

Ungodly Images and Idols: Debating National Identity in the National Parliament

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In November and December 2013, a controversy erupted in Papua New Guinea when the speaker of the national parliament, Theodore Zurenuoc, a devout Christian, tried to rid Parliament House of what he described as ‘ungodly images and idols’. Zurenuoc had already begun by removing the carvings from a lintel above the entrance to Parliament House, but planned to remove many more carvings throughout the building. His plans were strongly opposed, and considerable debate was generated in the two national newspapers and in social media. Those who opposed him saw him as a ‘religious fundamentalist’ and his actions as ‘sacrilege’ and ‘cultural terrorism’,¹ while those who supported Zurenuoc’s plans saw him as a ‘God-fearing’, ‘modern-day Reformer’ and ‘God’s anointed vessel’. Despite the protests, which included a number of high-profile critics, and the intercession of the prime minister, the speaker was unrepentant, vowing to continue his work until there were ‘no traces of elements of cult and demonic worship in the national parliament of PNG’ (Evara 2013).

The Minister for Community Development, Youth and Religion, Loujaya Kouza, was singled out as being a particularly strong supporter and influential in the formulation of Zurenuoc’s vision. During a visit to Israel she had evidently come under the influence of a messianic group and believed the only way that Papua New Guinea will benefit from its wealth is if it denounced other gods and declared that ‘the God of Israel is the God of PNG’. This required the ‘cleansing’ since the country’s ‘resources are spiritually hiding under the idol gods’. To complete the cleansing exercise she is

planning to host a group of Israeli ‘prayer warriors’ in March 2014 (Jackson 2013).

The issue here is much larger than the carvings in Parliament House, and Zurenuoc and his supporters are clearly seeking to redefine national identity in more exclusively Christian terms. The speaker saw his actions as part of a project of nation building, in which the issue of identity was clearly something that needed to be redefined. ‘The question is who really are we? Our identity is brought into question and that is the first hurdle we must overcome’ (Zurenuoc 2013). A common denominator was needed to advance the unity of the country which has such great cultural diversity and for Zurenuoc this was ‘Christianity and faith in God’:

There is a great diversity in this country. How do you unite this nation of 1000 tribal groupings, languages. It’s quite difficult unless you have found a common denominator: We have openly confessed our Christian faith, embraced in our Constitution. We are building this in our monument (Gerawa 2013).

The nation, he believed, needed to be unequivocally Christian and the constitution needed to be based ‘on the sure, immovable bedrock of the Bible’, a vision he set out in a four-page advertisement in the country’s national newspaper (Zurenuoc 2013).

As part of his reform process, Zurenuoc wished to replace the four-tonne ‘totem’ pole in the Grand Hall with what he called the National Unity Pole, a pillar of ‘national identity and unity’ that was to be inscribed with the word UNITY in all the languages of Papua New Guinea (Figures 1 and 2). This pole was going to be erected upon four layers of precious stones



which represented for him the essence of national identity, unity and destiny. The base of the pole was the ‘The WORD of GOD — The Foundation, the Eternal Source of Wisdom, Principles and Moral Conscience’. The next layer was ‘The CONSTITUTION — Mother Law generated and guided by the Eternal Word of God for peace, order and welfare of our people’. This was to be followed by ‘The PEOPLE’, which included an inscribed copy of the national pledge that had been changed to reflect Christianity by the addition of the statement ‘... we pay homage to God of the Holy Bible who is our God’. The final layer in the base was ‘The COVENANT’, a declaration made by Grand Chief Michael Somare in 2007, which entailed renouncing the worship of idols and evil gods (Zurenuoc 2013).²

Even though the speaker included the constitution as one of the foundations of his National Unity Pole, he saw a ‘need to define what is noble’ (*Post-Courier* 18/12/2013), a clear reference to the ‘noble traditions’ of the constitution. The Papua New Guinea constitution is much more accommodative of tradition than fundamentalist Christians like Zurenuoc would like, recognising both the country’s ‘noble traditions’ and ‘Christian principles’ as the foundation for nationhood:

WE, THE PEOPLE OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA—

- united in one nation
- pay homage to the memory of our ancestors—the source of our strength and origin of our combined heritage
- acknowledge the worthy customs and traditional wisdoms of our people—which have come down to us from generation to generation
- pledge ourselves to guard and pass on to those who come after us our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours now.³

In seeking to redefine what is ‘noble’, Zurenuoc has set his sights on reworking the constitution.

Historically, many mainstream churches have maintained an openness towards the local culture or the ‘noble traditions’ of the constitution, but this is increasingly being challenged by evangelical churches which articulate the kind of vision of Christianity enunciated by Zurenuoc and his supporters. Fundamentalist is an appropriate designation for these churches, since they place a strong emphasis on biblical infallibility, or what has been called ‘scriptural absolutism’ (Lawrence 1989:5). For fundamentalists, the only sure road to salvation is through unwavering faith in the Bible, which provides a true account of history, science, morality and religion. The Bible as a text thus provides all the guidance necessary for understanding life on earth, as shown in Zurenuoc’s emphasis on the word of God being the basis for national identity.

These churches are particularly noteworthy in their emphasis on conversion and being ‘born again’, which is described as an act of salvation in which an individual adopts Jesus as his or her saviour. As Reverend Walters put this, ‘True Christianity is based on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ’ (Walters 2013).

Becoming ‘born again’ means reforming or radically changing the self to become, in effect, a new person. Converts renounce the ‘evils’ of their past lives and many of their cultural traditions, before being ‘born again’ into a new, fully Christian life (Eves 2007). This requires the avoidance of biblically named sins and several other behaviours judged to be sinful. Although some minor variations occur, particularly how they negotiate local customs, such as mortuary rites and bride-wealth payments, these churches are broadly similar in their prohibitions, which usually include smoking, drinking alcohol, chewing betelnut, card playing and, in some cases, sport.

Change, often of a far-reaching nature, is clearly on the agenda, since these Christians view the world in extremely dualist terms. Thus, there is *either* Christianity *or* tradition, with no middle ground or compromise. This was enunciated by some of Zurenuoc’s supporters in the following way: ‘You cannot serve two masters’ (*Post-Courier* 2013a) or

'PNG can not falter between two gods' (Walters 2013). Sometimes this is refracted through the language of spiritual warfare, as when Reverend Joseph Walters expressed his support for the speaker:

The battle line is being drawn. This is indeed our defining moment. This is our moment of truth. No more fence-sitting. It is good versus evil, light versus darkness, Jesus or Satan, Bible-based Christianity versus compromised religious structures and systems (*National* 2013a; see also Gibbs 2005; Jorgensen 2005).

This event is significant in the recent history of Papua New Guinea, since it involves a conscious attempt to redefine national identity away from an acknowledgement and recognition of tradition towards one defined exclusively in terms of Christianity. It also seeks to break down the separation between church and state, seeing their projects as intricately linked. As the vocal opposition to the speaker's actions indicated, there is no unanimity in Papua New Guinea.

The 'Zurenuoc Affair': Religious Fundamentalism and National Identity?

R.J. May

In late November 2013 it was reported in the Papua New Guinea press that the speaker of the country's national parliament, Theodore Zurenuoc, had removed and destroyed a traditionally carved lintel from the facade of the iconic Parliament House and was in the process of removing a 4-tonne group of carved posts from the Great Hall of the building. The speaker's actions were later described as a 'cleansing' exercise to remove all 'ungodly images and idols' from the parliament (Evara 2013).

There was immediate and widespread reaction to Zurenuoc's actions. The director of the National Museum and Art Gallery, Dr Andrew Moutu, called on the speaker and clerk of the parliament to abandon their plans to remove the carvings and replace them with something more 'appropriate': 'to desecrate cultural symbols in this manner is to subject our national identity to an alien self-image', Moutu said (Elapa 2013). Moutu subsequently

laid a complaint with the National Capital District metropolitan superintendent of police, urging him to use his powers under the National Cultural Property Preservation Act to stop the desecration. Former prime minister, Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare, who had presided over the opening of the new national parliament building in 1984, called for a halt to the removal of the cultural images and took out a court injunction against the speaker to stop the work (Rheeney 2013). An online petition on the activist website AVAAZ.org was quickly organised, attracting a large number of signatures from within Papua New Guinea and overseas; it called on the prime minister to stop the speaker from destroying Papua New Guinea's cultural heritage and requested the attorney-general to investigate the legality of Zurenuoc's actions and lay criminal charges if applicable.⁴ The Catholic Church, through its Catholic Bishops Conference of Papua New Guinea and the Solomons added its condemnation, describing the actions of Zurenuoc as 'really ridiculous' and warning citizens 'to be aware of the rising religious fundamentalism which sprouts from arrogance, insecurity and ignorance'. Conference president, Archbishop John Ribat, accused Zurenuoc of 'lack of respect and disregard for the people, the Constitution and traditional identities of the nation' (*National* 2013b; *Post-Courier* 2013b). A professor at the Divine Word University in Madang accused Zurenuoc of 'cultural terrorism' comparable to the Taliban's destruction of the Buddha statues of Bamiyan, Afghanistan, in 2001 (*ibid.*).

On 10 December Prime Minister Peter O'Neill did intervene to stop the removals, but initially without effect (Australia Network News 2013). A group of members of parliament (MPs), including several government ministers, demanded that the speaker be sacked, and the Papua New Guinea Trade Union Congress called for the arrest of the speaker for destroying public property (*Post-Courier* 2013c).

But opinion was not all in the same direction. Zurenuoc clearly had some support from within the parliament, and in letters to the two daily newspapers, over the radio and in social media

Figure 1: Carving in the Grand Hall of Parliament House, Papua New Guinea



Source: Zurenuoc (2013)

PROOF 2

Figure 2: Theodore Zurenuoc's National Unity Pole



Source: Zurenuoc (2013)

evangelical Christians voiced their support for Zurenuoc's actions. In an interview with Radio Australia, evangelical church leader Reverend Joseph Walters of the Assemblies of God said the speaker had done the right thing:

If you take a closer look at this big totem pole inside and the faces that have been carved, you will be surprised to find that ... Their faces are of Egyptian gods, they're faces of Mongoloids, the face of Buddha ... Maori like kind of appearance ... We believe they have connections to the spirit world.

He went on to suggest that

... a lot of undesirable things like corruption and a lot of things that's going on in our country could be the result of the facts of this things being present in the Parliament House ... We as pastors, church leaders, we feel duty bound by the Almighty God to take some actions in that regard (Radio Australia 2013; see also Walters 2013).

Similar sentiments were expressed by Pastor Wilson Mark of the Lutheran Renewal Church, who said the carvings 'represent the devil' and that 'PNG was always facing leadership crisis because of the carvings and artworks in Parliament House' (*National* 2013d). Pastor John Bakri of the Komkui Council of Churches in Mount Hagen suggested that 'the carvings should be replaced with Bible verses ... [and] Christian images' (*National* 2013e), while author Francis Sina Nii said, 'The entrance [to the parliament building] should have murals of archangels with swords in their hands guarding it and not all those fierce and scary idols' (Nii 2013). Morobe provincial governor, Kelly Naru, a member of the parliamentary House Committee, supported his fellow Morobe MP, saying that the destruction was justified, and described the 'totem pole' (which by then had been attacked with axe and chainsaw) as 'criminal', 'grossly obscene' ('it depicts our genitals'), and 'offending against our Christian principles'. Naru further suggested that the national constitution and pledge should be amended to remove reference to 'cultural heritage' (Saiyama 2013).

In the face of criticism, Zurenuoc told a meeting hosted by the Tertiary Student Christian Fellowship Graduates Network that he was determined to push ahead with his crusade and that parliament could only contribute to nation building if it was transformed: 'There must be no traces of elements of cult and demonic worship in the national parliament of PNG' (Evara 2013). He subsequently told the *Post-Courier* that the five-member House Committee of the parliament, of which he is chair,⁵ had initiated a special project aimed at uniting the country and that the 'common denominator' for such unity was 'Christianity and faith in God' (Gerawa 2013). The removal of the lintel and totem pole (Zurenuoc's term) and, it seems, carvings on the speaker's chair and the large mosaic on the front facade of the building, were part of this project (*Post-Courier* 2013b), and they were to be replaced by a new structure ('the approved pillar of national identity and unity') that would have a Bible at the base and a flame at the top.

On 12 December a *Post-Courier* report implicated one of Papua New Guinea's three recently elected women MPs, the Minister for Community Development, Youth and Religion, Loujaya Kouza, in the 'cleansing' of the parliament (*Post-Courier* 2013c). In calling for the arrest of the speaker, Papua New Guinea Trade Union Congress general secretary John Paska also suggested Kouza be stripped of her portfolio. Kouza reacted angrily, branding the *Post-Courier* report 'a bunch of lies', distancing herself from Zurenuoc's actions, and accusing the media of a smear campaign against her (*National* 2013c). At the same time, she said that in a recent visit to Israel 'she had consulted Jewish spiritual bodies ... about the country's ambition to have a covenant with Israel and to have the God of Israel as the God of PNG [and] was told by Jewish religious leaders [whom she referred to as 'prayer warriors'] that if the country wanted to officially declare that there was no other god and then embrace the God of Israel, then there should not be any recognition accorded to any other gods' (*National* 2013c; see also Rheeney and Saiyama 2013).⁶ On her return she had communicated this

message to Prime Minister O'Neill and speaker Zurenuoc.

Kouza went on to say:

The wealth of this nation we have seen but are circulating amongst the elites — the minorities. Our resources are spiritually hiding under the idol gods. Our wealth hidden under the mentor and covering of Sepik culture. Parliament belongs to Sepik, represent their culture and gods. Other cultures come under the Sepik culture in the Haus Tambaran⁷ (Rheeney and Saiyama 2013).

The reference to the Sepik seems to have been largely directed at the leadership of Somare (although it is also notable that in his tirade against 'ungodly images and idols' on Radio Australia 16 December, Reverend Walters said, 'these things ... they're just from one or two provinces ... that are steeped in ... things of the dark ages, or dark people') (Radio Australia 2013). While the external architecture of Parliament House was clearly inspired by Sepik *haus tambaran*, the offending carvings were very specifically aimed at incorporating all the country's (then 19) provinces: the lintel comprising 19 different heads (or masks); the poles incorporating carvings from different parts of the country, including prominently the Tami-Siassi area in Zurenuoc's electorate; the carvings on the speaker's chair being done by a Trobriand (Milne Bay Province) artist; and the components of the facade mosaic mostly generic and drawing on the work of Chimbu artist Mathias Kuage and students from the National Art School. Ironically, in view of Zurenuoc's reference to the 'special project's' ideal of unity, the iconography of Parliament House had national unity firmly in mind.

Further, despite dissociating herself from the destruction of the lintel, Kouza reportedly 'vowed to press ahead' and said she would host a visit by the Israeli 'prayer warriors' in Port Moresby in March 2014 'to complete the cleansing exercise which Mr Zurenuoc started' (Jackson 2013).

On 16 December the National Council of Churches demanded an audience with Prime Minister O'Neill and sought a dialogue with

Zurenuoc, Kouza and church groups linked to the 'cleansing' of parliament, but Zurenuoc refused to meet, saying, 'I do not want to sit with them' because some of them had strong beliefs in some cultures that were not appropriate (*Post-Courier* 2013d). *Post-Courier* journalists were 'verbally attacked' by the speaker's staff at parliament. Two days later, the *National* newspaper carried a four-page statement by Zurenuoc (2013) and a one-page supporting statement signed by 15 evangelical church spokesmen,⁸ (*National* 2013a) and annotated pictures of 'the existing totem pole' and 'the approved pillar of national identity and unity' (Figures 1 and 2). Zurenuoc's statement outlined his 'Reformation, Restoration and Modernization program' for the national parliament, and repeated his attacks on the carvings, but mostly — notwithstanding Sir Michael Somare's opposition to Zurenuoc's actions — praised the leadership of Somare (and of Sir Julius Chan and other founding fathers) who, he said, had 'not only delivered us Independence, adopted for us a living Constitution, and averted the most explosive constitutional crisis we have experienced yet,⁹ but also made two decisions of far-reaching ramifications that cements the unity of this country' (Zurenuoc 2013). The first of these was the adoption of Vision 2050 in 2009. The second was Somare's 'dedication of PNG and covenant with God of the Holy Bible in 2007' (Zurenuoc 2013).

On 26 August 2007¹⁰ then prime minister Somare, himself a Roman Catholic, made a 'New Covenant with God' on behalf of the people of Papua New Guinea (26 August is now celebrated each year as National Repentance and Prayer Day, or Covenant Day).¹¹ Zurenuoc's statement contains a copy of Somare's declaration on this occasion; it includes the following words:

... I the Prime Minister and Founding Father of Papua New Guinea on behalf of the People of Papua New Guinea repent our iniquities and transgressions, and rededicate our nation to your almighty God. I renounce the worship of all idols and all evil gods. I renounce all covenants with evil spirits and demonic powers ... we acknowledge you as the only God in whom Papua New Guinea stands.

It is from this declaration — specifically the renouncing of ‘all covenants with evil spirits and demonic powers’ — that Zurenuoc claims his inspiration.

So, where does all this lead?

The Rise of Christian Fundamentalism and the Link to Israel

Recent decades have seen a pronounced expansion of evangelical and fundamentalist churches and ‘ministries’ in Papua New Guinea, many of them associated with Christian Zionism and generally espousing conservative — but often militant — social and political agendas. One aspect of this is the frequent occurrence in recent years of mass rallies organised by visiting (mostly American) evangelists, and the exposure of those who have access to television to ‘tele-evangelists’, many of whom preach a ‘Prosperity Theology’ message.¹²

The mainstream Christian churches have, on occasion, expressed concern about the spread of Christian fundamentalism and the impact it has on fostering discord among village communities. This was addressed by Archbishop Ribat in a Christmas Pastoral letter dated 23 December 2013. Having referred, critically, to Christian Zionism, the archbishop wrote: ‘Some groups go so far as to interpret the covenant signed by Chief Somare as opening the way for God’s blessings — understood with cargo-like overtones ... But we cannot support the identification of Israel with the State of Israel, or the cargo-like implications from some quarters’. He also argued for ‘a clear distinction between the task of the religions ... and the task of the State’ (Ribat 2013).

Concern has also been expressed from a secular perspective, notably by former student activist and MP Gabriel Ramoi, who has made a call to ‘strengthen science in our schools to address religious bigotry’ (Ramoi 2014).

The heated controversy arising from the unilateral destruction of the parliamentary carvings by speaker Zurenuoc and his House Committee illustrates the potential for such fundamentalist views to generate conflict — ironically, considering Zurenuoc’s quest for national unity. More divisions might be expected to appear if supporters of the

New Covenant pursue their battle against ‘cultural heritage’. As one observer has commented, ‘If this is allowed to continue every cultural institution (national, provincial, village) is in danger’.¹³ (Already, Christian fundamentalists have for some years been calling for the removal of the emblematic Nokondi spirit figure from the flag of Eastern Highlands Province.) In Papua New Guinea elections — which are characterised by large numbers of candidates (and hence a small number of votes required to win), little evidence of party voting, and a strong influence of local loyalties and bloc voting — the potential for locally based church groups to deliver electoral victory to a favoured candidate is perhaps greater than in many other places, raising the possibility that if Christian fundamentalism continues to grow we may see more fundamentalist sentiments among MPs.

At the core of Christian Zionism is the belief that the return of the Jews to the Holy Land, and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, fulfils biblical prophecies and foreshadows the second coming of Christ.¹⁴ The State of Israel has given official encouragement to Christian Zionism and Israeli religious leaders have fostered the sorts of linkages which took Loujaya Kouza and others to Israel in 2013. State-to-state linkages between Papua New Guinea and Israel have also been strengthened in recent years and in 2012 Papua New Guinea was one of 41 countries that abstained from the United Nations General Assembly vote on according Palestine non-member observer status in the United Nations (Solomon Islands, where Christian Zionism is also growing, was among the 138 voting in favour). Prime Minister O’Neill led a delegation to Israel in October 2013, where he visited religious sites, signed a Joint Declaration of Co-operation (specific areas of prospective Israeli assistance include defence, security and intelligence capability, agriculture, and information technology and communications) and an agreement reciprocally waiving visa requirements, and proposed to establish a Papua New Guinea embassy in Israel. The O’Neill Government has since approved a joint venture partnership with an Israeli group to develop the agro-industry (*Post-Courier*

2014). Although there is not necessarily anything wrong with these ties to Israel, it may be that the spread of Christian Zionism has implications for Papua New Guinea's foreign policy.

Conclusion

It may be that religious fundamentalism in Papua New Guinea, largely fuelled by foreign evangelists, will prove to be the passing fad of a few minority groups. On the other hand, the Zurenuoc affair may provide evidence of some growing tendencies which should give cause for genuine concern. Francis Nii has suggested (somewhat unrealistically) that a referendum be held to resolve the issue of the parliamentary artwork, and has ventured the opinion that the majority in the rural areas would support the actions of the speaker. While Prime Minister O'Neill and former prime minister Somare have both come out against the destruction of the parliamentary artwork (the latter perhaps more convincingly than the former), it is clear that there are a number of senior politicians who are sympathetic with the speaker's actions. Religion is a sensitive topic, and many people — politicians and others — are reluctant to debate the issues that have been raised. But they are issues which need to be addressed.

Tale of Two Speakers: Culture and Religious Hermeneutics

Philip Gibbs

News that the speaker of the national parliament, Theodore Zurenuoc, had removed carvings from the lintel of Papua New Guinea's Parliament House and is intending a complete 'cleansing' of parliament came as a surprise to many. However, in some ways the campaign against images appears similar to a wider religious trend with a history reaching as far back as the polemics of the Protestant Reformation.

In recent times the carvings in the Papua New Guinea parliament have become interpreted by speaker Zurenuoc as idols closely linked with evil spirits and demonic powers. Thus the carvings suffer a triple offence of being not only images but also images of evil gods and, moreover, images that harbour demonic spirits.

If images such as the carvings made for the parliament are inherently associated with evil, then surely all Christian church leaders should be applauding the move of the speaker.¹⁵ But that has not happened because of the wide range of opinion as to what constitutes evil, how it is manifest, and how it is to be opposed. Those promoting removal of the objects are concerned that evil forces may attach themselves to such carvings and statues and thus exert territorial control and influence so that people living in that environment will come under their spell. Paradoxically, those coming under the sphere of Catholic performance and belief, which includes belief in the 'devil', and who typically associate forces for good with images of the Virgin Mary and the Saints, do not appear to be particularly concerned about assigning evil efficacy to the parliament carvings. Those promoting the cleansing of parliament point to a contradiction that results in what they call a compromised pseudo-form of Christianity. Consequently, they say that 'the battle line has been drawn' in a defining moment for Papua New Guinea (Walters 2013).

This is the language of 'spiritual warfare' and it is not new. The idea was heard in Papua New Guinea during 'Operation Brukim Skru' at the time of the 1997 election campaign, and 'Operation Joshua' during the 2002 elections. In Operation Brukim Skru, Christians were encouraged to provide 'prayer power' to keep corruption (and evil spirits) away from polling sites. In Operation Joshua, Christians were encouraged to claim the land for Christ similar to the way Joshua had challenged the gods of the original inhabitants of the Promised Land and conquered the land for Israel. Rallies by visiting Israeli-American evangelist Benny Hinn in Port Moresby in 1999 further supported the intent of those wishing to exorcise Papua New Guinea of demonic spirits.¹⁶

A little over a decade ago there was a different attempt to address Christian faith and the Papua New Guinea parliament. In the year 2000, speaker of parliament Bernard Narokobi had a large illuminated cross fixed on top of the parliament building (Gibbs 2005). In explaining his action to the parliament, he said the cross is 'the light of Calvary. With your concurrence I would ask that

this cross remains. It is a memory of our hope in the future as Christians. This may not be the mountain or the hill of Calvary, however, the way we tend to crucify each other in here, we may as well nickname the hill on which Parliament stands, the Calvary Hill' (Hansard, PNG Parliament, 13 April 2000, 2).

Comments in the daily newspapers focused on the division between sacred and profane, sin and holiness. 'Observer' from Boroko felt that it was an insult to the cross because 'the National Parliament has become a place where Members of Parliament argue, swear and plot ways to destroy each other. The National Parliament is not a holy place ... You can never put darkness and daylight together' (*Post-Courier* 2000a). 'Citizen' of Madang went so far as to suggest that the members of parliament leave the cross as it was and remove the bottom part of the fascia of the house (presumably including the lintel) with its 'immoral naked carvings ... believe it or not, these images represent and manifest the activities of unseen ungodly evil spirits that have been the force behind all these wrong doings, and what can evil bring to the good and wellbeing of this nation' (*Post-Courier* 2000b).

Speaker Narokobi defended his decision to put up the cross, saying that it was a reminder that Papua New Guinea is a Christian country as provided for in the constitution. He also addressed the issue of the sacred and profane, saying that parliament makes decisions that are sacred, and for the common good of the people.

Perhaps not all the members of parliament shared the speaker's ideal that what goes on in parliament is sacred as it is for the common good of the people. Eventually, when Narokobi was absent from the speaker's chair, the member for Bulolo, Samson Napo, successfully moved a motion that the cross be removed.

Speaker Narokobi's attempt to link Christian hope and parliament was based on Catholic social teaching and the Papua New Guinea constitution. The recent actions of speaker Zurenuoc are based more on reservations about aspects of the constitution, and on belief in the need of spiritual warfare to rid parliament of territorial spirits.

Christians who, like Narokobi, acknowledge the possibility of a Melanesian spirituality, tend to feel uncomfortable with the revivalist notion of spiritual warfare. They hold that it is not necessary to destroy symbolic material objects, but rather to view them with eyes of faith and point to Paul's teaching on food offered to false gods (1 Corinthians 8:1–13). Thus they do not condemn outright traditional Melanesian culture but, following the early Christian apologist Justine Martyr, maintain that there are 'seeds of the Word' (of God) in traditional Melanesian culture, and that the God of Life was not far distant from 'those who seek the unknown God in shadows and images' (Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Church* 16). This is a more nuanced dialogical view of the relation between faith and culture than the rather literal form of moral interpretation adopted by their opponents.

If it were just about some carvings in the Papua New Guinea parliament the issue might have died down. However, aside from differences in the hermeneutics of good and evil noted above, there are major differences in the wider social and political implications of the recent events. Supporters of the speaker recall how in 2007 Grand Chief Michael Somare as prime minister signed a document called 'A New Covenant'. The New Covenant is between the God of Israel, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit and the People of Papua New Guinea. Little was heard of this New Covenant until 15 August 2011 when acting prime minister, Sam Abal, declared it as a National Day of Repentance and a public holiday.

Since then pastors and leaders of some churches have interpreted Somare's signing the document as a new irrevocable covenant with God signalling a departure from all forms of animistic and pagan belief. They believe that including reference to both the God of the missionaries and the noble traditions — which they interpret as 'ancestral gods' — in the preamble to the constitution was a mistake, and that Somare's signing of a new covenant corrected this, renouncing all forms of idolatry, paganism, ancestor worship and occult that had been mixed up in the constitution from day one (Zurenuoc 2013).

While that is the interpretation promoted by some church leaders and advertised with a multi-page spread in the *National* newspaper (*National* 2013a; Zurenuoc 2013), it seems they are not quite in accord with Somare, who has expressed his horror at the move to purge the carvings from parliament. He has confided that when he signed the document in 2007 he had no intention to change anything but in fact was restating what he understood as already in the preamble to the constitution, that Papua New Guinea is a Christian country.¹⁷

Now some proponents of the New Covenant are interpreting it, not just with the God of Israel, but also with the State of Israel. Some groups go so far as to interpret the covenant signed by Grand Chief Somare as countering God's 'curse' and opening the way for God's 'blessings' — understood with cargo-like overtones. This was illustrated at the Covenant Day celebrations in Goroka in 2013, where the main speaker, Reverend Tony Dalaka of the Cornerstone Church, told people that in establishing ties with Israel, God would bless Papua New Guinea so it would prosper like the 'Asian miracle' that is Singapore (*National* 2013f; Waima 2013).

It has become apparent that the move to promote the 2007 covenant and the links with Israel are strongly influenced by Christian Zionism that promotes the belief that the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 and the capture of Jerusalem in 1967 were the miraculous fulfilment of God's promises made to Abraham. The belief that Jews must occupy the whole of Palestine leads Christian Zionists to fund the return of Jews to Palestine, including the establishment of settlements in occupied territories. Christian Zionists are creating nearly impossible conditions for a two-state solution for the Middle East peace process. There is also increasing influence in some churches in the Pacific, including Papua New Guinea.¹⁸

Confusion over identifying Israel of the Old Testament and the current State of Israel is only one of the sociopolitical issues linked to the current debate on the carvings in parliament. Another is a risky mix of church and state in the present debate,

with parliament at the centre and some church leaders calling on parliament to approve changes to the Papua New Guinea constitution and the national pledge and in fact to the very identity of Papua New Guinea. At the same time they explicitly reject dialogue with those who oppose it, saying that the action of Grand Chief Somare has annulled the past and that the speaker of parliament is God's instrument in bringing a purified form of Christian faith and national identity to Papua New Guinea.

As explained above, the broad range of interpretations of culture and Christian identity in Papua New Guinea in recent years must surely call for further reflection, and restraint in demanding any one form, no matter how much the proponents believe they are fulfilling a covenant with God.

The Beginnings of a 'Pentecostalite' Public Realm in Papua New Guinea?

John Cox

The recent removal and partial destruction of the carvings from Papua New Guinea's Parliament House marks a shift in the public meanings of those carvings. Once, at least for those aware of their existence, they were accepted as a symbol of Papua New Guinea's national unity rendered as inclusive of cultural diversity and indeed composed of the various indigenous traditions of its people. The recent actions by the parliamentary speaker and the support from Pentecostal churches have now cast the carvings not as a meaningful national symbol but as an embodiment of demonic power and a spiritual threat to the nation.

While there has been much criticism of the treatment of the carvings, there has also been much support for the speaker, indicating the possible emergence in Papua New Guinea of what anthropologists studying Africa have dubbed a 'Pentecostalite' public realm. This term simply means that public language and social norms are now heavily influenced by Pentecostal ideas, images and expectations, which have moved from the confines of sectarian groups to be easily intelligible and recognisable elsewhere. Pentecostalism is commonplace, even 'mainstream', in the cultural life of modern Nigeria, for example. Meyer (2002) has

made this argument of popular cinema in Ghana and Piot (2010) notes the singing of Christian songs in nightclubs in Togo as another instance of the pervasive influence of the Pentecostal movement there. However, Pentecostal influence extends beyond these cultural artefacts and includes an extensive package of beliefs and practices that influence the way politics and social life are imagined. These include moral injunctions, millenarian prophecies, modes of dress and ideas of Christian lifestyle, including expectations of material wealth — the ‘prosperity gospel’ (Cox 2013). In their contribution to this discussion paper, Richard Eves and Nicole Haley describe the fundamentalist Christian project of creating a Christian nation, purged of ungodly elements, which is also characteristic of global Pentecostalism (Robbins 2004).

In this context, biblical ideas of Israel as the original chosen and righteous nation provide a model for modern Christian nations such as Papua New Guinea. Already in this paper Gibbs, and Eves and Haley, have noted the influence of Christian Zionism among fundamentalist Christians in Papua New Guinea (cf. Dundon 2011). Of particular relevance to the idea of purging the Papua New Guinea parliament of satanic forces are the biblical injunctions against idolatry that mark Israel as a nation purged of evil demons (although the story of the Golden Calf in Exodus provides an example of the immanent presence of evil and the temptation to fall into its power).

Spiritual Warfare and the Re-Enchantment of Sorcery

Pentecostal engagements with the state contest the state’s legitimacy as a producer and manager of public values (Marshall-Fratani 2001).

Pentecostals may critique the state as corrupt, unjust or immoral and often regard the mainline churches as sharing these qualities because of their historical accommodations with the state. While these critiques may have a political edge, more often they address a generalised project of redeeming the state and nation for Christ. This project of redeeming the nation has a number of components, including prayer for the nation’s

conversion and the placement of righteous leaders (ideally Pentecostals) in positions of influence. The current speaker of parliament can be seen as such a person with a righteous mission to place the powers invested in his position at the service of Christ.

Beyond the populating of professional roles with Christians, the struggle for the nation’s soul is imagined as a global battle against the forces of Satan, as noted by Eves and Gibbs in this discussion paper. The nation is seen as being in bondage to Satan or particular demons and this bondage must be broken for the nation to advance spiritually and materially. This framework allows local concerns and cosmologies to be drawn into an intensified experience of spiritual conflict. Jorgensen (2005) explains how ‘Third Wave’ Christian evangelism divides the world into nations and regions that then become a focus of its spiritual warfare and revivalist activities. The nation becomes a battleground where Christianity and locally embedded demons fight over the nation and its people. The language of spiritual warfare can revitalise local non-Christian religious traditions and elevate traditional spirits into minions of Satan (Meyer 1999; Robbins 2004). Whereas, in the recent past, traditional religious practices may have survived rather furtively in the shadows of Christianity, now, with the advance of Pentecostal ideas of spiritual warfare, traditional religion (and by implication cultural identity more generally) is altered to become far more public and far more powerful and sinister as a direct manifestation of Satan and his demons. Where mainline churches have seen traditional beliefs in spirits as superstitious practices that provoke unnecessary fears or as innocent pre-gospel gropings towards the sacred (Ribat 2013), Pentecostals attribute active malicious powers to such spirits as agents of Satan.

One of the interesting features of the debate over the Papua New Guinea parliament carvings is the shift in the interpretation of the carvings themselves. Those who wish to remove and destroy the carvings regard them as embodiments of evil and as a physical presence that keeps the nation in bondage to demonic spirits. In support of their claims, they quote from an anthropological book

on Papua New Guinea art (Craig 2010) and cite former prime minister Michael Somare's preface to the book, where he describes the carvings as having a 'living spirit'. This metaphorical reference to the carvings as a symbol of a living cultural tradition is reinterpreted as evidence of the actual living (and malevolent) presence of demons in the physical carvings. No longer harmless symbols of national identity or mere 'things of stone and wood', the carvings are now seen as powerful agents of satanic power that oppress the nation.

In the African contexts documented by Meyer, Piot and others, this transformation of traditional practices into evil protagonists in a global cosmological battle is not simply a Pentecostal rhetorical device. Rather, there are broader effects beyond the immediate reach of the churches, such as the intensification of fears of sorcery and the attendant accusations of witchcraft and killing of witches. In recent years, Papua New Guinea has seen a similar reinvigoration of sorcery beliefs and violent attacks on supposed witches and others accused of malicious sorcery. The African literature suggests that as Pentecostal denunciations of satanic power intensify, so too do accusations of witchcraft. Indeed, witches are feared even more intensely than before as their murderous powers are believed to have the backing of the ultimate evil being in Satan. When witchcraft is seen as an ever-present danger and even as a temptation for Christians, there is often an outpouring of confessions from self-declared witches and these confessions often take place in Pentecostal churches.

Cargo Cult Redux or the New Modern Papua New Guinea?

This reinvigoration of supernatural power in the (Pentecostalite?) public realm has been criticised as 'ignorance and cargo cult' by Catholic priests and in social media. However, in a four-page supplement published in the *National* newspaper, Zurenuoc (2013) presented his program as an agenda of 'Reformation, Restoration and Modernization' that flows from the Papua New Guinea constitution and from (rational) policy frameworks such as the Somare government's

Vision 2050. Zurenuoc's actions are not simply the destructive activity of a 'cultural terrorist' but entail a reconstitution of the nation purged of traditionalism, dedicated to God and ready to embrace a modern future.

This aggressive renegotiation of national identity refigures cultural heritage, not as a valuable grounds for a post-colonial national identity but as a hindrance to the full appropriation of modern life. In doing so, it rejects key parts of the political settlement reached by the country's independence leaders; specifically, the underlying premise that development flows from the integration of culture and modernity (cf. Cox in prep.). However, Zurenuoc is careful to preserve a place for the nation's 'founding fathers' (following the American phraseology) and, indeed, argues strongly that his program is consistent with Somare's Dedication and Covenant. Not only so but, in paying respects to the founding fathers, Zurenuoc clearly seeks to appropriate their patriarchal leadership as having been passed on to the next generation of politicians such as himself. Interestingly, the Minister for Community Development, Youth and Religion, Loujaya Kouza, one of three women in the current parliament, did not seem to share this deference for the founding fathers and has made disparaging remarks about the dominance of Sepik influence in the Haus Tambaran, which, as Ron May notes above, is presumably a thinly veiled reference to Somare. Kouza's role in this crisis also points to one of the unexpectedly modern features of Pentecostalism in sometimes allowing women greater possibilities of leadership inside and outside the domestic realm (Cox and Macintyre in press; Eves 2012).

In summary, while there are very disturbing elements of the carvings episode and while, as an anthropologist, I do not condone the destruction of cultural heritage, it is unsatisfactory to view the speaker's actions as an irrational act of religious fanaticism. Rather, the event signals that there are deeper social transformations underway; perhaps the emergence of a Pentecostalite public realm in Papua New Guinea. The Pentecostal attack on traditionalism is key to the movement's success

around the world and represents an alternative view of the world that is not satisfied by post-colonial settlements that seek to reconcile culture and modernity. Instead it demands radical change on a national scale. That many Papua New Guineans find this new approach convincing should not surprise us as, for some time, they have been expressing great disillusionment with the current state of the nation.

'Grass Roots' Views of the Papua New Guinea Parliament House Carvings Issue

Francesca Merlan and Alan Rumsey

Other contributors to this discussion paper have followed development of the Parliament House carvings controversy at the national level more closely than we have. Our perspectives are regional ones based on our long-term research experience in the Nebilyer Valley in Western Highlands Province, and our briefer stays in the provincial capital of Mount Hagen to the east. Most of the people with whom we have been in regular contact are village people who have had little or no formal education and are identified both by themselves and others as 'grass roots' people. We hope our contribution will provide a useful complement to the others in that respect, since none of them report on the views of such people. We are in a good position to do so, having made two field trips to the Nebilyer Valley during 2013 and one in early 2014 after the destruction of the carvings had taken place and been reported in the Papua New Guinea national media. Before presenting the views that people conveyed to us during that time we will first provide some background details concerning the region and history of Christianity in the area.

Missionisation began within two years of the arrival of the first Europeans (the Leahy Brothers) in Western Highlands — first by Lutherans (1933) and then by Catholics (1934). A de facto territorial division between them soon emerged, whereby given locales were either Lutheran or Catholic, with no overt competition between the two. This was still the case in 1981 when we began our fieldwork at Kailge in the western Nebilyer Valley, which was almost entirely Catholic, with only a

few remaining people among the older generation who still identified as heiden (heathen). Sunday mass was a festive and social occasion, especially when the parish priest was expected (at that time a Dutchman, who came from a station in the valley once every two to three weeks). Many people availed themselves of the sacraments insofar as they could. In our early years of association with Kailge the priest was aware of the possible attractions of charismatic Catholicism as this was being preached in Australia. Occasional visiting charismatics came to the area. The priest thought it was advisable to allow them to meet people and perform worship services, since otherwise, he reasoned, parishioners would soon develop the suspicion that they were being excluded from important developments. Better to let them see and hear it firsthand, he thought. This was part of his general understanding of his parishioners: that they might easily come to suspect that important knowledge was kept from them.

Since the 1980s, there has been the kind of diversification of churches that has occurred in much of Papua New Guinea. At Kailge alone, there are now, besides the Catholic Church, a Papua New Guinea Bible Church, a Holy Spirit Revival Church and a New Covenant Church. Approximately half an hour's walk away there is a new Seventh-day Adventist Church, which has attracted a considerable following. At Kailge itself there is a new congregation of Reform Seventh-day Adventists, who allow eating of pork. Members of the same household and extended family now often attend different churches; and many do not attend church at all, another aspect of change. There are now many local and regional preachers, and people seem to have a much greater sense of the affairs of these churches being in local hands.

When we visited Kailge in January–February 2014 many people there knew little or nothing about the destruction of objects in Parliament House; a few did who regularly go to Mount Hagen, read the newspaper, or had other sources of information. As might be expected, a disproportionate number of those who had heard about the matter and were interested in discussing

it with us were members of the clergy, including a Pentecostal (Assemblies of God) pastor whom we have known for many years, a Seventh-day Adventist pastor and several Catholic priests, including both Papua New Guinea-born and expatriates, most of whom we met at the Rebiambul Catholic Mission in Mount Hagen. At Kailge, the people we spoke with about the matter included several who had not heard about it until we told them about it and asked for their views.

Across the range of people with whom we discussed the destruction of the carvings, almost all were in favour of it. Other contributors to this discussion paper stress the role of fundamentalist Protestants in driving the destruction and in the push for further action along those lines. While fundamentalists have no doubt spearheaded the action, in our experience they are by no means the only supporters of it. And while the Catholic Church has officially come out against it, most of the lay Catholics and Papua New Guinea-born priests we talked to about the action were personally in favour of it.

What might account for this general weight of opinion? Our experience suggests to us, at least for the Nebilyer area, that there is a broad set of assumptions and attitudes that form part of the relevant background. Some of these are the same ones discussed in other contributions. Many local people believe that parliamentarians are not doing a good job, and that the state has failed to bring the services and development they desire. Like many other Papua New Guineans, they feel that parliamentarians fail to act in others' interests, and even that they do things that are wrong and bad, like stealing money. Many of our interlocutors offered the opinion that part of the explanation for this malfeasance might lie in the presence of the 'ancestral objects', which may harbour evil spirits that exert bad influences. Hence it is best to be rid of them.

People also say that Papua New Guinea is a Christian country. This is a point people can agree

on, no matter what their version of Christianity. Hence these objects, which are reminiscent of earlier kinds of practice, can and should be dispensed with. People in the region are generally fairly confident nationalists: they feel proud to be Papua New Guinean, and proud that Papua New Guinea has united as a country. But they see a Christian basis for this as perfectly suitable, and are not nostalgic about customary practices.

In this region over the decades of change since European arrival in the 1930s, people have generally been fairly radical in the way they welcome and enact transformation from one condition to another. In earlier decades people burned weapons in large piles as a way of expressing their turn to 'government law' (but this of course has not meant that peace has been uniformly kept). They also dramatised changes in economy and exchange and tried to open the way to engagement with the cash economy by burning their previously prized kina shells (or most of them). In our field site people gave up spirit cult practices (although in times of war there has been some reversion to these as described by Rumsey (2008:458–59)).

In these and other ways, people here do not espouse the idea that tradition needs to be preserved. Rather, they orient much more overtly although selectively towards the acceptance and dramatisation of change (cf. Merlan and Rumsey 1991:228–39; Rumsey 2006:59–63). As a final example, this came out strongly in discussion with our Assemblies of God pastor friend when Alan, in what he intended as a *reductio ad absurdum*, pointed out that the overall design of Parliament House is modelled on a Sepik *haus tambaran* (ancestral worship house). Should the whole building therefore be torn down? Her unhesitating answer was 'Yes, good idea!'. This was, we submit, not just a symptom of an emerging 'Pentecostalite public realm' of the kind posited in John Cox's contribution, but of a deeply rooted, more general disposition in the area that the fundamentalists have been able to tap into for their own purposes.

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Endnotes

1 These included the former prime minister Michael Somare; former speaker Timothy Bonga; Puka Temu; Papua New Guinea Trade Union General Secretary, John Paska; director of the National Museum and Art Gallery, Andrew Moutu; and several parliamentarians.

- 2 ‘I renounce the worship of all IDOLS and all EVIL gods. I renounce all covenants with the evil spirits and demonic powers. I renounce and reject all their actions and I reverse all their evil effects’ (Zurenuoc 2013).
- 3 Constitution of the Independent State of Papua New Guinea, <<http://www.igr.gov.pg/constitution.pdf>>.
- 4 https://secure.avaaz.org/en/petition/The_Prime_Minister_of_Papua_New_Guinea_Stop_the_speaker_of_the_PNG_Parliamen_destroying_irreplacable_tribal_art/
- 5 The other members of the committee are Morobe Governor Kelly Naru, Gulf Governor Havila Kavo, Mul-Baiyer MP Koi Trappe and Tambul-Nebilyer MP Benjamin Poponawa.
- 6 On National Covenant Day August 2013 Kouza spoke at a rally in Goroka. An extract from her speech, aired on the National Broadcasting Corporation’s Kundu 2 and transcribed by Father Philip Gibbs, conveys something of the tone of her speech: ‘... the “kings” of the ninth parliament [of Papua New Guinea] ... will take the wealth of our nation and bless Israel and the world ... None of us in the ninth parliament will be removed until we have fulfilled the purpose for which we have been brought into this house ... until the King of Kings and Lord of Lords has come’.
- 7 The external architecture of Parliament House broadly follows the lines of a haus tambaran (roughly, spirit house) of the Abelam (East Sepik) people, and the building is consequently often referred to as the ‘Haus Tambaran’. For an early discussion of the national parliament building as ‘a contested national symbol’, see Rosi (1991).
- 8 The signatories were from Christian Life Centre, Christian Outreach Centre, PNG Christian Center, POM Ministers Fraternal, KB Ministry, Reaching Out Ministry, City Reformation Centre, Agape Inter-denominational Ministry, Christian Apostolic Fellowship, Shema Evangelism, Rhema Church, Citadel, and Assemblies of God.
- 9 ‘The most explosive constitutional crisis’ refers to the ‘political coup’ against Somare in 2011. For a brief account of this see May (2011).
- 10 26 August is celebrated in Israel as Yom Ha’atzmaut — the national day of Israel, observing the foundation of the state in 1948.

- 11 Prime Minister O'Neill has endorsed the New Covenant, declaring, 'National Repentance and Prayer Day now and in the future has one goal: that is the God of Israel who is the God of the Bible is the supreme God of PNG' (*Post-Courier* 29/8/2013).
- 12 The 'Christian Zionism' entry in Wikipedia provides an overview of the subject as well as listing references and additional reading. For discussions of Pentecostal and charismatic evangelical church activities in Papua New Guinea see Eves (2008), Gibbs (2005), Sullivan (2007) and references cited in Sullivan. McDougall (2013) provides some Solomon Islands comparisons.
- 13 Helen Dennett, personal communication 11 December 2013.
- 14 According to some Christian Zionists, the second coming of Christ will be preceded by the gathering of the Jewish people in Israel, including the 10 'lost tribes' of the ancient kingdom of Israel. Among the Gogodala people of Papua New Guinea's Western Province there are some who claim to be one of those lost tribes and have adopted Jewish customs (Tony Crawford, personal communication; see also Dundon 2011).
- 15 According to the 2000 census, 96.2% of Papua New Guineans identify as 'Christian'.
- 16 Benny Hinn — a symbol of modern religion and prosperity — had been invited by prime minister Bill Skate to come as a guest of the national government. He was promised a welcome including a state reception (*National* 19/1/1999), and a contribution of K180,000 towards the crusade (*National* 15/4/1999).
- 17 Archbishop Douglas Young, personal communication 20 December 2013.
- 18 The Christian Zionist movement has been opposed by mainline churches in the United States such as the General Assembly of the National Council of Churches (2007), and others such as the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church. In 2006 four heads of churches in Jerusalem including the Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Episcopal and Evangelical Lutheran Churches published the Jerusalem Declaration insisting that they categorically reject Christian Zionist doctrines as a false teaching that corrupts the biblical message of love, justice and reconciliation. See <<http://electronicintifada.net/content/jerusalem-declaration-christian-zionism/627>>.

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