



THE SPIRITUAL REALM

I looked forward to finishing my cloth. Unlike the beating and designing stages, which tend to be solitary activities, applying the red dye known as *dun* is a social event. I had often passed groups of women chatting happily in the cool area under a house or tree, while they applied *dun* to their tapas from a shared pot. This looked like fun. I also assumed that applying the dye would not tax my meagre technical skills nearly as much as the hard labour of beating the bark or coaxing the sooty black *mii* into neat parallel lines.

First, we had to make the dye. Lottie and I gathered the materials. We walked along the beach until we came to a moderately tall tree the Maisin call *saman*. Lottie wielded the long knife she had brought to slice off a lengthy strip of bark, which she bundled into her string bag. We then strolled behind the village to gather leaves from a second tree known as *dun*. Unlike the wild *wayangu* creeper used in making the black dye, *saman* and *dun* trees are owned. One must seek permission to harvest them if they do not grow on one's own land.

We returned to the village and crossed the river to Martha's house. In the comfortable shade underneath, she and Lottie prepared the *dun*. Lottie used her knife to shred the inner bark from the *saman* bark. She then layered pieces of bark and leaves into a small steel pot. Once it was nearly full, she added water to the brim and placed the pot over a fire. We settled back to enjoy a snack and conversation while the pot boiled away for the next 90 minutes, with Lottie occasionally adding water. As the water heated up, the vegetation released a pinkish dye. The leaves and bark gradually combined as the water took on a satisfactorily bright blood-red hue. Martha brought out a collection of dried pandanus fruits whose tips had been crushed to expose the fibres. The *imongiti*, as these are known, come in a variety of sizes and make handy brushes. Martha dipped one into the bubbling pot of *dun* and tested it on a scrap of tapa. We were ready to begin.

There is an etiquette to sharing a *dun* pot. Once she has arranged herself and her tapa near the pot, the owner is often joined by women from neighbouring houses and relatives visiting from other parts of the village, each bearing a bundle of her own unfinished cloth. When they arrive, each woman takes up one of the host's tapas to work on. When the host feels that she has received sufficient help, she gives the others permission to turn to their own cloths. Usually a pot of *dun* is used up in an afternoon in this pleasant activity (see Plate 3).

We were joined by a few women, but only one brought her own cloths. Clearly I was to provide the entertainment for the day! I immediately broke with custom by reaching for my own cloth, unwilling to risk messing up Lottie's or Martha's creations, and tentatively dipped my pandanus brush into the dye. I found to my relief that applying the *dun* was much easier than working with the black *mii*, but it still required concentration and a steady hand. My first tentative strokes resulted in a blotchy pink stain. I was surprised by how quickly the cloth absorbed the dye. When one splotch seeped across the black line, I jerked my hand up. Bad idea! Spatters of red now festooned what was supposed to be a white area. So I stopped and paid closer attention to Martha's and Lottie's technique. They dipped their brushes into the hot liquid, flicked off the excess, and then applied it to a line, using a light hand and rapid forward brush stroke.

After a while, I got the hang of it, and my lines took on a satisfactory consistency, even if the colour was not as boldly red as my companions'. I was surprised by how quickly the work went. *Dun* dries rapidly. You don't need to wait long upon completing one panel before flipping the cloth to work on the next. We hung each piece on a clothesline as soon as it was finished, leaving the painted surface exposed to bake in the sun for a short time before turning the cloth inside out. When the women were satisfied that the cloths were thoroughly dry, they took them off the line. Much like a little kid bringing home his first shop project, I proudly showed my tapa to Mary Rose and George. I don't know if they really liked it, but they were very kind.

The vibrant red of the *dun* quickly fades in the bright Papua New Guinea sunshine, and the cloth itself is easily damaged by moisture, so cloths are stored in a dark corner of the house, usually inside a suitcase. Most tapa doesn't stay packed for long. While a few women regularly make cloth, most take up the demanding chore only when an opportunity arises to sell it or it is required for an exchange or dancing. Even so, George told me that it is best to hold a few well-designed large *embobi* back in the house for special occasions. When an important visitor arrives, for instance, one should show respect by spreading out a handsome tapa for them to sit upon. George and Mary Rose welcomed their children returning home from high school in this way.

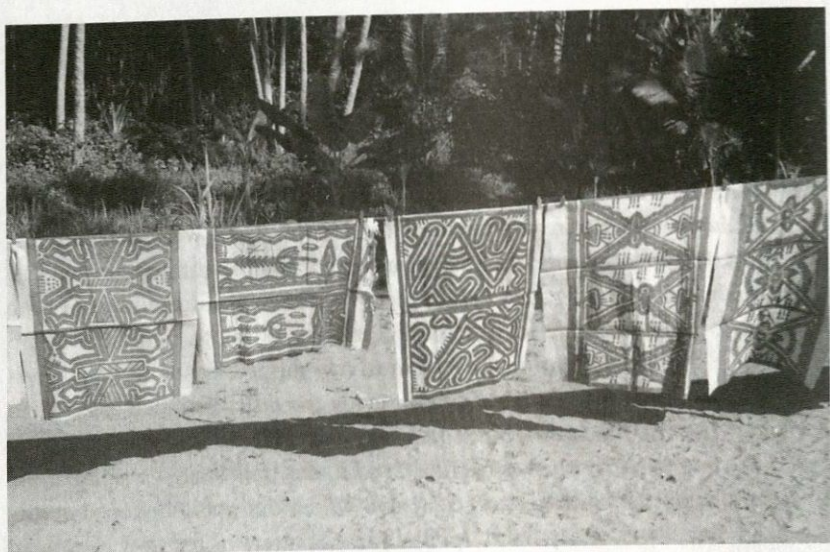


Figure 4.1 Recently completed tapa drying on a clothesline. (Photo by J. Barker)

I was reminded of how Lottie had honoured me with her beautiful tapa earlier when I had been designing my own.

Tapa has many facets for the Maisin. In the past, it was primarily a utilitarian object. This is no longer the case, but even in earlier times tapa was much more than simply clothing. It was and still is a type of wealth. A villager would not think of sponsoring or participating in a major exchange without a good supply of cloth. Along with other types of wealth—cash, food, shell necklaces, and so forth—the public giving of tapa serves to demonstrate the giver's social status while affirming or creating social relationships upon which that status relies. As we saw in Chapter 2, tapa is also a commodity, something that can be converted into cash to be used to purchase goods from the trade store, pay school fees, or buy airplane fares to Port Moresby.

At a more subtle level, tapa speaks to religious and cosmological assumptions. It took me some time to understand this. Early in my research, I read an article stating that Maisin clan designs derive from mythological stories (Schwimmer 1979).¹ This turned out to be true in only a few cases. The Jorega clan, for instance, associates a fern-like design known as *sividi* with a marvelous tale set in the Musa swamp area during the origin times. There are a few instances of clan designs associated with specific events in the migration histories. Most, however, are simply emblems. A couple of my favourite tapa makers, Natalie Kitore and Nita Keru, drew fanciful images of animals, insects, spirits,

and people. The vast majority of tapas worn and sold by Maisin, however, bear abstract designs.

My conclusion that Maisin regard tapa as a purely secular object unravelled in a curious way. On the day before I was to leave Uiaku at the end of two months of research focused upon tapa making and tattooing in 1986, I visited Agnes Sanangi and her sister Natalie Kitore to tie up a few loose ends. We were just running through the etiquette Maisin observe when sharing a pot of *dun* when Agnes added some new and surprising information. "In the old days," she said, a woman would announce to the household that she was about to apply the red dye. The night before, she and her husband refrained from sexual activity. The following morning, her husband and children left the house while she prepared the *dun* inside. She explained that if men were present or children were running around and making noise, the *dun* would dry out. Once the *dun* was ready, the tapa maker invited other women to join her in the privacy of the house. The *dun*, Agnes added, was "very strong," unlike the black *mii* dye, and thus had to be handled carefully and only by women. While listening, I thought of how when a newly tattooed girl first emerges from the tattooist's house she wears a special tapa known as *wamatuvi* that is dyed entirely red except for an unpainted fringe at the base. The Maisin thus seemed to associate the red dye with women, perhaps more specifically with women's blood. This association was subsequently confirmed by Anna-Karina Hermkens (2013). Several of her elderly informants told her that the red dye was called *tambuta* (an extremely bright or "ripe" blood red) during the time it was in the house.

These observations, so casually revealed, opened up a whole new dimension of tapa to me. They suggested that in the past the Maisin associated aspects of the making of tapa with the essence of femininity (cf. Hermkens 2013). Making tapa, especially the final stages, thus connected to a complex of practices and rituals involving food taboos, birthing, infant care practices, and gender etiquette (Tietjen 1985). Many of these practices had spiritual sanctions. Were a man to break the taboo on entering the house while the *dun* was present, I was told, he would become ill. Agnes told me that Maisin women stopped secluding themselves while using *dun* sometime around the end of World War II, although she was unable to tell me why.

Of course I asked Agnes and Natalie why they had not told me about this fascinating custom during our many sessions together. I already knew the answer: "You didn't ask." I have no reason to doubt their explanation. There was nothing secret about the older way of handling *dun*. Elderly men spoke as readily about it as did women once I knew to ask. The problem really lay with me. My job was to make sense of Maisin life. So I asked

questions, sought explanations. Many of my informants were very happy to speak about aspects of spirituality. Indeed, they told me that my questions were quite stimulating. However, the Maisin experience the spiritual world much more than they rationalize it. They feel no need to pull together often contradictory bits of ritual practices, observances of taboos, or encounters with spiritual forces into a big picture. Much of an individual's knowledge of the spiritual rests upon tacit, unarticulated assumptions. Thus, if the intrinsic incompatibility of red *dun* and men is something that everyone just knows, there is no reason to expect that anyone would think to volunteer the information to an anthropologist.

There is no subject so fascinating or challenging to study as the religious dimensions of a culture. The contemporary religion of the Maisin is rather like one of their finished tapas. One sees, at first, the bold patterns of red bounded by black, the equivalent of the widely shared religious beliefs and practices we shall examine in this chapter: church services, ideas about the nature of spirits, sorcery and healing practices, and rituals to deal with the passage between life and death. The basic elements of a tapa design are quite limited. Yet, as you develop a greater knowledge and appreciation, you become aware that every tapa design combines those elements into a unique expression. In this chapter, I focus mostly on the general, shared aspects of Maisin religious experience. However, as we shall see, the Maisin's approach to the spiritual realm is highly innovative and creative. This, more than anything else, explains why 90 years after most people became Christians, their religious lives retain a strong Indigenous signature.

CHRISTIANITY

St. Thomas Church is the largest building in Uiaku, although it is easily overlooked by visitors. It sits at the very back of the mission station, behind wide grassy sports fields edged by neat croton-lined paths that run past the teachers' houses and classrooms. The church itself looks like a long shed, its roof a patchwork of corrugated iron sheets in various shades of rust. Closer in, one notices a space between the sloping roof and sago-rib walls to allow light and cooling breezes into the building. You enter at the far end facing the altar, making your way between two sets of small logs that form the pews. The altar sits on a raised platform of sand and gravel that takes up the front quarter of the church. The back wall and the altar are richly adorned with tapa cloth, but apart from this there are few decorations. The simple interior, however, is clean and attractive. Prior to each service, a few women from the Mothers' Union sweep the floor, rake the gravel, and place a few clay pots filled with flowers along the edge of the altar platform.

On a typical Sunday, perhaps one-third of the adults from Uiaku and Ganjiga show up for the 8 a.m. service. As people quietly shuffle in, they divide, the women moving to the left pews and men to the right, with school children of both sexes occupying the front rows on the right, under the watchful eye of a deacon or school teacher. The number of adolescents and unmarried young adults attending ebbs and flows. Most weeks there are few, but the ranks swell on occasions like sports meets and youth fellowship gatherings that bring visitors to the village. By the late 1990s, the singing of Victorian-era hymns in the old "church language" of Wedau had been replaced by lively contemporary gospel songs in English and Maisin, usually led by young people playing guitars and sometimes a battery-powered electronic keyboard.

The services follow a standardized format in simple English, based upon the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. Bible readings and prayers are also in English, as is the sermon when a Maisin-speaking priest or deacon is not available. Prior to the mid-1980s, Church authorities discouraged clergy from working in their own tribal groups. Neither of the two priests serving Uiaku during my first fieldwork could speak Maisin. They delivered their sermons in simple and, to my ears at least, fractured English with a Maisin deacon or church council member providing translation. The rest of the service is not translated for the benefit of those who cannot understand English (a majority in the early 1980s). Indeed, the liturgy allows for very limited participation from the congregation. The congregants sit passively through the readings and sermons, chanting brief ritual responses to the prayers and coming forward to receive communion in a never-changing rhythm that echoes Anglican services around the world. The sermon allows for more variation, but only lay readers, deacons, and priests licensed by the bishop are allowed to preach.² Most of them stick to a simple formula of reiterating the Bible lessons and urging their flocks to obey God and love their neighbours. They rarely refer to events or concerns in the local community.

I had come to Uiaku to study the impact of Christianity on Maisin culture and so became a regular member of the small band of congregants attending church in 1981–83. I had plenty of time, perched uncomfortably on my hard pew, to speculate on what Christianity meant to villagers. My early impression was: not very much. To be sure, there was a small minority who faithfully attended church, studied the Bible, and prefaced each meal with a grace. Still, most people did not bother, and there seemed to be few if any consequences for missing services or for failing to contribute money to help pay the priest's salary. People also got away with flouting key Church teachings, most notably about marriage. It seemed that their adherence to Christianity was quite superficial.

I was mistaken. Christianity has a profound presence in Maisin life. All but one adult in the village have been baptized, and all received instruction in the religion as children; community meetings commonly opened and closed with prayers, and speakers often urged their listeners to adhere to Christian teachings; and church festivals, particularly the patron saint's day, were major social events, involving nearly all villagers in the preparations and celebrations. As of 2000, Uiaku had produced eight priests, two of whom rose to prominent positions in the national Anglican Church. People from across the community took great pride in their identity as Christians, insisting that the appearance of missionaries on the Uiaku beach in 1890 had transformed life for the better by ending tribal warfare and ushering in peace. People told more intimate stories about how they had recovered from life-threatening illnesses after experiencing visions or dreams of Jesus, Mary, and other biblical figures or of how their faith in God had preserved them from a terrifying sorcery attack.

Even taking such attitudes into account, many observers would probably still assume that the Maisin were not "really Christians," pointing to spotty attendance at church services and common belief in such things as magic, spirits, and sorcery. Indeed, a small but growing minority of Maisin feel this way and have left the Anglican Church to join denominations like the Pentecostals and the Seventh-Day Adventists that insist upon a radical break with many traditional customs as a condition of being a Christian. Yet it does not follow that Maisin Anglicans are not Christians. From a nonsectarian point of view, it is clear that Christianity has assumed a bewildering variety of guises during its 2,000-year history and expansion across the globe. Ethnographers are not called upon to judge which if any of these versions is legitimate. As part of a holistic study of their culture and history, our job is to investigate what people mean when they identify as Christians (cf. Barker 1990a; Cannell 2006).

It is important to bear in mind that Christianity is not new for the Maisin. The village church was established long before the birth of the oldest living villager today.³ The present generation does not regard Christianity as a foreign religion but as much a part of their identity as the origin stories of the clans. Yet the way Maisin understand Christianity differs significantly from the types of beliefs found among congregations in Western countries. It is largely the product of a "long conversation" between external church authorities and sacred texts, notably the Bible, and local cultural assumptions about the nature of spiritual powers.⁴ This conversation has progressed in two overlapping registers. The first and most overt has to do with the official teachings and requirements of the Church. The Anglican Church of Papua New Guinea is a hierarchical organization, with authority flowing down from the bishop,

through licensed priests, deacons, and lay-evangelists, to ordinary congregants. The Church exercises considerable control over the performance of services and teachings. Historically, there has been little space for local innovation, although this is now beginning to change with the encouragement of youth fellowship rallies and other largely lay-run initiatives. While conservative regarding its own practices and doctrines, the Church has historically been tolerant of local customs and beliefs. Unlike many Protestant missions operating in Papua during the colonial period, the Anglicans did not insist that converts separate themselves from their pagan neighbours and called for reform rather than abandonment of most Indigenous customs such as death rites and dancing (Wetherell 1977). If the congregants of St. Thomas Church don't insist on taking a larger role in church services, this is not because they are uninterested but because they accept a version of Christianity that accords the leading liturgical role to the clergy. If the Church has failed to reshape social practices to fit its doctrines, this is because its officials for the most part have seen little reason to do so.

Over the years, the Anglican Church has made some concessions to local culture (Barker 2014). The practice of blessing couples after a child or two has been born represents a compromise in which the Church recognizes marriage as a sacrament while allowing the Maisin a flexible means of dealing with the strict rules against divorce. Along with decorative tapa drapings, some local cultural colour in church services has been encouraged by Church authorities. Since the 1970s, parishes across Collingwood Bay have often celebrated patron saint days and Easter with feasting and traditional dancing (Gnecchi-Ruscone 1997; Hermkens 2007). During the 1980s, Deacon Russell Maikin translated the liturgy into Maisin and set it to traditional drummed chants to be performed by a choir in traditional dress during celebrations of Easter and the parish feast day honouring Saint Thomas (see Plate 7).

Still, the general picture at the level of official Anglican practices and doctrines is one of balanced separation: acceptance of the authority of the clergy in their own sphere of action on the part of villagers and tolerance of villagers' beliefs and actions in their daily life on the part of the clergy (Barker 1993). This is not the end of the story, however, because the long conversation has also carried on at a second register, in the course of people's life experiences. Drawing upon the thought of Max Weber, a great pioneer in the sociology of religion, Clifford Geertz (1973:100) has argued that, at its core, religion is a response to intractable crises of meaning that radically challenge our sense that the world is comprehensible, endurable, and ethical. When faced by a calamity (or opportunity, for that matter), most Maisin do not stop to sort out Christian doctrines from Indigenous beliefs. Instead, they draw on the



Figure 4.2 Celebrating Easter in St. Thomas Church, Uiaku, 1982. A chorus of men in traditional dress chants the liturgy in Maisin accompanied by drums. (Photo by A.M. Tietjen)

full compass of things they know or suspect, seeking confirmation from kin, neighbours, and clergy as they do so. The result is an ever-evolving popular religion made up of both local and imported ideas and practices.

The remainder of this chapter focuses mainly upon this second register: the religious beliefs and practices of everyday life in Uiaku. Our concern is to understand the ways that Maisin think about and experience spirituality, whatever the source of their ideas. That understanding, in turn, is dependent upon a conception of the nature of the cosmos and their place in it.

COSMOLOGY

John Wesley Vaso and Weston Nonisa had an extraordinary story to tell, and I wondered if I heard them correctly. Two weeks earlier, John Wesley's father, John Hunt Vaso, had failed to return from hunting bush pigs. A search party was sent out. Early in the morning of the second day, Weston came upon John Hunt stumbling up a garden path. He was accompanied by three figures that vanished into thin air within seconds of Weston's arrival. A few days later, I got the full story from John Hunt himself. The hunt had been promising at first. His dogs scared up a large boar, but every time he drew close to throw his

spear, the animal escaped deeper into the bush. Eventually, he found himself in the deep forest, well beyond the garden zone. It was getting dark. The pig suddenly transformed into a large old man with dirty hair and a twisted beard. John Hunt knew at once that he had been lured by a *yawu kosaro*, an extremely dangerous bush spirit. The spirit grabbed him and in the ensuing struggle through the night and part of the next day attempted to kill him by dragging him across sharp sago thorns and then trying to drown him. On the point of collapse, John Hunt called the name of his deceased younger brother. He felt a tap on his shoulder. The *yawu kosaro* vanished to be replaced by his brother and two of his deceased aunts. His brother asked, "Why are you worried? If he wanted to kill you, he would have done so." Exhausted, John Hunt slept, protected by the ghosts. The next morning, they woke him up and led him to the garden path where the group encountered Weston.

Fantastic as the story sounded, no one doubted its truth. Every adult knew similar tales of encounters with ghosts, spirits, and other supernatural beings. Such encounters were infrequent, initiated by the spirits themselves, and could happen to anyone—including me! I was interested in interviewing healers who I had heard had the ability to see the reflections of spirits mirrored in water as they passed. One of the most powerful was a wizened blind woman living alone in Ganjiga, Marcella Adeva. When I first visited, I was unnerved by Adeva's milky blue eyes that seemed to see right through me. She abruptly cut off my questions and engaged in an animated argument with, as far as I could see, herself and then retreated to her windowless hut. A weird voice issued from inside, demanding to know who I was and why I was so interested in "mother." My research assistant explained that Adeva's two deceased daughters resided with her in the hut. They ordered me to leave. A few days later, I was invited back by the daughters and completed the interview. It was a freaky experience, but informative. Like ordinary villagers, I came to rely on healers for insights on spiritual matters. I found them remarkably engaging and open in sharing their knowledge and experiences. All considered themselves good Christians whose healing powers derived from God. Indeed, two of the most respected were senior members of the Mothers' Union.

Like most Melanesians, the Maisin assume that they share the physical world with a host of spiritual entities and forces. They are not, however, particularly superstitious in the sense of being credulous. Stories of encounters with the supernatural get weighed and assessed according to what people know of these forces; they question and sometimes reject claims that strike them as unrealistic. Nor do the Maisin live in a kind of communion with the spiritual world. Some people pray to the Christian god, and many more allow the priest to pray on their behalf, but only sorcerers and healers regularly appeal directly

to spirits for help. People don't pay much attention to spirits except when they intervene directly in their lives, as when the *yawu kosaro* attacked John Hunt.

If the Maisin understandings of spirits strikes many of us as strange, it is because most people in industrialized societies work with different assumptions about the nature of the things—that is to say, with a different cosmology. Most Westerners, if they believe in God or gods at all, conceive of spiritual entities residing far away, concerned and caring perhaps, but nonetheless leaving us to deal with our day-to-day affairs as best we can. The business of explaining spirituality is mostly left to specialists like theologians, religious ministers, or clairvoyants. It is possible in the West to get by without concerning oneself at all with spiritual matters or denying their existence entirely, and many people do. People thus share a general set of cosmological assumptions that makes it possible to define themselves as “very religious” or “not religious” at all. Such claims would make no sense to the Maisin because they work from cosmological assumptions that place living humans and supernatural forces within the same physical environment. The Maisin simply *know* that there are spiritual entities that periodically intrude directly in people's lives in the same way that we “know” that germs cause sickness. For most people most of the time, these are commonsensical assumptions that require no further explanation.

Maisin notions of the supernatural tend to be rather fluid and flexible. Apart from the clergy, who speak only about Christian entities, there are Indigenous authorities to assure orthodoxy. A handful of healers claim knowledge about specific spirits, but most people share only a vague understanding of the spiritual world. Aside from responding to inquisitive anthropologists, people talk about the supernatural mostly in response to events that are believed to have spiritual causes. They draw upon oral traditions, general assumptions about the nature of the spiritual, and the state of social relations at the time to come up with plausible explanations. The more significant the event, the wider the range of speculation as to the spiritual causes.

Here is an example. In January 1983, the Vayova River overflowed its banks after weeks of heavy rains. A large portion of Ganjiga village was flooded. While no houses collapsed, several were seriously undermined. Nobody doubted that the disaster had a spiritual cause. Many people in Ganjiga suspected that sorcerers from the Uiaku side of the river had called on spirit familiars to cause the flood in retaliation for a long-standing feud. The Uiaku people, however, raised other possibilities: some Ganjiga people had annoyed other villagers by making gardens on disputed land, thus prompting sorcery attack, or perhaps God had sent the flood to punish Ganjiga people for lax church attendance. During a long, contentious meeting to discuss the disaster, several people noted how one of the clans on the Uiaku side had

traditionally possessed magic to cause flooding and so surely was involved. This was vigorously denied by the senior members of the clan, who protested that their ancestors had given up the magic when they became Christians. In the end, nothing was resolved but people worried about a retaliatory spiritual attack for some time.

The Maisin recognize that spirits and spiritual forces are powerful and usually invisible to living humans. Explanations cannot help but be variable because so much rests upon surmise. All the same, an examination of many explanations clearly reveals common underlying assumptions. These concern the nature of spiritual power, the types of entities that embody that power, and the relationship between living humans and the divine.

Spiritual entities share a trait of "strength" or "power," *anno wenna*. When applied to humans, the term describes physical strength: an adult may evince *anno wenna* but an infant does not. When applied to supernatural entities, the concept resembles the eastern Melanesian and Polynesian idea of *mana*. *Anno wenna* is not a substance; it is an attribute of entities that effect transformations (Keesing 1984). This potency is at once dangerous and creative. Humans must prepare themselves through certain rituals to build up their own "strength" before approaching spiritual entities if they wish to survive the encounter. Approached correctly, spiritual force effects the positive transformations necessary for survival: success in subsistence activities, for instance, and the maturation of children. Unfortunately, spiritual forces may also be manipulated to cause misfortunes as in the case of sorcery attacks or disasters like the Ganjiga flood. Humans have no choice but to try to manipulate spiritual forces, to draw upon and direct their transformative power. Yet humans ultimately cannot control the divine world. With the somewhat ambiguous exception of the Christian god, spiritual entities are intrinsically amoral. They can aid, harm, or ignore the living as they please.

The Maisin encounter a range of entities that manifest spiritual *anno wenna*. Some places, like gardens for instance, hold spiritual potency through their association with ancestors. The most common form, however, is magic. Individual Maisin use magic for a wide variety of applications: gardening, hunting, fishing, healing fevers, sexually attracting a mate, preventing pregnancy, and so forth. People are secretive about the magic they possess, but the forms I've seen or heard about all involve special leaves, barks, or odd-shaped rocks over which a simple incantation is chanted. Before using their magic, owners prepare themselves by avoiding sexual intercourse and eating foods deemed to be "hot." Those who fail to prepare or use magic improperly may be harmed and even killed by it. Whenever people come into contact with spiritual forces, they take on the quality of *anno wenna* themselves and

pose a risk for others. Hence, magical practitioners take precautions when their magic is active. They don't share food with others and keep their magic out of sight. Stepping over magically treated objects such as hunting spears will make a person sick.

The Maisin's environment is inhabited by a variety of spirits. The most commonly encountered are spirits of the recent or distant dead. As Christians, Maisin state that when a person dies, their spirit (*yawu* = "breath") eventually goes to Heaven. Yet people expect ghosts to linger around their homes for some time after death. One never sees them directly. They appear to their kin in dreams and visions, or to healers as reflections on the surface of water as they pass. The recently deceased retain their names and identities. They are known as *kaniniwa*, a word also used to denote "soul," "reflection," "shadow," and "picture." When a young person dies suddenly and unexpectedly, his or her ghost may hover around the village for days or even weeks. People do not venture into the gardens at such times. Women and children, whose "strength" is not as great as men's, are especially vulnerable to attack from the ghost, who may be angry over its untimely death or just lonely. The Maisin often attribute the deaths of babies to ghost attack. All the same, the recent dead can also be very helpful. They often appear in the dreams of their close relatives, showing good places to make gardens, to hunt, or to fish.⁵ Some also act as spirit familiars for sorcerers and healers, as we shall see later in this chapter.

For the most part, however, the spirits that the Maisin believe inhabit the bush and garden areas are anonymous. *Waa*, as they are called, were once human, but their specific identities have been lost. Maisin know of them mainly through folktales. Ghosts in these stories sometimes appear as old people, ravenous for human flesh; in others, they trick the living by donning skins that make them appear as sexy young men and women. The stories are often gruesome, but in general the Maisin don't worry much about *waa* as they are not imagined to be very interested in the living and only attack when disturbed, as when people speak loudly or let their children run wild when first clearing a garden.

At a further remove from the villages, in the deep forest and in rivers flowing down from the heights of the mountain wall, dwell certain spirits that may never have been among the living. Very few hunters venture this far and thus rarely encounter them. John Hunt's *yawu kosaro* belonged to this group. A few elders I worked with claimed to know the names of some. I purchased a striking tapa cloth whose design featured a monstrous form, with spades in the place of its legs and arms. The woman who designed the cloth, herself a healer, came from the Aisore clan, which traditionally had the magic to call this spirit from its home in the mountains to cause flooding. Maisin more often encounter

another form of bush spirit that inhabits the bodies of river eels. These eels, called *yun tamati*, "water men," attack women by invisibly entering their bodies through their vaginas and causing severe sickness marked by cold chills.

Prior to the arrival of the missionaries, the Maisin do not seem to have recognized any deities. However, everyone today knows of God, Jesus, and other Christian figures through church services and the Bible. Most villagers treat biblical figures as divine entities that continue to exist and influence the world. Angels or figures such as Jacob from the Old Testament or the Virgin Mary, sometimes visit in dreams, usually when people are seriously ill. Some friends told me that they had been visited by Jesus himself, although they were only able to look upon his feet, not his face. In general, people consider such interventions as benign, occurring at moments of personal crisis. They thus form an exception to the assumption that spirits are amoral. Yet there is some ambiguity on this point, especially in Maisin thinking about God. The Maisin accept church teaching that God is an omnipresent being. They credit him with the creation of everything and, as we'll see below, hold that faith in God and Jesus provides protection against sorcerers. Yet not everyone sees God as always benign or helpful. Like a lesser spirit, he can be capricious or moved to anger by slights. Many assume that God's interventions in the world must be on a scale with his greatness and power. Thus, people tend to attribute major natural disasters to God's anger. Elders who remembered the Mount Lamington volcanic explosion of 1951, which killed around 4,000 people in the central part of Oro Province, told me that it was God's revenge against the Orokaiva people of the area who had angered him by failing to keep their churches neat and clean.⁶ Most people saw the typhoon of 1974, which levelled Tufi, as another instance of God's revenge against local failings, and similar rumours circulated after Ganjiga was flooded.

Magic, ghosts, spirits, and even God as Maisin think of them exist in intimate relationship with living people. They exert *anno wenna*, transformative strength, upon which the living depend for the fertility of their gardens and the renewal of society. Yet they are unlike people, who are constrained by the moral requirements of reciprocity. The transformative power of spirits reflects their amoral nature: the ability to act in self-willed ways without consequence to themselves. All the same, perhaps because they depend upon them for survival, people assume that spiritual forces respond to human entreaties and interactions, whether in the form of magic, prayers, healing rituals, or sorcery attacks. Thus, when something goes terribly wrong (just as when things go exceptionally well), there is a reflexive tendency to assume that the explanation for why spiritual forces have acted rests ultimately in human relations and actions, the moral domain. This brings us back to the incident that opened

this section. John Hunt and everyone else I talked to about his encounter with the bush spirit was convinced that a sorcerer had set him up. I pressed John Hunt to describe the spirits he encountered, hoping to learn details about Maisin cosmology beyond the vague outlines most people supplied. I was disappointed. He only wanted to talk about why someone wished him dead. Unless he could deal with what he considered the real causes, he might well be attacked again. Discussion of local religion thus turns on an understanding of morality and its limits, a location occupied in the Maisin imagination by the terrifying yet familiar figure of the sorcerer.

MONA'S DEATH

Over the course of a week in October 1982, I overheard a growing chorus of concern about Mona. Mona was a middle-aged widow who had suffered from a debilitating illness for over a year. Her alarmed family had turned to every medical resource available to them: the government-sponsored village medical aid post, traditional medicines, and a prayer service led by the priest.⁷ When the nurses at the small hospital in Wanigela failed to cure Mona, her working relatives put up the funds to transport her to hospitals in the city of Lae and then Popondetta to be examined and treated by doctors. The doctors decided they could do nothing for her and sent her home. This was the clearest evidence, as far as villagers were concerned, that Mona was suffering from "village sickness." Powerful as they were, it was well understood that Western medicines were impotent against sorcery (cf. Street 2014).

Soon after, under a gloriously bright full moon, I canoed across the river to Ganjiga where Mona was staying in the care of a clan brother. She was emaciated, nearly a skeleton, lying on a thin mattress on the verandah where the occasional breeze cooled her feverish body. A group of men sat nearby, speaking in low tones. They were keeping *gumema*, a vigil to protect her from further attacks by spirits or sorcerers, who are believed to take advantage of the weak. One elderly man was applying bush medicine to her legs, which were paralyzed. A few nights later, a larger group gathered for a spirit séance. Accompanied by a chorus of young girls, the healer Adeva chanted spirit songs through the night, occasionally pausing to spray red betelnut spittle over Mona's body. Adeva later told me that during her trance her spirit had left her body in search of Mona's soul, which had been stolen and hidden by a sorcerer. She had been successful in returning Mona's soul to her body, but could not stop the sorcerer if he chose to steal it back again.

As Mona continued to decline, I heard increasing talk about how sorcerers were getting out of control. People reflected upon several recent deaths. If Mona were to die, perhaps her angered relatives would retaliate with sorcery

against those they felt responsible. Where would it all end? The village councillor declared it time to have a meeting. Nearly all adults from Uiaku, Ganjiga, and the nearby village of Yuayu attended. Several people spoke, including (unusually) two women, reviewing all of the reasons someone might have wanted to hurt Mona or her family. In the end, several people claimed that a Yuayu man had employed sorcery after being rejected as a suitor. He and his relatives denied this vigorously. As people reviewed past tensions and spats, the elders reminded everyone that the purpose of the meeting was not to accuse or punish the sorcerer but to bring the community together, to find an answer to the social tensions that led to "all of the ladies dying." One speaker after another stated, "We have not gathered here to blame anyone." The underlying message seemed to be that healing the poor woman's body depended upon healing the social breaches in the society. Russell Maikin, a church deacon, confirmed this at the end of the meeting. He first asked everyone to join him in a prayer for Mona's recovery. He then prompted the assembly to shout as one: "She will be well!" But Mona didn't recover and so the meetings continued. After the third gathering, she quietly passed away.

The reaction to Mona's illness was not typical. Early death is common in the area. People suffer from a wide range of serious diseases like malaria, dengue fever, dysentery, and tuberculosis. Accidents from machetes, wild boars, or falling trees are not uncommon. Western medical facilities are sparse at best. During the 1980s, the village aid post offered only a small range of medicines, often running out, until closing down entirely in the late 1990s after years of intermittent government funding. Most deaths occur among infants and the very old. Close relatives will sometimes attribute them to sorcery, but people usually accept such tragedies stoically. It is different when an adult, in the full vigour of life, suffers a serious accident or a life-threatening illness, and it is especially frightening when they die. Not only are such deaths tragic, they are dangerous to the living for they may touch off a sorcery feud that will threaten the survival of everyone. This is the dark side of reciprocity: An eye for an eye. Payback. Coming in the wake of several deaths of middle-aged women, Mona's sickness thus triggered panic. People needed to know the reasons behind the attacks before they spun out of control. Fortunately, no one else fell sick in the weeks following Mona's death, and talk of sorcery gradually faded away.

Sorcery and witchcraft beliefs are very common, and anthropologists have devoted much attention to them.⁸ Variations are found across Melanesia and, indeed, much of the world. In centuries past in Europe and the American colonies, church and government officials put hundreds of mostly poor women to death on charges of witchcraft and accused many more of secretly practising

the black arts. Yet concerns about sorcerers and witches have receded in the industrialized world, and for many its persistence elsewhere is perplexing. Dismissing sorcery beliefs as "superstition" fails to explain why people like the Maisin accept its existence. Consider this: The Maisin know about germs, readily use Western medicine when available, and understand that carelessness leads to accidents. Further, nobody admits to actually practising sorcery, although some people—mainly healers—claim to know a great deal about how it is done. People thus know about alternative explanations for misfortune, and they possess no direct evidence that sorcerers even exist. They also know that the Church officially frowns upon sorcery and that many Westerners are skeptical of its very existence. It is possible that some Maisin occasionally resort to trying sorcery.⁹ However, from an empirical standpoint, sorcery exists as a *post facto* explanation rather than an actual practice: as an explanation after the fact. The Maisin don't require proof of the existence of sorcery any more than most of us do of germs; they know it exists in large part because it provides a satisfactory explanation of why misfortunes like serious illnesses happen.

THE MEANING OF SORCERY

As we shall see, Maisin have long wanted to rid themselves of sorcery. However, from their perspective it defies common sense to deny its reality. No one questions whether sorcerers exist, although people do argue over specific interpretations and accusations. In the case of serious mishaps, people reflexively wonder, "Why did this happen?" They may think awhile about the identity or methods employed by the sorcerer, but inevitably they focus upon the state of social relationships. This is because sorcerers are assumed to be most often motivated by moral breaches or to be hired by people who are retaliating for some wrong. Talk of sorcery, then, intrinsically connects two things: personal misfortunes and the state of social relationships.

Before turning to this connection, we need to examine the ways Maisin talk about sorcerers and the closely related person of the healer. Unlike healers, who may be male or female, sorcerers are always male. Sorcerers and healers derive their power by virtue of having one foot in the world of the living and one foot in the spiritual realm. Both are thought to make themselves "hot" by shunning "cooling" foods, avoiding sex, and refusing to share their food and possessions with others. They take on the traits of spirits. People are wary around healers but live with them and use their services. In contrast, they imagine sorcerers to be solitary, living at the margins of the community, avoiding contact. Like spirits, sorcerers are thought to be amoral and self-willed. Lacking reciprocal morality, they are prone to jealousy and selfishness

and are quick to anger. They are greatly feared, yet there is also an element of tragedy in the Maisin image of sorcerers, for they are the victims as much as victors of their powers (cf. Stephen 1995). Maisin describe sorcerers as *dagari*, a complex concept that combines the characteristic of greediness with being physically crippled. Sorcerers exemplify individualism for the Maisin, which in this reciprocal society is generally not a desirable trait. Indeed, the sorcerer in many ways represents the antithesis of moral being for the Maisin: he is a figure of evil. Shrouded in secrecy, powerful and feared, he is at the same time lonely and vulnerable. Sorcerers must always be on guard against retaliation from others with similar or greater powers. Even if they are successful for a time, their engagement with spiritual forces slowly erodes their health and eventually kills them. Thus, the Maisin often picture the sorcerer as physically bent and twisted, a man both suffering and causing pain.

Maisin are troubled by four main types of sorcery and witchcraft. The most terrifying originate from outside. In the old days, Doriri warriors would raid the coastal villages from their homes in the mountainous country to the west of Collingwood Bay. Maisin today fear their modern-day descendants, known as Kosaro, who they believe come down from the mountains in packs during the dry season to ambush unwary villagers as they make their way to and from gardens. The Kosaro sing a siren-like song that mesmerizes their victims, leading them off the garden path and into the bush. They are struck down and cut open. The sorcerers gut them like pigs, replacing their innards with magical substances. They then close up the victims and send them on their way back to the village to drop dead a day or two later. Equally feared are the Yafuni, female flying witches from Milne Bay Province to the east, who leave the bodies of their hosts during the night to roam far up the coast (Kahn 1986; Malinowski 1922). Yafuni are said to be physically brutal, leaving wounds and bruises on their victims visible only to healers. Kosaro and Yafuni are suspected whenever a sudden death inexplicably occurs. When a young man died in the midst of a soccer game at Wanigela, for instance, everyone I spoke to was certain that Kosaro or Yafuni were to blame.

Kosaro and Yafuni attacks, while terrifying, are rare. The more common homegrown types of sorcery are practiced only by men and rarely kill their victims immediately. The older form is known as *wea* ("poison"). While exact techniques vary, they all involve the sorcerer surreptitiously collecting something from the victim—such as some hair, a piece of clothing, or sand from a footprint—and heating this up, mixed with magical potions, in a bamboo tube over a fire. This was a type of "sympathetic magic," operating according to a similar principle as voodoo dolls: as the tube got hot, the victim broke into a deadly fever. Maisin believe that a second type of sorcery has mostly

upplanted *wea*. This is known as *yawu* ("spirit" or "breath"). A sorcerer practising *yawu* befriends a dead spirit, often that of a close relative. At the bidding of the sorcerer, the *yawu* familiar steals the soul of the victim, hiding it in the bush. Bereft of his or her soul, the victim gradually weakens and dies. This is what most Maisin thought had happened to Mona.

Because sorcerers operate in secrecy, their presence can only be surmised. Except in rare cases where an apparently healthy person suddenly drops dead—a clear indication of Kosaro or Yafuni attack—the idea that a sorcerer has been at work usually begins as a suspicion, carried in worried whispers by loved ones. The Maisin are far from credulous. When a person gets sick, people first treat them with bush medicines or, in more serious cases, take them to the small hospital near the Wanigela airstrip or the provincial hospital in Popondetta for Western-style biomedical care. The relatives watch closely. The failure of these resorts firms up suspicions that sorcery must be at work. This brings us back to the two main purposes served by sorcery beliefs: when more immediate alternatives fail, they provide an explanation for misfortune and, just as importantly, suggest a course of action. For while sorcerers are perfectly capable of operating from pure malice, sorcery attacks are thought to usually be triggered by some action of the victim or their close relatives that either directly offended the sorcerer or led aggrieved parties to hire one. Thus, as suspicions harden into certainty, people engaged by the victim's plight begin to speculate on why he or she was attacked.

When a person suffers a serious illness or accident, they and their closest relatives rack their memories for things they might have done that provoked retaliation. In the close confines of village society, the list of slights and petty jealousies are endless. A sorcerer may attack or be hired to do so because the victim or the victim's kin stole some food from a garden or failed to share a smoke, or he may act out of jealousy because the victim possessed more valued things than others or because they were particularly successful as gardeners or lovers. The Maisin refer to such provocations as *daa*, a word English speakers translate as "mistake." A "mistake" is not wrong in any absolute sense. All the same, "mistakes" share a common feature: they deny reciprocity in some way. This facet is more obvious in the case of theft or adultery, but it is in play as well in cases where the sorcerer reacts in jealousy against someone who has a better garden, more valuable shell ornaments, or merely more friends than others. Success as much as deliberate misdeed can upset the fine balance of reciprocal relationships and trigger retaliation from a sorcerer. It was for this reason, you will recall from Chapter 2, that a villager decided to turn the iron-roofed dwelling built for him by his son into a shed rather than risk provoking jealousy by moving in.

A tragic illness or accident, particularly in the case of young to middle-aged adults, triggers a process of recollection and reflection that spreads if the victim fails to respond to treatment. A remedy depends upon healing the social breach that provoked the attack. Yet there is no certain way to know. It's at this point that families approach healers. While many Maisin know of bush medicines and some healing magic, healers are elderly women and men who in many ways resemble sorcerers and thus hold an ambiguous reputation. Because they also deal directly with spiritual forces, they too must prepare their bodies to make themselves "hot" and be cautious in their interactions with others. They make use of *yawu* spirit familiars whom they send out to recover stolen souls, as Adeva was attempting during the séance held for Mona. Healers are feared for their sorcerer-like qualities, but necessary. In their desperation, families go to healers in hopes they will use their powers to identify the "mistakes" that triggered the attack. Armed with that knowledge, the family may confront or, more often, send a gift to the aggrieved party in the hopes that they will desist.

There is no guarantee that such resorts will work. Indeed, they may make things worse if the individuals who are given gifts to desist feel falsely accused. The final resorts are to ask the Anglican priest to pray to God for salvation and, as we've seen, to hold a community meeting in which people are enjoined to air any and all relevant tensions. The cure at all these levels remains the same: restoring social amity by overcoming a breached relationship. People do not seek to punish the sorcerer or the people who may have hired him while the victim lives. This was the thrust of Deacon Russell's attempt at the end of the first meeting addressing Mona's illness to get everyone to shout in unison, "She will be well!" The health of the sorcery victim was tied intrinsically to the health of social relations within the community.

Anthropologists have long been fascinated by sorcery and witchcraft and have developed a range of explanations for such beliefs. Sorcery can be seen as a negative sanction that functions to reinforce social norms. Many Maisin are comfortable with that type of explanation. While they don't like sorcerers, they credit them with keeping people in line. Children grow up not only knowing that sharing things is good but also that those who fail to reciprocate get attacked and killed. They also learn of the dangers of standing out too much from the crowd, by owning too many things or by showing off their accomplishments. Sorcery thus acts as a kind of social levelling mechanism. The functionalist explanation, however, is not sufficient, for, as we saw with Mona, sorcery is just as capable of disrupting social life as reinforcing it. Many anthropologists see sorcery as a form of symbolic violence, a projection of the struggles and tensions between social factions. At any one time, sorcery accusations

is a fairly good gauge of the points and levels of community conflict. It is surprising, given the tensions we've explored in Maisin marriages, that people are often suspected of resorting to sorcery against each other. Finally, we have seen, sorcery beliefs provide people with a framework for understanding why tragedies happen and how they should respond to them. In the words of one of the most famous students of the phenomenon, "witchcraft explains unfortunate events" (Evans-Pritchard 1937).

These theories help us understand the workings and logic of sorcery beliefs in the Maisin. Yet they leave out, I think, a deeper dimension. A consideration of sorcery leads us back to the way Maisin conceive of the cosmos and their place within it. The trigger for a sorcery attack in almost all cases is a breach of morality, a denial of reciprocal balance. This is easy for us to understand. The notion of sharing is by no means a foreign concept for Westerners. The Maisin have found foreign and to this day extremely difficult to comprehend. The Maisin do not rank the wrongs that provoke attacks. The reasons for sorcery attacks leading to death have often struck me as amazingly simple and petty. One man I got to know quite well, for instance, was widely suspected to have employed sorcery to murder his own sister because she had borrowed a cigarette with him. That sorcerers kill just as readily for trivial as for serious provocations reflects the assumption that they, like other spiritual beings, are amoral and capricious. Yet it is clear that the Maisin nearly always place some blame for the victim. It is they, after all, who provoked the attack in the first place, they who made the "mistake" and thus brought the wrath of sorcery upon themselves. Maisin understandings of sorcery thus reveal a bleak assessment of the human condition. To live a good and long life, a person needs to meet his or her reciprocal obligations to kin without fail; it is virtually impossible to do so. No wonder, then, that the Maisin honor old people with respect verging on awe. Anyone who has reached old age, it can be assumed, has successfully navigated the difficult shoals of life, relationships and the perils posed by spiritual forces. It is equally little known that from the time of the arrival of the first Anglican missionaries, the Maisin have tried repeatedly to rid their communities of the scourge of sorcery.

RELIGIOUS CHANGE

In 1983, one of Anne's clan mothers—a superb tapa artist and tattooist—came to record a dream. I soon realized that Naomi Vatava was sharing a remarkable experience. Her long-deceased husband had appeared to her to travel back across the migration path their ancestors had taken to the origin of the Bedaide where the ancestors first emerged from under the earth. As she related the emergence of each clan bearing its distinctive insignia and

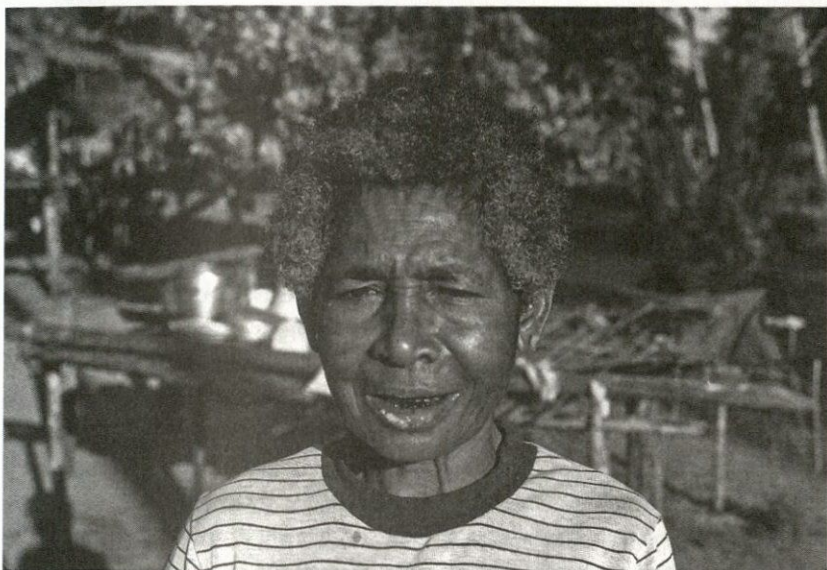


Figure 4.3 Naomi Vatava, 1982. (Photo by A.M. Tietjen)

rights, it felt like I was witnessing the event with her. The small crowd that had gathered fell into total silence as she reached the climax of the story:

They called for the fourth clan to climb out. So those people got their things and began climbing. The people on top called out, "What are you bringing up?" They said, "If you people hit our children or do something wrong to us, we won't use our hands or sorcery (*wea*), but we will kill you with our eyes." So the people on top said, "Oh, we don't want them up here! Use the knife to cut the ladder off." When they cut the ladder, those people fell down and landed at the bottom. The wife asked, "What is that noise like thunder?" The husband said, "It is those people hitting the bottom. We don't want them to come up because if they do our community will be no good. So we cut the ladder." The people still in the cave called out, "All right. We all wanted to come out, so we worked on that ladder day and night. But you people don't want us up there and so you cut the ladder. We will live down here, but our language will be different from yours."

Having shown her this vision, her husband returned Naomi to the world of the living.

The phrase I translate above as "our community will be no good" in Maisin is *tauk ramara sii*—literally, "living eternally bad." It's a phrase I heard a lot during Mona's sickness and the aftermath of John Hunt's near-death experience

with the wild bush spirit. But it wasn't just fear of sorcerers or spirit attacks that prompted dark mutterings of *tauk ramara sii*. People said the same when the cooperative store closed for lack of funds; they said it when they failed to build a new church; they said it when some of the school kids razzed their headmaster. They said it a lot. As I probed a bit further, I realized that *tauk ramara sii* was the negation of the key value of *marawa-wawe*. "Bad living" is a denial of reciprocal morality, a place in which people care only for themselves: where, as in Naomi's vision, people kill others simply by looking at them. It represents a breaking through of the unrestrained amorality associated with spirits into the moral world of the living. It is social death.

A preoccupation with the threat of uncontrollable sorcery likely preceded the arrival of the missionaries. When Percy John Money arrived in Uiaku in 1902 to build the first school and church, he was surprised to be approached by a group of men bearing wrapped bundles of objects, signalling to Money to take and destroy them in a fire. Money attributed the event to God reaching into the hearts of the unconverted Maisin. Yet Maisin repeatedly orchestrated purges of alleged sorcery materials over the following decades, requesting missionaries do the dangerous work of destroying magical substances. These must have been highly disruptive events since they entailed accusing individuals of sorcery. This in turn suggests that they were precipitated by crises, an impending sense of *tauk ramara sii*. In itself, the arrival of white men likely triggered such a crisis, not least the police killings of at least three Maisin men and the wounding of an unreported number at the beginning of 1900. In 1920, the district missionary supervised the destruction of "poison" lime pots in Uiaku, followed by a feast in which the alleged sorcerers were fed "cold" foods to end their power. This purge came in the wake of the worldwide influenza epidemic which killed many people in Collingwood Bay. A cult centred on a snake deity swept through the region during the same period, leading people to abandon their gardens to engage in weeks of all-night ritual dancing to heal their bodies and their communities.¹⁰ Similar combinations of sorcery purges and healing cults occurred in the early 1930s and 1950s (Barker 1990b; 2001).

Looked at from the outside, the persistence of sorcery despite the century-long presence of Christianity and the periodic purges suggests that Maisin still largely adhere to "traditional" religion; that they are, as one anthropologist described a similar community in Milne Bay, "Sunday Christians, Monday sorcerers" (Kahn 1983). This is misleading. Maisin do not experience sorcery as a remnant of pre-Christian religion but as a living reality that adapts to its time. The purges of the past, I was told, focused on "poison" (*wea*) sorcery, leading to its demise and gradual replacement by the "spirit" (*yawu*) variety. I heard stories of how the dreaded Milne Bay "flying witches" (*yafuni*) relied

on invisible spirit powerboats and cars to reach victims in distant places and of a secret market at Tufi where one could purchase newfangled sorcery techniques such as flashlights that killed merely by being pointed at their victims.

This last image, eerily echoing the climax of Naomi's story, suggests that while sorcery may be beaten back for a time, the threat of "bad living" forever looms on the horizon. It looms because, like sorcery attacks, *tauk ramara sii* tracks human failures, of people pursuing their own selfish interests rather than contributing to the welfare of the group. Putting aside the more exotic elements—the snake deities, spirit songs, trances, and the like—the healing cults of the past served to pull people together in the midst of crises that threatened to divide them. To borrow the terminology of the great French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1915), they were moments of "social efflorescence" in which people performed their society, healing as they experienced a communal wholeness. In anthropological parlance, the healing cults were "revitalization movements": responses to crises that drew upon and synthesized Indigenous and introduced elements in the effort to comprehend changes and forge a way forward (Wallace 1956).

Missionaries regarded the early snake and subsequent healing cults with suspicion, but they did not interfere. In one prominent case, the district missionary even praised the leader of a healing cult as an emissary of God and a sign of the inroads that the Christian faith was making on local religious understandings (Barker 1990b). It should be borne in mind that Christianity itself emerged out of a revitalization movement and that its 2,000-year history and long journey across the earth has been in no small part a story of merging and blending elements from many different cultures. In the Maisin case, this blending is masked by the conservatism of the Anglican Church, which in its basic ritual practices and institutional order has changed far less over the past century than the society the missionary arrived to transform.

By the 1990s, however, the stability of the local church was being challenged from without and within as new and generally more conservative theologically sects swept across Papua New Guinea (Barker 2012; Jorgensen 2005; Robbins et al. 2001). Maisin living in town encountered other branches of Christianity and brought them back home. Four families set up a Pentecostal chapel where they engaged in worship markedly more inclusive and livelier than the rigid Anglican mass. Several individuals, immediately identifiable by their gleaming white (non-betelnut-stained) teeth, began meeting beneath a house in Ganjiga on Saturdays for Seventh-Day Adventist services. Meanwhile, the young Anglican priest, himself a Maisin, initiated a youth fellowship group in Uiaku. This proved enormously popular, and soon chapters popped up across the parish in both Maisin and non-Maisin villages.

When I returned to study the anti-logging movement in March 1997, I found something of a religious revival going on (Barker 2003). The church services were better attended than a decade earlier, a large number of hymns had been translated into Maisin, and people were very excited about the arrival of two volunteers from the Summer Institute of Linguistics who were beginning the long process of translating the Bible into Maisin. For the first time, I saw people walking through the village carrying Bibles for personal study. During the weeks leading up to Easter, the youth held large rallies in each of the Maisin villages. Under palm leaf arches, richly festooned with flowers, young men and women joined in group dances and gospel singing, accompanied by guitars. The celebrations were followed by a meal and then hours of individual testimonials delivered by youth leaders, mainly males. Unlike the sermons given in church, the testimonials did not focus on biblical lessons but were highly personal accounts of the speakers' brushes with sin and their deliverance through faith in Jesus.

A few months before my arrival, there had been a purge of alleged sorcery objects. Members of the Melanesian Brotherhood, a religious order originating in the Solomon Islands, led a group of mostly young people to confront individuals thought to be hiding "old things": objects that could be used to compel spirits to attack others. As crowds gathered, owners reluctantly surrendered old ornaments, charms, and the like to the Brotherhood, who took them away to destroy. The owners I spoke with were still angry about the loss of their property and the implicit accusation that they were sorcerers, but the participants were still elated by the demonstration of God's protective power. I heard very little talk about sorcery per se, but several people declared that only faith in Jesus could save one from the sorcerer. This healing power was demonstrated at the youth fellowship meetings which climaxed with a laying on of hands for those experiencing illness. At the Easter service, I was startled when the heads of two adolescent girls slammed into the sand by my feet. They toppled backwards in turn as the priest laid his hands on their heads to bless them as they kneeled at the altar rail. In the language of Christian charismatics, they had been "slain in the spirit," a form of religious ecstasy in which the Holy Spirit enters the body of the worshipper. Unfortunately, nobody had informed the congregation that in Pentecostal and charismatic churches fellow worshippers catch the slain so they don't harm themselves. The girls soon got up and returned to their pews without appearing to have suffered much harm. Their proud father told me afterwards that they had been sick for a long time, but now that the spirit of Jesus had entered their bodies they would be well.

It is perhaps not entirely coincidental that the religious revival occurred during a period of intense excitement as Maisin fought against the theft of



Figure 4.4 Christian youth fellowship gathering, 1997. (Photo by J. Barker)

their lands by developers (Chapter 6). Certainly the combination of sorcery purge and spiritual healing movement followed a familiar pattern. In addition, during this period young people were enthusiastically donning feathers and tapa to engage in traditional dances and resurrect dimly remembered customs. This was done primarily to fete visiting environmentalists and dignitaries, but there was no denying the enthusiasm with which people performed. I felt a bit like I had walked into the midst of a revitalization movement. Yet it was different from the earlier events as described by elders or recorded in mission archives. This time the healing “cult” occurred within the confines of orthodox Christianity, albeit a markedly more individualist form than the conservative Anglicanism most villagers were used to.

The shifting nature of Christian practice and discourse was unsettling for many elders. They recalled that in the past the village church provided a foundation of community unity. On big days like Easter, everyone pitched in to decorate the church, cook and share the feast, and contribute tapa and money to the mission. Young people respected and obeyed their elders, and so the hard work got done. They suspected the late night fellowship meetings were mainly an excuse to party and have sex. It is difficult to assess the reality of such claims or the long-term implications of an increasingly individualistic Christianity. However, the cultural reverberations are clear enough. The threat of things falling apart, of *tauk ramara sii*, always lurks on the horizon. It can

be delayed by confronting sorcery directly. Yet, as one friend explained to me, it is not hard for a sorcerer to regain his power. The only lasting solution lies in the forging of unity in the community. And so it is to the challenges of building community that we must next turn.

Notes

1. Ziska Schwimmer's information on Maisin tapa was based on two quick visits to Uiaku in 1967 and 1975 (Erik Schwimmer, personal communication). While brief, the article's information on tapa making is mostly accurate and it includes a good translation of the myth associated with the *sividi* design, both owned by the Jorega clan.

2. Women are thus effectively barred from preaching in church services. During meetings of the Mothers' Union and youth fellowship group, however, some women offer prayers and short homilies.

3. Until recently, the Maisin did not keep track of their birth dates, making it very difficult to estimate precise ages. In 1982, I discovered that one of my oldest informants, Guy Kamanu, had been among the first Maisin baptized in 1911. Baptismal records indicated that Guy was a young adult at the time, so it is possible that he was born just before first contact with Europeans. While a font of information about the older culture, however, Guy had no personal recollection of Maisin life prior to the imposition of colonial rule.

4. Jean and John Comaroff (1991, 1997) use the phrase "the long conversation" in their magisterial study of the impact of Protestant missionaries on Tswana peoples in southern Africa during the nineteenth century. For other anthropological interpretations of Christian conversion, see Cannell (2006), Hefner (1993), and Robbins and Haynes (2014).

5. Dreams convey a critical source of truth and revelation in Melanesian cultures (Burridge 1960; Lohmann 2003).

6. Erik Schwimmer (1969) recorded similar explanations in the Orokaiva area 15 years after the disaster.

7. Limited Western health care has been available to the people of Collingwood Bay since around 1912, when a missionary nurse came to Wanigela. In the 1950s, the government established village-based aid posts run by medical orderlies with basic training in first aid and a limited range of supplies. Like most Melanesians, the Maisin make use of a wide range of medical options, including Indigenous cures, when they are sick or have an accident (Frankel and Lewis 1989).

8. Anthropologists generally reserve the terms "sorcery" and "witchcraft" for malicious forms of magic intended to harm people. In his classic work on the Azande people, Evans-Pritchard (1937) defines sorcerers as individuals who use materials to cause illness and witches as people bearing an inner substance that harms others. I follow

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that usage here, but it should be appreciated that Maisin themselves don't make such distinctions, and a key technique I label "spirit sorcery" could just as easily be considered a type of witchcraft. The positive notion of witchcraft found in Western neo-pagan religions, notably Wiccan, is entirely alien to Maisin thought.

9. The secrecy surrounding sorcery in Maisin culture is typical. However, there are a few places in Melanesia where sorcerers were public figures who enforced community morality, most notably the Mekeo people of the Central Province of Papua New Guinea (Stephen 1995).

10. A healing cult focused on the figure of a python spirit known as Baigona was first reported in Miniafia-speaking villages on Cape Nelson in 1911. Over the succeeding decades, several religious movements promising healing and garden fertility spread across the Northern District, the best documented being the so-called Taro Cult of the 1920s (Williams 1928). Traces of these earlier movements, including stories of a spirit python, continued in Maisin healing practices in the early 1980s, collectively referred to as *sevaseva*. The "snake cult" of 1920, however, appears to have been the most intense of these collective movements. The endless nights of unceasing drumming threatened to drive the resident white priest mad, forcing him to flee Uiaiku and depriving the Maisin of their own priest for the next 40 years (Barker 1987).