

**Gebusi Religion and Conversion Revisited:
Spiritual Change in the Area of Nomad Station,
Western Province, Papua New Guinea***

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This paper charts, analyzes, and draws general implications from the main features of religious change among the Gebusi people of Papua New Guinea from (a) the late pre-colonial period through the early 1960s; (b) the colonial and early post-colonial but still pre-Christian era of the late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s; (c) strong Christianization during the late 1980s and 1990s; (d) challenges

* Acknowledgements: This paper is dedicated to the memory of Yuway, my near age-mate. Yuway befriended me when I first arrived and was learning the Gebusi language in 1980. He was a stalwart friend ever since then, and was one of the most decent people I have ever met. Born about 1961, Yuway died after a major illness, at about age 48, on June 16, 2009. Amid the continuing short longevity of Gebusi lives, Yuway embraced the full potential that spanned the pre-colonial, the colonial, and the post-colonial eras. May the memory of him be bright, and may his several children and his extended family live long, and prosper

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faced by Christian denominations during a period of major economic decline and effective closure of the region's major airstrip and station in 2007-08.

I. Conversion and Transformation

I begin with the starkest period of contrast. In 1998, after an absence of sixteen years, I conducted a re-study of the Gebusi people of the Nomad Sub-District of the Western Province of Papua New Guinea. Based on my earlier work in 1980-82, at which time the Gebusi were "traditional" in the sense of being unChristianized and not exposed to Christian missionization, I had earlier been able to document substantial aspects of Gebusi religious life in pre-Christian terms. This included significant observation, interviews, and historical documentation concerning spirit mediumship; sorcery divinations and inquests; beliefs and practices concerning sickness, health, healing, and death; myths and folktales concerning supernatural beings and forces; and rituals of spiritual commemoration, initiation, curing, community celebration, and for a host of other reasons and causes (see Knauft 1985a, 1985b, 1986, 1987a, 1987b, 1987c, 1989a, 1989b, 1991, 1998a).

Rather than rehearse in detail these pre-Christian beliefs and practices here, the following can be telegraphically noted as a partial baseline of Gebusi pre-Christian religion and culture. Many of these features are also shared in some permutation with the other ethnic groups of the Strickland-Bosavi area, as delineated in Knauft 1985b, and to some extent also the Kasua people, discussed by Brunois in the present collection.

Gebusi cosmology in 1980-82 encoded a mirror-world and generally inverse relation between unseen spirits of the natural environment (and also dead people), and the world of living humans. Communication with this world was variously possible through spiritual mediums or shamans and through ritual practices and divinations to commune and communicate with, benefit from the superordinate awareness of, and enjoy the world of unseen spirits.

The flipside of this positive and beneficent cosmological tie between the human and unseen realms was a strong belief in sorcery, including the belief

that most if not all deaths by sickness or accident are in fact caused by people. Further, Gebusi exhibited a very strong commitment to take revenge against accused sorcerers—leading to a very high rate of homicide within as well as between communities.

For Gebusi, both positive and negative reciprocity in human-human and human-spirit relations reflected a strong social structural, social, and religious orientation toward direct or exact reciprocity. Direct reciprocity included a strong ideological propensity and cultural emphasis on direct exchange marriage (e.g., “sister exchange) between lineages or clans, e.g., sister-exchange. Reciprocally, it included direct reciprocity expected or demanded for the life of a person who died from sickness—by the taking of the life of the accused sorcerer who was deemed responsible.

Linking these dimensions of reciprocity was the spirit medium or shaman, whose own spirit left and was exchanged for that of one or more spirit familiars, which entered his body and spoke in a high-pitched voice during spirit séances. These spirit familiars, including especially flirtatious spirit women and the medium’s own spirit-son born to him by a spirit woman, provided a direct link of social contact and kinship between the world of Gebusi and the unseen world of the spirits. That these communications were publicly announced, responded to, and literally amplified in harmonious song by the assembled gathering of men in the longhouse during the night-long séance created a shared cultural reality of interaction between Gebusi and their unseen spirit world.

A related key dimension of exchange, spirituality, and social transaction was the development of sexual relationships between young adult men and teenage boys—who gratified their elders sexually and received semen orally as a means of enhancing their own growth and development into man-hood (Knauft 1987a; cf. Herdt 1984). These sexual relations appeared to be more mutually enjoyed and affectionate than in many other areas of fringe highland Papua New Guinea—and they occurred without particular stigma or opprobrium between uninitiated late-teenage bachelors themselves as well as

between young unmarried men and their junior uninitiated cohort.

II. Changes Arising

In 1998, when I returned to the Gebusi, many of the above practices appear to have been moribund or vestigial against the strong incoming tide of Christian influence. Indeed, Gebusi in my primary community of residence had moved their houses and their settlements lock, stock, and barrel several miles to the new Catholic Church that had been constructed to woo them near the airstrip, government station, school, market, and other facilities of the Sub-District office at Nomad Station (see Knauft 1998b).

These changes are no easier to quickly summarize than are the pre-Christian practices noted above as listed for 1980-82, and they have been documented in two books and several shorter contributions (Knauft 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2007a, 2007b, 2010). For present purposes, however, the spiritual and related changes that Gebusi in my communities of primary exposure had experienced and undergone by 1998 included several key factors. These included the Christian church-going and baptism of 84% of the population, and the associated demise and general discontinuation of traditional spirit mediumship, divination (including for sorcery), ritual fights, male-male sexual practices, traditional dancing, and initiation. Related to these changes was a pronounced decline in Gebrusi killings or executions of sorcery suspects. With the demise of spirit mediumship, Gebusi averred generally that they had little way to communicate with spirits or maintain effective contact with the unseen spirit world.

These spiritual changes were articulated materially in the social, political, and economic orientation of those Gebusi in my community of residence toward church leaders from outside the area—and toward officials at the Nomad Sub-District Office, which was about a twenty-minute walk from my community of primary residence at Gasumi Corners. The Nomad government station, indeed, had become a key point of orientation for activities and events that Gebusi regularly attended and participated in. These included:

- daily weekday attendance at the Nomad school by Gebusi school-age children
- weekly attendance at church, plus other church meetings and teachings
- attendance by most women Gebusi of Gasumi Corners at the twice-weekly Nomad market, including bringing heavy bags of forest and garden produce to sell
- regular attendance and participation by men and boys at rugby, soccer, basketball, and other games arranged in regular league competition at the Nomad sports field
- attendance at and active participation in government projects and meetings at the Nomad Station, including various economic and development projects
- walking to Nomad to celebrate and materially participate in festivities for various public holidays and related public festivities—especially at Independence Day, Christmas, New Years, and Easter
- walking to Nomad for free clinic health care or hospital services
- visiting the Nomad police station to lodge complaints or check on the progress of open investigations
- leisure pursuits at Nomad such as attending the Nomad video night, buying petty items at the small Nomad stores, or simply taking a “spin” to the station to see what was going on.

As titled in my 2002 book on the subject, Gebusi in 1998 said they were “exchanging their past” for ways associated with Christianity and the modern practices of the Nomad station and its educated outsiders, including government, school, market, development projects, and market. In this sense, their notion of direct reciprocity in traditional exchange was itself recast to exchange in a modern, asymmetrical way—the past practices themselves for locally modern practices that were hoped to lead to new and successful ways of life. When I asked Nomad school children to draw pictures of themselves as they envisaged their life in the future, their pages burgeoned with bright color drawings of themselves as soldiers, police officers, heavy equipment operators, pilots, rock musicians, teachers, doctors, nurses, and modern-dressed

housewives (Knauft 2002a: 199–200). Only a tiny percentage of the students drew their anticipated future selves as traditional farmers, dancers, or villagers.

Amid this strong and powerful drive to access the future at the self-avowed expense of the past, Gebusi also had strongly internalized a sense of political and spiritual as well as economic dependency upon the authority, knowledge, and beneficence of outsiders. Their ability to lead or meaningfully influence developments at school, market, government, or even the local church—which was led by educated Papuan clergy from other parts of the country—appeared to be minimal.

None of this is to preclude or deny the continuation of traditional sensibilities in some areas of Gebusi life in Gasumi Corners, including subsistence, forays to the forest, and interest in performing traditional dances – if mostly in government competitions at the Nomad parade ground. But in comparison with my observations and understanding of Gebusi beliefs and practices in 1980–82, it did seem that major and transformational shifts in so-called traditional cultural practices had taken place, as Gebusi themselves emphasized.

The agents as well as the subjects of this conversion were primarily Gebusi themselves. I use “conversion” here at one and the same time for both Christian conversion and conversion of social life and orientations more generally to locally modern forms. Indeed, it is difficult among Gebusi and perhaps among many Oceanian peoples to divorce the notion of conversion in a religious sense from that of adopting other outward-looking and locally “modern” practices (see Knauft 2002c).

As a case in point, the church services that Gebusi attended in 1998 had eerie similarities to the experience of children in the government school. In both cases key texts were copied on a blackboard at the front of the room and expounded in hortatory style by outside leaders to Gebusi listeners sitting on rows of wooden benches. In both cases, the time of indoctrination was long and carefully scheduled, and demanded proper Western dress of shirts and pants or shorts for men and boys, and blouses and skirts or dresses for women and girls.

The leaders also converged roles: the major government teachers also often preached sermons on Sunday, and school classes regularly taught Christianity as a scholastic subject, sometimes with a pastor as the teacher. In both cases, the authoritative judgments and superiority of outside power and understanding, beyond Gebusi's own ability or easy comprehension, was evident.

Many have discussed and debated the relationship between Christian teachings and orientations to and internalization of modern values and orientations—at least since Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958). In the Gebusi case, the cause-effect relation between the two appears to be more a linked question of chicken-and-egg. As many have argued, Christian conversion easily evokes and can be seen as tantamount (at least in hope) to material bounty, education and literacy, and a locally modern style of life, including in the present case wage salaries or at least money obtained from the outside, travel by plane or truck, the possession of labor-saving mechanical appliances, new forms of clothing and leisure pursuits, and emphasis on written skill and bureaucratic mastery as a form of work. Certainly these were true in the case of Gebusi aspirations.

It should be stressed that this process of conversion—in both a Christian and in a more general locally modern sense—was one of active engagement by Gebusi rather than by coercion. Though Gebusi were not self-missionized in the same way that were the Urapmin, studied by Joel Robbins (2004), they were not forced or badgered to convert. This was partly due to their physical location in a remote rainforest area. Gebusi were not effectively contacted by Westerners until colonial patrols reached them in 1963, at which time large trees were still being felled with stone axes. Committed and skilled at avoiding colonial patrols, they and other ethnic groups in the area were termed nomads, hence giving rise to the “Nomad Patrol Post” in the mid-1960s.

Ultimately, Gebusi had to be coaxed out by inducement to change their very residence as a kind of precondition to both being exposed to and to “benefitting” from Christianity and the other modern activities and accouterments of the Nomad Station. Gebusi were not subject to physical

coercion. To my knowledge, no Gebusi has even been killed, shot, or even mortally threatened by an outsider with a gun. Nor were they subjected to nor enticed by large-scale schemes of labor migration, cash cropping, or economic development in their remote forest location—much as many Gebusi wished for these (Knauft 1998a; cf., Dwyer and Minnegal 1998).

Nor, until the late 1980s, and in contrast even to some of their ethnic neighbors, were Gebusi directly exposed to Christianity. The Gebusi in my communities of residence and primary exposure, despite their relative proximity to the Nomad station, never were regularly visited or proselytized by, much less lived among, by a white missionary. By the time that the attractions of Christianity reached Gebusi in my communities of residence—or, rather, by the time they themselves moved into its orbit—it was already more than a decade after national independence in 1975, by which time most white Australian, European, and American expatriates had left the country, especially from remote outstation areas.

Despite or perhaps even because of the Gebusi's ability to control and return to their own land in the rainforest largely on their own terms, their connection with and exposure to Christianity and modern conversion more generally, occurred both on their own terms and with significant dependency on outside authority, economy, education, government, and religious instruction. In none of these institutions, including the local churches—Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, and Seventh Day Adventist—did Gebusi from my community of residence, near to the Nomad Station, take an active role in planning or leading church services or church activities; leadership was in the hands of Papua New Guinean pastors from other parts of the country or literate members of other, more populous and educated ethnic groups in the Nomad area.

As a small ethnic group, it should be noted that Gebusi had indigenously been subject to great and violent predation, especially by their neighbors to the east, the Bedamini (Knauft 1985a: Ch. 8; Sørum 1980, 1982, 1984). It was Australian patrol officers who put a strong and definitive end

to this decimation during the 1960s and 70s, shortly before the Australian colonial era ended. Gebusi themselves, who had been dying out at the hands of this depredation, were thankful, appreciative, and positively oriented toward Australian officers and to modern agents of externally introduced change generally.

Following national independence, this role of powerful outsider was assumed in Gebusi perception by incoming Papua New Guinean officers, government workers, and, eventually during the mid-1980s, Christian pastors who came to live at Nomad, with its fine large airstrip, from other parts of the country. In the mix, further specters of outside change were largely seen as beneficence engineered by modern-associated outsiders. The striking openness of Gebusi to Christian conversion by Papua New Guineans from outside the area from the mid-1980s needs to be seen in this context. As such, Gebusi's trajectory of Christian conversion is informed by their particular history of indigenous threat and of Australian colonial intervention that was late and relatively brief—just twelve years, from 1963 to 1975—and highly effective in forestalling inter-tribal decimation even as Gebusi themselves experienced little direct government presence until they themselves chose to engage it more directly during the post-colonial era.

III. Gebusi 2008

Against the above backdrop, further changes in the trajectory and results of Christian conversion—and modern-conversion—are also striking in recent years. In the winter of 2008, I was able to return to the Gebusi for a further restudy (Knauff 2010: Ch. 12).

The first inkling I had of major change was the difficulty of simply reaching the Gebusi at all. The Nomad airstrip—a large, long, flat, and regionally dependable place for planes to land ever since it was first opened in 1963—was closed. Given the lack of roads linking Nomad to other towns or other parts of the country, the closing of the airstrip was momentous. Supplies could not arrive, pay could not be delivered, and government

officials and others from the outside could not be supported. Those who were not from the Nomad area itself almost all left in the last planes before the strip was closed in 2007. As a result, government services, and projects and prospects of development, were effectively terminated.

When I arrived in February 2008—the first regular plane to land at the Nomad airstrip in about nine months—the Nomad school was closed, the health clinic was moribund, and the government officers and development workers had left, including all police. With no salaries or significant monies coming in, the local cash economy had crashed, with very little or no wage labor. The market that had been bustling twice a week at Nomad was desultory and with very few buyers and very high prices for any outside goods. The sports leagues were defunct and the large ball field at Nomad was covered with two-foot-high grass, with parts of the goalposts taken for firewood. Government houses were boarded up.

What had happened to Gebusi conversion, both Christian and modern more generally?

In a word, significant aspects of Gebusi religious life, including some I thought to have been dead, had resurfaced. A large traditional longhouse had been built in my community of residence, and a major traditional initiation had been held to indoctrinate a large new cadre of young men. (A significant number in the previous cohort, now too old to go through the ceremony, were never initiated at all.) Practices of customary male etiquette that had been highly developed and enthusiastically practiced in 1980-82 but which had been moribund in 1998—including smoking and sharing tobacco in large bamboo pipes, drinking kava (*piper methysticum*), and boisterous displays of male sexual joking—had all been resuscitated and were strongly in evidence.

Within two days of my arrival, a traditional curing dance, with a visiting dancer in full indigenous costume, was held within a few minutes walk of where I was staying—something that had not happened anywhere in the community during the six months that I was there in 1998.

Some features of customary religious and spiritual life, though, had not been reasserted or re-established. Importantly, this included spirit mediumship and spirit séance singing. Occurring approximately once every eleven nights in 1980-82, all-night song fests of male communion and communication via the spirit medium with the raucous and ribald spirit people had been the primary means by which Gebusi ascertained the causes and effected the cures of sickness, foretold the success or failure of planned collective enterprises, and determined the identity of sorcery suspects. Spirit mediums were also important in leading or interpreting evidence from divinations that were carried out to authenticate and validate society accusations – and to legitimate violence by men in the multi-clan community against the accused suspect (see Knauft 1985a, 1989).

However, the tie of communication between Gebusi and their spirits that had been cut with the conversion of spirit mediums themselves to Christianity in the late 1980s had not been re-established since. No new Gebusi in my communities of exposure had been initiated as spirit mediums, and spirit séances are not held. Accordingly, as was also the case in 1998, divinations to ascertain or validate the identity of sorcery suspects are rarely if ever effectively arranged. As such, the homicide rate, which had been very high through the early 1980s, given the frequency with which accused sorcerers had traditionally been executed, has continued to be zero, that is, since the last dramatic beheading of an accused sorcerer, and imprisonment of the Gebusi perpetrator, in 1989. This presents a dramatic long-term change in the incidence of spiritually mediated violence, since 32.7% of all adults in a large sample of 18 clans had been victims of homicide stretching back more than four decades from 1982 to about 1940 (Knauft 1985a: Ch. 5, 1987c).

Beyond the continuing absence of spirit mediums, séances, and active sorcery divinations and retributions, what lingering presences of Christianity have remained among Gebusi who now continue to reside near the Nomad Station?

To some extent, the answer varies depending on the religious denomination being considered. The Evangelical and Seventh Day Adventist congregations have apparently been hard hit by the economic crisis in the area, lack of outside personnel and supplies, and the departure of most of the literate pastors from other parts of the country. Attendance and new conversions are admitted to be low, it is difficult to keep church buildings maintained, money for new projects is difficult to raise, and Christian commitment in many instances seems to be flagging, with little energy.

On the other hand, the St. Paul Catholic Church, which is headquartered at the edge of my Gebusi community of primary residence in Gasumi Corners, has been very successful and indeed increasing its outreach and outposts at the expense of other denominations. How much of this relative ascendancy is due to differences of doctrine, belief, and religious practices between Christian denominations, and how much is due to the person of the resident Nomad parish priest, Father Aloï, is a significant question.

IV. Analitic Interlude

On the one hand, as has often been noted, Catholicism in many parts of New Guinea—as in other world areas such as Latin America over the centuries—has often been more open to tolerating combinations of customary practice or belief with Christian doctrine than has Protestantism and especially Evangelical or Pentecostalist Christianity. It may thus seem reasonable as an analytic inference that when modern material success and the great striving for moral and personal success that may attend its pursuit is compromised or dashed by crushing economic downturn—and with few prospects for realistic reversal—this difficulty may weigh more heavily on Protestant and especially Evangelical sensibilities than on Catholic ones.

Such reasoning bears caution, however, since significant strains of millennial or millenarian Christianity thrive on the anti-modern prospect of

decline in a material and moral world. As often noted, this can signal the beginning of the End Times and the need for greater and more fervent commitment than ever, before the Apocalypse. Even in so-called cargo cults in Melanesia from the 19th through the mid-20th century, it was common for more fervent millenarian cult activity to arise and then intensify during periods in which the hoped for “cargo” was being withdrawn or was more difficult to access than previously, for instance, due to a downturn or economic crisis in colonial or Western commercial presence and outreach (see documentation of cases and analysis in Knauft 1978).

This tendency—for millenarian commitment to intensify rather than to decline during periods of declining or disconfirmation of objective worldly success—was documented effectively in Leon Festinger et al.’s early book concerning American new age alien cults, *When Prophecy Fails* (1956). At the extreme, as also often occurred in classic Melanesian cargo cults, the success of a millenarian sect and its doctrine under periods of material disconfirmation was indicated by spreading its doctrine through active proselytization of the unconverted: the reality and truth of millenarianism was established through the fact of its social spread by new conversions rather than by its material verification or objective realization.

Over time, however, clear disconfirmation of millenarian predictions or of expectations of material reward may lead to polarization between more extreme and zealous wings of the movement and those that soften, mute, or defer expectations. In Melanesianist scholarship of the 1960s and 70s, this led to the suggestion that cargo “cults” were in many cases transforming into or part and parcel of “cargo religion,” which was more general and less specific in its material beliefs and expectations—and hence less vulnerable to clear disconfirmation (see Knauft 1978).

V. Catholic Characteristics: 1998 vs. 2008

In the case of the Gebusi and their neighbors, more fervent or extreme varieties of millenarian belief, Christian charismatic or otherwise, do not

seem to have gained purchase during the recent period of major economic decline in and around Nomad. Instead, the potential for accepting customary beliefs and practices, which Catholicism has on the whole been relatively tolerant of, has been cultivated and energized by the local parish Priest.

The impact of influential individual church leaders is arguably often underrated in the sociological and anthropological study of Christianity. In the case of the Gebusi, the contrast in style and impact of its two major Catholic Church leaders, in 1998 and in 2008, is palpable and important. The earlier leader, a lay pastor from the Bolivip area of the Mountain Ok region, felt the onus of trying to establish Catholicism among Gebusi with what he perceived to be little effective outside support—and amid significant competition from Evangelical denominations that were already present in the Nomad area.

Partly by his own temperament and perhaps by perceived necessity, the Catholic church at Nomad in 1998 echoed Protestant fundamentalist churches in the area by emphasizing fire and brimstone, including the need to repent and be saved prior to judgment day, the importance of giving up traditional customs, and the need to be disciplined and severe in commitment to Christian teachings. Much emphasis was on the Old Testament, and teaching from the New Testament often focused on the trials and crucifixion of Jesus. Little hybridization of Gebusi customs or ceremonies with Christian teaching was encouraged, and singing during church services seemed stolid and plodding rather than vivacious or joyful, in contrast to Evangelical services at Nomad.

Nonetheless, the Catholic Church was at the edge of Gasumi corners and was “their church.” The pastor did help local people with some of their concerns with the government, though he never learned to speak significantly in the local vernacular and largely kept his distance in the church compound when not leading services or badgering people to contribute labor and materials for church building projects.

Ironically, despite the Gebusi customs that the pastor castigated as sinful, including drinking kava and fighting, he never realized the significance of spirit séance singing in fomenting sorcery accusations and violence. Despite this fact, the gradual conversion of spirit mediums to singing in church led them to “cut their ties” to the spirit world; going to church, described as “going to sing” (*gio dula*), became mutually exclusive for the spirit medium with singing to traditional spirits. At the same time, secular forms of string band singing attracted evening audiences of men and boys that, on different grounds, undercut social support and regular attendance at traditional spirit séances.

In general terms, the attitude of the pastor to Gebusi was that they were like wayward or laggard sheep, grudging rather than enthusiastic Christians. He seemed to tolerate rather than enjoy being with them, and they, also, with him.

By contrast, ten years later, in 2008, the St. Paul Catholic Church at the edge of Gasumi Corners was a beacon of dynamism amid the desultory economic and social situation at the Nomad Station. By this time the church had a dedicated priest, young Father Aloï. A native of Indonesia who had wide pastoral experience with forest peoples in Southeast Asia, Father Aloï had a keen interest in local people and customs, high motivation, and became proficient in Gebusi as well, to a lesser extent, other local languages. His English was also excellent. Calm and yet extroverted, Father Aloï enjoyed interacting with Gebusi, attending their festivities, and traveling through the area including to other ethnic groups, taking his Gebusi lay leaders along with him.

Highly tolerant and encouraging of local customs as long as they did not directly contradict Christian teaching, Father supported the building of a new longhouse in Gasumi Corners, the holding of traditional dances, and the hosting of a major initiation for young men in the community. His growing and indeed impressive understanding of local custom and language positioned him as an effective mediator in local disputes, which

were increasingly brought to his attention.

Highly educated and respected, Father Aloï was also effective in procuring funds from the Catholic Diocese of Daru-Kiunga for economic development projects, including the growing of high-yield rice, the refurbishment and rebuilding of the Catholic church complex, and serving as liaison for Gebusi and other local people with the government, including at Nomad. Not surprisingly, he was widely liked, respected, and admired by Gebusi, and their involvement and attendance at church activities and at Sunday services in the new church increased. At the same time, given the declining fortunes of Evangelical and Seventh Day Adventist churches in the area, Father Aloï's patrols and pastoral outreach, which seemed respectful of local differences in custom, encouraged the growth of new Catholic churches and congregations in other Gebusi areas and among the adjacent Bedamini, which had been previously impervious to Catholic influence.

In his home church compound, Father Aloï was supportive of Gebusi taking more leadership and control in the organization and running of church activities, including the Sunday church service. When he was absent, either in Kiunga or when on mission patrol, the Sunday service was organized and lead by Gebusi themselves, including the sermon, scripture, hymns, offering, and "tok save" or news and information at the end of the service.

VI. Conclusion without End

What is the relationship between the resurgence of significant Gebusi customary religious practices and the growing significance, success, and apparent internalization of Catholic church teaching and religion in Gasumi Corners?

At one level, the relationship may seem to be one of hybridization or syncretism—as per the photo of Gebusi in traditional costume welcoming visitors for a special event at the Catholic Church (Knauff 2010: 166). And yet, there seems to be little explicit blending or combination of beliefs or

ritual practices between customary and Christian religious forms. Dances, customary curing rites, and initiations take place without substantial Christian content, and the reverse is generally true of church services and activities.

Why has one of these not subsumed the other—why have previous Christian commitments of Gebusi during the late 1990s not prevented customary religious practices from being reasserted, and why do these rediscovered commitments not reduce or retard Catholic influence in Gasumi Corners?

To some extent, I think this question is a product of doctrinal-cum-academic reification—of nominating and then perceiving different religious orientations as divided or opposed. In many practical contexts, alternative religious orientations do not entail a zero-sum contest whereby the increase of one kind of belief or practice entails the decline of another. It may be this way, of course, including when leaders or elites polarize one religious orientation against another in the name of asserting or defending group identity. But exactly how and why religious traditions may end up being considered mutually exclusive, not in doctrinal terms but in terms of social practice, need to be investigated rather than assumed.

For instance, singing to God in daytime church services and the conversion of Gebusi spirit mediums to Christianity seem to have gone hand in hand with the demise of night-time song séances with customary spirits. “Going to sing” on Sunday became mutually exclusive with “going to sing” all night with the spirit medium. However, the Christian clergy were largely ignorant about Gebusi spirit mediumship, and they never mounted a campaign against it. The change in question occurred during a period when I myself was absent from the Gebusi, between 1982 and 1998, so I can’t provide good evidence on the issue. It is true, however, that secular string band singing by Gebusi at night became a very popular and locally modern form of home-grown musical entertainment during this same period, and this seems to have competed directly with older spirit mediums for

community audiences in the evenings. On a less pedestrian level, it may also have been felt that "Papa God" was a more powerful and overarching spirit to supplicate, through prayer, than the powers of customary spirits. Whatever the case, it is worth asking why and how some alternative religious belief or practices become mutually exclusive without assuming, as religious doctrine sometimes does, that the growing popularity of or adherence to one religious orientation is marked or defined by through the decline of another.

In subjective terms as well, categorical or logistical contradiction from a western scholarly perspective, or even a local perspective regarding religious doctrine, may not present much of a practical problem in fact. Michael Lambek (1993) portrays in detail for people in Mayotte of insular East Africa the *de facto* co-relationship between Islam, spirit possession, and sorcery. He stresses that the threading together of disparate spiritual beliefs and practices through personal experience is increasingly the condition of contemporary religion more generally, beyond the Mayotte—or, one might add, the Gebusi. Fully trained and often quite accomplished medical doctors in Papua New Guinea frequently avow or allow that they also believe in sorcery. Gebusi, when told about Western germ theories of disease, thought it was well and good, except they then noted, like Evan's Pritchard's Azande (1937), that only sorcery could explain why a given individual got sick at a particular time and why one person recovered from an illness and another did not. When I asked my friend Yuway, an ardent Seventh Day Adventist in 1998, why he was carving elaborate arrows to present at a traditional initiation ceremony, he said, in essence, that performing a traditional ceremony was not the same thing as believing in it; that is was fine for him to be part of an initiation rite as long as he considered this folk-lore instead of religion. Frequently in fact, religion is neither hybrid or actively syncretic nor a contest between mutually exclusive alternatives.

Given this potential if not tendency, it can be difficult to predict religious trajectories, and especially as religious worlds become more

diverse and multifarious. In 1982, I never thought Gebusi sorcery investigations could be effectively forestalled, yet I found this to be the case sixteen years later. In 1998, reciprocally, I never thought the budding children of Gasumi Corners would ever experience a traditional initiation. Nor did I think that local Catholicism could become mindful and sensitive of Gebusi's religious past—or that Gebusi would be cultivated within the church as active leaders and organizers.

What may be next? After having conducted research on Gebusi religion in various phases for almost thirty years, I have gained enough humility to say that I honestly don't know. Will there be another turn of the religious wheel following the departure of the present proactive Catholic priest? Will the economy of Nomad—and/or the prospects of Evangelical churches—later somehow rebound? My guess is simply that the various strands of the lengthening tradition of Gebusi's exposure to various religious orientations—customary and Christian, Protestant and Seventh Day Adventist as well as Catholic—will provide them with an expanding pallet of choices that will emerge diversely and contextually over time as long as these alternatives are not overshadowed by economic or political dominance of one of these over others.

VII. Implications

Methodologically, the present account underscores the value longitudinal study, of re-studying religious practices, beliefs, and orientations over time. It can be narrow and ultimately myopic to portray religion as a snapshot in a single or restricted period, especially if the goal is to pursue broader understanding across time and space. Religious patterns that appear more categorical or firm in synchronic terms easily become muted as they contextualize across temporal change, alternative possibilities and personalities, and geographic spread or distribution.

Though past religious orientations frequently remain active resources, even if seemingly dormant at a given period of time, this does not indicate

that culture simply persists in the *longue durée*, as significant works by Marshall Sahlins (e.g. 1985, 1995, 2001) are sometimes taken to emphasize. As a mosaic or dialectic among multiple and emerging new strands, religious orientations may hybridize, but they perhaps operate more often like a multiple descent system that draws on alternative deeper principles and can vary greatly in practical application and expression across time and context, often without that much seeming contradiction among ostensibly contrasting options. Past possibilities of Christian as well as customary or ostensibly indigenous religious cultures may be drawn upon in this regard. In many areas of insular Oceania, Christian histories that can be drawn upon now themselves extend for more than a century, in addition to so-called traditional or customary religious beliefs and practices.

The story of religious change or conversion, including the relationship between so-called traditional and modern forms of religious belief and practice—is not only not over, it is newly fresh and just beginning. The more one is exposed to religious change over time, the harder it is to assert or defend its predictable path or even its stable process of transition as fixed by present categories of academic analysis. Between culture, meaning, and power, the dance of religious change continues. Confronting this mix, how scholarly understanding of religion and of religious change can move beyond its own tacit assumptions—including concerning the unidirectionality of religious conversion, the spread of one religion at the expense of another, and processes of religious re-enchantment versus secularization—remains a poignant question.

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