MISSIONARIES, ENVIRONMENTALISTS, AND THE MAISIN, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

The arrival of Anne Marie Tietjen and myself in Uiaku village in Oro Province, Papua New Guinea, in November 1981 triggered a great deal of speculation. I had made contact with the local priest and village leaders through the good offices of the Anglican Church and some of the people who met us were clearly familiar with the odd pursuits of researchers. Some fifteen years later, I learned that some of the older people had speculated that we were returning ancestors who would hopefully rejuvenate the fortunes of the Maisin people. Others, perhaps more in tune with the national times, hoped that we would draw upon our vast business connections in “America” to bring development to the Maisin. These reactions were the kind we expected in light of what we had read and heard about New Guinea.

What we did not expect was that the majority of villagers had already decided that we were missionaries.

Villagers were very concerned over what kind of missionaries we were. Although the Maisin had been dealing with Anglican missionaries since 1890, only one white missionary ever resided with them and he had left after suffering an emotional breakdown some 60 years earlier. In general, the Maisin learned Christianity and the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic from men who looked very much like themselves. The first mission teachers were New Hebrideans (now ni-Vanuatu) recruited from the sugar plantations of Queensland. They were later replaced by Papuans trained at the mission headquarters as teacher-evangelists and eventually by Papua New Guinean priests. The Maisin were now second and third generation Christians and the Anglican Church itself was almost completely localized. Still, some people obviously hoped that they were at last getting the white priest they had long hoped for. Others, observing that I did not seem at all priest-like, speculated that we were with the Summer Institute of Linguistics and had come to translate the Bible into Maisin; or perhaps we were evangelists for one of the Pentecostal sects that had begun to make inroads into the Anglican religious monopoly elsewhere in the Northern Province.

Anthropologists working in Papua New Guinea expect to encounter “strange” customs and “exotic” beliefs, by which we mean phenomena that we assume to be indigenous in origin, that make sense within the distinctive
logic of a cultural “Other”. We tend to be decidedly less impressed by things that look familiar – churches, schools, trade stores, and the like. Anthropologists have always studied such things – and in recent years these studies have become quite sophisticated – but usually as signs of the impact of outside agencies with which, as outsiders ourselves, we are already familiar. Like other anthropologists who have worked in Oro Province in recent years, I could not help but be impressed by how central the church was in Maisin life in the 1980s but I still perceived it largely as an import that duplicated Christian institutions elsewhere. So too, incidentally, did the Maisin. But Maisin notions about the nature of and their need for “missionaries” provided an early clue that much more was at work here. Christianity was an import but one that Maisin had over the course of decades remoulded to fit with their own cultural orientations, the contingencies of interacting with outsiders, and aspirations for social and economic improvement in their community.1 In greeting my wife and myself as missionaries, Maisin gave us our first clue that Christianity meant something different for them than it does for people in my own country.

When we arrived in Uiaku in 1981, most Maisin longed for missionaries who would assist them in achieving political and moral unity and, thus united, economic prosperity. In the mid-1990s, this dream seemed to be coming true. The Maisin have gained practical and moral support from a wide variety of organizations, most of them involved in environmental conservation. The activists do not think of themselves as missionaries anymore than my wife and I did. They tend to view the Maisin as an autonomous indigenous people whose traditional ways of life are now threatened by the rapacious forces of multinational corporations, particularly logging and mining interests. I do not think that their perceptions are entirely wrong. I do want to suggest, however, that the Maisin have been dealing with outsiders for a long time. Their prior experiences necessarily shape their perception of and ways of dealing with the newcomers. And to a considerable extent, they are treating the newcomers as if they were the long-awaited missionaries.

Unfortunately, there is often fierce rivalry between different groups and agencies that work in partnership with indigenous peoples. There is a long-standing rivalry between some anthropologists and missionaries although their battles tend to pale when compared to the nasty sectarian sniping that occurs between missions and between rival environmental organizations. What I write here could be read as a put down of the environmentalists who have arrived in large numbers in Collingwood Bay in recent years but this is not my intention. I feel tremendous respect and gratitude for the generous time, energy, and imagination that these activists have put into direct assistance to the Maisin and to the development of projects meant to benefit the community. Indeed, I have joined their ranks. I hope, however, that twenty years of research and thinking about Maisin society and history have provided me with some insights that will be of interest and use to my new colleagues. I use the term “colleagues” here deliberately. I have myself become a missionary in the Maisin sense.

THE ANGLICAN MISSION

Numbering around 3,500 people, the Maisin occupy four village clusters along the southern shores of Collingwood Bay on the eastern edge of Oro Province. They are among the largest of the five language groups occupying the Bay. The villages are divided into contiguous hamlets occupied by patrilineally-related men who share rights to certain lands for gardening. Like their ancestors, villagers today get most of their food through subsistence gardening, fishing, hunting, and gathering and they rely upon the resources of the rain forest and mangrove swamps that surround their homes for much of their material culture, including houses, canoes, and mats. Villagers eke out cash from periodic sales of copra and tapa cloth; but Collingwood Bay today is an economic backwater, as it was through the entire colonial period. But the Maisin are not deprived, at least by typical rural standards in Papua New Guinea. They enjoy a relatively high level of education. Since the 1960s, a majority of Maisin has graduated from at least grade six and many have gone on to secondary and tertiary institutions. At least a quarter of the Maisin population now lives in urban areas, most of them holding well-paying jobs in the public and private sectors. Their remittances, in cash and manufactured goods, had come to form a crucial subsidy for their village relatives. The Anglican Church, which Maisin have been encountering since the 1890s, deserves much of the credit for the present favourable economic situation, especially through its efforts to provide high quality educational institutions.
In the late colonial period, the Anglican Mission came to enjoy an enormous influence over much of the Northern District. Many villagers like the Maisin looked to the Anglican missionaries for information on the nature of the outside world and guidance in dealing with the changes sweeping over the country at the time. Many hoped that by forming relationships with the mission, they would eventually gain access to the vast wealth and power enjoyed by white people. This would happen through an exchange between moral equals, an exchange that would preserve the moral integrity of local people through Christian faith while elevating their material way of life. This was the crucible in which Maisin formed the notion that I would encounter in the early 1980s, of the missionary as a necessary partner in facing the challenges of an expanding world.

The Anglican Mission reached the pinnacle of its influence during the 1960s when it administered a network of churches, schools, teachers and theological colleges, and medical clinics covering most of the Northern District but it did so on a miniscule budget, dependent mostly on contributions from the colonial government and overseas supporters. The Mission owed much of its success to its long association with villagers and the fact that it offered the majority of positions available at that time for educated Papuans. This situation changed dramatically with the decision of the Australian government in the 1960s to fast-track Papua New Guinea for rapid independence. Graduates of Anglican schools now found their options enlarged as the administration practically overnight created a system of secondary and tertiary schools providing general and technical training in a variety of areas. To their immense frustration, missionaries watched many of their prize students lured into jobs in the government or public service – jobs that offered immensely better pay and larger responsibilities than anything the Mission could hope to match. The Mission suffered an additional decline in influence when the administration established a set curriculum for village schools and by the early 1970s took responsibility for accrediting and paying teachers. The Anglicans remained nominally in charge of the schools but limited their role to religious education. In most respects, the days of the “mission” properly speaking were over. Almost all the clerics were now Papua New Guinean, as were several bishops. In 1974, in recognition of this transformation, the Anglican Church of Papua New Guinea came into being as its own independent ecclesiastical Province, no longer a missionary diocese of the Province of Queensland.

WE ARE ALL MISSIONARIES

The Maisin and other local peoples in the Northern District played a large role in defining the nature of Anglicanism – broadly, of the mission – in village society. Even as the institutional mission became a national church, beginning a slow decline, villagers continued to organize their societies and make sense of their relationships with the outside world in terms of their conception of the nature of the Church and its mission. I had come to study the long-term impact of Christianity upon the Maisin. I quickly came to realize that they had localized an understanding of mission, drawing in equal parts upon received indigenous notions of moral and political action and their reinterpretations of missionary teachings.

In the early 1980s, the Maisin universally continued to refer to the Anglican Church of Papua New Guinea as a “mission”. Although they were by then mostly third generation Christians and served entirely by Papua New Guinean clergy and teachers, Maisin called the complex of classrooms, residences, playing field, and church at the centre of Uiaku a “mission station”. They did not associate the term “missionary” with the act of proselytizing. Instead, it referred to those people and groups associated with and through the village church. Most major public events in the 1980s occurred on the grounds of the mission station, from Saint’s day feasts to independence celebrations at the school. Maisin regarded these, along with the routine tasks of maintaining station buildings, paying the priest’s salary, and practising traditional dances for upcoming church celebrations and fund-raisers, as comprising “mission-side” activities. Much to my surprise, I found an abundance of “missionaries” resident in Uiaku: retired clergy, lay evangelists, teachers, members of the Mothers’ Union church group, and associates of Anglican religious orders such as the Melanesian and Franciscan Brotherhoods. Once, as I attended a church service in honor of “women’s day”, the head of the Mothers’ Union volunteered that now “We are all missionaries here”.

To most Maisin, “missionary” referred to something more than offices and church pursuits; it implied certain attitudes and
orientations. The missionary’s main duty, according to the Maisin I interviewed, is to “care for” (kaifu) the people. They do this by giving the people giu – roughly, accurate knowledge and sound advice. Those people who “respect” the missionary and “hear” the giu live good moral lives. My informants saw the Bible as the major source of the giu but they had a quite vague notion of its contents. They tended to speak of it in a general sense, as a kind of knowledge that clarifies understandings, dissipates confusion, and allows a person to perceive the truth. Christian faith, in their view, was based upon a fundamental relationship in which the missionary acts as a mediator between the truth as revealed by God and the people. Most of the Maisin represented this as a collective relationship. They saw the missionary as caring for all the people, not for individual sinners.

This last assumption was in accord with the paternalistic model of the relationship between the “father” priest and his congregation favored by the Anglo-Catholic missionaries. But it also reproduced indigenous assumptions about hierarchy. The Maisin, in common with many other coastal peoples in New Guinea, distinguished between two types of ranked clans and associated leaders, usually described as “peace” and “war” chiefs (Chowning 1979; Hau’ofa 1981; Lutkehaus 1982). In the past, kawo leaders had the responsibility of hosting inter-tribal feasts, building alliances between groups by sharing food and other gifts with outsiders. The lower-ranked sabu, in contrast, were said to be hot-tempered, driven by their passions, and had the right to initiate fighting. In their oral traditions, the Maisin imagined the kawo as “older brothers” to associated sabu clans. Like older and wiser brothers, the kawo were supposed to temper their younger brothers’ anger by offering sound counsel. When fighting occurred, they should make the first efforts to restore peace.

The Maisin likened the missionaries to kawo and themselves to sabu. Like many other Christian Melanesians, for instance, Maisin represented the arrival of white missionaries as a moment of episodic change – a transformation from a condition of Hobbesian violence to peaceful relationships, from an absolutist sabu state to kawo bliss. They more frequently applied the model to their contemporary situation, portraying the relationship between missionary and villagers, like that between kawo and sabu, as an exchange relationship. The missionary should dispense the giu and, in return, received the respect, obedience, and material support of his dependent congregation, acting like proper sabu. The hope was to bring the two exchange partners into a perfect balance (marawa-wawe). From such balance, Maisin believed, came not only peaceful relationships but also the bountiful blessings of both the Christian god and the ancestors.

It would be tempting but I think quite misleading to see this merely as an instance of cultural appropriation, as an indication, on the one hand, of the enduring power of Maisin culture and, on the other, of a superficial grasp of Christianity. The distinction between “peace” and “war” leaders is quite ancient and widespread in coastal Melanesia but I suspect that Maisin notions of the opposition were strongly influenced and reinforced by mission teachings about the transforming power of Christianity. The Maisin formulation about missionaries is better understood as an historical product of a long conversation between Maisin and Anglican missionaries and teachers. It bears the traces not only of indigenous cultural categories but also Anglo-Catholic conceptions and the direct experience the Maisin had with the mission, particularly during the 1950s and early 1960s when it helped them to establish cooperatives. These initiatives were never very successful but had one major victory in enabling Uiaku Maisin to finance the building of a semi-permanent church consecrated in 1962, the first in southern Collingwood Bay (Barker 1993). For Maisin, this event represented the climax of a carefully-constructed exchange relationship. They had given the missionaries (and the Christian god) their prayers, their labour, and their children. In return, the mission had given them the gift of the cooperative. The relationship promised a future economic prosperity if the moral unity of the church community could be maintained.

The localized model of the mission provided Maisin with a framework within which to make sense of their current predicament. Most villagers in the early 1980s perceived themselves as poor and their communities as backwards and “dirty”. They resented their growing dependence upon remittances from working relatives in town but worried about how to find money to cover school fees, provide for the priest’s salary, and purchase clothing and other manufactured goods that people now consider necessities. It was universally believed that the Maisin had only once achieved the desired state of marawa-wawe, of balance between the missionary and his congregation. The construction and consecration of the church at Uiaku in 1962 provided the model for the desired state.
At village meetings and in private, Maisin conducted a great deal of soul searching to determine the reasons for their failure to bring economic riches – “development” – to the villages. Following the logic of the model, many blamed themselves for an assortment of lapses: people gossiped too much, did not provide generous offerings to the church and other public institutions, and were too “lazy” to work hard on community projects organized by village leaders. Overall, people did not listen to the 
giu. There was too much arguing and division and, as long as this was true, the Maisin villages would remain mired in poverty, sickness, and sorcery.

But the missionary model suggested that “missionaries” could just as easily be to blame for the sad state of things in the villages. As we have seen, most villagers could be viewed as missionaries of some kind or another. Maisin focused their criticisms on leaders whose connections to the church and to outside institutions and knowledge put them in the position (ideally at least) to dispense the kind of useful knowledge that would bring health and prosperity to the village. Village leaders were criticized for being lazy or greedy or sometimes for stealing money. But their worst fault, in the imagination of the people, was that they tended to favor their own relatives over others. A missionary, according to the model, brings unity by serving all. And this is probably why the most promising missionaries in the Maisin imaginings were outsiders who might stand above the incessant bickering of village family politics.

It is interesting to note that at this time many Maisin were quite critical of the bishops and leaders of the Anglican Church. Many villagers complained that the mission had failed to provide the people with plantations and other forms of economic development that might help lift them from their “poverty”. David Hand, then the Archbishop of the Anglican Church, provoked an outraged protest from village leaders in 1983 when, on a visit to Uiaku, he spoke out against a proposal to allow commercial logging in the rain forests behind the Maisin villages. Father David used to be a good missionary, I was told, but he had “forgotten” the people and no longer looked after their interests. Villagers were eager to do their part to bring prosperity. They needed new missionaries who would respond to their gifts and provide help. Hence the keen interest and anticipation when my wife and I first arrived in Uiaku late in November 1981.

FROM SAVING SOULS TO SAVING THE RAIN FOREST

The independence of Papua New Guinea and the creation of a national Anglican Church might have been expected to bring the era of the mission to a close. But in many parts of the country, including Collingwood Bay, missionary campaigns have in fact intensified in recent years. These new missionaries can be roughly divided into two groups, religious and secular.

The new religious missionaries, while all Christians (so far at least), differ from earlier Anglican evangelists in several respects. Most promote forms of Christianity focused upon individual salvation and morality. They challenge the older tendency to identify community unity with membership in the Anglican Church. Overt sectarianism began to appear in the early 1990s in the form of small congregations of Pentecostals, Jehovah Witnesses, and Seventh Day Adventists, mostly made up of Maisin who had converted to these churches while living and working in urban centres and brought them back to the villages. But the old association between church and community was also weakening among the majority who still belonged to the Anglican Church. Encouraged by visits from Australian charismatics, by the ready availability of popular gospel music on the radio and on cassettes, and by an expanded program within the Anglican Church to encourage youth “fellowship”, young people in particular were embracing individualistic Evangelical styles of worship and belief, leaving behind the established Anglo-Catholic traditions as stodgy and conservative.

The secular “missionaries” are made up mostly of environmentalists concerned to conserve the great rain forests of Papua New Guinea. While these “missionaries” do not bring an overtly religious message and are not trying to build a church, it is clear that many Maisin visitors think of their relationship with them in ways that strongly resemble how villagers viewed Anglican missionaries in the 1960s. In other words, they imagine themselves in an exchange partnership with these outsiders, one that requires a unity of identity and purpose on the part of the community and a willingness on the part of the outsiders to connect villagers with outside sources of knowledge and wealth.

In this section, I assess the nature of this relationship from the point of view of the villagers and also consider the implications
for Maisin society of a growing separation of religious and community commitment.

Use of the term “missionary” to describe environmental activists and their associates is my designation. I have never heard Maisin call environmentalists “missionaries” and I know that many of the activists who condemn the Christian missionary project in principle would be quite offended to be labelled as such. There are indeed vast differences between the projects of most Christian missionaries and those of environmental activists. Yet I think the designation is helpful if used cautiously to remind us of the reality that, from the point of view of local villagers themselves, the foreign activists who arrive to work with them to save the rain forest bear a number of striking similarities to foreign missionaries who work to save their souls. And they treat them in similar ways.

There are a number of crucial commonalities between the religious and secular missions. First, foreign-sponsored agencies working with rural people in Papua New Guinea have a primary commitment to concerns that transcend localities and nationalities. Missionary agents usually perceive themselves as serving and often protecting the interests of local people from other outsiders bent on exploitation. This is because they assume that the real interests of local people are identical to the transcendent truth they wish to communicate. This assumed commonality is critically important for it help legitimize the mission itself. Older missionary texts are replete with instances in which heathens beg missionaries to send them evangelists, to make them fully Christian. By the same token, environmental tracts often present “indigenous” people as inherently conservationist. The missionaries or activists thus present themselves as coming to protect and build upon a truth that is already present.

Second, foreign missionaries and secular activists who work intimately with members of rural communities are prime agents of cultural globalization. Different and conflicting as their ideological mandates might be, mission and environmental organizations share an underlying commonality reflected in their routine operations and organization. Both are international bureaucracies whose operations require fund-raising, budgets, plans of action, and so forth. To the degree that they participate in the routine work of mission or environmental organization, local peoples gain a practical sense of the cultural logic of these global enterprises. This often is not entirely voluntary. That is to say, if members of a local community want to attract and hold a mission or environmental agency, they will be obliged to conform to some of the key values of the foreign group.

Third, local people often identify enthusiastically with the ideals of the outside agency. They want to be part of the global Christian community; they feel pride at being one of the “tribal” peoples who have the wisdom to save the rain forest. All the same, they bring their own cultural orientations and historical experience to these concepts and inevitably understand them in ways that differ, often profoundly, from the official understandings of the foreign agency. This provides fertile ground for both creative and destructive mutual misunderstandings. While the relationship between foreign agency and local people is fraught with inequalities, it is nonetheless a dialectical one, which eventually transforms both parties.

Finally, once they enter the local scene, the project initiated by foreign missions and activists alike become subject to local politics. In poor countries like Papua New Guinea, where the national and provincial government provides few and often inadequate social services, independent organizations like the missions and larger environmental organizations may provide major material assets for the local communities lucky enough to attract them. Local leaders build their reputations by attracting foreigners to “help” their communities. By the same token, these leaders are subjected to the constant criticism and intrigue that characterize the competitive ethos of village politics.

I stress that I am here using the term “missionary” in the elastic sense of villagers in the 1980s. A missionary for the Maisin is not necessarily a proselytizer. While a few of the activists who have worked with the Maisin over the past few years hold their beliefs with something akin to religious fervour, most are very focused upon practical projects with specific benefits. I myself have now become a “missionary” in this, the Maisin, sense. I have raised money overseas to help Maisin defend their lands from logging and recently led a delegation of Canadian aboriginal people and a film crew to the area to help publicize the Maisin cause and to promote a relationship that I hope will benefit both parties. I have thus entered an exchange relationship in which I am perceived (with some discomfort on my part) by many villagers as “caring for” them, much as a kauo leader must care for his sabu or an older sibling for a junior. I have thus finally become a missionary.
The Maisin came to the attention of environmental activists in the mid-1990s when villagers launched a public campaign, including prominent advertisements and interviews in the national newspapers, to prevent the national government from permitting commercial logging on their ancestral lands. Ten years earlier, Maisin leaders had actively courted logging companies, seeing this and the subsequent planting of commercial plantations as the best option for bringing economic development into the area. Most villagers at that time, however, voiced strong objections to any scheme that would pay higher taxes and royalties to the national and provincial governments than to the landowners. Villagers perceived this latest scheme, which had been developed in secret between the government and a small group of urban-dwelling men claiming to represent Collingwood Bay, as little more than theft. There was now, however, an additional group, made up mostly of educated younger men in the towns, who had come to question the wisdom of clearing the forest itself. Sensitized by the squalor, poverty, and violence of the towns, these individuals – many of whom looked forward to retiring in the village – reminded people that the forest held many non-monetary assets that would vanish with logging. The petitions, interviews, and advertisements presented a strong conservationist message along with the essential point that the Maisin alone would determine what to do with their lands.

The Maisin had already gained the important support of an activist from Greenpeace International. The public action to prevent logging attracted more support. The logging industry in Papua New Guinea had been the subject of innumerable complaints and a major government probe since the 1980s. Villagers around the country frequently complained that the logging companies had not given them promised compensation while racking up large profits for themselves (Filer 1998). The Maisin were quite unusual, however, in protesting against a logging project before it even got off the ground. Their initiative attracted logistic and financial support from a number of international and national nongovernment organizations (NGOs). Since 1994 the Maisin have unfortunately had to call upon the support of their new allies to fend off additional development schemes, launched like the first without local consultation, which would result in the clearing of the forest on Maisin lands. Over the past two years, the Maisin have been involved in an expensive court battle with a developer to contest a fraudulent “sale” of most of their forest lands.

Rejecting commercial logging did not mean rejecting economic development. At this time, several environmental groups were assisting rural peoples with small-scale development schemes meant to help them earn cash with a minimum of harm to the environment. In an odd echo of the origins of a mission-sponsored cooperative movement in the late 1940s, a Maisin man employed at the Oro Butterfly Conservation Project in central Oro Province (as the Northern District had been renamed) returned to the villages to promote a scheme to form an “integrated conservation and development” organization (ICAD) to be run by the Maisin. The national Department of Environment and Conservation, with the prodding and financial assistance of international donors, had launched the first ICADs in 1993. The butterfly project, an endeavour sponsored by the Australian government to protect and commercially breed the rare Queen Alexandra birdwing butterfly, the largest in the world, had started in 1991 and then been reconceived as an ICAD (Filer 1998:246-8, 254-5). It provided the basic model that was now presented to the Maisin villagers.

While clearly a creature of the environmental politics of the 1990s, from a local perspective the Maisin Integrated Conservation and Development group bears striking commonalities with early cooperatives. Formally, it is an autonomous political body with its own elected officials and rules of procedure. Most villagers, however, regard MICAD as the embodiment of an exchange relationship between themselves and powerful outsiders. On the one hand, villagers give the “gift” of their time and attention to the efforts of environmentalists to teach conservation values and to conduct the necessary research on flora and fauna, as well as land tenure, to allow the Maisin land to be declared a conservation area under Papua New Guinea law. Most of these efforts have been conducted by Conservation Melanesia, one of the larger national environmental NGOs that for several years worked exclusively with the Maisin and is now headed by a Maisin biologist (a graduate of the University of Papua New Guinea). In return, as it were, villagers have expected their partners to help develop enterprises that will bring cash into the villages. Another striking parallel is the insistence by MICAD leaders and ordinary villagers alike that the organization must represent all Maisin and embody a
consensus of the community. This is enormously difficult to achieve logistically and very expensive. Finally, Maisin leaders have again proven adept at deploying symbols of “traditional” identity in rituals meant to shore up the new partnership and local unity. The arrival of the Greenpeace flagship in Collingwood Bay in 1998 was marked by days of traditional dancing and community feasts. While the occasion was very different from the more limited church feasts I knew in the 1980s, let alone the feasts orchestrated by kawo clan leaders in the past, Maisin represented it as a statement of their common heritage. The joint effort simultaneously indicated their common endorsement of the new partnership with the environmentalists.

The partnership has been very productive during its short existence. In close consultation with village representatives, Conservation Melanesia has coordinated a multi-pronged approach to protecting the environment in Maisin lands. First, they have conducted independent surveys of flora and fauna in marine and forest environments and inventories of natural resources recognized and used by villagers. Conservation Melanesia has also organized a number of workshops meant to raise consciousness about environmental matters and landowners’ rights in the villages. The main aim has been to establish the groundwork for the Maisin to declare their lands a conservation area which would make it more difficult for the government to approve development projects there. Environmentalists have also played key roles in defending Maisin’s rights over the future of their lands. They have given advice and funds on those occasions when villagers have had to fend off development projects. They have also sponsored a number of initiatives to publicize the Maisin struggle to preserve the rain forest. Since 1995, small delegations of Maisin have travelled to the United States, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand to attend museum exhibitions featuring Maisin tapa cloth, to speak before audiences of environmentalists, and to seek out financial support for small-scale economic projects in the villages. As knowledge of the Maisin has spread, a steady stream of visitors has made the trek to Collingwood Bay. In 1999, both CNN and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation covered the Maisin “story” of resisting commercial logging. The story will receive even more attention as the subject of a documentary to be aired on the internationally-syndicated program The Nature of Things in 2001.

Bringing sustainable local economic projects has proven more difficult. For many years now, the Maisin have sold tapa cloth both for a small national market (where it gets used as traditional clothing in dances) and for tourists who purchase it in artifact stores in Port Moresby. Tapa has a number of attractions as a development project. Both the cloth and the dyes are made from fast-growing local plants so there is a minimal environmental impact. Further, the cloth is traditionally made by women, a target group that most of the Maisin’s partners particularly want to support. A Greenpeace activist put in a great deal of effort to develop the international market for tapa while two Peace Corps volunteers stationed in Uiaku helped train Maisin to organize the local business and keep track of the costs and profits. These efforts resulted in a steady if still moderate increase in cash earned by villagers. Environmental groups have explored other economic options with the Maisin, including insect farming, with few results so far. The environmentalists, through their very presence, provide Maisin with important material benefits. Visitors pay villagers for food and lodging and often leave behind gifts, adding to the remittance economy. In addition, partners have donated medicine, a satellite telephone, and (as a loan) a motorized dinghy. Conservation Melanesia assists MICAD with finances, including a bank account, lends money for those needing to travel to town, and provides a reliable alternative to the rickety national postal system.

Despite these achievements, the relationship between the Maisin and outside environmentalists has become increasingly stressful. The major victim of these differences has been MICAD which seemed on the verge of collapse during my last visit to the area in July 2000. There are many points of tension but much of the stress can be understood in terms of the different ways Maisin and their environmentalist partners conceptualize their partnership. For the Maisin, I have argued, the partnership represents an exchange. For the environmentalists, much like the Anglican missionaries in the past, the partnership should be understood as a temporary alliance meant to bring about a permanent change in the indigenous society. While both parties were able to work productively together at first, eventually their differing perceptions created a clash that may be difficult, if not impossible, to resolve.

Exchange relationships are inherently unstable. While Maisin villagers have taken
At this point, they may feel some resentment over the Maisin’s apparent lack of gratitude for the sacrifices the visitor has made or feel some guilt that not enough has been done. Few if any partners perceive the politics of the village in terms of the cultural logic of exchange. Instead, most of the partners working with the Maisin tend to see these complaints as a reflection of a “culture of dependency”, itself a product of the colonial period during which rural people came to see the mission and government as the source of material progress. They may dismiss the villagers’ hopes for immediate material returns as “cargoism”, an irrational belief that the mere presence of Europeans attracts wealth. Such “mistaken” beliefs can only be countered through education. The environmentalists aim to enhance the self-reliance of local community, not make them even more dependent upon the outside economy that tempted them to allow the destruction of the natural environment in the first place.

In the past, the Anglican mission also laboured to create self-reliant communities. While Anglo-Catholic missionaries saw villagers and village life as essentially good, they insisted that the goal of self-sufficiency still required practical and moral changes. The new environmental “missionaries” do not build schools or preach every Sunday but they do require the Maisin who work with them to learn the mysteries of rationalized surveys, planning, book keeping, and regular reports. Maisin leaders have assigned young men and women to these tasks, much like their own ancestors sent their sons and daughters to the mission schools. But more overt attempts to transform village society can be met with resistance. Many of the Maisin’s new partners, for instance, are ideologically committed to elevating the status of women. Maisin women enjoy a relatively high status by Melanesian standards. They lack the right to speak publicly or to inherit land but they do make their opinions known through their brothers and husbands and suffer very little violence. Many of the activists working with the Maisin insisted on a much more visible role for women. In response, the Maisin formed a new women’s organization, included women representatives in MICAD, and agreed that delegations headed overseas would include equal numbers of women and men. From the start, most Maisin men resented and resisted these changes, attempting to contain them to the times when valued partners were actually in the villages. By 2000 the resistance had become far more overt. In June, I led a group of five members of an
aboriginal group from British Columbia on the first stage of an planned exchange between the Sto:lo First Nation and the Maisin people. Most Maisin men, and apparently some women, were upset with my insistence that the delegation making the return trip to British Columbia be made up of equal male and female representatives. The (male) leaders of the Maisin villages insisted that women were too poorly educated, too shy, and unwilling to participate in public life and therefore only men should go. Several men politely but firmly protested to me and a female Sto:lo delegate against efforts of outsiders like ourselves to “change the culture”, the first time I have ever heard this complaint made.

CONCLUSION

To sum up: present-day Maisin have responded to the emergence of an environmental movement in Papua New Guinea much as an earlier generation did to the Anglican experiment with community cooperatives. In both cases, Maisin assumed that they required a partnership with powerful outsiders to secure community prosperity and political unity. The village cooperatives and MICAD both emerged as intermediary institutions meant to both unify the Maisin and to demonstrate a moral and political unity that the people believed was the essential requirement for the creation of prosperity. While the integrated conservation and development model has proven popular in many parts of Papua New Guinea, few groups have taken up the program with as much enthusiasm – as the Maisin. A review of Maisin history suggests that they were already searching for “new missionaries for old” in the early independence period. Given their generally positive experience with the Anglican mission, the Maisin may have been quicker to see the potential in building partnerships with environmentalists than other communities. While successful in the face of immediate threats to Maisin lands, the relationship is nonetheless a fragile one, balanced between two contradictory perspectives. The Maisin for the most part continue to view their relationship with outside partners according to the logic and politics of exchange while the environmentalists seek instead to create a short-term alliance that preserves and strengthens the Maisin’s self-reliance. The relationship, based in part upon creative misunderstanding, demands adjustments on the part of both partners if it is not to break down entirely.

History repeats itself, but never in the exactly same manner or under the same conditions. The Maisin of the 1990s had far more education and a far greater sophistication about the outside world than did the men who initiated the Christian cooperative movement in the 1940s. And the environmentalists were not Christian missionaries, let alone anything like the Anglo-Catholic romantics who dreamed of recreating an imagined medieval theocracy in the jungles of Papua. Both the cooperatives and MICAD began as local social movements drawing ideological strength by virtue of an imagined exchange partnership with powerful outsiders. But in the case of the cooperatives, the Anglican Mission was too poor and too insular to offer much practical support and Maisin were left to draw mostly from their own resources. In contrast, environmentalists have offered individual Maisin unprecedented access to institutions and organizations spread around the globe.

There are many other differences that one could point to but perhaps the most important is this: in the early post-World War II period, the Anglican Mission provided the Maisin with their major source of knowledge of the outside world and their major link to it. In those days, old people told me, they believed that Jerusalem and heaven were the same. The Anglican monopoly started to break down during the 1960s as Maisin trained in mission schools suddenly found their skills and knowledge welcomed in the public service and government. By the early 1990s, Anglicanism had lost its monopoly within the villages and individuals became increasingly aware of different forms of belief, different approaches to the world. Some Maisin visited Jerusalem and returned to tell the people that it was really a city, much like other cities on earth. Many Maisin are still actively searching for “missionaries” – partners who will unite their communities, link them to the outside, and thus bring prosperity. But they no longer presume coherence between religious faith and political unity. Perhaps the time is not far off, as Maisin society becomes more individualistic, when the idea of a common partner for the Maisin people will cease to make sense.
Missionaries, Environmentalists and the Maisin, Papua New Guinea

AUTHOR NOTE

John Barker is an associate professor in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. He has long ethnographic experience working on indigenous Christianity, especially amongst the Maisin of Oro Province, Papua New Guinea, where he has done fieldwork on several occasions, and also among Indigenous Canadians in British Columbia. He is the editor of the seminal work on Pacific Christianities, Christianity in Oceania: Ethnographic Perspectives (1990), and has published many articles and book chapters.

NOTES

* This paper is an abridged pre-publication version of a forthcoming chapter entitled “Between Heaven and Earth: Missionaries, Environmentalists and the Maisin”, due to appear in late 2002 in Victoria Lockwood (ed.), Pacific Island Societies in a Global World (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall). For publication details, please refer either to the volume or contact the author (barker@interchange.ubc.ca).

1 Scholars have long observed that Christian missionaries may influence indigenous cultures as much through the practical routines they establish for converts as through explicitly religious instruction. By participating in schools and churches, converts may gradually become accustomed to and even internalize the missionaries’ own cultural orientations to such conceptual dimensions as time, space, work and value (Smith 1982). Ironically, Western missionaries have been key agents of secularization in rural Melanesia, easing the incorporation of people into the hegemonic framework of global capitalism (Trompf 1977). However, this is by no means a simple process of cultural replacement, of missionaries forcing Western culture upon villagers. In their magisterial study of nineteenth-century Protestant mission activity among the Tswana in southern Africa, Jean and John Comaroff clearly demonstrate that even at the level of routine, local people resist, contest, and transform the cultural patterns missionaries work to establish — in other words, they engage in a dialogue or a dialectic with the mission (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991-7). In places like the Maisin villages, where missionaries had to work from a distance and through Islands intermediaries, villagers played an even larger part in determining popular Christian understandings and practices (Barker 1993).

2 Tapa cloth was traditionally made across the Pacific Islands, usually from the pounded inner bark of the paper mulberry tree. Although Pacific Islanders have universally adopted Western clothing, a few groups in scattered parts of the Pacific still make tapa today for use in ceremonial exchange and as a form of tourist art. The Maisin may have begun selling their beautifully designed tapa cloths to visitors as early as the 1930s. By the early 1980s, they had found a niche the small national artifact market for their cloth and at this time are the only group producing it for sale in the country.

3 An observer of the national election of 1972 reported that villagers in several parts of the Northern District assumed that the bishops of the Anglican Mission would (and should) tell them which candidates to support (Jawodimbari 1976).

4 In 1998 when I was visiting the area to discuss the exchange and the film, I am told that a woman who had once been my wife’s research assistant spoke up at a meeting I was not able to attend and said something like: “Baka [my Maisin name] came here and lived with us for a long time, but he didn’t do anything for the people. He went away. And then he finally thought about us. Now he is finally going to help us”. The people who told me about this speech clearly thought it would please me. And they are probably right. After all, they do regularly speak of their own relatives working in town to such prodigal terms.

REFERENCES


The State, Society and Governance in Melanesia (SSGM) Project was launched in 1996 in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University. Funded by the ANU with financial assistance from the Australian Government through AusAID, it comprises three Fellows (Dr Bronwen Douglas, Mr Anthony Regan and Dr Sinclair Dinnen), a Convenor (Mr David Hegarty, on secondment from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) and an Administrator (Ms Jeanette Regan).