrance the elders, ceremonially bedecked, and each with a handful of stinging nettle. As though to impress upon them one last time that initiation to full social manhood was not a status awarded lightly, the elders yet again vigorously applied the plant to the initiates' bodies. Having endured this final ordeal each initiated man travelled to their respective house where they found waiting hung upon the wall a string bag full of cooked taro, as though to symbolically express that their ritual education would lead to such benefits.

Perey writes (1973:126) of a final hair binding ceremony, *Mafom*, that occurred once the initiates had returned to their respective communities. This was never mentioned by my own interlocutors, perhaps because it occurred outside of the formal four stage process. Barth also provides an overview of this ceremony among other Min groups, most of whom call it *mafomnang* (Barth 1987:4–9). Perey describes how

the young men's hair is bound into topknots using wild pandanus leaf, other materials, and string made by the women...the next morning they gather in two large groups at the Tekin River, where they wash, are rubbed on the face with stinging nettle, anointed with the fat of pigs, and decorated with red paint, parrot feathers, and tamarind seed health charms.

¹² Perey also describes this act (1973:124), but locates it within the second stage of initiation, the *lät käk ben*.

It is also possible that Perey's informants were referring to their own participation in *mafom* among the Telefolmin (Jorgensen 1981a), since this was also the name of one of their stages of initiation that presumably some Oksapmin had undergone.

Having completed the four stage process, from the *hän äp tem* to the *lät käk ben* to the *lät äp* and finally the *yewel äp*, Oksapmin males were systematically indoctrinated into the sacred knowledge and techniques of their ethnic group and thereby considered adult men. As described above, this sacred corpus primarily concerned taro and to a lesser extent the possum and other masculine responsibilities. The initiation system was certainly the central engine room for the generation of sacred meaning within the life of most Oksapmin adult men. For several years they were enmeshed in its strictures and processes and emerged from them socially, emotionally, and intellectually transformed. But the initiation cult was but one part of the Oksapmin religion at the time it encountered the Baptist missionaries in 1962. Indigenous Oksapmin religion was a multi-dimensional field composed of many kinds of sacred ideas and actions adapted to different contexts and purposes. I now consider those other levels.

The Yuän myth and ritual

Stepwise initiation into the ancestral cult was the basic component of Oksapmin ritual life and indeed of indigenous religion in the Min culture area. But alongside and supporting this complex were a host of other sacred practices and beliefs. According to anthropologists, one of the historically defining features of the Min religious system was a common belief in the mythical ancestress Afek and also the paramount sacrality of the village of Telefolip as her resting place (Barth 1987; Craig and Hyndman 1990; Jorgensen 1996). Afek, the dominant Telefol designation, has many other localised names, including Karigan, Fukunkon, and Fitipkanip (Jorgensen 1996:193). The Oksapmin name for this mythical actor is Yuän Ku. But while I refer to Yuän as female, my ethnographic data suggests the situation is not quite as clear cut as others have suggested.

The majority of the people I spoke with referred to this legendary figure as Yuän Ku, denoting a woman. But some insisted that it was Yuän Hän, denoting a man; others stated it was Yuän Gämin, denoting a married couple; and still more suggested it might have been a

brother and sister pair. This variation is reflected in the myths that describe the movements of Yuän. It is generally held that Yuän Ku crossed into the Oksapmin territory from across the Strickland Gorge and that, travelling westward towards Telefolip, she enculturated the Oksapmin people, exposing them to new cultural and religious customs. Some say she travelled alone, some say it was actually a man, while others contend that her mission was carried out with the assistance of either her husband or brother. The Mianmin, a group living to the north of the Oksapmin, believed that she was androgynous, like the cassowary (Gardner 1984). In support of his thesis of ‘ecological superposition,’ Brutti (1997) refers to Yuän as a ‘cosmogonical and ecological master’ (1997:109) and transcendent ‘god’ (1997:111) but then confuses the matter by stating that ‘Yuan [sic] did not create either humans and animals or the environment’ which is exactly what one would expect of a cosmogonic actor (1997:91). Not once throughout my fieldwork did people say that Yuän was a god or that she/he/they created the world or the universe. What we do know for sure is that Yuän, most likely a woman, and possibly or sometimes acting with the assistance of a man, was a powerful mythical ancestress who is thought to have shaped the Oksapmin cultural landscape. It is also likely that she shared attributes of Afek and also that Telefolip was of religious significance, but this Telefol-centric point of view I do not uncritically accept. Not only did people have several variations of the Yuän myth, but not one of them contained mentioned of Telefolip; instead, in pragmatic fashion, my informants often referred to Mt Fubilan, the site of the giant Ok Tedi gold and copper mine, as the place to which Yuän eventually retired, thus positing a link between their own cultural traditions and the wealth generated from the mine (see also Jorgensen 2007 and 2001:122 for similar claims among the Telefolmin).

Foremost among the traditions introduced to the Oksapmin by Yuän was a sacrificial ritual designed to promote the fertility of land and people. My account of this ritual differs significantly from that of Brutti (1997:92–96) and where this occurs I make note. Brutti claims (1997:90) that the ritual was performed at the end of what he calls a ‘transgenerational cycle’ of male initiation, which he calculates to have been every six generations. The focus of the ritual was the successive sacrifice of three individual human beings belonging to three different Oksapmin clans. Brutti makes mention of only two of these. The account I provide here also exhibits many parallels with Poole’s description of the Bimin-Kuskusmin ‘great pandanus rite’ (1983:17–29) and I point these out where necessary. It is firstly important to note that the Bimin-Kuskusmin sacrificed only two individuals, the first ‘an appropriate

victim from the prescribed Oksapmin community of human men,' the second a local woman, corresponding to the two phases of the ritual process (Poole 1983). The fact that the Bimin-Kuskusmin captured and also ate portions of Oksapmin males for ritual purposes is interesting for it indicates the powerful and sometimes deadly religious relations between groups. As far as I know, the Oksapmin never took ritual victims from the Bimin-Kuskusmin.

The first phase of the ritual occurred within specially constructed houses known as *Yuän äp*. My informants, belonging to the Wetäp clan, knew of two such houses, one of which was situated in the Tomianäp/Ränimäp area, the other near Wauläp. This supports Craig's (1990:78) supposition that two houses were built by Yuän on her travels throughout the region. Wetäp men, some of the principal actors in this ritual event, usually attended the latter house. Immediately after the house was built, a young girl from the Waul clan was killed. Aside from these basic characteristics of the victim I did not ascertain the circumstances surrounding the killing, such as the manner in which it was undertaken, who performed it, and also why an individual of that clan, age, and gender was sacrificed. Poole describes how, as part of their own paramount ritual, the Bimin-Kuskusmin also sacrificed a female victim for 'the fertility, propagation, and growth' of their nut pandanus groves (1983:18). However, in contrast, this act was undertaken as part of the second and final phase of their performance; the victim was an adult woman; and lastly, unlike the Bimin-Kuskusmin, the Oksapmin appear not to have partaken in any anthropophagic behaviour. Following her death the victim was taken to the Wauläp *Yuän äp*. Inside the house the girl's body was laid on the floor and then covered with earth. On top of this the elders then made a fire. It will be recalled that this was also done to a novice within the second stage of male initiation, or *lät kāk ben*. However, here the fire was larger and allowed to burn until the girl's body was reduced entirely to ash. Participants had explained to them that this ritual cremation was done in order for taro to become abundant or 'kamap planti.' It is interesting to note here that the neighbouring Asabano found any form of cremation abhorrent, since they believed such an act would destroy the soul of the deceased (Lohmann 2005). Whether or not the ash was utilised in any way I did not discover. As with certain phases of the initiation system, here, too, participants had their consumption of water regulated. Apparently the men involved were prohibited from drinking water for several days and it was only after the cremation of the girl's body that the ban was lifted. The men that participated in this first act remained in the house for several days after the sacrifice had been undertaken.

Once this first phase of the ritual was complete, the senior men of the Wetäp clan immediately mobilised for the second. Of the three human sacrifices, this was the most important it seems, as suggested by the attention paid to it by my informants and, it turns out, also by Brutti's (1997). Having assembled, the Wetäp group made directly for Dubän, in the extreme southeastern corner of the Oksapmin territory, where they were to kill a young man from the Alipim clan. This individual was chosen, firstly, because he was in peak physical condition; as such he embodied those attributes which the ritual sought to impart to the world at large. The second reason for his selection was that he belonged to the Alipim clan, a social group historically believed by the Oksapmin to have been created by Yuän herself. The fertility intrinsic to his body was thus symbolically augmented by his social identity. He was the ideal sacrifice.

The Alipim clan understandably lived in considerable fear about the fate of their young men at the hands of the Wetäp. So much so, in fact, that it was told to me that occasionally Alipim women would kill their male children to spare them being violently murdered later in life and also to preclude the grief they themselves would feel from losing a child to whom they had become strongly attached.

Through guile and deception the armed Wetäp drew their victim to a secluded area. The man was then shot in the leg with an arrow. This part of the anatomy was deliberately targeted since the initial objective was to incapacitate and not to kill. Mortally wounded the man then cried out to all within earshot that the Wetäp had come to take his life. With stone or wood his joints were then smashed one by one, crippling him completely. The next task was to then transport the victim back to Sambate. But rather than carry the victim he was instead rolled along the ground. This obviously would have greatly prolonged the return journey but it had the more important and desired effect of allowing the victim's blood, his sacred life force, to seep into and revitalise the land upon which the Oksapmin people lived and depended. Eventually the party returned home and deposited the body on a small hill on Wetäp land situated roughly half way between where Sambate and Landslide are today.

The man was killed and divided in the same way as a pig, a point mentioned by my informants and also by Brutti (1997:93–94). First he was shot through a vital organ with an arrow, killing him instantly. Using a sharp bamboo knife his body was then cut into portions. During this process the ritual participants smeared the victim's blood over their bodies. Because of its regenerative attributes, any excess blood was allowed to soak into the earth.

The flesh was stripped and buried near the Tekin River, an act which many people believe is responsible for the continued high fertility of land in this particular area.

The next and most important aspect of the rite was the distribution of skeletal material. Like the body of a cooked pig, the different parts of the victim's skeleton ranged in their magical value and were thus carefully and judiciously allocated. Bones were firstly awarded to various Oksapmin clans. In traditional Oksapmin thought, it was believed that the power to attract wealth and influence resided in the body, particularly in the back (*kom*). A man with high social status was known as *kom hälsi hän*, that is, 'man with power in his back.' In light of this association, it is no surprise that the bones from this anatomical region carried the greatest value. The pelvic bone was perhaps most prized of all and was given to the Waul clan as a display of gratitude for services rendered within the *Yuän äp*, where the trophy would thereafter be stored. A cervical vertebra, with its distinctive transverse foramina (holes on either side), was taken by the Wetäp and placed in a magic house known as the *kum äp* where it was subsequently used in rites to promote the growth of *karuka* pandanus or *ket*. The skull was customarily given to the clans of the Upper Tekin Valley, such as the Bäk and Tek.

Besides being distributed among the Oksapmin themselves, skeletal material also circulated among neighbouring ethnic groups including the Bimin-Kuskusmin, Feramin, Telefolmin, Urapmin, and Wopkaimin, all of whom, it can be presumed, wished to capture the potent regenerative force the bones contained. According to my informants, it was only through their exchanges with the Oksapmin that these mentioned groups learned of the cult at all. The constituent knowledge and skills, they say, travelled east to west, following the paths along which the remains of Yuän's victim were traded. This local explanation is at odds with other anthropological accounts of the Afek cult that posit the Telefolmin as its custodians (Jorgensen 1981a).

While details of the second sacrificial event were plentiful, what occurred within the third and final phase of the ritual remains somewhat obscure. It is not described in any depth by Brutti (1997:95–96), and neither did my own informants know much about it. The scant information I did acquire is as follows. Once the bones of the second victim had been allocated, the last sequence of the ritual was commenced. Whether or not an interval obtained I was not told. However, I assume that, like the transition between the first two stages, this also was undertaken with little delay. As with the preceding two phases of the ritual, the

third, too, centred upon the sacrifice of a human individual. The victim was another young man but this time belonged to the Dilän clan, a group based in the Lower Tekin Valley near Mitianäp. According to Brutti (1997:95), this clan was supposedly created by Yuän and bestowed with her life-giving capacities. Aside from these basic characteristics and associations, however, nothing else was known or revealed about the event by my informants, which suggests that their involvement in this final phase was not as central as in the previous one. Brutti (1997:95) states that the Dilän were the protagonists, sacrificing someone from ‘inside their own clan,’ but no ethnographic evidence is presented to support this. In any case, this third sacrifice and presumably the distribution of skeletal material completed the fertility ritual introduced to the Oksapmin by the mythical ancestress Yuän. For the Oksapmin, its fulfilment meant the regeneration of the land upon which human life depended. It was the sacrifice of three individuals for the benefit of the entire society. As will be seen in the following chapter, the existence of this ritual, and the mythical ancestral figure it was designed by and for, were crucially important factors influencing Oksapmin conversion to Christianity.

Thus far in the current section I have been primarily concerned to outline the institutionalised ritual life of the Oksapmin at the time of systematic contact with Europeans beginning in the early 1960s. The two primary elements of this complex were the initiation system and the Yuän Ku sacrifice, both of which acted in various ways to revitalise the biocosmos. In addition to these were other ritualised activities imbued with religious significance. Here I will mention two, namely, celebratory performances or singsing and also magic.

Singsing

First it should be pointed out that the terms singsing and magic retrospectively designate areas, and not particular kinds, of activity; within each existed a great deal of variation in performative content, form, context, and rationale. Singsing, for instance, is a Tok Pisin word that is now used to describe a wide range of traditional celebratory performances. Before the arrival of Christianity, the Oksapmin collectively sang and danced for an array of social occasions. Sometimes performance accompanied a particular event or occurrence in the life of the group. Whenever a couple married, an esteemed guest visited, and so forth, song and

dance served to both mark and enhance the occasion; it announced to those present that the event was noteworthy and also impressed itself vividly upon their senses.

As well as performances embedded within important social junctures were those undertaken for the satisfaction of singing and dancing itself. These gatherings typically occurred at night and often lasted until morning (Perey 1973:172). They were held either at an open air location within the village or within specially constructed dancing houses known as *tel äp*. By Oksapmin standards, these structures were huge, with a standing capacity of roughly 100 people. In the middle of these airy houses, some of which I had the chance to inspect among the Om River peoples, was mounted a large wooden pole around which the throng danced. In each corner was installed a firebox for heating and cooking. Unlike the ritual contexts described earlier, participation was open and broad. These were not restricted, secretive undertakings but rather community events which theoretically anyone was free to attend. People came not only from the immediate area but also from neighbouring clans and ethnic groups, particularly the Bimin, to enjoy the festivities.

Within singing, participants were often bedecked in ceremonial garb. Such adornment took a variety of forms, many of which were gender specific. First were the resplendent headdresses composed principally of red bird of paradise plumage but which sometimes contained feathers of the cassowary and other bird species. Initiated men also delicately threaded feathers and pig tusks through their pierced septum (Perey 1973:173). This section of the population further elaborated their appearance by wearing the string bags (*ung*) that accorded their rank within the initiation system. Coastal shells, usually cowrie and other lustrous varieties, were stitched onto rope belts and slung over the shoulder by both men and women but predominately the latter. These shell ornaments, still in use today, are known to my interlocutors as *tiambel*, and referred to by Perey as *baneng*.

The singing that took place within these contexts likely complemented the given social occasion. The Oksapmin composed songs for certain events, such as marriage songs, songs of welcome, mourning, and so forth, as well as general songs applicable across contexts. The style of singing, which can still be heard both within churches and calendrical performance events such as Independence Day (September 16th), is characterised by a strong accent placed upon each beat. This mirrored and emphasised the basic rhythm patterns provided by the wooden hand drum, or *wälon*, the sole form of indigenous instrumentation within these performative contexts and played only by men. I assume that dancing techniques

were similarly context specific, varying from one type of occasion to the next, though perhaps less so than did singing. While I did not conduct any interviews on the topic or have the opportunity to exhaustively catalogue the Oksapmin dance repertoire, I often observed within church services a couple of styles and techniques. The first of these is known locally as the ‘snake dance,’ whereby a chain of individuals held each other by the waist and followed a meandering course around the performance space. The second was a dancing technique whereby individuals adopted a split stance and then, jumping, alternated that stance with every beat of the music. Both of these styles are described in similarly brief terms by Perey (1973:175–176).

As will be seen in the following chapter on conversion, the perception of singing as either religious or simply social occasions was a crucial point for the ABMS within the process of evangelisation. The ramifications of having considered it one or the other are still apparent today.

Magic

The other arena of ritual that I will briefly mention is magic. Within traditional Oksapmin society magic was employed for a myriad of purposes, yet following Malinowski (1922) we can say that most were directed toward managing and controlling enterprises that were inherently risky or uncertain. Unlike the Kiriwinians, the Oksapmin did not have to worry about perilous sea voyages. Rather, the principal areas of social activity to which magic was directed regarded land based subsistence. When planting a garden, for instance, both men and women would chant certain sacred incantations, manipulate certain devices, and so forth, in an attempt to ensure the future abundance of their crop (Perey 1973:142). Likewise, when hunting, men would, and many still do, carry certain special items with them into the bush, such as fragrant tree bark, or make certain implorations to the bush spirits (*sup*) in order to make their hunting trip successful. The people primarily responsible for the performance of, and indoctrination into, the realm of magic were known as *kusem*, either a *kusem hän* (magic man) or *kusem ku* (magic woman).

The afterlife

I now turn to consider mortuary ritual and the beliefs associated with death and the afterlife. Prior to the introduction of Christianity and ideas of Heaven and Hell, the Oksapmin had their own notions of post-mortem spirituality. Every individual was believed to possess both a perishable body and a single immaterial soul, their animate life force, called *hanip dä* (the life of a person; see also Perey 1973:135). Upon death a person's body was taken to the bush and exposed upon an elevated platform until only the bones remained. These were then taken and stored either in a cult house, cave, or other suitable place, depending upon the individual's social status (cf. Lohmann 2005). It was the responsibility of the living to ensure the departed spirit travelled safely to the *hanip dä äpti* (afterworld). The passage of a spirit to the afterlife was imperilled by a mythical dog known as Kolom who was known to devour souls and thus prevent them from ever attaining repose. Appeasement took the form of a pig sacrifice, the soul of the pig acting as a substitute for that of the human, satisfying the dog so that the spirit could easily pass. The *hanip dä äpti* was a utopian land of plenty where taro abounded and no one was left wanting, but this was as much as I could glean about this place in its traditional state. Subsequent to encountering the Australian colonial administration and the ABMS in the early 1960s the Oksapmin reimagined this world along the lines of Western modernity, which I detail later in the thesis.

The spirituality of nature

The Oksapmin world is populated not only by human spiritual forces but also by non-human ones, something only briefly touched upon by Perey (1973:139). Historically and to some extent today, the Oksapmin believed that various dimensions of the natural world were inhabited and animated by *sup*, which simply means power or force. *Sup* are similar in several ways to the Urapmin *motobil* described by Robbins (1995:214–215), spirits which also reside within 'the bush, the streams, the trees, and...the land itself.' They also resemble the Asabano supernatural beings portrayed by Lohmann (2000a:82–83). As he states, '*Kabiambeno*, stone spirits, *nambeno*, tree spirits, *mulumbeno*, vine spirits and *nomombeno*, water spirits were unpredictable and extremely dangerous, able to steal a person's spirit by looking at them, for the sake of a meal of human flesh or simple vindictiveness' (2000a:82–83). For all their likeness, however, a key point of difference between the Oksapmin and their neighbours, is that *sup* are impersonal, generalised animistic forces, whereas the entities

mentioned for the Urapmin and Asabano both appear to be supernatural beings with distinct personalities.

Like the Asabano and Urapmin, the Oksapmin also subdivided the concept of *sup* into particular kinds of power corresponding to different natural entities. For instance, power was thought to reside in the earth (*mongsup*), water (*tomsup*), stone (*kweisup*), taro (*fäsup*), and so on. Each of these powers was the province of one or other clan group and it was the magicians and experts of those clans that were solicited whenever each respective power was sought or needed (Perey 1973:139–140). It was they who knew the utterances and possessed the ritual paraphernalia required in order to realise the force within these elements. But while they were subject to a certain degree of human control, the *sup* were by no means under any obligation to follow human direction at all times. When a hunter ventured into the bush at night there was no guarantee that the *mongsup* or *tomsup* would not plunge him down a limestone crevice or engulf him in a flooded stream. As such, these sacred forces were the object of fear and reverence, a spiritual nemesis that humans engaged only with the greatest caution.

Witchcraft and sorcery

It was not only the *sup* who were feared by the Oksapmin. Indeed their world contained spiritual beings and forces that were far more insidious and immediate. Above all else, and it remains very much the same today, the Oksapmin feared witchcraft and sorcery. I discuss these in greater detail in later chapters and here provide only an overview. Sorcery is broken into two distinct types. The first of these is known as *äm* and entails the sorcerer (who can be of either gender) using a particularly heavy, round stone, known as the *äm san*, to first smash their victim unconscious and then hammer into their body a variety of sharp, nail-like objects. The sorcerer then wakes the victim and gives him or her news that they have four or five days to live. After the allotted period the sharp objects penetrate the heart of the victim killing them instantly.

The second kind of sorcery is known as *kimon* and is closer to classic anthropological and popular understandings of sorcery. Here the sorcerer firstly acquires either part of the target's body or something that has been in direct contact with it. This includes fingernails

and hair but might also include cigarette butts, leftover food, and so forth. The sorcerer then manipulates this object in such a way as to injure or kill the victim.

Then there is witchcraft. I never conducted any interviews on the topic of witchcraft prior to the introduction of Christianity *per se*, but because this cultural realm has persisted strongly into the present, much of the information I collected on it in its current form can, with certain inferences and modifications, be used to reconstruct a general picture of what it was like before. Here I distinguish witchcraft from sorcery on the basis that, *inter alia*, the sorcerer manipulates real, physical objects to pursue their wicked intent whilst the witch is thought to act spiritually, utilising innate evil powers to attack the soul of their victim, a distinction discussed and critiqued throughout the chapters of Stephen's edited volume *Sorcerer and Witch in Melanesia* (1987). Witchcraft, both the art and its practitioners, are known by the name *tamäm*. Among the Oksapmin, both men and women can be *tamäm*. Of significance is the fact that witchcraft operates through and upon those very relationships by which society is integrated. As discussed above, Oksapmin descent and inheritance is patrilineal; an individual takes the clan identity of their father and property is passed through the paternal line from father to son(s). Oksapmin witchcraft operates in like manner. That is, a witch can only attack a person with whom they are patrilineally related. One cannot attack one's mother, sister, or maternal cousins, but can attack one's siblings, father, paternal cousins, and so on. In short, witchcraft problematises the central principle of Oksapmin sociality and kinship.

As mentioned, witchcraft is a spiritual act. It is also a furtive one, set apart, taking place not only invisibly, but also in secret. Typically at night, the witch will fall into a trance, reverie, or sleep, at which time they depart from the realm of the visible and sensible to that of the hidden. As I state in a later chapter, the witch does not travel to the afterlife but rather has revealed to them the spiritual dimensions of the everyday world imperceptible to ordinary human beings. This dimension is inhabited by living human souls. It is here that witches set about making their attack. They select their target and, either alone or with the assistance of other witches, attack and eat the soul of their victim. This spiritual assault manifests as sickness or death in the everyday world. Indeed, whenever an individual falls gravely or suddenly ill it is common to attribute witchcraft as the cause.

From the above descriptions it can be seen that sacred forces and ideas were basic to the Oksapmin lifeworld, either in the form of nature spirits, notions of the afterlife, or the dynamics of witchcraft and sorcery.

Taboo

The supernatural was also an important current in the world of Oksapmin taboo. In addition to the moral rules that governed everyday life there were more stringent, sacred sanctions that we can term taboos not only on account of their rigour but also their punitive consequences, the latter of which were often injurious. Rather than trying to catalogue the Oksapmin taboo system exhaustively (an impossible task in any case), for present purposes it will suffice to simply list a few examples and give an idea about what kind of things resulted from transgression.

Many Oksapmin taboos concerned water, particularly small pools and creeks. In the course of interviewing people about their culture and religion before the introduction of Christianity, it was mentioned on several occasions that it was strictly forbidden for certain bodies of water to be entered or utilised in any way lest that person incur misfortune. Even to set foot inside a prohibited stream or pool was to tempt a dark fate, let alone drink from or bathe in the water. Transgression was thought to typically result in sickness, often serious, sometimes fatal. But sometimes the water itself would wreak havoc, flooding or drowning the negligent individual or group.

As mentioned earlier, taboos also often concerned the consumption of food. Certain sections of society were prohibited from touching or consuming certain kinds of food. Most of these restrictions concerned meat (Perey 1973:288). For instance, it was strictly forbidden for women and children to, at least publicly, eat possum meat. Women had further restrictions placed upon their consumption of food and also physical movement whenever menstruating, lest they pollute or defile the group. Thus certain things Oksapmin considered to be off limits or prohibited no matter what the circumstance; failure to abide by such rules would result in a crippling spiritual attack.

Myth

The final aspect of the indigenous Oksapmin religion I will mention is myth. As with taboos, Oksapmin myths were numerous and diverse. Many of them are still told and believed today, a crucial fact that I take up later in the thesis. Mythological stories dealt with a wide range of phenomena. For instance, there were stories that concerned the existence and formation of certain, often peculiar, geological features. These often take the form of short anecdotes rather than extensive narratives. The narrow opening between two steep, thin walls of rock near Kunanäp in the lower Bäk Valley, for instance, is thought to have resulted from the impact of a rock blasted off the Mitianäp cliffs, several kilometres away in the Tekin Valley, by a lightning bolt, which itself was caused by the death of a prominent leader. A strangely shaped rock in the Gaua Valley was explained to me as having been a pig which later ossified. There are also myths, often very elaborate, that explain the origin of specific natural elements or occurrences, such as the stars, rainfall, taro, and so forth.

As well as natural phenomena, social phenomena are also explained through mythological stories. The social group basic to Oksapmin society, and indeed to PNG and Melanesia more generally, is the clan. Most, perhaps all, of these clans, including their divisions, possessed mythological stories describing the group's origin, including their apical ancestor, historical trajectory, and so forth. The line between myth and genealogy is often blurred here as imagined entities become the direct, named ancestors of living human beings, a difference which poses no problem for local people however.

Lastly, we have the dominant mythological narratives that in former times would have been known, in full or in part, by most Oksapmin people. Into this category would be included the story of Yuän Ku, the mythical ancestress whose cult I described above. So, too, would the story of the sun, known to the Oksapmin as *atän*, itself a kind of creation story about how the sun and certain social groups associated with it were formed. This narrative was particularly well known and important to the groups living in the Bäk Valley, although people throughout the wider Oksapmin area certainly knew of it. The third story with broad social distribution concerned the legendary thief and trickster Dahaplän. It is an extensive narrative that details the birth, life, and death of Dahaplän, paying close attention to the deceptive stratagems employed to fool his relatives and friends in order to gain various material and spiritual benefits. Both the story of Dahaplän and that of *atän* were recorded by Perey (1973:325–333), although only in abbreviated form.

Many Oksapmin myths are still known and told today. This is an important fact for a research project that concerns itself with the relationship between Christianity and the traditional cultural and religious world into which it was incorporated. As will be seen, since conversion to Christianity, these stories have been modified and arranged in ways that make them commensurate with the events depicted in the Bible. The last two myths I mentioned, those concerning the sun and Dahaplän, I use as examples of this process in a subsequent chapter (see Chapter 7).

4. Oksapmin Conversion to Christianity

The evangelisation of the Oksapmin

This segment of the chapter describes how the Oksapmin were introduced to Christianity by the ABMS and is based primarily on extensive written and verbal exchanges I have had with Reverend Keith Bricknell, the first missionary to live among the Oksapmin people. Once I returned from my ethnographic fieldwork I found his contact details and sent an email introducing myself and my work. This initiated what would become a long and very detailed back and forth between us, me sending (interminably) the questions and Keith providing the responses. We have also managed to meet face to face on the couple of occasions that Keith and his wife Val visited family in Canberra. All of the mentioned interaction has proven invaluable to my research as a whole, yet particularly beneficial in the current chapter.

The ABMS began preparing to evangelise the Oksapmin and their Min neighbours in 1950. During that year, at the first conference of Baptist Missionaries held at Baiyer River, the organisation agreed that it should expand its missionary activity beyond Baiyer River and Sau Valley (Kompam), then the only areas in which Baptist work was being carried out. Several male members of the mission subsequently decided to charter an aircraft and, accompanied by a government patrol officer, survey the considerable expanse of terrain lying west of Baiyer River to the newly opened government station at Telefomin. After crossing the Strickland Gorge the plane flew over a number of densely populated valleys, the inhabitants of which the patrol officer identified to all on board as the Oksapmin. The plane then continued on to Telefomin. Because they were numerous and densely settled, the Oksapmin were considered by the ABMS an eminently suitable group within which to conduct mission activity, since it would be possible to quickly disseminate religious information to a substantial population.

It is thus unsurprising to note that when the ABMS commenced missionary work at Telefomin in 1951, their aim was to introduce Christianity not only to the Telefol but to the Oksapmin as well. Several years passed before Don Doull, the senior missionary at Telefomin, travelled with a government patrol east into Oksapmin during the latter part of 1960. It is historically important to note that on this trip Doull was joined by Abipnok, a

young Oksapmin man from Hute Wava who, months earlier, had arrived at the Telefomin mission. This man would later emerge as a key figure within the early phases of evangelisation. Seeing firsthand the high concentration of people within the Tekin Valley confirmed in Doull's mind its suitability not only as a platform for mission activity but also as a location within which to establish a permanent footing. Consequently, on June 30th 1962, ABMS missionaries Don Doull and Keith Bricknell, together with several Oksapmin and Telefomin assistants, flew to Oksapmin with intentions of establishing a permanent Baptist mission in the Tekin Valley. The next day, the ABMS team, assisted by two Australian patrol officers based at the government station, travelled from the Trangap Valley, where they had landed, to the Tekin Valley, where they began searching for an appropriate site to construct an airstrip, a conduit through which the missionaries would acquire whatever they needed in terms of food, tools, and so forth. After having selected a location, the team repaired to the government station. Doull then returned to Telefomin while Bricknell remained in Oksapmin awaiting the arrival of fellow ABMS missionary Doug Vaughan, who had recently returned from furlough in Australia.

Immediately following Vaughan's arrival two weeks later, both men travelled to the Tekin Valley, where at the already selected location they erected a temporary corrugated iron shelter and began, firstly, clearing the airstrip site and second, building the first of two proposed houses. Following many tribulations over the ensuing weeks, Bricknell found himself alone and without assistance. Once he had managed to finish building the house, however, he was joined by his wife and two daughters. Yet much work still lay ahead. Firstly, due to difficulties with its approach, the airstrip had to be relocated to its present position. This entailed again clearing a considerable area of bush with little labour or capital. Such difficulties were partially overcome with the opening of a trade store, the modest profits from which allowed the airstrip construction to continue, eventually being completed in late 1963. Precisely how Bricknell motivated the Oksapmin to work on this project I did not learn, yet I assume it was principally through a payment of either cowrie shells or cash.

For the missionaries, building houses, airstrips, and trade stores, however, were physical activities ancillary to the really important spiritual work of evangelism. After all, the ABMS had chosen to establish themselves in the area, above all else, to spread the Word of God and convert the Oksapmin to Christianity. While Bricknell and the ABMS provided the impetus and direction for evangelisation, the actual task of introducing the Oksapmin people to the Christian faith was accomplished mainly by local people from in and around the area,

what Lange calls ‘the indigenous dimension’ of Pacific Christian history (2005:34). Of these, two men were of particular importance: Abipnok, the Oksapmin man referred to above and Yemis, a Telefol, both of whom had been trained at the Telefomin Bible School and travelled from Telefomin to Oksapmin with Doull and Bricknell on the initial flight of June 30th 1962. The two regularly led small teams consisting solely of men into and throughout the major valleys within the Oksapmin territory, where they explained to those interested what Christianity was and how it might benefit their lives. Perhaps a few months later, students of the Oksapmin Bible School were stationed at each of the main population centres visited by the evangelical teams, where they instituted regular Sunday services. This means that while the ABMS missionary acted as the administrative centre of the evangelical process, the actual work of interpreting the Bible for local people and of revealing to them the various techniques of Christian worship was ultimately shaped and determined by the Oksapmin evangelists themselves.

As told to me by both Bricknell and those Oksapmin who were alive at the time, most people were, understandably, initially circumspect. There was no sudden realisation by the Oksapmin that Christianity was worth adopting. I think it would be fair to say that all Oksapmin, regardless of age, were intensely curious as to the content of the Christian message, but this was by no means tantamount to their support or endorsement of it. One man stated that ‘it was difficult to listen with any real interest or belief to the very different things that Bricknell wanted us to hear’ (Draper 1990:176), while another recalled being frightened when asked to pray, saying that ‘at times everyone would be asked to close his eyes. The fellows were afraid and suspicious about this for they did not know what these newcomers might do to them while their eyes were closed’ (Draper 1990: 180). It is likely that similar attitudes prevailed away from the station although the level of fear was probably smaller in the absence of the white missionary himself.

It took three years of consistent evangelisation before any Oksapmin individual made the decision to convert to Christianity. Bricknell recalls Wednesday, 30th June 1965, precisely three years to the day since the ABMS team had arrived in the area, as being particularly important, since it was on this day that a young man by the name of Sep made clear his intention to become Christian, which he expressed to Bricknell in writing. This act was both the catalyst and harbinger of popular conversion to Christianity. Early the next morning Bricknell was accosted by two men, one Oksapmin and the other Bimin, who also made known their desire to become Christian. Then, later that day, a returning evangelical team

brought news that people from the Bäk Valley wished to convert. The interpreter of the team added that he too wished to become Christian. Throughout the remainder of the day many people travelled to the mission station with the same objective in mind. Significant religious transformation was beginning to take place.

All existing and potential converts were encouraged to attend a specially instituted weekly 'Tok Bilip' class, in which the fundamentals of the Christian faith were explained. This Sunday afternoon session supplemented the existing but limited weekly round of worship, which at that time consisted of weekend church services held alternately at the mission station and the Oksapmin patrol post and also a small service held on Sunday evenings at the Bricknell's house for those employed by the mission. Bricknell ordered the content of the class around three principal themes: (1) the phrases of the Apostles' Creed as published by the Lutheran and South Seas Evangelical Churches in PNG; (2) 'Living in Society' which dealt with personal behaviour, marriage, community responsibilities, and so forth; and (3) the church, ministry and sacraments (Bricknell 1986:88). After only a year, the number of individuals regularly attending the class had grown dramatically to approximately 400. This dramatic groundswell prompted Bricknell to organise the first baptisms and, through institutional extension, the formation of the first Oksapmin churches.

Thus it was on December 3rd, 1966 that the first baptismal service was held at the mission station. On that day 85 individuals were baptised, received into fellowship and participated in communion, consequently forming the Tekin Baptist Church (see Figure 2, following page). Three days later the same process was repeated at Wauläp, where 40 individuals were baptised, thus creating the second Oksapmin church. Shortly thereafter both churches elected their own pastors and deacons, all of whom were men. Pastors were chosen from the senior class of the Oksapmin Bible School that had been established in 1964, while the deacons were members of the given congregation elected on the basis of demonstrated leadership qualities. It is crucial to note that the first baptismal services, the election of individuals to the mentioned positions, as well as the evangelism that paved the way for both, were all undertaken by local people without direct involvement from Bricknell or any other ABMS missionary. This is a fundamental. In any case, over the next four years Christianity rapidly spread throughout the area to the point where in 1970 there had been formed 12 churches boasting a collective membership of roughly 800 people.



Figure 2. First Oksapmin baptismal service, December 3rd, 1966 (courtesy of Rev. Keith Bricknell)

As the new faith grew in popularity, church organisation and administration became increasingly localised. The recruitment of young men to leadership positions, formerly the responsibility of the evangelical teams led by Abipnok and Yemis, now fell to senior men within each respective congregation. Further, where the systematic explanation of Christianity had mainly been undertaken by Bricknell at the mission station, now local churches initiated their own Tok Bilip classes. The Oksapmin were well and truly taking ownership of religious institutions exogenously produced. This process of incorporating cosmological ideas and practices external to the immediate social milieu is of course nothing new for the Oksapmin. Indeed it has been argued by Barth (1987) that there traditionally existed a high degree of religious exchange between the Oksapmin and their neighbours. He explains that for the Min ‘there is an undeniable sharing of a wider stock of ideas than those embodied in the rites of one’s own community, and a potential whereby cultural materials can be, and clearly sometimes are, passed on to other communities and adopted or transformed by them’ (Barth 1987:9). But while we can therefore locate the adoption of Christianity within a long history of religious innovation, it is equally important to emphasise

its marked particularity. Above all, the material incorporated derived not from a neighbouring social group but from a different culture altogether. Although the Oksapmin were crucially involved in evangelisation and the subsequent organisation of their churches, the individuals responsible for introducing Christianity in the first place were not from neighbouring groups but were European Australians. We can thus see that the incorporation of Christianity shows both continuity and divergence with earlier modes of religious transformation.

By the early 1970s, then, the majority of Oksapmin people had converted to Christianity. Throughout the decade, and continuing into the present, the Oksapmin continued to describe themselves as Christian.

Oksapmin conversion to Christianity, as I have presented it, is unique within the Min area. That is because, for almost all other groups in the area, popular conversion on the scale I described above occurred only as the result of an indigenously orchestrated charismatic movement that began in 1977 at Duranmin within the Sepik Baptist College and irradiated through the region over the next four or five years, bringing with it profound religious and social change (Lohmann 2007b, 2000a; Robbins 2004; Jorgensen 1996). The leader of the movement was a Telefol man from Eliptamin named Diyos (the Telefol pronunciation of George, a name given to him when working as a cook at Telefomin). Of its many interesting qualities, the revival was most noteworthy for the fact that the people that really made it work were women, in particular, ol spirit meri (spirit women). It was they who were most crucially involved in charismatic performance and it was also they who were most outspoken about the often drastic changes required in society. The main point here, however, is that prior to the revival, many or most of the Min groups had an only superficial relationship with Christianity, whether as a result of deliberate distantiation or due to physical and social isolation from nodes of mission activity.

The revival did come to Oksapmin, via the Bimin-Kuskusmin, around 1980 and, while intense and widespread, it didn't produce the same kinds of radical change seen in other societies in the region, owing primarily to the fact that these transformations had been taking place in a more moderate manner within Oksapmin society for over a decade. But while the Oksapmin version of the revival cannot be credited with catalysing popular conversion, it did institute charismatic techniques of worship, such as speaking in tongues, shaking, and healing. The intensity of these techniques reached its zenith during the revival and subsided following its conclusion, but, certain of them, such as shaking and speaking in

tongues, can still occasionally be observed during Oksapmin Baptist services, especially during the major events in the Christian ritual calendar.

The above thus clearly illustrates that by the 1970s most Oksapmin had in some way publicly aligned themselves with the Christian religion as they understood it. As will be seen throughout the remainder of the thesis, Oksapmin Christianity must be distinguished from ABMS or mission Christianity. The two are not the same. Mission Christianity is what Bricknell and the ABMS believed, displayed, and attempted to convey through their evangelical capillaries while Oksapmin Christianity is the localised interpretation and institution of that material. Three crucial questions thus arise. Firstly, why did the Oksapmin decide to convert? Secondly, what impacts did conversion produce upon the indigenous lifeworld into which it was incorporated? Lastly, what shape did local Christianity take and how was it distinct from that displayed by the mission?

Why did the Oksapmin convert to Christianity?

Within this section I elucidate a series of factors that I believe explain why the Oksapmin decided to convert to Christianity. My analysis includes factors that the Oksapmin themselves identify as important as well as those which they do not articulate but which are still pertinent anthropologically. But first a point about the concept of conversion itself. While the word suggests a straightforward even total shift in religious commitment and identity, the process with which the Oksapmin incorporated Christianity into their society was much more complex. The point of greatest importance is that conversion is a process destined to incompleteness; there is no point at which an individual or the social group to which he or she belongs can be said to have broken with their past and ‘fully’ converted to the Christian religion, irrespective of how this transition may be conceptualised in language; rather, it is always something emergent that continuously develops and transforms through time. Thus, conversion is never clean and simple but always ongoing, and processual rather than instantaneous, what Comaroff and Comaroff refer to as ‘the long conversation’ (1991:198). This thesis is a testament to these observations.

At no stage have the Oksapmin ever fully relinquished their indigenous cultural patterns, nor perhaps could they if they wanted to. Indeed, this thesis shows that the incorporation of Christianity into Oksapmin society did not entail a substitution of one

religiously sanctioned lifeworld for another but rather initiated a dynamic interplay between Christianity and what was already there. Their conversion to Christianity is different from that of the Urapmin, who Robbins characterises as being ‘strikingly uninterested in the possibility of syncretising Christian and traditional ideas’ (Robbins 2001:903; Robbins 2004) but in some ways similar to the Telefolmin, where although Jorgensen reports (2002:73) ‘wholesale conversion to Christianity’ following the charismatic revival of the late 1970s, the transition appears to have produced intriguing linkages between indigenous and Christian phenomena (Jorgensen 2001). What is even more interesting is the way that the Oksapmin managed this encounter, namely, by linking these two worlds together by means of creative reconfiguration; Christianity was internalised according to the existing Oksapmin culture at the same time that this indigenous cultural material was being moulded around Christianity. As mentioned above, in this way two different modes of meaning-making were made consistent with each other, thereby creating ritual, cosmological, and ontological integrity within a context of social change. Unlike the Urapmin, the Oksapmin are not particularly ‘troubled’ (Robbins 2004:313), they are not ‘caught between two cultures’ (2004:327), and their cosmology cannot be characterised as an ‘unsynthesised duality’ whose elements repel integration ‘in predictable ways’ (2004:332). Rather, from their own perspective, they see no separation whatsoever between the two; for Oksapmin people there is simply one fundamental worldview which embraces and conflates both inherited tradition and what the missionaries taught. They have always been Christian and Christianity has always been indigenous; they are one and the same thing, a singular and all encompassing sacred narrative. So, while I make the anthropological argument that the Oksapmin have creatively merged the two, for local people themselves it is only the final composite product that holds any significance, which has, in fact, been internalised as historical and social truth.

The fact that the Oksapmin have never really let go of many of their traditional beliefs means that in this context the word ‘conversion’ should not be taken to mean a clean break with the old and a wholehearted embrace of the new. Rather, conversion, as I employ the term, merely marks an historical point where it can be said that the Oksapmin, as a group, had decided to publicly affiliate themselves with Christianity. Internal debates and deliberations about the validity of what the ABMS presented had run their course and people had now chosen to formally accept the new religion.

The most accurate means by which to assess such commitment from both an anthropological and religious viewpoint is with reference to the ritual of baptism, since it

provides a clear message about the public identity of the individual. So, it is when the Oksapmin began to be baptised *en masse* that we can say they ‘converted’ to Christianity in the present sense. As seen above, this commenced in 1966 and continued for several years following. But while these acts publicly announced shifting loyalties they did not describe the shape of Oksapmin understandings of the Christian religion, much less that the Oksapmin had interpreted it as the ABMS intended.

As Joel Robbins states in *Becoming Sinners* (2004:84), ‘the literature on conversion from “local” to world religions, while extremely rich ethnographically and historically for certain areas such as Africa, is theoretically unsettled’ and that ‘there is no agreed on standard for what a clear, useful account of conversion should look like.’ This likely owes to the fact that all accounts of conversion are necessarily shaped by the unique social contexts they describe. However, while there may exist considerable variation in how anthropologists explain this process, many would concur with Mills and Grafton that it marks ‘an unyielding form of conquest,’ ‘the takeover of human identity, imagination, and consciousness’ (2005:ix), even if this transformation is never fully accomplished. Nonetheless, the fact remains that people convert to Christianity for many different reasons. Robbins summarises these attitudes under two headings, utilitarian and meaning-centred (2004:85). The former refers to the lure that the material wealth often possessed by missionaries has over Melanesians, who have traditionally defined wealth and spiritual power as inextricable. The other describes how people psychologically engage with mission teachings and is often used to explain why indigenous people remain attached to Christianity long after the initial material revelations have passed.

For the Urapmin it was a mix of both. Their conversion was mainly an attempt to restore lost cultural pride (Robbins 2004:88–100). In pre-contact times the Urapmin considered themselves to be at or near the core of the Min religious system. This prominence was upset by the concentration of the colonial administration and ABMS at Telefomin. Access to the benefits of the new order these institutions represented and enforced, such as schooling, steel axes, cash, and the mission’s version of spiritual truth, were now agonisingly out of reach. From apparently being one of the crucial nodes in the traditional Afek cult, the Urapmin were then relegated to outsiders or a ‘bus lain’ (Robbins 2004:98; Tok Pisin for rural, underdeveloped people). This anticipated swift conversion to Christianity. Robbins, employing Sahlins’s notion of humiliation (Sahlins 1992; Robbins 2004:9) states (2004:99–100):

In response to the humiliations this dislocation caused, the Urapmin aimed to provide themselves with a place in the new order that maintained something of the regional centrality and independence they had enjoyed in the past. It was this goal that provided the framework in which their first utilitarian approaches to Christianity were carried out.

For Robbins such marginalisation also explains the rapid manner in which the Urapmin embraced Christianity, thus generating what he describes as a fraught moral duality between the traditional and Christian ways of living which the Urapmin try, but ultimately fail, to resolve through a variety of Christian rituals.

As will be seen below, no comparable psychologically functionalist view is plausible for the Oksapmin. Like the Urapmin (and probably all other Min groups), the Oksapmin also felt their position within the traditional religious world was central; however, they were not dislocated as a result of colonial or mission expansion. The ABMS established a mission in Tekin and there was a government patrol post in the neighbouring valley. Therefore, the things that the Urapmin lacked but so keenly desired to restore their damaged collective worth were readily available to the Oksapmin from the outset of this new era. As can be seen from my discussion that follows, certainly the utilitarian model described by Robbins played an important role. But it was not only that, and it also cannot be explained with any simple reference to a meaning-centred model. Rather, Oksapmin conversion was mediated by a whole host of factors of internal and external provenance and which operated on all levels of social life.

An explanation of Oksapmin conversion must begin with the mission itself, in this case the ABMS. Here, as among the neighbouring Telefolmin, where the ABMS initially established themselves, the mission was the driving force behind breaking down the attachment of local people to their existing religious systems (Jorgensen 1981b). This contrasts strongly with the Urapmin case as described by Robbins, in that they were apparently not thoroughly missionised but instead had to ‘seek out the missionaries and expend considerable effort to remain in contact with them’ (2004:2; see also Robbins 2001). For the Oksapmin, through evangelisation the mission opened up to local people an unfamiliar cosmology and compelled them to accept it as truth. In this view it was not Yuän Ku but actually God who was the principal architect and designer of human life. Humans had incurred a debt to God that had been atoned for by his only son Jesus, and through life and

death they could be expected to enjoy an intimate relationship with Him. Further, this explanation of the nature and essence of being was said to be not only true, but, when sincerely believed in, greatly beneficial. This is the message and the objective that defined the mission. While this information and action was reinterpreted once by the evangelical teams, and then again by their local audiences, the mission must be acknowledged as a necessary starting point.

Of course, the Oksapmin did not simply submit passively to this version of reality. Indeed, it was only after four years of evangelisation that the first baptisms were conducted. In that time the Oksapmin had turned over in their minds the value and purpose of what they were being fed and wrestled with the idea of conversion. It was not something that they rushed into, but a decision of great import that they approached with caution. But the simple fact that the mission, with the various evangelical ‘teams’ acting as its mouthpiece, repeatedly emphasised over a period of several years the benefits of accepting this new way of life, cannot be overlooked in terms of its importance for motivating popular conversion. It was partly through such persistence that the fear initially felt by the Oksapmin toward Christianity subsided. I use the term ‘partly’ advisedly since, as I will show below, what was even more influential in facilitating conversion was the existence within Oksapmin society of beliefs, understandings, and practices onto which Christianity could effectively be mapped by local people.

More important than either the diligence or content of the ABMS evangelical programme were the people who practically implemented it. Regardless of how well the ABMS had strategised or how meticulously they had planned what they would say, their evangelisation would have failed without anyone to effectively communicate their message to local populations. This is a crucial point. As noted above, with the exception of the Telefol Yemis, the evangelical teams were comprised of young Oksapmin men, foremost among them Apipnok. While Yemis only ever developed a basic competency in the Oksap language, all other members of these teams, as locals, were fully proficient. These ethnic and linguistic aspects of evangelisation were important for two main reasons. The first concerns communicative efficacy. Because the teams were composed almost entirely of Oksap speakers, the messages devised by the ABMS missionaries at Tekin in Tok Pisin or English could be clearly relayed to the local people in their language, using idioms, metaphors, and other figures of speech that were comprehensible, meaningful, and convincing. This means that these men were not only using the Oksapmin language but also Oksapmin ideas to

communicate Christian messages and that the form Christianity took was indigenous from the beginning.

The second point relates to social proximity. Not only were these men capable of speaking the local language, they were, except for Yemis, part of the same ethnic group, sometimes even the same community or family, as the people to whom their evangelisation was directed. While the men conveyed the interests and ideas of outsiders, namely, the white missionaries and the ABMS more broadly, they were nonetheless speaking to their own people. The importance of this cannot be overstated in an explanation of why the Oksapmin decided to accept Christianity. It is one thing for an individual to have explained to them by an outsider the moral and spiritual benefits of Christianity, but it is different and enormously more persuasive for that individual to have the same thing explained to them by a person with whom they share their language, culture, physical appearance, and identity; and, other things being equal, it is easier to 'convert' to a Christianity being rendered and interpreted in terms of the vernacular and thus similar in important ways to what is already understood and believed.

Immediately it can be seen that the social dimensions of evangelisation promoted an atmosphere of understanding and trust within which conversion could occur. The familiarity of the Oksapmin with the evangelical teams immediately gave to the ABMS, and the gospel they espoused, a legitimacy and relevance they otherwise would not have had. But the motivations to accept Christianity related not only to social proximity but also to the intelligibility of that new religion within existing cultural frameworks. It is an anthropological truism that human beings necessarily interpret new social forms in terms of existing understandings, attitudes, and beliefs. It cannot be any other way. Regardless of what changes may later transpire, it remains the case that the incorporation of exogenous material must initially occur according to what is already there. This process is known as indigenisation or localisation. We are thus encouraged to think again about Oksapmin religion at the time of missionisation. What elements did it contain that Christianity could be mapped onto? In other words, what aspects of the existing religious structure were generally similar or commensurate with Christianity, such that local people could meaningfully compare and integrate the two?

Brutti (1997) points above all else to the existence within traditional Oksapmin religion of a 'cosmogonical and ecological master', namely, Yuän. That is, prior to the arrival

of the ABMS, the Oksapmin already had a notion of a figure responsible for creating the universe and everything in it. What the evangelical teams said about the Christian God having made everything, then, was interpreted in these terms. Brutti further claims (1997:109) that through a process of ‘superposition’ the Oksapmin inserted the Christian God into this existing slot, thereby assuming the position previously held by Yuän. The Oksapmin indigenisation of Christianity thus reproduced existing cultural concepts and categories while shifting and expanding their terms of reference (Sahlins 1985).

I generally agree with Brutti but disagree about some of the details. For instance, God and Yuän cannot both be properly titled ‘cosmogonical and ecological master.’ As described in the Bible, God did create all in Heaven and Earth and can thus be considered cosmogonic, and it is granted that stewardship over nature fell under this universal banner. It is more difficult to fit Yuän into the category of ‘cosmogonic.’ Indeed, Brutti contradictorily states (1997:91) that ‘Yuan did not create humans and animals or the environment,’ which are some of the basic characteristics of being cosmogonic. It seems that Yuän did play an important role in enculturating the Oksapmin, particularly by introducing them to the sacrificial ritual designed to ensure the prosperity of people and land, but there is nothing either in Brutti’s article, my fieldnotes, or the anthropological literature on the Min to suggest that this figure created the universe. Nonetheless, this definitional inaccuracy is vitiated in ethnographic importance by the fact that both figures were sufficiently analogous for the Oksapmin to have substituted God for Yuän, irrespective of the degree of their equivalence or the complexity with which this process was executed. Although slightly different in their respective capacities, both were crucial sources of life, vitality, and security for human beings and the land upon which they depended.

Another factor that Brutti posits (1997, 1999) as critical in informing the Oksapmin decision to convert to Christianity is the material wealth of the ABMS. He claims (1997:106) that within the process of conversion ‘a big role was played by...a fascination with the material world rather than ideological adherence.’ While I don’t entirely agree with his privileging of the material over the ideological, Brutti nonetheless makes the important observation that the Oksapmin saw the material wealth of the ABMS as a sign of religious power and that this contributed to the decision to convert to Christianity. For the Oksapmin living at the time, what was the connection between materiality and religious efficacy and how did this influence or promote the integration of Christianity? Again we are brought back to the existing cultural framework. In the last chapter on ‘traditional’ Oksapmin society I

described how the main objective of local ritual was to ensure the health, abundance, and prosperity of people, gardens, and of animate life more generally. These are all desired enhancements of material life. Having an abundant food supply, being a capable hunter, and so forth, were the results of having properly executed the relevant religious act. This was the frame of reference for evaluating religious potency at the time the ABMS arrived in 1962.

When Bricknell and his team came to Tekin, they brought with them an assortment of material items that Europeans were accustomed to living with. This included everyday tools and implements such as pots, knives, axes, hammers, saws, and so forth. As well as this, the houses they built were large, robust and permanent, not like the cramped, temporary huts in which the Oksapmin were used to living. Through radio communication they were able to summon an aeroplane to airdrop supplies and mail whenever required. A steel axe could fell a tree in a fraction of the time required by its stone counterpart; a saw could process timber more quickly and accurately than if done by hand, and so on. Brutti argues that, to the Oksapmin, this material wealth was perceived, according to existing frameworks, as a sign of superior ritual and spiritual capacity. If the ABMS had so much wealth, then the God which bestowed such blessings must be formidable and the knowledge and techniques used to marshal such power must be similarly potent. By converting to Christianity, the argument runs, the Oksapmin thus fulfilled their desire to participate more intimately in this arena of material and divine promise. To use Brutti's terms (1997:107–108) the Oksapmin had been unwittingly 'seduced' into converting (see also Brutti 2000:106–107).

The next factor concerns the transgression of cultural taboos previously held sacred by the Oksapmin. This is a topic that Joel Robbins has discussed in significant detail for the Urapmin in his paper "Dispossessing the Spirits" (1995). There he argues that Urapmin 'ethnoecology' was shaped primarily by two kinds of taboo, one spirit based, the other law based. The first referred mainly to taboos on space thought to be inhabited and guarded by custodian spirits known as *motobil*, much like the Oksapmin *sup*, while the latter related to food taboos. Since embracing Christianity, however, these taboos have diminished greatly. As Robbins states, 'one of the most significant aspects of Christianity for the Urapmin is that it has provided them with a rationale for doing away with almost all of the taboos that formerly interdicted food consumption and land use. The basis of the abrogation of these taboos is found in an Urapmin cliché: "God," they say, "made everything and He has left it for us to use"' (Robbins 1995:215). Of interest is that this abrogation, like the Urapmin engagement with Christianity more generally, was internally motivated, that is, it occurred

independently of direct mission involvement. Furthermore, it seems as though they did so without trepidation, since ‘a willingness to break taboos enforced by vengeful spirits is a sign of Christian faith’ (1995:218). Breaking age-old, sacred proscriptions was simply part of confidently asserting a new Christian identity. As I show below, while the Oksapmin had a similar set of taboos governing their lives, the way in which their power and validity was challenged and the indigenous psychological consequences of their transgression were very different from that which Robbins describes for the Urapmin.

It will be recalled from the previous chapter that at the time the ABMS arrived in 1962 the Oksapmin observed a complex system of taboos that embraced many facets of social life. Like the Urapmin, the Oksapmin had both spirit based and law based taboos (Robbins 1995). Certain bodies of water were not to be entered, particular caves and stones should be avoided, specific kinds of foods were ritually prohibited at given times, and so forth. To contravene any of these taboos was to court death, sickness, or misfortune. A belief in, and fear of, such consequences maintained the existence of this cultural stratum. Evangelisation and the spread of Christianity negated the validity of these taboos and their reality. The mechanism by which this process operated was to subvert these taboos through their direct and deliberate violation, to show that such actions did not actually have bad consequences. An undertaking of this kind must have been terrifying for the Oksapmin for whom these attitudes comprised a basic part of their daily lives. While it can be said that the Oksapmin ‘believed’ in taboos and their harmful consequences, for the people themselves these processes were an unquestioned aspect of reality, as predictable as gravity might be for us. To then contravene these rules with an understanding that to do so may entail death or punishment must have produced immense fear.

Ian Flatters, the ABMS missionary that succeeded Bricknell, recounted to me (personal communication, 31/08/2010) several of these instances in a passage that describes the diminishment of specific taboos as well as other fears more generally. He states that prior to the arrival of the mission:

People would not walk anywhere alone. A five year old child would be sufficient to accompany an adult. This fear of walking alone gradually disappeared and people confidently moved around freely.

At the head of the airstrip there were some skull bones under a large rock which, if looked at would send a person blind. These bones must not be looked at or moved and

for a long time the lengthening of the airstrip was not possible. Finally the person with the authority said they could be moved and the airstrip lengthened.

There were a number of these types of things. A small creek beside the mission was said to cause blindness if a person washed in it. Slowly these types of fears disappeared. Pastors generally took the lead in testing the authenticity of such restrictions.

Some of their food restrictions were slowly changed. e.g. only the older men could eat possum. Again some of the younger men decided they would test things out and eat some of the forbidden food. When they were not sick or struck down, etc. they felt a release and continued to make changes.

One of the very first Oksapmin Christians, Biktel explains in Norm Draper's book *Daring to Believe* (1990:181) his fear of being baptised, since he

had seen people killed almost instantly by the water spirits. On the big day, people came long distances to see what was going to happen. Some thought we were going to die. Some thought this was some other kind of initiation ceremony - as I suppose it was, but not the way they were thinking. As I went down into the water, I was still afraid. I wasn't a fish - I couldn't breathe under water - what would happen if Bricknell left me underneath for too long? But it was too late to pull out now. I was scarcely aware of Bricknell talking to me, and then, under I went. But Bricknell was holding me firmly, and up I came again, almost at once, spluttering, but still alive, and somehow very happy.¹³

The levels of fear produced within, and courage required by, any Oksapmin individual participating in the first round of baptisms would have been extraordinary. Here were individuals who were breaking deeply seated cultural rules with an understanding that they might die or become gravely ill, yet they still submitted to the act without resistance. The emotional atmosphere of fear is thus common both to initiation into the men's cult and also into the Christian church, although the social dynamics are markedly different.

It was through this process of violation that the Oksapmin eventually questioned the force and reality of their taboos, one by one. People ate forbidden foods and did not fall sick,

¹³ It can be seen that Biktel recalls that it was the white missionary who baptised him, yet Bricknell denies that he played any direct role in the baptisms of the Oksapmin and that they were completely undertaken by locals.

they entered prohibited streams and pools and were not blinded, and so forth. I argue that it was partly and importantly through this compelled disenchantment, whereby the relations between people and the natural world were gradually stripped of the sacred proscriptions governing their interaction, that the Oksapmin were essentially forced to discard much of their traditional religion and acknowledge the ABMS and Christianity. This was surely a key part of the mission's success in getting the Oksapmin to accept Christianity and something into which they invested significant energy. It is important to note here that while understandings of the dangers of tabooed places and foods were certainly hugely diminished through missionisation, certain of them still prevail. For instance, one day I wished to accompany some men to a place in the bush where they believed gold could be found. However, the journey entailed crossing a sacred stream that if attempted by an outsider would imperil and jeopardise the entire party. I stayed in the house that day.

Another factor that likely facilitated the incorporation of Christianity into Oksapmin society is the theme or idea of sacrifice; death for the sake of new life was a concept common to both worlds, thus making them mutually intelligible and compatible. As seen in the previous chapter, much indigenous ritual was sacrificial, in that it involved killing a living creature in order to produce cosmological revitalisation through acting upon invisible spiritual forces. This was demonstrated most dramatically during the killing, immolation, and distribution of human victims to ensure the fertility of land and people as historically performed by the Oksapmin at the behest of the ancestress Yuän; the sacrifice of three human beings for the benefit of all. In addition to this, though, the Oksapmin conducted other sacrifices, particularly within the context of mortuary rites. When a person died it was necessary to kill a pig in order to ensure the safe passage of their spirit (*hanip dä*) to the land of the dead (*hanip dä äpti*). Again, the process is of killing a living creature to ensure a particular benefit and peace of mind.

The stories told to the Oksapmin people about Jesus were probably understood in terms of such existing cultural material. To begin with, there are parallels between Jesus's death and the Yuän sacrifice that would have been quickly discerned by the Oksapmin. Jesus, like the Alipim man killed in the second phase of the Yuän sacrifice, was an idealised figure. Furthermore, both gave their own lives, though the Alipim man did so against his will, for the improvement and benefit of the wider populace. Lastly, it was through the response of invisible spiritual forces that the sacrificial act gained its efficacy.

I would say that the fact that the Oksapmin could employ their existing understandings of two kinds of sacrifice to comprehend the Bible stories told to them by the ABMS evangelical teams was yet another factor promoting conversion to Christianity. This is not simply because of the resemblance between the respective elaborations of the sacrificial theme in and of itself. Rather, Christianity was easier to incorporate into the local social lifeworld because there were already understandings and attitudes in place that facilitated and encouraged its reception. As will be seen throughout the thesis, this incorporation entailed neither a complete cultural reproduction nor transformation but instead initiated an ongoing reciprocal interplay between Christianity and what was already there.

The next factor that helps to explain Oksapmin conversion also relates to parallels between aspects of Christianity and the existing indigenous lifeworld. In the last chapter I described one of the core elements of the traditional Oksapmin ritual complex, the male initiation system. It is useful to recall certain key characteristics of the setting, content, and dynamics of this process. All phases of the initiation cycle occurred within large houses specially constructed for each occasion. Proceedings consisted of a group of senior men disseminating to the assembled initiates, through both material and linguistic symbols, a corpus of sacred skills and knowledge with overarching religious significance. The instructors were often active and standing while the novices were invariably passive and seated. A significant proportion of the messages communicated within the ritual houses were proscriptive in nature, strictly outlining the guidelines for a moral life.

We might compare this pattern of behaviour, then, to the Christian worship instituted by the ABMS. The latter takes place within a large, specially constructed (albeit permanent) house. Again it is a group of senior men, a pastor foremost among them, who lead the service, disseminating sacred knowledge to a group of people compelled to learn. Those conducting the service are standing and physically mobile while the congregation sits, submits, and listens. What is said, too, outlines the lineaments of a pious existence.

Notwithstanding the many and important differences, the parallels between initiation and church worship in terms of their physical and social characteristics are vivid, so clear, in fact, that the Oksapmin continue to remark upon them today. Whether in sermons or informal discussions, the Oksapmin often draw attention to the fact that aspects of their indigenous culture, but particularly the initiation cult, display clear similarities with the Christian way of life which they now practise, as I demonstrate in Chapter 5. Building on those local

observations, I again argue that it is because the practices and ideas of the ABMS had an equivalent in the existing indigenous society that incorporation of and conversion to Christianity could more easily occur. Similar structures of thought and action pre-existed there and could act both as devices to interpret and evaluate the forms offered by the mission as well as cultural portals into which these new procedures could be received.

Our discussion now takes in vectors that had a more visible and concrete impact upon the Oksapmin. The Christian package that the ABMS brought to Tekin included not only formal techniques of worship but also other social skills and services considered to be crucial in achieving their spiritual objectives. Foremost among these were education and health. First through a modest Bible School and then later through the establishment of a Primary 'T' School in 1967, the ABMS systematically introduced the Oksapmin to modes education that were, *per se*, previously unknown. A staple element of the pedagogy was literacy. This, of course, figured importantly in achieving the religious aims of the mission, as it also did among the Asabano (see Lohmann 2001). Christianity is a text-oriented religion that recognises the Bible as the ultimate source of truth and guidance. Therefore, in order for the Oksapmin to more fully and intimately understand Christianity, it was useful for them to be taught how to read and write. From the perspective of the Oksapmin convert, by being able to read one thereby gained access to spiritual truth and material gains.

What I think was much more influential in securing the commitment of Oksapmin to the Christian religion was the health services provided by the mission. Education exposed a small number of people to the esoteric knowledge of the missionaries, while the basic medical treatment, performed mainly by Bricknell's wife, had a greater impact since, firstly, it was available to anyone and, second, its results were obvious signs of spiritual power. Their own rituals and magic were evaluated in terms of their ability to produce, through acting upon unseen spiritual forces, observable changes in people and the natural world around them. Changes of the sort produced by the medical rituals of the ABMS, then, indirectly legitimated the Christian religion they were concerned to establish in Oksapmin society. Through simply administering shots of penicillin and so on, many kinds of ailments and diseases that formerly either crippled or killed were cured or quickly brought under control. This seemingly miraculous power was a powerful motivator for the Oksapmin to convert to Christianity. To local people, the performance and results of such actions were inextricably connected to spiritual power; they were not just symbols, but signs and indexes of great religious efficacy, that the mission had access to a special spirit. In indigenous Oksapmin

thought, to be physically healthy was to be spiritually blessed, a state that arose from the successful execution of religious ritual. To local people then, this was simply a more powerful extension of what they already knew and understood.

Keith Bricknell, the first ABMS missionary in Tekin, relates in detail how:

One event took place that was to have a profound effect on the work of the mission, although this was not realised at the time. The patrol officer, Peter Lancaster... was out on patrol taking a census at Yentanäp in the lower reaches of the Bäk Valley. His police sergeant noticed a young woman (Gwenam) holding a baby and then heard a whimper from her “billum”. To her embarrassment he made her open the “billum” and there was another baby, the twin sister of the one she was holding. It was emaciated and not far from dying... Local custom was that when twins were born, the mother knew she could not feed both, so one was killed. If they were mixed, then the girl twin would be killed. Gwenam couldn’t bring herself to do this, even though there was a lot of pressure for her to follow the custom. So a week or so later, they turned up at the mission station... Val [Bricknell’s wife] and the girls [his daughters] took over the job of bottle feeding the twins and the mission provided sweet potato for the parents. Most people were sceptical about the survival chances of either let alone both of the twins so they waited to see what would happen. The twins thrived on the twice daily bottle feeds that Val gave them, usually assisted by Jennifer and Lynne. Gwenam and Hasibi [her husband]... stayed at the mission station for several years. As their children put on weight and survived, so the local people came to be more open and trusting of the missionaries. *This became one of the keys to authenticating the message that was being preached throughout the area* (1986:82, emphasis added).

Although the medical techniques employed by Bricknell’s family were basic, they nonetheless demonstrated to all concerned how the skills and knowledge of the ABMS were not only practical but lifesaving, and thus possessed spiritual merit. By producing observable, positively valued changes upon the empirical world, which as earlier seen was the core logic of most indigenous ritual, the mission and the Christian religion acquired popular validity. As Bricknell observes, this had the added consequence of giving greater persuasive force to the stories, fables, and sermons disseminated by the evangelical teams. Through physically caring for the Oksapmin people the Christian message gained weight. It can thus be seen how

the services provided by the ABMS, particularly those concerned with physical health, persuaded the Oksapmin to convert to Christianity. This argument dovetails nicely with the evidence-based explanation of conversion provided by Lohmann for the neighbouring Asabano (2000a).

The final factor that helps to explain why the Oksapmin converted to Christianity relates to the general historical context. Beyond the particular synergies and affinities that existed between Christianity and Oksapmin society were broader currents of social change in which the Oksapmin were enmeshed. One year prior to the arrival of the ABMS, the Australian colonial administration had established the Oksapmin patrol post in the Trangap Valley. This institution had already introduced the local population to Western discipline, law, food, technology, education, economy, and so forth, all of which were likely interpreted by the Oksapmin as indications of spiritual efficacy. Also during the early 1960s, young men began to leave the area in search of formal employment, mainly on tea plantations in the Western Highlands province (Weeks 1980:17), yet sometimes further afield. Then, of course, there was the establishment of the ABMS at Tekin, which both consolidated the patterns of change initiated by the administration and also produced new transformations of its own. To put it simply, during the early 1960s Oksapmin society was being ‘opened up’ to Western spheres of influence. As Bricknell put it to me (personal communication, 17/05/2010), ‘change was in the air’; the broad climate of social change lent a mood of excitement and even inevitability to the transformations taking place, of which the spread of Christianity was among the most important.

Above I have listed and described a series of factors that help to explain why the Oksapmin converted to Christianity. My explanation is not exhaustive but rather points to some of the crucial components and processes present in Oksapmin society at the time the ABMS arrived that either facilitated or promoted conversion to Christianity. It was seen that the incorporation of this exogenous form operated mainly according to existing frameworks of thought and action; the Oksapmin evaluated and appraised aspects of Christianity in relation to concepts, categories, and figures that they already knew. In addition to this, however, it can be seen that conversion was also motivated by externally-induced inversions and transformations. The demonstration that violating taboos did not carry with it any harmful consequence, for instance, was an important factor that moved people away from, rather than compelled them to reproduce, existing symbolic material. The broader climate of socio-cultural change catalysed by the intrusion of Western political and economic forces into

Papua New Guinea is another example of how conversion was supported by influences whose origin lay outside the immediate milieu.

From here I would like to shift attention more squarely on to the ABMS and consider their perspective on indigenous culture and religion. Above I have offered what I take to have been some of the reasons why the Oksapmin converted, but we know little about the directions in which the ABMS were guiding local people and, most interestingly, which aspects of traditional life they condoned and which they prohibited. Once we more fully understand the approach of the ABMS it is possible to better consider the changes that conversion produced and from there discuss how the Oksapmin have negotiated the overall process of social change, as evinced by contemporary ethnographic data.

The effects of missionisation upon the Oksapmin social world

In this section I examine the effects produced by the ABMS upon Oksapmin culture and society as they encountered it from 1962 onwards. As will be seen, their attitudes and directives were of crucial importance in shaping local social life, particularly its sacred and religious aspects, into its current form.

It is common for both anthropologists, as champions of ‘indigenous culture’, and informed members of the wider public alike to view missionisation negatively, as a process of one culture forcibly and irrevocably changing another without sufficient objective moral or ideological grounds. Such criticisms are also typically levelled at colonialism and globalisation more generally. But mission activity often suffers greater derision for the belief that it more pointedly and unfairly targets indigenous culture as being ‘satanic’, ‘demonic’, or labelled by other derogatory epithets. Catholics often fare better in this debate since they tend to be regarded as relatively tolerant of the persistence of indigenous religion and its integration with Christianity. Protestant missions, particularly Pentecostal and evangelical variants that espouse a break with one’s old life and an associated embrace of the Christian lifeworld, being ‘born again’, have been more heavily criticised for their often heavy-handed denigration of indigenous religious practice, especially as realised through the manipulation of sacra (Robbins 2004).

The ABMS was an evangelical Protestant mission. In line with the above, then, were they, too, culpable of denouncing indigenous culture and ritual in their pursuit of bringing

light to the masses? Brutti, the only anthropologist to have recently published on the Oksapmin relationship with Christianity, certainly seems to think so. In no uncertain terms he states with specific regard to the Yuän sacrifice but with general import that:

From their arrival the missionaries strongly opposed any form of indigenous ritual performance also because they came to know of the existence of the yuan [sic] and they supposed that to be a horrible, barbaric custom inspired by evil (1995:104–105).

According to Brutti, then, the ABMS, like a typical Protestant mission, preached against indigenous religious action on the basis that it was evil.

In the course of my research I have had the great opportunity to regularly correspond with Keith Bricknell, the first ABMS missionary based at Tekin. With him I have discussed in considerable detail all aspects of the mission and the role it has played in shaping Oksapmin religious history. Throughout, I have found his answers measured and thoughtful. Interestingly, not once did I read or detect in any of his responses evidence that the ABMS, at any time during his tenure as missionary, were ‘strongly opposed’ or even openly critical of indigenous cultural forms. According to Bricknell, the ABMS ‘had deliberately not been confrontational in regards to Christianity and Oksapmin beliefs’ (personal communication, 05/07/2011). Their approach was rather to ‘tell them about Christianity and then basically let them decide what was culturally compatible with their new way of life’ (personal communication, 17/05/2010). He also states that ‘my own approach to the Oksapmins [sic] was that I really was the stranger in their midst and was not able to make calls on cultural issues very effectively...as I did not have the insights for a deep understanding of the meaning and implications of cultural matters or their meanings’ (personal communication, 05/09/2011). This perspective is very similar in tone to that of David Livingstone, missionary of the African Tswana, as analysed by Comaroff and Comaroff (1991:198), who stated that the London Missionary Society (LMS), too, were ‘strangers exercising no authority and control whatever.’ Bricknell’s statements suggest a ‘hands-off’ approach to evangelisation that allowed the majority of decisions regarding the place of Christianity in society to be made by the Oksapmin people themselves.

Did missionisation really occur in such a benign manner? Was the attitude of the ABMS actually so mild? While it appears that Bricknell, later missionaries, and the organisation they represented did approach the Oksapmin respectfully, there are also several reasons to doubt the claims made above. In particular, the statement that the Oksapmin were

merely presented with Christianity and then allowed to decide how it would fit into their lives does not hold up under the weight of ethnographic evidence. In reality, the Oksapmin did not ask to be evangelised and they were not really given a choice about abandoning their traditional religion and accepting Christianity; the ABMS were there to convert the Oksapmin and would do whatever was necessary to achieve that goal. Rather, it is probably more accurate to say the Oksapmin were ‘pushed’ to convert and certainly that there was a considerable power differential which made this possible. This is not to say that the Oksapmin did not find fulfilment and satisfaction in their new Christian identities, for many certainly did. It is simply to underscore the fact that the mission imposed Christianity upon the Oksapmin. While it is likely that Bricknell was not openly confrontational, indeed, to have been so would have been to place himself and his team in grave danger, as a committed Christian missionary he could not have accepted or sanctioned the existence of alternative spiritual realities and would have necessarily and probably in an indirect way, such as through his evangelical team, sought to delegitimise them.

The main obstacle to missionisation and conversion to Christianity was that the Oksapmin already had their own complex of sacred practices and beliefs which they had adhered to for generations. It was therefore not enough to simply tell them about Christianity and expect them to change their minds. There must be some effort expended on separating the Oksapmin from their existing religious institutions. This effort mainly took the form of judgments about what within Oksapmin society was and was not compatible with the Christian way of life presented by the ABMS. The question then becomes, what parts of the indigenous world did the mission deem compatible with Christianity and which did they consider opposed? An added question that will figure importantly in the discussion to follow is: how limited was the mission’s perspective? Were they able to apprehend all parts of the indigenous world or did they overlook or have hidden from them certain practices and beliefs they would have otherwise deemed antithetical?

The ABMS deemed that certain aspects of Oksapmin society were either opposed to or incompatible with the Christian way of life they wished to implement. Above all else, this included those components of the existing indigenous lifeworld, *which they apprehended*, that supported the existence of non-Christian spiritual entities. Another way is to say that the ABMS discouraged the Oksapmin from continuing their participation in any activities that to the mission were saliently ‘religious,’ thus instituting through action a categorical distinction the Oksapmin did not likely possess. The most important consequence of this position is that,

firstly, what the mission did not perceive to be 'religious' or, second, what escaped their purview, persisted, either through their consent or their ignorance.

The ABMS suppressed those activities that they deemed incompatible with the Christian way of life. Foremost among these was the men's initiation cult. This system was the core of an indigenous ritual complex designed to promote the health and abundance of people and nature. Because of its social prominence and status (although conducted in secret), initiation was immediately apparent to the mission as a fundamental component of the indigenous spiritual world. It 'stuck out,' so to say, as the most important of a series of associated institutions that supported the existence of non-Christian spiritual realities. It is not surprising, therefore, to note that the mission insisted that 'to become a Christian meant to leave the ways of the Haus Tamberan behind' (Keith Bricknell, personal communication, 05/07/2011). Initiation was the central pillar of the Oksapmin religious world; if Christianity was to gain a foothold, the mission would have to take this institution as its central target. If the Nonconformist mission among the Tswana mentioned by Comaroff and Comaroff was concerned to establish itself 'at the heart of the indigenous social order' (1991:200), then the ABMS wished to displace it. Once the first churches had been established, the ABMS 'suggested to the leaders that it may not be appropriate for Christians to be involved in the Spirit House practices (mainly the initiation of young boys)' (personal communication, 17/05/2010). While this may seem as though the mission was saying 'if you want to join us then you must leave the old ways behind,' based on the ethnographic evidence I've presented here it was probably 'leave the sinful old ways behind and join us.'

The effects of such clear discouragement, operating in combination with the many factors already mentioned that attracted the Oksapmin to Christianity and away from their existing rituals, was that the initiation system and the spirit and magic houses associated with it, rapidly collapsed. This process was manifested most clearly in the deterioration of the physical structures within which these activities occurred. For example, it will be recalled from my discussion of initiation in the last chapter that the final and most esoteric stage of initiation was held within the *yewel äp*. By the time of the first baptismal services in 1966, the *yewel äp* closest to the Tekin mission station had been reduced to a dishevelled pile of saplings with no further sacred function. Such deterioration, which occurred pervasively throughout the area during the early years of the ABMS, was not the result of purposively destroying these sacred structures but rather of the Oksapmin failing to rebuild or maintain them as required. After all, most of these houses were designed specifically to accommodate

certain ritual performances that lasted, at most, a few months. Even the spirit houses that acted as permanent depositories of clan sacra could only be expected to survive four to five years without due care. The state of disrepair into which these formerly sacred buildings fell, then, was not the result, as at Telefolip, of zealous Christians violently destroying all evidence of indigenous religion under the direction of the Operation Joshua movement, an organisation independent of the Baptist Church (Jorgensen 2005:452–454). Rather, the fact that these structures, formerly of paramount sacred value, so quickly dilapidated and were not rebuilt, suggests that the mission were involved in repressing the institutions they housed.

So, we can say that because it obviously recognised alternative sacred forces, indigenous ritual, particularly in its institutionalised form, was identified by the ABMS as an aspect of the existing Oksapmin lifeworld that was incompatible with Christianity and must thus be stopped. Through the subsequent repression of these practices and the internalisation by the Oksapmin of the attitude that the ways of the ancestors was sinful, organised indigenous ritual largely ceased. The initiation cult, the Yuän sacrifice, as well as the host of spirit and magic houses that supported their existence, were discarded. It was upon this part of the indigenous world that the mission's impact was most heavily felt and understandably so, since as earlier noted it was the main obstacle to establishing Christianity among the local population.

Other local performance activities seemed not to bother the ABMS as much. For instance, the Oksapmin regularly held communal dancing events, or singsing, within purpose built structures known as *tel äp*. While these houses no longer exist in Oksapmin society, the neighbouring Akiapmin/Tomware people maintained one which I was fortunate enough to enter and observe. As mentioned in Chapter 3, *tel äp* are very large, airy structures, capable of holding at least 100 individuals. There was a central pole around which the party would dance and several fireboxes to keep them warm throughout the night and into the next day. I did not learn a great deal about singsing in Oksapmin society, both because it is no longer regularly practised and also because people simply did not talk about it in everyday conversation. To the Oksapmin, such activities were largely relegated to history, aside from special calendrical occasions such as Independence Day. It is thus difficult to ascertain what they meant to the people who participated in them and what their role was in Oksapmin society and cosmology more broadly. The point of greatest relevance for the present discussion, however, is that the ABMS did not consider singsing to be religiously significant events and thus had no misgivings about their continued performance, quite unlike the other

ritual procedures mentioned above. Bricknell 'attended some and saw them basically as a social occasion and one in which the whole community participated. People from nearby clans would often join in with their neighbour's singing' (personal communication, 17/05/2010). Bricknell notes that they may have also provided 'opportunities for young men and women to link up and no doubt some marriage arrangements came as a result' (personal communication, 05/09/2011). To the ABMS, then, singsing were essentially gatherings of a convivial nature, designed simply to bring people, typically unmarried, together for a good time, much as disko are today. An important point to be kept in mind and that will emerge in the next chapter is that not only were these events allowed to continue but so, too, were the assemblage of performance techniques they contained, including indigenous styles of dancing, singing, and instrumentation.

We are then brought to aspects of the indigenous cultural world which recognised the existence of non-Christian spiritual realities but were beyond the evangelical grasp or capacity of the ABMS. As stated above, what the mission perceived to be incompatible with the Christian way of life they sought to eliminate. But what they could not perceive or apprehend could not be captured, readily identified, and cautioned against, even if in some ways it was counter to the objectives of the mission.

To begin with, there are what might be called private sacred practices; acts and utterances of a sacred character that were undertaken away from the public eye, either alone or in a small group. This includes, firstly, the magic that accompanied the activities of hunting and gardening. Whenever a new garden was planted, or a group of men ventured into the bush in search of possum, and so forth, spells were performed that they believed would, at least, prevent them from harm or misfortune and, at most, encourage the success of the given enterprise. Under this rubric can also be included witchcraft and sorcery. Again, while social facts, these were intrinsically private undertakings, invariably conducted under cover of darkness and in total secrecy from the wider world. We can also include the recitation of mythology as another private sacred practice. The mythological history of clans and ancestors was a matter of great importance and, as such, was not widely disseminated. This kind of information was shared principally among the senior men of each clan during initiation cycles and, to a lesser extent, individuals of other social categories. Further, because of the importance of the knowledge they contained, the performance of these stories would take place only on special occasions, often late at night and in small groups.

All of the activities I have described immediately above were integral components of the indigenous Oksapmin cosmology. Through their performance, whether the manipulation of charms, effecting curses, or the recitation of ancestral history, a world of sacred forces different and opposed to those espoused by the ABMS was given reality and maintained. Such activities thus qualified on the same criteria as the institutionalised ritual complex as being incompatible with the Christian way of life and thus quashed by the mission. But, primarily because they were private, they thereby escaped direct condemnation and persisted. There is no question that the ABMS knew of the existence of most of these practices, particularly witchcraft and sorcery, but they were simply beyond thorough apprehension and control. It is one thing to identify and put an end to a ritual complex involving large groups of people, conducted in specially built houses, and which most of the local population know of, but it is quite another and much more difficult task to perform the same operation on acts and utterances undertaken secretly, with no physical institutionalisation, and always either alone or in small groups.

What was even harder to grasp than the often hidden practices outlined above were local beliefs and understandings about spirits and spiritual processes. Of course, these were sometimes physically realised through being talked about in everyday life or through certain ritual practices associated with them. But the fact remains that, in and of themselves, these were not palpable entities but part of the psychological substrate against which the Oksapmin people appraised objective reality. They were the basic framework of perception and understanding, a crucial part of the indigenous ontology. For example, the Oksapmin believed that when a person died their spirit or soul (*hanip dä*) travelled to the 'place of the dead' (*hanip dä äpti*). This journey was imperilled by a ravenous mythical dog that, if unappeased, would devour the soul *en route*. The solution devised by the Oksapmin to this eschatological dilemma was to sacrifice a pig, whose own life force thus acted as a substitute for the human one, an act and process that could obviously have provided a powerful template from which to apprehend the crucifixion of Jesus. It is also worth stating that the Oksapmin performed other rituals at death, though seemingly not directly connected to the understandings presently discussed. For example, the corpse was placed upon a burial platform and left to totally decompose, at which point the bones were collected and deposited within an appropriate place. Through the influence of the mission the Oksapmin ceased these rituals. However, the beliefs and understandings about the spiritual processes that these actions were designed to facilitate and assist continued on, such as the concept of the human

spirit and the afterworld as its destination. While the beliefs and rituals were obviously intertwined, each evidently could exist separate from the other. It would seem that people's fundamental conceptions of the nature of life and death were much harder to change than things that were openly said and done.

The same can be said for Oksapmin beliefs in the spirituality and animation of nature. I described in the previous chapter how this overall understanding was subdivided into categories that corresponded with various aspects of the natural world. There were powers within stones (*kwei sup*), water (*tom sup*), trees (*lät sup*) and so forth. Aside from the various charms and incantations employed by men whilst hunting, it seemed that these beliefs were not immediately linked with any particular ritual expressions. Like the Oksapmin understandings of the spiritual processes involved in life and death discussed above, these animistic concepts, as cultural phenomena that existed in people's minds, were beyond the direct action of the ABMS and thus persisted. In important ways this parallels Robbins's observations concerning the nature spirits of the neighbouring Urapmin, locally referred to as *motobil*. He writes that 'the existence of these spirits has not been put into question by Christian conversion. Urapmin ontology has changed very little in this respect, except that people have recruited God as a powerful spiritual ally' (1995:218). While the account of the incorporation of Christianity by the Urapmin given by Robbins is very different from my own for the Oksapmin, it is interesting to note that for both groups many core components of their indigenous cosmology persisted after conversion. As will be seen throughout this thesis, these beliefs, and almost everything else within the Oksapmin culture that survived missionisation, were transformed through their encounter with Christianity. Such modification and restructuring was an indigenous process that occurred as a result of the Oksapmin attempting to fuse together two different worlds as they gradually internalised the evangelical teachings.

These beliefs, as with the private sacred practices discussed above, were not directly changed by the mission, either because they were not considered religiously significant or, more frequently, because they were hidden away in the recesses of Oksapmin society and consciousness and could not be easily accessed.

Now I turn the discussion away from esoteric matters and toward the more quotidian aspects of Oksapmin society. The ABMS was concerned to evaluate all dimensions of Oksapmin society as they encountered it and assess them in terms of their compatibility with the Christian 'way of life.' As seen above, they consequently focussed most intensively upon

eradicating the indigenous ritual complex and anything else that obviously recognised or supported the existence of non-Christian spiritual entities. In terms of the flow of everyday life, no similarly major ‘problems’ were encountered by the missionaries. Patterns of subsistence (aside from their magical aspects which were overlooked or ignored by the ABMS) were of no issue. Warfare was not endemic among the Oksapmin at the time the missionaries arrived (owing possibly to government suppression) and the occasional skirmishes which did intermittently arise were internally managed on an *ad hoc* basis. The insistence of the mission upon living peacefully together as Christians also acted to diminish the frequency of conflict between or within clans and families. However, there was one deeply seated customary practice that proved a conundrum: polygynous marriage.

The conditions that often surrounded marriage, such as the union being arranged, women sometimes being married against their will, or the exchange of bridewealth between families, the mission did not deem to be in conflict with Christianity. Rather, it was the simple fact that there were two or more spouses that was the problem. Bricknell stated to me (personal communication, 05/07/2012), the only issue that he recalls being ‘confrontational’ was

talking about Christian marriage. I said the ideal Christian marriage was between one man and one woman for life. Polygamy was out, so was polyandry (to which the Oksapmins hooted with laughter as they had not heard of it!). I made it clear that for those who had polygamous marriages, this did not mean sending one wife away.

However, as he also states (personal communication, 14/06/2012), the ABMS did impose certain restrictions upon men with more than one wife since ‘the qualification for church leadership, among other things included being married to only one living wife.’ The effect of such discouragement and, in the latter case, prohibition, was certainly to greatly decrease the frequency of polygamous marriage among the Oksapmin. From this moment it became the norm for a man, especially if he identified as being Christian and wished to participate in the public activities of the church, to marry only one woman, a trend that continues into the present, irrespective of denomination.

But while the practice was thereafter disparaged by the mission, the impulse to polygamous marriage remained for many Oksapmin men. Some chose to simply ignore the decrees of the mission and follow the ways of their fathers, taking two or more wives. Others more tactfully circumvented the rules of the ABMS by delaying their baptism until having

taken a second wife. Those Oksapmin men with the gumption to marry a second wife after having been baptised were not looked upon favourably by the mission, particularly if they were leaders, since as noted above, while polygyny was frowned upon generally, it was deemed an especially serious transgression for an individual of standing within the church. A short example supplied from Bricknell that I present below demonstrates the attitude of the mission toward Christian leaders who married for a second time subsequent to their baptism. But it also reveals the conflict that sometimes transpired between traditional and Christian models of sociality, as well as the pangs of conscience experienced by the missionary passing judgment on these matters. He relates (personal communication, 14/06/2012) how he perceived there to be

a good deal of pressure on some people, particularly clan leaders, to take second wives. Our earliest interpreter, Abipnok, was under pressure to do this. He was the son of the Kutik headman and that was virtually expected. He eventually did take a second wife and we asked him to stand down from leadership in the churches. I think we didn't handle that too well at the time, because at that time we probably weren't too aware of the sort of pressure he was under. I know his first wife, Timbris with her children, were very upset about the second marriage and didn't want it to happen. Not too sure what we could have done otherwise apart from being a bit more understanding and caring than we were. He remained a Christian, but not in the leadership role. His first wife and children, all remain as Christians.

This passage shows that the mission swiftly punished those who contravened their precepts, particularly those who 'should have known better.' Yet it also illustrates the complexity of divided loyalty for the Oksapmin, of committing to Christianity while at the same time satisfying traditional social obligations. For men in positions of traditional leadership the pressures to demonstrate status through the acquisition of multiple wives sometimes won out over adherence to aspects of the way of life defined by the mission, with the consequence of being stood down from their position but not barred from church membership. This decision was clearly not an easy one to make, with Bricknell retrospectively expressing a degree of regret about this unfortunate turn of events. In the end, though, a balance was achieved whereby the individual concerned was able to remain a member of the church while at the same time satisfying his obligations as a traditional Oksapmin leader. In sum, the attitudes and actions of the ABMS acted to decrease the frequency of polygynous unions and,

concomitantly, to expand the already dominant monogamous form of marriage (see Perey 1973:86).

In light of the preceding discussion it is clear that the Oksapmin were actively and clearly discouraged from participating in those aspects of their existing lives which the ABMS *could perceive to be* incompatible with the Christian way of life and thus sinful. It was seen that foremost among these were the indigenous ritual complex, with the male initiation cult at its core, but which also included many other kinds of institutionalised ritual and magic, as well as polygynous marriage. These were the things that the mission could see, evaluate, and control. As a result of this process such activities were more or less discarded by the Oksapmin; it seems with varying degrees of willingness. Almost everything else in Oksapmin society the ABMS did not confront, either because they considered it consistent with Christian principles, such as singsing, gardening, and so forth, or because it was outside their apprehension and control, such as private sacred practices and the beliefs and understandings concerning spiritual processes, all of which may have been considered 'incompatible' on the basis of reproducing an alternative cosmology and ontology.

However, as alluded to earlier, those aspects of indigenous society which escaped direct attention from the ABMS and which thus persisted were nonetheless transformed as a result of the establishment of Christianity. Such changes, though, were indigenous orchestrations; they were the result of the Oksapmin people fusing together what was left of their indigenous world to their understandings of the Christian religion they were incorporating. As this thesis argues, this was a dual process that entailed Christianity being wrapped around and threaded through indigenous ideas and practices and, at the same time, indigenous motivations and cultural forms being imported into the Christianity presented by the ABMS; the indigenisation of Christianity and the Christianisation of indigeneity. The overall result of this dual process was to integrate two different and opposed modes of being in the world such that cosmological and ontological coherence was achieved in spite of widespread social and religious transformation. Initially separate, indigenous and Christian religious ideas and actions were fused together in the formation of a new, single religion and cosmology. Moreover, for local Oksapmin people, this total composite is construed not as the result of bringing together two initially separate entities but is rather an all-encompassing and fundamental worldview that has always existed. My analysis of the creative processes of religious fusion begins with an examination of contemporary Oksapmin Christianity.

5. Contemporary Oksapmin Christianity



Figure 3. Baptist Church, Tekin Station

Missionisation provoked a disruption in local history and ontology (in that it upset established modes of explaining and constructing the essence and nature of life) and it was the Oksapmin who, using novel creative procedures, mended the break by creating consistency and continuity. In the current chapter I examine how this dual process of mutual adjustment - the indigenisation of Christianity and the Christianisation of indigeneity - plays out within contemporary Oksapmin Christian worship.

I provide an overview of the current denominational landscape which describes the churches that have been established among the Oksapmin, when they arrived, as well as the relative size of their following. The chapter then turns to consider how the construction of

cosmological and ontological coherence is manifested within three separate forms of Christian worship, namely, church services, private worship, and group ‘retreats.’ Since church services are the most locally important as well as ethnographically accessible mode of Christian worship, it is on them that my discussion primarily focuses, yet both private worship and retreats are given due consideration. Each section is structured identically: I first describe the constituent practices and then provide an analysis that reveals the operation of fusion.

Oksapmin Christianity today

Contemporary Oksapmin Christianity is diverse, and becoming increasingly so. While there are two or three churches to which the majority of Oksapmin belong, there is also a regular uptake of new denominations from other parts of Papua New Guinea, a process which acts to continually modify the religious field. During my fieldwork in Oksapmin, I noted a total of seven Christian denominations: Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist (SDA), Papua New Guinea Bible Church (PNGBC, formerly Evangelical Bible Mission or EBM), Revival, Evangelical Church of Papua (ECP), Foursquare and Flame Ministry.

In terms of membership and geographical distribution, by far the two largest churches in Oksapmin are Baptist and SDA. Whereas the other, smaller denominations might have three or four church buildings within the Oksapmin area, practically every ward would have both a Baptist and SDA church. But this is not to say either that the membership of the two churches is equal or that the majority of residents in any given settlement may not support one church over the other. The Baptist church is the dominant Oksapmin denomination, which is primarily because the ABMS were the first mission to enter the area, formally establishing the Tekin Station in mid-1962. Again, the same historical factors help to explain the prominence of the SDA church; they were the second mission to contact the Oksapmin, crossing the Strickland Gorge into the Gaua Valley in 1965. While some village areas present a balance of membership between Baptist and SDA, others strongly favour one or the other. For instance, in Kusanäp ward, the Baptist and SDA churches have roughly the same number of members, Ranimäp residents are mainly SDA, while the Baptist church dominates in Tekäp.



Figure 4. Revival Fellowship group, Wauläp

The third largest Christian denomination in Oksapmin would probably be PNGBC, with established churches in Ranimäp, Daburäp, Kusanäp, and Trangap. It seems that PNGBC entered the area sometime in the early 1990s. Revival, ECP, Foursquare, and Flame Ministry have considerably smaller followings than the three churches already discussed. Nonetheless, while marginal, these denominations certainly have the capacity to expand. The establishment of the sole Flame Ministry church in Sambate by a Morobeian man, for example, caused several members of the Baptist church to defect, which, in turn, created fear and bitterness within the latter. At the time of my fieldwork, the Revival church (as distinct from the charismatic movement or *rebaibal* that occurred in Oksapmin from 1980 onwards) had yet to build a church and consisted of two small fellowship groups within the wards of Wauläp and Divanäp (see Figure 4 above). As far as I know, ECP had established churches in two locations within the Oksapmin area, one in Daburäp in the Bäk Valley and another possibly in the Trangap Valley. Again, to the best of my knowledge, Foursquare had only one church, which had been constructed in Trangap, somewhere near Oksapmin Station.

The Baptist church is the only Christian denomination in Oksapmin to have developed a regional administrative network. Known as the Min Baptist Union (MBU), this body

incorporates all of the Baptist churches within the wider Min area. The MBU is sub-divided into various local units such as the Tekin Baptist Association (TBA), which manages all of the churches within the immediate Oksapmin territory, as well as their Bimin neighbours. The main responsibility of the TBA appears to be the appointment and distribution of pastors throughout its area of jurisdiction. The responsibilities of the MBU, on the other hand, relate more to the general form and content of church services, as told to me by the late Pastor Dickson, former TBA administrator. Overseeing the development of Baptist-funded educational and health services is the Baptist Union of Papua New Guinea (BUPNG), which is based in Mt Hagen, Western Highlands Province. It seems as though this organisation, run principally by Australians, is content to allow the Oksapmin to determine the course their faith will take, and has instead focussed its interventions in the areas of health and education.

Church services

The most fundamental component of contemporary Oksapmin Christianity is the church service. This is true whether considered from an anthropological, local, or institutional perspective. From the former, we can say that church worship is of crucial importance, for it is within this arena that the Oksapmin collectively and publicly express what Christianity means to them, giving shape and form to their own understandings of what the ABMS first revealed to them in 1962. An examination of their structure and content, therefore, stands to yield insights of considerable anthropological value. From the local perspective, church worship is also of paramount importance. For most Oksapmin, going to church is the defining aspect of being a Christian. Attending church symbolises both to the individual and to those around them, whether in the church or in the community more broadly, not only an acceptance of Christianity but also a commitment to self-betterment and overcoming sin. Conversely, failure to attend church is looked upon with derision and may be a source of considerable shame to the individual concerned. Institutionally, church worship is vital, since it is chiefly through their services that denominations are constituted. While it may support and encourage Christian activities outside the church, a denomination depends for its vitality and reputation mainly upon the services it conducts. In light of the above remarks, then, an analysis of church worship is essential in order to understand Oksapmin Christianity.

The foundation of Oksapmin church worship is the weekend service, held every Saturday by the SDA church and every Sunday for all other denominations. In addition to

these formal weekly performances, most denominations also conduct one or two mid-week services, typically held in the afternoon, which are more casual in tone and with smaller attendance. However, while these are important in terms of providing added counsel and guidance for particularly committed individuals, the focus of both the church and its congregation is very much upon the weekend services. As such, my discussion too shares this priority.

In terms of their structure and content, church services exhibit considerable denominational variety. Rather than discussing each in detail, however, I instead advisedly select Baptist services as the template for the discussion that follows. This is because Baptist is the foremost denomination in the area and is thus more representative of Oksapmin Christian worship than any alternative. Moreover, unlike the services of other churches, those of the Baptist church present the most anthropologically intriguing combination of indigenous and Christian content. The structure of a typical Sunday service at an Oksapmin Baptist Church is as follows:

- (1) The sounding at regular intervals of a wind instrument (often someone blowing through a piece of PVC pipe) to announce to church members that the service will commence shortly;
- (2) Songs welcoming people as they enter the church;
- (3) Prayer;
- (4) Formal introduction and welcome;
- (5) Announcements;
- (6) The performance of 'items,' usually songs, by either individuals or small groups;
- (7) Scripture reading;
- (8) Songs;
- (9) Offering;
- (10) Prayer;
- (11) Sermon;
- (12) Closing Prayer.

While the above describes a typical Sunday service in the Baptist church, the number, duration, and sequence of the listed phases may vary from one service to the next. For instance, a congregation lacking in either energy or motivation will likely not perform any items for that particular week, a sermon may be abbreviated due to the absence of the pastor,

and so forth. However, while perhaps one or two of the mentioned acts and utterances may be sometimes absent, there are certain key components that are never omitted. Although it may appear in truncated form, a sermon is always presented. Similarly, it would be seriously ‘ungrammatical’ for the congregation not to pray at the appropriate times. Singing, too, is a staple activity that invariably appeared in some shape or form.

The services of most other denominations are structurally similar to the basic Baptist scheme outlined above. Some notable differences include: an additional monetary collection within SDA services; a “Sabbath School,” also within SDA services, wherein church members are familiarised with topics of spiritual interest also being learned by SDAs throughout the world, which occurs immediately prior to the main sermon; and, lastly, a segment within PNGBC services dedicated to testimony and tales of moral transformation, which is usually inserted between either steps five and six or six and seven. To the differences in structural attributes can, of course, be added differences in style and emphasis.

There are differences that exist among the various Christian denominations in terms of the content of their services, particularly as this concerns the inclusion or exclusion of anything overtly ‘traditional.’ Some churches deliberately and explicitly seek to distance themselves from the indigenous cultural world while others have adopted a more moderate approach. The Revival, SDA, and PNGBC churches are nearer to the first outlook. Of these, PNGBC appeared the most strongly opposed, placing considerable effort into bleaching from both their religious ceremonies and the lives of their congregation any trace of the ‘sinful past’ from which they were liberated upon converting to Christianity. For instance, one PNGBC pastor said that:

Following the ways of the ancestors is wrong. The Bible prohibits this. Many people continue to mix Christianity and tradition. They haven’t broken out yet. The way of following God is not like this. When people truly convert to Christianity they completely break out of a world and into a new one. They leave everything of this earth. The people still engaged in this mixing are being tricked by Satan. This is the road along which sin travels. The Bible says no. According to 2 Corinthians: 5:17, the old will go and the new will come. When you become a true Christian you will be completely transformed, born again.

Within SDA services there is also a notable absence of ‘traditional’ cultural material but this is due more to an attachment to and identification with the global SDA network than the

espousal of any 'born again' rhetoric. The distance these churches construct between themselves and the social context in which they are necessarily embedded is also revealed by the fact that their services are held mainly in Tok Pisin interspersed with English, the standards of dress and bodily management that obtain within the church are noticeably western, and there is a strong emphasis placed on literacy and Scripture.

But all attempts at total change are destined to incompleteness. This means that despite their efforts to the contrary, the SDA and PNGBC churches necessarily and usually unwittingly reproduce the indigenous culture from which they seek to distance themselves. It filters into the social dynamics of their services, the expressions, metaphors, and analogies employed in their sermons, and so on. Yet in line with the overall argument being made here, it is by no means a case of straightforward reproduction. Indeed, the 'traditional' phenomena present within the services of these churches have often been subject to reimagination following conversion. While the examples I employ throughout the remainder of the chapter have been drawn from Baptist ceremonies, since they are more representative and often more interesting, the processes that I extract through analysis also characterise the services of other denominations, as presently alluded to.

Rather than analyse church services in their entirety, I instead single out three components for special attention: singing, 'items' (so called locally), and sermons. My selection could be shortened to two, since as I will show below, much of what occurs in songs is also common to the performance of items and vice versa. But I think each phase is sufficiently distinctive to be analysed separately; the primary distinction is that items are typically special, one-off performances whereas songs are a habitual component of weekly services. Of course, all performances, whether occurring for the first or fiftieth time, are to a certain extent 'one-off,' since all absorb characteristics particular to the transitory social contexts in which they are embedded. However, as will emerge, the items are sufficiently singular and the songs sufficiently habitual for this not to matter greatly. These three components have been chosen because they most vividly condense and illustrate the dual process of fusion that I am concerned to elucidate in this thesis. All clearly show how aspects of the indigenous cultural world inhabit ostensibly Christian forms but also how understandings of the Christian religion have been utilised to reconstruct that same indigenous material; two complementary processes that combine in the construction of a single religion and cosmology composed of both Baptist Christianity and parts of traditional culture.

Songs

While singing is an essentially verbal activity, in Oksapmin church services it is accompanied by an array of non-verbal expressive forms and I include those in my discussion here. Even within the category of ‘verbal activity’ it is important to distinguish between the words of a song and how they are realised, that is, between the semantic and embodied aspects of singing. I refrain from employing the term performative to refer specifically to the physically realised dimension of singing for I think that the arrangement of lyrics can also have dramatic effect in and of itself. In other words, every facet of singing is potentially performative, whether or not it is embodied.

Here I show how the fusion of Christian and indigenous religion operates within the singing that takes place during church worship. It will be recalled that this process is one whereby the Oksapmin have, firstly, made Christianity their own by embedding it within the existing social context and, secondly, used Christianity to remodel the indigenous culture that survived conversion such that a new, integrated religion, cosmology and ontology are formed within a context of rapid social change.

It will be useful to first reconsider the impacts of the ABMS upon Oksapmin society as described in the previous chapter. There I explained how the Oksapmin were discouraged from participating in activities that the ABMS perceived to be incompatible with the Christian way of life. This meant that those aspects of the indigenous world that the ABMS deemed consistent with Christian principles, or those that may have been considered incompatible but that the ABMS either overlooked or were not privy to, remained in the lives of Oksapmin people, who were thus more or less free to utilise them as they saw fit. Among the indigenous activities considered by the mission to be compatible with Christianity were the communal dancing and singing events regularly held by the Oksapmin within the specially built structures known as *tel äp*. As already described, the ABMS saw these gatherings as essentially social occasions in which the entire community participated and were thus content to allow their continued performance. Within these performative contexts were elaborated unique indigenous styles of dancing, vocalisation, instrumentation, and adornment. So, not only were the events, as events, permitted to remain, but so too were the



Figure 5. Landslide Baptist congregation song performance

bodily techniques that comprised their human expressive activity. Of interest for the present discussion is that while the frequency and centrality of these celebratory occasions diminished over time, the mentioned performance styles were imported by the Oksapmin into the sphere of Christian church worship. As I show below, these existing ritual forms were used to accommodate the Christian practices, ideas, and meanings introduced through the process of missionisation. However, at the same time, the Oksapmin employed their understandings of Christianity to assign new meaning to the indigenous phenomena brought into the church; the two were fused together.

Because I completed my fieldwork without having obtained much data on how church members viewed the use of traditional singing rhythms within Christian songs, here I consider only the aforementioned dancing, instrumentation, and adornment. However, I did acquire such data for the performance of items and will discuss it in the section that follows.

I begin by considering the dancing that occurs as part of the segment of church services during which songs are performed. During song performance I observed two main kinds of dancing. The first is, essentially, jumping two to three centimetres off the ground to

the beat of the song. This basic action is modified by adopting a split stance, one leg forward, the other back, and then alternating the position in time with the beat. The second type of dancing that regularly occurs is locally referred to as a 'snake dance,' whereby a chain of individuals, holding each other by the waist and jumping in a manner identical to that outlined above, follow a meandering course around the church. While these two styles usually occur independently of the other, the percussive jumping is common to both. As well as sharing this characteristic, another noteworthy feature is that the first kind of dancing may develop into the second. A group of several individuals vigorously jumping to the rhythm may decide to concatenate and, continuing their original motion, weave their way around the church as they sing.

Like the other facets of song performance I will mention later, these dancing styles have traditional origins. As told to me by my informants and also as reported by Perey (1973), this dancing would customarily take place during singsing. Its presence within this aspect of church worship thus demonstrates the indigenisation of Christianity; it is Christianity appearing in indigenous form. The precise character of this localisation is unclear, however, since I was unable to obtain any detailed information about the experiential or ideological dimensions of dancing in its traditional context of enactment. It is thus difficult to determine how much of that meaning has been imported with the practice into the Christian sphere. However, it must be assumed that because this dancing was imported directly from a traditional performative context, much of its psycho-physical energy, whatever that was, was retained, especially in the years when first implemented. So, the above remarks illustrate the first dimension of fusion. It can be seen that the Oksapmin utilised existing dancing techniques to give local bodily form to Christian singing. This aspect of indigenous society, and probably a significant amount of its internal meaning, was reproduced within a Christian context.

However, as this thesis argues, while much of the indigenous Oksapmin social and cultural world persisted, it did so as it was being simultaneously remade in Christian terms. For the present case it can be said that the performance of traditional dancing within church worship has not only reproduced this particular indigenous cultural form and its social meaning but also subjected it to reconceptualisation in terms of the Christian context in which it is enacted. The Oksapmin have encased Christian songs within existing performance techniques but, in so doing, have significantly altered the latter's meaning and purpose. Tradition and Christianity are reconciled to each other in the creation of a new composite

religion. For example, Bapris, the wife of one of the first local Baptist pastors expressed to me during an interview that:

Yes, all of those traditional things are in our services. The way we dance, too, is traditional. But now it has a different meaning. Now we do it to praise God, to glorify God. The traditional meaning is gone. It is nothing. We do it to worship God. Galatians, Chapter Five, Verse 22 [a passage in the Bible referring to the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit]. When dancing I feel these things. I feel happy, overjoyed. It is from my heart. This is why we dance. We feel so overjoyed that we want to jump up and down. Traditionally we danced to celebrate a marriage but now it's a sign that we have Jesus Christ in our lives. Before, we would sing and dance for a marriage and then forget about it. We would do these performances for a marriage, for children, and then that would be it. Now we do the same things because we want to go to Heaven. We will gain eternal life and we will be there forever.

This passage nicely illuminates how the indigenisation of Christianity has also entailed the Christianisation of indigeneity. Traditional styles of dancing as well as a proportion of their former internal value persist, yet the ideas and understandings surrounding their performance have been recast in Christian terms. That is, the action and likely the feeling of dancing has remained consistent across both traditional and Christian contexts but its motivation and perceived efficacy have changed. Oksapmin people are doing and probably experiencing the same things when dancing in church as they used to at a singsing, but they now think about such performances as one of several means through which to gain access to Heaven and no longer simply as an accompaniment to social celebrations. The Oksapmin have thus employed existing dancing styles to accommodate the practice of Christian singing but at the same time have employed their knowledge of Christianity to transform both what this activity should mean as well as what it can achieve.

The dual process of indigenisation and Christianisation also operates within the instrumentation that accompanies singing. It should first be mentioned that the instruments used during singing, aside from the human voice, are both traditional and introduced. The main instruments introduced to the Oksapmin by the missionaries were the guitar and tambourine. With the recent acquisition of solar electrification, the Oksapmin now occasionally play the electric keyboard and, more rarely, the electric guitar and bass. The acoustic guitar remains the instrument of choice across all denominations and is sometimes

accompanied by the tambourine. But the latter is not the only percussive instrument employed by the Oksapmin when singing.

In addition to the instruments they have adopted from the ABMS, the Oksapmin also employ one of their own, namely, the elongated hand drum known locally as *wälon* and in Tok Pisin as kundu. As a percussion instrument, the *wälon* is used to provide a weighty beat and appears either in combination with, or as a substitute for, the tambourine. The character of this rhythm is identical to that of the dancing described above, with which it regularly occurs, that is, persistent and monotonous. Due to their tapered shape and wide sound hole, the *wälon* resonates clearly when struck correctly. In this way the sound produced from one beat adequately fills the space until the next, creating a constant, driving feel. When played alongside the guitar, the traditional dancing movements, as well as the singing itself, the overall performative effect is energetic and captivating.

Like the dancing styles mentioned earlier, the presence of the *wälon* within church worship exemplifies the indigenisation of Christianity; it is a means through which new ideas and practices have been made sense of within, and thereby reproduced, the existing social and cultural framework. The Oksapmin had introduced to them by the ABMS the practice of singing Christian songs and subsequently situated that activity within the performative means they had available to them, which, among other things, included the *wälon*. It can also be assumed that playing the *wälon* within church services recalls to participants not only the outward form but also the inner experience of this traditional act. But, in further parallel with the previous example, the employment of the indigenous Oksapmin drum during church worship is not a case of simple cultural reproduction. Indeed, while the Oksapmin have clearly used this aspect of their indigenous performative repertoire in order to give local shape and meaning to the Christianity revealed to them by the missionaries, the process of recontextualisation produced a concomitant shift in its overall social and religious significance such that it was made consistent with Christianity.

The impacts of missionary activity upon the meanings and use of traditional drums has been the topic of a recent article written by Lohmann (2007a), who has described this sphere of activity among the Asabano, neighbours and friends of the Oksapmin. There he shows that, historically, playing the drum was restricted to initiated males and that its sound was considered to be that which emanates from a woman's vagina during sex (2007a:90). As a result of a charismatic Christian revival that occurred in the area, however, the drum began

to be used within the church and it was also played by women, thus embodying the Christian idea of ‘universal access to God’s bounty’ (2007a:89). He also notes that while this is the case, drumming, especially when it occurs outside the church, still carries a strong masculine value. My discussion echoes many of Lohmann’s findings.

Among the Oksapmin, missionisation has influenced the use of the *wälon* in three main ways. First, by both permitting the performance of singsing and also allowing the Oksapmin to determine what course their own faith should take, the ABMS indirectly facilitated the relocation of this activity from its traditional context into a Christian one. Secondly, its conditions of use were restructured according to the new context of enactment. The mission espoused the value of gender equality and encouraged local pastors to communicate this message to their respective congregations during church services. This has had the additional effect of democratising the use of the *wälon*. Prior to the introduction of Christianity, the drum was played only by men and prohibited for women but today, within church worship, it is played by both genders. The third way in which the entrenchment of Christianity has altered the use of the indigenous drum is through the reconceptualisation of its purpose. Akin to the dancing example used above, local people openly acknowledge that this activity has traditional provenance, but they also make clear that, to them, the origin and efficacy of the instrument has been retrospectively imagined as Christian. James, a senior Oksapmin Baptist pastor described his perspective on the matter to me in the following way:

All these things are a traditional way of worship. For example, like a guitar, it’s the same you know, even some Australian cowboys play a guitar. You play the same thing, but you see, we pray, pray over the instrument for a different purpose. So, for the kundu [*wälon*], we prayed over the kundu a long time ago, we pray over, and then we say that this is God’s. God has given us this ability to use, to play this kundu. It doesn’t matter what the object is as long as we are using it to worship God instead of the old spiritual world.

James recognises that the *wälon* is a product of the traditional past. But he also carefully draws attention to the fact that the meanings historically associated with the drum have been transformed in accordance with the new context of its enactment. The outward form and perhaps inward experience of playing the drum remains the same, yet how it appears to the mind, as well as the conditions surrounding its use, have been altered in accordance with the practices, values and beliefs instilled through missionisation. Again can be discerned the dual

process whereby the indigenous world has simultaneously accommodated and been remade by Christianity.

The final dimension of song performance that exemplifies this process is bodily adornment. During the singing that occurs within church services, individuals are typically adorned with either of two objects. The first is a closely plaited rope strap, richly embellished with approximately 40-50 small, luminescent clam shells known to the Oksapmin as *tiämbel*, which is slung from the shoulder across the chest. The shells exhibit an attractive bluish lustre. This physical property is accentuated by the reflections of light produced when the shells respond to the action of a dancing body. In addition to their visual beauty, the *tiämbel* also appeal to the ear. Many and contiguously arranged, the shells inevitably jangle when subjected to movement. As with their lustre, this sonic effect is enhanced by dancing and transforms the *tiämbel* into an ornamental percussion instrument.

The other main way in which the Oksapmin adorn themselves during song performance is with the feathers of various bird species. Although, in theory, these could come from any sufficiently attractive bird, within song performance it is the feathers of three species that most frequently appear, namely, the bird of paradise, *ilnem*, and *kumbäkambä*, all of which possess significant aesthetic appeal. Such finery is invariably mounted on the head, either as a single feather threaded through the hair or as a composite headdress attached with string or rope.

Regarding their utilisation, the *tiämbel* and feathers are worn either separately or in combination with each other. Further, any individual, regardless of age or gender, may bedeck themselves with these decorative items. Within song performance, however, certain patterns can be discerned. Firstly, while men often wear the *tiämbel* and, more occasionally, feathers, it is the women who adorn themselves with the most frequency and attention. Secondly, due no doubt to their greater familiarity with and historical experience of the performative contexts within which these items originally figured, it is the senior members of the congregation who are more inclined towards these expressive bodily practices.

Like the *wälon* and the dancing styles described earlier, these modes of adornment featured within singsing, that is, customary performances designed to acknowledge and celebrate societally important junctures, including marriages, exchanges, and so forth. The logic underpinning bodily adornment was most likely simply to increase one's aesthetic and sexual appeal towards those participating in these festive occasions.

Of interest for the present discussion is that subsequent to missionisation these styles of indigenous beautification have been shifted by the Oksapmin from their traditional context of enactment into Christian church worship. They are one of several ways in which the Oksapmin have utilised aspects of their traditional performative repertoire, sanctioned by the ABMS, to incorporate the practice of Christian singing into their society. Through missionisation the Oksapmin were taught to sing Christian songs and it has been through the recontextualisation of these various indigenous techniques that they have given local form and meaning to this introduced practice; it is the way in which they have transformed mission Christianity into Oksapmin Christianity. It is the local face of the global religion.

Most obviously, recontextualisation has not altered the physical appearance of these styles of bodily adornment. Nor has the way in which they are performed been changed, since they are subject to the same movement and manipulation as within singsing. It is likely that the continuities extend beyond appearance though. I expect that the same sense of occasion would pertain for those arranging their bodies in this way. In both the traditional and Christian contexts, that is, participants would at least have a feeling that decorating themselves in this way was something special. So it can be seen that the *tiämbel* and plumage are two ways in which the Oksapmin have employed existing performative techniques to integrate the practice of Christian singing into their society and that this process has directly reproduced certain aesthetic and social dimensions of this traditional activity. But again it needs to be recognised that through accommodating Christianity this indigenous form has simultaneously been transformed by it. Because they appear in church worship these decorative means are inevitably coloured by the principles and values that obtain within that sphere, like the other examples given above.

In this section I have identified the operation of the reciprocal transformation of cultural material within three aspects of the singing that occurs during church services, namely, dancing, instrumentation, and bodily adornment. Throughout I have shown how these aspects of the indigenous cultural world have, firstly, been used to accommodate the Christian practice of singing introduced to the Oksapmin by the ABMS. The mission considered that singsing were essentially social occasions and thereby permitted their continued performance. Having converted to Christianity, the Oksapmin then retrieved certain creative procedures from this context and redeployed them within church worship to give local form and meaning to the practice of Christian singing. But as seen, the contextual shift also produced a reconceptualisation of meaning. While in outward and sometimes

experiential and social terms the indigenous techniques remained the same, how they appeared to the minds of Oksapmin Christians underwent at least partial transformation in terms of the new religion to which they had converted. All of the examples discussed demonstrate how these aspects of the existing world simultaneously accommodated and were remade by Christianity. The broader argument being made is that through fusing the two worlds to each other in this way, religious and cultural unity was constructed in a context of dramatic social change. A syncretic religious world composed of elements drawn from both Christianity and tradition was constructed as the Oksapmin collectively negotiated the historical rupture caused by missionisation. Through the mechanisms described, the two worlds are fused together, reciprocally transforming both in the formation of a new composite religion.

Items

Items are presentational performances made by members of the church, either alone or in groups, to the rest of the congregation. Much of what occurs during singing is common to the performance of items. Indeed, their content often overlaps considerably, since items invariably contain singing of some sort. But while generally similar, the two can be differentiated in important ways. One concerns repetition. Items, unlike the songs discussed above, are singular, one-off, presentational performances. This is not to say they lack either pattern or regularity, for items surely borrow from earlier performances and are also rehearsed. Rather, the point is that items are both unprecedented and terminal; in their realised form they have not been performed before and will not be performed again. In fact, the majority of items are created specifically for the particular occasion on which they are enacted. Another distinction concerns participation. During regular singing, although there may be a handful of individuals leading the performance, all in attendance, regardless of their skill or inclination, will participate. Items differ in this respect, since they establish the existence of, and a definite boundary between, performer and audience. During items performers will stand at the front of the church and present their creation to a seated, mostly passive audience. Further, items can be distinguished from regular songs by their broader expressive range. It is true that song is a basic feature of both regular singing and items, but within the latter is found greater variety, including not only group but also duo and solo performances.

In addition to variations in number are those in genre. The singing, dancing, instrumentation, and adornment mentioned earlier are common to items, but while the component of services dedicated to song rarely, if ever, shifts focus away from the activity after which it is named, during items, particularly those performed at services held to mark important dates in the Christian calendar, other expressive genres, such as dramatic skits, may be presented. A final difference worth mentioning is that, whereas song performance operates within an established, albeit gradually evolving, corpus of bodily, decorative and musical structures, items allow presenters to devise new material for each separate occasion. It is an anthropological truism that any act of cultural innovation inevitably occurs in relation to and partially reproduces, existing ideas, beliefs, and practices, yet the fact remains that items are often unique, unprecedented performances.

Having outlined the defining features of items and distinguished them in several ways from regular song performance, it is now possible to consider how they exemplify the process of fusion I consider definitive of the Oksapmin relationship with Christianity. The approach here is much the same as that outlined in the foregoing section, namely, to demonstrate how certain elements of the indigenous performative repertoire have simultaneously accommodated and been remade by Christianity.

An Indigenous Easter

Here I do so by means of a particularly representative case study, namely, the 2009 Baptist Easter service held over three days at the Tekin Station church. The rationale for deciding to focus exclusively on this occasion is simple: aside from being deeply impressed by the physical and emotional intensity of the service as a whole, the items presented within it vividly condense the processes characteristic of the Oksapmin interaction with Christianity.

Easter is a special time of year in Oksapmin society. For three days, subsistence activities all but completely cease and attention collectively turns toward commemorating the Biblical events leading up to and including the resurrection of Christ. This heightening of consciousness finds performative expression in the church services held throughout the area.



Figure 6. Item performance at 2008 Christmas Baptist service, Wauläp (note use of *wälon* drum as well as women adorned in *tiambel*)

Unlike regular Baptist Sunday services, those held at Easter are organised and attended together by several congregations, collective worship known in Tok Pisin as bung lotu. The churches that participated in the Tekin service were those immediately adjacent to the station, namely, Sambate, Wauläp, Landslide, and Kusanäp.

Notwithstanding minor thematic changes made according to each respective stage of the resurrection, the programme for each of the three constituent services was uniform and more or less mirrored that of any normal Baptist service. Prayer and song welcomed attendees to the service. Once sufficient numbers had settled inside the church, a series of formal introductory remarks and acknowledgments were issued by the pastor overseeing proceedings. The quotidian announcements that would usually follow were either truncated or omitted in favour of maintaining focus on specifically religious matters. The service then proceeded directly onto item performance. However, in contradistinction from ordinary

Sunday worship, within the Easter service it was not two or three diffident individuals performing to their audience but a group of 15–30 individuals from each church delivering items with rigour and passion. From the manner in which these items were brought forth it was clear that this was truly an important event for the Oksapmin. Following items were scripture readings, songs, and also the offering, all of which eased the mood considerably. Prefaced with a blessing, the sermon then commenced, which, as earlier stated, dealt with themes relevant to the given phase of the resurrection and their moral implications for living Christians. A final prayer of thanks concluded the service thus allowing all gathered to either return home or casually mill about making conversation with acquaintances.

While in structure the Easter service closely resembles a typical Sunday village service, in intensity and detail it is significantly greater. In other words, the same things occur in both kinds of service but Easter is given more attention, effort, and energy. This ethos and sense of occasion is manifest in various ways throughout the proceedings. First and most basically, the services held during Easter are attended by many more people than a regular Sunday service, thus establishing a platform for the experience of ‘communitas’ (Turner 1969) or ‘collective effervescence’ (Durkheim [1912] 1995). Also, the extent of instrumentation is broader; while in a normal village service instrumentation may be limited to a couple of guitars, tambourines and hand drums, within the Easter services not only are instruments greater in number but also in variety, with electric pianos and guitars complementing the existing ensemble. Lastly, with greater numbers and stronger intent, whatever singing and dancing occurs within the services is considerably amplified.

The items performed within the three day Easter service were often truly captivating, not only for me, but for the entire audience. Here I would like to analyse two of them, one an item performed by members of the Sambate congregation, the other by a lone elderly man. As alluded to earlier, these particular performances are analytically useful, firstly because they are representative of the general category of performance to which they belong and also due to the crucial fact that, as regular components of church worship, they reveal how the Oksapmin orient themselves toward the Christian religion.

The Sambate contingent presented their item during the second of the three services comprising the Easter programme. In total, the group numbered approximately 25 and with the exception of Bulex, the male leader, consisted mainly of women. With the item set to commence, Bulex, guitar in hand, strode confidently to the front of those gathered while the

remaining performers assembled in a line outside the church. Aware the group was now ready to start, the audience quietened and directed their attention forward. The item began with Bulex strumming a major chord. On top of this basic metric framework was gradually introduced a single speech sound liltingly sung and melismatically phrased. Because the notes within the vocal sequence were ordered in an ascending pattern, a mood of tense anticipation spread throughout the audience. After two measures, Bulex suddenly paused, deftly suspending the performance in time and space. The roughly five seconds of ensuing silence was dramatically broken as he launched into the item proper. His shift catalysed the rest of the group, who immediately began filing into the church, weaving their way through the audience to join Bulex at the front. They performed the ‘snake dance’ as they came, synchronously bouncing their bodies up and down. As they entered deeper into the church, it became apparent that each member of the dancing chain carried some garden produce, later to be donated as part of the offering. Because they were many in number and performing with such intensity, the dancers exerted considerable stress on the weak floorboards, which buckled and shook under the seated audience. To me, it felt as though the floor was on the verge of collapse, yet those around me remained untroubled, concentrated on the performance in front of them. While the dancers meandered through the audience toward the front of the church, Bulex repeated a rhythmically dynamic opening couplet. Sung with passion, its lyrics were:

Hän(a) yes ohoh, ayeeoo

Hän(a) kraiss ohoh, ayeeoo

When translated into English these Oksapmin phrases simply mean ‘He is the man. Christ is the man.’ The ‘ayeeoo’ attached to the end of each line is used for emphasis. Here Bulex sang in a strongly percussive manner. Each beat was strongly accentuated, thus lending to his singing a pronounced, steady rhythm akin to that of a drum.

Once at the front of the church, the dancers proceeded directly to the small raised stage, where they carefully placed in a pile the various items of garden food they had brought for the occasion. Following their donation, the dancers took their respective positions beside Bulex. The now united group was then led by Bulex into the next lyrical block of the song. Corresponding to the development in linguistic content was another in vocal dynamics, since it was at this moment that the dancers, who had yet to contribute verbally, began also to sing with Bulex. But while the number of singers thus increased, the additional voices were not

arranged chordally nor sequenced polyrhythmically. Rather, all members of the group followed the same melody and rhythm as initially established by Bulex. What they added was thus not complexity but power.

The lyrics collectively sung by the group were as follows:

Hän(a) yes ohoh, amämsi hat apripla, ayeeoo

Hän(a) yes ohoh, deninsi hat apripla, ayeeoo

Amämsi hat aplis nambul savla wu, ayeeoo

Here the singers are joyfully anticipating the Second Coming of Christ as expounded in the New Testament. The first line simply expresses the state of happiness (*amämsi*) found in the belief of Christ's imminent return from Heaven to Earth. The following line similarly conveys the excited expectation of the Second Coming. The third and final phrase moves from a description of the emotions and moods associated with Christ's return to actively soliciting the Saviour to 'come and take us away [to Heaven].'

With the group now physically and musically integrated, the dynamism, volume, and presence of the performance grew significantly. There began to emerge for all present that intangible, yet nonetheless definite, sense that something socially powerful was occurring. Audience members began to clap their hands, tap their feet, and sway their bodies to the captivating rhythm. Having repeated the second lyrical segment three times the group was then led by Bulex into the third and final couplet, which ran as follows:

Nämbul saks äp yah tenong na tivla wu, aiyeoo

Äp yukta nung na tivla wu, aiyeoo

This brief stanza takes up where the preceding one left off, namely, to promote the coming of Christ. On behalf of those assembled, the group firstly sings 'take us to the good place (*äp yah*) [Heaven].' To complete both the couplet and the item itself, the final line then confidently assures all listening believers that the promised Salvation shall indeed be theirs. When translated it reads 'He will take us there, He is going to put us there.' The group repeated these two phrases perhaps three times before concluding their performance. In a show of appreciation, the audience responded with a brief yet warm round of applause.

The performance of this item manifests the fusion and reciprocal transformation of indigeneity and Christianity. I begin by considering the process of indigenisation. As with the singing that takes place during regular Sunday services, performers utilise patterns of dance, adornment, and instrumentation drawn from traditional *singsing* to impose local form and meaning upon this Christian practice. My remarks above about the nature and effects of such indigenisation pertain similarly here and thus, for the most part, do not require reiteration. One important dimension of performance not included in that earlier discussion, however, was language. Here I examine both its content and form.

To begin with, consider the words of the song. Upon first glimpse, their meaning is obviously Christian; the group sings about Jesus, his Second Coming, and their hope to participate in that event. However, it is important to observe how this Christian act is couched in existing local forms. For instance, the group is singing not in English or Hebrew but their own Oksap tongue. Their expression is thus necessarily shaped by the conceptual structure of that language. While analysis in this direction is constrained by my limited linguistic competence, it can still be seen, for instance, that ‘*äp yah*’ (‘the good place’) is used to denote Heaven, thus showing how Christian concepts have been captured by and assimilated to existing linguistic means. Further investigation into this trend would likely reveal many more examples of such indigenisation.

Then there is the manner in which the words are sung. As briefly described earlier, led by Bulex the group sang in a percussive style placing emphasis not on melody but on complementing the rhythmic framework established by dancing and instrumentation. Like those accompaniments, this style of singing was clearly traditional in origin and was yet another performative technique to have been drawn from singsing and redeployed within Christian worship. Indeed, anyone listening to an audio recording of the performance without a knowledge of the Oksapmin language would have no reason to think it was either Christian or being sung during a church service. So, from not only the dancing, adornment, and instrumentation of the performers, but also from the content and form of their singing, it is possible to discern Christianity being embedded within and informed by indigenous Oksapmin culture. It shows how the Christianity presented by the ABMS was changed by the Oksapmin in a way that made it comprehensible within their existing way of life. To reiterate, however, as these indigenous forms were accommodating Christianity they were also being remade by it. Christianity was changed to fit the existing Oksapmin way of life but that lifeworld was also changed to fit Christianity.

This dual process of fusion is apparent in Bulex's explanation of the item performed by the Sambate congregation within the Easter service. He stated to me in an interview that:

The snake dancing [the elongated shape cut by the women as they weave through the crowd toward the front of the church] that occurs in our item looks traditional. It used to mean different things. We used to dance like this on traditional occasions. But the dance here is expressing the joy we, as Christians, find in Christ. All of the dancers were holding food. This shows the blessing of God and Jesus. When the dancers were in a straight line, this represents that we are 'straight' and true in our commitment to God.

You see the drums, the shells, our songs, the way we sing, these are traditional things. That is true. But we use these because we don't have any other way to praise God.

Bulex's statements clearly illustrate the reciprocal interaction of indigeneity and Christianity. On the one hand, he draws attention to the traditional appearance of these Christian practices. The singing, adornment, dancing, and so forth are all parts of the indigenous performative repertoire utilised to give local form to the Christianity presented by the ABMS. As I have said, it is not only the outward form but likely much of the inner experience of these traditional practices that have been recontextualised. Bulex also supports received anthropological theory in saying that indigenisation was necessary and inevitable in light of the fact that there were no other available means through which to embody the worship of God. Incoming ideas and practices were made sense of and incorporated by what was already there. But, on the other hand, he also makes clear that, notwithstanding these traditional origins, the performance techniques have been transformed through their recontextualisation into a Christian context. Christianity was made intelligible within Oksapmin culture and the latter was also made intelligible within Christianity. Although it looks and feels the same, it is now done in a different place and for different reasons. Whereas before, these embodied manoeuvres were undertaken during social occasions such as singsing, they are now directed toward glorifying the Christian God and attaining the spiritual rewards He is believed to bestow.

I conclude this section of the chapter with a few observations on another item within the Easter service, this time a solo performance by an elderly man. As applause for the

preceding item faded, an elderly man, probably 65 in age and holding a *wälon*, slowly rose from his position on the floor. Once upright, the man briefly composed himself before turning to address the audience. Confident they were ready, he then began. Instantly it was apparent that this item differed considerably from the group presentation above. Most basically, of course, this was the project of a single and not corporate entity. But the most salient shift occurred not in volume or gesture but rather in tone and mood. Whereas the Sambate item had been boisterous and direct, here the style was sombre, wistful, and plaintive. He sang of being symbolically washed by the blood of Christ and also how all Christians are connected to each other through the death of their saviour. Further, while the *wälon* was again used to provide rhythmic structure, played by the old man it was but a steady murmur beneath the lyrics. The melody, timbre, and rhythm of the man's voice were clearly traditional in character.

Despite my efforts, an interview with the performer never transpired and I thus failed to acquire a detailed explanation of the origin and meaning of his performance. However, in light of the description given above and the analysis of the chapter thus far it is still possible to discern the operation of the dual process under consideration. To begin with, although it deals with Christian themes, the item has a strongly traditional appearance and mood. In other words, it is a Christian act expressed indigenously. Through the recontextualisation of aspects of the traditional performative repertoire, the performer has given Christianity local form. But, as with all other dimensions of the indigenous world utilised within church worship already discussed, the reproduction of indigenous culture within church worship has subjected it to reimagination in Christian terms. Through the mentioned processes of reciprocal transformation, the two systems of being in the world are fused to each other in the making of a new composite body of religious thought and practice.

Sermons

The final aspect of church worship that I will discuss is sermons. Within sermons the commensuration of indigeneity and Christianity occurs more explicitly through the verbal conflations, comparisons and descriptions made by particular speakers. Whereas with songs and items the duality of social change is revealed through bodily action and only secondarily through the reflections of the performers, in this context the Oksapmin deliberately and openly establish such isomorphism through spoken language.

Whilst I often found sermons mundane, they did, nonetheless, frequently shed light upon the Oksapmin relationship with Christianity. Irrespective of denomination it was common for preachers to reflect on the changes brought about by Christianity, as well as the ways in which it either differed from or conformed to their traditional value system. Invariably, the juxtaposition of the two systems positively emphasised similarity. This contrasts strongly with the content of Urapmin worship as described by Robbins, who states (1995:216) that ‘Urapmin religion is almost never mentioned in church,’ and ‘never in such a positive light as a model to be followed.’ This supports his overall argument that missionisation there produced a clear and uneasy separation between the traditional and Christian worlds. The Oksapmin, however, have sought to bring the two together, and are unafraid about positively emphasising their perceived similarity. For example, consider the following excerpt taken from an SDA service:

Christianity and tradition are the same. Our fathers and ancestors had formal rules and prohibitions that prevented people from behaving badly. They didn’t have the Bible but they still had this law. Now, when we became Christian and we read the Bible, we saw that it had similar rules and prohibitions. So, I think that before, men had some ways of stopping men from behaving badly, like sleeping with another man’s wife or stealing another man’s land. That was there long ago. There were men who didn’t obey these rules, those who fought with each other, who were angry, and behaved like that. There were men who did obey these rules and who had good thinking. Those men who followed the rules had good lives. So when I think about it, the men who followed the rules led good lives. The best. But the men who didn’t, and who fought, and things like that, they led short, unhappy lives. Now, we look at the Bible, and the Bible says the same things. The Bible gives us the same thinking; it tells us ‘you should do this, you shouldn’t do that.’ Before our fathers told us the same things, so I think that the way they taught us before is basically the same as the Bible.

Within this passage is clearly discernible the establishment of strong moral equivalences between Christianity and tradition. The pastor, Jebet, is not in the act of simply comparing these two worldviews but is underlining their essential similarity. Although it is occurring in a different way from within the items and songs described earlier, the process of adapting Christianity to tradition in the pursuit of religious seamlessness is equally apparent. The pastor is directly claiming that conversion to Christianity did not entail a significant transformation in the content or structure of existing morality but rather its continuation and

development under a new guise. In reality, of course, the establishment of Christianity produced large shifts in local society and culture, including, most importantly, the abolition of an indigenous ritual complex designed to ensure the fertility of people and land, the systematic destruction of the taboo system, as well as the diminution of polygamous marriage. But the matter of importance here is that, rather than attend to this actual disjunction, Jebet instead constructs equivalence and similarity. As with the other creative manoeuvres outlined above, this process of commensuration synthetically ‘closes the gaps’ between the two systems. By emphasising their essential sameness, Christianity and indigeneity are in this way melded and reduced to each other.

Immediately below I provide a similar piece of ethnographic data, this time taken from a sermon within a Baptist church service. It will be seen that whilst the general intention of the speaker remains the same, namely, to expose through designed comparison certain moral structures common to both Christianity and tradition, the way in which this is achieved is significantly more sophisticated. Instead of explicitly identifying for the congregation the attributes and qualities common to both systems, here the pastor, Kakuun, implicitly constructs equivalence by juxtaposing an account of historical religious practice with a Biblical passage. Unlike the previously cited speaker, here the pastor is not interpreting for his audience the specific ways in which Christianity and tradition can be deemed essentially similar but instead aligns the two in such a way that meaningful connections arise.

Elijah in the men’s house

After explaining in true Protestant fashion that it is primarily as individuals and not as members of a group that we must transact with God, the elderly pastor Kakuun, one of the first men to be appointed to that position in the Oksapmin area, outlined his thoughts thus:

The spirit house and the men’s houses: this was something that extended throughout the Oksapmin area. The boys were not taken for nothing, they were taken for a special purpose. Some of the activities they would do with their mothers had to stop. The main purpose was to permanently sever the relationship of dependence that boys had on their mothers. Men were taught how to care for pigs, how to hunt, how to create wealth, and gardening skills. Within these houses boys were trained. The father or the elder brother would take the boys to certain areas and train them in particular tasks.

Different areas were used for different skills. Gaua Valley was used for pigs, Tekin for taro. Regardless of the weather the boys would gather at the specified place. When they arrived they would all huddle together in a group. All were there for the same purpose and would have to struggle to get inside. When inside they would sit down and be told secret knowledge. The boy attends because he wants to learn this secret knowledge and also to become like his father. Men also built a house called *lät äp* [house of fire]. When they went inside it wasn't for nothing. The house was very big and long and the boys stayed there from six [AM] to six [PM]. When the boys entered they would see a lot of *wängä* [stinging nettle]. This was applied to the boys' skin constantly for the time they spent in the house, creating immense pain. This made the skin of the boy very strong, like the bark of a tree. After being subjected to and passing through this ordeal the boys were believed to be *bäpkwei* [blessed, fortunate]. When they leave, they will walk prouder and taller, and will be stronger. They will have many friends and enjoy material abundance.

Without any remarks as to the rationale of this description or how it would relate to whatever followed, Kakuun directly proceeded to read aloud 2 Kings 2:1–15, a passage from the Old Testament within which the prophet Elijah is taken to Heaven. The author narrates how one fateful day Elijah, together with his attendant and disciple Elisha, are travelling from Gilgal. *En route*, Elijah counsels Elisha to remain while, on God's command, he continues on to Bethel. Elisha protests that 'As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you.' Elijah assents, and the pair proceed to Bethel. Once there, a group of prophets accost and ask Elisha if he is aware that the Lord will take Elijah, his master, to Heaven. Elisha replies that he is indeed cognisant of these plans and implores the prophets to remain silent on the matter. The structure of interaction between Elijah and Elisha and Elisha and the prophets is identically repeated at Jericho before the pair travel to the River Jordan. After miraculously crossing to the far bank, Elijah invites Elisha to make a final request before his imminent departure, in response to which Elisha asks for a double portion of his master's spirit. Shortly thereafter, a chariot of fire suddenly appears to dramatically transport Elijah to Heaven. Having now received from the Lord his spiritual request, Elisha takes his former master's cloak and mantle and again crosses the river in spectacular fashion. Elisha thus signifies generally, as well as to the group of 50 prophets that accompanied the pair from Jericho, his worthiness and intent to continue the work of the departed Elijah. After briefly recapitulating the important junctures in the story, Kakuun concluded the sermon.

The onus is now to determine the anthropological significance of this series of utterances. This is made more difficult by the fact that the pastor offers no interpretive remarks throughout or after his sermon. The two linguistic blocks are simply placed next to each other without any hint or suggestion as to how they may relate. But the closer the content of the respective stories is inspected, the more obvious it becomes that Christianity and tradition are being compared and commensurated. Certain components of the indigenous ritual life that existed prior to the arrival of the missionaries are selected and then positioned in relation to the Biblical text in such a way that equivalences emerge.

This process occurs most basically on the level of narrative content and structure. Kakuun's description of the Oksapmin initiation system focuses on the members of two socially defined life stages, the junior initiate and the senior instructor. The members of the former category are soon to be ritually transformed into that of the latter, but for the purposes of the story these roles remain stable. Likewise, within the recited Biblical passage, while the context of interaction is obviously different, in Elisha and Elijah we again find the disciple and the master from whom he learns sacred knowledge. The stories differ in the respect that, in the latter, the protagonists are individuals, while in the former they are members of a group, yet the hierarchical-didactic relationship of social statuses overlaps clearly.

Also common to both stories is that they unfold over several geographical locations. We hear described how Elijah and his apprentice travel throughout the Kingdom of Israel on various divine errands. Similarly, a prominent aspect of the Kakuun's historical account was that various population areas within the Oksapmin territory were visited according to the particular task or skill to be learned by the initiates.

From here I now proceed to trace two other implicit linkages. It will be recalled that the climax of the cited Biblical story is the point at which a chariot of fire remarkably sweeps Elijah off to Heaven. Consider the fact that the chariot is one of fire and also that, of the total range of houses traditionally employed within the Oksapmin initiation complex, Kakuun selected for appraisal the *lat äp*, which literally means 'the house of fire.' The thematic link seems far from accidental. Through the identification of an element and process common to both his memory of initiation and his readings of the Bible, namely, the fearsome representation of fire within the context of religious instruction, Kakuun conveys an image of Christianity and indigenous history as being made of the same material; two parts of an encompassing and singular religious truth.

The second linkage tacitly established by the pastor appears to be one which I assume would be of great importance to the Oksapmin. Within the 2 Kings reading, it is seen that although Elijah instructs him otherwise, Elisha remains steadfastly loyal to his master up until the moment he is taken to Heaven. We also see that as recompense for this unerring commitment to both God and his immediate human superior, Elisha inherits a great spiritual reward, namely, a double portion of Elijah's spirit. With respect to the Oksapmin initiation complex, as portrayed by the elderly pastor, we can see that a similar nexus obtains between obedience and blessing. The boys who endure the travails of initiation emerge mentally, physically, and socially stronger than before. So it would seem that at least an implicit equivalence is being set up between the traditional concept of *bapkwei*, meaning blessed or fortunate, and the benefits promised and given to Oksapmin Christians by God.¹⁴

In both examples that I have discussed, it can be observed how each speaker selects and arranges aspects of traditional Oksapmin society, particularly those concerning initiation, in a way that matches or calibrates them to given aspects of Christianity. While history furnishes both individuals with a range of examples with which to construct oppositional or contrastive scenarios, both instead opt to underscore essential similarity, to posit an isomorphism between the two. At this point it must again be asked why specific features of the two worldviews are being related to each other in this particular way.

In line with the overall argument of this work I maintain that, through their utterances, the two pastors are fusing together the indigenous and Christian worlds. Of course, as was seen in the case of the performance of songs and items during church services, since missionisation, the Oksapmin have thoroughly intermixed indigeneity and Christianity by importing existing techniques and meanings into the church while at the same time reimagining them in Christian terms. That is, the two have already been reconciled to each other through that dual process. The initial separation of Christianity from indigeneity by the two pastors, therefore, at this point in the history of Oksapmin Christianity, is an artificial one employed rhetorically. To me, it seems that this is the reflective, discursively explicit manifestation of what has already occurred and continues to unfold on a practical, bodily level within the performance of items and songs, as well as other areas of Oksapmin society to be discussed later. In a myriad of ways, both inside and outside the church, the Oksapmin

¹⁴ This raises the question of whether the term *bapkwei* is itself used in reference to the divine blessings that are believed to flow to Christians. In the course of my translation work I was unable to establish whether or not this is the case.

have adapted their traditions and Christianity in a way that makes them mutually compatible and, in this context, we see a formal, retrospective legitimation and rationalisation of this dual process. The pastors are attempting to fuse together aspects of the Bible, and the Christian way of life more generally, to what they know from their past.

Private worship

Christian worship is, of course, not confined to public church services. Indeed, for Oksapmin Christians some of their most important engagements with God occur privately, whether in their own homes or in the bush, with their families and sometimes alone. The central pillar of private worship is prayer. Literate Oksapmin occasionally read the Bible in their own time and some sing Christian songs with their families in the evenings, but almost all Oksapmin pray at regular intervals throughout the day, either in their heads or speaking aloud. Indeed, during any given day, prayer is typically the first and last thing one will hear when staying in an Oksapmin home and is something often undertaken by people in the world during their daily lives. This Christian ritual occupies a similarly prominent position within the lives of the Urapmin people described by Robbins in his article “God Is Nothing but Talk” (2001). There he writes that the Urapmin ‘minimally begin and end their days with prayer and most people pray many more times during the day’ (2001:903). Further, they do so for many different reasons and in a wide range of different social spaces. Prayer has become ‘the punctuation of Urapmin social life, and it is now the most routine part of their religious practice’ (2001:904). All of these statements apply equally well to the Oksapmin.

Here I would like to draw attention to the different contexts in which the Oksapmin pray and also to demonstrate how pre-existing religious motivations and impulses persist within these acts. I focus mainly on how prayer has been moulded around existing cultural structures and less on how anything recognisably indigenous has been remade in Christian terms, but the latter still warrants mention. The main argument I underline here is the continuity of an Oksapmin concern with promoting material increase through ritual acts across the historical divide of conversion to Christianity. This perspective differs somewhat from Robbins’s appraisal of the role of prayer in Urapmin social life. For the Urapmin, as described by Robbins, prayer has acted as an incubator for the emergence of a modern linguistic ideology premised on veracity and truth (Robbins 2001). Whereas in the past the Urapmin were sceptical about the value of anything that was said as opposed to something

that was bodily or physically manifest, through the adoption of Christianity this understanding has been transformed. God, unlike people, can discern all of one's intentions; therefore, people cannot and therefore typically do not lie to Him in prayer. In this way, then, 'the creation of a new kind of omniscient listener elicits a new kind of truthful speaker' (Robbins 2001:906). In true Protestant fashion, an ideology based on the mutual dependence of truth, intention, and meaning has established itself (Keane 2006), yet it has done so alongside and in tension with an indigenous framework founded on the shifting and unstable nature of speech. The process outlined by Robbins echoes his general standpoint that the adoption of Christianity by the Urapmin has produced in their lives a stark contrast and tension between Christian and indigenous morality and ethics. But the situation among the Oksapmin is different from that described by Robbins. Prayer is indeed a new ritual behaviour but, unlike the Urapmin case, it has been employed as a new means through which to achieve existing indigenous ends. As such, it marks part of the overall process whereby the Oksapmin have reciprocally transformed Christianity and indigeneity in the production of a new, integrated religion, cosmology, and ontology.

It will be recalled from Chapter 3 that the objective central to almost all indigenous ritual was the promotion of observable physical increase in both people and the land upon which they depended. Ritual action, including the Yuän sacrifice, the men's initiation cult, garden and hunting magic, and so forth, were all focussed on this end and a noticeable increase in the health of the environment was proof that these procedures were effective and had been properly performed. With the exception of some hunting and gardening magic, the indigenous ritual complex collapsed as a result of missionisation and was replaced by a Christian apparatus. However, while missionisation introduced both religious practices and objectives into Oksapmin society, much of the conceptual substrate of indigenous ritual remained in place. This meant that while the Oksapmin converted to Christianity and embraced the new goals instituted for them by the mission, they nonetheless held partially to the understanding that rituals and magical spells existed to deliver temporal, worldly gain. Christian religious practices, therefore, but particularly prayer, were suffused with this rationale and became directed toward achieving those same ends by more or less similar means. It should be noted that this was, by no means, a simple continuation of indigenous logic under a shift in ritual means, for in light of missionisation the Oksapmin certainly began to orient themselves toward new religious aspirations such as going to Heaven, and so forth.

Rather, it is simply another example of how the Oksapmin adapted Christianity to fit their existing social and cultural world.

The use of prayer to produce material increase occurs within a broader field of understanding that being a good Christian will result in observable blessings and that an insincere one will lack these benefits. I recall speaking with the wife of one Baptist pastor at their house one day and our conversation touched on the presence of one denomination that had recently established themselves in their locality. The Oksapmin are quite partisan when it comes to worship and are often openly critical of other churches that may compete for members. The woman that I spoke with shared this viewpoint and expressed her dissatisfaction that another church had now settled in their supposed domain. What was more interesting was the form of her critique. As might be expected of a Protestant, she argued that their understanding of and relationship with God was not 'true' but defective. But to support her perspective she did not refer to differences in ritual or doctrine but instead pointed to her own perception that the gardens of the people to have joined the new church were not productive. She expressed this viewpoint as though it were self-evident and did not require any explanation; it was simply cause and effect and showed very clearly what anthropologists mean when they say that in Melanesia there is no boundary between the material and spiritual worlds but that they are seamlessly interpenetrated. To her, and for many other Oksapmin, there is a direct relationship between being a good Christian and being materially prosperous, of which a fertile garden is among the prime indicators. It is no surprise to note, then, that Christian prayer is directed toward achieving these objectives, just like indigenous magic. It is a new ritual act employed to pursue existing indigenous aims.

During my time living with the Oksapmin I frequently enquired about and observed how Christianity influenced their thinking and behaviour. This included examining the role of prayer. How often did they pray? Where was prayer undertaken? Also, most importantly, why did people pray? There existed considerable variation across all categories. Some individuals prayed only occasionally while others prayed several times a day. Certain individuals were very passionate in prayer whilst others were more subdued. Further, prayer, it seemed, was undertaken across nearly all social contexts. Whether at rest, in the garden, out hunting, or going about their other ordinary activities, the Oksapmin will pray. In terms of intention, too, there was variety. Daily prayer often praised and thanked God for his benevolence and might as well as for the physical and emotional security he provided. Sometimes individuals prayed that they be granted access to Heaven. In addition to these

obviously Christian solicitations and remarks, however, were those that showed an abiding desire to bring about material increase, in this world, through ritual procedures. For example, a woman named Janet whom I interviewed stated to me that prayer was an essential and effective aspect of planting a garden:

When one plants the kaukau (sweet potato) in the garden, one has to believe that there is God and pray first. When one has this kind of thinking and acting, then surely one will notice a great increase in the yield of the garden. I pray every day for my garden to grow well, sometimes when I am in the garden and sometimes in my house.

Another man, Smorty, underlined the fundamental role played by prayer in his life:

When we have a shortage of food or money, my family and I will pray and without being told but just through praying, people from outside our family will come and help us. So before we have asked for school fees and then people have helped us with these...Prayer is continual, just like breathing air. Morning, afternoon, evening, we pray.

Bapris, the woman quoted earlier, similarly emphasised the efficacy of prayer in her life:

Sometimes when people rear pigs, they do not fatten well and they stay skinny and look unhealthy. But when I pray, the pig becomes healthy and quickly becomes fat. This happens through prayer. Also, after I pray to God there is a lot more kaukau in the garden. Also, when we pray we can make sick people healthy again.

Lastly, Bulex, a leader within the Sambate Baptist church, told me that:

When I need cooking oil, I pray in my house. I pray. When I am walking, like when I go to the station [Tekin], then people will give me cooking oil. I asked God for oil and He helps me. If I want to ministry and I am short of money, I will pray. If I pray for one day and I want to go ministry, nothing will happen. I must pray for two, three, four weeks, even for a whole year, sometimes three months, and it will happen.

These passages illustrate two main things. Firstly, they demonstrate the centrality of prayer to the lives of Oksapmin Christians. It can be seen that all of the individuals cited above really depend upon prayer in their everyday lives. While their prayers are directed at a variety of ends, all are using this ritual procedure to obtain items they need and desire. It is also worth noting how three out of the four respondents place emphasis upon the regularity with which

they pray. One says she prays every day, another compares prayer to breathing, while the last states that he is prepared to pray continually for a year in pursuit of an objective.

The second point I draw from the statements above is that the Oksapmin habitually use prayer in order to generate increases in materiality. Again, while each individual has their own particular concern, whether school fees, sweet potato, pigs, or cooking oil, all intend toward promoting observable increase of some sort. Since this was the motivation and rationale basic to almost all traditional indigenous ritual, it must be argued that this aspect of contemporary Oksapmin Christianity exhibits a clear continuity with the past. In other words, in this case the Oksapmin have adapted the new ritual apparatus to fit their existing magico-religious outlook. Whereas prior to missionisation it was the initiation system, sacrifice, and other magical procedures that made people and land healthy, now it is Christian ritual, particularly prayer, that partially fulfil this task. It is a point at which the two worlds meet and interact.

As mentioned earlier, this is not a simple case of cultural reproduction under a shift in terms of reference. To begin with, the act of Christian prayer is not completely traditional; it is an introduced practice that had no exact equivalent in pre-Christian society. Also, people pray to the Christian God. It is He that is believed to bestow the mentioned benefits and not an indigenous force or being or any permutation thereof. Further, prayer is used not only to bring about changes of the kind formerly pursued through indigenous ritual. Indeed, we can notice, firstly, that the range of material ends pursued has expanded since missionisation; now it is not only people and land that are the objects of ritual efficacy but also school fees and cooking oil.

Another observation is that the total range of phenomena addressed through prayer has similarly expanded to include not only the existing objectives of material increase in this world, but also the specifically Christian ones of attaining salvation in the next. Indeed, often the Oksapmin will not make any solicitation for material gain when praying. These latter remarks are made only as reminders that while the above examples show strong continuity in ritual logic there has also been important additions and changes in how the Oksapmin employ religious procedures. Christianity has indeed been moulded around existing practices and concepts but at the same time has produced considerable change.

Retreats

In this final section of the chapter I continue the indigenisation argument advanced above and show how the occasional Christian practice of retreats manifests intriguing continuities with the indigenous ritual complex that collapsed as a result of missionisation. Since a retreat was not held while I was living with the Oksapmin I was unable to acquire any first hand information about how they worked and what people did within them. I was given the opportunity, even encouraged, to sponsor a gathering of this type but I was not in a position to defray the required amount of money. Nonetheless, the small amount of data I did acquire about retreats suggested several interesting linkages to indigenous ritual performances that were worthy of investigation. As above, my discussion reveals considerable continuity between this introduced practice and elements of the former system.

A retreat is when a group of Christians undertake intensive worship over the period of several days at a remote location in the bush. Before the retreat commences, a site is chosen and a temporary structure is erected especially for the occasion. These gatherings are apparently quite large; one senior Baptist leader told me that up to 150 people may attend, drawn from various congregations throughout the area. The worship that takes place during a retreat is largely the same as that conducted during a regular church service, but is both more intense and controlled. According to my informant, the late Pastor Dickson, during a retreat not only are people more focussed and energetic but the general mood and atmosphere is serious and strict. Each day tightly follows a predetermined programme and also those in charge exercise greater authority over proceedings than is usual within the church. The successful conclusion of the retreat is celebrated with the killing of a pig, a large feast in which the entire group participates.

Another point about retreats concerns the rationale underlying their performance. After all, if ordinary church worship is satisfactory then what is the need of performing these events that require considerable expenditures of time, money, and effort? Dickson informed me that retreats are performed to restore and revitalise the spiritual energy that animates the church and the community within which it is embedded. He explained that:

When our spirit towards Christianity starts going down and we don't want to pray, we don't want to go to church, and doing the church activities. When this starts happening, when the spirit goes down, then we decide to undertake a retreat.

The final descriptive remark I will make is that retreats were not the creation of the Oksapmin but were suggested and implemented by the ABMS missionary John Peterson. It appears that the Oksapmin accepted the idea and, thereafter, conducted them once or twice each year.

The parallels between these events and certain aspects of the indigenous ritual complex that preceded the introduction of Christianity are compelling and suggest that, while this was a practice introduced through missionisation, the Oksapmin have certainly shaped it in terms of their traditional religion.

The similarities between retreats and indigenous ritual, particularly the men's initiation cult, are numerous and very clear. To begin with, both take place in isolated locations in the bush away from quotidian social action in order to ensure the effectiveness (and formerly secrecy) of the communication therein. Secondly, both occur in temporary houses built especially for the particular occasion. As well as the mentioned cosmetic differences of these events are those regarding their sociality. It will be recalled that the boys and men that participated in initiation belonged to not one but many different Oksapmin clans. Similarly, while women and children have now been included, retreats also manifest a diverse social composition, since it is the members of several different congregations (and thus clan groups) that attend. Another parallel relates to ritual dynamics and mood. In retreats, like male initiation, there is a power dynamic that exists between leaders that instruct and instil and an audience that listens and obeys. The manner and tone of communication in both contexts is also serious. Another parallel is that the conclusion of the retreat, as in nearly all public indigenous ritual, is marked by the killing and consumption of pigs.

But the most important, encompassing, and interesting synergy between retreats and the indigenous ritual complex is the reason lying behind their execution. In Chapter 3, I described how the core objective of traditional Oksapmin ritual was to promote the fertility and vitality of land and people. Through initiating young men, sacrificing to Yuän, or performing magical utterances when planting a garden, it was thought that the force embedded in all living things was created anew; the soul of the cosmos was recharged. Dickson's response above, although framed in Christian terms, demonstrates clear affinities with this indigenous ritual logic. Retreats, like those traditional religious practices, are means through which to restore the cosmic energy upon which the community depends for its survival and vitality.

These are crucial parallels that serve to illustrate how the Oksapmin have fused Christianity to their existing culture. The indigenous ritual complex ceased very shortly after the onset of missionisation, yet the understandings and conceptual underpinnings of what religion is and should look like abided. Thus, when this new form of worship was suggested to the Oksapmin by the ABMS, they shaped it in ways that gave it an indigenous aspect. In appearance, sociality, and function, Oksapmin Christian retreats exhibit vivid similarities to traditional religious ritual. The indigenisation and cultural continuity thesis is thus well supported. But, what also need consideration are the important differences and changes produced by Christianity. After all, this thesis argues that the Oksapmin engagement with Christianity is characterised by a mutual adjustment of Christianity to indigeneity and not simply a reproduction of Oksapmin culture and society under a new name.

First, and most obviously, while I have drawn attention to the commonalities that exist between the two sets of practices, it cannot be ignored that retreats are Christian activities while indigenous ritual was not. Although perhaps the same processual logic applies, people believe and act as though they are worshipping the Christian God. What they do, what they say, and how they explain these actions, supports this notion. Another important point concerns the participation of women and children. Organised indigenous ritual such as the initiation cult and the Yuän sacrifice were the province of men and strictly prohibited for the uninitiated. To have included them would have polluted and jeopardised the entire objective. Missionisation, however, broke down this restriction and thereby allowed women and children to participate in, learn of, and help to shape, organised religion. The participation of these formerly prohibited groups in the sacred sphere initially irked men but these reservations steadily diminished over time. A last observation to balance the perspective being given here is that, as noted, while they may resemble indigenous ritual practices, retreats were the product of the mission, not Oksapmin people. While they have been significantly indigenised, the idea of retreats came from the outside. Whether or not the missionary thought worship of this sort could act as a substitute for initiation, or whether the Oksapmin immediately took ownership of the suggestion, marrying its intention to their own indigenous ritual logics, I cannot determine.

Final remarks

This chapter has shown how the fusion characteristic of the Oksapmin engagement with Christianity plays out within local Christian worship of various kinds. Through the process of missionisation the Oksapmin were introduced and converted to the Christian religion while, at the same time, having the practical foundations of their indigenous religious complex removed. As shown in the preceding chapter, conversion was a process jointly mediated by the Oksapmin and the ABMS. The mission strongly encouraged the Oksapmin to adopt the Christian religion and ultimately forced them to do away with their existing ritual practices, but the motivations underlying conversion and the manner in which this transition occurred, can only be understood in relation to existing Oksapmin cultural patterns.

As I have shown, conversion, that is, the actual incorporation of Christianity into Oksapmin society, was a dual process. On the one hand, the Oksapmin interpreted and shaped the religious forms presented to them by the ABMS in terms of their existing culture. The performance of items, songs, and sermons within church worship, the practice of prayer, as well as retreats, all show in different ways how the Oksapmin imposed local form and meaning upon the Christian religion. However, at the same time that local cultural forms and understandings were being utilised to accommodate Christianity they were also being remade by it. Not only was Christianity being indigenised but indigeneity too was being Christianised. In all of the mentioned areas, yet particularly evident within church worship (because of the prominence of traditional performative techniques), it was seen how those persistent elements of Oksapmin traditional culture have been reimagined in ways that render them compatible with their new context of enactment. The process of fusion, moreover, was not something undertaken by the Oksapmin after having converted to Christianity but actually constituted the process of conversion itself. That is, the reciprocal transformations I have described occurred as the Oksapmin were bringing Christianity into their society and not as a subsequent accomplishment.

This process of reciprocal intermixing can be seen as one of making Christianity and indigeneity commensurate with each other, of constructing equivalence in the midst of social change and opposition. I am arguing that this is the principal way in which the Oksapmin have handled the incorporation of Christianity into their society. Conversion precipitated the encounter of two religious systems, each with their own respective way of explaining life and the universe. Instead of living in the potential torment caused by their unsynthesised

existence the Oksapmin integrated the two, thus establishing ontological and cosmological coherence. This created a new religious world, neither completely Christian nor indigenous, but a creative fusion of both. Such an observation directly mirrors Lohmann's claim (2010b:228) that 'all creations are in fact recombinations of pre-existing elements.' Furthermore, for local people, this composite field of religious thought and action is perceived not as the result of human agency or design but rather as a singular and embracing worldview that has always been. Through the processes of fusion, that is, the Oksapmin claim that their Christianity and indigeneity are essentially the same; they have always been Christian and at the same time Christianity has always been indigenous; they are part of one fundamental truth.

6. Souls, Spirits, and Witches

To begin this chapter it will be useful to again briefly recall what I have said about the effects produced upon the Oksapmin lifeworld by the Australian Baptist Missionary Society (ABMS). In Chapter 4 it was described how the mission concentrated its efforts upon those observable aspects of Oksapmin society and culture that were deemed incompatible with the Christian way of life they espoused. What could and could not be seen by the mission was also crucial, for it determined what they could and could not act upon. It was seen that certain activities that the mission surely considered antithetical to Christian identity, such as witchcraft and sorcery, escaped suppression because they escaped apprehension; the mission simply could not stop something that it could not easily access. The mission would have known of these activities and beliefs through rumour, gossip, and accusation, but they were prevented from directly acting upon them due to their private character.

But the mission could, and did, condemn behaviours that were obviously counter to those they wished to establish. Foremost among these was the indigenous ritual complex designed to promote observable physical improvements in people (mainly men) and the natural environment. This multifaceted system had as its two main pillars the men's initiation cult and the paramount sacrificial ritual performed in honour of the mythical ancestress Yuän. These were actions that the mission considered to be incompatible with Christianity, which they could access, and which they quashed. Another social practice, not overtly religious in character, but which was also frowned upon by the mission, was polygynous marriage.

Everything else that the mission considered consistent with Christian morality, or that was inconsistent but was not acted upon due to their private or immaterial character, persisted intact. This included a wide range of cultural forms, such as the performance of singsing, witchcraft and sorcery, the recitation of sacred mythology, as well as hunting and gardening magic. In addition to these was a series of beliefs and practices relating to spirits and spiritual processes, embracing understandings of the human soul, nature spirits, and also the operation of witches and sorcerers. It is these beliefs and practices that are the topic of this chapter. The recitation of myth, as another important sphere of activity that survived missionisation, is treated in the next chapter (Chapter 7).

In Chapter 5 it was seen how contemporary Oksapmin Christian worship demonstrated the reciprocal transformation and fusion of Christianity and the existing

indigenous lifeworld. Various indigenous performance techniques, for instance, were imported into church worship and used to give local form to Christianity, but also had their meaning and function reimagined such that both cultural orders were brought together. Here the discussion leaves the realm of Christian worship and I show how the process of religious fusion operates in relation to the Oksapmin spirit world.

Oksapmin understandings of life, death, and the afterlife

Religions do many things, yet a key question they all must ultimately address is ‘what happens when people die?’ This question is necessarily entwined with ontological postulates concerning the essence of being; that is, how humans conceptualise death is inextricably related to how they conceptualise life. In traditional Oksapmin understanding, *dä* is the essence and seat of animate life. It is the dynamic life-force resident within all living things. This is exemplified in the natural realm by dawn. Westerners understand dawn as the time when the sun begins its daily ascent; thus we name this process ‘sunrise.’ The Oksapmin, however, understand this time of day differently. Rather than describing how the sun’s movement physically appears, they instead adopt a different perspective. Dawn is known to the Oksapmin as *mong dä*, with *mong* meaning ‘ground’ or ‘earth’ and *dä* meaning ‘life-force.’ Taken together, then, the Oksapmin term for dawn literally means ‘the life-force of the earth.’ In reference to human beings, *dä* takes on more specific meanings. Firstly, *dä* is the word most commonly used to describe intelligence. Thus *däsi blel* refers to an intelligent child, *däsi hän* to an intelligent man. *Dä timbas* (*timbas* meaning ‘without’) refers to someone lacking in intelligence and in everyday life is a pejorative term used to insult or slight the person at whom it is directed.

In Oksapmin thought, *hanip dä* refers to the spirit of a human being (*hanip* meaning ‘human’ or ‘person’). After death, the *hanip dä* was thought to persist in an anthropomorphic state. Moreover, *hanip dä* were not randomly dispersed but instead transmigrated to *hanip dä äpti* (*äpti* meaning ‘place or home of’). To enter this realm, a placatory sacrifice of one or more pigs was made to Kolom, a mythical dog that, if unappeased, would devour the souls of the dead, thus preventing them from attaining peace. *Hanip dä äpti* was a spiritual world that coexisted with everyday Oksapmin society. There exist several continuities between the two realms and it is important to outline these before describing the particularities of the *hanip dä äpti*. Firstly, both the spiritual and the everyday world occurred in the same space, namely,

the wider Oksapmin territory. Notwithstanding various embellishments, the mountains, rivers, and valleys that one ordinarily saw in daily life were the same ones which appeared within the world of departed spirits. Another synergy concerns social organisation. The spirits observed many of the cultural rules that structured the lives of living human beings. For instance, although I never heard it stated that *hanip dä* assembled in village or hamlet groups, it was held that they remained strongly attached to their respective clan territories. Thus a Divan man would posthumously return to inhabit that portion of the *hanip dä äpti* coextensive with the land controlled by his clan in real life. In the final instance, this juxtaposition produced an existential stratigraphy whereby beings of different ontological status inhabited the same space. Clan land acts as an interface through which spirits and humans, the past and the present, commingle.

These traditional Oksapmin understandings of death and the afterlife have been changed by contact with the wider Western world. Firstly, they have been changed in relation to ideas about Western modernity and material wealth inherited through reading newspapers and magazines, observations of town life, and, more rarely, watching TV and movies. Today the *hanip dä äpti* is understood as an urban environment similar to any Western city. It is principally described as a place of modernity and wealth, containing cars, large houses, cash, planes, highways, and so forth, as well as the emotional and moral comfort these objects are thought to bring about. This demonstrates intriguing parallels with the experiences of a group of male Ngaing initiates described by Kempf and Hermann (2003:68–73), who had revealed to them through dream experiences a similar spiritual world urban in character and populated by whites. It is interesting to note that the Oksapmin believe that the main rivers within their territory, in particular the Tekin and Om Rivers, are the highways along which *hanip dä* regularly travel in their cars, typically at night. Many Oksapmin claim to have seen *hanip dä* on these nocturnal journeys and, in fact, during my fieldwork one expatriate living in the area was reportedly seen travelling along the Tekin River late one evening.

The second and, I would argue, most important way in which traditional understandings about life and death have been altered is through their contact with Christianity. In a recent article, Lohmann (2005) similarly analyses the impacts produced by Christianity upon traditional Asabano understandings of the afterlife. There he shows how the prohibition placed upon storing human bones by the mission altered important dimensions of how Asabano people relate to the deceased, stating simply that ‘bone curation and holding

the bones of ancestors has been replaced with burial and the loss of one means of relating to the deceased' (2005:204). My discussion here also addresses the changes produced by the incorporation of Christianity but I focus more on how living people conceive of the dead and the places they inhabit as opposed to any particular relations they maintain with them. Conversion to Christianity made the Oksapmin directly confront their existing beliefs about death and the afterlife. The central tension did not concern the logical consistency or comprehensibility of Christianity, that is, the principal issue was not about whether it was plausible or desirable to go to heaven, for it seems that the majority of Oksapmin thought so. Rather, the crux of the matter lay in how to reconcile heaven and the *hanip dä äpti*. The Oksapmin were compelled to ponder: 'the missionaries have informed us that our ultimate destination is either Heaven or Hell, yet our indigenous cosmology posits the *hanip dä äpti* as our spiritual terminus, regardless of our actions when alive. What status can we now accord that existing realm? How can we reconcile our understandings of life and death with those taught to us by the mission?' As will be seen below, the Oksapmin have faced these problems through reciprocally transforming and fusing the two worlds. Christian understandings become indigenised and indigenous understandings become Christianised until there is one syncretised field of understanding about spiritual processes composed of elements from both realms.

The Oksapmin have seized upon the concept of an intermediate phase between death and either salvation or damnation to integrate heaven and the *hanip dä äpti* into a single understanding of the afterlife. Since converting to Christianity many Oksapmin people, indeed all that I spoke with on this topic, have reimagined their indigenous afterworld as a 'waiting place' to which spirits travel before progressing onwards, with approval from either God or Jesus, to Heaven. The definition and legitimacy of these intermediate states is widely contested among all Christian denominations and I refrain from discussing them in detail here. Since most Protestant denominations of the kind Oksapmin belong to typically posit an immediate transition from death to either Heaven or Hell without delay, precisely how the Oksapmin found and then developed this concept of a 'waiting place' is intriguing. In the absence of reliable historical data, however, we can only speculate as to whether the local existence of this concept is the result of missionisation or indigenous creativity.

One man, Cletus, said to me that:

Everyone has a *hanip dä*. *Hanip dä* have their own special place. They all stay in the waiting place, the waiting court. When the last days come, people there will be judged. Everyone must go to this place before being judged.

Another woman, Janet, expressed similar sentiments:

When people die they enter a waiting place. When Jesus comes back he will choose people from within this place to travel with him to Heaven. The individuals not chosen by Jesus will go to Hell.

Prior to the arrival of the missionaries, the Oksapmin believed that after death the human spirit travelled directly and finally to the *hanip dä äpti*, a parallel spiritual world populated by other spirits and characterised by both material and moral comfort. But following missionisation and the internalisation of Christianity eschatology, the Oksapmin have reconceptualised this previously ultimate destination as a waiting place. In so doing, I argue, they have melded Christianity and indigeneity together in the creation of a single ideological sphere. The indigenous world gains Christian meaning through being reimagined as a waiting place that one enters before travelling to Heaven, while the Christian religion is localised through having inserted into it indigenous understandings of the afterlife that add to it another sequential layer. The two worlds are thus reciprocally transformed as they are fused together, creating a new version of what happens when people die. For local people, this synthesised cosmology is taken as given: not a product of integration but rather an unquestioned reality that has always been there.

The discussion gains further complexity when the characteristics of the spirit being transferred are considered. Until this point, I have left unchallenged the notion that it is the indigenously conceived *hanip dä* that is undergoing the mentioned passage from death through mediation to Heaven or Hell. But as soon as such assumptions are posited other queries appear. Above all else, it must be asked how the incorporation of Christianity has impacted not only understandings of the world the soul inhabits but the properties of the soul in and of itself. A critical point here is that the Bible contains its own particular conception of the human spirit. The issue for me is to appraise how this notion and its indigenous counterpart have interacted since the Oksapmin converted to Christianity. Has the Christian soul displaced, augmented, or destroyed the Oksapmin *hanip dä*? In the contemporary

Oksapmin religious world is there to be found a single Christian soul indigenously named, an indigenous soul which persists unchanged, or a lamination of both in a kind of spiritual stratigraphy? Discussing such abstract theological subjects with Oksapmin men and women proved tremendously difficult and yielded little useful data. I was forced to postpone such questions though they remain interesting and pertinent to me.

This reimagination of the afterlife (and likely the characteristics of the human soul) is but one dimension of the process of religious and cosmological fusion whereby the Oksapmin have mutually integrated Christianity and their existing culture and society. Understandings of the afterlife, however, were not the only aspect of Oksapmin social life to have changed in light of missionisation and conversion.

Angels in the bush

The pre-Christian Oksapmin spiritual world was variegated. As outlined in detail above, Oksapmin believed in a dynamic life force within all people which posthumously migrated to the *hanip dä äpti*. In addition to this anthropomorphised spirituality, however, there were other impersonal and unseen spiritual forces that were believed to reside within various dimensions of the natural environment. Elements of traditional Oksapmin religion can thus accurately be termed animistic, yet only in the broad sense of belief in the ‘animation of nature’ and not in the more specific sense of belief in natural objects possessing individual souls. The Oksapmin name for this spiritual category is *sup* (pronounced soup), which literally means power or force.

This abstract category includes subcategories representative of the power resident within aspects of the natural environment. Spiritual power is thought to exist primarily within earth (*mongsup*), water (*tomsup*), taro (*fäsup*), rocks or caves (*kweisup*) and fire (*lätsup*). Certain designated clans have affinities with these respective forces and are consulted whenever category-specific crises arise. The Wetäp clan, for instance, traditionally exercised control over *mongsup* and were solicited in the event of crop failure. The Adave clan enjoyed a similar relationship with fire, and heat more generally, and were called upon whenever excessive rain threatened to disrupt garden yields and the normal patterns of social life. The different types of *sup* are not coextensive with the respective dimension of the natural environment after which they are named but only with selected portions of it. For example,

tomsup is not resident within all bodies of water but only within particular streams and ponds, usually located in the bush. Similarly, *kweisup* inhabits only certain caves and outcrops and is not synonymous with rock itself.

In terms of their character, *sup*, notwithstanding the restorative powers mentioned immediately above, traditionally were considered highly dangerous forces capable of causing serious, sometimes fatal, injury to human beings. Such harm could, to a large extent, be precluded through the performance of certain magical and ritual procedures prior to engaging the particular force. However, should the object or incantation be forgotten or improperly performed, the unappeased forces may attack or harass whosoever foolishly opted to enter their territory. Precisely how injuries were inflicted was unclear both to me and my interlocutors yet, needless to say, the primary concern was that they did, in fact, occur. So should a hunter not recite the correct sequence of utterances prior to his departure, or carry with him the appropriate objects to ward off malignant spiritual forces, then he was liable to incur an array of misfortune. The *tomsup* might drown him, the *kweisup* might hurtle him off a cliff or down a chasm, or the *mongsup* might dispose of him down a steep and slippery hillside.

Above I have described one dimension of the indigenous Oksapmin spiritual world, namely, *sup*, showing that they were thought to inhabit selected aspects of the natural world and that they were perceived as malignant forces capable of injuring humans. How have these practices and attitudes been affected since conversion to Christianity?

The incorporation of Christianity into Oksapmin society transformed these traditional beliefs significantly. As with the case of indigenous notions of the human soul, here, too, we can see that the Oksapmin have interwoven Christianity with their existing understandings such that a new syncretic concept emerges. The meetings and exchanges that occurred between Christianity and *sup* have been of three main types: attempts made through prayer to expunge, or at least challenge the presence of *sup*; the reciprocal transformation of beliefs in *sup* and certain selected aspects of Christian thought described in the Bible; and, lastly, the addition of prayer to the series of magical acts and utterances traditionally deployed to ensure protection from *sup*. It is the last two of these that are most important for my discussion.

Concerning the first, on some occasions during the initial period of missionisation, several Oksapmin individuals, assisted by an unidentified ABMS missionary, travelled throughout the territory attempting to exorcise *sup* from the pockets where they dwelt by

means of Christian prayer. This can be seen as one part of the overall strategy whereby the mission sought to invalidate existing religious structures, as was the case in the forced transgression of various cultural taboos. Most of these efforts at expulsion were directed at sites within the Kusanäp and Wauläp areas, since both were located near the mission station. When talking to Tony Simsim, a man living in the Kusanäp ward, on this topic he voiced the following opinion:

The power of these spirits (*sup*) is overcome through prayer. This was done in the time of the missionaries, who went with us through the area to pray for the spirits to go. Wherever they prayed the spirits departed. Wherever they didn't pray the spirits remain...Before, the landscape contained many areas where we couldn't garden, because of these spirits. Now at these places people plant an assortment of crops and are not harmed.

So, Tony maintains that *sup* no longer inhabit the places where spirit removal rites were conducted but that they continue to reside within those places where those acts were not performed. Yet, when interviewing other Oksapmin individuals on this topic who resided at a significant distance from Tekin Station, no mention was made of exorcisms and the consequent partial bleaching of the spiritual landscape. In these various hamlet groupings, unlike those that immediately surround the Station, the existence of this class of spiritual forces was largely unquestioned.

The point here is that it seems all Oksapmin believe in *sup* equally, and that the density and power of these forces are understood to correspond directly to the proximity of settlements to the Tekin Station and thus the rituals of the missionaries who have resided there; the closer to the station one is, the less potent *sup* will be; the further away from the station one goes, the more wary one must be. Conversion to Christianity has produced other general effects that have been more or less uniformly manifested throughout the population. This relates to my second point regarding the mutual adjustment and integration of understandings about *sup* to selected aspects of the Bible that occurred as a result of missionisation.

Following conversion, the Oksapmin have selected particular concepts within the Bible to explain the existence of spiritual forces in the environment. Utilising these Biblical ideas in this manner, I argue, is yet another way in which the Oksapmin have integrated Christianity and indigeneity into a single totality.

The particular Biblical idea that the Oksapmin have used to explain the existence of *sup* is contained in the three passages I cite below:

How you have fallen from heaven,
O morning star, son of the dawn!
You have been cast down to the earth,
you who once laid low the nations!

You said in your heart,
"I will ascend to heaven;
I will raise my throne
above the stars of God;
I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,
on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain.

I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High."

But you are brought down to the grave,
to the depths of the pit (Isaiah 14:12–15).

Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe. And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire (Jude 1:5–7).

And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called

the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him (Rev. 12:1–9).

While contextually disparate, the passages above emphasise a single subject, namely, ‘war in Heaven.’ Elaborated in greatest detail within Catholic and Mormon doctrine, this Biblical theme concerns a cataclysmic struggle for Heavenly power and its earthly application between Lucifer (Satan) and God. The three excerpts describe in various ways Lucifer’s wish to wrest from God both dominion of Paradise and stewardship of humankind. The conflict itself receives only cursory description, yet we do learn that the principal combatants are two groups of angels: one, led by the archangel Michael, representing balance and justice, and the other, representing self-interest and rapacity, is led by Lucifer. But, in addition to describing Lucifer’s impudence, the three selected passages also discuss its consequences, and it is these that interest me here. Simply put, God considered Lucifer’s behaviour unacceptable for an angel and peremptorily expelled him from Heaven together with the angels that supported his conquest. The rebellious cohort was exiled to earth, where they were destined to live in shame and infamy forever.

The Oksapmin have seized upon this concept of ‘fallen angels’ to fuse together Christianity and their surviving spiritual beliefs. No longer are the *sup* simply *sup*; they are now seen as the angels who, together with an unruly Lucifer, were cast out of Heaven by God. When asked about the *sup*, one man, Cletus, a school teacher, replied that:

They are all here. The bush spirits that are looking after the water up in the mountains? I believe that they are the masalai (spirits) that have come from Heaven. All of it comes from Heaven. They were sent away from God and now they live here on earth.

Another man, Smorty, a leader in the Baptist church, expounded in greater detail:

In the beginning, God created everything and the sin starts in the Garden of Eden. But actually it didn’t start there, the sin only hides in there. Actually, sin started in Heaven. It started with the number one angel, the number one angel inside Heaven. This angel was one of the musicians and he liked to pursue his own interests. He wanted to overtake God. So there was a big war in Heaven between this angel and God and God then divided the spiritual beings into two groups: those that were with

him and those that were against him. The number one angel was in the group against God and he was cast out of Heaven with all the other bad angels. The masalai that we have in the bush are these angels that were cast out by God in the beginning of time.

These statements show how the Oksapmin have used concepts they found in the Bible to reimagine surviving aspects of their indigenous spiritual world. In the present case we can note how understandings of the *sup* are obviously Christianised through being reimagined as fallen angels. But, at the same time, it must be observed how the Christian concept of 'war in Heaven' has been localised through having inserted into it entities and forces of an entirely indigenous origin. Missionisation has compelled the Oksapmin to perform this creative process, to marry together two different religious worlds. As a result, Christianity has taken on an Oksapmin form and Oksapmin traditions are shaped in terms of a global religion. This field of understanding is neither wholly indigenous nor wholly Christian but a composite of both.

The last aspect of the process whereby Christianity has transformed the spiritual aspects of nature concerns the addition of Christian prayer to the various spells, incantations, and charms traditionally used by the Oksapmin to ward off malevolent forces lurking in the bush.

Prior to the arrival of Christianity, the Oksapmin employed a range of acts, utterances, and objects whenever they ventured into the bush in order to prevent hunting failure, as well as to prevent the sometimes meddlesome *sup* from causing misfortune. Missionisation diminished the use of such magic but it is interesting to note that it is still widespread today. In one instance, a man took from a small pouch and showed to me a fragrant, resinous piece of bark that he informed me was a traditional hunting charm that would ensure success. Men may also carry on their person other items, often plants, which they believe will have some effect upon the unseen forces in the bush that may either imperil or bless their mission. Since converting to Christianity, the Oksapmin have added to this repertoire the ritual of prayer which, in this context, the Oksapmin see as yet another form of magic helping them pursue the same goals as before.

Men continue to perform indigenous, traditional spells and incantations to safeguard themselves against malicious forces lurking in the bush, but today they also pray to the Christian God for the same protection as well as to bless their chosen activity. As with the other aspects of the Oksapmin spirit world already discussed, then, we can see that the

incorporation of Christianity has expanded this field, adding to it new ideas, beliefs, and understandings. To the Oksapmin, as for their Asabano neighbours, these actions are all ‘technologies of the sacred’ (Lohmann 2000a:258), but now this sphere contains not only traditional acts and utterances but also those appropriated from the mission. This area of cultural activity is no longer indigenous and neither is it Christian; rather it is simply a field of thought and action composed of elements of both, like everything else in the Oksapmin religious world. This process of using prayer, in combination with indigenous techniques, exhibits the reciprocal transformation of both. The Christian act of prayer is directed toward existing indigenous aims while an existing indigenous sphere of activity has introduced into it a basic Christian ritual technique. The coexistence of both orders is not problematic for local people, who view them as essentially similar components of a single religious world.

So far in this chapter I have been concerned to illustrate how two facets of the indigenous spirit world, *hanip dä* and *sup*, have interacted with Christianity following missionisation and conversion. Now I shift my attention to a specific category of individuals held to enjoy a privileged relationship with those two domains, particularly the former.

In Satan’s service

Witchcraft and sorcery are other components of the indigenous religious world that survived the process of missionisation. The ABMS missionaries certainly were aware of their existence and openly condemned local participation, yet because both were intrinsically furtive activities, undertaken away from the public gaze, the mission was unable to apprehend, control, and eliminate them. Here I want to show how this cultural sphere has both affected and been affected by the presence of Christianity.

But, before doing so it is useful to first briefly distinguish witchcraft within the wider scheme of Oksapmin magic. For current purposes this broader category includes not only witchcraft but also two kinds of sorcery. Practitioners of both witchcraft and sorcery share a common goal, namely, to curse or bring misfortune on a selected human target (Stephen 1987). In this case, they differ in the sense that, in pursuit of harm, the Oksapmin witch marshals innate malevolent powers whilst the Oksapmin sorcerer manipulates physical objects, acts, and utterances to realise their nefarious intent, a distinction common across many cultural boundaries. The first kind of Oksapmin sorcery is known as *äm*, and typically

occurs in the following sequence. My description follows closely that offered by Marshall Lawrence (1980), an SIL (Summer Institute of Linguistics) linguist who was based at Divanäp for several decades.

After having chosen his or her victim, the *äm* sorcerer lies in wait, covertly monitoring the marked individual's behaviour. It is when the target ventures unaccompanied to a secluded location that opportunity for attack presents itself. Approaching undetected from behind or imperceptibly emerging from a hideout, the *äm* sorcerer takes the *äm sän*, a round, medium sized (usually six or seven centimetres in diameter), yet surprisingly heavy stone specifically used in this kind of sorcery and smashes the victim on the head, rendering them unconscious. The sorcerer subsequently utilises the *äm sän* to hammer thorns into various sections of the victim's body. Any lacerations caused during this process are removed without trace by applying the *äm sän*. The victim is then woken. According to Lawrence's account (1980:80), the victim is then informed by the sorcerer that he or she has four to five days to live, during which time the thorns that have been hammered into the body travel to and enter the heart, resulting in immediate death. My own ethnographic data deviates from this, albeit only slightly. According to the people I interviewed, once awake the victim is not informed about their imminent death but is instead kept in a state of ignorance as to both what has occurred and what tragically will follow. In parallel with Lawrence's account, the mentioned four or five days elapse, after which the victim dies. But, according to my informants, this is not the result of the thorns eventually penetrating the victim's heart but, rather, of the sorcerer performing certain incantations which fatally activate them.

The second variety of sorcery in which the Oksapmin believe is called *kimon*. In contrast to *äm sän*, which involves a violent face to face encounter between sorcerer and victim, *kimon* is more impersonal. Firstly, the sorcerer will obtain, through stealth or deception, a sample of the target's physical substance. This might be a strand of hair or fingernail, but matter indirectly related to the victim's body, such as a cigarette butt, would also suffice. Once acquired, the material is manipulated in ways not described to either myself or Lawrence, but that, nonetheless, result in the victim's death. This contrasts with Poole's account of sorcery among the neighbouring Bimin-Kuskusmin, among whom it is similarly referred to as *kiimon* (1983:13). There, *kiimon* sorcerers, both male and female, are considered to engage in particular kinds of cannibalism. Female *kiimon* sorcerers 'are known to consume only the most polluting of female bodily substances, which they transform into ritually powerful male substances,' while their male counterparts 'are reputed to eat both

powerful male and polluted female bodily substances and to strengthen the strong male parts of the bodies of both their victims and themselves by such cannibal acts' (1983:13). As the Oksapmin currently understand it, *kimon* sorcery does not contain this anthropophagic dimension and is restricted to the kinds of curses outlined above. Lawrence concludes his discussion of *äm* and *kimon* by claiming that 'sorcery seems never to have been practiced [*sic.*] much by Oksapmin men. There has been no evidence of sorcery among the Oksapmins [*sic.*] since we first went into the area in 1968' (1980:80). This contrasts with the statements of the individuals I interviewed who attested, with certainty, that both *äm* and *kimon* were still widely practised today.

What of witchcraft? In the current section I have much to say about witchcraft, known to the Oksapmin as *tamäm* (a word that refers both to the art and its practitioners). Clifford Boram, an anthropologist who spent several years teaching and conducting ethnographic research in the Divanäp area, has also written on the subject from a descriptive, case by case, basis (Boram 1976). While his discussion does not examine the significance of witchcraft within Oksapmin society and culture more generally, it does, nonetheless, highlight the important fact that being a *tamäm* is a life and death matter. Many of the individuals in his story that are accused of being a witch (and who through such pressure often 'admit' to being one) are murdered as a result and only one or two manage to escape such a fate, often by accusing someone else. He makes the claim (1976:50) that 'based on a complete census of all the Tekäp and Divanäp *tamams* within memory...50 were killed despite their denials, 6 "admitted" being *tamams*, and at least 32 more were suspected, denied guilt, and were either excused or only wounded.' These figures highlight the gravity of the situation as it existed up until the 1970s. Things have certainly changed a great deal since then and, while accusations of witchcraft and sorcery are still regularly made, cases are now more likely to be solved with payments of compensation as opposed to murder, although suspected witches may still be violently attacked. But while the consequences of its supposed enactment have changed, witchcraft still looms large in the Oksapmin imagination, much as it does for their Asabano neighbours (Lohmann 2000a:266–268).

Poole has considered witchcraft among the Bimin-Kuskusmin, who also refer to it as *tamam* (yet without the long 'a' sound as among the Oksapmin) (1983:13). As with *kiimon* sorcerers, local witches are also thought to be cannibalistic, a quality they share with Oksapmin witches, as I shall detail below. Among the Bimin-Kuskusmin, *tamam*, both male and female, are highly dangerous individuals, capable of killing and harming normal living

people. Poole describes how the female witch, thought to be ‘more deadly than male witches...eats and transforms male substance, which she ritually pollutes, into “naturally” polluted female substance and destroys the ritual importance of the “male anatomy”’ (1983:14). Male witches, on the other hand, are said to ‘consume various aspects of both the female and the male substance of their victims’ (1983:14). But while they are thus considered highly dangerous people, witches are themselves the ‘ideal victims’ of other cannibalistic social categories in the Bimin-Kuskusmin world, namely, sorcerers (as described above) and tricksters. While I demonstrate that Oksapmin witches share attributes with those portrayed by Poole, this triad of anthropophagic action appears to have no local equivalent.

Almost every person with whom I spoke about witchcraft considered it a secretive, mysterious activity about which they knew little. But, still it figured prominently in many facets of social life. This tension proved no obstacle in exploring the social effects of witchcraft beliefs, since I could observe and record firsthand people’s opinions and reactions to the phenomenon. Rather, the primary difficulty generated by this dynamic was defining the practice itself. If people considered it a clandestine, anti-social activity they didn’t know much about, or if they were hesitant to divulge what they knew about something regarded with suspicion, then how could I ascertain precisely what it was? My resolution was to go to the source, to speak with witches themselves. This was by no means easy. Known witches in Oksapmin are generally considered evil, dangerous, and mentally unsound and, as such, are invariably ostracised. Even mentioning witchcraft in conversation is enough to cause unease among those assembled. Therefore, arranging an interview in which I hoped to learn about this furtive art had to be done with the utmost caution. Should the wider community learn that I was holding detailed discussions with a known witch my reputation within the village would be damaged and my research placed in jeopardy. Also, expecting an individual to provide this kind of knowledge was tantamount to labelling them a witch. I thus had to locate a witch and speak with him or her behind closed doors. With my main informant to mediate, I managed to accomplish both tasks.

Over the course of two days I held detailed interviews with a female witch in the privacy of my own house. Needless to say, the discussion was tense. Why did I want to talk with her? What interest did I have in such a topic? Don’t you as a waitman know about this anyway? Diffusing these pointed enquiries required prudence and tact. I was simply a student based in the village in order to study the Oksapmin way of life, of which witchcraft was a part. No, I did not know anything of witchcraft, since in my homeland such beliefs and

practices had long ago been replaced by other beliefs and practices. Her suspicions sufficiently, if incompletely, assuaged, the interview proceeded, initially yielding an account of witchcraft.

Firstly, as most Oksapmin are aware, witchcraft can only be practised upon one's relatives, especially those to whom one is consanguineally related. In important ways this is similar to Mekeo sorcery described by Stephen (1995:41) in *A'aisai's Gifts*, whereby, in general, 'people suspected those who were close to them, both in relationship and physical space, of employing mystical means to harm and kill them.' Upon closer inspection, it appears that these linkages are, like the clan system, patrilineal in nature. Thus an individual can attack, or be attacked by anyone related to him or her on their father's side, should they so desire. The primary implication of this rule is that witchcraft is predisposed to operate within family groups, between brothers, uncles, cousins, and so forth. How exactly does it work? Before any iniquity occurs, the witch, who can be either male or female, must first have their latent wickedness brought out. In line with the distinction offered above between sorcery and witchcraft, this process is not one of indoctrination but of induction, as will be shown below (cf. Stephen (1995) for a rich ethnography of apprenticeship to sorcery among the Mekeo). The woman I interviewed described her immersion in the following terms:

One day my husband [also considered a witch] and I planned to make a garden on the Landslide side of the Tekin River [the north side of the river directly opposite Sambate, the village where the ethnographer was based, which lies on the south side]. We visited a family in Sambate and they gave us some pork, which we carried with us to the garden. Once there we cooked and ate the meat. It was when we were in the garden that my husband showed me the ways of witchcraft. When we had finished eating, we found some fruit [possibly a berry], taken from the *gapa* tree, which my husband gave to me to eat. I ate the fruit and immediately fell unconscious and entered a dream. During the dream I was able to hear somebody knocking. It was at this point that I realised to myself that I was being introduced to witchcraft. I always had these powers but my husband was bringing them out of me. Until this happened I was completely unaware I possessed this capacity. After this my husband and I were joined spiritually. Whoever consumes the fruit will then become a 'queen' or 'king' witch. My husband wanted me to become a queen witch and that is why he gave me the fruit. While unconscious I could see myself in a different spiritual world. Everything that happened during that time was mysterious, it all happened invisibly.

When I was being taught my heart changed place, going from the front to the back of my body. My husband also hit me on the chest with a frog, which is what happens when a witch wishes to introduce another person to witchcraft. Everything was explained to me through action and without words.

This assisted realisation of an innate spiritual capacity revealed to this woman different aspects of reality. Yet, when practising their craft, a *tamäm* does not enter a spiritual world in the sense of the *hanip dä äpti* mentioned earlier but, rather, gains access to the hidden spirituality of everyday life. That is to say, they do not transmigrate to a discrete and delineated spiritual space within which they travel as part of their nefarious errands but, instead, have illuminated to them dimensions of reality beyond the sensory grasp of ordinary people. Practically speaking, this means that, once inducted, the *tamäm* is able to apprehend and manipulate a person's soul, which appears to them in a succession of quasi-anthropomorphic forms. The basis and first stage of the sequence is blood. Indeed, I think it could be argued that Oksapmin witchcraft is, above all else, about blood, whether structurally, metaphorically, or spiritually.

According to the woman I interviewed, blood is something which is not only concentrated in the physical body but which can also be spiritually dispersed. That is, every individual has a corporeal body within which real blood flows but, in addition, they possess a spirit or soul (*dä*) animated by the spiritual equivalent of blood, able to be perceived only by *tamäm*. Blood, in its dispersed state, attracts the interest of *tamäm*, much like I think bloodied water excites a shark. The *tamäm* then undertakes a search for the substance. Once located, the blood is mystically compounded in order to form a complete spiritual body, the anthropomorphised soul of the victim. The integrated body is then taken to a large lake, where it is cooked in an earth oven or mumu. Following this, the body is eaten by the witch, who attends particularly to consuming the blood and brain of the victim. Attracted by the grotesque scene, other witches will often join the meal. Analogically, then, in social reality the witch and their associates are consuming a living person's soul, mounting a surprise attack on their life force. Such insidious spiritual activity has real life consequences for the Oksapmin. Whomsoever has their soul devoured by a witch will suddenly fall gravely ill, encounter serious misfortune, or even die. The hidden world of the witch is thus thoroughly and complexly interwoven with the seen world of everyday life.

My account is causal in nature; there is an event, namely, the *tamäm* consuming a relative's soul, and an effect, namely, illness, misfortune, or death. Oksapmin social logic is also causal but, given that witchcraft is furtive, concerned parties are forced to work backwards from the event to its cause rather than see the effect fulfil the cause. The Oksapmin, then, like so many other indigenous peoples described by ethnographers, use witchcraft to explain and rationalise unfortunate occurrences in life. If a person unexpectedly falls seriously ill, plummets into a cave, drowns in the river, or is subject to any other such mishap, witchcraft is often immediately invoked as the cause. Parties instantly assemble in hunt of the supposed perpetrator and claims of compensation, invariably contested, typically follow shortly thereafter. As mentioned earlier, in former times witches were often tortured and killed, but these days such treatment is rare. Only once during my fieldwork did I hear of harm to a suspected witch, who apparently had his finger either partially or completely severed by the friends of a boy he was accused of having cursed.

What has been the result of the encounter between this indigenous cultural realm and Christianity? How have Oksapmin people managed this relationship? Some of the content and social application of witchcraft has not been changed by Christianity; *tamäm* are believed to undertake surreptitious activities of the kind they historically had and witchcraft remains an important way of understanding the misfortunes that inevitably befall human beings. What has changed is that, like the other examples already discussed in this chapter, the Oksapmin have selected certain ideas and figures within the Bible and used them to integrate their belief in witchcraft with the Christianity introduced to them by the ABMS. Witchcraft is given a Christian gloss while, at the same time, the selected Biblical material has injected into it Oksapmin cultural forms. As the thesis argues, this creative process gives rise to new syncretic religious understandings and practices.

Let us now consider the motivations behind witchcraft and why it is that people feel compelled to participate in this activity. When discussing this issue with me, the woman cited above claimed that her behaviour as a witch was inspired by Lucifer (Satan). This is the first way that the incorporation of Christianity has affected witchcraft. It is his iniquitous will that animates witchcraft, his direction that compels *tamäm* toward evil deeds, and it is with him that deals regarding spiritual attack are made. As she explains:

Lucifer is behind me. He is the one pushing me to do witchcraft. If I eat the insides of a person I incur a debt. Then I make an agreement with Lucifer to repay that debt by

killing one of my own blood relatives... When I go out to the spiritual world it is not by my own choice. It is Lucifer who directs and commands me to do it. He gives me the orders. I receive these orders through the sun, as that is where Lucifer resides. Sometimes I ascend to the sun to receive the order from Lucifer and at other times the sun descends for him to give me the order. This all happens spiritually. When I approach Lucifer the environment becomes so bright that I can't get too close. I'm not afraid though. But Lucifer doesn't always specify who I must attack. If I want I can write the name of a person on a piece of paper and then hand it to Lucifer who then later either approves or denies my request. In any case, we always make arrangements with him to kill a person in a particular place and at a given time.

It can be seen that this woman perceives her own thoughts and actions as a witch to be motivated by Satan. Her statements thus demonstrate the mixing together and mutual influence of Christian ideas and those of witchcraft. Missionisation did not frontally challenge the existence of this indigenous cultural realm but it did institute Christianity within Oksapmin society. The way in which people have managed the co-presence of these two worlds is through assimilating them to each other, by joining them into a single cosmology. This practitioner of witchcraft sees her actions as driven by a figure taken out of the Bible while the notion of Satan motivating evil deeds is mapped onto existing indigenous cultural practices.

I now widen my focus from how the content and practice of witchcraft has been Christianised to how witchcraft as a cultural category has been reconceptualised by the Oksapmin. Prior to the arrival of Christianity, witchcraft, although pervasive and, in theory, able to be practised by anyone, was surely considered an anti-social behaviour damaging to the fabric of society. It still retains those connotations today, but since converting to Christianity the Oksapmin now assign to it a more specific value. Witchcraft is now considered to be not simply a sinister activity but is thought of more specifically as sin. Again we see the reciprocal transformation that lies at the centre of the Oksapmin relationship with Christianity; the Christian concept of sin is indigenised through becoming a vessel for this existing Oksapmin behaviour and, simultaneously, the indigenous activity is reimagined in Biblical terms. The Christian is being made to fit the local at the same time as the local is absorbed into the Christian. I argue that, in the current state of affairs, that is, post-conversion, witchcraft and the concept of sin depend on each other. Witchcraft needs a place within the Christian cosmology, to which the Oksapmin have imparted sin, while the

Christian concept of sin needs a local foil to evince its power, which it finds in the sphere of witchcraft.

Many Oksapmin, particularly those who see themselves as committed Christians, are concerned not only with the identification of witchcraft as sin but also with its eradication. These people construe witchcraft as a redoubtable foe to be vigorously engaged lest its corrupting influence persist or, even worse, spread. The primary means through which such spiritual combat systematically occurs is Christian ritual, especially prayer and confession. During the course of my fieldwork I spoke with Det and James, two Baptist pastors who articulated this viewpoint with detail and clarity. Det, who belongs to the Landslide Baptist Church, had the following to say:

It is very hard for these *tamäm* to change, change their life, because they are worshipping their own God, Satan, the father of all evil, and those people who don't have *tamäm* they will follow Jesus. When the Spirit of God convinces them, that's the time when they come out and confess with their mouth, saying that he or she is a *tamäm*. Recently, two ladies came out and said they were *tamäm* and they did it in public, inside the church. They confessed and said 'we were once *tamam*, we have been going around attacking people' and how they have been dealing with Satan. When speaking, confessing, they are happy, expressing happiness. When they were *tamäm* they are unhappy but when they come out, when they talk inside the church, they were happy, saying 'Christ has changed me'...Some of the *tamäm* have been attending church for a while before they confess, about a few months or weeks. Sometimes they go into the mountain, or for a retreat and that's the time, the Christmas camp, or youth camp, the special occasions and then once the Spirit of God convinces them, that's when they are ready... The *tamäm* spirit must die out. Many Christians want and have been praying for this. It will work and *tamäm* will be destroyed. *Tamäm* must all come out and confess that they are sanguma [meaning 'witch' in Tok Pisin] and commit themselves to God. If the *tamäm* is in a family that family has to come and talk with the church. They confess publicly in the church. If everybody can confess in public then the spirit of *tamäm* will die. The battle with *tamäm* is taking place right now both inside people, spiritually, and through their actions and feelings.

James, a Baptist pastor from Wauläp, held concordant views, which he expressed to me in English:

Traditional beliefs are gone. When the Christianity came in, we don't believe in the traditional way of, you know, haus tambaran [meaning 'traditional religious activities' in Tok Pisin] and any of those. But, there is only one, they call it sanguma [as defined above], *tamäm*. That's when we never know who is *tamäm*, it's a spiritual thing, when you are going into initiation, some sort of training in these activities, but it is spiritual. Like, I mean, like you Europeans, you don't tell something like, you don't have a *tamäm*, but like, PNG culture, you know, this sort of activities are happening. Christianity is trying to, it needs to, they are preaching on this, to break through into the spirit of *tamäm*. Many people come up, they make testimony and they confess in the church. They are possessed by the evil spirits, so trying to kill people. It is happening, but many of us think, we believe in Christianity, we think that Jesus has the power to break down every demon, anything.

The above passages demonstrate that witches are considered to be sinners in need of spiritual rescue by means of Christian ritual. More specifically, *tamäm* are construed as playing host to satanic forces which through concerted prayer or sincere confession must be systematically exorcised and replaced by the affirmative life force of Christ. The confessional practices of witches is a topic that Badstuebner (2003) has recently explored among Pentecostal Christians within black, urban townships across the Eastern and Western Cape provinces of South Africa. There, typically young women come forward within church services and calmly lay claim to acts of witchcraft, tales which include 'arcane worlds, magical transportation, violence, and bloody murder' (2003:9). Badstuebner interprets these acts as particular responses to a 'hyper-real' modernity whereby young, black women have been pushed into vulnerable and dangerous spaces on the margins of society. Through confessing, she argues, these women are, in fact, exercising their agency to 'claim power firstly through ceasing their life as witches and secondly by claims to possess specialized knowledge about a realm that lies underneath much of South African social life' (2003:20). Although the social context is very different, I would agree with Badstuebner that witchcraft confession is undertaken for similar reasons among the Oksapmin. Schram, too, has examined witchcraft confessions among the Auhelewa of Milne Bay province, PNG. As with the South African case presently discussed, here, too, many people 'see a moral danger in the use of confession rituals to demonstrate witchcraft' (2010:727). Their central function for Schram, however, is

as ‘a collective epistemic practice by which people can presuppose the witchcraft that they cannot see’ (2010:735); the invisible is made real and thus, in many ways, manageable. Since I didn’t observe any confessions first hand it is difficult for me to analyse this particular issue in any detail but the above articles and others (see Dundon 2007) suggest fruitful lines of enquiry that I would like to pursue in the future.

To return to the Oksapmin case, for both Det and James, the ritual process ideally effects a personal transformation from witch to Christian. My discussion here thus moves slightly away from the interaction of Christianity and indigeneity within the realm of belief and understanding and moves towards the real-world practical encounter between the two. The statements above reveal the interpenetration of these worlds, not only through the comprehension of witchcraft as sin, but also through the description of a procedure through which to address and contain this named enemy. Witchcraft is Christianised through being identified as a target for prayer and confession rites learned from the mission, but these Christian acts are indigenised as a means to manage specifically local issues.

The described encounter between witchcraft, sin, and Christian ritual, is sometimes manifested in public, everyday life. It moves from something thought or talked about to something that is actually happening and that demands attention. Since the matter at hand concerns spiritual and physical life and death, these kinds of social interactions are often charged, dramatic, and explosive. Accusations fly, insults thrown, and conciliations pleaded. They are especially interesting when they occur within the confines of a church. One Sunday I was party to one such exchange during a service at the local Papua New Guinea Bible Church (PNGBC). It shows us how the mutually adjusted understandings of Christianity and witchcraft are borne out in action.

Within PNGBC services, like those held by other denominations, prayer features prominently, acting to both indicate and bless every significant phase of the event, including, but not limited to, the arrival of the congregation, the formal commencement of the service, musical performances, material offerings, and the sermon. Of all the prayers, the one marking the start of the sermon is crucial, since it acts, firstly, to structurally separate the sermon, generally seen as the most important and informative aspect of the service, from the other phases that precede it; and, second, to psychologically focus the congregation on making the corresponding attitudinal shift. During the mentioned service, this prayer, offered by my main informant John Manden, was disrupted by the jostling and insults of a female considered by

many local people to be a *tamäm*. As will be seen below, John was not only cognisant of her ‘satanic’ presence but immediately incorporated it into his prayer, consequently altering its flow, style, and content. It is important to note that the prayer was passionately delivered, its force and tone steadily ascending throughout.

Our Heavenly Father, we say thank you to you in the name of Jesus Christ. You’ve given us life. Our Father, we can never know the thoughts and feelings of all men and women. We are not God; God is in Heaven. From your throne look down on each one of us. Judge our lives and see if they glorify you or glorify the bad things of this world. Look inside all of us and touch us, each and everyone of us. Feed us, open our minds and our hearts on this morning. Father, every individual has come into this church with their own kind of thinking. Inside the church there are some people who are not good. Touch us all according to your will. Bless every individual in the church today. We pray also that you will care for our schoolchildren this year. Help the teachers, the administration, the parents, and the students to all work together. In Proverbs Chapter One Verse Seven it is said: ‘The fear of God is the beginning of knowledge.’ Father, we must be afraid of you. When we are afraid of you that is when good thinking and knowledge comes. Please hear our prayer on your throne. Father, bad spirits are influencing many people today. Not only with our Papua New Guinea Bible Church but all churches in the Oksapmin area. Satan is using many men and women. Satan is setting traps. Satan is trapping people and killing them. God you must save us from this. Use us according to your own plan. Open our minds and our hearts. We pray for your help. Open us up, dynamite us! We want to become your people. Let a revival break inside this very church! Bless every individual. Make every one of us strong...

During the last two or three sentences of the cited passage, the woman, who was standing at the entrance to the church, began to jeer the assembled congregation, asking ‘why have you Sambatians come here (referring to the inhabitants of neighbouring Sambate who had attended the service)?’, intimating that their presence was without value or purpose. Immediately John changed the course of his prayer to directly address her remarks, which he perceived to be a spiritual threat, becoming thunderous and vituperative. This decisive shift in verbal style and linguistic content produced approving noises from the congregation.

Pray and we will stop all of the disturbances to Your work! Stop all satanic things in the name of Jesus Christ! On this morning, Satan cannot stop us! Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, we command, wreck, destroy, smash, the work of the bad people of the world! Father, Satan is disturbing us in here! Oh God, God knows that you [addressing the witch in passing] want to trick us! God will not touch or visit the bad people who have come!

From this point on, the prayer gradually became calmer until concluding a minute or so later. The woman, who had remained silent during the denunciation, availed herself of the break in proceedings to offer some further commentary: ‘Why are you all looking at me? Excuse me, but you don’t preach well in this church. You are not committed to God. You are looking at me. Why? You will go to Hell.’ With that, she swiftly departed, skipping and singing as she went. Despite this series of unsettling disruptions, the mentioned service continued and was successfully completed approximately an hour later.

John Manden is a firmly committed Christian and respected leader within the Mangede congregation. We find him deeply engaged in a prayer designed both to structurally propel the service toward its culmination and also to psychologically concentrate the congregation on this transition. He is primarily concerned to supplicate God in the name of Christ but from the outset is also aware of, and preoccupied with, the presence a woman the congregation consider to be a witch. Although initially silent, the witch was nonetheless registered as a spiritual hazard both through the actions of the congregation and the content of the prayer. From the moment she appeared, the atmosphere inside the church became uneasy and John’s prayer, while still exalting the divine, evinced this tension through references to ‘bad people’ and Satan. The foreboding evil presence then transformed through the woman’s derisive remarks into a real threat to be combated.

To the gathered Christians, and especially to John, what was formerly latent became physically manifest; Satan had been lurking on the periphery but through the woman and her speech had established himself in the midst of proceedings as a foe to be reckoned with. Reckoned with she was. Immediately following her interjection, John redirected his prayer away from raising the name of God to grappling with Satan. Above we saw how prayer and confession were suggested ritual measures through which the identity of a witch could be realigned along a Christian trajectory. Here ritual also plays a central role, but instead of operating as a mode of personal transformation it is spontaneously manipulated to ward off

an unexpected spiritual threat. I was sitting immediately next to John when the described events occurred. I remember being startled by the woman's remarks, even though I couldn't fully understand them, and impressed by John's prompt and unequivocal retort. With hindsight I now look back on this situation and marvel at how quickly and skilfully John was able to address the threat within an appropriate Christian idiom, which among other things suggests the significant extent to which Christian concepts and imagery pervade his consciousness. Without any hesitation, and literally within a second, his imagination had not only addressed and encountered the woman but also constructed her as a satanic force endangering all those inside the church.

Identifying and engaging the woman as an enemy was largely successful; after being castigated within the ritual frame she hastily exited. Yet this was by no means a final victory for Christianity and its adherents over its nemesis witchcraft. At best, the ritual improvisation demonstrated by John deflected the spiritual danger but did not vanquish it. Witchcraft still exists within Oksapmin society and it is likely to remain for a long time yet. Indeed, as I suggested earlier, Christianity depends upon witchcraft to partially substantiate its concept of sin; Christians, therefore, ironically have a vested interest in its perpetuation. Existing local behaviours that are considered anti-social are reinterpreted in terms of the Christian concept and thereby change and indigenise it; sin is made into something uniquely Oksapmin through its application to the realm of witchcraft. So, too, with the active efforts at its elimination. All these Christian ideas and actions are being made to fit the local social context. But, at the same time, a place is being found for beliefs and threats concerning witchcraft within the sphere of Christian morality and these too are changed through this process. Christian conversion made witchcraft a sin.

These observations open out to the overall argument I am making in this thesis, namely, that missionisation and conversion catalysed in Oksapmin society a process of fusion between the Christianity introduced by the ABMS and those surviving aspects of the indigenous religious system such that a new syncretic religion and cosmology composed of elements of both worlds was created. In all of the instances provided in this chapter it is possible to see that indigenous and Christian understandings and practices are being remade in terms of each other. Aspects of the indigenous world are given a Christian meaning while selected Christian concepts and actions are moulded to fit existing indigenous motivations and social processes. The end result is that the Oksapmin religious world becomes a composite product, neither Christian nor indigenous but a mix of both. It is in this way, I

argue, that the Oksapmin have constructed coherence in the context of religious transformation. Two worlds with differing principles and explanations regarding the genesis and essence of life are, through creative modification, married to each other, brought to the same level, and combined.

7. Stories, People, and Places

The incorporation of Christianity into Oksapmin society had a markedly uneven impact upon the existing indigenous religious world. Several central ritual institutions were condemned by the missionaries and thereafter collapsed. But much of the indigenous religious world continued, owing mainly to the fact that it was beyond the mission's reach and control. The Oksapmin have managed this process of social change by fusing the two worlds together and thereby reciprocally transforming Christianity and their indigenous religion in terms of each other. Christianity was interpreted in terms of existing cultural frameworks and was simultaneously utilised to remake surviving aspects of indigeneity in a way that constructed isomorphism.

In this chapter I demonstrate how the process of fusion has occurred in the context of myth. I refer to two main examples: the myth of a traditional Oksapmin 'prophet' and a myth describing the genesis of a particular clan and a kind of cosmogonical actor. These examples are used primarily to illustrate how an aspect of the Oksapmin culture which has survived missionisation has been adjusted to fit the Christian cosmology. The two previous chapters have, in different ways, sought to reveal the reciprocal process of the Christianisation of surviving indigenous phenomena and that of giving local form to Christianity. My emphasis here is on the former and I show mainly how these myths have been refined in ways that make them appear Christian. Where necessary, I also consider the implications of this reconfiguration for the Christian material involved. Both stories that I present vividly exemplify the clear Oksapmin drive towards unification of the two worlds (cf. Gewertz and Errington 1991).

By conjoining parts of Bible stories with their traditional myths the Oksapmin are, in fact, constructing the same kind of 'ancestral precedent' for Christianity as described by Taylor for the Sia Raga of Vanuatu (2010), an article that features at several points throughout this chapter. The analysis also reveals striking parallels between the Oksapmin and the Somaip of Western Highlands, as studied by Reithofer (2006). In an interesting passage (2006:271) he describes how: 'The Somaip considered the Bible stories as equivalent to the mythical narratives of their ancestors.' Furthermore, he shows how 'biblical and ancestral heroes blended into each other, and narrative strands from different traditions were

interwoven into a (syncretic) new fabric' (2006:271). Identical processes operate among the Oksapmin as they combine two cosmologies.

More generally, many aspects of my data and analysis confirm Jorgensen's observation that 'the process of Telefol mythic production' is 'a response to historical circumstances that is both constrained and enabled by the extant corpus of myths and the conventions surrounding them' (2001:122). Jorgensen's central example, the story of Tibulam, demonstrates how the Telefolmin people have creatively revised their existing stories for a number of important reasons, including rationalising disparities in wealth between themselves and Europeans, collapsing differences between traditional and Christian religion, as well as refuting new religious movements locally perceived as potentially harmful. Throughout the discussion I refer frequently to Jorgensen's article, in the process delving deeper into the particular mythic modifications and associations established by the Telefolmin and showing how they either conform to or depart from those made by the Oksapmin.

The same kind of argument concerning the ability of myth to be dynamically employed as a means of engaging contemporary socio-political dilemmas is also something referred to in a recent article by Taylor (2010), who writes that myth should be viewed 'first and foremost as dynamic and historically defined processes of myth *making*... This is because the discourse of both history and myth are simultaneously discourses of identity, consisting of the attribution of meaningful pasts to structured presents' (2010:427). Indeed, as will be seen below, through their utilisation and modification of an extant mythic corpus, the Oksapmin are making many claims about who they are as a people, particularly in relation to the revealed beliefs and practices of Christianity.



Figure 7. The Om River Valley. It is within this area that the myths of Dahaplän and Atän play out.

The myth of Dahaplän

Within the corpus of Oksapmin myth, probably the most widely known story is that of the ‘prophet’ Dahaplän.¹⁵ This story was one of four main narratives recorded by Perey during his fieldwork among the Oksapmin from 1967–1968, and was later presented in his Ph.D thesis (1973:329–331) as ‘The Man with Pink Skin.’ His abbreviated account contains only a few basic details and is not particularly useful here, either as a source of supplementary detail or as a point of comparative reference. It omits many key features of the story, including the names of characters, places to which they travel, as well as several crucial events. As such, I do not frequently refer to it in my discussion below. But, it is important for one simple reason, namely, that it contains no evidence of Christian influence. It will be recalled that the Oksapmin had only just begun converting to Christianity during the time that Perey

¹⁵ I bracket the word prophet in order to indicate its somewhat problematic meaning, for although he is often referred to as a prophet by the Oksapmin, precisely which of his mythical actions can be considered prophetic is still unclear to me.

conducted his fieldwork among them in the late 1960s. The version of the story he collected, therefore, represents the myth in its ‘traditional’ form, before the Oksapmin had begun to adjust and modify it with their knowledge of Christianity. So, while it cannot serve as a backdrop against which to precisely identify the changes brought about by Christianisation, his account still acts to illustrate and strengthen my argument that the myth in its current form is the result of having been ‘updated’ with Christian content.

The story of Dahaplän is, in actuality, not a unified narrative but a more or less integrated conglomerate, comprised of three interrelated stories which deal with various stages of Dahaplän’s earthly and spiritual existence. There isn’t a single Oksapmin individual I met during my fieldwork who could provide a thorough account of all three segments of the overall story. I contend that this fragmentation is not due to the length of the story but rather to its social and geographical embeddedness.

Dahaplän’s story unfolds in several locations throughout the Oksapmin territory. The people residing within any of those given locations possess a deeper knowledge of that particular episode than they do of the events that occur elsewhere. This is because each segment of the story is rich with information particular to the geographical location in which it takes place and also to the social groups that customarily reside in those places. Furthermore, in many instances the story relates closely to magical powers over which certain clans exercise control. Taken together, these factors do not provide a complete explanation of the causes lying behind the fragmentation of the story, but they do, nonetheless, provide insight into the possible factors maintaining this narrative organisation.

The overall myth is composed of three segments, each relating to a particular phase of Dahaplän’s existence: birth, adulthood and death, and afterlife. The first episode unfolds within the lower Tekin and Bäk Valleys; the second episode takes place within the lower Tekin Valley and Om River Valleys; and the concluding passage occurs entirely within the Om River Valley. The final, third, passage of the myth appears to not have been subject to any revision in light of conversion to Christianity and it is thus with the first two episodes that I will be primarily concerned. The fact that the third portion of the story has not been Christianised owes to the fact that the people who know it best, namely, the Oksapmin, Tomware, and Asabano people living around the Om River and its tributaries, have had a less intensive relationship with Christianity compared with the main Oksapmin population and have thus not sought to adjust or assimilate this part of the story to parts of the Bible.

Part One: Birth

The first phase of the myth primarily concerns the circumstances surrounding Dahaplän's birth. This part of Dahaplän's life is not referred to in Perey's brief account (1973). As will be observed below, within this passage narrative focus rests not so much on the initial stages of Dahaplän's life *per se*, but rather on the places and the people connected to him at birth. Of the three constituent parts that make up the mythical whole, the first is certainly the shortest. I collected this part of the narrative during an impromptu visit to my house by an elderly man from Wauläp who had heard that I was interested in this particular story. The story, as he described to me, including all ambiguities and inconsistencies, is as follows:

One afternoon, a woman by the name of Apelyä ascended Davup, a peak high on the southern wall of the Tekin Valley, in search of possum. At day's end, having completed this task [whether successful or not I do not know], she began to descend. However, due to fading light, Apelyä was unable to return to her house, and was instead forced to sleep at Sinwanet, a rocky outcrop situated approximately 150 metres above where the settlement of Sambate is currently located. The next day Apelyä awoke to the realisation, or recollection, that at some point during the night she had engaged in sexual intercourse with a man and that this had occurred within a cave. The name of the man who had sex with her was Gonhän, which in the Oksapmin language literally means 'man of no, or unknown, social origin.' Further, at the conclusion of their sexual activity Gonhän withdrew his penis from the cave, and it was Apelyä's memory of this precise moment that sparked her realisation that the interaction had taken place at all. The following day she returned home to the hamlet of Gamaäp ('the place of the Gama clan'). She remained there for some time before eventually realising that, as a result of her encounter at Sinwanet, she had become pregnant. Apelyä subsequently decided that she would not deliver the child at Gamaäp but would do so at Yentanäp in the Bak Valley, which she considered to be her true home. The inevitable moment drew nearer and Apelyä departed Gamaäp. Upon arriving in the general Yentanäp area, Apelyä made her way directly to Gelhrum, a place located immediately next to a small stream known as Lamba, and without delay gave birth to a white-skinned baby son. Although he would later become known as Dahaplän, the name bestowed upon the child at birth was Titomyap.

News of Titomyap's birth spread quickly through the Oksapmin area and, in due course, reached four women: Filinip of the Waul clan, Waninip of the Nianing clan, Mahtia of the Divehe clan, and, lastly, Koasep of the Yentän clan. These four women collectively assumed the role of Titomyap's carers while Apelyä recovered from childbirth. The four women travelled from their respective hamlets to Yentanäp with the intention of helping Apelyä. When they arrived, Apelyä promptly delegated work, the instructions for which she gave to Filinip: the group were to go and fetch water for her and the child. More particularly, they were instructed to obtain it from Galilee, a stream in the Tekin Valley.¹⁶ The four women obediently carried out her request, travelling to Galilee, filling several containers from the stream and then returning to Gelhrum. However, once back in Gelhrum it became apparent that the substance the women had collected from Galilee was not water but, in fact, oil [petroleum]. Notwithstanding this remarkable discovery, the four women, having completed the task assigned to them by Apelyä, each returned to their respective place of origin. Filinip, Apelyä's principal carer, married a man named Babylon after returning home.

As mentioned earlier, the events of Dahaplän's early life are peripheral to this phase of the myth. The focus here instead rests on the broader socio-geographical context within which his birth and infancy occurred. Nonetheless, the initial stages of his life were described to me in brief and general terms, as follows. At an undefined point after the above events had occurred, Dahaplän settled with his two brothers Isnom and Asnom (alternatively known as Apin and Nianing, both Oksapmin clan names) at Sinwanet, the rocky outcrop near Galilee where their mother went hunting at the beginning of the story. There, he apparently hunted regularly, constructed a house with a fireplace inside, and planted fruit trees. This is the limited extent to which the events of Dahaplän's early life figure in the first section of the myth. It is largely in the second part of the narrative that they come to prominence.

Part Two: Adulthood and Death

The second phase of the myth deals directly with Dahaplän's adult life and subsequent death. In contrast to the conclusion of the first section of the myth, which describes Dahaplän as

¹⁶ This is a creek to the west of Sambate called Gumut.

having settled with his two brothers at Sinwanet, this next phase opens with the three residing together with their dog at Yente, a place situated within Ranimäp, roughly a kilometre from Sinwanet. Although Dahaplän's location has thus been shifted, both places retain importance within the narrative.

As told to me late one night by an old man named Ninsan, this section of the myth begins by briefly illuminating Dahaplän's personal capacities. It was already mentioned that Dahaplän and his two brothers live at a house in Yente. Before going to sleep, Dahaplän would regularly implore his two brothers not to disturb him. Unknown to Isnom and Asnom, the reason for such behaviour was that during his sleep Dahaplän would make spiritual travels between Yente and Lembanäp (the Oksapmin name for Lembana, an Om River settlement of a single great house of the Lembana people, who speak their own language). Further, and in conjunction with elements of the first section of the myth, these travels would be made by way of following the stream Galilee.¹⁷ Therefore, should he be unnecessarily disturbed during these peregrinations, certain harmful consequences would follow.

Perey's account of the story does contain mention of the two brothers and a dog (1973:329), but aside from being described as a 'counterforce' to Dahaplän's often secretive behaviour, no further detail is added. Dahaplän's death is also not referred to. As told to me by Ninsan, the story is as follows.

One day, Dahaplän instructed his two younger brothers to go hunting for possum together with his dog, known alternatively as Aliäm or Kulam. Suspicious of Dahaplän's motives, Isnom and Asnom, instead of ascending the mountain in search of possum, chose to hide at Sinwanet, a vantage point from which they could secretly observe their elder brother. Believing that Isnom and Asnom had now ventured some way into the bush, Dahaplän began to climb a tree. As he moved up the tree, however, it began to grow taller, until it reached a tremendous height. After Dahaplän had reached its summit the tree bent in an enormous arc down to Amahe, a small stream within Ranimäp. Whilst positioned thus, he here acquired, without consent, a great number of small taro, which he proceeded to place inside his bag. The tree then sprang back to its original erect posture. The tree subsequently made another great curve, this time down to Boganbip, where Dahaplän obtained, again without asking, considerable amounts of garden vegetables and sugar cane. The towering tree then

¹⁷ This also relates to a general Oksapmin belief that spiritual beings travel along rivers, streams, etc.

again rebounded, but instead of arching down to another nearby location it remained upright. From his perch Dahaplän acquired a great length of rope and cast it in the direction of Sinwanet, where his younger brothers continued to hide, where it fixed itself. A short while later, prodigious numbers of small possum began to traverse the rope toward Dahaplän, of which he killed many. Now having an abundance of food resources, Dahaplän descended the tree and, once on solid ground, prepared a cooking pit (mumu) in which to ready his bounty for consumption.

Dahaplän acquired this wealth of food without obtaining the consent of the people who either grew or had rights of access over it. As a result, he became despised as a thief. In fact, the local people from whom he had stolen and who had heard of his exploits labelled him Dahaplän [which in the Oksapmin language means, simply, ‘thief’].

After the mumu had finished cooking, Dahaplän climbed onto the roof of his house and announced to all of his relatives and friends that many local people considered him a thief and wished him dead. These accusations made Dahaplän so ashamed that he eventually desired, like his offended neighbours, to end his own life. Having heard this announcement, Dahaplän’s kin proceeded to remove the cooked food from the mumu. To their astonishment, they saw that the small taro and possum earlier obtained had, through cooking, now increased dramatically in size. Dahaplän, seemingly uninterested in such a revelation, simply informed his kin to save some food for his two brothers, who had yet to return from their excursion. From Sinwanet Isnom and Asnom could see the great feast unfolding and decided to make a prompt return to Yente. Homeward bound, they temporarily stopped at the Tekin River to wash Kulam, Dahaplän’s dog. Having been washed, the dog bounded ahead of the two brothers to Yente, where it was greeted by its inquisitive owner. Dahaplän rhetorically asked the dog, ‘Have you all been hunting in the bush as I instructed you?’ before betraying their secret, and his knowledge of it, with the accusation ‘No! You’ve all been hiding at Sinwanet!’ The brothers arrived, and immediately began their meal. Once satiated, Dahaplän addressed them. However, instead of reproving them for disobedience, Dahaplän apprised them of more serious matters, namely, his intention to die and shockingly for Isnom and Asnom, his wish for them to carry out the act. This initiated a behavioural pattern common to many Oksapmin myths, whereby the protagonists visit a particular location, have their motives thwarted, and

are then forced to move on to the next location in hope of resolution. In the case of the present myth, Dahaplän, Isnom, Asnom and Kulam travel to numerous, ostensibly suitable locations to commit the deadly act, only to have Dahaplän at each place lament that his brothers should not kill him lest they violate certain spatial taboos. Starting at Yente and moving north toward Lembanäp, thwarted attempts to kill Dahaplän were repeated at Wele, Lagä (both within the Mitianäp ward), Ilfatil (a ridge overlooking Mitianäp), Kaktawe, Hobdup, Ungte, Minte and Yembelu (all of which are situated within the Om River Valley), before eventually arriving at Kängdup. Dahaplän had dissuaded his brothers from fulfilling his request at all of the aforementioned places, but here he finally put himself at their mercy. He stood astride a small fissure in the earth, with one foot grounded on the side of the Apin clan, the other on the side of the Tomsup clan, and, grasping a tree with each of his arms, assumed the position of a crucifix (*'diwai kros,'* the same phrasing used to refer to the crucifix in the Tok Pisin Bible), his two brothers standing on either side. Having thus arranged his body, Dahaplän issued final orders to Isnom and Asnom to perform his will. The two younger siblings tightened their bows and prepared to shoot. They counted down, 'three, two, one,' and then released their arrows. However, at that moment there occurred something most extraordinary: Dahaplän disappeared into the earth, descending through the fissure over which he was standing into the spirit world (*hanip dä äpti*). This proved fatal for Isnom and Asnom, as the arrows intended for their elder brother instead crossed mid-air, Isnom's killing Asnom and Asnom's killing Isnom. The two younger brothers duly followed Dahaplän into the spirit world.

According to the narrator, making a final journey into the spirit world with his brothers was Dahaplän's intention all along, something he hid from Isnom and Asnom. Unknown to them, Kängdup was the portal through which the dead entered the spirit world. Thus, Dahaplän's deferral and dissimulation during the journey were manoeuvres designed to lure Isnom and Asnom closer to Kängdup and their subsequent death and new life. Dahaplän, of course, wished to depart the world of the living due to the shameful insults he had received, but precisely why he wanted his siblings to accompany him was never explained to me.

Discussion

It is my contention that the above story represents a merging of Christianity with the indigenous Oksapmin cultural world. As part of conversion, the Oksapmin have fused the two worlds to each other and in this sphere it can be seen that this has been achieved primarily by ‘updating’ the existing myth with content and themes learned from the Bible stories taught by the missionaries. This likely happened at the same time as Christianity was being incorporated into Oksapmin society. The two systems have been joined through these creative procedures. Further, as they are being melded together, the difference between them collapses and is replaced by commonality and equivalence. For local people, this fusion has also entailed its own erasure in an effort to construct a singular and foundational religious identity composed of both elements. The composite product that currently exists, that is, local people consider to be a mythic truth with no proximate historical provenance. The fusion of the two is something that for them has always been there; their traditions have always been Christian and their Christianity has always been traditional; they are one and the same, just different aspects of one encompassing truth.

One of the main ways that the Oksapmin have conjoined the two worlds in this myth is through establishing implicit and explicit parallels between Dahaplän and Jesus Christ. This kind of conflation of local mythical actors with Jesus or God is widespread throughout PNG and Melanesia. The identification of a traditional mythic actor with Jesus Christ is a creative manoeuvre that has been undertaken by the Telefolmin (Jorgensen 2001). Within their own story of Tibulam, itself a creative fusion of two existing prototypes (Lohmann 2010b), the eponymous actor is identified with Jesus. In one rendering of the story this is ‘envisioned as a reconciliation between Christianity and tradition Telefol religion,’ while in another it takes on a more politicised meaning, expressing opposition of the speaker and the community of Telefolip to the rebaibal movement, which at the time of the myth’s genesis was threatening to erode important aspects of their cultural heritage (Jorgensen 2001:120). Further afield, Taylor (2010) has also described how some Sia Raga people of Vanuatu ostensibly conflate the mythical trickster-hero Tagaro with the Christian God (2010:420), though, on the other hand, many others consider Tagaro to be a ‘demonic, murderous stranger’ (2010:422).

To my thinking, the most striking synergies between Dahaplän’s story and the life of Jesus, as portrayed in the New Testament, are the way in which the two men died, as well as

the spiritual implications of their respective deaths. As written in the Gospels, Jesus was sentenced to death by crucifixion for, in many people's view, fraudulently claiming to be the Son of God. With arms outstretched, he was nailed by the Romans to a wooden cross, flanked by two convicted criminals also positioned in the same way. Further, Jesus's death on the cross did not mark the termination of his existence but merely its transformation, as demonstrated by his later resurrection and ascension to Heaven. Jesus did not resist the will of those seeking to kill him but instead complied in the understanding that his death marked the fulfilment of the Scriptures. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, according to the Bible, Jesus did not die in vain but to atone for the sins of mankind. His death is held to have been the sacrifice of one morally and spiritually perfect man for the collective sins of an imperfect humanity. As flawed beings, humans thus incurred a debt to both Jesus and God for the access to Heaven afforded through this ultimate sacrificial act.

In ways that I will explain below, many of these events and themes have been interwoven through the myth of Dahaplän in order to integrate it with the Christian cosmology. Oksapmin people have taken their knowledge of Christ's life and threaded it through the traditional narrative in a way that makes it both a prefiguration and echo of Christianity. It is a prefiguration in the sense that it entails that knowledge of Christ, and Biblical content more generally, existed prior to the systematic introduction of Christianity in the 1960s. It is an echo in the anthropological sense of representing a restructuring of indigeneity that conjoins it to the introduced religion. The Christian themes and events mentioned immediately above find implicit and explicit expression in the myth of Dahaplän.

The connections that I draw here between the two cultural spheres vary considerably in type. At one end, some are purely hypothetical and represent implicit, possibly coincidental, possibly deliberate, synergies. At the other are the construction of parallels rendered explicit either by content within the myth or by comments made by the narrator. Apropos the first kind, there are instances within the myth that closely resemble Biblical occurrences, yet without being explicitly framed as such. For example, as noted above, Jesus passively submitted to his accusers in the self-knowledge that his death and the fulfilment of the Scriptures were closely entwined. It is interesting to note that Dahaplän also succumbed to the will of his respective accusers and embraced a fate externally imposed upon him, even if only partially. It is possible that this theme has been imported into the traditional myth in order to adapt it to Christianity but a perception of this overlap is something that occurred to

me only after I had left Oksapmin and thus one I hadn't the opportunity to pursue through direct questioning.

Next, I will consider the aftermath of Dahaplän's death. Like Christ, Dahaplän's exit from the everyday world did not extinguish his life force but transformed it. For Christ, death was the precursor of resurrection and eventual ascension to Heaven while, for Dahaplän, death directly opened out to his spiritual incarnation. Notwithstanding these differences, it is interesting to observe this process operating in both contexts, and its appearance in the myth of Dahaplän may, indeed, mark its borrowing and interposition from the New Testament in an attempt to make the story of Dahaplän approximate that of Jesus.

There are other aspects of Dahaplän's story that more clearly and strongly support the thesis that the Oksapmin have attempted to fuse together this traditional story with those found in the Bible. Firstly there are the circumstances of Dahaplän's death. There are several parallels here between Christ and Dahaplän. At the time of his execution by the Romans, Jesus was nailed to a wooden cross, his legs positioned vertically while his outstretched arms were positioned horizontally. It will be recalled that Dahaplän's body was positioned in the same way at the time of his death, holding two branches to assume the form of the crucifix. However, not only is this replication physical in nature, it is also specified in language. In the Tok Pisin version of the Bible, the crucifix is referred to as a diwai kros, which translates to 'wooden cross'; a common refrain in Bible songs is 'Jisas i dai long diwai kros,' meaning that 'Jesus died on the wooden cross.' The passage in the myth where Dahaplän positions his body as a crucifix before his entrance into the *hanip dä äpti* appears in both the second and third phases of the overall story. In the second, described above, the event marks the conclusion of the story, while in the third it signifies the beginning of Dahaplän's spiritual peregrinations. During the time that the second and third portions were being told to me it was emphasised to me by both narrator and interested audience members that Dahaplän's posture was that of a 'diwai kros' and identical to the Biblical crucifixion. Jorgensen has observed similar kinds of mythic synthesis among the Telefolmin, where aspects of the story of Tibulam have been juxtaposed to the tale of the crucifixion in a way that reconciles them to each other (2001:114). Furthermore, Dahaplän, like Jesus, was flanked by two men at the time of his death. In the Bible these were criminals, while Dahaplän was accompanied by his two brothers, yet, notwithstanding this difference, the convergence in narrative structure is striking. My argument is further strengthened by the fact that nowhere in Perey's brief account of the 'traditional' version of the story (1973:329–331) is there mention of

Dahaplän's death. This suggests that the Oksapmin have introduced these narrative forms into the original myth as a result of converting to Christianity.

The Oksapmin conflate Dahaplän and Jesus also when considering the moral and spiritual dimensions of their deaths. As mentioned above, Christ's death is widely understood as an ultimate sacrifice, the death of a perfect individual for the salvation of an imperfect humanity. Humankind incurred a debt to both God and Christ for the access to Heaven afforded to them through this selfless and compassionate act. During the recitation of Dahaplän's story, not only was this sacrificial theme underscored, it was also explicitly construed as consistent with the spiritual consequences of Christ's crucifixion. Although I have given this matter protracted thought, I still do not comprehend precisely how Dahaplän's death might be considered a sacrificial act productive of moral and spiritual debt. Nonetheless, the Oksapmin people who told me the story clearly do conceptualise it in this way. Ninsan, the elderly man from Mitianäp primarily responsible for telling this second phase of the myth to me, phrased it in the following terms:

Dahaplän's debt? It's our responsibility. We owe him. Jesus, who died on the cross? He died for us. Dahaplän also died for us. He told us that through his death we have incurred a great debt to him. When he died he took our lives and he went forever.

This series of sentences powerfully illuminates how many Oksapmin think about and have constructed the linkages between Dahaplän and Jesus. Many Oksapmin think about Dahaplän and Jesus as essentially similar, juxtaposing and conflating them. Further, some Oksapmin people argue that they are, in fact, one and the same person, that Dahaplän is Jesus. On two occasions I interviewed a woman, widely known throughout the Oksapmin area as possessing extensive knowledge of both witchcraft and the spirit world, who conceptualised the relation in the following way:

Jesus resides at Lembanäp within the *hanip dä äpti*. Jesus is Dahaplän. Dahaplän is Jesus. There is no difference between the two. I believe in the Bible, but I also believe that Dahaplän is real too.

Both these quotes clearly illustrate the fusion of the Christian and indigenous worlds. The various linkages between the respective lives of Jesus and Dahaplän include the circumstances of their deaths, particularly the use of the phrase 'diwai kros,' the sacrificial theme, notions of atonement, and, lastly, the reduction of Jesus and Dahaplän to a single

figure inhabiting the spirit world. As a result of conversion to Christianity, Oksapmin people such as those quoted above, now identify and emphasise the commonality between Jesus and Dahaplän such that the difference between them, and thereby the difference between the cosmologies they inhabit and symbolise, is dissolved in the emergence of an integrated figure. The boundaries separating the two cultural orders are through the processes of fusion broken down in the construction of a single cosmology inhabited by entities of both worlds. Jesus and Dahaplän, angels and bush spirits, witches and Satan, all come together inside one cosmological frame, which is posited by local people as a residual, powerful, and eternal truth.

The conjoining of the Christian and indigenous worlds within this myth operates primarily through the establishment of parallels between Dahaplän and Jesus Christ. The construction of sameness and the reduction of cultural distance have also been achieved by Oksapmin people creatively interposing general Biblical content and narrative structures. I have two main examples of this. Firstly, it will be recalled that after having delivered Dahaplän, Apelyä instructed the four women responsible for her care to go and fetch some water. The women obeyed Apelyä's simple request and went and gathered water from a small stream in the Tekin Valley called Galilee (in reality named Gumut). This name was, firstly, recognised through Bible readings as religiously significant or powerful; secondly, appropriated by members of Oksapmin society; and, then, finally inserted into the myth of Dahaplän. Names and places found in the Bible become anchored and embedded in the Oksapmin mythical landscape and the gap between the Christian and an indigenous world is further closed.

Beyond the identification of Dahaplän with Christ, another way in which this myth and Christianity have been conjoined is through the manipulation of narrative structure. I was told that there are two roads or paths leading to the *hanip dä äpti*, the place to which the spirits of dead people travel, one being wide and easy to follow, the other narrow and difficult. Further, it was also mentioned that Dahaplän and his two brothers entered the *hanip dä äpti* by way of the narrow road. These two expressions precisely echo a passage within the Sermon on the Mount as described in Matthew 7:13–14, whereby Jesus instructs his listeners to '(13) Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. (14) But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.' While there is an obvious difference that one of the roads mentioned by Christ leads to destruction while both Oksapmin roads lead to the *hanip dä*

äpti, Dahaplän and his two brothers thus had presented to them spiritual pathways of different widths like those presented to followers of Christ and followed the one analogous to the road extolled by Jesus as leading directly to salvation. Again, these are vivid parallels being constructed by the Oksapmin between the indigenous and Christian worlds such that they are essentially made one. As with other components of the myth already discussed, Perey's (1973) account of this story in its 'traditional' form contains no mention of these particular circumstances surrounding the group's entry into the spirit world, which clearly suggests that the presence of this narrative detail is the result of Christianisation.

To recapitulate, then, it is possible to discern numerous techniques utilised by the Oksapmin to construct synergies between the story of Dahaplän and various content found in the Bible, particularly as it pertains to the life and death of Jesus.

It is worth stating that the Oksapmin men who told me this story, as well as the people who have ever heard it, firmly believe that its content predates the introduction of Christianity into the area. To the Oksapmin, the restructured myth is understood as 'traditional' (*'em i stap long bipo bipo*, meaning 'from long ago') and that is the really interesting point. While it seems clear to me that they have reconfigured the myth by incorporating Christianity (most obviously because of the presence of Biblical names), they attest that the story, in its current form, has been there for many generations. This imaginative manoeuvre thus integrates two ontologies and histories. By changing their traditions in such a way that they merge with Christianity, the Oksapmin are, in effect, claiming that 'we have always been Christian; the Bible is nothing new to us; it is already at the heart of who we are; there has been no change in our ontology and history, only continuity.' The same names, the same places, the same processes and narratives are now common to both worlds such that difference and disruption are eliminated and replaced by fulfilment, commonality, and continuity; two worlds conjoined as a result of creatively navigating social change.

The story of the sun

Another myth widely known among the Oksapmin is one that is generally referred to as 'the story of the sun.' This is another of the four narratives recorded by Perey during his fieldwork and which appeared in his thesis as 'Why the Kweptana People are Called Children of the Sun' (1973:325–327). Like his version of the Dahaplän myth, Perey's account of this

Oksapmin narrative is also lacking in detail. It is cursory in description and again omits many crucial names, places, and events. Its role in the discussion, below, then, is minor, although I do refer to it where relevant. As with the story of Dahaplän presented by Perey, its primary significance for my discussion is that it contains no evidence of Christianisation and thus serves to illustrate how my own data is the result of such processes.

While the sun (*atän*), in various incarnations, figures prominently in the events described therein, the myth is principally concerned to explain the genesis of an Oksapmin clan, the Kweptan, as indicated by the story's title in Perey's thesis. As will be seen, within this myth there are certain parallels instituted between the protagonist and Jesus, akin to those outlined above within Dahaplän's story, yet these are complemented by other, unique and fascinating interpositions and manipulations of Biblical material. The overall trend is the same as that noted above, that is, the modification of the indigenous narrative in such a way that the distance between it and Christian Bible stories is collapsed and commonality is asserted.

Unlike the myth of Dahaplän, the present story is not composed of discrete phases but is instead one continuous narrative. In further contrast to Dahaplän's story, the sun myth unfolds primarily within one locale, namely, the area of land within the Om River Valley customarily overseen by the Lembana people. Further, although the story primarily unfolds within this area, certain events, some of them crucial, occur within the Oksapmin territory, including the upper Tekin and Bäk Valleys. None of these locations are mentioned by Perey (1973).

This myth was also told to me by the old man Ninsan, who had accompanied me and several others on a trip to explore the Om River Valley and its inhabitants. After walking all day through the bush and traipsing up and down steep, slippery slopes, we arrived one afternoon at Lembana, perched atop a hill overlooking the Om River. We ate dinner and then once most people were asleep, Ninsan began. The myth opens with Maria (or Mary), the story's main protagonist, and her brother (unnamed by the narrator) residing at Bukte, within the wider Lembanäp area.

The pair belonged to, yet was physically distanced from, the wider Bukte community; Maria and her brother resided alone at the foot of a large hill, while the remainder of the group lived at its crest. At night, a groomed and perfumed Maria would sneak out of the house she shared with her brother. Aided by a traditional bamboo torch, on

these excursions her usual route was to, firstly, follow a small stream known as Tupe. Having arrived at the stream's head, she subsequently laboured through dense nettles and foliage before finally emerging at her destination, a cave known as Dakläp. Originally indifferent to Maria's travels, her brother eventually decided to see what she was up to. One night, not long after having left the house, Maria became aware that she was being followed by her brother and immediately began to try and mislead him. Instead of following Tupe as usual, she took an alternative route up the Hutek River to a small pond where she ostensibly commenced searching for frogs, a common night-time activity for local women. On this occasion, Maria decided to return directly to the house without visiting Dakläp. Nevertheless, the impulses drawing her to the cave were of sufficient strength for her to attempt the venture again the following night. Still intrigued by this behaviour, Maria's brother endeavoured to steal even more quietly through the night in the hope of finally discovering what his sister was intent on hiding.

Maria left the house that night, her brother leaving shortly thereafter in careful pursuit. His surveillance was conducted with such stealth that Maria arrived at Dakläp unaware she was being observed. Several minutes later, Maria's brother arrived at the cave, where he was confronted with a most unusual and shocking sight. From out of the cave irradiated an immensity of dappled light. Upon closer inspection this was revealed to be Maria being rigorously penetrated by God's gigantic phallus. During sex, God deposited a Bible inside Maria's body, placing it immediately next to, or as a substitute for, her heart. Maria would later deliver this Bible as she would a child. Maria's brother looked on incredulously until hearing the shrill cry of a species of small bird known as *dapnung*, which signalled the coming dawn. He thus promptly withdrew from his vantage point and started his journey homeward. Having returned unobserved to the house ahead of Maria, he then went about preparing some food. At sunrise, his sister returned from Dakläp back to the house, where she remained for several weeks. It eventually became apparent that Maria was pregnant.

Several evenings later, Maria again absconded, yet this time undetected by her brother, who remained in the house. As the night wore on, Maria's brother grew cold and consequently went outside to break some firewood. Once outside, he heard a man's voice coming from the main settlement above. The man initially addressed the whole community, rhetorically asking 'Have you all heard?' before pointedly

questioning Maria's brother: 'Is that your wife? Or is she your sister? We have no idea what the pair of you are getting up to down there at your house!' Maria's brother retorted: 'In good time you will all see and understand. After the passing of many generations you will be enlightened.' Then, immediately following this exchange, Maria's voice was heard calling, from a distance, for her brother's aid. With this, the inhabitants of the hilltop camp urged her brother to quickly locate and assist her. However, ignoring their request, he instead collected his broken firewood and went to sleep. He awoke the next morning and without delay walked to the main settlement to question its inhabitants about Maria's whereabouts. Unable to provide a definite answer, the people referred him to the settlement of Damabut as a likely source of reliable information. This was repeated at the settlements of Aitabe, Nugum, Dakäk, Tinbi, Bikleta, Disselkäk, Umtem, Bilebäk, Awiambit, and finally at Lakasa. The residents of that latter settlement informed Maria's brother that while they could not be of assistance the people of Kunte probably could. Sure enough, this group knew of Maria's current location, which happened to be within the immediate vicinity. Maria's brother further learned that his sister had arrived earlier that day seeking accommodation. However, she had been prohibited from settling in the main camp and was instead offered a house hitherto used to house pigs. Having now ascertained her location, Maria's brother walked to the house. He entered to see Maria comfortably seated on the floor with a baby boy cradled in her arms. Vexed by her brother's late arrival, Maria indignantly addressed her brother: 'Yesterday I called for you and yet you failed to heed my cry! Why have you arrived only now?' Dismayed, Maria's brother failed to offer any explanation, but simply wondered to himself why he had behaved so irresponsibly.

Later that day, Maria procured a long worm from her outer thigh and placed it on her brother's chest. She subsequently obtained, from the same place, a leaf of the kind women usually sit upon when delivering children, which she also gave to her brother, who then returned to Bukte with the two items he had been given. News of Maria's pregnancy had since reached her two younger sisters Martha and Mandala [residing in a location unspecified by the narrator], who decided to cook some wild pandanus for mother and child. Back at Kunte, Maria's infant son, who had rapidly developed linguistic competence, expressed to his mother his wish to visit his uncle (Maria's brother). In addition, he asked her to, firstly, ready some rope in order that

she could make for him a string bag (*ung*) and, secondly, to construct for him a bow and arrow, since he planned to hunt while with his uncle. Maria completed the latter of these two requests first and presented to her son the bow and arrow. But while giving it to him a metamorphosis took place which revealed the object to be not a bow and arrow but a gun! The boy immediately went outside and killed a particular variety of lizard traditionally used in the construction of the *yewel äp*, or spirit house.¹⁸ His next target was a grasshopper, which he killed and then presented to his mother. Having thus satisfied himself of the gun's power, he then announced that he wished to go and visit his uncle at Bukte and that he would be leaving presently. Now alone, Maria contemplated how her child could possibly undertake the long journey to Bukte unaided and also when her two sisters would arrive.

A couple of hours after the boy had left, Martha and Mandala arrived at the house with the wild pandanus they had cooked earlier. When Maria informed the pair of the boy's unaccompanied excursion, they dropped the pandanus in shock and insisted the three of them immediately depart for Bukte. On arrival, the trio's attention was initially claimed by a busy crowd. More concerned with the boy's whereabouts, however, the women proceeded to ask people they came across: 'Has the boy come?' One individual replied in the affirmative and pointed knowingly to the noisy throng that had earlier distracted them. Looking towards the crowd, the three women beheld the young boy seated amidst an attentive audience enthralled by whatever he was saying. The women enquired as to what was occurring but were simply told to remain quiet lest they disturb proceedings. They then overheard Maria's son question his captive audience: 'All of you, the family of my uncle, call the name of the leaf belonging to the tree from which you collect the posts for your houses.' Aware that a boy of this age normally would not know of such things, the audience refused to humour his bizarre enquiry. Unperturbed, the boy continued his interrogation, asking them to name both the branch and the trunk of the same tree. Now somewhat disconcerted, the crowd defensively retorted 'we only use this tree for supplying the material for our houses. How are we to know?' Believing he was being deceived, the boy asserted: 'No! Everything has a name!' The group replied: 'We are your family! If we knew the answer to your question we would surely tell you.' The boy countered: 'You are all adults and I but a small boy! You are surely withholding your knowledge

¹⁸ The centre post of the structure would be planted directly on top of the dead lizard.

from me. Seeing as you refuse, I will tell you the answers myself.’ He first ventured a final question concerning the name of the floor within a typical house, to which the assembled group again feigned ignorance. The boy then began: ‘I am not as young as you think. Although I appear to be a child, I have, in fact, been alive for a long time. I am from a place without water, people, or food. I am from the place where the sun sets.’ After these introductory remarks he proceeded to enumerate the phenomena at issue. The leaf of the tree from which house posts were typically obtained he named *tesde faste*. The floor of the houses in which people lived he named Galilee. Further, the doorway of a house he named Gesthemane. He concluded by offering a final piece of technical advice, namely, that should people like to ensure the fertility and increase of their taro gardens they must incant ‘*God bopol*’ whilst planting, a phrase which literally means ‘God’s heart.’

After that, the boy bade farewell to his mother and proceeded to climb a large tree known as *beek*. Around the tree wound a vine, which he used to support his ascent. Once at a considerable height, the boy paused, cast his glance downward, and asked his mother: ‘Here?’ to which Maria replied: ‘No, not yet, continue climbing.’ The boy proceeded further up the tree until he reached its peak, at which point he addressed the onlookers assembled below: ‘Mother, uncle, my family, can you see me?’ ‘No, we can’t,’ the group responded. Now at the tree’s summit, the boy took the rope his mother had earlier prepared for him and, swinging it over his head several times, cast it an enormous distance to his front, back, and two flanks. The rope was cast with such strength that it travelled from Lembanäp to as far as the Tekin Valley and Mitianäp in the central Oksapmin territory. Maria’s son then gathered the four strands back into a ball, which he held tightly to his chest. With that, he stated for all to hear that he would now return home to the place where the sun sets, where there exists no water, food, or people. Through his ascent and speech, the boy had, in fact, described to the people the arc of the sun’s daily path, moving to the height of the sky before descending to the horizon. He then announced his departure, saying ‘Goodbye, I am now going to Kulamul (a settlement within the Tekäp ward, in the extreme west of the Oksapmin territory),’ and with these words disappeared. Maria’s child vanished with such rapidity, in fact, that the gathered throng saw and heard only a rustling of branches.

Once at Kulamul, the boy took a handful of corn seed and decreed that ‘wherever I cast these seeds the Kweptan clan shall proliferate.’ He then flung the seed a great distance in every direction, a dispersal which explains the numerical preponderance and wide distribution of the Kweptan in contemporary Oksapmin society. From Kulamul he traversed south into the Bäk Valley, which he followed east to Duban, a settlement situated nearby the Strickland Gorge in the southeast corner of the Oksapmin territory. Once at Duban he ascended to the sky, where he became incarnated as the sun (*atän*).

Discussion

Yet again the Oksapmin mythological corpus presents us with a fascinating case of the melding of indigenous and Christian imaginaries. As with the Telefolmin myth of Tibulam described by Jorgensen (2001), this particular myth lends itself to myriad interpretations. Indeed, Lohmann has argued (2008) that such multivocality is a central characteristic of myth in general, stating that ‘myths are reservoirs of imagery to be drawn upon in expressing and explaining issues of the moment’ (2008:125). In the present case, links can be drawn between the story’s content and the genesis of units basic to Oksapmin social structure, the origin and dynamics of natural processes, as well as the social mapping of certain portions of the Oksapmin territory. However, the story most pressingly calls for explanation in terms of its Christian content. The creative interpellation of Biblical material is of a similar nature to that described above for the myth of Dahaplän, yet here we see that the connections made are numerically and thematically more significant.

The most salient aspect of Christianisation within the present story is the interposition of Biblical names. Christian names proliferate in the story of the sun: Galilee (the area where Jesus undertook his prophetic ministry); Gethsemane (the garden to which Jesus and his disciples retired following the Last Supper in order to pray the night before the crucifixion); God (the omnipotent, cosmogonical Biblical figure); Maria (the Tok Pisin name for Mary, Jesus’s mother), as well as that of the Bible itself. It is also interesting to note the presence of the name ‘Martha’ in this story, one of Maria’s sisters. The gospels of Luke (10:38–42) and John (11:1–7, 12:1–3) contain brief mention of Mary and Martha, a pair of sisters living at Bethany with their brother Lazarus, though this Mary is not the Virgin Mary. It seems the Oksapmin have taken the idea of Mary and Martha as sisters and imported it directly into

their myth, at the same time making Martha's sister Mary synonymous with the Virgin Mary. Similar adaptations have been made by the Somaip, who also identify the two Marys with each other but who identify Martha with Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist. In the story of the sun we also saw how a third sister, Mandela, was mentioned, but the local origins of this name are unknown.

The presence of all of these names indicate so many attempts by the Oksapmin to restructure their surviving indigeneity in a way that sameness is constructed between it and the introduced Christian socio-religious order. The presence of these borrowed Biblical names within the myth of the sun is sufficient to support the argument here being advanced, but it is the indigenous conceptualisation of this content which is of greater analytic interest. How do these names figure and interrelate within the story and how are the narrative themes and emergent structures considered by local people?

There exist considerable differences between the mythical story and the Biblical events it echoes. My argument, therefore, is not that the Oksapmin have produced an exact copy of Biblical material through a process of duplication but that through imitative reconfiguration they have constructed a version of indigenous phenomena that approximates it; they have fused the two together. The most vivid structural synergy between events within the myth involving figures or places whose names have been borrowed from the Bible and events as they are originally described therein, concerns the union of a spiritual actor with a mortal woman resulting in the birth of a socially gifted child. Within the Bible, specifically the four Gospels of Matthew, Luke, Mark, and John, there are several passages outlining the circumstances of Christ's birth. For example, it states in Matthew 1:18–21 that 'Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit' and, further, an angel counsels an understandably beset Joseph to 'take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.' We also learn through these four chronicles that the progeny of this remarkable union had bestowed upon him profound spiritual and moral gifts. Jesus has an intrinsic capacity not only to eventually restore, through his own death, humanity to eternal life, but, in a quotidian sense, to reveal to people, often through public events, powerful yet hitherto concealed knowledge valuable to their everyday lives. How do these events, relations, and processes find expression within the myth of the sun?

When earlier discussing the myth of Dahaplän it was noted that the constructed linkages between indigeneity and Christianity ranged from those explicitly posited by the Oksapmin to others that reflected my own interpretation. A similar spectrum obtains here, yet instead of moving from the hypothetical to the concrete as done previously, here I move in the reverse direction. I begin by drawing attention to the fact that, like the Bible, the myth of the sun reproduces the productive spiritual-mortal union. In Perey's account of the story in its 'traditional' form, he, too, describes an act of sexual intercourse, but not one mediated by Christian terms of reference. He writes (1973:326) how an unnamed 'sister'

goes from coldness to warmth: from the cold Oksapmin Valley to the warm Om River Valley at a much lower altitude. There she meets the caress of nature and man as one thing: "There was a man in the stone who was making love to her." The world is the cause of something new coming forth from her body: she "became pregnant, had a child."

The events of the pre-Christian version of the myth are obviously paralleled in the story I collected but in the present case it is not 'a man' but the Christian God, a mythical-spiritual figure full of potency, who impregnates Maria within the cave. Of course, the imagery conjured to describe the encounter of God and Maria is both more graphic and sexual than in the Bible, where Mary miraculously becomes 'with child' as a result of the enigmatic actions of a transcendental Holy Spirit. Notwithstanding this important difference, the structure of the relation between Mary and God, as described in the Bible, is clearly reproduced within this myth. This quite obvious connection between the myth and the Bible is reinforced by the fact that the characters share the same names.

Another striking resemblance lies in the fact that the myth contains mention of a Bible. Within Christianity, the Bible is inextricably related to God, since he is not only the source of the wisdom contained within the Old Testament but also the father of the son whose life and teachings constitute the focus of the New Testament. The Christian Bible can, therefore, be construed as God's creation. This creative process finds expression within the story of the sun. We saw how the traditional version of the story presented by Perey (1973) described how an unnamed 'sister' was impregnated by a man and later gives birth to a child. The Christianised version I collected, however, relates how during Maria and God's sexual intercourse, the latter inserted a 'Bible' into the former's body immediately next to, or as a substitute for, her heart, which at a later date she gave birth to, in addition to a child: a

remarkable Christianisation of mythical content. The exact dynamics of the process through which the Bible is 'conceived' thus differ considerably between the myth and the Bible, yet I would argue that the overall thrust is similar.

We also have to investigate the contents of this so-called Bible. Do the Oksapmin think it is identical to that introduced to them by the ABMS in 1962? The people with whom I discussed this matter thought that the indigenous Bible referred to in the myth was similar in certain ways. Their Bible, like the Christian one, was replete with moral axioms and aphorisms, a kind of catalogue of cultural norms. It was in this book that individuals could learn how to behave in an appropriate manner in everyday social life. Broadly speaking, in this sense the Bible described in the myth is considered by many Oksapmin to be similar, if not identical, to the Christian one. However, it is also perceived as different in important ways. Many of the individuals I questioned on this topic informed me that the Bible in the myth was not only a reliquary of moral, but also of technical knowledge. Apparently, the book contained detailed information concerning the construction of planes, automobiles, schools, etc., in short, a definitive guide to socio-economic development. So, if the book appears in the myth and the myth is considered to be a version of reality, then for what reasons does the Oksapmin area lack development of this nature? Some individuals maintain that the book was stolen from them by Keith Bricknell, the first ABMS missionary in the area, before they were able to implement the knowledge contained therein. I asked Bricknell about this indigenous Bible but he said he had never heard of it. For the Oksapmin a compelling explanation for a lack of modern material development is thus furnished: 'we had the capabilities to become wealthy and technologically complex, yet the platform from which we would accomplish this was unfairly taken from us.'

In a recent article, Jorgensen describes a similar mythological rationalization of under-development among the neighbouring Telefolmin (2001). One of their myths tells of how the mythical ancestress Afek banished her son Tibulum, together with his collection of modern technological belongings, for persistent recalcitrance. While he left a few of his things behind, such as a soccer ball, a book (the Bible), and some cloth, the technically and mechanically more powerful items such as airplanes, cars, torches, and radios, he took with him and eventually revealed to Europeans. Tibulam's expulsion thereby provides the Telefolmin with an explanation of why it is white people and not themselves who have these objects (Jorgensen 2001:110–111). This kind of classic cargoistic thinking is widespread throughout PNG and Melanesia more generally and is centred on the understanding that the

intruding white man has prevented the material betterment of local people (see both Lawrence (1964:222–273) and Burrige (1960:246–283) for detailed elucidations of this idea). With regard to the Oksapmin case, I think there are also deeper concerns expressed by the claim of a Bible prior to missionisation, but I leave discussion of this for later.

From this point onwards the connections between the Bible and the story of the sun become more indirect and complex. This is apparent mainly when considering the synergies between the offspring of each respective union. Born out of the mysterious impregnation of Mary by the Holy Spirit (one of the three manifestations of God), Jesus Christ, as portrayed in the Bible, possessed remarkable spiritual and moral capacities, which he utilised in a personal attempt to turn an errant humanity away from sin and temptation and settle them on a path to purity and salvation. This redemptive enterprise most dramatically occurred at public events, particularly during the Sermon on The Mount, where Jesus famously told a captivated gathering that in order to achieve eternal life in God it was insufficient to outwardly conform to the Jewish Scriptures; rather, one had to fulfill the spirit of those scriptures, to move beyond punctilious religious performance toward emotional and psychological self-mastery. These characteristics of Christ's life and teachings resonate within the myth of the sun. Firstly, and most importantly, the sexual union of Maria and God, like the more delicately portrayed union of Mary and God in the Bible, produced a child with outstanding qualities. When still only an infant he had the ability to discourse confidently with adults, to undertake long, unaccompanied journeys over formidable terrain, to hunt with modern firearms and he was also possessed of extensive cultural knowledge. A parallel between the boy and Jesus is thus established. This connection is deepened when considering the expression of the boy's unique capacities. Maria's son, like Christ, revealed his detailed understanding of the world through a public event, namely, the assembly that took place at Bukte, during which he enunciated the biblically named components of trees used in house construction. Moreover, this expressed knowledge was of great practical value; whilst Jesus informed his followers how they could improve themselves within the context of their everyday lives, Maria's son enumerated to his audience aspects of the natural world on which they regularly depended for shelter and wellbeing. An indigenous Sermon on the Mount.

What is this all really about? Why have the Oksapmin Christianised certain indigenous myths? I have argued in this chapter that the Oksapmin have done this to, firstly, reduce the difference between Christianity and indigeneity and, secondly, to construct an essential similarity between the two. These myths were aspects of the indigenous cultural

world which survived missionisation. But the process of conversion did not leave this cultural material uneasily opposing Christianity. Rather, as a result of conversion the Oksapmin chose to fuse together the Christianity presented to them by the ABMS and their existing religion and culture into a single totality. In the present case, we have seen how the Oksapmin carefully selected certain Biblical content and inserted it into particular places in their traditional stories. This aspect of the Oksapmin cosmology which survived missionisation is thus pulled closer to the Bible. But this creative move simultaneously indigenises Christianity through the construction of a local ancestral precedent. The stories that the Oksapmin read in the Bible have created for them an indigenous precursor. Once upon a time, Mary was actually Maria, and the Bible, the authoritative source of Christian knowledge, was actually the product of something that happened in a local cave. Through these creative techniques I have discussed, then, the Bible and its stories are given an indigenous substrate that grounds and underpins them. Obviously the Oksapmin have made their myth approximate Christianity. But this creative manipulation of mythical content also has significant consequences for the Bible and people's understandings of it. As the transformed story circulates through the Oksapmin population, people potentially begin to realise that the formative events of Christianity might actually have unfolded not in the Middle East but in their own backyard. The overall effect of this mutual calibration is that discrepancy and opposition gives way to constructed isomorphism. The two worlds are merged together in the creation of a single, foundational identity and cosmology.

On a broader level, by combining the two in this manner, the potential opposition and tension between two different ways of explaining the genesis of the universe and life within it is replaced by cosmological and ontological coherence. The Oksapmin have reconstructed their culture to suggest that nothing has really changed and that history and being human have followed a smooth, continuous trajectory. I noted when discussing the myth of Dahaplän that the Oksapmin explicitly do not perceive the Christianisation of their myths as the Christianisation of their myths. The content, structures, and themes that appear to an outsider as unequivocal evidence of creative interposition are perceived within the society as traditional phenomena that antedate the incorporation of Christianity into the Oksapmin lifeworld; the two have always been related to each other in this way. Whenever I asked an interlocutor 'why is it that names, places, and events that occur within the Bible also occur within the myth we have just heard?', the answer I inevitably received was that 'we do not know; this is the way the myth has always been.' Therefore, the Oksapmin have internalised

a reconfigured version of their indigeneity and in so doing erased the processes that brought the fusion about. It is through such perceptions and attitudes that a larger perspective on Christianity emerges, namely, that many Oksapmin believe that they have, in a sense, always been Christian, that they have always had awareness and knowledge of Christianity. Conversion thus comes to take the form of realisation or fulfillment, not as a redemptive shift from one religious system to another.

8. Conclusions

I have been attempting to accomplish a number of things in this thesis, and on a variety of levels. Above all, I have been concerned to present a balanced, accurate, and faithful account of the Oksapmin relationship with Christianity. Using concepts that emerged from that analysis I have also sought to address an imbalance in the anthropological literature on the study of Christianity in the area where the Oksapmin live. My findings also contribute to anthropological studies of Min cosmological belief systems more generally. Lastly, it has been my aim to draw some general conclusions about the nature of humanity and social change. Here I recapitulate several themes outlined in my introduction and expand upon their significance.

The main idea that I have pursued throughout this work is that the Oksapmin have handled the encounter between their indigenous cosmology and the Christian one introduced to them by the missionaries by fusing them together. From the onset of missionisation until the present day, the Oksapmin have sought to identify, construct, and establish an isomorphism between Christianity and what was already there. They have moulded their existing traditional practices and beliefs in a way that makes them Christian and simultaneously shaped the Christianity introduced to them by the ABMS so that it satisfied and perpetuated existing indigenous religious motivations and outlooks. This process of fusion has therefore reciprocally transformed indigeneity and Christianity as they have been adjusted to each other. Through bringing the Christian and local worlds together in this way, the Oksapmin have constructed religious and cosmological singularity within a context of extensive social change and have posited for themselves a foundational and encompassing identity that transcends history.

Robbins and Brutti on the indigenisation of Christianity

In the introduction I outlined how my own model of religious fusion represented an intermediate position between two different accounts of local Christianity in the region where the Oksapmin live. On the one hand was the work of Joel Robbins among the Urapmin, a relatively small ethnic group living to the west of the Oksapmin, numbering 'roughly 390 people' (Robbins 2004:1). He argued that there the incorporation of Christianity occurred

without the mediation of, and in the absence of any mixing with, the existing Urapmin cultural framework. Starved of any direct and materially beneficial contact with the emerging colonial regime, and painfully aware of the loss of status produced by this marginality, the Urapmin adopted Christianity into their society essentially as an attempt to restore cultural pride. Due to what Robbins characterises as its ‘cultural logic,’ Christianity was not internalised in such a way as to adapt it to Urapmin cosmology, but was taken on as a complete block, a total system. Conversion left many aspects of indigenous culture intact, however, and the duality thereby created left the Urapmin torn between two competing moralities.

Contrasted with this explanation of local Christianity is that offered by Lorenzo Brutti for the Oksapmin people living in the Trangap Valley, a walk of several hours from the Tekin Valley where my own fieldwork was based. I travelled to Trangap several times during my time in the area, albeit only once or twice to collect ethnographic information. According to Brutti, the Oksapmin incorporated Christianity into their lives through a process of what he calls ‘superposition.’ The image we are presented with is one of continually shifting sacred references underneath which survives an indigenous religious logic aimed at acquiring and promoting new material flows. Keeping with the metaphor of superposition, Brutti also argues that Oksapmin Christianity is not syncretic but simply another layer of religious change.

This thesis has shown that the incorporation of Christianity by the Oksapmin cannot be accurately characterised as either ‘adoption’ as with Robbins or ‘superposition’ as with Brutti. The relationship between the Christian and indigenous cosmologies has not taken the form of an unsynthesised duality nor a stratigraphic layering. Here, I first show how my own findings either diverge from or conform to those of the two mentioned anthropologists and then proceed to discuss the possible reasons lying behind whatever discrepancies exist.

Turning first to Robbins, the principal difference between his analysis and my own regards the role played by existing cultural frameworks in the incorporation of Christianity and, by extension, the nature of the relationship between the two systems. Of most importance is Robbins’s claim that the incorporation of Christianity by the Urapmin occurred in the absence of mixing with the pre-existing indigenous culture that was already there. As he describes (2004:3), the Urapmin

did not adopt Christianity in bits and pieces seized upon as syncretic patches for a traditional culture worn thin in spots by their attempts to stretch it to fit new situations. Rather, they took it up as a meaningful system in its own right, one capable of guiding many areas of their lives. That is to say, change in Urapmin was not a matter, as so much contemporary anthropology expects, of a traditional culture assimilating a new one and constructing in the process a hybrid entity that is either still largely traditional or else different from both of its starting points. It was, instead, a case in which people seemed to grasp a new culture whole. And because this process involved very little assimilation of the new into the old, it left many aspects of traditional Urapmin culture intact as well.

According to Robbins, then, Christianity was taken on in its entirety and was not made sense of in terms of what was already there. Thus, a rigid cosmological and moral opposition was constituted, within which the Urapmin were unhappily positioned and out of which they could not escape.

This thesis has presented a different picture of conversion and religious encounter. As I have demonstrated, the incorporation of Christianity into Oksapmin society was fundamentally mediated by the existing cultural framework. When discussing conversion in Chapter 4, I showed how particular synergies perceived by the Oksapmin between Christianity and their own social world were crucial in influencing their decision to embrace the new religion. I also demonstrated, particularly in Chapter 5, that in their worship the Oksapmin perpetuate indigenous religious motivations, outlooks, and social aesthetics within the Christianity imparted to them by the ABMS. That is, they have embedded Christianity into their existing cultural world and, therefore, what was introduced by the mission now bears a distinctly Oksapmin imprint.

I have also argued that, for the Oksapmin, the relationship between the Christianity introduced to them initially by the ABMS and those aspects of their existing culture that survived missionisation was not unidirectional but reciprocal and dynamic; a process of fusion whereby the two worlds meet and fluidly interact. Conversion was not simply a matter of Christianity being made sense of by reproducing those aspects of traditional culture which survived missionisation but initiated a transformative interplay between the two. Christianity was indeed made to fit existing cultural forms but simultaneously it remade them. This back and forth mixing between the two systems has generated a new syncretic religion. This is a

crucial difference between my account of what happened among the Oksapmin and Robbins on the Urapmin. He argues that an absence of mixing resulted in a fraught moral dualism, whereas I argue that through fusion the Oksapmin merged Christianity to their existing culture. Rather than allowing them to sit uneasily juxtaposed the Oksapmin instead fused them together.

My account thus diverges clearly, and in important ways, from that of Robbins and I consider the implications of this below. But first I turn to Brutti and compare his work with mine. To be fair, Brutti's main concern is not with the relationship between indigenous and Christian religion and cosmology but more about why and how the Oksapmin converted to Christianity in the first place. His account, however, does contain claims about the nature of the relationship and I here interrogate these. My own findings partially confirm yet significantly depart from Brutti's. He argues that the Oksapmin converted to Christianity to acquire the material objects and goods of the ABMS. There occurred what he calls 'a seduction process in empirical terms' (1997:107) whereby the primary factor drawing the Oksapmin towards the mission and Christianity was 'a fascination with the material world rather than...ideological adherence' (1997:106; see also 2000:106). Further, as with Robbins, Brutti claims that the relationship between Christianity and indigenous religion was not syncretic. Rather, he argues that Christianity was laid over the indigenous Oksapmin religion and that this existing framework continued to thrive beneath, expressed in millenarian terms. As he states (1997:112), 'what is changing is the paradigm of reference even though certain modes of expression remain apparently unaltered.' The Oksapmin cosmology is thus described as 'dynamic and self-innovating toward both endogenous and exogenous factors of change (2000:101),' and, in this instance, was able to rearrange its outward ritual apparatus while retain its internal conceptual and technological basis.

The findings of my research among a group of Oksapmin living in the lower Tekin Valley supports some of what Brutti has to say. In particular, this thesis confirms his central claim that an existing concern with the acquisition of material wealth played a key role in motivating the Oksapmin to convert to Christianity and has continued to inform their contemporary Christian worship. The material goods of the ABMS were certainly perceived by local people as a direct index of superior religious power and compelled them toward Christianity. Further, this thesis has shown how the indigenous preoccupation with the generation of wealth through ritual means persists within contemporary Oksapmin Christianity. This occurs perhaps most importantly in prayer, which Oksapmin people treat as

a procedure for promoting material increase in the world around them. I have expanded on Brutti's ideas to show how it is not only this particular indigenous ritual logic that continues within contemporary local Christianity, but other aspects of traditional Oksapmin culture and religion as well. For instance, concerns with the symmetry of Christianity and indigenous morality are crucial to sermons, and it was also seen how the appearance and experience of church worship directly reproduced aspects of indigenous Oksapmin performances, particularly the male initiation complex (as seen in Chapter 5: Contemporary Oksapmin Christianity). My thesis also confirms Brutti's broader claim that Oksapmin conversion to Christianity clearly manifests the ability of the indigenous cosmology to incorporate exogenous cultural material through transformation.

My research, however, has illuminated many dimensions of the Oksapmin engagement with Christianity overlooked by Brutti. First and foremost, this thesis has provided an account of conversion that acknowledges more than simply material factors. Indeed my findings are consistent with those of other Melanesianist anthropologists who argue that the material aspects of local religion cannot, in practice, be divorced from the spiritual, moral, and ideological. Such an artificial separation is what Brutti attempted in his own analysis when he claims that conversion was about 'the pragmatic exigency and not the metaphysical adherence' (1997:109). In Chapter 4, I demonstrated that while marshalling flows of wealth was important to the Oksapmin, conversion was a total process in that it engaged all dimensions of social reality. Acquiring the goods of the ABMS was but one factor involved in the Oksapmin decision to convert to Christianity. Indeed, to this motivation can be added, firstly, certain parallels between the Christian and indigenous cosmologies which facilitated conversion. Then there was the mission's persistent evangelisation. Another crucial factor was the indigenous composition of these evangelical teams, thus bridging any cultural or linguistic barriers between the mission and local people. This problematises Brutti's double claim that: 'The Christian religious concepts simply could not have been fully communicated to the people by the missionaries not just because of the cultural gap between western and indigenous people but because of the lack of a deep linguistic competence on both sides' (1997:107). We saw that the violation and resultant negation of symbolic taboos by the mission was significant, as were the provision of health and education services, through which local people became further convinced of the mission's power and worth and thus, by extension, that of the Christian religion too. A final factor discussed was the broader context of socio-political change within which the Oksapmin were positioned. This thesis

has, therefore, shown that Oksapmin conversion to Christianity was a far more complex and encompassing process than that described by Brutti.

The next important discrepancy between my findings and those of Brutti concerns the relationship constructed by the Oksapmin between their indigenous cosmology and the Christian one promoted by the mission. As outlined above, Brutti claims that the Oksapmin handled the encounter between Christianity and their existing religious system by ‘superpositioning’ the former over the latter (1997). According to Brutti, this process did not entail much interaction and exchange between Christianity and what was already there. Rather, Christianity was laid over the existing religion as a cloth over a table; the appearance of the religious system changed but its structure, shape, and constitution remained fundamentally unaltered; and, also, the two systems, while contiguous, did not exchange substance. As I described immediately above and also in the introduction, Brutti certainly does allow for, and emphasise, change and fluidity as important attributes of the Oksapmin religious world (Brutti 2000); in an attempt to interpret and control various, usually material, changes in the wider world, the Oksapmin have continually rearranged aspects of their cosmology. But the issue here is not whether Brutti acknowledges the flexible nature of the Oksapmin cosmology. It is, rather, more specifically about how he views the relationship that has been established between the Christian and indigenous religions as a result of the shifting and reconfiguration that occurred as the Oksapmin sought to ‘acquire the white man’s wealth’ (1997:109). The only way Brutti definitively characterises that relationship is as one of ‘superposition,’ which I have presently summarised.

As I have shown in this thesis, the Oksapmin people that I lived with cultivated a relationship with Christianity characterised by reciprocally transformative fusion. The reciprocal adjustment of Christianity and indigeneity has generated a new syncretic religion. This is where the contrast between my work and that of Brutti’s is sharpest. His geologically derived metaphor of superposition suggests a static and unidirectional relationship between Christianity and the existing indigenous cosmology, as if Christianity had simply been placed on top of, and acted as a new voice for, what was already there. I have shown, however, that through various creative procedures the Oksapmin have syncretically mixed the two systems. Christianity has been adjusted to the existing social context while the various local traditions to have survived missionisation have been remade in a way that calibrates them to Christianity. This is how the Oksapmin people have incorporated Christianity into their

society and it is an ongoing and emergent negotiation, undertaken as they continue to grapple with the question of where and how Christianity should be positioned in their lives.

The question must then be asked as to why my findings differ in the mentioned ways from both Robbins and Brutti. Turning to this topic, I consider first the divergences between my work and Brutti's. How is it that Brutti and I have arrived at different conclusions when we were both working among the same ethnic group? Could it be due to differences between the two groups of Oksapmin that we worked with? This seems unlikely. I regularly travelled to the Trangap area where Brutti worked and found the people there to be culturally similar to those living in Tekin in every major respect. Another potential factor explaining the difference may be ethnographic focus. There are many Christian denominations in the Oksapmin area and Brutti's work focusses specifically upon the SDA church, while mine is focussed more on the Baptist church, due to its local and regional preponderance. Is it perhaps that the members of these two churches see the world in different ways and have approached the encounter between tradition and Christianity accordingly? Again, this seems unlikely. For while most of my work was with Baptists, I have used information drawn from the members and services of many different Christian denominations, including a considerable amount from the SDA church, in the formation of my model of fusion. This process has been a crucial mechanism employed not only by Baptists but all Oksapmin Christians, as I have shown throughout the thesis. Indeed, my data and experience clearly show that the technique of bringing the two worlds together in a reciprocally transformative manner occurs across all denominations in the Oksapmin area.

Another possibility is that the differences between my findings and those of Brutti are the result of historical changes in Oksapmin society. Brutti undertook his fieldwork among the Trangap Oksapmin in 1995, while I arrived in the Tekin Valley in late 2008. Could people's attitudes towards Christianity have changed in the intervening period? More precisely, during this time is it possible that the Oksapmin relationship with Christianity transformed from one of 'superposition,' as per Brutti, to one of 'fusion' as per my own argument? While I acknowledge the fact that any social system is constantly in flux, there is no apparent reason why, 40 years after having converted to Christianity, the Oksapmin would have decided to pursue such an extensive transformation of the relationship between the Christian and indigenous religions.

This is not to say that these kinds of changes cannot in practice occur, for of course they can. To take one, locally relevant, example, Lohmann (2007a) shows how over roughly the same time period under discussion the neighbouring Asabano remade aspects of their Baptist Christianity. In the mid-1990s, the use of traditional drumming in church and women drumming anywhere was not done, but by 2005 both had become common for Baptists. This change is explained with reference to the greater time, routinisation, and generational change since initial conversion and the revival, as well as the arrival of a competing denomination, namely, the SDA church.

The Oksapmin case is different in important respects, however. Some things to consider include the fact that I am not talking simply about the inclusion into worship and society of an indigenous practice formerly restricted, but the transformation of the way in which the Oksapmin people have incorporated Christianity as an organised system of belief and practice into their society as a whole. The one can be a symptom of the other in the sense that the change in this practice may refer to wider changes also taking place, but this is not discussed by Lohmann. But more importantly than the issue of scale and magnitude is the fact that the reasons supplied by Lohmann to explain the change in Asabano Baptist Christianity, while indeed relevant to understanding how Oksapmin Christianity works in general, do not provide sufficient grounds for a shift from superposition to fusion within the space of 10 years. Aside from the establishment of a handful of smaller denominations scattered throughout the Oksapmin area, there have been no major changes to the religious landscape or the original hegemony of the Baptist and SDA churches instituted in the middle of the 1960s.

Further, the other factors mentioned by Lohmann, such as greater routinisation and generational change, while probably important influences within Oksapmin society during the late 1990s and early 2000s, appear not to have significantly shaped local Christianity and, moreover, even if they had, it is unclear why they would have encouraged this particular kind of change. In sum, there is no factor that can be located in this time period that can account for why the Oksapmin would have chosen to not only reproduce their indigenous culture within Christianity (as Brutti claims) but also to use Christianity to revisit and reconstruct those parts of their cosmology that survived missionisation. Rather, the reciprocal interplay of the two religions appears not to be a recent development but is something that has been going on since the start of the Oksapmin relationship with Christianity and continues into the present.

This leaves one possible reason for the variance between Brutti and myself and that is difference in interpretation of similar data. We were dealing with essentially similar people and drew our data from similar sources yet arrived at divergent conclusions. I argue that Brutti contributed important insights into the nature of the Oksapmin engagement with Christianity, ideas that this thesis confirms, but that my own work has provided a fuller and more nuanced account of that relationship, both in terms of why the Oksapmin converted and also how they negotiated the co-presence of two cosmological systems.

As for Robbins, the scope for empirical, as opposed to interpretive, difference seems greater. After all, the Urapmin live at a considerable distance from the Oksapmin; they have their own distinct culture and traditions; and, most importantly, they have had a very different historical relationship with Christianity and the ABMS. So it is, therefore, to be expected that the way in which they incorporated Christianity into their society and how they handled its encounter with the existing moral and cosmological system would differ from how those processes occurred among the Oksapmin. The question is, to what extent? After all, the structure of Urapmin Christianity presented by Robbins differs from the accounts provided not only by myself and Brutti for the Oksapmin but also from that of most other anthropologists to have examined Christianity in the Min culture area (cf. Lohmann 2000a; Jorgensen 2005, 2007). Is the Urapmin case sufficiently different in time and place to explain this peculiarity or is it again a case of interpretive divergence? Does the evidence presented by Robbins across the range of his publications support his argument that the Urapmin ‘adopted’ Christianity, through a religious rupture, into their society thereby producing a fraught moral duality? Or does this same material potentially support other, moderate theoretical positions more amenable to mine or other anthropologists working in the region?

Given the historical information provided by Robbins, as well as the existing anthropological literature from the area, it seems likely that the Urapmin converted to Christianity in the rapid manner he describes. Due to their regional marginalisation and concomitant desire to participate in whatever socio-economic development was accessible to them, the Urapmin actively sought out Christianity from ABMS posts at Telefomin and Tifalmin and then, several years later, underwent popular conversion within the context of a charismatic revival movement led by Diyos of Eliptamin. This pattern, namely, of superficial contact with Christianity for several years followed by widespread and intense conversion as a direct result of revival, has been observed among several other groups in the same culture area and thus corroborates Robbins’s position (cf. Lohmann 2007b)

The immediate impact of conversion upon the existing indigenous religious context among the Urapmin appears consistent with my own findings and those of other anthropologists working in the area. For the Urapmin, conversion was a process of ‘clearing out the ancestors’ (Robbins 2004:150), which primarily entailed disposing of the material structures and sacra that supported their indigenous religious world. The system of sacred houses, as well as various kinds of magical objects, were dismantled and disposed of within the fervour of revival, though below I show how this was incomplete. Although the Oksapmin didn’t completely discard their magical repertoire, certainly there were similar patterns of neglect and abandonment. In further parallel to the Oksapmin case, Urapmin conversion to Christianity, while it had a profoundly disruptive effect specifically upon the seen, material dimensions of traditional religious life, left many of its less public and visible components intact, particularly the moral and spiritual (Robbins 1995, 2004).

No part of Robbins’s historical account contradicts or opposes the findings of my own research. Conversion occurred more rapidly among the Urapmin but this was due to the local importance of the charismatic revival, whereas the same kind of popular shift had occurred much earlier among the Oksapmin, owing mainly to the fact that the mission was firmly established among them and could thus evangelise much more effectively and intensively from the outset. The immediate effects of conversion upon the indigenous religion, as presently mentioned, are common across both examples. What really requires explanation, however, is why Robbins has arrived at not only a different perspective, but a conclusion about the relationship between Christianity and the indigenous religious world it encountered and partially displaced that bears almost no resemblance to all other accounts of local Christianity in this culture area. In this respect, the two main points of contention I identified above were firstly, that Robbins attributes no efficacy to the existing cultural framework in interpreting and shaping the exogenous material being adopted and, secondly, that the Urapmin allowed the two cosmologies to remain uneasily juxtaposed.

Throughout his publications, Robbins makes a convincing case that things really did occur in this way among the Urapmin. But one can also find evidence in them that supports alternative readings of Urapmin Christianity. The critical reappraisal of Robbins’s work is a task that has already been taken up by several anthropologists, especially in the wake of the publication of *Becoming Sinners* (2004) and the widespread acclaim it received. The thrust of this critique has been directed toward the dichotomy set up by Robbins between a ‘relational’ traditional Urapmin culture and the ‘individualist’ Pentecostal Christianity they adopted

(Mosko 2010; McDougall 2009; Hirsch 2008). These two cultures sit side by side and the Urapmin are, allegedly, uncomfortably positioned between them. Here Robbins's critics have pointed out various weaknesses in his argument. Above all, it is claimed that Urapmin Christianity is not solely characterised by an 'unrelenting individualism' (Scott 2005:104) that subordinates all other cultural logics but that it contains the same kind of relational elements and patterns found in traditional Urapmin culture. Examples include the 'elictive relations' and 'dividuality' (Mosko 2010:226) which operate in both spheres, as well as the categorisation of congregations using traditional kin terms (McDougall 2009:3). The fact that Urapmin Christianity exhibits such clear signs of indigeneity suggests that Robbins's claim that there was little or no assimilation of the new into the extant is problematic. Indeed, this evidence supports the argument that the incorporation of Christianity into Urapmin society was importantly mediated by the existing cultural framework, as I have described among the Oksapmin.

On the cosmological level it would thus seem that some kind of mixing or interaction occurred. If it is true, as Hirsch (2008:156) has surmised, that the Urapmin situation is better understood as 'a 'relationist' understanding of an 'individualistic' system,' then we can expect that the Christian and indigenous cosmologies have undergone some kind of adjustment to each other. Hirsch speaks to this when he asks (2008:157): 'Is the Urapmin impasse an impasse about holding together these cultures or wholes, or is it a predicament about God's place in a single cosmology: populated by spirits and regulated by a potentially deceptive taboo system?' The picture of the Urapmin relationship with Christianity alluded to by Hirsch bears resemblance to my own. Indeed, I have been concerned to describe the interaction of the Christian and indigenous worlds as productive of a new composite cosmology within which Oksapmin spirits and the Christian God, traditional and Bible stories, coexist and intermingle.

In pursuing his argument for duality Robbins doesn't acknowledge the possibility of such a reciprocal and dynamic relationship for the Urapmin. Instead he argues that the two systems coexist in opposition and that, for the foreseeable future at least, the situation cannot be changed, irrespective of the problems it causes for the Urapmin people. But some of Robbins's statements about the co-existence of indigenous and Christian phenomena incline me to think that the kind of reciprocal fusion I describe for the Oksapmin may possibly apply to the Urapmin too. For instance, Robbins states (1995:214) that

in Urapmin there is no conflict between Christians (kristins) and heathens (haidens). Individual dabblings in magic and even occasional collective participation in indigenous ritual forms are interpreted within a Christian framework as instances of backsliding and sin, rather than as moves between religious or political factions.

This contradicts Robbins's later claim that conversion entailed a 'decisive break' with the traditional past (2004:154) and as a result that 'even the small, private daily observances of Urapmin religion were gone, replaced by prayers to God for his help in matters great and small' (2004:150). The second and even more important point is that this statement provides evidence of the mutual integration of Christian and indigenous cosmologies. As Robbins clearly describes, traditional religious practices are reinterpreted within a Christian framework as sin; they are being brought into a new cosmological setting and have their meaning changed accordingly. Such Christianisation of indigenous value I have shown to be an important dimension of the Oksapmin relationship with Christianity too.

So, in Robbins's work we have the two pieces of the puzzle that make up my own model of fusion. I have described this process among the Oksapmin as one of reciprocal transformation, of Christianity being adjusted to fit existing indigenous concerns and, at the same time, surviving aspects of the indigenous world being reimagined in ways that rendered them consistent with the Christian cosmology. It can be seen from the above that both of these complementary processes are also operative within the Urapmin engagement with Christianity. So, while Robbins may maintain that conversion to Christianity involved little or no involvement of the existing cultural framework and that the incorporation of Christianity into Urapmin society established a fraught moral dualism, it can be seen that both of these claims are doubtful and that, rather, a process of mutual adjustment similar to fusion may indeed be in effect.

To return to the topic of the present discussion, then, it can be seen that while there were historically derived differences between the way conversion unfolded among the Urapmin and Oksapmin, the discrepancy between how Robbins and I have characterised the encounter between each group's indigenous religion and Christianity is primarily one of interpretive difference. Indeed, with support from other anthropological writings, including his own, I have shown that while Robbins argues that the Urapmin 'adopted' Christianity, a process that operated in the absence of assimilation of new into old and which established a fraught dualism, in actual fact Urapmin Christianity bears clear resemblance to that of the

Oksapmin. But while the difference between our respective arguments is due mainly to interpretation, empirical factors are still certainly relevant, since, as I and others have shown, the ethnographic data contained within his various publications undercuts his theoretical argument of adoption. It has been seen that Robbins argues for ‘adoption,’ but that his data suggests that processes of mixing and integration are at work.

Making cosmologies among the Min

While speaking to a particularly charged debate in the anthropological literature on Christianity in the Min region, my work can also be placed within the study of Min religion and cosmology more generally. This wider lens takes in not only the study of Christianity but also of traditional, indigenous religious systems, most importantly the men’s initiation cult. In his book *Cosmologies in the Making* (1987), Fredrik Barth performed a synthesis of the available material on traditional religion in an attempt to provide insights into the forms and variety of social and religious forms in the area. A crucial factor influencing the variation in cosmological ideas and expression is what Barth calls the ‘pulsation in the modality of cosmological knowledge between long periods of secrecy and non-communication, and concentrated bursts of public manifestation and revelation,’ the latter occurring within the context of male initiation ritual (1987:78). This oscillation is important since it provides a ‘pervasive impetus to creativity and modification of tradition on the part of initiators, despite a native epistemology that sees transmission from previously living ancestors as the only source of knowledge’ (1987:78). In particular, the mentioned ritual leaders utilise the periods between performances to refine the knowledge and methods they later reveal to young men during initiation ceremonies. This modification, which, according to Barth, is done in the name of trying to communicate a tradition ‘more truly and deeply’ (1987:46) is thus generative both of change and variety within and between ethnic groups in the Min region. Barth shows that innovation, creativity, and change are thus inherent in ‘traditional’ religious systems.

The indigenous religious world of the Min and the picture of contemporary Oksapmin Christianity I have provided are obviously different, particularly in terms of their epistemology, social organisation, gender orientations, and modality. But, notwithstanding these differences, I would argue that there are certain important attributes that both share and that can thus be said to be characteristic of Min cosmologies more generally. It would seem

that people living in this area, whether contemporary Christians or those practising ancestor worship in the past, share an approach to the sacred world that is defined by creativity and flexibility. These two characteristics are primary in Barth's account of Min religion and I have similarly foregrounded them in my own analysis of Oksapmin Christianity. The fact that they have emerged in both contexts indicates that, while much has changed in the religious world of the Min, certain core processes and understandings appear to have remained more or less constant.

Like Barth, I have made a strong case for the central role played by creativity in social change. While I have been unable to pinpoint the precise origins of the modifications and alterations that have taken place to unite Christianity with the surviving traditions of the Oksapmin, something that Barth imputes to ritual leaders among the Min, all of the evidence I have presented in the thesis demonstrates that such processes have indeed taken place. The stories, ideas, and actions that have appeared throughout my research all reveal how the Oksapmin people have, through their imagination and will, negotiated the encounter of two different ways of establishing truth and meaning.

This thesis is also a testament to the flexibility and pragmatism of Min cosmology. While it has become obvious through this thesis that many of my findings differ in important ways from those of Brutti, he, nonetheless, offers useful insights in this regard stating that 'Oksapmin cosmology has always been dynamic and self-innovating' (2000:101) and also that change among the Oksapmin has tended to occur through 'a plastic operation of redefinition of cultural models and cosmological explanations' (2000:109). While Brutti and I differ in how we explain the incorporation of Christianity into Oksapmin society, we both agree on this crucial point, namely, that the Oksapmin religious system, like others in the region, is not, and has never been, static but always open to changes locally perceived as desired or necessary.

Possible extensions of the theory of fusion

Much of what I have written about the ways in which the indigenous Oksapmin and Christian cosmologies fluidly interact and exchange through the creative projects of local people can be applied equally well to areas of social life beyond the purely 'religious.' Indeed, it is not only religious systems that can be matched and integrated, but other cultural products too. Recent

work in the field of economic anthropology, for instance, suggests a fertile ground for my model of the reciprocally transformative fusion of different orders of cultural phenomena.

Over recent history, Melanesian societies have had to reckon with the imposition, often forced, sometimes welcomed, of various cultural products by outsiders. My thesis has examined one of, if not the, most important of these, namely, Christianity and shown how local people managed its encounter with existing religious frameworks. But the incorporation of Melanesian people into wider spheres of Western influence introduced them not only to new cosmological perspectives but, amongst other things, new ways of mediating exchange and trade. Above all, this meant managing the presence and use of state currencies or money. I would suggest that there are potentially very fruitful parallels that can be drawn between how I have characterised the interaction of indigenous and Christian religion and that of local and state 'transactional orders' (Parry and Bloch 1989:23). My aim here is not to provide an overview of the literature nor conduct an analysis of ethnographic material, but only to establish, in brief, the potential value of my theoretical argument within this area of anthropological enquiry.

When local people first encounter money they are compelled to pose the same kinds of questions as they would when introduced to Christianity. Where does this thing come from? Is it good and worthy of adoption? Or is it potentially harmful and should be repelled? Furthermore, people are forced to consider how the new currency should be positioned with regard to their existing modes and mediums of exchange. Building on Bloch and Parry's foundational work on the relationship of money to cultural order and social reproduction (1989), Akin and Robbins offer their own take on the role of money in Melanesian societies (1999). As with the fate of indigenous religions throughout the region, the authors note how today 'there are few places where indigenous currencies still dominate' (1999:20). The intrusion of money, like the process of missionisation, has gone a long way to reduce the prominence and efficacy of traditional cultural processes. As they describe, the role of money in local social life is variable. There are studies that have demonstrated how money has been put to use in much the same way that traditional currencies were, thus supporting an argument for indigenisation, while, on the other hand, some anthropologists have underlined the transformative effects of money and its ability to not only displace traditional currencies but also to install, in place of reciprocal exchange mechanisms, counterparts of the capitalist market (Akin and Robbins 1999:16–27).

However, while their role and vitality has diminished, local currencies, usually items such as shells, have not been entirely replaced by money but often co-exist with it in intriguing ways. The permutations of this relationship, like that between indigenous and Christian religion, are numerous and always reflective of ‘complex cultural, historical, and geographical variables’ (1999:20). Of greater interest here is the observation made by Akin and Robbins (1999:21, emphasis added) that: ‘The adoption of money, sometimes in replacement of shells, has often occurred through *dual processes* whereby shell valuables become more money-like, and simultaneously or subsequently, moneys come to be employed in the manner of local currencies.’ This is very similar to the way I have characterised the interaction of indigenous and Christian religion and cosmology among the Oksapmin. While Akin and Robbins do not develop this particular claim any further, their awareness that cultural phenomena can interact in this mutually transformative manner certainly suggests that my own model of fusion could be felicitously applied in this area of investigation. If local people throughout Melanesia are reciprocally transforming money and local currencies as a means of handling their encounter with the Western cash economy, then it is apposite to speak not only of the fusion of religions, as I have argued in my thesis, but of the fusion of economies and currencies as well.

The generalisation of my model need not end there. What can be said for cosmologies and economies can probably be said for systems of politics, morality, subsistence, personhood and sociality, gender norms, and so forth. In short, my model of fusion is a theory of social change, a way of explaining what happens when two cultures come into contact with each other. As such, it can be usefully applied not only to the encounter of cosmologies but to any other dimension of social change. The way in which this process played out among the Oksapmin is ethnographically unique, yet the lessons learned from my analysis can shed light upon how people negotiate social change more generally.

Some final remarks

As I hope to have shown in this thesis, the Oksapmin are an intelligent, resilient, creative, and pragmatic group of people. Indeed, their adept management of the situation within which they found themselves, namely, having Christianity dramatically introduced to them by outsiders and then being compelled to find a place for it in their society, clearly reveals all of these attributes. The challenge that confronted them, like that which indigenous people the

world over have faced as a result of missionisation, was enormous. Their native religion, cosmology, ontology, and epistemology, in short, the foundation and essence of their lives as an ethnic group, were abruptly put into question by the mission. Not only were they led to believe that many aspects of their traditional culture were wrong, but they were urged to adopt Christianity as a replacement. As a consequence of this proselytization, much of the basic architecture of the indigenous religion was perforce destroyed forever as Christianity came to occupy a prominent position in local life. But, while this meant that the sacred rituals and institutions that had hitherto underpinned their lives were never to be seen again, many local traditions and beliefs remained. The Oksapmin did not discard these, nor did they treat them as invalid in relation to Christianity. Rather, they fused these aspects of their indigenous religion to the Christianity borrowed from the mission in the production of a new, composite religious world. The stress of the Oksapmin has been towards unification of the two religions, and they pursue this task through reciprocal transformation, that is, by making Christianity Oksapmin and by making Oksapmin traditions Christian. The fact that they have constructed this coherence in response to such an immense conundrum is what makes the Oksapmin case so fascinating both as an object of anthropological study and as a creative achievement of humanity.

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