The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713689832

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Online publication date: 13 February 2011

To cite this Article Eves, Richard(2011) "Great Signs from Heaven': Christian Discourses of the End of the World from New Ireland', The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology, 12: 1, 13 — 28
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/14442213.2010.534814
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2010.534814

The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology
Vol. 12, No. 1, February 2011, pp. 13–28

'Great Signs from Heaven': Christian Discourses of the End of the World from New Ireland

Richard Eves

The intensifying global spread of apocalyptic forms of Christianity, now well established in Papua New Guinea, has popularised readings of the Bible that stress a cataclysmic end of the world from which only the faithful will be saved. This paper examines the way that this apocalyptic discourse is being embraced by the Lelet of central New Ireland, taking the case of an earthquake that occurred during the year 2000. Apocalypticism is increasingly the operative explanatory framework for unusual events that are seen as signs. However, recourse to it varies between individuals. Signs are very carefully examined and various theories, new and old, are considered before an explanation is finally accepted. I argue that the acceptance of new beliefs does not always depend on the existence of prior similar beliefs, and neither are older beliefs simply displaced by the new.

Keywords: Globalisation; Pentecostalism; Apocalyptic Christianity; Melanesia; New Ireland

There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven. Luke 21

Graun i no stap stret moa. Graun i slip sait, graun i no stap stret, graun i no stap olsem long lukluk bilong God. . . . Nau papa God i got bikpela waning. Papa God i got bikpela singaut long 4 pela kona long graun, olsem—kam.[1]

[The world is not straight anymore. The world is sleeping crooked, the world is not straight. Now God has a big warning. God is calling out to all the four corners of the world—come.]

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ISSN 1444-2213 (print)/ISSN 1740-9314 (online)/11/010013-16

DOI: 10.1080/14442213.2010.534814

Introduction

I arrived in the Lelet Plateau field in mid-November 2000.[2] It had been two years since I last came for the opening of the new church at Limbin and I soon learned that the Pentecostal enthusiasm of that time had waned considerably.[3] To remedy the flagging church attendance, two three-day workshops or 'rallies' had been organised (one for women and one for men). These were to culminate in a large combined 'renewal' service. The women's workshop, which I was able to attend, began on the morning of 16th November in the new church. Participants were greeted with the directive on a blackboard: '**You come**', and below this: '**Invitation → Warning → Come!**' Then the number of months, weeks, days and hours in the year 2000 and how many remained was charted. These figures were updated daily.[4] Then, to ensure that people realised how imperative it was that they accept the invitation, there was a warning that when it came to the end-times, there was nowhere to hide:

> *Tingim, i nogat wanpela gutpela ples hait i stap long dispela graun, i no got tru! Amen!*
>
> [Think about it. Truly, there isn't one good place to hide on this earth. Amen]

Finally, the blackboard displayed the English word 'vice' with an arrow pointing to the Tok Pisin words *ples nogut* (bad place) and *ples hit* (hidden place), which I understood to be a warning that immorality led straight to hell. However, despite these strenuous efforts to galvanise people, only a small percentage of Lelet women attended—about thirty—and these were the most pious women who were confident of their righteousness.

The morning session of the workshop featured a role play emphasising the stark nature of the alternatives Christians are faced with: either embracing Jesus or rejecting him, and choosing to go either to heaven or to hell.[5] Discussion of some illustrations of biblical scenes followed, the minister dwelling especially on how, after Adam and Eve brought sin into the world in the Garden of Eden, God became so angry that he sought to destroy his creation in the great Flood. Throughout the morning, the destruction wrought by God in the Flood was emphasised repeatedly. God warned Noah, the participants learned, but spared him because of his righteousness, and thus the lesson was brought home: the only way to escape God's wrath is by being righteous. The fire awaits those who ignore the warnings they have been given and no alternative to righteousness exists: 'If you want to dig a hole in the earth and go down, God awaits. You cannot escape'. People cannot escape God's vengeance by hiding or lying, because God sees everything as clearly as if people were living in glass buildings.

Many of the themes presented during the morning session were reiterated after lunch. The morning session had put emphasis on a terrible warning, and now the afternoon session stressed the urgent need for people to come to Jesus who is the only one who can save them from the trials and tribulations that God will unleash on the

world. The theme of being ready, or changing your life, heard so often in Lelet Christian discourse, was invoked repeatedly.

Considerable mention was made of the end-times, one pastor commenting that these are hard times ('*Endtaims i hardpela taims*'). One of the Bible readings, Matthew 24, cited earthquakes as one of the many signs that would appear when the end of the world was near.[6] The imminence of Christ's return was stressed: 'Lots of marks, plenty of signs will come up—now they are starting to come up, but many have failed to recognise them.' Jesus would return very soon because today we are experiencing a great deal of upheaval. This is a time of apostasy, the pastor declared—a time of sin, of unbelievers going about their sinful ways, of young men drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana, a time of arrogance, of people attending mortuary feasts, of people dancing and rejecting Christianity.

After this outburst, there was a period of silent prayer while the youth ministry sang a worship song accompanied by the slow strumming of guitars. During this, as is usual, the pastor prayed aloud for a few minutes, reiterating the workshop themes of warning and the need to accept the invitation to 'come to Jesus' (*kam long Jisas*). His prayer included much thanking of God and recognition of His overwhelming power. Eventually, the pastor ceased praying aloud and the youth ministry ceased their worship song, allowing the voices of those attending the rally to be heard in collective prayer. This ecstatic prayer gradually increased in intensity until it became a great cacophony of noise. After several minutes of this intense praying, at almost 2 p.m., an earthquake struck.

The building began to shake violently and I could feel the floor heaving up and down. The windows began to rattle and the Jesus clock on the wall behind the pulpit was swinging wildly back and forth. I was sitting near the front of the church, in the first row of pews next to the aisle. The church, a large building with a considerable weight in timber and galvanised iron in the roof above, was moving so much and shaking so violently that I was concerned that it may not withstand the forces it was being subjected to. I looked down the aisle to the door and planned my getaway for the first sign of anything falling from above and prepared myself to shout out for everyone else to get out. However, surveying the others in the church, I saw only two girls, high school students who had recently returned home, with their eyes open and looking around. We exchanged a smile expressing our mutual bemusement at the situation, for everyone else in the church had their eyes resolutely shut and were continuing their prayers, many with arms outstretched as a sign of exaltation at the longed-for sign of the end-times, confident in their righteousness. These people considered themselves to be ready for the end of the world and joyously anticipated its coming, since they held to the idea of the Rapture. This notion, based on Thessalonians 4, 16–17, gives the 'promise to the faithful that they will not have to endure the Tribulation', the period of the rule of the Anti-Christ with its horrifying events (Robbins & Palmer 1997, p. 11, emphasis removed). Born-again Christians expect to be rescued by Jesus who will draw the faithful high into the air, clear of the catastrophes unfolding below.

Few people seemed to share the concern I was feeling, though there had been a noticeable change in the intensity of the praying when the earthquake began. Indeed, the sound of praying had risen and a number of women were wailing aloud in ecstasy. Punctuated with the occasional cries of Hallelujah, the noise was almost deafening; it was hard to believe that such a small number of women could make such a din. After two or three minutes, the heaving and shaking subsided as the earthquake ended. The ecstatic prayer session, however, continued for a further ten minutes or so. Several minutes after the earthquake, the youth ministry began singing and guitar playing again, and soon after this the pastor spoke up with the following extemporaneous prayer:

> Thank you Jesus. We thank you Jesus. We say thank you. We thank the Holy Spirit of the Lord on this afternoon, you showed us your strength. We thank you for showing us the signs. We praise you on this day, this afternoon, for making these signs, wondrous miracles. You showed us by bringing it out into a clear place. You have all the power, you have all the strength. You brought your strength out into a clear place. Thank you Jesus.

While the pastor prayed, others also continued to pray aloud, and this eventually merged into a chorus of the song *Lift up the name of Jesus*. The singing and praying came to an end approximately fifteen minutes after the earthquake had struck.

When the earthquake struck, some Lelet were fearful, others were not. One woman I questioned on the way home from church afterwards said she was not afraid because she was 'ready', but people who had not heeded God's words almost certainly would have been afraid, she added. Indeed, I was told that people not attending the workshop were heard to say 'Moroa, Moroa, Moroa' (God, God, God), in fear when the earthquake struck. As it turned out, the earthquake was of considerable magnitude, measuring between 7 and 8 (Mw 8) on the Richter Scale, and in due course was listed as one of the top twenty-five natural disasters in Papua New Guinea for the twentieth century.[7] Two days after that earthquake, I walked with the United Church minister, John Loxodan, around the exterior of the church to check for any cracks or other damage. Surprisingly, there were none, which for him was clearly a miracle. Elsewhere on the plateau there had been some minor damage, including some water tanks bursting. It was reported that a hole opened up in the ground at the village of Lengkamen, though I did not see this. I was also told that someone had fallen over and received minor cuts, though I could not confirm this either.

The Globalisation of Christianity

Events like this earthquake, and other phenomena that are interpreted as signs of the end-times, provide specific ethnographic contexts for reflecting on the nature and form of globalisation. Globalisation theory emerged in an effort to develop conceptual tools for understanding the intensified movement of commodities, ideas and people around the world (Mintz 1998, p. 118). For scholars examining the effects of the globalisation on local cultures, the spread of Christianity to many parts of the

world is of considerable interest (see Coleman 1991, p. 6). Some scholars believe that 'globalization theory is vital for the understanding of the expansion of Christianity generally, just as the study of the expansion of Christianity is vital for understanding the processes of globalization' (Hutchinson 2001, p. 1752; Csordas 2009).

The global spread of evangelical forms of Christianity was one of the most dramatic developments of the twentieth century (Martin 2002, p. 1) and has been increasingly addressed in the literature (see Mayrargue 2001, p. 291; van Dijk 2001, p. 218, p. 222; Meyer & Geschiere 1999; Jorgensen 2005; Robbins et al. 2001). The expansion continues unabated in this century, with increasing transnational movement as evangelical preachers travel the world to spread their beliefs through rallies and crusades. Often this movement is to countries and places where Christianity has already taken hold in an earlier manifestation of globalisation, as is the case with the Lelet. 'To speak of globalisation in the religious field is hardly to speak of something new: the spread of systems of religious belief, ritual and authority across ethnic, national and linguistic boundaries is as old as religion itself', and so with Christianity, whose history has been marked by endless campaigns of penetration and conversion to fulfil its global ambitions (Lehmann 1998, p. 607; see also Martin 2002, p. 7). Indeed, it was the globalisation of Christianity during the Evangelical Revival or Awakening in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that began the development of Christianity in the Pacific (Hutchinson 2001, p. 1754). As John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, remarked in his journal: 'I look upon all the world as my parish' (Wesley 1951, p. 42).

The Methodism that found its way to the Lelet early in the twentieth century was an outgrowth of that Protestant 'errand to the world'. Lelet Christianity became more evangelical during the 1970s, when a wave of revivalism swept through many parts of Papua New Guinea (see Robin 1982; Barr 1983). In the New Ireland case, several influential United Church members were inspired by a 'crusade' in East New Britain, run by an evangelist associated with Billy Graham, and returned to promote revivalism among their congregations (see Eves 2007; Threlfall 1975). Known to the Lelet as 'the revival', the crusade placed great stress on the radical experience of being 'born again', which remains a feature of Christianity today. Recently, the Lelet have embraced Pentecostal beliefs and practices more fervently. This entails a strong emphasis on the reception of the Holy Spirit, a fundamental aspect of all Pentecostal theology (Anderson 2002, p. 525; see also 2004, p. 187). Much of this has come about through an Australian evangelist, David Odd, who has been a regular visitor to New Ireland speaking at rallies, workshops and teaching at a bible school at Liga, near the capital Kavieng.

This renewed globalisation has brought a flow of Christian literature and other media, such as videos, cassette tapes, that often enunciate the same apocalyptic discourse as was presented at the workshop. Indeed, I have often been surprised by the variety of literature they have in their possession, including photocopies of obscure newspaper clippings from the Philippines and Brazil. There is no doubt that the Lelet's eschatological interpretations of events situate them globally.

Much anthropological writing on globalisation, especially its cultural dimensions, has sought to problematise the assumption that globalisation leads inevitably to homogenisation.[8] It is seen, rather, as a highly contested and negotiated process in which global flows are subject to creative refashioning as they are incorporated into local worlds. Appadurai, for example, maintains that 'area studies is a salutary reminder that globalization is itself a deeply historical, uneven, and even localizing process. Globalization does not necessarily or even frequently imply homogenization . . . to the extent that different societies appropriate the materials of modernity differently . . .' (Appadurai 1996, p. 17; see also 2001).

The situation with evangelical forms of Christianity, however, is decidedly more complex than the dualistic alternatives of homogenisation or heterogenisation imply. Given the increasing pervasiveness of these forms of Christianity in Papua New Guinea and the large numbers of converts, it is difficult to argue that they do not manifest an ascendant globalisation. Far-reaching change is often clearly on the agenda. Among the Lelet, a distinctive feature of Pentecostalism is its antipathy to cultural difference and the eschewal of local customs in favour of forms of Christian modernity, as has been noted more generally of Pentecostalism (Meyer 1998; van Dijk 1998; Marshall 2009). Lelet Pentecostals, for example, aspire to a radical conversion which brings them to reject their past lives and many of their cultural traditions (Eves 2007, 2010). Traditional practices, such as mortuary feasting and the use of magic, are denigrated and their abandonment encouraged, while Western-style living, such as the nuclear family living together in a permanent house, complete with pictures on the walls, is valorised. The aim is to 'make a complete break with the past' (Meyer 1998, p. 183), often expressed as leaving behind 'the old life' (*olpela bel*), 'changing one's life' (*senisim laip* or *i lok pukus lororo* [M] or *i soxun lororo* [M]) or 'turning one's stomach' (*tanim bel* or *i lok pukus lebelen* [M]) to adopt a new life (*nupela laip* or *lororo maxat* [M]). These expressions are equivalent to the common Christian expression of being 'born again', a term also occasionally used. Though the rejection of the past is often not as thoroughgoing as Pentecostalist discourse urges, it has, nevertheless, deeply recast the cultural horizon of the Lelet.

This rejection of tradition differs markedly from Lehmann's description of the 'cosmopolitan' Catholic Church, 'which recognises cultural differences, legitimises rather than denigrates them and responds to them by creating mechanisms of accommodation or coexistence, for example by co-opting "other" practices, symbols and rituals' (Lehmann 1998, p. 610). Catholicism relates to the cultural context by accretion and absorption, in recent years pursuing 'acculturation' (Martin 2002, p. 5) or 'inculturation' (Orta 1998). Pentecostal globalism, however, has no such proclivity, making no effort to create forms of syncretic Christianity in which local tradition sits comfortably with the imported religion, or to assimilate cultural practices into its repertoire. Nevertheless, this does happen; for example, Pentecostalism's emphasis on other-worldly and extraordinary powers, and its demonology of 'evil spirits' give credence to local conceptions of supernatural powers, which may, then, continue to

exist within the culture. It does not follow, however, that a recently adopted belief or practice manifests a necessary continuity with a past belief or practice because the two are similar (Robbins 2003, p. 228; Robbins 2007). Such a claim assumes that people only incorporate the new through already-existing categories (Robbins 2003, p. 230; see also Eves 2000a, p. 455).

Christian apocalypticism

Lelet Pentecostalism is a cultural product that cannot be adequately rendered as produced through either the local or the global categories. A more nuanced analysis can move beyond such easy oppositional thinking. The point is to understand the complexity of the interaction, to delineate the nature of the changes and how these play out locally. The ways that people relate their local understandings to these new globalising ideas varies considerably. Thus it is not simply a case of the new being understood in terms of the old. In some cases, the global encompasses the local explanations, but in others it does not. In some cases, local explanatory frameworks can provide interpretations of global events, while in others they are inadequate. Therefore, conclusions are sometimes reached rapidly, but at other times an extended process of critical examination of the various possibilities and carefully negotiated differences of interpretation occurs.

Christian apocalypticism creates a different relationship to the world. Current events become deeply meaningful; any unusual local, national and even international occurrences are assimilated into the apocalyptic framework as sure signs (*loklok katling* [M]) that this is now the period of the end-times, which apply to the entire world. Heavily imbued with ideas about the end-times with its predictions of widespread social disintegration and disasters such as wars, earthquakes, droughts and many other horrendous events, Christian apocalypticism makes global events locally significant: the global is made local. It also encourages an outward-looking viewpoint, from the local to the global, since local events can readily be interpreted as signs of the end-times.[9] Thus, the question posed by Piot is entirely appropriate here: 'Where is there a "local" that is not also "global"?' (Piot 1999, p. 173; see also Foster 2005, p. 173). However, the extent to which events that might have significance as global signs of the end-times are accepted as such by the Lelet varies. Despite Christian apocalypticism encouraging a globalising view, some events lend themselves more readily to this type of interpretation than others. The existence of alternative frameworks for understanding events either obviates the need for recourse to a global Christian interpretation or makes reaching a conclusion a negotiated process.

Through their long exposure to more orthodox Methodist Christianity, most Lelet have long known about the end of the world. However, this discourse was not given the prominence it has today. For example, while the end of the world and the Second Coming were acknowledged aspects of Christian belief during a period of fieldwork in 1990–91, recourse to apocalypticism was largely absent, and the more speculative and sensational sections of the Bible, such as the *Book of Revelation* (Rev.) with its dystopic

images, were generally discussed only by the small community of Seventh Day Adventists. 'End-times' or 'Last Days' (*Levenaleng axap* [M]—all days) was not a term I heard at that time, but it has now become a frequently used part of the Lelet Christian lexicon.

Although the Lelet have increasing recourse to Christian apocalyptic understandings of unusual events, this is not automatic. However, the conclusion that the earthquake was a sign of the end-times was reached quite rapidly and unequivocally. This was undoubtedly due to its extraordinary severity, but other factors also predisposed people to see it this way, not the least being its occurrence during two simultaneous workshops whose major theme was the need to be prepared for just such events.

Prior to the year 2000, there had been considerable speculation that something big would happen during that year. Although people reject the idea that the time of the end of the world can be predicted, for the Bible tells them that 'Jesus will come like a thief in the night' (Rev. 3:3), there were many predictions that a significant event would take place and expectations were high. I heard as early as 1998 that something big would occur during the year 2000. One person believed that significant events occurred every one thousand years. Another, reflecting on the vivid sunset that was seen as an omen for the severe El Niño drought of 1997–98, remarked that:

> Some people think that, because the world is close to the year 2000, a sign will happen. We believe this. Like when Sodom burnt, God burnt it. We think that during the year 2000 there will be some signs. You will not know what kind of sign. There will be plenty of heavies. We saw this sun and we believed that it was true, that a sign like this will happen in the year 2000. It is to tell people to recognise that they should put their belief in God.

Some Lelet thought that the year 2000 was when the Anti-Christ would put his program for world domination into action (see Eves 2000b, p. 85; Eves 2003a). Speaking in 1997, John Loxodan cited some internationalist evangelists to declare that the year 2000 would be characterised by tremendous events, such as wars that the United Nations would be unable to stop, no matter how much money they used. In his view, wars of this nature were '*bikpela pe*', or retribution for people's past evil ways. Evangelists, he told me:

> Say plenty of things will happen. For example, during this year 1997 they declared that it will be another kind of year for the world . . . . But another something will happen yet, in the year 2000 there will be plenty of things that will occur. . . . They prophesise that these things will occur. They have examined the Bible, and predict that something will take place and they are warning people as a result. They are telling people that they must be ready and look out for this time. Some of them say maybe the year 2000 or after that year Jesus will return. Plenty of people say these things. Something big will happen.

Although the conclusion had been reached that the 1997–98 drought was also a sign of the end-times, this general consensus was not reached quickly but required

a prolonged process of negotiation. It was only when local frameworks of meaning were exhausted and failed to explain the drought that people sought other, wider interpretations. As I have explained more fully elsewhere (Eves 2000b), the apocalyptic explanation was arrived at only after the possibility that the drought was the work of a local weather magician was ruled out because its effects extended far beyond the geographic capabilities of such a magician. Although weather magicians have the capacity to cause catastrophes such as extended periods of drought that cause famine, their effects are unquestionably limited to the local.

The Significance of Signs

The weather is a constant and daily source of discussion among the Lelet. Since they have well-developed criteria for interpreting signs that predict it, they have no immediate need to turn to Christian explanations. Since weather is often believed to be a product of human agency, a great deal of speculation occurs as to who may have caused a particular storm or period of intense sunshine, particularly at the time of important events, such as a mortuary feast or the opening of a new church or school classroom. Sometimes the talk of particular weather conditions is purely speculative or 'nothing talk' ('*tok nating*' or *levelinga gamasa* [M])—an easy pondering of whether something is the case or not. If confronted by contrary evidence, people will readily change their opinion of the cause of current weather. This was evident at a mortuary feast I attended, when a dozen or so men were huddled in the men's house chatting about who could have caused the rain that was teeming down at the time. When I suggested that the rain was perhaps not caused by a weather magician, but was merely a consequence of the feast being held during the rainy season, several others tended to agree. One man, however, noted that if it was sunny next day, it was highly likely the rain had been the result of human action.

There is also wide recognition that certain climatic events convey significant meanings about future weather conditions. Just as signs of the end-times are considered revelatory of the future, the Lelet traditionally believe that various signs indicate future weather. These include various types of sunset, cloud formations, rainbows, thunder, the appearance and calls of particular birds and the sounds of insects. A rainbow, for example, indicates the weather will be sunny. Depending on their direction, thunder and lightning indicate the next day will be either sunny or rainy. Thunder and lightning in the north, south and west signifies sunny weather, whereas it signifies rain if it comes from the east. If vertical bands of cloud rise in a road-like pattern from the horizon where the sun rises, the day will be very hot and sunny. If the sky is red at the horizon at sunrise, it signifies that the day will be pleasantly sunny, colloquially called a 'good time'. A red sunset also means tomorrow's weather will be hot and sunny, but very colourful sunsets are often thought to be indications of some sun magician's magic.[10]

Despite being so extensive, this local predictive framework proved inadequate in 1997, when a particularly distinctive and spectacular sign supported the prophesy of a severe drought that had been made by their minister, John Loxodan, after a vivid dream. For many, the gravity of the predicted drought became certain when the sun produced the startlingly red sunset mentioned earlier. The wide significance of this sunset was confirmed when Lelet people working in other parts of the country returned home and related stories of its occurrence elsewhere in Papua New Guinea. While a colourful sunset is not unusual, this sunset was said to be greatly different from any other that people had ever seen. Normally, the sky turns red late in the afternoon when the sun is setting. However, in this case the sun and sky became red hours before the sun was due to disappear beyond the horizon. As the local explanatory framework was unable to encompass this strange event, people sought other explanations. Thus, it was decided that, rather than being a product of human agency, the sunset had been sent by God as a sign.

The earthquake was not subject to the kinds of scrutiny that was undertaken during the drought, partly because apocalyptic understandings of such events had become more dominant, and partly because the Lelet have no explanatory framework for earthquakes. The almost immediate adoption of the apocalyptic explanation was also supported by the Bible, which mentions earthquakes several times and confirms their role in the end-times. The passage from Luke, cited at the beginning of this paper, predicts great earthquakes as well as famines. Revelation also mentions earthquakes in a number of passages (Rev. 6:12; 8:5; 16:18–20), including one that says there will be an earthquake like no other (Rev. 16:19).

In contrast to weather conditions, the various earthquakes and tremors the Lelet have experienced have had little direct effect on their lives, and so interest in their origins and significance has not been as great. Their impact is more immediate and usually localised, whereas the impact of a drought can be prolonged and severe, with direct impact on people's livelihoods. Some vague speculation that emerged after the earthquake demonstrates the paucity of local theories and how dependent people were on other sources of understanding. Some people suggested that the earthquake signified there would be another prolonged period of intense sun, much like that experienced during the drought of 1997–98. This caused one informant to ask me whether earthquakes affect the climate. Some of the 'nothing talk' or idle speculation about vague possibilities concerned the relationship between volcanoes and earthquakes. For example, it was said that the island of Lambon at the southern tip of New Ireland was going to disappear because a hole 30 metres wide and 10 metres deep had appeared near there. This part of the island was said to be above the 'road of the volcano', the pathway of lava to the Rabaul volcanoes in neighbouring East New Britain. This fragmentary and distorted information had been assembled from the talk of scientists heard on the radio.

This earthquake clearly differed significantly from previous ones, being far more severe. Several people commented that it was also of a far longer duration than any

previous ones. It was, they felt, clearly a sign of the end-times and a warning from God: 'There isn't any man on this earth who can make something like this happen. All things like this God controls'. One man said that when the quake struck, he held his child to him and thought, 'Now God, I am in your hands. . . . If you want to come and get all those who believe in you, it is in your hands'. He also believed that the earthquake was to test out people's commitment to Christianity, in the same way as He sometimes sends illness, to check on people's faith. Uncommitted Christians are being warned that they must become born again or suffer terrible consequences. Catastrophic events such as earthquakes are also sent by God to warn sinners to reform. When He sends illness as a similar warning, people speak figuratively of God beating people with a big stick, since the warning does not kill the sinner outright, but provides an opportunity for the sinner to reflect on his or her errant ways and to change (Eves 2010, p. 497).

Events such as earthquakes reinvigorate religious enthusiasm. The situation among the Lelet differs slightly from that discussed by Robbins, who invokes the concept of everyday millenarianism[11] to describe the way that the Urapmin mix strong belief in the imminent end of the world with a steady commitment to carrying out the tasks of everyday life (Robbins 2001, p. 526). Everyday life for the Urapmin, he says, is marked by a millenarianism that forces them to keep one eye on the coming apocalypse and one eye on what are considered more earthly preoccupations (Robbins 2001, p. 533). Robbins says that there were regular reports during his fieldwork that Jesus was about to return, as well as occasional periods when millenarian speculation increased (2001, p. 532).

Rather than having one eye on the apocalypse and one on more earthly preoccupations, I would argue that for the Lelet the imminence of Jesus's return constitutes a background feature—on the periphery but not a daily preoccupation. As an event predicted in the Bible, it is an infallible truth and believed to be inevitable. However, despite regular reminders from the pulpit that the return of Jesus is imminent and that people should be prepared by becoming born-again Christians, the church leaders have a constant struggle to maintain the evangelical passion of the congregation. The avoidance of setting a specific date for this important event may insulate the Lelet's faith from 'empirical disconfirmation' when the prediction does not eventuate (Robbins & Palmer 1997, p. 15), but it poses another problem. If the possibility of failed prophecy haunts apocalyptic movements that set dates, then waning evangelical enthusiasm haunts those that do not. This might best be described as apocalyptic fatigue, where the need to be constantly 'ready' can be corrosive of religious commitment. This certainly seems to be case for the Lelet, whose religious enthusiasm tends to wax and wane. Significant events, at local and global level, are likely to push apocalyptic interpretations into the foreground, heightening expectation and generating considerable discussion and speculation. Such events seem to remind people of the truth of the Biblical predictions and reignite religious enthusiasm.

Conclusion

With its stress on signs, apocalypticism encourages Christians to find in events confirmation of the end-times scenario. Indeed, during the year 2000 and subsequently, I often received very different explanations to those I had been given in earlier years for the same phenomena. For example, in 1990–91, cases of women giving birth outside of marriage were seen as due to a breakdown of 'tradition'. The failure of young people to abide by traditional strictures was seen as due to the weakening of elders' power brought by modernity. Later, for the more devout, these occurrences became signs of the general disintegration that marks the end-times, for as well as natural disasters such as the earthquake, the end-times are said to be characterised by a great deal of immorality, especially sexual immorality (*pasin pamuk*) (Eves 2003b).

A similar reinterpretation has occurred in cases where women have given birth to infants with abnormalities. Previously, such cases were explained to me as the work of spirit beings (see Eves 1998, pp. 151–78), but they have now become signs of the end-times, for those who have embraced apocalyptic interpretations. Not only are such occurrences said to be increasing in number, but they are now far more dramatic. While previous stories told of hydrocephalic children and slow development, they now tell of children with six fingers, no noses, and no hands. Some even say women are giving birth to animals, one man claiming that a woman had given birth to sixteen rats (Eves 2003b, p. 255).

Such re-evaluations rarely rule out the prior local understandings, for the two explanatory frameworks often coexist. The point is not that the new interpretations replace the old, but that they generally take priority over the old. God is considered to be the ultimate decider of events but these may be produced through various agencies, be they human or non-human. Thus, while some Lelet still believe that the earlier reasons for extramarital pregnancies and abnormal births are valid, others may assimilate them into the overarching apocalyptic framework. This is perhaps little different from the way that modern Western Christians accept scientific explanations for phenomena such as evolution, while still believing that God remains in command. Thus, that individual events are interpreted within global frameworks does not constitute a simple dualist opposition in which acceptance of one means rejection of the other.

Although the global discourse of apocalypticism has certainly made itself at home among the Lelet, the extent to which events are assimilated into this understanding varies between individuals. Those who are erudite in terms of the Bible and its prophesies tend to be predisposed to make apocalyptic interpretations and to articulate these widely. The less knowledgeable are inclined to reach such conclusions only in exceptional cases, such as the earthquake.

Notes

[1] The *lingua franca*, Tok Pisin, and the vernacular, Mandak, are italicised; the latter distinguished by [M].

[2] This paper is based on a total of twenty months' fieldwork on the Lelet Plateau, from 1990. My discussion refers only to the dominant United Church and not to the much smaller Charismatic Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist or the Lelet Christian Fellowship (formerly the Christian Life Centre) communities.

[3] The Lelet, roughly one thousand people, occupy the plateau of the same name in central New Ireland. Like many rural Papua New Guineans (approximately 87 percent), their lives are dominated by the rhythms of subsistence agriculture, cash-cropping and regular church attendance. The Lelet are a little better off than many Papua New Guineans, being able to sell their vegetables at the provincial capital, Kavieng, and some earning wages at the large resource project on nearby Lihir Island. A few Lelet own trucks, and a few have permanent houses. As elsewhere in rural Papua New Guinea, the 'hand of government' is remote, though the Lelet have access to some basic services, such as an aid post (though its orderly is often absent) and a primary school with several permanent buildings, many built by the Lelet themselves.

[4] 2000–365 days 52 *wik* 12 *mun* 8760 hours; *Nau* 45 days 7 *wik* 1.14 *mun* 1080 hours.

[5] The latter message also confronts those entering the church, in the form of a painting on the front of the building.

[6] 'Tell us, when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world? And Jesus answered and said unto them, . . . ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. All these are the beginning of sorrows.'

[7] It was placed at no. 25 for the number of people killed (one person) and at no. 17 for the number of people affected. The list relied on the print media for its raw data, without independent verification, and so cannot be relied on completely. For example, it cites a figure of five thousand affected by the earthquake, reported by the *Post-Courier* (21 Nov 2000), but never confirmed. The list is produced by the Asian Disaster Reduction Center (ADRC) and is found at the following url: http://www.adrc.or.jp/publications/databook/databook_20th/PNG.pdf

[8] See Foster (1991); Friedman (1994, 1997); Hannerz (1996); Kearney (1995); Meyer (1999); Meyer & Geschiere (1999) and Miller (1995).

[9] For the Lelet this has included, sometimes only after considerable critical examination, the drought of 1997–98, the Indian Ocean tidal wave of 2004, the Aitape tidal wave of 1998, the volcanic eruption that destroyed Rabaul in 1994 and the earthquake I have described (Eves 2000a; see also Schmid 1999, pp. 16–8; Stewart & Strathern 1999, p. 131, p. 137; 2000, p. 7, p. 16; Bashkow 2000, pp. 157–58).

[10] As sun magicians are often employed to ensure good weather during a mortuary feast, there is a need to prove to those who have commissioned the magic that the prevailing weather conditions are their own. This is done through a colourful sunset, which mirrors the colourful patterns painted on the magician's paraphernalia. A number of forms of sun magic use skulls, which are painted with colourful ochres and limepowders. How these are painted depends on the particular magician, but, however it is done, the sunset should reflect that individual pattern.

[11] Relating to the millennium.

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