THE INVENTION OF CULTURE, MAGALIM, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

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Whether implicitly or explicitly, convention is reinvented again and again in the course of action. Of course, since its continuance is predicated upon invention, it may often be reinvented in ways that depart somewhat from earlier representations. Most of these departures, whether gradual or precipitous, collective or individual, amount to mere alterations of imagery, like the cult ideologies of tribal peoples, or clothing styles in America. But when changes occur that serve to alter the distinction between what is innate and what is artificial, we can speak of a significant conventional change (Wagner 1981: 104-5).

One of Roy Wagner’s consistent positions is that meaning (or culture) does not simply exist as something out there in the world, but that it is elicited and created, something that people do and make. Anthropologists create culture as a more or less plausible account of what we think people are up to, and one of Wagner’s complaints is that the anthropologist’s success in this task often comes at the expense of recognizing the creativity of those we study. In our notions of culture-as-system we invent “rules” (conventions) and models of seamless wholes that leave precious little for people to do apart from being rule-abiding or occasionally deviant, when in fact they are improvising their way through life, making it up as they go along. Although this might sound a bit like Bourdieu’s practice theory, Wagner sees something else at work, a flow of innovation that leverages meaning out of the dialectic between the realm of the innate and the realm of human responsibility and action. Discontinuous but constantly impinging on one another, these realms provide the dynamic that moves culture along.

For Melanesianists of the day, this was powerful stuff, for it obviated—in dual the sense of doing away with while rendering obvious—what had for long seemed like a problem in the analysis of Melanesian cultures,
namely, their capacity for flux and tolerance of indeterminacy. Traces of this in the ethnography abound, from the debates on “loose structure” to perennial arguments about whether or not cargo cults exist, and if they do, why they seem to come and go with such breathtaking abandon.

Wagner deployed these insights to transform the staples of Melanesian ethnography. In *The Curse of Souw* (1969), for example, he argued that patriclans are far from being given in the Daribi order of things. Instead, they are the precipitate of men’s purposeful attempts to escape or at least counter the implications of their own view of what is ‘natural’ about the facts of life. Local ideas about the body and reproduction stress the blood a woman shares with her children, with the result that children and their maternal uncles are made of pretty much the same stuff. The payments a man makes to his affines on behalf of his children, therefore, are in the nature of a counter-invention in which flows of male wealth counter the flow of maternal substance. While from one point of view this analysis anticipated a lot of subsequent work on gender in Melanesia—including the idea that women are sufficient and men correspondingly contingent—the relevant point here is simply that Daribi invent patriclans in opposition to the blood ties they take to be innate.

Understanding social structure as culture, and culture as meaningful innovation was no mean feat in Melanesianist work of the 1960s and 1970s. Beyond this, however, were several important implications about what Melanesian cultures were like. Against the view of social life as the production of groups to form ever-greater societal building blocks, Wagner’s perspective on Daribi clans suggested that they were in the first instance about dividing and differentiating. These insights later became central to Schieffelin’s (1976) development of the concept of “the opposition scenario” and have become relevant in understanding the dynamics of landowner politics surrounding the Kutubu oil project (Weiner 1998).¹

These ideas were more explicitly developed in *Habu* (1972), where Wagner analyzed ritual as an interplay between conventional ideologies and metaphorical invention, with the punch-line that the *habu* ritual is in fact a kind of anti-funeral. This was a point repeated in a different register in his analysis of Daribi myth (1978), where he looked at two dialectically engaged genres of tale: *Po Page*, constitutive myths, and *Namu Po*, stories about what people do in the face of what *Po Page* have given them. By tracking the sequence of narrative events in examples from each genre, Wagner is able to show how each of these types of tale takes the other as its context and foil.

This is a view of Melanesian cultures as meaning in motion and carries with it the insight that they are in some sense always unfinished, works-in-
progress. Characterized by internal discontinuities and disjunction, they are kept open by a thoroughgoing practice of differentiation. For Wagner, it is important that we understand this differentiation to be as much semiological as sociological: not just a matter of one bunch of people setting themselves off against another (Wagner 1974), but of setting off one practice or custom against another (even or especially if it is one’s own) (1972, 1978). Like Bateson before him, Wagner perceived the creation of counter-meanings as a key dynamic of Melanesian cultures: one could no sooner understand the Daribi habu ritual without invoking opposition and negation than one could understand the Iatmul naven ceremony without invoking schismogenesis (cf. Bateson 1958; Wagner 1972). From this angle, Melanesian conventions cannot but elicit invention.

Melanesian ethnographers who were paying attention were put on notice that the normal state of affairs was not one that would submit to ironing out the kinks and papering over the cracks. If Wagner was right—and I think he was—the point was that these kinks, cracks, and apparent inconsistencies were crucial properties of Melanesian cultures. More than that: it is not merely that Melanesian cultures tolerate a certain amount of disjunction and flux; they produce it.

Wagner’s Daribi ethnographies and *The Invention of Culture* reveal a view of culture as motion, in which traditions or customs are the points of departure in an extended improvisational dialogue. Having come this far, however, we should recognize that this view poses certain problems for us, particularly if we want to understand cultural change. The problem is that this account of culture on the move carries with it little sense of things going anywhere, or of providing us with a way of seeing such movement when it happens. A sense of the difficulty can be had from a passage in Mimica’s *Intimations of Infinity* that closely parallels the opening epigraph from *The Invention of Culture*. Mimica writes of the genesis of cultural forms as the outcome of both structural and historical processes, citing:

> that profound characteristic of Melanesian societies in which cultural configurations seem to be subtended by inherent creative instability manifesting itself in their transformations. In a myriad of contingent situations through which every structure is daily reproduced, there may occur a slight alteration, say a new element is introduced, and there ensues a global restructuring of the entire configuration. Yet in its essential structure the new configuration may remain within the confines of the same general type as before (1988:142).

The problem is that constant changes, while important in understanding the day to day life of Melanesian cultures, never seem to amount to very much; differences that do not make a difference. Here I am reminded of cer-
tain arguments concerning a Melanesian sense of episodic time, a sense of history marked by ruptures and sometimes apocalyptic disjunctures, rather than a (putatively western) sense of cumulative incremental change. Most often deployed in discussion of cargo cults and millenarian enthusiasms, such reasoning normalizes radical departures. By doing so, however, the force of the argument can often turn into something like its opposite, for the general import of such discussions is as much to highlight cultic evanescence and transience—and hence a return to the status quo ante—as it is to emphasize discontinuity. While clearly not what Wagner had in mind, this can easily produce a sense of oscillation between states that lapses into something like an invocation of the le plus ça change principle in which the lurches of the short run translate into the wheel-spinning of the long run. What is needed is a way to see if all the invention that goes into making culture can tell us something about how culture changes.

In what remains of this paper I would like to explore what the spirit of The Invention of Culture can tell us about historical change in Melanesia. My example is drawn from the history of the Telefolmin people of Papua New Guinea over roughly the same span of time since The Invention of Culture’s first publication.

Telefolmin belong to the Mountain Ok group of cultures of the Fly and Sepik headwaters, and like their neighbours Telefolmin share a tradition of descent from a founding ancestress known as Afek. Telefolmin also share with their neighbors a common colonial history and a location on Papua New Guinea’s postcolonial mining frontier, a circumstance that has had profound effects on Telefol life.

Afek is a central figure in Telefol cosmology, and is the putative author of most what we would take to be traditional Telefol culture. Practices specifically mandated by Afek included a complex system of food taboos, incest prohibitions, an elaborate body of mythology and a regional men’s cult centred on Telefolip, the village she founded. Entry to the cult was through a series of initiations, and the cult also performed rituals for gardening and warfare with the assistance of the spirits of the dead. These spirits resided in netbags of human bones that were the major sacra of the cult. To the extent that Telefol culture had a series of conventions, most of these were explicitly seen as Afek’s legacy.

Afek is not the only important figure in Telefol cosmology, however, for she and the customs she established—indeed, Telefol society itself—were obliged to come to terms with the Bush Spirit, Magalim. Unlike Afek, Magalim has no stake in Telefol culture and is conceived to lie outside the range of human intervention or moral relationships. Magalim differs from...
Afek in a number of other ways as well, including the fact that he is not the subject of an elaborate mythology or ritual practices, was never human and, most importantly, never died. Whereas Afek died but left Telefol culture as her bequest, Magalim remains present—indeed, omnipresent—and will remain after the last Telefolmin has died. Intimately associated with the earth and the powers of the wild, Magalim will endure as the earth endures (see Jorgensen 1980).

Having multiple names and forms, Magalim is himself only visible through his effects, and he generally comes to mind when things go wrong. Implicated in uncanny events ranging from spectacular landslides, persistent failures in hunting, or unexplained visions, Magalim lies outside the range of human control but may impinge on human affairs in unexpected and often disruptive ways. Telefolmin sometimes say that Magalim spoils Afek’s work. Far from being peripheral to Telefol concerns, however, Telefolmin also say that Afek and all her children “sit down on top of Magalim,” that is, that everything they do is ultimately founded—and contingent—upon him. He is, in Wagner’s terms, the innate par excellence and is the non-negotiable condition of possibility for all that people do.

While Telefolmin cannot control Magalim, they are very alert to his manifestations in events that demand their attention, and this sometimes leads to unexpected success in hunting or the revelation of some hitherto undisclosed knowledge. One of the striking things about Telefol history is that it is punctuated at significant junctures by Magalim’s interventions. So, for example, he is said to have produced a hunter’s vision in the bush half a century ago; a red man sitting atop piles of objects that were later identified as boxes and crates. In this way he anticipated the arrival of the Americans and Australians who descended out of the sky in gliders to build the local airstrip during the Second World War. It is in instances of this kind that Magalim relativizes Telefol culture by registering its incompleteness (Jorgensen 1994) in a way people cannot help but notice, and, indeed, the attribution of such events to Magalim is a way of saying that something noteworthy is going on.

Since Papua New Guinea’s independence in 1975, Telefolmin have witnessed profound changes, including the demise of the men’s cult, wholesale conversion to Christianity and the advent of the nearby Ok Tedi mining project. In a span of roughly ten years, between 1975 and 1985, Telefolmin went from being a colonial backwater to become one of the most prosperous rural areas of the country. This development was accompanied by dramatic shifts in village life, as hundreds of men went off to work at Ok Tedi (Jorgensen 1996). A short catalogue of the attendant changes include alter-
ations in the customary division of labor as women perform many tasks previously done by men, and the emergence of large cash brideprices. Traditional intervillage dance feasts have now morphed into annual Christmas celebrations as workers return to their home villages to be presented with pork, transactions that are accompanied with the expectation that they will be generous with cash gifts to friends and kin. Cash, in turn, has had an easily visible effect on village life; milled-timber houses with corrugated iron roofing are commonplace, and there is a robust enthusiasm for consumer goods ranging from radios to stylish sportswear.

While I cannot detail all these developments and the Telefol engagement with them here, I would like to focus on Magalim’s recent career and the appearance of the Holy Spirit on the Telefol scene. In the mid-1970s Magalim became particularly active in Telefolmin. The Baptist mission had established a nurse’s training program at the mission station which attracted talented young women from throughout the area. Before long a series of untoward incidents took place in which a number of nurse-trainees behaved strangely, leading the District Medical Officer to write of an outbreak of “mass hysteria (Frankel 1976).” The ‘symptoms’ young women displayed varied from rigid trance-like states to shaking fits and uncharacteristic attacks on male kin, including stone-throwing and cursing. All agreed that whatever was going on was unprecedented and attributed this to attacks by Magalim.

A year or so later, a teenage schoolboy embarked on a novel but short-lived career as a spirit medium, precipitated by an encounter with Magalim, who is said to have “kicked” him. As a result, he was able to go into the previously inaccessible Land of the Dead. In what became known as Ook Bembem, or “shaking work,” he held seances in which people conversed with recently deceased relatives. Many were curious about the whereabouts of Jesus Christ, of whom the missionaries talked so much, but he was not to be seen there. Interest soon waned and Ook Bembem faded as quickly as it had emerged.

Later, with the construction of the Ok Tedi mine, Magalim embarked on a new and more active career. As mine construction got underway, Magalim made his presence felt in a series of earth tremors and spectacular landslides, one of which resulted in the collapse of the tailings dam then being built. Workers began to report encountering him in one of his favourite guises, that of a great speckled python seen around the mine site. Magalim has assumed other shapes at Ok Tedi, where he is apt to sidle up to workers in the form of a lone European cruising the company canteen and offering to buy them drinks. When mine workers returned home on
Christmas furlough, they warned people that they might see “bad things,” just as they had near the mine. Sure enough, Magalim was soon seen hanging around village fringes or near stream crossings in the form of a headless European wearing a white shirt and long black trousers.

No longer content to lurk in the deep bush or around caves or limestone sinkholes, Magalim is now closely associated with mine workers and impinges on Telefolmin at precisely those sites marking the intersection between village life and the regional mining economy. As the innate, Magalim is now more than the spirit of the bush and also serves as a figure of troublesome external forces with which Telefolmin are increasingly confronted, forces which, like Magalim, may occasionally work to one’s advantage but are in principle indifferent to one’s fate.

It was during the beginning of the period of heightened activity by Magalim that the Holy Spirit first appeared on the Telefol scene. Shortly after Independence, the Baptist mission established a bible college at nearby Duranmin. Before long, several women—wives and sisters of pastors and students at the college—began to experience uncontrollable fits of shaking and began speaking in tongues. Taken as evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit, these events were the first signs of what became known as Rebaibal. Acting as hosts to the Holy Spirit, these women—soon to be followed by several others—became known as spirit meris and would go into trance as the Holy Spirit spoke through them in a combination of Telefol and Tokpisin. As the Holy Spirit made his wishes for Telefolmin known, a thoroughgoing program for the transformation of Telefol society emerged. Reflecting God’s desire for a closer relation between men and women in the context of the Christian family, the Holy Spirit urged men, women and children to join together in a family meal in which they jointly consumed foods that Afek had made taboo; henceforth children could eat adult foods, women could eat men’s foods and men could eat women’s foods. God had meant for people to be able to eat everything together, the Holy Spirit explained, and while some were fearful of the risks, the fact that no one suffered ill consequences from doing so was taken as evidence of the Holy Spirit’s power. Likewise, the Holy Spirit explained that the customary prohibition on eating one’s own pigs was the mistaken result of ancestral ignorance, and people were to be given license to do so and sell whatever pork they did not consume for cash. Although some Telefolmin continued to avoid eating their own pigs, this had now become a discretionary choice rather than a matter of observing taboos (cf. Robbins 1995). God also wanted people to become Christians, and the Holy Spirit insisted on baptism and the abandonment of men’s cult practices, occasionally reinforcing...
the point by “kicking” skeptics, who underwent the same kind of shaking the *spirit meris* had shown. Most of all, the human bones that served as cult relics were to be removed and either buried or cast off into the bush. These bones were said to be the cause of illness and the tools sorcerers used to inflict harm, and were to be cast away in the interests of general well-being. As *spirit meris* fanned out over the landscape, all but two Telefol cult houses were either destroyed or converted into village churches as all but a handful received baptism and became Christians.

Though *Rebaibal* initially met with skepticism and resistance from several quarters, this was for the most part short-lived. One of the most persuasive factors was the immunity of converts from the illness or death that was held to automatically result from violation of food taboos, a move that was underscored by the casting out of men’s cult spirits who were also thought to punish such transgressions. Perhaps even more dramatic was the fact that the Holy Spirit visited involuntary shaking upon skeptics, who quickly became believers. Others, in particular senior men, had rather different reasons for joining *Rebaibal*. Many tired of having accusing fingers pointed their way when illness struck, for as the circle of Christians in any village grew, so did the number of possible candidates for sorcery accusations narrow.

Finally, many men self-consciously threw in their lot with *Rebaibal* because of the dilemmas of commitment that it posed. While nobody doubted the existence of the traditional Land of the Dead as the abode of ancestors and deceased kin, it also became clear that Christians were instead destined for Heaven. Having to choose between joining deceased parents or wives and children after death, most men chose the latter.

*Rebaibal* radically transformed a number of the basic tenets and conventions governing Telefol society, most notably in relation to patterns of exchange and consumption and the abolition of the men’s cult established by Afek. In both instances, a reconfiguration of sociality replaced forms based on the division between men and women with a division between nuclear families drawn together into church congregations. Since *Rebaibal’s* first appearance nearly a quarter of a century ago, virtually all Telefolmin remain practising Christians, and church services are now routinely marked by visitations of the Holy Spirit (cf. Robbins 1998). The evangelization of Telefolmin being complete, *spirit meris’* tasks and the interests of the Holy Spirit have shifted from transforming Telefol society to helping to deal with disruptions in contemporary Telefol life.

Often called upon to assist in healing, *spirit meris* and the Holy Spirit have also effectively dealt with problems arising from the reintegration of former mine workers into village life. In one case, for example, a returned
mine worker complained of encounters with ghosts and suffered severe bouts of depression following his return to the village. After an abortive suicide attempt a spirit meri was called in to hold a prayer meeting with the man and all his near kin. Forbidding him to venture into the bush unaccompanied, she also elicited statements of support from those around him and led a collective prayer on his behalf (he has been well ever since). In another instance, spirit meris were instrumental in ending a one-man crime spree. The Holy Spirit revealed the whereabouts of an armed jail-escapee and his hidden cache of stolen goods, information passed on to police as the spirit meris danced and chanted their news at the government station.

A crucial role undertaken by spirit meris and the Holy Spirit is to take on Magalim. In Blantevip, for example, a woman whose husband was away working at Ok Tedi was visited by a being described as a tall European with four glowing eyes and whose attire included the distinctive yellow boots worn by workers at Ok Tedi. When she screamed, the apparition disappeared at superhuman speed over the mountains in the direction of the mining project. Never seen before, it was nonetheless clear that this apparition was a visitation by Magalim, and matters were put right by a spirit meri who, in consultation with the Holy Spirit, advised the woman to bury her absent husband’s remittances in the ground near her house. This having been done, Magalim put in no subsequent appearances in this village and the matter was closed.

If we step back from the particulars of these accounts, we can note a parallel in the careers of Magalim and the Holy Spirit in Telefomin, but a parallel throwing several important differences into relief. Both are clearly associated with a rapid period of historical change in Telefomin, with the difference that while Magalim only impinges and disrupts, the Holy Spirit has undertaken to guide and assist Telefomin. What is particularly interesting here is that although both Magalim and the Holy Spirit are innate and beyond the realm of human control, Telefomin try to steer clear of Magalim while at the same time enthusiastically welcoming the by-now frequent and benign visitations of the Holy Spirit: Magalim poses problems, while the Holy Spirit assists in locating and managing them. Finally, if the Holy Spirit is in some sense Magalim’s doppelgänger, it is also true that he has replaced Afek as the principal source of help in identifying the realm of human responsibility.

Here I would like to make two points about the Holy Spirit within the frame of Wagnerian ideas about the invention of culture and its relation to history. The first is that we can easily identify processes giving rise to Rebatbal and the appearance of the Holy Spirit in obviational terms. When
spirit meris took the lead in evicting the spirits of the men’s cult, this move was both an anticipation of Rebaibal teleology and an unmasking of men’s reliance on women as the source of their spiritual power. This is so not simply because the men’s cult was established by a woman, but also because women’s conception theory identifies them as the source of the bones which were the locus of cult spirits (Jorgensen 1983). Women hold that a foetus’s bones are formed exclusively of the mother’s blood, and by seizing upon these bones and the associated spirits, women were getting their own back in more ways than one. The embodiment of the Holy Spirit in spirit meris was thus an obviational move in the double sense of neutralizing male cultic hegemony by rendering male dependence on women public and dramatically visible. Obviation theory is in this case a helpful guide in identifying the ways in which a politicized creativity works to transform local life.

My second point, however, is somewhat different and returns to a consideration of transformations that are something more than another lap on the historical treadmill. Here I find it interesting that Telefolmin, despite persistent attempts at elicitation, consistently fail to identify the appearance of the Holy Spirit in Telefolmin with any of those events that seem to an outsider to constitute obvious precursors. So, for example, there is no hint that the possession of spirit meris is in some sense related to Magalim’s visitation to the women at the nursing station, nor of the possession trances that marked Ook Bembem. This amounts to a masking of innovation which enables the Holy Spirit to appear precisely as claimed; a rupture with the past that irrevocably changes the terms by which life had hitherto been lived.

Finally, while Magalim does not so much speak as happen, the Holy Spirit does both, and comes to the spirit meris at the heart of Telefol life rather than on its fringes. While Magalim’s interventions can be dealt with episodically in order to facilitate a return to the routine business of life, the Holy Spirit insists on something more. As any Telefol Christian will tell you, it is your soul that interests the Holy Spirit most. This is a difference that makes a difference, for after the transformation of themselves, a transformation of human responsibility follows, and with it, a continual relativization of convention.
NOTES

1. Weiner reports that Foi and Fasu people near the Kutubu oil project have made application for formal recognition of numerous new entities—notional 'clans'—in response to government policies on land group incorporation. These emergent groups are in fact subdivisions of previously existing groups of the same kind, and Weiner argues that this development is an application of traditional social logics of differentiation to novel circumstances (1998: 1-3). This is entirely consistent with Wagner’s ideas of Melanesian sociality.

2. That is to say, he is said to have died once but still live.

REFERENCES


