Chapter 4

CARGO CULT OR SIN CULT?

A Melanesian rite to better God

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‘It takes a very long time to become a true sinner. It’s not something you achieve just like that. Hard work and good health are two conditions, but even then nothing is certain. Let’s say one has to have the right aptitude. All this takes a long time to attain’

Jorn Riel. Le récit qui donne un beau visage

‘Without the trade store there would be no Anglican god’

A Maring pundit (quoted in Lipuma 1988: 88)

The Sulka of New Britain (Papua New Guinea) often refer to the past, using the stereotypical missionary expression, as ‘the time of darkness’, that era of ignorance and error which came to an end when Christianisation ushered in the ‘time of light’. Yet the fact that some people speak of themselves as those who both follow the customs of the ancestors and keep the Ten Commandments shows that, in certain contexts, light is not necessarily the opposite of darkness. Borne along by a constant current of recomposition and totalisation, Sulka thought strives to maintain a necessary but non-dichotomous relationship between the two terms. I showed this in an article published in 1988 based on the analysis of a myth legitimising the practice of a certain rite. I will offer here a closer examination of the modalities of this same rite.

The Sulka number over 3500 and are divided into three main groups living several days’ walk apart in the eastern part of the island of New Britain. The vitality of the exchange relations and the constant flow of persons between the separated communities account for the cultural homogeneity that prevails in spite of the fairly contrasted sociological environments. Living essentially on the products of their own gardens, the Sulka also earn a little money by selling the copra or the cacao produced on small family plots. Salaried work in town or on the large commercial farms, another possible source of income, attracts only a small number of young men and then for a length of time that does not as a rule seem to exceed three or four years.
Situated on the shore of Wide Bay, some twelve hours by boat from the provincial capital, Rabaul, the original territory, today home to the largest population, was evangelised around 1930 by Catholic missionaries from the Sacred Heart congregation. Twenty years earlier, the first church in the Sulka area had been built by the same congregation among another section of the population in the region of Mope, in the north-eastern part of Gazelle Peninsula. In contrast to some previous experiences in New Britain, these missionaries encountered no notable hostility on the part of the Sulka. With no direct competition until recently, in particular before the Seventh Day Adventists began to overshadow them, their principal and only detractors were the members of what they long denounced as a ‘cargo cult’.

This so-called ‘cargo-cult’ began spreading a few decades ago among the Wide Bay Sulka by way of their Mengen neighbours, gaining the surrounding localities as well (Sohr, Kol, Tomuiip, Baining). Although it has attracted large numbers of Mengen, only a minority of the present-day Sulka population are members and they are congregated in a single village. The movement is known as the Pomio Kivung Group, a name that has never been replaced by a vernacular equivalent. Its literal meaning is ‘Pomio Meeting Group’ (from the Pidgin kivung: ‘meeting’ — Pomio being the name of a Mengen village). Like the Church, it was to this movement too, that the local administration alluded every time it wanted to denounce a ‘cargo cult’ in the area. The question of the activities associated with the Kivung Group is an extremely sensitive subject and is generally met with silence or reticence, since those who belong will not let those who do not belong talk about it, and those who do not belong seize the pretext of being outsiders to justify their inability to talk about it.

In the analysis of the way this movement functions, I will dwell in particular on two aspects: the very specific interpretation of the notion of ‘sin’ that underpins cult-members’ activities, and the meaning of the path travelled by the money given during the rites which is seen as having a major instrumental role.

Custom revisited
Feeding the ancestors and redeeming sins
In its present form, the cult’s members, among other obligations make twice-weekly food offerings to the spirits of the dead and monetary contributions to ‘redeem sins’. ‘Sin’ or ‘offence’ (Pidgin, pekato; Sulka, kermatnek) is minimally defined as any violation of the Ten Commandments and the self-imposed renunciation of ‘bad magic’, chewing betel, or failing to accomplish ritual duties. Subject to ‘redemption’ are not only the sins of Kivung members, but also the presumed sins of those who remain outside the movement, Sulka or non-Sulka, living or dead. The amounts given individually range from a few toea to one kina or more, according to the gravity of the sins to be redeemed, which is appraised by the participant. In the coded language of the group’s members, the rite is referred to as ‘washing’ (orop), which is instrumentalised by the money, compared by the movement leader to soap that ‘takes away the ugly skin and reveals the good skin’.

As a sort of extension of this ‘washing’ of persons, the members of the Kivung also take on the upkeep of the cemetery grounds so that, as one of them explains, the dirt and the
diseases present in the soil cannot harm the deceased. Since the colonial administration's prohibition on exposing corpses and celebrating second funerals, all dead must be buried in the village graveyard. The shrub-lined clearing in which they rest is entirely free of weeds, with no material indication to mark the gravesites. Cleaning consists of sweeping the ground and removing the weeds that have come up since the previous week. This civic service, which in theory is incumbent on the entire village community, is performed exclusively by the movement, which thereby secures a monopoly on relations with the dead.4

On a ceremonial site next to the cemetery where the food and money offerings are brought twice a week, stands a house known to all as the Ancestors' House. It is framed by two written lists: towards the back wall, engraved on a board planted in the ground, is the list of the names of all those buried in the cemetery; near the front wall, a list of Roman numerals refers to the Ten Commandments. These numerals are disposed on a wood carving representing Moses with the Tablets of the Law. The whole display rests on a traditional club. At the base of this club or wedged among the branches of a nearby tree is an empty can, for the coins that people will come, one by one, to deposit, in an amount known to each alone, for the redemption of sins.

Built on the lines of the traditional dwellings, the Ancestors' House is typically covered by a roof of thick vegetal thatch that comes down to the ground and keeps out all light. The only opening is a low narrow doorway that one must stoop to pass through; there are no windows. Except for the one village that is home to the Kivung movement, this type of construction has completely disappeared from the Sulka area. People today say that the dark houses gave their residents somewhere to flee to and thus provided them with a chance to escape any assailants that might come — as their eyes would be unaccustomed to the sudden darkness and they could not see them. Architecture of this type is currently interpreted today as referring to the ignorance that, until the advent of Christianisation, kept the ancestors under the sway of murder and fear. The Ancestors' House is thus plunged into inner shadows that implicitly recall the obscurity of mind prevailing in the 'time of darkness'. At the same time, the Ancestors' House, as the site of a rite purportedly based on the strict observation of God's commandments, attests by its presence next to the cemetery that 'light' has indeed come to the land of the Sulka.

The twice-weekly offerings made by the movement members must include both food and money. The foods differ slightly from the villagers' ordinary fare, and generally consist of what are regarded as the best varieties of tubers, rarely eaten or cultivated fruits like pineapples, store-bought rice or canned meats. Prepared in a nearby hut that serves as a kitchen, the food is taken into the Ancestors' House, where dishes and cutlery are set out — utensils which the Sulka, whether or not they are members of the movement, hardly ever use for eating. The food is dished onto the plates for the spirits of the dead, who are thought to come and eat its numu ('spirit', 'image', 'duplicate', 'reflection'). After an hour or two, the food left by the spirits of the dead (the food minus its numu and therefore 'cold') is taken out of the House, and then divided up and eaten by the members of the movement.5

The funds collected are periodically turned over to the Mengen responsible for the general management of the movement and who centralise, not only the Sulka's money, but that of the other Kivung subgroups in the neighbouring populations. Once a year, all the takings are
deposited in an account opened in the name of the Pomio Kivung Group, at a bank in the provincial capital. In 1967, a total of A$ 40,000 was collected. A document drawn up by the group’s treasurer for the period from 1975 to 1986, concerning the whole movement, indicated a sum of nearly 300,000 kinas. This money, invested in constructing a medical post and school, health and administrative facilities on the grounds of a village located in Mengen territory, heralded, according to the leader of the Sulka movement, the advent of the first ‘town born from the money of the Ten Commandments’.

Food and money are connected by a relation that is both continuous and discontinuous. The bond of continuity accounts for the fact that one cannot be given without the other. This link further appears in the fact that the money is deposited in an empty tin can, thereby replacing the food that previously filled the recipient. Unlike food, however, money can be deposited only outside the Ancestors’ House, it was explained to me, so as not to defile the House by introducing into it the sins the money was paid to redeem. The difference in the way the two types of offering are handled suggests a discontinuity between money, which falls into the province of sin, and food, which does not. In fact, food is so far removed from the idea of sin that there was a time when the members of the Kivung Group grew most of it in gardens worked in common which they called paradiso.

‘This is not a cargo cult’

The name ‘cargo cult’, used by missionaries and government agents to stigmatise Kivung activities, is violently contested by the movement itself. The group’s objection can best be understood as the rejection of a clearly pejorative label. On the occasion of a Sunday homily in which he had used the term once too often, a Catholic missionary was publicly reprimanded by the movement’s leader:

Father, plenty of times you’ve talked about cargo cults. Do you see cargo cult here? Where is there cargo cult? Who cares about cargo cults? Where is there cargo cult? Do you see cargo cult? Shut your mouth. You don’t know. Me, I know custom. It isn’t your custom, it’s my custom. People do like they think. You can’t stop someone thinking. Now suppose I say, ‘Stop saying mass!’ Can you do it? Can you do it? Suppose I say: ‘It’s finished, you don’t say mass any more.’ Can you do that?

This diatribe persuaded the missionary to drop the subject, an obligation to keep silent that he justified (to the anthropologist) by the fear of seeing his Sunday congregation decline. In short, the Kivung was willing to hear what the Church had to say only once the Church had heard its injunction to keep quiet.

The same speaker claimed he did not know exactly what the mission or the administration meant by ‘cargo cult’. To know about this, he would indeed have had to engage in the cult! Nevertheless, it was clear to him that this term implied an opposition between Kivung ritual and work, and thus contained an accusation of passivity — following an interpretation found in other New Guinea societies. He therefore seized every available occasion to repeat that the members of Kivung were not content to simply ‘stand idly by’. Several times he had given the masks he made for ceremonies the provocative name of
'Cargo Cult'. When he cried out this name on the dancing ground, as is the custom at ceremonies, he had, he said, the jubilant feeling of defying his detractors. He imagined that those who were 'always talking [to him] about cargo cult, cargo cult, cargo cult', must then say to themselves: 'This man, all the time we are talking to him about cargo cult, and yet he put work into that!' Indeed, everyone knew that making a mask was *wok* ('work'; Sulka, *eha*). And it was clear that a man capable of doing such 'work' could not be suspected of idleness, no more than one who went to the trouble of raising pigs. He himself raised pigs and, as a way of recalling that this was indeed 'work', his herd from time to time boasted an animal that bore the name of Cargo Cult.

**Custom as a divine commandment**

If it is not a cargo cult, the reason is that it partakes of 'work', and thus embodies custom itself.

'We work because we know that things cannot happen by themselves,' the same speaker told me, as a way of indicating that this was nothing unusual.

Today we remember: the great men of old, the ancestors of our great men and their ancestors worked at this. And that is what has come back today. People, at the mission and in other places, are fighting this custom. But whose custom is it? I have been sent to court for this … But it’s my thing, it’s the custom of my ancestors … It isn’t for something new that I am sent like that to court. It’s something from before that the ancestors worked at.

As a rule, when the Sulka say 'work' (*eha*) they are referring to the cultivation of gardens and the raising of pigs that are fed with produce from these gardens. At the same time, as is often the case in Melanesia, the term covers the whole notion of performing a ritual. Inappropriate, for instance, for wage-labour on plantations, the notion of 'work' properly applies to the definition of an initiation, a marriage or a mourning ritual. Described as an act of remembrance or fidelity, 'work' consists of doing today as the ancestors did in the past, the legitimisation of each act depending on the retrospective attribution of a precedent to it.

To recall that 'work' partakes, by definition, of 'custom' is to say that what is done is right because it is not new. 'It was not invented just recently', declared one follower of a messianic movement in another province, thus denying any connection with a cargo cult. It is also on their claim to continuity with the past that the Kivung Group members base their legitimacy, thereby putting History on their side. Thus detractors cannot incriminate them without calling all of History into doubt.

Perceived as forgetting, as ignorance, error, deviation, infidelity, and even treachery, discontinuity — or difference in general — appears as a disqualifier. So that those who, like the mission or the administration, denounce Kivung activities, condemn ancestral practices or want to impose their own changes implicitly discredit themselves. It could be said — literally — that they do not know what they are talking about.

Yet continuity and discontinuity are exclusive of each other only in a perspective that assumes their mutual incompatibility. In opposition to this viewpoint, which is that of the
Church and the administration, the Kivung ‘works’ to impose another conception of history in which continuity answers for discontinuity, where fidelity to what was is conceived as fidelity to what is supposed to be. This is true of the Kivung practice of offering food to the dead, presented by the movement leader as an ancient Sulka funeral rite. This ‘custom’, he asserted:

… the ancestors used to work at it. We had forgotten it and I brought it back. Suppose I did not do this work, there would be no more Ten Commandments. It was the Ten Commandments that said to me ‘Do this work!’

The Ten Commandments are taken literally as orders, injunctions commanding the members of the movement to ‘work’, in other words to work at continuity by reviving the rituals performed by the ancestors. In short, they are an injunction to remember, to be faithful to ‘custom’, which is thus provided with an origin and a legitimacy rooted in the Bible. The Bible prescribes this fidelity, whereas the mission, like the administration, condemns and combats it. To ‘work’ therefore means to be placed in the predicament of disobeying the mission in order to obey God’s commandments. It is impossible to do one without doing the other, and so the ‘custom’ in question puts the Church in contradiction with the Bible.

The call to keep the commandments accounts for the need to carry on the ‘work’ of the ancestors, and vice versa, the ‘work’ accounts for their survival. (‘If I didn’t do this ‘work’, there would be no more commandments.’) ‘Ancestral custom’ and the divine commandments are linked: preservation of the commandments rests on observance of ‘custom’, and the perpetuation of ‘custom’ depends on keeping the commandments. One could say that in a way ‘custom’ ranks as a divine commandment.

Working and knowing

The movement leader observed with some acrimony: ‘Everybody knows the Ten Commandments, but nobody does the work of the Ten Commandments.’ The excellence on which the Kivung members pride themselves stems from the fact that theirs is the only practice that involves both ‘knowing’ and ‘working’; they are the only ones, as opposed to ‘everybody else’, the living (outside the movement) but also to the dead.

About the ancestors, the movement leader said in substance that they already kept the Ten Commandments, but without knowing it. They too, he argued, believed, for example, that one must not kill or steal; they too upheld the principle of neighbourly love through the institution of the former taven, village heads or ‘fathers’ who looked after their co-residents. Thus, like the Kivung ‘custom’, the Christian commandments ‘are not something new’, as one of the Sacred Heart missionaries was told by the Sulka as early as 1913:

An old man, E Rougwa, more than 70 years of age, with grey hair and a long grey beard, without a tooth in his mouth, and supporting himself with a stick… told me in substance: You need not tell us that we should take good care of our relatives (4th commandment), that we should not kill anybody (5th commandment), that we should not commit
adultery (6th commandment), that we should not steal (7th commandment), that we should not lie (8th commandment).

These things, he said, are not new to us; we are fully aware of them although we act against them frequently. I am an old man now. When I was a boy, I was taught these lessons by my relatives who had not learned them from any white man, but knew them all by themselves. For at that time they had as yet no knowledge of people with a white skin; they had not seen any, and still less had come in contact with them.16

Let me mention that, while for the Sulka members of the Pomio Kivung Group the divine commandments may not have been ‘something new’ with respect to ancestral practice, for the missionaries themselves, the tribe’s religion or morality did not appear entirely new either. The remarks made by the missionary Carl Laufer, who saw the Sulka founding hero as a local version of the Supreme Being and implicitly regarded the Sulka as Christians in fact if not in name, could in this sense be regarded as a Kivung-style discourse.17

According to today’s movement members, the ancestors were unaware that, by respecting custom, they were actually keeping God’s commands. One can thus infer that the ancestors were in a position to violate the Ten Commandments without knowing it. They were unaware that, when they performed acts condemned by custom, they were actually sinning; similarly, they were unaware of what was wrong with certain traditional techniques such as sorcery or love magic. In short, while the ‘time of darkness’ that preceded evangelisation lasted, men were constantly sinning without knowing it. Then ‘light’ came, and they discovered they had been sinners.

In this respect, the dawning of ‘light’ together with the Biblical commandments was the advent of the rule, but a rule that was laid out as such, a written rule, which henceforth enabled one to commit acts classified as transgressions…and to know it. In this rule, it would seem that the element discriminating between darkness and light was less the commandments’ negative definition of what constituted a transgression than the fact that, while the rule did not prevent the offence, it henceforth forbade ignorance. The first commandment could thus be said to read ‘Thou shalt know’.18

Symmetrically to the ancestors, who did the ‘work’, that is kept the Ten Commandments but without knowing it, the Sulka outside the Kivung Group are today denigrated as those who do nothing but pray, that is who know, but do not work. By not ‘working’, as an applied knowledge of the Ten Commandments enjoins them to, by therefore not following the ‘custom of the ancestors’ who used to ‘work’, they are committing a sin.

The ancestors and the non-Kivung living share the same inability to establish a continuity between knowing and ‘working’: when they work they do not know it; and when they know, they do not work. The ancestors and the living not affiliated to the Kivung also have in common the fact that they do not redeem the sins they commit. What neither group does, the members of the Kivung undertake to do for them. Today the money given for the ancestors by those who claim to be ‘following the custom of the ancestors’ (the Kivung members) must therefore redeem two kinds of sins: sins defined as a breach of the divine commandments and sins stemming from the failure to redeem sins. In other words, the money is meant to redeem the fact that the ancestors followed their custom instead of
following the divine commandments and abstaining, for instance, from killing or practising sorcery; and

the fact that the ancestors did not redeem their observance of custom, that is, they did not redeem the sins they (inevitably) committed by following it.

Those who follow the ‘custom of the ancestors’ must therefore give money to redeem the fact that the ancestors followed the ‘custom of the ancestors’.

The cult of excellence

The opposition stressed by the Kivung between ‘knowing’ and ‘working’ is also drawn between praying and paying. To be sure, the same speaker concedes with respect to Sulka outside the group, ‘the others, too, pray to God for their offences, but they don’t give any money. So what can God do with all those offences?’ The condemned discontinuity between praying and paying contrasts two ways of relating to God: an internalised mode (prayer) asking God to give, and an externalised mode (payment), asking him to receive. Knowing and working, praying and paying: the Kivung movement refuses the separation of these terms, and treats it as a sin. This sin, committed by the ancestors, is likewise committed by all those living outside the movement, and resides in the fundamentally ineffective character of their relationship with the deity.

When they ‘worked’, in other words when they kept the commandments but without knowing it, the ancestors were working, but in vain, since their work was not dedicated to God and was therefore of no value as a sacrifice. Likewise, today those outside the movement who know the commandments but do not keep them, who pray to God but do not give money, who thus abstain from paying with either their person or from their pockets (in other words, who abstain from making any sacrifice whatever), can never hope to have any sway over the deity.

Just as they declare themselves the only ones who combine ‘knowing’ and ‘working’, the members of the Kivung also claim to be the only ones to combine prayer and sacrifice, asking and giving. They are, quite unmetaphorically, the only ones to pay a price for praying to God, which is also a way of designating themselves as the only ones capable of rendering God’s power effective. It can be said that here ‘work’ is to knowledge as money is to prayer: a sacrifice necessary to move the deity to make use of its power, the implication being that nothing God does to benefit people can ever be free of charge. Paying with one’s time by ‘working’ or paying with one’s wealth by giving money keeps the knowledge or the request from being in vain. In the terms of the quotation above, that is what is supposed to force God to ‘do something’ with the offences people pray for him to redeem. The religious concern of the Kivung Group here should be understood as a concern with effectiveness, which bears on the ability of its members to move God to action.19

The sacrificial dimension believed by its own members to distinguish the Kivung movement is also what, from the viewpoint of non-members, defines the conditions of membership. Of the Kivung members, they say, for instance, that they were forced to give up all their magic, the ‘bad’ magic (for killing), but also the ‘good’ magic (for seducing and healing); that they destroyed their personal weapons; that they continually impoverish themselves by the amount of money they pay to redeem sins; that this poverty drives them to
hire themselves out to white planters; that their self-imposed prohibition on betel chewing exposes their mouth to all sorts of infections and makes it stink. Seen as disarmed, both literally and figuratively, by all these deprivations that weaken them (leaving them vulnerable to sorcery and disease), they are further suspected of depending on persons outside the movement who in exchange for payment ensure them the benefit of their own magic. From the viewpoint of non-believers, who claim the movement is the product of a ‘dream’ and denounce the illusion kept up by its members, the constant sacrifices made by these members are no doubt one of the few things whose reality and truth are undeniable; and all the less deniable as it is the extent of these sacrifices that is advanced to explain non-membership (the fact that one has either left or refused to join).

Echoing what is said outside the movement about their vulnerability, Kivung members implicitly show the full measure of their sacrifices when they describe the hostility they encounter because of their membership (risk of being poisoned, murdered, etc.). The leader of the Sulka movement often terminated our conversations by referring to his fear of talking. The constant feeling of insecurity of which he spoke took him one step closer to the ‘custom of the ancestors’ that he prided himself on observing, since the ever-present fear of murder is believed to have characterised the ‘time of darkness’.

The value of sacrifice resides in the twin aspects of the offering: that of paying for the gifts one has given the deity with a deficit of ‘strength’. Having become better Christians through the means they adopt to compel God to make use of his power, the members of the movement themselves enjoy all the more power because they consent to weaken, deprive, expose themselves — to sickness or misfortune. Defenceless, weaponless, and for that very reason in a position of strength: perhaps this is the meaning of the club which, in the carving erected near the Ancestors’ House, supports the representation of Moses and the Tablets of the Law. The condition of the effectiveness of the gift, and its price, is the weakening it implies for the person, a weakening that can sometimes go as far as that peculiar state of frailty the Sulka assimilate to madness, or to the total loss of strength that spells death.

Among the members of the Kivung, there was a man whose slight mental derangement was thus attributed to sorcery on the part of persons hostile to the movement. A few weeks before he died, in 1985, it was to this same type of activity that the leader of the Sulka movement ascribed the illness that was to end his life. Two previous deaths in the Kivung Group had been imputed to the same causes by its members. It may be that these interpretations were more an attempt to ascribe an operative meaning to these events than a quest for a cause. It was an attempt to salvage misfortune by giving it a dedicatory, sacrificial value: death sent from outside as the price of membership in the movement thus partakes, a posteriori, of an offering.

In the same system of gift and debt, this could be regarded as a Melanesian illustration of the analysis carried out by Charles Fredrikson in Portugal, showing how the transformation of misfortunes into aggressions victimising the woman in the serra at the same time provides her with a virtually inexhaustible fund of sacrificial credit that she can invest in her relations with the saints.

Gifts of objects and gifts of oneself: these two modalities of the offering, each implying the other, are the vehicle for the sacrifice the Kivung members make of their ‘strength’. The sacrifice here conditions the capacity to render God powerful, in other words effective. The
excellence of the movement is defined as knowledge applied to bettering God. Rather than a sign of blessing or divine approval, the prosperity awaited is a mark of the Kivung's power to constrain the divinity. But more specifically, what is this constraint and what is this prosperity?

The fecundity of sin
Among the Kaliai of New Britain, people sometimes say that God changes into a devil so as to 'test the moral fibre of his subjects'. The Sulka in the Kivung Group have a different version of this divine ambivalence: God was hampered by Adam and Eve's chastity because it prevented the earth from being populated. So he decided to turn himself into a serpent. Then the former catechist who was telling this story drew the obvious conclusion: 'Without sin the earth would still be uninhabited.'

Sin therefore was doubly responsible for the origin of humanity. First as a principle of life: no sin, no people. And second, as an ontological principle: in order not to sin, remarked in substance the Sulka leader of the Kivung movement, you would have to be dumb, blind and without hands (because I have a mouth, I lie; because I have eyes, I covet; because I have hands, I kill, I steal, etc.). One might as well say people are no longer supposed to be human; one might as well say, therefore, that it is the vocation of the members of the human body to be instruments of sin.

In the beginning, sin was a sign both of the humanity of mankind (having eyes to covet with, a mouth to lie with, etc.) and of its divinity, namely: God's will that they become sinners. If the serpent tempter is indeed an avatar of the deity, as this version of the Fall has it, then sinning is tantamount to doing the will or the desire of God. Each time a person sins, he is showing his allegiance to God, he is acting as God's debtor. And in so doing, he puts God in his own debt.

Sin is thus a means of putting the deity in one's debt; a double process, in fact, since it consists, for humans, of doing what God wants by sinning, and then proceeding to 'redeem' the sins committed according to his will. It should be noted that this logic of indebtedness cannot be attributed to a specifically Kivung ideology, since it can also be found in other ritual contexts. This is the case, for example, of the practice known as 'paying/compensating for the desire' (enkim/srim ka svil), which obliges the organiser of a ceremony — the 'father of the feast' — to make a gift to every member of the audience who has expressed his admiration or his emotion — the actual word used is his 'desire' — for the beauty of a mask, a song or a dance. However the expression of 'desire', which is assumed to be the outcome of the magic performed by the organiser of the ceremony, represents nothing other than the fulfillment of his own desire that the audience become 'desiring'. The desire of the one is thus satisfied by the 'desire' of the other, and is attested by the gift that must obligatorily be forthcoming from the 'father of the feast'. Thus, whether he be human or divine, the being whose desire one fulfills thereby incurs a debt that he is obliged to repay.

However, even if sin is the expression of God's desire and an indication of one's allegiance, sin alone can never signify sin, in other words prove allegiance. Sin requires a ritual in order to exist as such. Specifically, the money paid by the members of the Kivung certifies the reality of the sins. It does this so successfully, moreover, that it cannot be introduced into the Ancestors' House for fear of defiling it. The money paid certifies the
reality of the sins just as, for example, in other ritual contexts the brideprice or the funeral payment certifies the reality of the marriage or the mourning. Potentially omnipresent in all mankind, sin is not fulfilled as the divine will until it is redeemed. It has only an ostentatory or a dedicatory reality. Unredeemed sin, the sins of the ancestors or of people outside the Kivung, does not constitute a statement of the relation to God. It is, in a sense, an act devoid of intentionality, of which one may ask whether it still deserves to be called a sin.

Sin does not have an autonomous existence in the sense that it could be associated with specific behaviours denoted as guilty. It saturates virtually all human conduct, but acquires true relevance only within a relation, the one the Kivung ritual establishes between two acts, of which one is always a gift of money. ‘No sins, no money’, said the leader of the movement. One would be tempted to say ‘no money, no sin’.

In this sense, as much no doubt as a means of wiping out offences, the monetary redemption of sins represents a way of bringing the sins into existence. Redeeming sins means first of all causing them to be. The monetary payment whereby sin is in this way ritually manufactured can thus be understood as a way of compelling others to become sinners. No money, no sin, as we have said. By paying for all, for the dead and for those living outside the movement, the Kivung methodically ensures the growth and multiplication of the number of sinners.

If the money paid indeed certifies the reality of the sins, it thereby certifies the reality of the debt. God cannot deny the existence of that for which a payment has been made, any more than men in society can do so. The payment here is a gift that retrospectively turns each sin into a debt owed. God, incapable of denying the existence of the debt, must then reimburse this debt to humans. Within the Kivung, sin can be defined in this way: acts the redemption of which compels God to create prosperity. While it is an expression of divine power, prosperity also appears as a sign of men’s power over the power of God.27 ‘No sins, no money’, declared the leader of the movement, almost as if he were setting the conditions of a tit for tat. Absence of sin is sterile, the corollary being the absence of prosperity. For, while sin lies at the origin of humanity, it also lies at the origin of human economic development. It is this development that is announced by the first ‘town born from the money of the Ten Commandments’ — in this case, the town born from the commandments that were violated, since kept commandments do not generate payments of money.

The fecundity of sin is inexhaustible, as the movement leader said: ‘There is always some sin to be redeemed.’ This assertion indicates that there is always some sin that has not been redeemed, and that one is a sinner for not having redeemed it. The Kivung member is defined ontologically as a perpetual debtor who can never repay all his debts, whereby he also gains the means to establish himself as a perpetual creditor. The obligation, and with it the promise of prosperity, are infinite since the debt is indelible.

The wages of sin and the creation of debts
On the art of governing sins … and those who govern
The sums collected — the wages of sin — are centralised by the Mengen and deposited in a bank account held by the Kivung Group; the declared recipient is the national government,
of which the money is said to be the ‘head’ (ka lpek) or the ‘picture’ (ka kaunun).\textsuperscript{28} Lacking the resources to ensure the economic development of the whole country, according to the Sulka leader of the movement, this government is forced to restrict aid to those localities to which it feels it is under obligation: for example the home locality of the Kivung, from which it has received earlier material support.\textsuperscript{29} This government aid — which would be no more than a reciprocal contribution to counterbalance the sums paid in by the movement members — should take the form of roads, airports, bridges, stores, office buildings and other installations.

Yet, far from being an end in itself, the construction of these facilities, seen by the Kivung as so many indicators of economic development, is regarded as representing only the first stage of a much more ambitious plan. These external signs of prosperity are designed to whet the economic appetites of the Whites,\textsuperscript{30} who would then let flow the financial and industrial investments they have been withholding from the indigenous populations. The sharing of resources would then be a time for sharing in white people’s knowledge, considered to be the origin of these resources. Partaking in their knowledge would at last enable the Sulka to understand why they had been so long refused access to it. The project of creating a ‘town’ and thus setting up Western civilisation as an icon aims at learning the secret reasons that have kept the Sulka at a distance from it. Much more than aspiration to the abundance of the Whites or to equality with them, often mentioned in the ethnographic literature, it could be that aspiration to knowledge is among the principal issues involved in the Kivung movement.

By displaying their prosperity as one dangles a lure, it seems the members of the Kivung are basing their strategy on the idea that, as the French say, ‘One lends only to the rich’. This view of matters undermines to some degree the classical anthropological interpretation, which postulates a unilateral desire on the part of Melanesians for Western goods and sees this desire as one of the principal driving forces driving messianic movements. The view as seen from the Kivung suggests that it is above all the idea the Sulka have of white people’s cupidity for Melanesians’ resources which commends this strategy to the movement. If creating a ‘town’ may be one of those imitative strategies observed elsewhere in Melanesia,\textsuperscript{31} perhaps the mimicry in question expresses not so much desire for a foreign way of life as a means of addressing white Europeans, using the only language they are presumed to understand.

Observations on movements in other populations suggest, however, that the Melanesians’ desire is not self-evident. They note, for example, the absence of millenarian expectations or the patent lack of interest in products from the West.\textsuperscript{32} This is also suggested by studies questioning the pertinence of the distinction between subjects and objects in Melanesian societies,\textsuperscript{33} or showing the transformed meanings and values given products exogenous to these societies.\textsuperscript{34} Accepting that Melanesians are not necessarily envy ridden should, from this point of view, prompt us to examine our own projection of envy, in other words to ask ourselves what drives us to assume the desirability of whatever our societies produce. The idea that Whites’ avidity for the local resources may be a relevant fact for Melanesians seems to have attracted little attention. It is as though it were of no importance that the colonisation, the alienation of lands, the predatory activity of gold prospectors, birt-
of-paradise hunters, ‘blackbirders’ or other recruiters of labour or soldiers during the war, like the exploitation of forests and mineral resources today, were and are activities of Whites in Melanesia, never of Melanesians in the West.35

Another interpretation of the Whites’ rapacity is conceivable, however. In terms of the ideology of desire discussed above, the rapacity thought of by the cult members as being the product of a ritual construction might refer to their own desire of exciting the cupiduty of the Whites. Thus this cupiduty, rather than constituting the motive of the subjugation of the Melanesians by the Whites, as was the case under colonial rule, would instead manifest the subjection of the Whites to the action of the movement and demonstrate the ultimate superiority of the knowledge wielded by the Kivung. Thus the capacity of the movement to control history would be visible even in the intrusion of foreign powers into the region.

The relationship the Kivung Group strives to establish with the national government by assuming the role of money-giver partakes of the logic of debt which underpins all social relations in Melanesia, and particularly all exchange relations. But its specificity lies in achieving this by ‘hijacking’ the relationship with another government authority: the agency charged with managing the province.36

The opposition implicitly posited by the Kivung between national and provincial governments appears to be based on three main factors:

— the fact that the historical founder of the movement as well as its present leader (both non-Sulka) are members of the national parliament, whereas the provincial parliament has never had a Kivung group member;37

— the fact that the national government represents one and all, the whole independent country in its relation with ‘white people’s countries’; the provincial government, on the other hand is a mere subsidiary of the former and is accused, in addition, of being a Tolai vassal;

— the fact that the national government neither demands nor represses, unlike the provincial government, which is persuaded that it is periodically owed money (taxes) and which places its repressive system at the service of the administration. For Kivung members, who refuse to pay the provincial tax, the judicial ‘persecutions’ carried out by this administration are a recurrent subject of protest. The local Church, in the person of the missionaries who urge people to pay their taxes and who condemn the Kivung movement, is also a part of the system of repression.

The Kivung’s decision to turn over the collection to the national government, by contrast, sheds some light on their refusal to pay the annual provincial tax. It can be interpreted as an attempt to substitute a fertile far-reaching relationship for a local relation judged to be unsatisfactory and non-productive.38 Paying one’s taxes, paying what is owed is a very poor relationship — and an impoverishing one as well. For two reasons: it precludes the reversibility of roles, since those who pay and those who receive are always respectively the same; and not only can the money paid out never appear as a gift, but it cannot even rank as a claim, because nothing is ever forthcoming to counterbalance it. The money received by the provincial government is seen as being invested solely on behalf of the Tolai, with no positive fallout for the Sulka. As long as taxes go to this government, denounced as a ‘Tolai government’ because it counts a majority of Tolai, things will never, it is claimed, be otherwise.
The members of the Kivung movement refuse to pay the taxes assessed by the provincial government because they have already paid the national government — which in fact has not asked them for anything. Indebted to one institution, they deny this debt by placing the other institution in the position of being their debtor.

This type of relationship, in which one is able to exercise compelling force precisely because one has given something the receiver never asked for but which will oblige him to reciprocate, corresponds to the Sulkah definition of the relation of ‘solidarity’ known as *mokpom* (literally: ‘to hold each other’). This is a long-term bond, since it can theoretically be passed on from one generation to the next; this mutual obligation, in which each in turn is creditor and debtor, is the opposite of the momentary relation of ‘aid’ or ‘loan’ (*a toh*) instigated by satisfying a request and ending shortly thereafter with the repayment of the loan.

The Kivung strategy consists of so contriving it that the acquittal of the debt (paying their taxes) amounts to a claim. It thereby implies transforming an obligatory gift (the tax) into a voluntary gift, in other words turning something owed into a gift and a gift into a debt by playing one government against the other. In this way, the Kivung’s debt to the provincial government becomes the nation’s debt to the Kivung.

For the members of the movement, who are debtors of one government because they have chosen to be creditors of the other, the reimbursement demanded by the province indirectly gives its full importance to the credit extended to the national government. The impossibility of avoiding debt (taxes), heightened by its aggravation (fines, lawsuits, prison sentences), accounts for the fact that the members of the movement have no choice but to make the best of their misfortune, since they cannot avoid it.

The interest of misfortune
Judicial persecutions, hostility from outsiders, insecurity, new debts, the various ills by which the Kivung claims to be beset are a measure of the sacrifices made on behalf of the national government; at the same time as they give the refusal its demarcative value. We are better than the others because, in order to obey God’s commandments, we disobey both the provincial government and the Church; we are better because we pay the national government, and pay the full price, or twice the price: the monetary price and the price of misfortune.

These misfortunes cannot be entirely unfortunate, however, since they are imbued with an operative value, with a sacrificial meaning. One former catechist and Kivung member asserted that Hell was not something to be feared after death because it was what people were already living here on earth. And it is precisely because one lives through Hell during one’s lifetime that one no longer has to fear it afterwards — since living consists, if I may sum up his viewpoint, in paying in advance. Members of the Kivung, as we have seen, pay with zeal. The sacrifice contained in these repeated payments (of their goods and their person) can be viewed as a total rejection of any gratuitousness, beginning with gratuitous misfortune. Sacrifice is in this sense the capacity to produce misfortune for oneself for the purpose of rejecting the gratuitousness of misfortune. A sign of excellence because it is a sign of belonging, misfortune as defined by the Kivung is also a sign of sin. The movement’s durability relies precisely on this ambivalence, as we shall see.
From the movement leader’s affirmation that ‘there is always some sin that needs redeeming’, we inferred earlier that there was always some sin one was guilty of having failed to redeem. The perpetuity of the debt, the fact that there is ‘always some sin that needs redeeming’, corresponds to a dimension of the Kivung that fits the definition of what, in a different context, Charles Fredrikson analysed as an ‘etiology of failure’.\textsuperscript{40} It is to this debt, to this neglected redemption that the members of the Kivung attribute retrospectively any failure. One anecdote illustrates this nicely: a man, apparently on his own initiative and shortly after joining the movement, spent the night in the village graveyard beseeching the spirits of the dead to show themselves. But in vain. For all he gained from his long wait for a miracle was, in addition to a cold, the suspicion of the other members, who promptly interpreted the absence of results as the sign of some sin he had failed to redeem and which was now preventing the spirits from coming forward.

Among the Sulka, this type of explanation of failure is not peculiar to the Kivung movement. It can be found, for example, in the content of one male initiation rite that involved repeated applications of manganese earth (\textit{a ket}) to the teeth and exposing them to the heat of a fire. At length, a sort of shiny black lacquer formed that could last several years. The success of this ordeal, described as long and painful, was subject to one precondition: that the novices ‘reveal’ their past ‘offences’ or ‘failings’. Today people say that admission of these ‘offences’ (\textit{kermatnek}), having to do for example with murders, thefts, illicit sexual relations, was not sanctioned by any particular punishment, but that whatever the novices neglected or forgot to confess, ‘the ket would reveal it’. Failing the test constituted this ‘revelation’: the earth would not adhere to the teeth, or would chip off, leaving uneven black splotches. The novices were then enjoined to reveal what they had been keeping back before renewing the ordeal which, if they had told all, would this time be successful.\textsuperscript{41}

In the teeth-blackening ritual (no longer performed) as in Kivung practice, the question of ‘offense’ is couched less in terms of moral content than in terms of power, that is in terms of an operative, manipulative relation to knowledge. An offense is whatever jeopardizes the effectiveness of the rite. Rather than implying something sanctionable, it implies something that sanctions. Sin, in other words, is not evil itself, it is whatever renders the rite inoperative. Everything that in daily life is experienced as failure therefore signifies the presence of sin. Wounded game that escapes, a fruitless fishing expedition, a clumsy accident, for example, are all warnings, all calls to order.

If collective prosperity is proof that sins have indeed been redeemed, as the emblematic ‘town born from the money of the Ten Commandments’ shows, individual misfortune or failure, conversely, reveals failure to redeem:

\textbf{If I don’t pay for that day I didn’t work, that day I didn’t give food or didn’t clean up the graveyard, or for a work of the Ten Commandments I didn’t do, if I don’t redeem that, the dead will get cross. There will come a time when the ax will cut me, or I will fall out of a tree, or a flood will carry me away… For that thing I didn’t make amends for, a mark like that will appear.}
Misfortune or failure — which reveals sin — is itself a sin. It is the original sin that founds and federates the Kivung society, which resides in the failure to redeem sins. The same speaker observed later: ‘My money watches over me’, ‘money is my guardian’ (*kwa mani kamtot mang dok*).

The effectiveness of the movement, achieved through reiterated sacrifices for the redemption of sins, cannot manifest itself immediately. The definition of Kivung practice as ‘work’ arises precisely from the idea that ‘things cannot go fast’. The person who made this remark observed in substance that, when you plant a taro, you have ‘to wait before you can harvest anything’. And he added, alluding to the movement’s detractors — no doubt as a way of turning their presumption of irrationality against them: ‘They would like everything to go fast. Their idea is: “I work today, today I see.”’

Nor can the effectiveness of the movement be visible at the individual level for each of its members. The lonely night-long vigil for the miracle in the graveyard could only result in disappointment. Only failure can manifest itself in a proximate and immediate fashion to the individual. The effectiveness of the sacrifice can never manifest itself this way. It establishes a spatial distance, the space between the Ancestors’ House in the Sulka village and the ‘town born of the Ten Commandments’ in Mengen country; and it is deferred in time, disjoined as it were from the act of depositing a coin in a tin can. Failure, with its higher visibility quotient, in fact argues for renewed allegiance to the Kivung movement.

Ascribed to a manifestation of the spirits of the dead, individual misfortunes or failures which punish the non-redemption of sins amount, in a sense, to negative miracles. Nothing of the like could indeed ever happen to someone outside the movement. The spirits take no interest in such people, the movement leader insists, for ‘the dead are only concerned with men who give them food’. Refusing to join the Kivung, members believe, does not engender any reprisals. Failure to redeem sins, or to make offerings to the spirits is thought to have adverse consequences only for movement members, not for those outside. Exteriorty is of course no protection against misfortune, but the misfortunes that may befall a non-believer are not attributed (by the members of the Kivung) to the spirits. Since the spirits punish only those they care about, the capacity to be punished implicitly claimed by the members of the Kivung appears almost meritorious. Expression of a relationship with the dead, price of membership in the group, tribute paid to excellence, misfortune thus imbued with punitive value is therefore not entirely misfortune for members of the group. In this way it differs from the kind of misfortune that, outside the Kivung, is precisely nothing more than misfortune.

The profitability of the movement

The problem of accounting for the durability of messianic movements, in view of the inevitable disappointments they must engender, has received several responses in the literature, as Mondher Kilani has shown; their diversity is related to the degree of strategic irrationality or rationality attributed to the movements. Kivung practice among the Sulka would suggest that the movement derives its staying power from its unquestionable profitability. A major contribution in this regard resides in the demonstration of the bond between the local dimension (the Ancestors’ House in Sulka territory) and the supra-local dimension (the ‘town’ in the Mengen region). This relation is conceptualised by means of another, between money...
paid and investment made, between depositing a coin and building a ‘town’. The Kivung is profitable because it enables its members to conceptualise the relation between the redemption of sins and the advent of prosperity. The money that redeems sins is the same as that which gives rise to towns. Redeeming sins betters people because it makes them prosperous. The symbolic and the economic are thought in the same terms, and the movement’s profitability is predicated essentially on the refusal to disjoin them.

Its cost-effectiveness is thus based on the means employed by the Kivung Group to demonstrate their superiority to those who reason in terms of a supposed opposition between ‘real’ (what is effective, true) and ‘imaginary’ (what is inoperative, erroneous). To the non-believers who disparage the movement as nothing but an illusion, the existence of the ‘town’ provides concrete evidence of their own illusion. With its health and administrative facilities, it is a testimonial to secularism and accountability where some charge the movement with superstition. To the local authorities, it manifests their inability to exercise authority, therefore their ineffectiveness. In by-passing the government responsible for managing the province, the members of the Kivung act to relieve it of the functions it is to exercise in the future economic development of their region. In so doing, they place the very authority that oppresses them for failing to fulfill their obligations (refusing to pay the provincial tax) in a situation of failing to respect its own obligations.

In response to those who accuse the Kivung rite of being part of the ‘dark’ pagan past, they claim to be best Christians. The religious discourse of the mission is taken literally. Appropriately demetaphorised, the divine commandments become orders, the redemption of sins is accomplished in monetary terms, and the ‘time of darkness’ is recreated in the dark interior of the Ancestors’ House. Indeed there can be no better Christians than these apostles of tradition, for to demetaphorise, when it comes to redeeming sins, is to act in accordance with the customary practices of payment consisting of making a gift in kind (a valuable and/or food) ‘to compensate for’ (srim), ‘to drive out’ (pet) or ‘to finish’ (rum) the harm (anger, shame or suffering) caused someone.

The Mengen claim that part of the money collected by the Kivung movement is turned over by the movement to the local Catholic mission.45 From the standpoint of the mission, which is in need of money and regularly appeals to the faithful through fund-raising drives, the best Christians should therefore also be defined as those whose sins help build churches. No doubt, the God the Kivung strives to better will recognise His own.

Addenda

a) Since this article was written, a trip to New Britain, in 1994, enabled me to gather some more information on the Kivung movement. I did not incorporate the new material into the text because it would have called for new and substantial developments. I will therefore limit myself to the following brief indications. In the Mengen area, the ‘town born from the money of the Ten Commandments’ has acquired some new facilities. The Kivung has established its headquarters in this ‘town’ now endowed with shops, a wharf and a jail, which is said to be always empty and whose usefulness in such a setting would seem to reside in the demonstration of its
perfect uselessness. A large house for receiving visitors has been built on the model of the (extinct) Men’s Houses erected until several decades ago for the celebration of second funerals. The interest on bank accounts is used for disaster aid in the name of solidarity with affected areas in New Guinea and in the rest of the world (via the National Appeal Committee). It is also from this interest that the sums contributed to the Catholic mission are drawn. It should be noted incidentally that, for some of the Sulka in the movement, membership in the Pomio Kivung Group does not exclude the possibility of belonging to fundamentalist movements like the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

b) Extracts from the Post Courier on-line, dated 1st and 31st January 2000:

‘The East New Britain governor [the leader of the movement] has openly challenged the Church to excommunicate him and other Kivung members. The problem came to head during a talkback show on the provincial radio […] in which Catholic priests […] branded the association a ‘cult movement’ which was involved in activities not considered to be Christian-Like. [They] claimed that the group was nothing more than a cargo cult movement which made false promises to the people and prospered on their ignorance. […]

[They] said the association was involved in practises which included its members digging up skeletal remains of dead relatives from bush cemeteries and re-burying them in a cemetery close to the association’s headquarters and then leaving food next to the graves.

[In his reply, the governor] branded the priests liars and the Catholic Church as a hypocrite which practised the very things that it has branded as immoral and unchristian-like. He called on the priests and the church to explain if their digging up the remains of a catechist who died over 50 years and keep his bones in a casket at a church on the Gazelle Peninsula, was different to what they practised. ‘I am not criticising, I am just making comparison.’ [The governor] laughed loudly…

[He] said members showed their respect for the dead by inviting them for a meal and if other cultures practiced that, there was nothing wrong if they did the same. He said: ‘The Japanese do it, the Chinese people and the Taiwanese do it, the Asian countries do it. If the Church is condemning us, will they condemn those cultures too?’ […]

Speaking in Tok Pisin [the governor] said it was funny the Catholic Church should talk about the issue of the association followers contributions, when that very Church collected money from its members each Sunday. [He] said that the Catholic Church had not right to prevent the association from adopting the 10 Commandments.’
Footnotes

1 See Jeudy-Ballini (1988). The material presented here was collected among the Sulka of New Britain between 1980 and 1988, in the course of three missions conducted with the financial support of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. Matters relating to the Kivung movement were extremely sensitive issues to discuss with my informants, owing to the acute reticence and tension aroused by their very mention. I owe the bulk of the material presented here to ‘my father’, Petrus Mangil, a member of Milim village and leader of the movement in the Sulka area until his death, who divulged the information on the condition that it would never get back to his country. I would be grateful to those who read this to enable me to keep this promise. The analysis I propose was nurtured by several months of exchanges with Charles Fredrikson (from the Anthropology of Portugal group at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris). His work, in particular on debt, renunciation, sacrifice and misfortune, as well as his critical comments on my handling of the Sulka material were a privileged source of inspiration. To this unfailingly attentive and stimulating partner in dialogue, I would like here to express my gratitude.

2 For recent analyses of the Kivung movement among the Mengen and the Baining, the reader may consult respectively Trompf (1990) and Whitehouse (1996).

3 The kina, the national currency, is divided into 100 toeia. At the time, the annual tax paid by a woman was around K2.

4 This cleaning up is also described as one of the ritual activities performed in other populations (Ryan 1969; Strathern 1979/1980). Note that the maintenance of cemeteries was formerly an obligation imposed by the German colonial administration and placed under the supervision of health officers. On their patrols, these health officers would punish (with the help of the police — luluai) the men of the village whose cemeteries were not kept up. Before the Kivung decided to take over this task, it was the local doctor’s job to see that the villagers did the work.

5 One man who did not belong to the movement claimed that, once the ancestors had eaten the nunu, the food was ‘like ice’. Nevertheless, those outside the movement, who never miss a chance, understand this ‘cold’ to mean much more prosaically the effect of the time elapsed between the cooking and the eating, thus jeering at those who are credulous enough to think they are eating what was not eaten by the spirits, whereas in reality they are eating the leftovers of rodents and other marauders that managed to sneak into the House.


7 Given the fluctuation of the national currency, and the absence of an official exchange rate, it is hard to give a precise equivalent for this sum. An estimate can be made from the fact that, in 1986, one kina was worth around two US dollars. According to Guilhem Maistre, who worked with one Mengen subgroup, various sources mentioned, in 1991, the remarkable sum of 4.5 million kinas (Maistre 1994: 29).

8 Built with imported materials (Fibrociment, corrugated metal), the facilities in question are no different from those built for similar uses in the other towns of the area. At the time the study was carried out, there were no particular restrictions on access to these facilities for non-Mengen or people from outside the Kivung.

9 This is the only instance of the term or the notion of ‘paradise’ I encountered in connection with Kivung activities.


14 I have shown this elsewhere, when discussing cultural otherness, condemned by the Sulka because they regard it as forgetting, as a loss. This is the case, for instance, of the otherness of their Baining neighbours, seen as infidels of a sort, as Sulka who have forgotten to remain what they are (Jeudy-Ballini 1988).

15 It might be the eleventh commandment, as the sculpture beside the cemetery suggests, by the inversion of the roman numerals for the number nine, carved as XI instead of IX. On the use of the concept of ‘custom’ as ‘anticipating past’, as Roy Wagner (1969) puts it, the reader may refer to Keesing and Tonkinson eds. (1982).


17 See Laufer (1955: 55–56). Laufer’s writings about the Baining contain another even more striking illustration, in which the missionary strives to show how each of the Ten Commandments has its counterpart...

18 I will not attempt here to analyse the general ideology of the rule, violations and amends in Sulka society. Nevertheless, it would be worthwhile asking whether awareness or knowledge of the ‘offence’ does not precisely create the ‘offence’. Speaking of adultery, for example, the Sulka say that it is reprehensible only if it becomes public knowledge. But my data do not allow me to decide the extent to which this principle might apply to other forms of transgression.

19 One could object that all religions are a way of mobilising God. For the Kivung, however, the meaning of the ‘work’ performed in the movement is based on the postulate that there are some religious practices that do not mobilise anyone (praying without giving any money, for instance).

20 The speaker who mentioned this point claimed that, by giving up their own magic, the movement members had deprived themselves of ‘strength’ (ka selpak) and that they henceforth had to ‘pay’ people outside to recover enough of it, for instance, to be able to win over a future spouse. Using the same distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ magics, while modifying their content slightly, the leader of the Kivung Group said that members had only given up their ‘bad’ magics, under which heading he placed love magic because it might encourage stealing someone else’s husband or wife.

21 This remark is in line with Andrew Strathern’s reading of the deaths that occurred in a cult in the New Guinea Highlands: ‘I gained a strong impression, although no-one would say so, that these deaths were interpreted as a necessary sacrifice before the ghosts would release the money’ (1979/1980: 166).

22 See Fredrikson (1994).


24 In Sulka, the same word, ka svil, means ‘desire’ and ‘will’.


26 The nature of the present varies and is usually left to the discretion of the organiser. It can be bits of cloth, string bags, ornaments, taro cuttings, small objects or coins, for example. Equivalent practices can be found in other societies, in New Britain (Dark 1983; Maschio 1995), New Guinea (Strathern and Strathern 1971) or the Trobriand Islands (Weiner 1976). See Jeudy-Ballini (1999 and forthcoming).

27 On prosperity as an expression of divine power, see Lipuma (1988: 88) : ‘…from the Maring perspective, the essence of being a Christian, indeed the power and authority of Jesus Christ is his worshippers’ access to rice and fish. The food distributed by the Church is not an added benefit to Christianity but its heart and soul. As one pundit put it: ‘without the trade store there would be no anglican God’.

28 With respect to the ‘image’ (nunu; referring for instance to a reflection in the water) and understood as a sort of immaterial duplicate of a being or a thing, the kaunun picture designates, in Sulka, the figurative and materialised representation of this being or thing (a woodcarving, for instance).

29 It is not possible within the scope of this article to discuss the geopolitical aspects of the movement, even though they are crucial. Let me simply say that the ‘locality’ in this case covers several districts around Pomio (in Mengen country) and includes essentially, besides the Mengen and the Tomuip involved in the movement, only a fraction of the Sulka population. The rest of the population living in the Mope region, together with the Baining and the Tolai, belong to another district. The idea of secession from the latter has been raised by the Kivung Group, which sees this as one possible means of throwing off what it regards as a Tolai yoke.

30 O Kaer, in vernacular, ol waetskin, in neo-Melanesian pidgin : literally ‘Whites’. When I use the essentialising term ‘Whites’, it should be viewed as a translation of the vernacular and pidgin words.

31 See Lattas (1992b).

32 See Ryan (1969), Billings (1983), Kilani (1983), Hermann (1992), Kempf (1992). A. Strathern mentions the natives’ yearning for wealth which, once in their possession, would put them on an equal footing with the Whites. At the same time, he remarks: ‘if the economic acquisition of cargo was truly an important aim in the cult, one might have expected at least a faltering in the enthusiasm if the cargo was not forthcoming. Unfortunately, we cannot be sure at this point, for it seems that the cult was forcibly halted before the practitioners had reached any stage of disillusionment. There is some problem here’ (1971a: 261).

33 See Iteanu (1990), Breton (2002).

Judging by the ulterior motives attributed to them in certain provinces of Papua New Guinea, it is to be feared that ethnologists may sometimes be counted among the predators, as may be tourists and film-makers (Coiffier 1991, Errington and Gewertz 1989).

Endowed with an independent government since 1975, Papua New Guinea is divided into 19 provinces, each with its own governing body. The Sulka, like the Mengen, the Baining, the Tomuip and the Tolai, live in East New Britain Province.

The present leader of the Kivung Group was re-elected to the national parliament in 1991 (Maistre 1994).

An analogous principle, but underpinned by different means, appears to be at work in the New Hanover ‘Johnson Cult’, described by Dorothy Billings (1983).


Like the magical practices that the Sulka say ‘go cold’ (have no effect) as soon as they are revealed, it is as though the simple fact of naming the ‘offences’ made them lose their power. But the same revelation that, in the case of magic, accounts for the failure of the rite is, in the case of initiation, the condition of its effectiveness. And for the same reasons. Revelation (magic) or admission (initiation): each time, speech acts externalise the powers, thus supposing a distancing and a consequent dwindling of these (beneficial or harmful) powers.

This notion of gradual development runs counter to the analyses that establish a correlation between Melanesian expectations and temporal discontinuity (McDowell 1988; Kempf, 1992; Errington, 1974).

This can be seen as a case of ‘etiology of failure’ as well as an indirect illustration of the protective powers attributed to non-belief (Fredrikson 1991 and 1994; Jeudy-Ballini 1991 and 1998). For the Sulka, these same powers, also attributed to ignorance and exteriority, account, for instance, for the fact that evil spirits cannot harm those who, because they are uninformed or strangers to the area, are unaware of the risk they run (Jeudy-Ballini 2002a).

See Kilani (1983).

See Maistre (1994). This piece of information, not mentioned by the Sulka at the time of the ethnographic study (1980-1988), has since been confirmed by them (see Addenda).