Partible penitents: dividual personhood and Christian practice in Melanesia and the West*

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Recent discussions by anthropologists and others regarding the transmission and adoption of exogenous cultural elements have been framed by such tropes as cultural ‘rupture’, ‘collision’, ‘disjuncture’, ‘hybridity’, and ‘globalization’. These studies have been undertaken largely independent of the ‘New Melanesian Ethnography’ and its distinctive understanding of partible personhood. Burgeoning studies of Christian conversion have elided the partibility of persons with respect to both indigenous modes of agency and analogous features of Christianity, while practitioners of the New Ethnography have mostly avoided analysing religious change. I seek to transcend this bifurcation by demonstrating the *dividual* character of personhood and agency in several exemplary instances of Melanesian Christianity (Maisin, Karavar, Gebusi, and Urapmin), which previous investigators have portrayed in opposed terms as inherently *individualist*. There and in a further ethnographic treatment (North Mekeo) I show how people’s assimilation of Christianity has been effected through elicitive exchanges involving parts of their persons and corresponding personal detachments of God, Jesus, Mary, Holy Spirit, the Devil, and so on. Paying due heed to these heretofore unrecognized analogies between indigenous dividualism and Christian ‘individualism’ provides a novel explanation for the nature and rapidity of conversion and change in Melanesia and beyond.

Among the more innovative developments in Pacific ethnography over the past two decades has been the elaboration of the Maussian model of gift-exchange (Mauss 1967) into a new perspective on the dynamics of Melanesian sociality, sometimes tagged the ‘New Melanesian Ethnography’ (hereafter NME; see Josephides 1991). Central to the NME is the distinction of the ‘partible’ or ‘dividual’ person from the bounded possessive ‘individual’ of Western politico-jural discourse (Macpherson 1963). Following Marilyn Strathern (1988; 1991b; 1999) and Roy Wagner (1974; 1981; 1991), numerous ethnographers have illustrated how Melanesians typically interact as composite beings constituted of the detached parts/relationships of other persons through prior agitative elicitations and exchanges.1

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While the partible person has been celebrated by some for the novel insights it affords into indigenous sociality, it, along with its encompassing NME framework, has been critiqued on two main grounds: its inherent synchrony – an inability to address processes of social change; and a perceived essentialization of both the Melanesian dividual and the Western individual. On the other hand, as Foster (1995: 1-18) has noted, most studies of Melanesian social change have paid little heed to the region’s undeniable cultural alterities – such as widespread indigenous understandings of partibility – laying stress instead on people’s shared historical experiences of colonialism, capitalism, secularization, and so on, or the overwhelming forcefulness of those intrusions at the expense of Melanesians’ own agency.

Although the NME is no longer particularly ‘new’, the conflicting implications it poses between dividual and individual personhood still dog Melanesian anthropology, leaving it deeply bifurcated. Where NME practitioners underscore trajectories of continuity or reproduction even in circumstances of pronounced change, analysts of change affix perceived innovations to the same exogenous influences that have supposedly produced analogous transformations elsewhere, regardless of Melanesia’s cultural distinctiveness.

Unfortunately, solutions proposed to this impasse have not proven entirely successful. Foster’s (1995: 19, 227) procedure of conducting the two analyses side by side makes little headway towards their theoretical integration. Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart’s promotion of the ‘relational-individual’ – a ‘dialectic between relationality and individuality (the sociocentric and the egocentric)’ (2000: 6, 63-6, passim) – elides the key dynamics of personal partibility and the role played therein by the absence of clear distinctions between subjects and objects (see below), thereby spuriously bridging the distance between studies of Melanesian personhood and change. Similarly, Scott’s (2007) dismissal of the NME in favour of ‘poly-ontologies’ deflects attention away from the dividual character of both indigenous and, possibly, Western personhood. Some of Marilyn Strathern’s (1992; 1999) discussions of Western sociality, while partly informed by Melanesian patterns, address transformations in seemingly individualist Western institutions rather than changes in Melanesia. Certain implications of Sahlins’s structural history approach have been recently adapted for Melanesian contexts (Robbins & Wardlow 2005) wherein elements of Western culture have been appropriated for service in pre-existing social arrangements – a general conclusion not antithetical to the approach adopted here – but those studies have tended to evade the possible entanglements of personal partibility (cf. Mosko 1992; Wardlow 2005: 65).

What is required, I suggest, is an approach to personhood and change which differs from those of both NME practitioners and their critics – one which clarifies the relation between dividual and individual personhood in such a way as to enable exploitation of the dynamic potentialities of partibility and elicitive exchange as change, and which takes due account of processes analogous to dividuality in introduced dimensions of presumably individualist Western sociality (cf. LiPuma 2000; M. Strathern 1991a; 1999: 132-58).

The burgeoning interest in Pacific, especially Melanesian, Christianity is a case in point. Just as NME practitioners deploying the partible person model have been inattentive to Christian missionization and conversion, students of the latter have presupposed Christian personhood to be strictly individualist. In this article I therefore seek to overcome this specific impasse by examining several well-documented cases of religious transformation for the role played therein by transactions of reciprocal elicitation premised on personal partibility. I argue that the partibility notion contains a
considerable unrealized diachronic potential that is superior to rival conceptualizations as it relies on closer approximations of indigenous religious understandings and practices, both Melanesian and Western. It is implicit, firstly, in the very notion of partibility that Melanesian individuals are composites of prior interpersonal transactions and that a given person’s composition at any one time indicates his/her potential for future action (cf. Bourdieu 1977). Melanesian partible persons can thus be appreciated as agents of history and change par excellence.’ Secondly, I suggest, the partible person concept more closely approximates distinctly Christian understandings of ‘individual’ agency than the notion of the bounded Western individual to which it is commonly opposed. Contrary to prevailing stereotypes, there is at least one highly significant context of Western culture which is premised on personal partibility and elicitation: relations between Christians, and between them and their deity as dividual persons – that is, there exists a certain profound misunderstanding in the discipline over the contrast between Melanesian dividualism and Western individualism which Melanesian Christianity in NME perspective can clarify. I therefore argue, thirdly, that the sort of ‘individualism’ routinely attributed to Christianity actually consists in just one aspect of a wider, encompassing unbounded form of personhood – related to, but distinct from, the bounded possessive individual – which is instead closely analogous to Melanesian dividuality. To the extent that these formal compatibilities between indigenous Melanesian modes of sociality and Christian practices can be substantiated, finally, I venture that those concordances have contributed to the impetus and intensity of Christianity’s spread across many parts of the region or beyond. Suitably reconfigured around the dynamic potentialities of personal partibility, therefore, the NME offers to social anthropology novel theoretical insights into Christianity and processes of religious change as well as continuity (cf. Cannell 2006a; Robbins 2007).8

I proceed by first outlining the possibly counter-intuitive transactional dynamics of dividual personhood, drawing particular attention to the place of the subject/object distinction and the means whereby partibility and elicitation can be fruitfully extended to contexts marked by social change and the seeming presence of ‘individualism’. Next I compare this view of personal partibility to Dumont’s and Burridge’s authoritative accounts of Western individualism, arguing that the Christian ‘individual’, contrary to widespread presuppositions, is but one aspect of a broader composite, dividual Christian person. Then I scrutinize several highly regarded ethnographies of Melanesian Christianity for traces of partibility: Barker (1990b; 1992; 2003) on Maisin; Errington and Gewertz (1995) on Karavar Islanders; Knauf (2002) on Gebusi; and Robbins (2004) on Urapmin. Here I demonstrate, on the one hand, that although ‘exchange’ and ‘relationships’ figure conspicuously in the authors’ portrayals of pre-Christian religions, their neglect of personal partibility effectively reduces their accounts of indigenous sociality to ‘subjects’ transacting over categorically distinct ‘objects’, consonant with the Western notion of possessive individual agents (Foster 1995: 9–10; Mosko 2000; 2002). On the other hand, I argue that these studies’ shared assumption that Christian personhood and agency are intrinsically individualistic is misleading (cf. Barnett & Silverman 1979: 41–81; Dumont 1985; LiPuma 2000: 130–2; M. Strathern 1988: 268–70): that is, close examination reveals how Christianity in these cases also involves elicitive detachments and attachments among dividual persons (converts, God, Jesus, Holy Spirit, the Devil, etc.). I then report my own ethnographic findings regarding contemporary North Mekeo Christian practice, highlighting the transactional dynamics of personal partibility informing relations among human and spiritual persons.
I conclude that many characteristically Christian notions of personhood and agency can be seen as closely akin to Melanesian understandings. Contrary to received views, much seemingly individualistic Christian belief and practice in the West and elsewhere involves elicitive ritual transactions over parts of dividual persons, divine and human, so that religious change consists in conversions from one dividual mode of sociality into another. Thus suitably modified, the NME effectively bridges the bifurcation that currently impedes Melanesian ethnography while giving much to the anthropological theory of change and to understandings of Christianity in general.

**Melanesian personal partibility**

For Melanesia and possibly elsewhere, the person can be considered a *dividual* being, a composite formed of relations with a plurality of other persons (M. Strathern 1988). In this view, a person is a product of the gifts, contributions, or detachments of others. In many Melanesian contexts, persons are regarded as composed of gendered substances, such as father’s bone and mother’s menstrual blood, plus lifetimes of donations of embodied and non-substantial labour by other kin and relatives such as food, magical knowledge, ceremonial wealth, land, and so on. Typically, these personal gifts should be reciprocated. Among North Mekeo, for example, since my mother contributed womb-blood to me during conception and gestation, at appropriate later points I am obliged to give her analogous parts of myself acquired from still other persons. Thus persons’ compositions change through time as they both attach others’ contributions to themselves and detach personal tokens for attachment to others. The transactions composing persons and relations create a history of sequential reciprocities as so many capacities for future agentive action.

Following Gell (1998), I define an ‘agent’ as a person capable of changing the dispositions of some victim or ‘patient’. By acting (i.e. detaching parts of themselves that they earlier acquired as patients from others), agents externalize the relations of which they are, or until then have been, composed. Through acting, partible persons are decomposed, anticipating and evincing the recognition of their externalized capacities through the responses of corresponding patients (Fig. 1). For me to detach the appropriate part of myself so that it will be effective in drawing forth a desired part of another person (i.e. his or her sister in marriage, a shell valuable, or a ritual spell), I must be able to conceptualize the internal capacities of both myself and my exchange partner so that I can strategically externalize that part of me which will be successful in uncoupling the part of the other person which I desire. Through these kinds of elicitations, persons stimulate one another to action and reaction. Every action – or trans-action – is in this way both conventional and innovative.9

![Figure 1.](image-url)
This model of dividual personhood and agency, like classic Maussian gift reciprocity, presupposes the absence of the rigid distinction between ‘persons’ and ‘things’, or ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’, which is definitive of the bounded, possessive individual of Western ideology. Thus when people from a Western viewpoint might appear to be exchanging objects – items of food, wealth, knowledge, etc. – in indigenous Melanesian perspective they are rather transacting over bits of themselves as persons (Barnett & Silverman 1979: 62-6; Hampsher-Monk 1996: 244-5; LiPuma 2000: 130-6; Lohmann 2003: 117; Mead 1934: 222-226; M. Strathern 1988: 171-81). I take the reluctance to appreciate this distinction fully to lie at the heart of many ‘relationalist’ misreadings of Melanesian sociality. Regardless of how intensely people valorize relationships, if the items transacted are not construed as parts of the transactors as persons, relationalist perspectives tacitly recapitulate the subject/object distinction on which possessive individualism in the West is premised. Similarly, as discussed below, the denial of possible identifications between persons and things in certain contexts has greatly distorted the scope of ‘individualism’ in the West.

With the aim of transcending the NME’s essentialist and synchronic limitations, however, I introduce several refinements of the personal partibility notion. First, gender is not necessarily the only contrast animating Melanesian partibility (cf. M. Strathern 1988). Dimensions of relational meaning and identity such as sacred/profane, human/divine, good/evil, living/dead, and so on, may also participate in partibility processes, especially in religious contexts. And inasmuch as Western persons may also exhibit dividuality – for example, in Christian ritual practice (see below) – a suitably modified NME perspective escapes the charge of crudely ‘essentializing’ or ‘othering’ Melanesians. Second, extension of the partibility model to temporalized interactions between Melanesian and exogenous persons, whether human or divine, enables the NME to accommodate processes of change: that is, it is through such transactions over acquired identities and capacities that Melanesians change themselves, their social relations, and their cultures. And third, as already mentioned, the stark opposition of individual versus dividual personhood on which Melanesia’s current bifurcation is premised is overly simple; rather, the individualism that has been routinely associated with Christianity is itself a manifestation of dividuality closely analogous to Melanesian personhood.

The Christian dividual person
Of course, this last claim, that Christian personhood could be at base dividual rather than individual, opposes received anthropological wisdom. Burridge (1979) and Dumont (1985), among others, are often cited as testimony to Christianity’s inherent individualism in contrast to Melanesia’s relationalism. But careful readings of the key texts affirm that the total Christian person represented therein is as fully partible as indigenous Melanesians: that is, that the individuality at issue concerns only a single, detachable element of an otherwise composite agent. For Dumont as for Weber (1930), the modern Western individual – the non-divisible ‘individual’ subject categorically differentiated from things he/she transacts – emerged fully formed only in the last few centuries of Christianity’s unfolding. So what kind of Christian person existed in pre-Reformation times? Dumont (1985) locates Western individualism’s first appearance in the early Church as a transformation from an ‘inworldly’ to an ‘outworldly’ orientation. Like ancient Hindu ascetic renouncers, early Christians removed themselves from society, amounting, I suggest, to no less than the rejection/detachment of inworldly parts/relations from people’s persons which enabled them to receive/attach
the outworldly gifts of Pentecost as further detachments from God. As surprising at it may appear to some, Dumont’s model of the achievement-orientated early Christian individual consists in an overall dividual (as in divide-able) being or person significantly distinct from its modern descendant:

[S]omething of modern individualism is present with the first Christians and in the surrounding world, but that is not exactly individualism as we know it. Actually, the old form and the new are separated by a transformation so radical and so complex that it took at least seventeen centuries of Christian history to be completed, if indeed it is not still continuing in our times (Dumont 1985: 94, emphasis added).

The key pivots of transformation into the modern individual for Dumont were the later theologies of Luther and Calvin, wherein early Christian outworldliness was re-focused upon the penitent’s inner, indestructible, and sacred but indivisible soul, identified with the will of God (1985: 113-19): that is, detachable, transactable parts of both people’s and God’s total persons.12 The post-Reformation Christian thus remains a composite being comprising at minimum inner immortal soul, will, and faith as well as mortal body, outer devotions to God, good works directed to fellow communicants, and so on.13 And even if the individual Christian soul is hierarchically valued over other personal parts, it remains only one component of the plurally constituted total Christian penitent.

Building upon Dumont’s treatise, Burridge (1979) distinguishes between ‘person’ and ‘individual’ as alternate states of a composite, dividual ‘self’. Whereas, for Burridge, the thoughts and actions of a ‘person’ largely conform to accepted roles, statuses, and norms, the predications of an ‘individual’ consist in the stripping away of those conventions and in the receipt or creation of new charismatically inspired arrangements for transmission to other people in the future (1979: 41, 47, 54, 165, 211, 218). The individual is therefore a being who both detaches from and attaches to him/herself elements of personhood rather than objects through transactions vis-à-vis others. Similar to Dumont also, Burridge traces Western individualism to the early Church, specifically to Pentecost, where penitents, having shed their customary social identities and relations, became qualified to receive spiritual gifts from God for communication to fellow Christians (1979: 54, 72, 158-9, 168, 194, 208). Further in the direction of Melanesian partibility, Burridge ties individualism cross-culturally to metanoia – ‘a renunciation of the given moralities when it is not a transcending of them ... a change of mind envisaging new moralities, it appears as the basis of, and may lead into, individuality’ (1979: 215, emphasis added). As a process, in other words, metanoia involves the dividuality of the self into parts – alternate states of mind and moralities – neither of which qualify as objects separate from self (1979: 193, 210). Burridge’s ‘individual’, Christian or otherwise, therefore, implicates a conception of personhood which, similarly to the composite partible person of Melanesia, contrasts with the bounded possessive individual distinguished through transactions over depersonalized things. I strongly suspect that this particular confusion over radically distinct meanings of ‘individualism’ has contributed most egregiously to the bifurcation of the anthropology of Melanesia and, perhaps, elsewhere, and to widespread misunderstandings over the character of personhood in the West generally and Christianity specifically.

**Melanesian Christianity as dividual agency and transaction**

Aiming to transcend these lacunae, I now reconsider several exemplary ethnographies of Melanesian Christianity.
Barker, ethnographers’ neglect of Melanesian Christianity, and Maisin charismatic revivalism

John Barker’s (1990a; 1990b; 1992: 147) influential critiques of anthropologists’ neglect of Melanesian Christianity, while laudable, have reinforced the discipline’s bifurcation in at least two ways. First, paragons of the NME such as Munn (1986) and Wagner (1986), among others, have been singled out, with undoubted justification, for their superficial treatment of Christianity’s presence in the communities they were studying (Barker 1992: 147). But rather than underscore the contribution that indigenous understandings have made to villagers’ appreciation and embrace of Christianity, Barker has argued, second, that local Melanesian Christianities constitute ethnographic subjects in their own right as products of historical experiences shared by Islanders and expatriates (1990a: 5–9; 1992: 145, 149, 151; 2001: 106). Here particularly, the role of personal partibility in Melanesian Christianity is elided in favour of Christianity’s supposed ‘individualism’ (2003: 272, 280–1, 287, 291; 2008), which actually, as discussed above in reference to Dumont and Burridge, closely approximates Melanesian partibility. As a consequence, Barker’s analyses tend to exclude indigenous dividual forms of agency even when considering the ‘crucial part played by villagers, especially converts, in adapting Christian ideas and institutions into Melanesian settings’ (1992: 155; see also 1990a: 15, 22; 2008: 146–7, 211).14

The analytical dividends that personal partibility might offer to Barker’s materials can be illustrated in his account (2003) of Maisin (Oro Province, PNG) charismatic revivalism during the late 1990s. After a decade’s absence, Barker returned to his doctoral research site to find young Anglican Church members engaged in a fellowship movement focused on possession (‘slaying’) by the Holy Spirit as a cure to serious sorcery illnesses (2003: 278, 290). While noting that the rituals – healings, laying of hands, testimonies of sin and faithfulness in God – resembled indigenous practices of curing (sevaseva) sorcery illness, Barker claims they represented instead a decisive shift from concern over collectivist (i.e. ‘relationalist’; see above) moral breaches in the community to an individualist conception of Christianity (2003: 275, 280, 290; 2007: 126–7, 132–3; 2008: 146–7, 211). I shall focus here on aspects of the charismatic activities that were characteristics of the supposedly new individualism.15

By the time of the revival, Maisin had already accommodated many tenets of Christianity to their understandings of ancestral spirits and sorcery (2003: 288). For some, God was either a kind of ‘super sorcerer’, capable of bringing (i.e. giving) disasters on people when angered by their actions, or the party responsible for giving sorcery to humankind in the first place. For others, sorcery was being perpetrated without the receipt of God’s approval, thereby eliciting for practitioners personal sins against God. But Maisin universally believed that by placing (i.e. giving) their trust in God (or Jesus) or by giving oneself to Christ, God gave people health and the power to turn from sinfulness and defend themselves against sorcery attack (2003: 278, 289; 2007: 150). People suffering fatal diseases (attachment of evil spirits sent by sorcerers) were cured after receiving palliative visits and/or gifts from Jesus, Mary, or God (2003: 289). Healing was a gift of God or Holy Spirit (2007: 130, 131). ‘Salvation’ (jebuga) which rendered Christians free of sorcery consisted in people ‘telling narratives to one another [which] entail[ed] a mutual healing of bodies’ (2003: 286). These verbal reciprocities reiterated the elicitive process of indigenous sevaseva curing whereby detachable ancestral spirit familiars were internalized and externalized by participants in séances, possessions, and trances (2003: 279–80, 282, 287–90).16 Similarly, at youth fellowship meetings,
'individuals' would give (and thus receive, detach, and attach) testimonials of their sins to one another in order to restore or re-give their faith in God (2003: 290).

A Maisin villager’s relation with God, I suggest, was neither an individual matter nor a collective one, but revolved around the partibility of all persons (cf. Barker 2003: 281). The possessions by Holy Spirit – gift detachments from God – were viewed as driving off the previously attached, afflicting evil spirits. At possession meetings, participants gave personal testimonials and externalized songs in exchange for communion. Unconfirmed members offered their heads and shoulders to the priest, who reciprocated with gifts of his blessings and the laying of hands which took away patients’ illnesses (2003: 277). Barker records, ‘God had given everyone his or her own special gift. He himself [i.e. the priest] had received the “gift of healing” ’ (2003: 278). During the revival, faith surrendered to God was understood to give people ‘the truth’ and the capacity to resist sinful behaviour (2003: 278, 284). A church deacon proclaimed that Jesus, everyone’s ‘elder brother’, died for his younger siblings so that they could be united with him and take care of each other in social amity (marawa-wawe), the ‘sharing of one’s innermost self’ (2003: 285) or ‘sharing oneself with another’ (2008: 55).

Just as earlier forms of sorcery causation and curing were far from being merely communal or relational in their underlying mechanics, the sociality of the Maisin charismatic revival was decidedly not ‘individualistic’ in the sense of bounded personhood but consisted instead in elicitive transactions between dividual persons, human and spiritual.

Errington and Gewertz on Karavaran Christian conversion
Fred Errington and Deborah Gewertz’s (1995) study of conversion and New Church revival on Karavar Island (East New Britain, PNG) also underscores the bifurcation of contemporary Melanesian anthropology. On the one hand, their account of Karavaran Christianity fully engages with local agency in historical perspective; and, although they reference their exposition to seminal NME works (1995: 117-19), they effectively limit their treatment of indigenous personhood and agency to a version of ‘relationalism’ where personal partibility plays virtually no role. On the other, similarly to Barker, Errington and Gewertz fail to appreciate the dividual character of Karavaran Christian personhood.

Shortly after the arrival of missionary Rev. George Brown in 1875, Karavarans universally converted to the Methodist (later United) Church (1995: 103n). In the 1990s, one-fifth of Karavarans underwent a second conversion to a ‘modern’ New Church which set them apart from ‘anachronistic fellow villagers’ still loyal to the United Church (1995: 107). According to the ethnographers, the New Church was a nostalgic return to the particularly distilled form of ‘individualism’ delivered by Rev. Brown to their ancestors, initially emulated by them but subsequently corrupted by backsliding, hypocrisy, and falling into sin (1995: 107, 109-10, 116, 118, 130-2).

There are numerous indications, however, that New Church members were seeking instead to revive the kind of gift transactions their ancestors and Rev. Brown engaged in as indivuals. Rev. Brown ‘first brought the “wider world” to their ancestors’ (1995: 107, 120, 129-30), and the supposed individualism he bequeathed involved ‘sharing’ in significant measure his sense of the portentous making of history’ (1995: 108, emphases added). Members remembered that, with gifts of salt, money, and steel tools, Rev. Brown pacified the ancestors (1995: 79), who, handing over their weapons, were given hymn books (1995: 91). The missionaries’ ‘purchases’ of land and local big men’s
attempts to ‘buy’ the new church for their own villages were clearly perceived by the ancestors as gift transactions, as were missionaries’ offerings of a ‘free gift of God’ (1995: 91, 111) and Rev. Brown’s gifts of God’s Word, the Gospel, light, life, Christian souls, messages, and joy and happiness (1995: 78, 83, 95, 102, 108-10). 17


Partibility and elicitive gifting were thus definitive of New Church members’ relations with one another and with spirits. The individualism highlighted by Errington and Gewertz was restricted to dealings with non-members, that is, Karavaran New Church non-members and nation-state representatives (1995: 117-22, 130). The fact that Karavarans’ ancestors underwent initial conversion within three days of Rev. Brown’s arrival also implies that, despite many undoubted misunderstandings, they readily recognized in Christianity familiar patterns of gift reciprocity. The kind of personhood that modern-day New Church members sought for themselves was similarly premised on the commonalities between Christianity and indigenous sociality. The problem they sought to overcome was less the loss of Rev. Brown’s primal ‘individualism’ than the subsequent intrusion of the ethic of bounded individualism which compromised his original gifts proffered through Christian dividualism.

Knauft on Gebusi ‘exchanging the past’
Presuppositions of Christianity’s inherent individualism also figure centrally in Bruce Knauft’s (2002) portrayal of religious change among Gebusi (Western Province, PNG) based on a re-study conducted some sixteen years after initial fieldwork. For Knauft, Gebusi ‘exchanged’ their pre-Christian, non-individualist mode of sociality for the individualist Christianity and individualism of modernity. None the less, his account is replete with instances of partibility and elicitive gift-giving in both pre-Christian and later Christian contexts. 18

Indigenous Gebusi religion was orientated to the maintenance of ‘good company’ (kogwayay) among humans and with non-human ‘true spirits’ of the above. Good company meant literally to ‘talk or yell/joke all together’, such that feelings lodged in the
chest were audibly forced to 'come out from inside' through the breath (Knauft 1985: 61-9). Traces of anger in people’s hearts were externalized for attachment to sorcerers, enabling the breath of camaraderie to be reciprocated among participants (1985: 92, 296). Such interpersonal transactions were performed at feasts, dances, and séances led by mediums possessed of the souls of spirit wives with whom they fathered spirit children (1985: 66-7, 87, 296-304; 2002: 134-5). Mediums’ spirit wives and children helped secure the aid of other true spirits in giving people knowledge, identifying sorcerers, curing sickness, and securing life and well-being (1985: 303-7; 2002: 52-3). In the absence of such good company, people experienced fear, held anger secretly in their hearts, or acted violently (1985: 69-79; 2002: 76). Lower ancestral and other malevolent spirits caused illness and death by exchanging their souls for the souls of their victims (2002: 83-9, 93, 404n2). Curing involved the expulsion of the attacking lower spirit’s soul and the return of the patient’s soul through the aid of true spirits (2002: 83-9, 93-4). Sorcery and its cure similarly involved the removal and replacement of detachable parts of people’s and spirits’ persons (1985: 86, 94-7, 104, 312; 2002: 60, 120, 131).

By the time of Knauft’s 1998 return, Gebusi had supposedly abandoned these practices and adopted a fundamentalist Christianity based none the less on personal partibility and elicitation. Like true spirits, God and Jesus lived in an invisible, remote world (2002: 148). At church services people could ‘sing to God’, offering praise to him and his spirit world (2002: 24, 157, 162). Pastors rather than mediums led the singing and other ‘talk’ with this spirit world, duplicating in their forceful ‘teaching’ the previous singing and yelling (2002: 133, 135, 161). Church-goers accordingly offered heart-felt prayers to God and received through pastors’ pronouncements God’s talk or Word – a ‘big present’, vital for the soul of any person who accepted it (2002: 137, 140, 142, 151, 162). Like true spirits’ messages given through mediums, pastors relayed God’s Word in unfamiliar language (i.e. Tok Pisin or English) (2002: 135, 161, 162). Bible-reading enabled literate Gebusi to receive God’s ‘talk’ and ‘have the spirit of God’ (2002: 162). Gebusi thus took up new personal souls and life-breath in exchange for their old ones through transactions with Christian instead of indigenous spirits (2002: 39, 151).

Trust previously given to mediums was transferred to Christianity (2002: 124). Rather than mediums being fathers of spirit children, Christians were children of paternal God (2002: 133, 146-7). Earlier animated affinal/heterosexual spirit séance transactions were accordingly converted to more subdued agnatic reciprocities (2002: 133, 146-7, 151). Christian ritual consisted principally in offerings of breath, prayer, testimonial, obedience to God’s Word, sin-avoidance, thanks, hymns, and praise intended to elicit God’s protection and satisfaction of penitents’ desires (2002: 124-5, 129, 135, 146-7, 149). As God’s son, Jesus was a giver of aid much like mediums’ children, and people established sibling-like spirit exchange relations with him (2002: 135, 145). Jesus’ crucifixion and blood were gifts of life analogous to the health and vitality of true spirits (2002: 148). Jesus was allowed into people’s hearts, while people gave themselves to Jesus (2002: 166, 169).

Acceptance of pastors’ teachings was considered sufficient to disrupt people’s sinful reciprocities with indigenous spirits so they could receive baptism (2002: 25, 125, 128, 131-2, 140-2, 147, 160-1, 169). Baptism enabled Christians to ‘speak out the talk of God’ and receive new souls and names from God ‘in direct reciprocity for Jesus’ (2004: 78, 124, 162). Many sins were conceived as internalizations of the Devil and/or evil lower spirits that ‘come up inside’ a person, making him/her forget God’s injunctions and forcing God to withhold grace (2002: 131-2, 164, 166-7):
If you give one finger to Satan, he will take your whole body and your heart. So don’t give even one finger to Satan! Satan will take your soul and drive you into the pit of fire! Satan kills the body, but if you let him do this, the Lord will kill your spirit!! So let us pray for forgiveness ... (2002: 166).

Very likely, Christian Gebusi recognized a parallel between lower spirits’ underground abodes and Hell. Relations among Gebusi Christians also involved interpersonal detachments and gift-giving. Catholics interpreted their work as ‘bringing’ Catholicism to fellows (2002: 267n3). For Evangelicals, inner anger could harm others, as earlier, but it could be eliminated through receipt of Jesus’ mercy and forgiveness (2002: 166). As indices of people’s good company with God, church-goers gave of themselves by working on the pastor’s compound and church grounds and by giving money and materials. For these devotions, church authorities distributed material gifts (plane-fares, food, lodging, etc.) and God was presumed to reward them in the next life (2002: 145, 152-7). Even malingerers were viewed as personal givers, that is, of ‘excuses’ (2002: 143).

I suggest these transactions qualify as personal detachments rather than exchanges between individual subjects over objects. Knauft argues differently, that Christians cannot bargain with God and that acceptance of Christian precepts is construed as ‘a resolutely individual responsibility rather than as a collective or interactive one’ (2002: 149, see also 132, 144, 158-9). However, converts clearly perceived their church and other observances (praying, singing, sinning, etc.) as reciprocal elicitive transactions between God, Jesus, Satan, pastor, and themselves. God was expected to ‘answer’ people’s prayers (2002: 146), and his messages were both internalized and externalized as personal tokens rather than transacted as commodity-like items. Judgment Day was viewed as God’s own sorcery inquest, wherein Jesus as a ‘super-spirit medium’ would assign people’s detached souls to Heaven or Hell, which, in either event, promised to be as intensely social as life before Judgment (2002: 132, 162). Those granted salvation would receive omnipotent grace, unlimited wealth and happiness, and Gebusi who had redeemed their sins prior to death would be reunited in Heaven (2002: 24, 25, 148). It is difficult to detect here that the anticipated pleasures of Heaven were to be enjoyed individually, for through Christianity Gebusi persons became related ‘to a wider community of Christians and especially to the kingdom of God’ (2002: 164).

Robbins’s ‘adoption’ theory of Christian conversion

Joel Robbins’s account of conversion among Urapmin (West Sepik, PNG) – perhaps the most thorough treatment so far of Melanesian evangelical Christianity – has been more strongly influenced by NME writings than comparable studies (2004: 187-91, 291-4, 347n1). However, his attraction to Sahlins’s (1981; 1985) structural history programme and his reading of Dumont (1985) on Christianity’s individualism have evidently precluded any overt consideration of the relevance of dividual personhood to his materials. On the one hand, the Urapmin case for Robbins exemplifies a distinct type of culture change, ‘adoption’ (2001a: 7-9; 2004: 11-14, 48-9, 87-8), wherein people incorporate a foreign complex more or less intact without the sorts of complicated conceptual revaluations involved in either of Sahlins’s ‘reproduction’ or ‘transformation’ scenarios. And on the other, in terms critiqued above, Robbins presents Urapmin pre-Christian religion as ‘relationist’ and their adopted Pentecostal Christianity as ‘individualist’ (2004: 13, 182-3, 292-4). Additionally, for Robbins, the two religions co-exist in a hybrid situation (2001b: 903; 2004: 13, 313-35), consonant with Barker’s
early anti-syncretic viewpoint but in contrast to Knauft’s Gebusi case, where Christianity has supposedly replaced the indigenous religion.\textsuperscript{19}

In accord with NME postulates, Urapmin conceive of human procreation and kin and clan relations as consequences of the exchange of bodily substances – i.e. the detached parts of other persons such as parents and grandparents – even determining people’s genders and gender-based capacities. But Robbins claims that Urapmin soci-ality is based instead on the connections between people’s desires or wilfulness (\textit{san}) and the pre-existing lawfulness (\textit{awem}) of social relations which constrain them (2004: 25-6, 190, 191, 196).

This is true for all of the relations and groupings – marriages, families, trade partnerships, gardening and hunting groups, villages, and sports teams – that make up the Urapmin social landscape. In creating these, people have recourse to idioms of kinship and something like ‘clanship,’ but these idioms only have force when they are put to persuasive use in willful individual projects of relationship building. On their own, they do not determine any aspects of Urapmin social life (2004: 191).

However, I suggest, ‘will’ itself constitutes merely one part of a person, with lawful relationships to parents, grandparents, agnates, and other kin composing other parts (2004: 25-6). Thus Urapmin will is comparable to Christian ‘wilfulness’ as just one element of personhood, namely ‘a condition of the individual heart considered as the innermost essence of the individual’ (2004: 293; 2005: 51, 54-5; cf. Dumont 1986: 244, and above). Even aggressive, epitomizing big men assert their wills successfully on others only by appealing to shared relationships of generosity and reciprocity elicited in prior exchanges through which all Urapmin are plurally composed and capacitated (2004: 16, 25-6, 185, 191-2). Of particular relevance to Christian agency (see below), big men’s ‘pulling’ consists in eliciting specific behaviours from others in exchange for past or future gifts of food, land, pigs, and so on (2004: 197-8, 201-4, 208, 286). Wilfulness and pulling thus involve the same ‘kind of regular interaction that leads people to regard each other as kin and to develop dense histories of reciprocal giving and communal sharing’ (2004: 204, 207-8).

The indigenous religion focused on similar elicitive relations with spirits. People’s lands were gifts of nature spirits, as were taboos imposed by them. Inhabitants who rejected those taboos were made sick by the transfer of another, malevolent element of the angered spirit to the human patient. Curing required the sacrifice of pigs, the detached smell- and blood-offerings of which induced attacking spirits to exit patients (2004: 66, 135, 151, 168, 180, 184, 209-11, 222-4, 345). Men and households similarly sacrificed to ancestral spirits for the transfer of their powers of fertility into gardens and young men’s bodies (2004: 151).

Conversion to Christianity transpired during a charismatic revival of the 1970s and 1980s when leaders received previously secret knowledge – God’s Word, a detached part of God’s spiritual person – given by ‘Spirit’ (Holy Spirit) and shared among community members (2004: 122-4, 130, 144, 266). These and other divine gifts were received in dreams, visions, possessions, and other ecstatic experiences (2004: 124, 126, 343n). They included guidance on interpreting the Bible, healing, and speaking in tongues, as well as new names, enhanced strength, and other miracles (2004: 131-3). Recipients were ‘kisim Spirit’ (possessed of Holy Spirit), wherein a detachment of God entered people, recalling pre-Christian possession by nature and ancestral spirits (2004: 129, 130-1).

Through possession of Spirit and other revival gifting, Urapmin received knowledge of their personal sins and the requirement that they cast them off, give them to God in

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confession, and be baptized (2001b: 903; 2004: 131; 2005: 52-3). People sometimes received God’s gifts in response to prayers for his help (2004: 126, 254). Some revivalists requested worldly success with health, gardening, hunting, and protection; others asked God or Spirit to give the strength and knowledge to recognize past sins and to avoid future ones (2001b: 903; 2004: 132). These appeals, I suggest, amounted to sacrificial transfers of penitents’ sinful wilfulness/desires designed to elicit God’s blessings (see Mosko in press, and below).

Urapmin also understood salvation as a gift from God to persons in relationships (i.e. groups comprising pastors and their congregations) rather than individual or single petitioners (2004: 300-9). Converts visited one another’s houses offering prayers to God for each other (2004: 310). Families and communities worked towards salvation together, rendering one another help, sharing inner thoughts, knowledge, and feelings (2001b: 905-6; 2004: 306-9). Robbins discusses in considerable detail the tension between what he sees as individualist and relationalist salvation (2004: 278, 294-309); but to the extent that it was detachable parts/relations of persons — their eternal souls rather than their total selves — that elicited salvation from God, Urapmin Christian personhood was constitutionally dividual.

To Revival Urapmin, God was a ‘father’ who, analogous to human fathers, provided care and protection for his children. Jesus – God’s son and an extension of his person — was the people’s ‘friend’. Holy Spirit, detached from God, was sent to Jesus’ friends when he (Jesus) had been unable to communicate with them. None the less, like big men, Jesus was expected to deliver on promises given in return for his friends’ fidelity (2004: 313n, 343n).

Urapmin sin and confession corresponded to the agency of dividual rather than bounded individual persons (cf. 2004: 297). Sinful acts, thoughts, and especially emotions arising from wilfulness and anger were understood to be acquired through interaction with ‘devils’ (i.e. nature and ancestral spirits) (2004: 148, 298). Sins (yum) established debts towards God, ‘heavy things’ or ‘burdens’ that collected inside the body until removed through confession (2004: 282). Confessions were given privately to pastors and deacons, ‘act[ing] only on the “heart” ’, where sins as well as people’s inner essences, including their wills, were stored (2004: 286-7, 297). Once confessed, sins were placed in God’s hand, and he took them away (2004: 282, 297). Confession thereby enabled cleansed sinners to receive God’s Word and the salvation of their souls upon Jesus’ second coming (2004: 298).

Urapmin Christian dividuality was most dramatically exhibited in ‘Spirit disko’, which erupted at church meetings when it was concluded the sins of all present had been sincerely confessed. Penitents asked God and/or Jesus for possession of Spirit, whereupon they received God’s or Jesus’ strength in their ‘hot’ hearts, enabling them to praise the deities’ names and give them happiness (2004: 283-4). ‘Spirit disko’ prayers were conceived as ‘pulling the Spirit’, similar to big men’s elicitations. Hymns previously received as Spirit gifts were sung back to God. The ritual ended after Spirit departed the possessed, leaving the congregation spiritually healthy and free of sinful wilfulness (2004: 282-8), at least until they were subjected to new wilful elicitations outside of church services.

There is therefore in Urapmin as in other influential accounts of Melanesian Christianity and religious change strong empirical evidence of personal partibility, the oversight of which has produced misleading analytical effects. Descriptions of indigenous ‘relationalism’ have tended to conceal unwarranted assumptions of bounded
individualistic subjects transacting over categorically differentiated objects, while explicit presuppositions of Western Christianity’s individualism have obscured intrinsic individualities. The natures of culture change represented in Melanesian Christianity and of Christianity itself have thus been misconstrued. Christian personhood, I suggest, has appeared to some Melanesians, at least, as dividual as they are themselves. The chief differences consist in the distinctiveness, novel or otherwise, of the detachable parts of persons, not in the processes by which they are transacted or the dividual character of the persons doing the transacting.

North Mekeo personhood, agency, and Christianity

My enquiries among North Mekeo (Central Province, PNG) further substantiate these claims. Like other neighbouring Austronesian-speakers, their pre-colonial social organization was based on a complex system of ‘hereditary’ officials (i.e. ‘chiefs’ and ritual experts or ‘sorcerers’) ideally represented in each local branch of the several dispersed patrilateral clans. Village communities and tribal confederations, however, were established around formalized affinal exchange relations between exogamous patriclans. Sustained encounters with Europeans began in the late nineteenth century. Although colonial and national governments have been significant forces since then, it has been primarily through the Mission’s presence that villagers have sustained relations with the outside world.

Indigenous understandings of procreation, food exchange, spirits, magic or sorcery, and renown or fame usefully contextualize the mode of personal partibility intrinsic to pre-Christian and subsequently adopted Christian sociality. Human beings are conceived (engama) from the release, admixture, and solidifying of two gender-marked ‘bloods’ (ifa; i.e. father’s semen and mother’s womb-blood) in roughly equal proportions inside the mother’s womb. Ordinarily, people’s blood(s) stays inside their bodies, but the ‘heat’ of coitus concentrated on the woman’s vagina (ito, the same word for ‘fire’) reverses those predilections, eliciting the simultaneous ejaculation of both parents’ procreative bloods. In her womb, the father’s semen coagulates the mother’s amorphous womb-blood to form the foetus. Since each partner’s parents are also composed of equal gendered procreative blood contributions of their parents, and so on, a person at birth shares as parts of him/herself the shared blood elements of all known kin or relatives. Within this interpersonal web of cognatic relations, ideally purely patrilateral blood commonalities are regarded as the feature connecting fellow clan members. Similarly, maternal procreative bloods link each person to members of his/her mother’s clan as ‘women’s children’. Each North Mekeo person is thereby conceived as a composite of detached blood parts/relations to other similarly constituted persons.

Food exchanges augment these blood relations. Vegetables and meats contain the vital complementary elements of blood formation, including the embodied labours of persons who produced them. But, instead of eating the comestibles they grow themselves, villagers reciprocate the foods they nurture or procure with kin, thereby compounding existing reproductive blood relations. The special foods eaten by a woman in pregnancy which nourish the foetus, for example, are provided by her husband and his kin, enhancing contributions of paternal semen. After birth, the foods a person attaches to him/herself through ingestion and/or detaches for giving to others reinforce the blood relations initiated in conception. In complex mortuary exchanges, however, the blood and food contributions that composed living persons are undone or ‘de-conceived’ (Mosko 1985: 150–99).
Along with blood and food relations, every person (papiau) embodies a ‘soul’ (lalau), possession of which differentiates humans and human-like spirits from ordinary animals and plants. When people die, their souls become ancestral spirits (tsiange). However, the region’s autochthonous bush spirits (faifai) and several mythic deities, most notably the spiritual culture-hero Akaisa, also possess souls and are thus recognized as persons (papiau) with distinct agentive capabilities. Just as human souls are intrinsically associated with people’s material bodies and leavings, spirits are incorporated in particular physical entities (e.g. parts of plant and animal species, stones, locations) depending on the type of spirit involved. These detachable personal tokens of spirits are commonly regarded as ‘hot’ and ‘dirty’ and can cause harm if contacted or improperly assimilated by living humans. But also they can be used as ‘medicines’ (fuka) in magic and sorcery (see below) wherein the contained spirits act as ritual allies. Knowledge of which items embody spirits is mostly secret, carefully guarded by ritual experts.

Persons, human and spiritual, are seen as acting in accordance with personal predilections or ‘desires’ (anina keani), typically associated with particular body parts – e.g. food in the belly, meat and water in the throat, sex in the genitals and skin, betel nut in the skin. In general, desires are mediated through a person’s ‘mind’ or ‘brain’ (mino), which is closely associated with his/her soul. Some thoughts are thus considered promptings of one’s own soul or other body parts, or from the soul-parts of other persons (‘medicines’) which have become attached to oneself through magical or ritual exchange and elicitation. Agency (etsifa, ‘cleverness’, ‘skilfulness’) in traditional and contemporary understandings thus consists in transactions which are hot, inverting the ordinary predilections of patients so that their desires become undesirable and the things they ordinarily dislike become desirable. For example, villagers desire food and avoid hunger. When one is hungry, ingested cooked food is hot for changing an unsweet belly to feeling sweet. By eating to satiation, however, food becomes unsweet and one’s belly no longer desires food. But then with the continued withdrawal of hot food, a person’s belly eventually cools and reverts to its prior state of hunger whereby food is perceived as sweet.

Indigenous ‘magic’ and ‘sorcery’, for which Mekeo peoples are renowned, are especially germane to villagers’ experiences of Christianity, involving analogous reciprocal detachments and attachments vis-à-vis spirit persons. Prototypically, the practitioner employs the hot, spiritually impregnated medicines obtained from other persons’ remains to affect mystically the likes and dislikes of his patient (see Mosko 1985: 54–5, 61, 79–80, passim). The magician first acquires (attaches to himself) the hot material remains of the appropriate spirit allies. By manipulating these tokens outside his own body and voicing hot spoken spells with his externalized breath, he directs his spirit allies to enter the patient and reverse his/her predilections (e.g. ‘change the mind’, ‘belly’, or ‘skin’) in alignment with the magician’s own desires. If successful, the magician’s attachment of his spirit allies to the victim produces the desired effect, a further detachment on the part of the victim: he/she vomits, excretes blood, plays cards foolishly, approaches the sorcerer rather than fleeing, and so on. In the typical scenario, upon receiving confirmation of these responses, the magician will effect another detachment to produce yet a further response in his victim, and so on in a prolonged series of such transactions.

As with other Melanesians, the most intense desire villagers usually attribute to one another is personal ‘fame’ or ‘praise’ (keauafangainia; see Mosko 2002), consisting also
in interpersonal transactions but as regards third parties. Public display of one’s skills and effectiveness in work, gardening, fishing, cooking, oratory, and so on, is regarded as sufficiently hot that it changes other people’s minds from not wanting to praise you to wanting to do so. In 1976 I once asked a neighbour how she was so certain my close friend, Kaiva, possessed hot magic for hunting, which he had never confided to me. She answered, ‘You have eaten enough of his meat that you should know’. Correspondingly, the commentaries that people receive from others, whether as praise or ridicule, become parts of their personal inventories and/or capacities for future action.26

Christian missionization among Mekeo peoples has been dominated by the activities of the Sacred Heart Mission (MSC), based in Issoudin, France (Bergendorff 1996; Delbos 1985; Dupeyrat 1936; Mosko 2001; Stephen 1974). From 1885 to the present, MSC personnel and institutions have been the primary agents of external-induced change in practically all areas of ‘development’ and ‘modernity’ (education, health, commodification, etc.), including Christian practice. Here I concentrate on the dynamics of North Mekeo Christian personhood as I have observed it over the past thirty-five years.

From the beginning, MSC priests, unlike some Protestant missionaries, have conceded to villagers that indigenous spirits recruited as magicians’ allies are true, actually existing beings with hot powers capable of affecting living people’s thoughts and actions. However, allowing those spirits into one’s heart or mind by calling their names in spells amounts to ‘sin’ (pekata; see below) against Deo (God). Prior to receiving Deo’s message about salvation through Yesu (Jesus) via the Church, it is argued, some ancestors were good and some were bad or evil (cf. Hau’ofa 1981). The souls of these people are now in either Heaven or Hell, respectively, which Deo only knows. So if villagers invoke indigenous spirits as allies in magical performances, there is no way to ascertain whether they are summoning allies from Deo or Diabolo (the Devil). To avoid sin and Deo’s retributions, Christians should offer prayers (mengamenga) only to good spirits with Deo – Deo himself, Santa Maria, Yesu, los Sangtos, or ‘all those deceased ancestors who are now in Heaven with Deo’ – so they can help Deo give back blessings.27

Villagers accordingly understand sin as adding to one’s person some bit or taint of Diabolo, which simultaneously closes oneself off from receiving Deo’s gifts. On a recent fieldtrip, people I have known for decades clarified for me that pekata, the word that priests had been using for ‘sin’ in their language, was a Latin word, and that the true indigenous word was iofu, the term for hot, dirty, spirit-laden detachments manipulated by sorcerers and magicians. The internalized hot, dirty detachments of Diabolo change sinners’ minds to desire evil instead of goodness. Sin confession thus consists in the giving away of acquired bits of Diablo to Deo who forgives and forgets them. Only then can people atone and open themselves to receiving hot, clean detachments of Deo (blessings, strength, Espiritu Sangtonga or Holy Spirit) to become parts of their persons.

The success achieved intermittently by some communities in marketing areca nut and betel in Port Moresby over the past two decades is widely regarded as a miraculous gift received directly from Deo, enabling people with his hot, clean power to attract hot, clean money and manufactured articles to their persons (Mosko 1999b; 2007). But rather than using this God-given wealth in morally positive sharing with family, kin or church relatives, many North Mekeo opened themselves to transactions over Diabolo’s hot, dirty influences in the forms of drunkenness, adultery and fighting. To no one’s surprise, during 1994–6 Deo replaced his hot, clean blessings with punishments including the loss of villagers’ previous betel trade monopoly and a dramatic increase in deaths by sorcery and raskol attack. To elicit Deo’s blessings once again, affected villages
contributed surplus wealth towards the construction of modern permanent church buildings and, in one case, inaugurated nightly *kerismatik* (Catholic charismatic) performances wherein penitents gave praise, song and prayer to Deo, Yesu and Santa Maria in order to restore the flow of blessings.

In the aftermath of 1990s developments, villagers proclaim they cannot expiate sins simply by participating in *kerismatik*, going to Sunday prayer services and Mass, or even by confession unless their thoughts and actions are sincere. One cannot become a true Christian ‘for nothing’; one has to ‘pay’ (*kaua*) with something personally appropriate such as honest remorse, generosity to others, support of community projects and so on in exchange for Deo’s grace. With the hot powers of Deo inside them, people can cool the powers of sorcerers and raskols so they cannot be harmed. In possession of Holy Spirit, people are made ‘happy’ (*engama*) – the same expression used for procreative conception, hence ‘reborn’ (see above). In receipt of Deo’s blessings, people are made further desirous of giving their praise to him to enhance his personal fame; and as a result, Deo is made happy and desirous of giving blessings and *Espiritu Sangtonga* to the people. It was in these terms that the increased sickness and death of the mid-1990s ended by decade’s end.

Although in numerous respects contemporary North Mekeo Christianity appears to be continuous with indigenous modes of personhood and agency, in others it differs significantly from both pre-Christian and MSC orthodoxies. For example, women play active roles far exceeding their earlier gender-based agency. Their devotions often dominate Church Committee and Fatima Society activities inasmuch as the clean offerings of Christian rituals have replaced the dangerous, dirty ingredients of magic which earlier disqualified them. Even adult men previously had to close their bodies or abrogate many relationships through fasting, sexual abstinence, and other detachments so as to prevent hot, dirty elements of other persons, including their spiritual allies, from entering their bodies and causing harm. Under Christianity, these relations have been partly inverted. Men as well as women can now assert their ritual agency by opening their bodies to receive the hot, clean, externalized elements of other spiritual persons such as Deo, Yesu, or *Espiritu Sangtonga* so as to protect them from and cool Diabolo’s evil influences. In the past, North Mekeo would never knowingly ingest the hot, dirty flesh of another person. Yet, for Catholics the Eucharist consists in the hot but clean flesh and blood of another (albeit extraordinary) human with precisely the opposite effect of giving eternal life rather than death. Also, many villagers are deeply sceptical of priests’ claims that inducements directed at indigenous spirits are inherently evil, since in the past (and for many villagers, still today) these same spirits contributed to ancestors’ morally good undertakings such as growing crops, raising pigs, hunting, curing illness and sorcery, hunting, and mortuary feasting. These doctrinal points constitute subtly profound transformations of indigenous understandings, which have been affected through the dynamics of personal partibility.

**Conclusion**

Contrary to prevailing understandings of both Melanesian relationalism and Christian individualism, religious change in the instances examined here has pivoted around the elicitive detachment and attachment of the parts/relations of dividual persons, human and spiritual. On this evidence, Melanesians’ engagements with Christianity consist neither in cultural ruptures, disjunctions, or collisions between relationalist and individualist religions nor in their simple syncretic fusion or hybridity. Such claims misread
both the beginning- and end-points of these transformations while betraying, perhaps, a particular Western conceit. On the one hand, the modes of pre-Christian sociality I have discussed exhibit properties whose significance far exceeds the mere ‘relationalist’ valuation of relationships, exchange and transaction – namely the partibility of persons/relations and the absence of indigenous discernments between them and items or objects transacted. On the other, Maisin, Karavarans, Gebusi, Urapmin, and North Mekeo exhibit the considerable extent to which, consonant with Dumont’s and Burridge’s formulations, Christian ‘individualism’ itself is premised on analogous understandings of the partibility of total persons, notwithstanding the momentary emergence of ‘individual’ agents in processes of elicitory detachment and attachment or the uniqueness of the indivisibility of the human soul. In Melanesia, therefore, Christian activity and experience as religious change appear to consist in the conversion of one dividualist form of personhood, agency, and sociality into another. And in light of ethnographic reports of personal partibility beyond Melanesia, it is conceivable that over the centuries many missionized and evangelized peoples have been transacting elements of Christian personhood in accordance with similar procedures.

The same compatibilities may also help explain Christianity’s sometimes-rapid adoption across some parts of Melanesia as compared with the more moderate pace at which other Western institutions have spread. Depending on circumstances, in other words, aspects of Christianity as presented by missionaries, indigenous evangelists, Bible-readings, modern media, and so on, might well have been more readily perceptible and thus inducing to villagers than, say, features of modernity premised on the boundedness of individual subjects (e.g. commodified markets, formal education, electoral politics, court jurisdictions, medical treatment, development projects). And if both pre-Christian and Christian religions indeed share analogous forms of personhood and sociality, then conversions between them would not necessarily have entailed the deep ruptures that have sometimes been posited.

In this regard, specific claims by Knauft and Robbins deserve special comment. Knauft reports that Gebusi, after exchanging their indigenous culture for Western modernity, exhibited a certain ‘recessive agency’, or voluntary submission to the authority of powerful outsiders (e.g. pastors, missionaries, government agents) who controlled access to the benefits of the inaccessible wider world. From an NME viewpoint, however, this seeming passivity might be better interpreted as the response appropriate to persons who, having surrendered the detachments required by God or other authorities, were merely awaiting expected counter-prestations. God had given a promise that Jesus would come, the people had given what was expected, so they then had to wait for God’s response, knowing it would not be immediate: ‘When we pray, we may have to wait a long, long time for God to answer our prayers’ (2002: 146). ‘We don’t know when [Jesus will come], but we have to wait and be ready ... Jesus might come soon. So we must be ready now’ (Knauft 2002: 145-6; original emphasis; cf. Robbins 2007: 12).

Robbins’s claims for Pentecostalism’s distinctive capacity to retain its content and form in situations of culture change (2001a; 2004: 320, 323-32; 2007) presupposes that it and Melanesian pre-Christian cultures are radically distinct from and antithetical to one another, albeit joined in a relation of hybridity, and that the two persist in unsynthesized struggle. But if Urapmin and their Pentecostalism are neither ‘relationalist’ nor ‘individualist’ but share dividual forms of personhood, then some other explanation for their observed irreconcilability is required. I suggest that Urapmin have conceptualized the two cultural orientations as closely approximating the profane and the
sacred, respectively—i.e. having desacralized their traditional culture while sacralizing Christianity—and it is the intrinsically oppositional character of this relation as posited by Durkheim which has inhibited their synthesis and, hence, lent the impression that Pentecostalism travels as a ‘hard’ and coherent cultural form. If so, moreover, then the ongoing periodicity among Urapmin—from sinful traditional pursuits to church redemption and back again—on which Robbins’s ‘adoption’ model (2004: 215ff.) is based, consists rather in Durkheimian-Van Gennepian-Turnerian-Leachian sacred-profane-type transpositions put to the creative service of cultural transformation. This would imply also that the transformative roles that Robbins attributes to people’s experience of ‘humiliation’ (2004: 33–6; 2005; see also Sahlins 2005: 39) might be clarified as reflexes of people’s recalibrations of their indigenous practices as profane in relation to newly introduced sacred powers of divine foreign origin.

Although Melanesian Christianity does not exhibit quite the sort of rupture that some have posited, neither does it involve the mere continuity of pre-existing religious beliefs and practices or some simple slotting-in of exogenous features. For each of the communities I have discussed, villagers have taken upon themselves some elements of Christian personhood and agency in complex transactions involving the strategic elicitive relinquishment of personal elements of indigenous heritage. And because the acquired novel elements have replaced pre-existing ones, it can be affirmed that persons’ identities, relations, and religions have changed.

If so, and finally, my modified version of the NME based on the dynamical potentialities of dividual personhood provides a plausible theoretical path for bridging Melanesian anthropology’s current bifurcation. Personal partibility and elicitation are not necessarily restricted to pre-modern, non-Western societies; rather, those notions intimate some of the critical dynamics at the centre of Western sociality. By implication, studies of social change wherein exogenous Western persons, images, and material items are being or have been disseminated to Melanesia and beyond through modernizing, globalizing flows might be profitably reassessed for the distinctive kinds of contributions they both present and elicit.

NOTES

1 Some of the ethnographies exemplifying the NME would include: Battaglia (1990) for Sabarl Island; Bercovitch (1996) for Atbalmin; Clay (1986) for Mandak; Damon (1983) for Muyuw; Foster (1995) for Tanga
Islands; Gillison (1991) for Gimi; Mimica (1988) for Iqwaye; Mosko (1985; 1995) for North Mekeo and Trobiands; Munn (1986) for Gawa Island; Reed (2003) for Port Moresby prison inmates; Wagner (1967; 1986) for Daribi and Usen Barok; and Weiner (1991) for Foi. A number of studies of personal partibility and dividuality have recently emerged regarding other regions of the world, including India (Busby 1997; Marriot 1976), Amazonia (Kelly 2005), Fiji (Miyazaki 2004), Native Alaska (Fienup-Riordan 1994), and West Africa (Poti 1999).


6 The main exception to this claim is chapter 5 of Property, substance and effect, ‘New economic forms: A report’ (M. Strathern 1993: 89-116, see esp. pp. 106-7, 112-15), describing changes in monetized personhood among Mt Hageners. There, Strathern’s critique of the ‘possessive individual’ in relation to markets and the nation-state converges closely with my commentary on Dumont’s and Burridge’s characterization of the Christian individual (see below): that is, both of these formulations of the modern ‘individual’ in the West figure as components of total, dividual persons.


11 In this and other respects, Dumont’s (1985: 98-105, 113-17) account of the origin of Western individualism in Christianity closely followed the writings of the philosopher-theologian Troeltsch, particularly his magisterial The social teachings of the Christian churches (1931); see, e.g., Troeltsch (1931: 55-5, 325-8, 472, 480-1, 587-90, 991-2).


13 It can be argued that Dumont’s view of ‘outworldly’ as distinct from ‘inworldly’ experience closely approximates the classic Durkheimian opposition of sacred versus profane. For reasons I have discussed elsewhere (Mosko 1994), Dumont’s analysis of Indian caste hierarchy in terms of purity and impurity required a certain elision of the sacred/profane dichotomy. His formulation of outworldly and inworldly thus appears to be similarly motivated. This is particularly germane to my argument below that the alternation between traditional sinful and Christian sinless activities which Robbins describes for Urapmin conversion and ‘adoption’ conforms to classical formulations of rites de passage.

14 While Barker’s more recent writings partially concede the extent of syncretic mixing in post-PNG Independence Christian revivalism and in one instance (Barker 2007) touch on the topic of partibility, he has yet to address the contradictory implications of individual versus dividual personhood when he writes, for example, of ‘the possibility that individuals not only may shift religious identities rather easily but hold more than one simultaneously’ (2001: 106, emphasis added).

15 Elsewhere (Mosko forthcoming) I expand this commentary on pre-Christian Maisin sorcery and healing as involving more than just ‘moral breaches’ and ‘making amends within the community’ (Barker 2003: 289).

16 Although Barker claims that jebughe heals ‘a community’, it seems clear that only the people who engaged directly in the exchange of narratives were healed.

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It is possible, of course, that in these contexts Rev. Brown was covertly acting in terms of commodity-like transactions of ‘buying’ converts, but the overt content of the Christian messages that he delivered regarding himself and his actions leaves little doubt as to the extent to which his offerings would be interpreted as gifts requiring appropriate reciprocity.

Although Knauft does not declare himself on the ‘relationalism’ of his account of pre-Christian sociality, it certainly would qualify as such to the extent that the ‘good company’ of traditional Gebusi sociality was underpinned by themes of exchange and contrasted to Christian individualism. As ethnographic and historical background to Gebusi Christian personhood traced out here, I elsewhere (Mosko forthcoming) attempt a fuller reinterpretation of Knauft’s (1985) outstanding account of indigenous Gebusi sociality, or ‘good company’, which was published a few years before the NME had coalesced as such.

Elsewhere (Mosko forthcoming) I elaborate on the implications of personal partibility for Robbins’s model of ‘adoption’; here I concentrate on the evidentiary nature of Urapmin conversion from pre-Christian to Christian personhood.

In this view, Robbins’s differentiation between ‘petitionary’ and ‘self-formation’ prayers (2004: 254-5, 266) would appear to be an extraneous imposition of the Western subject/object distinction (see above).

For fuller ethnographic accounts of Mekeo culture and social organization, see Hau’ofa (1981) and Mosko (1985). Although I focus here on transactions between North Mekeo and agents of Western Christianity specifically, in other recent publications I have similarly extended the NME approach so as to address additional dimensions of North Mekeo social change: commodification, the adoption and utilization of manufactured goods, body decoration, religious syncretism, architecture, changing patterns of chiefly inheritance, and so on (Mosko 1999b; 2001; 2002; 2007; forthcoming).

Knowledgeable people I have interviewed since 1974 have so far revealed no definitive cultural theory of the source of people’s souls.

Dead human’s spirits animate their bodily remains. Bush spirits often assume the bodily form of specific animal species (e.g. fish with big heads, worms that devour buried corpses, certain eels). ‘Medicines’ (fuka) consisting mainly of plant and animal materials as well as small stones employed in magical charms are considered the bodily/spiritual remains of Akaisa or other deities.

North Mekeo ‘desire’ (anina ani) in my view very closely approximates the Urapmin notion of ‘will’ as I have interpreted it above.

I refer to North Mekeo agents as gendered males in contexts of ‘magic’ and ‘sorcery’ inasmuch as it is ritually prepared men rather than women who nominally qualify to practise these arts (Mosko 1985: 60-99). For the sake of clarity, this technical schema of indigenous North Mekeo personal agency enjoins a kind of personal individuation which remains fundamentally distinct from canonical Western individualism (i.e. bounded politico-jural individuals). Villagers view one another as personally distinct or individuated to the extent that the exact combination or integration of ordinary desires and dislikes of each person at any particular time is unique. My personal predilections and those of my close relatives may be very similar but not identical, and it is the very dividual, non-individualist character of our respective persons which establishes our individuated distinctiveness and corresponding agentive capacities. See comments above in reference to the ‘individualism’ of Dumont and Burridge.

The term for Christian prayer (mengamenga) is an introduced duplication of the indigenous word for magician’s or sorcerer’s spells (menga) which consist in articulated requests (pinoi ‘begging’) for specific responses from named spirit addressees.


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Des pénitents divisibles : personne dividuelle et pratique chrétienne en Mélanésie et en Occident

Résumé


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