
This book is a result of anthropological fieldwork among the Kome clan in Pairundu, a remote village in the southern highlands province of Papua New Guinea. It is a translation of work that was originally published in 1995 in German. Melanesian Christianity has been the subject of scholarship in recent years. In its German version this work was a precursor to some of that literature's major themes, but it also charted a new course especially in its ethnographic examination of two different denominations of Christianity and their relationship to each other in the field. We now have access to this study in English.

As in so many places across the globe, millenarian and Pentecostal cults are assuming great significance in the lives of Melanesians and this book looks at the reasons for an increasing number of young persons leaving their familial moorings in Catholicism to embrace the radical, fundamentalist Christianity of the Seventh-Day Adventist (SDA) Church. Jebens begins by defining religions as ‘culturally and historically determined enterprises’ through and with which human beings communicate about themselves and their environment as well as attempt to negotiate individual and social conflicts in collectively binding ways. As a result of this definition, it becomes clear that an explanation is needed to show how in a particular historical context, religion and religious transformation ‘interprets and constitutes social reality’ and influences that reality too (p. 3). This book then is an attempt to interpret ‘the need and beliefs’ with which the people of Pairundu converted first to the Catholic and subsequently to the Adventist form of Christianity.

Ethnographic studies of religion based on long-term stationary fieldwork have a great deal to contribute to our understanding of the workings of faith. They are able to capture far more successfully perhaps than any other method systems of belief from an ‘emic’ perspective, as well as examine ritual and its relation to proclaimed belief, very closely. This book is a good example of the best traditions in this regard. Jebens traces the contours of the traditional religion and through the archival sources available, charts the course of ‘missionization’ in the region. He notes that the Kome represent themselves as submissive victims of colonization and ‘missionization’. Nevertheless, their adoption of Western influences and Christianity is not a passive process but is selective and closely attuned with their needs and beliefs.

There are three phases in the process of adopting Christianity, according to Jebens. Catholic Christianity came to the Kome sometime in the late 1950s, while the SDA movement gathered strength only in the mid 1980s. A Holy Spirit Movement took off in Pairundu between 1987 and 1989. Some persons, chiefly old Catholic women, were participants. The movement slowly disintegrated largely as a result of conflicts between the mostly female participants and male community members. Several changes were introduced as a result of colonization and missionization. Traditional ways of demonstrating strength such as war and pig-killing festivals disappeared or were discredited, while new ways emerged in the form of the availability of new sources of income from the Church or government. There was an increase in already existing economic differences and a rise of new differences. This diminished the inequality between Big Men and ordinary men and also increased the status of women with respect to men, since they could now earn an

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2007  DOI: 10.1163/156853107X203531
income through the sale of food in the markets and were not excluded from participating in cult practices under Christianity.

Jebens spends time looking at the practices and beliefs of Catholics and Adventists. The ethnographic material shows that there are gradual rather than substantial differences between Catholic and Adventist beliefs. The latter are more rigid or intensive versions of Catholic beliefs. Indeed, Jebens argues that the Kome have a basically pragmatic attitude towards religion in that action takes primacy over belief and individual actions are judged rather on the basis of concrete consequences than ethical considerations (p. 65). Accordingly, there are few quarrels between Adventists and Catholics since there is hardly any ritual or communal interaction. This can go along with stated rejections of each other's beliefs.

From an ‘etic’ point of view, conversion to either form of Christianity is linked with the attempt to appropriate and partake of a new source of power — the power of the whites. As such, Adventists are able to wean Catholics from the fold because of their greater success in appropriating the world of the whites in terms of cult practices, language, clothing and the like. If Catholicism has not produced the power that was hoped for, perhaps the Adventist Church would. Both Catholics and Adventists try to separate themselves from tradition; the rigidity of the Adventists, their fundamentalism, allows them greater success in this regard. Paradoxically, however, while the Adventists owe their popularity to their severing themselves from tradition, it is precisely the parallels to tradition that underlie this popularity. There is a clear parallel between traditional principles of reciprocity and the relation drawn by Adventists between rigidity and the certainty of its reward or return in the form of salvation.

Pairundu is relatively marginal to areas in which colonial and mission impact has been experienced over a longer time span. This may, together with the pragmatism of the people, contribute to the lack of decline of traditional beliefs and ideas. Colonization and missionization have had a less drastic impact on the region. In Pairundu, the subsistence economy is still central and cooperation, co-residence and kinship still determine social cohesion. The Big Men have not lost all their influence. For these reasons, perhaps, the situation is one less of a decline of traditional religion than of its transformation and adaptation (p. 202). Jebens sees the adoption of both Catholicism and the Adventist faith as ways whereby the locals actively take over and adapt Western influences and deploy these according to their own needs and beliefs. In the course of this process, they seek to reclaim their identity and autonomy.

While I enjoyed the book greatly, I have some quarrels with the author. For one, I feel that he takes on the use of the term ‘fundamentalism’ to describe the Adventist faith somewhat uncritically. In this, he relies almost entirely on the ‘etic’ rather than the ‘emic’ perspective. Secondly, the sharp distinction he draws between ‘pragmatic’ and ‘other-worldly’ forms of faith is somewhat problematic. Not only is the source of this pragmatism, however understood, not clearly explained, the author admits that the material itself reveals no such radical dichotomy (p. 243). The easy conflation of pragmatism with the ‘this-worldly’ and the ‘secular’ is also troubling. Traditional faiths in many parts of the world may assume a ritualistic and pragmatic (action-oriented) form even while imbuing the world with a sense of sacredness that does not dwell comfortably with the secular.

Finally, while it is important to always re-emphasize, that, the notion of indigenous passivity in the face of colonization and ‘missionization’ is something of a myth; this has