

## God's Brideprice: laissez faire religion, and the fear of being left behind in Papua New Guinea<sup>1</sup>

Nancy Sullivan

But when a Man's Fancy gets astride on his Reason, when Imagination is at Cuffs with the Senses, and common Understanding, as well as common Sense, is Kickt out of Doors; the first Proselyte he makes, is Himself, and when that is once compass'd, the Difficulty is not so great in bringing over others; a strong Delusion always operating from without, as vigorously as from within.

—Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*

Everywhere you turn in Papua New Guinea (PNG) these days there are conflicting messages about money. It is not so much earned anymore, as it is prayed for, bestowed upon and 'planted' in Savings and Loan Societies, microcredit societies, U-Vistract, Money Rain, televangelical missions, and even the private account of the widow of a Cote d'Ivoire Minister. A letter from the 'Central Bank of Madrid' tells me I have won 385,510 Euros in a Coca-Cola Promotion, which I can redeem by sending back a form with my bank details. A friend who works in fundraising for DWU has been selected and invited to a women's conference that will be entirely free of charge once she pays for a hotel room in Switzerland.

Then there are the church appeals. Sundays EMTV is filled with televangelical ministries insisting that money is no longer the root of all evil. The filthy lucre of yesterday is now a tool for the Lord's mission on earth. Similarly, a New Tribes couple includes me in their regular email appeals for help purchasing vehicles, tools, computers, and household appliances for their remote highlands Mission ('please make these financial needs a matter of prayer with us'). The meek may inherit the earth, but viral and media marketers are getting it now.

### What would Jesus buy?

Times have changed. Some Christian web pages tell us that Jesus wasn't poor; that his disciples never scorned wealth or comfort after all (so we need not either). External abundance can reflect spiritual abundance. 'Health and Wealth Faith' Pastor J. Avanzini, for one, believes that many Christians remain poor because they've been taught to accept the traditional belief that Jesus was poor. It is as a result of such 'negative conditioning' that all their efforts to 'worship prosperity' fail to reap material rewards. Avanzini cites John 19:23-24 as proof that the garment that Jesus wore at His crucifixion was a 'custom-

<sup>1</sup> I owe a many of the ideas in this paper to a discussion with John Charles Cox and his writings on microcredit in PNG.

made designer garment', the kind that kings and rich merchants wore, reminding us that the soldiers who crucified Him cast lots over the garment afterwards. (Avanzini 1996:8-9) <sup>2</sup>

One strain of evangelical thought now tells us the heightened pursuit of money is a sign of the end times, and that Satan is behind everything from bar codes to microchips, ATMs and cell phones. This suggests that money is *still* mammon, and new money-making technologies are to be avoided. Weren't the Madrid bombs triggered by mobile phones?<sup>3</sup> Some even say the IMF, World Bank and WTO are all Satan's operators, and much of the dysfunctional development that is mushrooming around PNG – the empty buildings and ugly refineries sponsored by foreign aid organizations – is also evidence of the last days, and the advent of a one world government. But here's the rub: This does not mean we should refuse money, especially if we can return wealth to the church. There is a logic to new evangelical thought that makes the eager pursuit of wealth both demonic, as a natural byproduct of endtime transformations, and the root of our very salvation, perhaps even the ticket to be on board the chosen conveyance when we face the Rapture. If we hunger, work, pray and visualize for money and abundance, and then harness it as a tool for one of these ministries, we are to be welcomed to heaven rather than left behind during the final end time.

This is an urgent message because there is a real threat that some of us will not make the cut for the Rapture. Much of the activity of new ministries seems to focus on how we might join the chosen few who get 'beamed up.' In the words of one Christian web page blogger, '[A]fter the Rapture takes place, everyone left behind will know someone who was mysteriously taken away. It could be a neighbor, a distant cousin, or a person's entire immediate family.' (Strandberg n.d) <sup>4</sup>

The many new evangelical ministries clustered under a Prosperity Gospel rubric take heart in biblical passages like Deuteronomy 8:18, which says, 'God gives you the power to get wealth to establish his covenant.' Because God wills the financial prosperity of every Christian, when and if an avowed believer lives in poverty, he or she is simply not fulfilling God's will. 'You must realize that it is God's will for you to prosper,' says hugely popular

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<sup>2</sup> i.e. the shroud of Turin is a fashion relic. This may explain the ubiquity of celebrity t shirts.

<sup>3</sup> As one commentator observes: 'You can log on to RaptureReady.com for a taste of how some of these believers view the world—at this writing the Rapture Index had declined three points to 152 because, despite an increase in the number of U.S. pagans, 'Wal-Mart is falling behind in its plan to bar code all products with radio tags'.' McKibben (2005:np).

<sup>4</sup> Those left behind will also still have the internet, so blogs are being posted like the following:

I realize this web page will be addressing two audiences: those of you who read this page before the rapture and those of you who read it after the rapture. My focus here will be on those who have found this page after the rapture of the Church. For anyone reading this material before the pre-trib rapture, I highly recommend that you ponder the negative consequences of being left behind and seriously consider committing your life to Jesus if you have not done so already. 'I realize this web page will be addressing two audiences: those of you who read this page before the rapture and those of you who read it after the rapture. (Anonymous, n.d. Oops! I guess I wasn't ready! <http://www.raptureready.com/rap49.html> )

American Pastor Kenneth Copeland (Copeland 1974:51). And what should we do with our wealth? Feed the ministries. A familiar face on EMTV, televangelist Joyce Meyer heads a \$100 million a year ministry, which makes her amongst the most 'rewarded' of God's spokespersons. Some call these proponents part of a 'name it and claim it' movement, because, as Meyer and others maintain, those who give generously to these ministries can have anything and everything they want. The most published and televised members of this movement would be E.W. Kenyon, Kenneth Hagen, Joyce Meyer, Benny Hinn, Robert Tilton, Paul Crouch, Joel Osteen, Marilyn Hickey and Pat Robertson, who, on his globally popular TV show, *The 700 Club*, calls Prosperity Doctrine the 'Law of Reciprocity.' And they command enormous and powerful followings. Former leader of the National Association of Evangelicals (before being 'outed' by a gay prostitute who also dealt him drugs) and personal advisor to George Bush, Ted Haggart and other 'megachurch' pastors are all part of, if not central to, this movement.<sup>5</sup>

These churches espouse a form of Biblical literalism of some of the most poetic of scriptural passages, most notably the Book of Revelations – which is taken as just that: revelations, or prophesies. Literalism involves an almost obsessive reading and re-reading of Revelations that reduces all hermeneutics to crystal ball visions of upcoming events. Many of these American ministries are packaged for diverse markets of today's new media: they publish children's books, self-help pamphlets, marital advice, and even novels. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, for example, have a series of 'Left Behind' novels that do a good job of fleshing out what we can expect from the Apocalypse. These need not even be read as allegorical. The series' hero, and leader of the Tribulation Force Commandoes, is a Robert Redford look-alike and airline pilot-turned-holy warrior named Rayford Steele who speaks in long-winded and preachy monologues about the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the Wrath of the Lamb earthquake, and a treaty to be forged between Israel and the UN (Lyons 2005:np)<sup>6</sup>

Apart from literalism, and, for some, predestination, the evangelical /charismatic churches embrace a number of 'modern' concepts, which appear to be informed by popular psychology. First and foremost is the concept of Positive Confession, or The Theology of the Spoken Word (what televangelist Kenneth Hagin calls Rhematology), which is no more or less than positive

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<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere similar and sometimes more strident versions of prosperity theology are known as The Word of Life, The Prosperity Gospel, The Faith Movement, The Third Wave, New Life, Name It and Claim It Theology, Health and Wealth Doctrine, Signs and Wonders, Third Wave Evangelism, The Latter Rain Third Wave Movement, and Faith Preaching.

<sup>6</sup> McKibben (Op Cit) writes:

Other End-Timers are more interested in forcing the issue—they're convinced that the way to coax the Lord back to earth is to 'Christianize' our nation and then the world. Consider House Majority Leader Tom DeLay. At church one day he listened as the pastor, urging his flock to support the administration, declared that 'the war between America and Iraq is the gateway to the Apocalypse.' ...The creed of Tom DeLay—of Tim LaHaye and his *Left Behind* books, of Pat Robertson's 'The Antichrist is probably a Jew alive in Israel today'—ripened out of the impossibly poetic imagery of the Book of Revelation.

thinking. The spoken word is a defence and a spiritual tool at the same time. Thus Pastor Kenneth Hagin claims not to have suffered even a headache for the past 45 years. Bad thoughts are bad for you. Think wealth and you will become wealthy. Is this related to verbal protocols in small scale societies (*sensu* Brennis and Myers 1984 who write about the effects of 'hard words' in the Pacific)? Or is it a dangerous stoicism?

Then there are the Third Wave people, who experience miracles, have visions, speak in tongues, prophesize, predict the future, and read people's minds. (Oddly, a common miracle seems to be filling and/or replacing bad teeth.<sup>7</sup>) They appear to be mediums for the Book of Revelations. Dan Jorgensen recounts a Charismatic mission in Telefomin where the believers acquired the power of 'discernment', 'often understood as the ability to identify satanic forces at work in the spiritual realm. In [one man's] case, this took the form of visions, - 'like watching television'—that revealed the identity of sorcerers to him.' (Jorgensen 2005:454).

Those in Papua New Guinea who receive these words by downlink or mail order may not realize how confusing these churches have become even for the American public (whence most of them originate). While Ted Haggart may have President Bush's ear, the general pitch for these Bible Belt and southwestern state megachurches is that they are beleaguered, misunderstood, fighting the good fight like so many Davids against Goliath.

As one reporter observes:

After living in the Bible Belt for more than thirty years, I've learned several things about our fundamentalist Christian brethren: First, theirs is an embattled faith, which requires an ever evolving list of enemies to keep its focus. It includes Satan worshipers one year, 'secular humanists' the next. Panic over backward masking on phonograph records yields to fears that supermarket bar codes harbor the Mark of the Beast. Some years back, Procter & Gamble was forced to deny widespread rumors that a moon-and-stars logo on boxes of soapsuds symbolized corporate diabolism. More recently, purging school libraries of Harry Potter's witchcraft has emerged as a cause. As if the real world weren't scary enough, chimerical threats must be found. It often appears that no form of occultism is too arcane or preposterous to provoke alarm. (Lyons Op cit )

Some apocalyptic visions are scarier than horror movies, and would give children nightmares. But other truths are soft-pedaled to appeal to a wide middle class public in the States—and they can be purchased or mail ordered as books, CDs, audiocassettes and DVDs.

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<sup>7</sup> C. Peter Wagner of the New Apostolic Reformation reports on an Argentine faith healer in the movement, named Carlos Anacondia, who said that during his services, on a fairly regular basis, decayed teeth are filled and new teeth grow where there were none before. (MacArthur 1991) Is this divine supply and demand?

A *New York Times* reporter visiting one booming megachurch outside Phoenix recently found the typical scene: a drive-through latte stand, Krispy Kreme doughnuts at every service, and sermons about ‘how to discipline your children, how to reach your professional goals, how to invest your money, how to reduce your debt.’ On Sundays children played with church-distributed Xboxes, and many congregants had signed up for a twice-weekly aerobics class called Firm Believers. (McKibben 2005:np)

At the softest side of the marketing spectrum is the insinuation that most of us are already saintly. You may drive a big car and spend too much eating out, but if you save the last piece of pie for your spouse, and save to give the kids better schools, it is now time for you to stop sacrificing, to relax and indulge in a better life. Televangelist Joel Osteen says, ‘I believe God wants us to prosper.’

Osteen exhorts readers [of his 2004 book, *Your Best Life Now* (Warner Faith Books)] to shun negativity and develop ‘a prosperous mindset’ as a way of drawing God’s favour. He tells the story of a passenger on a cruise ship who fed himself on cheese and crackers before realizing that sumptuous meals were included. ‘Friend, I don’t know about you, but I’m tired of those cheese and crackers!’ Mr Osteen writes. ‘It’s time to step up to God’s dining table.’ Or, as he also puts it: ‘God wants you to be a winner, not a whiner.’ (Blumenthal 2006)<sup>8</sup>

Naturally, it is important to contextualize these ministries, to see how they respond to the socioeconomic environment that harbors them. The prosperity pastors want Americans who drive SUVs to know that cutting back is not the best spiritual strategy (and by logical extension, not the best political one either). By investing in these expansive megachurches which have already transformed great swaths of the American southwest into theme parks and shopping malls, they can insulate themselves against the Antichrist and banish negative thinking altogether.

How does this product apply to PNG? It’s been selling off the shelves, as they say. In a country where the bulk of print media comes from the local Christian Book Store, and where one television station now brims with televangelism, all it takes is one carny with a megaphone to change the ideological map of an entire District.

### **Laissez faire and unfair**

More to the point, if we say the whinging unfortunates of this world are *not* trying to better themselves, but in fact are expressing disloyalty to God

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<sup>8</sup> ‘He said he knew he was under a moral microscope and was uncomfortable discussing the widely publicized episode last Christmas when the Osteen family was taken off a Continental flight to Vail, Colo., after Mrs. Osteen got into an argument with a flight attendant over cleaning up spilled liquid on her first-class seat. ‘It was blown out of proportion,’ said Mr. Osteen.’ (Blumenthal 2006)

(they're not on the programme and have only themselves to blame), is this not a new Social Darwinism? It reminds me of a wealthy American friend who (despite working very hard all her life) explained that she would never be impoverished because she 'worships abundance.' 'Does that mean,' I wanted to ask but didn't, 'all the untouchables of India who spend their days hammering stones into gravel actually worship poverty?' What I really want to ask is whether Positive Confession is a political position.<sup>9</sup>

Money wasn't always mammon. It's had a long and troubled relationship with Christianity. Early capitalism, in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, actually promoted ascetic tendencies and what Max Weber famously called the Protestant ethic (1976 [1944]). Weber explains how Protestantism favoured the rational pursuit of economic gain and thus gave worldly activities a spiritual significance. A Protestant who lived spiritually, and capitalistically, was rewarded by accumulating money and could therefore follow a secular vocation with as much zeal as possible. But there was a hitch. The more austere Protestant sects forbade any method of actually *using* money gained through secular means.

By the nineteenth century this ethic had led to a working ethic of capital accumulation, with the most successful Christian industrialists hoarding unprecedented amounts of wealth, and exhibiting record-breaking stinginess. It is not for no reason the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century titans of industry were called robber barons. *Laissez faire* conquered the old *noblesse oblige*. Evangelical Anglicans in early nineteenth century Britain campaigned for the Poor Law Amendment of 1834, which forbade cash donations to poor people and established the workhouse as their refuge instead. This righteousness also drove the great Irish famine of 1845-50, when evangelical Whigs argued against any artificial interventions in the market. The Irish had only themselves to blame, it was said, for depending on potatoes. Social Darwinism proved extremely effective as over one million Irish then perished.

To early evangelicals, the free market was the perfect social regulator: it rewarded good Christian behaviour and punished the unrepentant. It was logical, it was natural, and it should not be restrained. The original sin with which we are all born could be tempered by the stress of an economic life, where the labour, the sacrifice, and even the 'faith' of investing were all means of atonement for this sin. As one historian has remarked,

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<sup>9</sup> Some of this positive thinking has raised questions about truth in advertising for the televangelists endorse merchandise on their programs and through their web sites. Pat Robertson and the 700 Club has had its problems with truth. At one point he advertised and endorsed an energy drink that he claimed gave him strength and vitality enough to leg press 2000 lbs. (909.09 kg) This assertion is controversial, as the Florida State University record for leg press, for example, is 1335 lbs. (618.82 kg), and the person who broke the record (later an NFL player and Navy SEAL) burst the blood vessels in his eyes in his attempt. In addition, no current piece of exercise equipment could support 2,000 lbs. for Robertson to press. The energy drink was then removed.

These were the people Dickens detested. The extreme among them urged mortification of the flesh and would scold anyone who took pleasure in food, drink or good company. Moreover, they regarded poverty as part of the divine program....[P]oor people were poor for a reason, and helping them out of poverty would endanger their mortal souls. (Bigelow 2005:35)

What's ironic about all this Protestant righteousness is its constant dialectic with the Catholic Church. Cathars in 12<sup>th</sup> Century France were persecuted because their asceticism made the Catholics look bad. And six hundred years later Jonathan Swift railed against the hard-hearted excesses of the Catholic Church in *Tale of the Tub*. It wasn't so long ago that anti-Papists still sickened to imagine the net worth of the Pope.

But evangelicals were the first to seize on the modern entrepreneur as a moral icon, as, for example in the famously spendthrift American industrialists (e.g. the Rockefellers, Fords, Vanderbilts, Carnegies, and Astors). But the wildly unregulated markets that created these heroes also brought on the crash of 1929, the Great Depression that followed, and the need for a Keynesian economics that called for market regulations. The history of economic thought in the twentieth century is a bit like the history of Christianity in the sixteenth century. Until John Maynard Keynes published *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* in 1936, economics—at least in the English-speaking world—was completely dominated by free-market orthodoxy. Classical economics, wrote Keynes in 1936, 'conquered England as completely as the Holy Inquisition conquered Spain.' And classical economics said that the answer to almost all problems was to let the forces of supply and demand do their job. After the Great Depression, though, when classical economic could not longer provide humane answers, Keynes played the role of Martin Luther in making heresy respectable.

But then Keynesian economics was unsurprisingly followed by a counter-reformation. Many economists were influential in bringing back classical economics, in rolling back Keynesian heresy, but none have been more famous than Milton Friedman. If Keynes was Luther, Friedman was Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits. If Keynes told us money doesn't matter, Friedman responded by saying it did, very much. (Krugman 2007:29)

Friedman called for free market solutions to all social problems –education, health care, the drug trade, rent control, pollution (he is the father of pollution credits and permits). By any measure, the world in 2007 has moved a long way back in Friedman's direction, as we have seen the most spectacular increase in economic inequality since the 1970's. Was Friedman too sanguine about the generosity of the invisible hand? He did slip too easily into claiming that markets always work, and that only markets work. He brought individual rationalism to the field of macroeconomics.

New Lifers, writes Pastor Ted Haggart, 'like the benefits, risks, and maybe above all, the excitement of a free-market society.' He believes it is time 'to harness the forces of free-market capitalism in our ministry' (Sharlet 2005:47).

Free-market economics is a 'truth' Ted says he learned in his first job in professional Christendom, as a Bible smuggler in Eastern Europe. Globalization is the vehicle now for spreading his brand of Christianity. Unfortunately, he says, there are cultural and theological stumbling blocks.

[T]he nations dominated by Catholicism look back. They don't tend to create our greatest entrepreneurs, inventors, research and development. Typically, Catholic nations aren't shooting people into space. Protestantism, though, always looks to the future. ...In America, the descendants of the Protestants, the Puritan descendants, we want to create a better future, and our speakers say that sort of thing. But with the influx of people from Mexico, they don't tend to be the ones that go to universities and become our research-and-development people. And so in that way I see a little clash of civilization. (Ibid: 48)<sup>10</sup>

In a free market world, not only can everyone seek the same wealth and happiness, but everyone can now share the same Gospel written in the same language, and purchase the same reading guides and audiocassettes and bumper stickers (e.g. 'In Case Of Rapture This Car Will Be Unmanned'). It almost seems as though the need for 'difference' has become ...un-Christian.

President of the [American] National Religious Broadcasters, Frank Wright, says: 'Today, the calls for diversity and multiculturalism are nothing more than thinly veiled attacks on anyone willing, desirous, or compelled to proclaim Christian truths,' he says. 'Today, calls for tolerance are often a subterfuge, because they will tolerate just about anything except Christian truth. Today, we live in a time when the message entrusted to you is more important than ever before to reach a world desperate to know Christ. Does it strike you,' he asks, 'that we are the first generation in the history of the world that might see every nation, tongue, and tribe reached with the Gospel!' (Blumenthal Op cit)

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<sup>10</sup> This could only be a reference to the controversial text by Samuel P. Huntington, 1998, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster, which argues for the basic irreconcilability of western and non-western (viz. Muslim) nations. But when this xenophobia becomes dogma in these new churches, it is often hard to discern the fears of 'one-world' government and the desires for one-world government-religion-culture. A humorous profile of Pastor Tim LaHaye (Lyon 2005) explains how a *Time* Magazine profile had referred to him as 'Dr. LaHaye':

...an 'influential theologian' (Academic titles are very big among graduates of Bob Jones University)...the *Time* profile did mention LaHaye's attacks on Catholicism as a 'false religion,' but it soft-pedaled his zeal for the granddaddy of nutball conspiracy theories: the 'Bavarian Illuminati.' Believers argue that this cabal of European-Jewish bankers and secret fraternities such as Skull & Bones has stage-managed world events since the late eighteenth century. (Some contend that America was betrayed into sin when George Washington was secretly assassinated and an impostor named Dr. Adam Weishaupt assumed the presidency.) In his 2002 book *The Rapture*, LaHaye indignantly defended himself against a John Birch Society critic who accused him of being in cahoots with the Illuminati. To the contrary—LaHaye pronounces himself an avowed enemy of what he calls the 'satanically-inspired, centuries-old conspiracy to use government, education, and media to destroy every vestige of Christianity within our society and establish a new world order.

Free markets equal free people. It's an idea that pervades new development theory as well, and so the implicit associations between the two give it a progressive cast. Development economist Amartya Sen tells us rationality is freedom, and so development is freedom (Sen 2000, 2004); and Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto tells us the developing world is being impoverished by customary land tenure, and freeing land on an open market will liberate the world's poor (De Soto 2000; cf. Easterly 2002). Both Sen and de Soto have been influential in World Bank, IMF and UN policy formation, and it is de Soto's ideas that validate the World Bank's structural adjustment attempt to register customary land in PNG, leading to riots and untold strife.

### **Caveat emptor**

Global conversion has been greatly simplified by made new communications media. On the eve of the new millennium a whole raft of quick-money projects erupted across PNG, the most popular of which were Money Rain, U-Vistract, Papalain, Windfall, and Hosava. Hosava was said to be an alternative stock exchange, Windfall was a grassroots 'Investment and Management Company', while most others have been based on the pyramid model which allows only the first investors to see healthy profits, after which any and all returns simply evaporate. Papalain, in Lae, was a compensation scheme targeting former employees of a forestry company; The War Carriers Association promised Australian compensation for unpaid Papua New Guinea soldiers during WWII; and the PNG Redress Association, which hit the Sepik and Madang area full force, promised Japanese Government compensation for prisoners and soldiers of the War.

Not surprisingly, most of these schemes travelled through church networks. Papalain spread through Lutheran and Pentecostal churches; SDA churchgoers invested in the Lifetime Benefit Scheme (a pyramid—where the metallic stripe on a special credit card was supposed to enable people to draw money from a bank); and the Christian Life Centre in Port Moresby campaigned for Money Rain, which, in the words of one CLC Pastor, was 'God's answer to the poverty Christians were facing.' (Cox Ibid:10-11).

Economic anthropologist John Charles Cox has recently pointed out that there are two factors at work here. All of these schemes rely on the early success of prominent individuals, who attach their names to them. Mostly civil servants and politicians, these people have access to large amounts of cash and, in some cases, made excellent profits before returning the capital to the public coffers. Getting in early, they banked the profits as their own and could argue no harm had been done. This target population nicely overlaps with the audience for new Christian Crusades because Pentecostalism, Cox notes, is largely an urban phenomenon in PNG (to which anyone living next to public ovals in Port Moresby can attest). Those who can afford to invest in Money Rain can also buy the Christian merchandise hawked at these big tented events, and so it's natural the two products be marketed together. It doesn't hurt to have the public official endorsing your scheme say he or she has been Born Again, either. (Ibid:11)

The Clerk of Parliament, who is said to have been a key contact for Money Rain with Moresby elite, invested K300,000 of public funds into the project. The PNG Secretary of Finance is alleged to have illegally transferred large amounts of money from public funds into buying land for the establishment of the new Assemblies of God Jubilee University. When 2300 people in Port Moresby were baptised during the Seventh Day Adventist crusade of Mark Finley in 2001, they were supported by a national government grant of K100,000 so that certain provinces could buy satellite equipment and receive the EMTV broadcast of the event (*National* 31 May 2001, 6). Minister for Lands, John Pundari, took the opportunity to welcome the crusade and declare that PNG would be richly blessed by God's abundant grace (*Post-Courier* 5 July 2001, 5). A week later, Brother Andrew Simpson, now of Divine Word University, wrote a letter to the *Post-Courier* describing how the 'crusade opened with the special commendation from the Prime Minister [and soon] turned into 'Catholic bashing' by the presenters' (*Post-Courier* 18 July 2001, 10). (Ibid).

Without doubt, however, the most successful cross-marketing campaign came at the eve of the millennium when Prime Minister Bill Skate and Treasurer Iairo Lasaro jumped aboard the Benny Hinn crusade when the famous televangelist arrived in Port Moresby.<sup>11</sup> Skate contributed K180,000 to the Benny Hinn Ministries and then through the hirsute televangelist a state reception (*National* 19 January 1999: 1, *National* 15 April 1999: 3). In turn, Hinn declared, 'The Prime Minister of this country is none other than Jesus Christ (and) I am his ambassador' (*National* 3 May 1999:3, *Post-Courier* 8 March 1999: 4). (Gibb 2005:9-10)<sup>12</sup>

### **Economic rationalism**

The anthropology of Melanesia has no shortage of cargo cults (Burrige 1960, Lattas 1998, Lawrence 1964, Gesch 1985, Strathern 1979). The analytic method has generally been to 'rationalize' or 'normalize' these sometimes bizarre behaviors in terms of the local culture and the expectations of their participants (e.g. Sullivan 2005). Nancy McDowell (2000:373) reminds us that anthropologists have long been trying to build contrast rather than similarity in their discussions of such phenomena, if only because the *bas relief* of difference is easier to see. In fact, she says, we need to compare these movements without ignoring their similarities to western social change, especially with regard to the distinction between 'rational' and 'irrational'

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<sup>11</sup> As early as 1987 Lasaro was committed to the 'prosperity gospel' and proposed in Parliament that if PNG committed 'ten percent of its budget to God... God himself will open the windows of heaven and pour out more blessings in (sic) this nation.' This included protection from a range of troubles including natural disasters and law and order problems (*Hansard* 20 Nov 1987, 22-24, quoted in Gibbs 2005 np).

<sup>12</sup> It's doubtful whether PNG ever got a receipt for the K180,000 donation, as Benny Hinn Ministries/World Outreach Church has been roundly excoriated for its lack of transparency by such watchdog organizations as ministrywatch.com.

responses to events. Anthropologists do spend a considerable amount of time 'demonstrating that these irrational behaviours and beliefs are really parts of cultural logic foreign to us. Although we cannot quite admit that these things are rational, at least we can defuse the irrational label' (Ibid:377). But in a world where churches lobby Wal-Mart to switch their bar codes and peddle everything from yoga tapes to prayer candles (see fn. 4), 'defusing' becomes no little ironic.

More recent studies of nationalism and identity in PNG talk about something called the bureaucratization of consciousness in PNG (See Fife 1995, Stewart and Strathern 2000b), and employ the idea of bureaucratic mimesis as a creative act (Lattas 2006, cf. Taussig 1993). Foster, Gewertz and Errington, amongst others, have seen the internalization of certain late-modern Judaeo-Christian values as signs of increasing individualism, consumerism, nationalism and 'rationality' (Gewertz and Errington 1996, 1999; Foster 2002, 1993). Then there are the explorations of 'bureacratization' in PNG thought and popular culture (Fife 1995; Foster 2002; Cass 2000; Errington and Gewertz 1995, 1996; Hirsch 1990; Robbins 1997; MacDowell 2000). Messages and public exhortations that might have been written by Ayn Rand are now found everywhere from bus stops to TV in PNG: 'Take control of your life!' 'Dance to your own beat!' 'Indulge your senses!' 'Earn interest on your money!' Whereas fifty years ago none of these would have made 'sense' to Papua New Guineans, now they have referents in modern urban life. Today the 'esoteric' beliefs of pentecostal and charismatic evangelicals enter the PNG marketplace of ideas through such public media, and they arrive in the tropes of 'rational' neoclassical economics.

There are still chain letters and pyramid schemes circulating (see Kulick and Stroud 1990; cf. Taussig 1993), and compensation claims for WWII service which move through rural PNG flamed by the fuel of desire. Reporters (Vulum 2006, Callick 2007) have recently thrown the kleig lights on some of the more outrageous scam artists moving through Pacific Island States capitalizing on the gullibility of newcomers to a cash economy. Some have been African Princesses, others agents of Eastern European regimes, but all of them understand the art of raised expectations in an imperfectly globalized age.

But it is in keeping with the 'fetishism' of Biblical text that the language of pie charts and Venn diagrams has become integral to the new evangelical campaigns.<sup>13</sup> A number of recent excellent ethnographies of PNG now write about the intersection of new rational and evangelical beliefs (e.g. Lattas 1998, Kulick 1992, Bashkow 2006, Robbins 2004a, Eves 1996). Joel Robbins tells a complex story of self-loathing and evangelism for the Urapmin of Sandaun Province (2004a); and Andrew Lattas' work in West New Britain (1998) also

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<sup>13</sup> Note, for example, Kenneth Copeland Ministries' *Managing God's Mutual Funds.*, and Gloria Copeland's *No deposit, No return* ---whose blurb reads: 'Many people try to withdraw faith from their 'spiritual account' when there is nothing in the account to draw out. Learn how to make 'heavenly' deposits so you will have a rich supply of God's Word on hand for immediate withdrawal.' Both available on KCM website [www.kcm.org](http://www.kcm.org)

talks about the feelings of neglect and low self-worth that new evangelical converts say defined their lives beforehand (see also Stewart and Strathern 2000a, 200; Schieffelin 1981). Both Jorgensen and Robbins talk about the 'world destroying' and 'world-creating' goals of evangelical Christianity (Jorgensen 2005; Robbins 2004a, 2004b), which requires converts to disavow their past and their prior identity in order to accept the new. For people familiar with the radical psychological disjuncture of initiation, the concept of being born again is not difficult, nor is it new. But being born anew historically, and revoking all that has come before, is an idea that only arrived with the first mainstream church missionaries. And it is upon that familiar sense of colonial inferiority that these new churches generate the challenge to villagers to gamble their past on a promise of the Rapture.

Neoclassical economics looks at markets as essentially rational, treating macroeconomic institutions as rational beings. Friedman's disdain for government regulation was its own call for faith in the free will of the individual and in capitalism. *Homo economicus* in Friedman's world is driven by rational calculations about maximizing utility. But the difference in PNG is that these gambles of faith don't just build upon given social relations, they shatter traditional bonds and insinuate that a believer's real family is their community in Christ (See Gewertz and Errington 1996). And they make this choice look modern, and rational.

### **Gifts and commodities**

Massive accumulation of wealth is certainly not the objective of this new free market Christianity. If the cornerstone of Calvinism is saving, that of Prosperity Theology is spending. 'Yahweh has prospered individuals by making them millionaires and even billionaires in order that the money be used to meet the needs of His people,' Pastor Smith Wigglesworth tells us (n.d.:2) in various publications available in Madang's Christian Bookstore. Long and thoughtful discussions of this mandate to give back are all over the web pages and blogs of 'abundance' and 'prosperity' Christians. One such blog explains Pat Robertson's 'Law of Reciprocity':

The Lord didn't promise us wealth so that we could spoil and pamper ourselves with obscene amounts of luxuries and toys. He promised that we would be rich in every way so that we could be generous on every occasion. There's a cause and effect relationship at work here. Being made rich is for the purpose of being generous. This is the Divine Law of Reciprocity. The Lord is generous with us and we repay Him by being generous with others. This prompts Him to be more generous with us, allowing us to be more generous with others, and so on. In failing to be generous, we violate the Law of Reciprocity and impede the flow of resources. And remember, tithing is not being generous. It's meeting the minimum. (Anon 2, n.d.)

Anthropologist Simon Coleman (2004) describes how the prosperity faith has found its way to a small town in Sweden, where the traditional ethos of living

frugally has been upended by this new command to make and donate generously. Referring to Marcel Mauss' classic treatise on reciprocity, *The Gift* (1967[1925]), Coleman distinguishes between traditional forms of reciprocity in small scale societies, which has known returns, and upon which one can gauge risk, and the kinds of giving this new theology demands, which is free, lavish, and undirected--representing a much greater risk. A prerequisite of risk taking is that one understands the boundaries of a community, the limits of the risk, the extent of delay to anticipate between investment and return—whether that's social, temporal or spatial. The more nebulous concept of what goes around, comes around, which explains unbounded acts of risk that might be found in Buddhist or Hindu social contexts, has no precedent in small scale societies like those in PNG, and contrasts sharply with the protestant ethic of rural Sweden. The great risk in a cash economy is giving away cash and not expecting anything in return.

David Akin and Joel Robbins (1999) have edited a collection of essays on Melanesian currencies and how these articulate with the cash economy. Much of the emphasis of these essays is on new social relations that these introduced currencies are forging, as they do or do not follow principles of short term quid-pro-quo or delayed reciprocity that drive *kula*, *moka* and other indigenous trade systems. In their introduction (Robbins and Akins 1999:4-7), the editors explain that although local valuables look like 'currencies' in many ways – and anthropologists even suggested before Independence that the introduction of the cash economy had been relatively smooth and a new 'kina' would not be disruptive of the older currencies (viz. Counts and Counts 1970:91) – they never act like them. And the destabilizing effects of new currency have definitely been felt in these economies, where there are no indigenous counterparts for anonymous transactions. Where the new money undermines pre-existing systems of authority it also generated anxiety about social and political power. Suddenly traditional institutions have lost their authority, and new figures of importance arise from wage labor and the growing consumer culture. Big men back from their jobs in the capital are now given more credence in village affairs than the elderly Luluai, if only, perhaps, because they now own the best veranda for a public meeting.

Traditional currencies never ever end in consumption – they form continual chains of transactions and social expectations. It is true of western money that people must pass it on in order to consume it; it must be converted to be 'spent.' The final transaction becomes the most important. All modern currencies are only important as a means of exchange – they are, by definition, exchangeability itself. By contrast, however, traditional currencies are continually creating social relations and thus remain less fluid, less 'interchangeable', than western ones: they keep moving and accruing density, accumulating associations with their transactors and only growing more 'valuable' as they slip *less* easily from palm to palm. People create kin by manipulating the flow of these exchange objects. These can be consumables, shells, information, dances and esoterica. Their movement sustains relationships, defines a community, and works as a constant regulator of

hierarchy and authority. It's a great deal more complex than the mere idea of 'money is power' that imbues in western capitalism.

Classical neo-liberal economics is based on an equilibrium model, governed by mathematical laws that are presumed to be 'natural' or beyond human intervention. The market used to be a volatile beast in pre-Keynesian capitalism, but now it is a rational entity that strives for equilibrium – these are the metaphysical premises of capitalism, whether or not one agrees with them. And as such, they have no exact epistemological counterpart in Melanesia, where people constitute economic institutions more often than they 'shape' or constrain them. People are economics in PNG; there is no economy without sociality here.

### **'Affinity fraud'**

The many Pentecostal and charismatic evangelical churches now based in, travelling through, or reaching out to PNG are essentially in the business of creating communities. These are communities that can define themselves by their media, the books, CDs and television programs that cross-market their ideas and allow remote Papua New Guineans to remain a clansman or woman, a Morobe or Eastern Highlander, a Papua New Guinean, and now also a part of some global 'imagined community' (*sensu* Benedict Anderson (1991 [1983])). Dan Jorgensen says that an important part of the appeal of a Pentecostal crusade called Operation Joshua that came through the Telefomin area in 1992 was the invitation to join one such global community, not only as members of a church, but as descendants of the Biblical tribe of Benjamin. One of the most interesting aspects of the story he tells is how the American evangelist George Branson arrived in Telefomin fully well-read on the community and its regional importance as the birthplace of the ancestor Afek. Invoking one kind of affinity, he then offered the villagers a loftier, universal identity as one of the lost tribes of Israel. But Branson had a crucial strategy in cultivating this flock. Perhaps because he had read the work of anthropologists like Jorgensen, perhaps because it was a trusted marketing strategy, he sought out the most important ritual expert in the community, an old man named Falamsep, and proceeded to sell him Operation Joshua.

In the words of one of the participants, they 'pushed him and pushed him' with a combination of directed prayer, pressure and inducements. Taking a leaf from the Deliverance Gospel, it was claimed that the spirits of the house were responsible for illnesses and deaths, hunting that Falamsep was implicated. By way of inducement, Branson was said to have given him K350, a carton of tinned beef, five chickens and a promise of a trip to America (Jorgensen 2005 :453)

Not surprisingly, Falamsep capitulated. He destroyed the spirit house, burnt the relics, and with other villagers, began to dig for diamonds on the sacred ground. In fact, Branson had arrived with a geologist (appropriately enough), who tested the newly cleared and sulphuric-smelling ground and suggested it might harbour a valuable (if poorly defined) 'uranium gas' (Ibid:453-4).

The lesson of Operation Joshua is that sociality is key to success. The best way to cultivate communion and inclusion, is to define the 'other.' Who is them and who is us? Who is sinner and who is saint? American ministries accomplish this on home soil by selling sweet talk and xenophobia in equal measures. Their outreach to developing countries seems to appeal to a fraternity of 'disenfranchised' fighting the global behemoths of world banking and foreign aid. It may be that viral marketing has something to learn from these Christian appeals. Despite Central Bank warnings now being run on EMTV, those ubiquitous Nigerian email scams are not that successful in PNG (although one high level civil servant did sign away K800,000 in a related scam [Cox 2006:2]). Help me, they say, rather than help us. Their long distance anonymity works against them, says Cox. One of the crucial determinants to the success of fast money schemes has been their use of face-to-face social networks; the kind of word of mouth marketing that personalizes any deal. It does matter that named individuals have signed on and can provide testimony to getting their 200% returns, but more importantly, people join these schemes in ways that reaffirm existing social boundaries and posit their overlap with international ones.

This explains the appeal of 'compensation claim' forms, for example, which promise reparations or rewards on the basis of one's professional or social identity: you are being acknowledged as a member of some wider community of consumers, believers, sufferers or victors. Pyramid and savings and loan schemes take this *communitas* one step farther, usually promising rewards to a beleaguered or disenfranchised minority who may otherwise be suspicious of legitimate finance institutions. The *sine qua non*, of course, is religious: the 'universal' church that offers moneymaking opportunities to their flock only. It is this kind of inclusion that lured Telefomin church goers into a charismatic movement called Operation Joshua, in the early 1990's, which promised both the recognition of their status as one of the lost tribes of Israel (through DNA testing but also the windfall of discovering 'uranium oil' under the old spirit house that they were compelled to destroy (Jorgensen 2005).

U-Vistract has had a similar appeal. Originally it was open to Bougainvilleans only, moving in Port Moresby through workplaces like Air Niugini and Bank of South Pacific, and in the North Solomons and across PNG through United Church and Pentecostal networks (Cox Op cit: 2-3, Gibbs 2005). Pentecostal pastors were even character witnesses during the trial of U-Vistract's leader, Noah Musingku, and Deputy Senior Pastor for the Christian Life Centre in Port Moresby claimed that he was a Born Again Christian (cited by Cox Op cit:3). Pastor Bob was on the Board of U-Vistract and told Cox that many of his parishioners who benefited from the scheme then funded social programs, a new church building and even a car for the Pastor (Ibid). The CLC pastors 'used their influence over the congregation to promote the scheme enthusiastically and preached this from the pulpit at Sunday worship. Their preaching also included denunciations of the bank of PNG and those within the church who were opposed to the schemes' (Ibid).

An unregistered bank, the appeal has always been to avoid national or international banks, which pulled out of Bougainville during the crisis, and opt out of the satanic hands of globalization which have already undermined the mainline churches (Cox Ibid:13). U-Vistract was designed as a self-sufficiency scheme that could be expanded to other developing countries and eventually supplant finance institutions like the World Bank and the IMF. Tragically, these ambitions got drowned in a morass of controversy surrounding Musingku's Fijian bodyguards, and an attempt to offer the Solomon Islands Government roughly US \$350 million U-Vistract dollars. U-Vistract's objective, Musingku says, has been to 'finance the end-time harvest' Ibid:6).

The organization is here to ensure that grassroots citizens not only accept Jesus Christ as their personal saviour but also to ensure that each family has enough food to eat each day, enough money to buy clothes, enough money to pay for school fees, accommodation, transport and all other basic necessities of life (*U-Vistract News*, Nov 23, 2001, Vol 1, Issue 12).

Cox (2006:10) reports that Noah Musingku was able to use United Church and Pentecostal Christian networks to promote U-Vistract, and three Pentecostal pastors actually gave written character witnesses for him during his contempt of court trial in 2000. Pastor Bob Lutu, Deputy Senior Pastor for the Christian Life Centre, Waigani Praise Centre, stated in his National Court Affidavit (as cited by Cox 2006:10) that Musingku was 'a Born Again Christian (sic)... who faithfully attends Christian Life Centre Waigani.' Members had invested in the scheme and used this income to donate to the church, funding its social programs and the pastor's own vehicle. 'It has been our experience that the Church income was at a high level when members of the church were receiving returns on their investments under the programme.' The Christian Life Centre apparently funded a new building from U-Vistract income. Pastor Bob was on the board of U-Vistract. He and other pastors at CLC, notably Senior Pastor Charles Lapa, used their influence over the congregation to promote the scheme enthusiastically and preached this from the pulpit at Sunday worship (Ibid).

Musingku says globalization is driven by the World Bank and other institutions in 'the interests of the devil' (citing Revelations 17 and Romans 12:2). U-Vistract is a godly system fighting the powers behind globalization, which has already coopted mainline churches in PNG.<sup>14</sup> Tragically, however, this sanctification did not prevent U-Vistract from causing at least as much pain and suffering to its members than any other manifestation of globalization. People have lost life savings, and irreparably damaged those all-important relationships that made U-Vistract initially successful.

A recent editorial in *The National* called 'Never again' (*The National Online*, 10.2.07, <http://www.thenational.com.pg/>), offers an excellent eulogy to U-Vistract:

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<sup>14</sup> Ironically, Musingku later claimed his money was coming from the World Bank, prompting a denial by the Bank's PNG Manager (*Post-Courier* 28 Feb 2006).

THE Bougainville administrator is one of the first Papua New Guinean leaders to speak bluntly about the failed U-Vistract money scheme. This week, Peter Tsiamalili gave a warning to the public servants under his control. He told them that they must remain loyal to the Autonomous Bougainville Government and not to U-Vistract. And he was straightforward about the notorious money scam. 'Investors in U-Vistract must know that their money has disappeared for good. They were bad investments, and the illegal money scheme will not make any payout,' he said.... U-Vistract began as a classic pyramid scheme of financial investment and return. ...U-Vistract appeared to present an extraordinary opportunity to such people, and to those who might loosely be labelled our country's middle class...The first investors were receiving substantial profits on their small investments, just as the scheme's originator Noah Musingku had promised. It seemed everybody knew somebody who had become rich overnight as a result of this wonderful scheme. This word of mouth publicity was assiduously boosted by U-Vistract officials, and the names of some senior PNG figures were bandied about as examples of investors in the scheme. The result was inevitable. It is reasonable to say that the nation was galvanised, and normally astute people became enmeshed in the U-Vistract web. Despite repeated prompting from the media, and from economists and financial experts, who explained how such systems must ultimately collapse, U-Vistract became a national network, with agents reaping ever more unsuspecting citizens in a grim harvest. As recently as last year, U-Vistract representatives were attracting hundreds of existing investors and would-be investors to large meetings in towns such as Madang. This was despite the on-going failure of the scheme to pay dividends to investors. It is a remarkable tribute to the charisma of Mr Musingku that he was able, against all the odds, to maintain substantial public confidence among ordinary people despite the stark failure of his scheme, and a seemingly endless line of broken dividend promises. The most distressing aspect of that whole scenario was the continuing silence from our leaders. Apart from warning advertisements placed by the Central Bank, and the occasional half-hearted alert from government sources, very little action was either taken, or apparently contemplated... Musingku travelled overseas, visiting Singapore in order to get the Mint there to print currency for his newly established 'Kingdom of Papala'. He infiltrated the Solomon Islands, and promised to rescue that unfortunate nation from its financial woes. And most savage of all, he convinced hundreds, perhaps even thousands of crisis-weary Bougainvilleans of his ability to end their miseries and create a glowing and prosperous future for them.

### **Microcredit**

Here's the problem: How can legitimate credit schemes, many of which are sponsored by well-heeled NGOs, avoid the pitfalls of these quick-money schemes while learning from their peculiar success? How does this new fusion of Christianity and anti-globalization sentiment effect development efforts in

PNG? Despite the cynical view taken here of the evangelical campaigns, one of the simple lessons of these money scams seems to be that people are willing to take an economic gamble when they see it as a leap of faith with real social benefits. Sometimes it is worth the price just to be a member of the club. People gather like iron filings around religious and development leaders across PNG when they know this will involve them in a new society, a new community of members. Whether it is the 'imagined community' of video/audio/text consumers for a particular crusade, or the crude receipt one receives for signing up with a War veterans compensation scheme, these are all contemporary equivalents of local identity markers in PNG, which not long ago would involve a tattoo, haircut, dialect or shell necklace.

At the peak of these pre-millennial money schemes the *Development Bulletin* hosted a collection of articles dedicated to assessing the validity and longevity of the most secure of them (Vol 50, 1999). David Kavanamur and Robert Turare (1999) focused on Liklik Dinau Abitore Trust (LDAT) and the Simbu Microcredit Scheme, which had been in operation for more than two years by then. Liklik Dinau, a prototype of the Grameen Bank Bangladesh, was founded by the UNDP in 1993 and backed by UNDP, PNGBC, AusAID, NCW, and Peace Foundation Melanesia. Operating out of the Eastern Highlands and targeting mainly rural women, it already had a strong recovery rate (Ibid:13, cf. Bablis 1999). The Simbu Microcredit Scheme was similarly successful, and had not been introduced to barren ground: Simbu has long had a sterling reputation with its rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs), which are informal clan-based credit schemes. Most notably, the Wok meri system in Chuave has been pooling and lending small amounts of money to entrepreneurial women since the seventies (see Sexton 1982, Warry 1987, and cf. a study of Kerowagi Secondary School with discussion of local credit schemes in Emori et al 2006).

Management Professor Nicole Biggart (2000) writes about microfinance schemes comparatively, and says that everywhere in the developing world that they have proven successful, they have credited that success on the social relations that fuel and sustain them, which confirms the assessments of those writing about the PNG case (Bablis 1999, Cox 2006). Microfinance simply cannot be divested of its social component, or what Biggart calls their 'situational logic.' Members are not individuated in the way bank customers or internet investors are; they enter and engage in these schemes as members of a community, sometimes church-based, sometimes not. David Kavanamur and R. Turare (1999:12) are also quick to point out that of the women's credit schemes in PNG, many of which did not succeed, the most commendable one came from the Western Highlands where the women took good records and also hounded their clients for repayments. The lesson may be that members must follow a business plan, and the strategies for its application should be acceptable in their own community.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>By contrast, for example, Horan (2002) reports on a microfinance scheme in rural Tonga, where women were loaned money to produce handicrafts but instead they produced traditional fine mats, which, to Horan, represented an equally 'rational' strategy.

Karen Lewin of the Lutheran Development Service describes the case of Putim na Kisim, a microfinance scheme operated by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of PNG (Lewin 2002, see also Kopunye et al 1999), by challenging a proposition of economic anthropologist Chris Gregory (1999). Gregory claims that the root crop subsistence basis of Melanesian societies makes them resistant to entrepreneurial capitalism. The fact that root crops do not store makes their economies fundamentally different from Asian rice-growing economies, where this commodity can be saved and transacted in local and international markets. While sweet potatoes provide 'subsistence affluence,' they do not predispose farmers to petty trading, and therefore produce relatively few indigenous entrepreneurs. Most finance in PNG, Gregory also notes, is provided by foreign aid or private expatriates (Gregory 1999:84-86).<sup>16</sup>

On the contrary, Lewin points out, traditional exchange systems are especially well-suited to the concept of savings and loans—think of pigs and brideprice, she says; and it is the very sociality of these indigenous systems that make them work.<sup>17</sup> Putim na Kisim models build on traditional networks of obligation and reciprocity.

The wisdom of Putim na Kisim members in finding the unit of society where the strength of obligations is such that people risk being excluded from the community if they are seen to upset the lives and harmony of others. By building a Putim na Kisim group among the same people who together will pay compensation and bride-price, fight as a clan, celebrate and worship, their obligation is as strong as to a clan member. (Op cit:96)

James Charles Cox says these fast money schemes must be seen in terms of the social relations they inscribe, and for this reason it is extremely important that economists become anthropologists during the introduction of microcredit projects across PNG. Microcredit now enters an environment that is faintly phobic of international banking, where everyone knows someone still waiting for their payout from one or another scheme. Evangelical crusades have crystallized ideas about Satan and fanned fears about an imminent end time where the 'included' will be spared and the 'excluded' left behind. What is more imperative than forging national identity today is the need to join one or another of these churches, where one's identity as a member will spare you from a gruesome fate and reward you with riches in the Lord's name.

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<sup>16</sup> It should also be noted that Gregory's ideas run counter to prevailing anthropological thinking on Melanesian economies, which has referred to highlands systems (in particular) as 'pre-adapted' to capitalism from the seventies forward, beginning with the classic work of Ben Finney's (1973) on big men and business in the Eastern Highlands.

<sup>17</sup> Cox (n.d.:5) also reminds us that relative isolation from the cash economy has meant that some communities have yet to fully grasp features of the new economy. 'Thus, when Babilis (1999:20) reports that 90% of microfinance clients with the Liklik Dinou Abitore Trust did not understand the concept of 'profit', this should not be interpreted as a case of simple ignorance but as an example of a subsistence culture which has only limited engagement with the cash economy.'

### **The paradox of keeping-while-giving**

The Asian-Melanesian rice-root crop contrast Gregory draws is interesting to debate, but it evades some of the important variations that exist within Melanesian economic systems. Along a highlands east-west axis, anthropologist D.K. Feil (1987) first elaborated the many social variations (social structure, marriage rules, gender relations, and more) that exist across a continuum of high and low intensity agriculture, population density, and varieties of 'incremental' exchange – that is, systems running east to west that either trade in pigs or pearlshells, and rest on different degrees of short-term profit: two pigs loaned, for example, means three pigs returned, and so forth. Anthropology is full of binary contrasts to explain socioeconomic variations in Melanesia. Highlands big men have simply been the most successful fundraisers and investors in PNG to date: their *modus operandi* being to subsume their clansmen's wealth under their own ambitions and produce interlocking networks of indebtedness that can translate to political followings in a modern age. The *moka* of the Western Highlands perfectly articulates across the *tee* of Enga, as it runs west; and to the east, smaller, less subsistence rich communities tend to downplay the profit motive for a trade in equivalents that maintain peace and harmony.

Similarly, there is another well-known continuum running from highland to lowland societies that posits wealth-based societies at one end and knowledge-based societies at the other. In the first case, these systems of incremental exchange (like *moka* and *tee*) create what are called egalitarian societies, where democracy and competition beget ambitious and entrepreneurial bigmen and polities of clansmen 'investors.' But unlike coastal societies, these power configurations don't endure through time; they're made and unmade during a bigman's lifetime. Coastal exchange is more about knowledge transaction, and the circulation of critical information over time rather than across a wide populous. This is where linguistic diversity serves the fundamentals of exchange, so that even with relatively less material wealth, people maintain relationships by transacting apples for oranges, your pots for my shells, or this ritual for that garden magic. It is also where money does not make power, where men and women inherit their titles (and the insignia of titles – like shell valuables) rather than earn them, or where initiation brings entitlement to young men rather than chutzpah (Lindstrom 1984, Harrison 1989).

It may be evident by now that the highland-lowland distinction is one way to frame PNG culture's vulnerability to Prosperity Theology or not. It would be easy to call lowland societies immune to the ideas of wealth and salvation, but these are also the societies where initiation and being 'born again' after radical disjuncture and trauma are part of the traditional culture. Hence, it doesn't work to say new Protestant ideas can take off in the highlands whereas mainline Christian churches will hold onto the coasts.

A common distinction is made between gift-exchange and capitalist commodity economies. Anthropologist Fred Myers (2001:6) opens an edited volume on 'regimes of value and material culture' with a discussion of Annette

Weiner's work in the Trobriands (1992, 1994), and how it challenged the established theories of exchange in Melanesian culture. Undoubtedly the most complex and celebrated exchange system in Melanesia is the *kula*, which not only stumped Malinowski but in so doing demolished the 19<sup>th</sup> Century 'primitive economic' straw man (1961 [1922], Weiner 1992). Long sailing expeditions, magic, mythology and ceremony accompanied the circulation of shell valuables that moved, apples for pears, in opposite directions around a ring of islands. What couldn't be adequately explained, however, was why?

There was no rational, i.e. functional, explanation for the trade and while it performed many utilitarian roles in the matrilineal societies it traversed, it had no apparent overarching purpose. Particularly problematic was the fact that no one could actually 'own' these constantly circulating valuables. Old and elaborately decorated, they could never be alienated from the ring, presenting *kula* players and their partners with the unusual paradox of 'keeping-while-giving' (Weiner Ibid; cf. other Massim exchange systems, e.g. Munn 198, Leip1999).

Weiner says both Malinowski and Mauss depend too heavily on western economic theory. The whole premise of 'self-interest' driving the marketplace is inappropriate for systems where men (and their offspring) gain no direct returns from trading shell valuables, for example. Weiner's says previous theories have been identified with reciprocity and equivalence, as in Sahlins (1965), and this is too great a reduction to economics. Instead giving should be related to social reproduction, politics, and the making of power relations. She opened the aperture of analysis so that exchange would be viewed beyond the moment of transaction to how things are created by such systems over time, how societies reproduce themselves and establish their social hierarchies.

She coined the concept of 'keeping-while-giving', saying exchange is always embedded in greater and wider systems of reciprocity. Gifts are never just gifts, they always imply a return. And commodities are not just objects, either, they have their own sociality. In both commodity and gift economies there are the anomalous objects which we call hierlooms or treasures--- 'inalienables' for Weiner, and 'immeubles' for Mauss. Weiner and others, like Arjun Appadurai (1986), writing about the 'social life of things,' have argued for the coexistence of capital and gift ethics in both western and non-western societies. There is capitalism in the gift, he says, and vice versa.

Writing about Fiji, anthropologist Nicholas Thomas says:

[While] alienation, commoditization, and abstract exchange are most pronounced in capitalist economies, they are not peculiar to those systems. Capitalism is characterised by social relations which bind worker to capitalist in exploitative transactions, which predated capitalism historically and which now exist in some forms in all societies....The transformations and contextual mutations of objects cannot be appreciated if it is presumed that gifts are invariably gifts and commodities invariably commodities (Thomas 1991:38-39).

### **Sociality as prosperity**

Prosperity Theology is undoubtedly a good match for many local traditional ideologies in PNG. Highland societies in particular have always understood the ethic of wealth accumulation and limited distribution. Even the idea of Positive Confession is sort of a put-up-or-shut-up argument for blindly following a bigman. Bellicose highlands communities may also understand how prosperity flocks are under siege, forever battling nay-sayers and Satan's minions, not to mention multiculturalists, Muslims, Catholics and Mexicans.

The fact that wealth-based economies in PNG have much shallower genealogical memories than do knowledge-based societies brings to mind Henry Ford famous aphorism that history is bunk. Where money reigns, no one needs a memory or a pedigree. In the highlands, utilitarian knowledge is favored over metaphysical knowledge, which completes an analogy with the protestant ethic over more ecclesiastical forms of leadership.

It may seem to readers we have veered far off course from a critique of new quick-money scams and new gospels in PNG. But an important point to be made is that the differences between western and nonwestern economies, as between lowlands and highland, are more subtle than binary opposites can capture, and the coexistence of multiple systems in each economy should be the starting point for more detailed comparisons between these new Christian ideologies of monetarism, individuality and the imminence of an apocalypse, and the indigenous ideologies that have begun to assimilate them. PNG worldviews may be more 'pre-adapted' to these capitalist Christianities than we have been willing to admit.

The common assertion that 'gift' economies are particularly vulnerable to corrupt forms of capitalist exchange, the palm-greasing of modern business in the Pacific, is also misleading. Proponents of new-style reciprocity in the form of kick-backs and payoffs are more often beneficiaries of this kind of corruption, as I note elsewhere in a discussion of Pacific Islands political corruption (Sullivan 2004). Whether it is dressed up as 'Asian capitalism', and therefore made to appear part of a proliferation of new nonwestern capitalisms, or given a Bible and a megaphone (and a weird hairdo, I might add), greed is greed. The same politicians who 'support' televangelists in their prayers for PNG prosperity are also the first to accept kickbacks as gifts and boast about their connections to criminal gangs. Benny Hinn, U-Vistract, Money Rain, and so many of these other schemes are excellent examples of 'irrational' economics. But that does not mean they appeal to 'irrational' or 'pre-rational' societies. In the end, scam artists are no more or less than that, whether the crop up within in response to rapid economic change (see Gesch 1985), or as part of free market globalization.

.<sup>18</sup> Traditional societies are no more or less predisposed to aberrant behaviors, and studies that would explain away Pacific corruption in terms of indigenous exchange are no more meaningful than religious screeds that pronounce all non-Christians to be sinners.

Papua New Guineans are more likely to invest in the social relations behind these scams than their propounders will ever know. In PNG people do not invest money; they invest the social relations implicit in that transaction, and expect those relations to resonate well beyond the moment you send a money order or your bank details. People who invested in pre-Millennial schemes are still waiting for their payout, fully aware that the economic transaction has collapsed but absolutely assured that the social relationship forged will not let them down.

Are Papua New Guineans naturally gullible? Do they have more faith in the unseen (the invisible hand) because they have always had magico-religious beliefs? Is this pre-rational man reaching for a faux-rational modernity? Hardly! Papua New Guineans do not expect the anonymity of rip-offs, they are not accustomed to being marked by con artists at random, and are waiting for some reciprocity to vindicate their investment. But in the global free market there is no accountability, only consumer culpability: no clansman at your gate, no global court of transparency for the unconscionable. What quick-money and quick-salvation programmes effect is a gradual disillusionment of 'community' as it is known in PNG and in Melanesia more generally? They introduce anonymity, unaccountability, and the quid-pro-quo of transaction as strong as and more rational than the sociality of exchange. The ultimate assimilation of capitalism in PNG will no doubt come when the remote villager is resigned enough to say *caveat emptor* – there is no one to blame but myself.

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<sup>18</sup> But Prosperity Doctrine has its apostates, too. Reverend Jim Bakker, who spent five years in prison for defrauding Heritage USA investors, says he has had a change of heart about the prosperity gospel. The same man who once told his PTL coworkers that 'God wants you to be rich,' now says he made a tragic mistake. 'For years, I helped propagate an impostor, not a true gospel, but another gospel,' Bakker has said in his 1996 book, *I Was Wrong*. 'The prosperity message did not line up with the tenor of the Scripture,' he said. 'My heart was crushed to think that I led so many people astray.' (*The prosperity gospel*, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, USA, Nov. 18, 2003).

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### **Author**

Nancy Sullivan is an anthropologist and former lecturer at Divine Word University. She now has an ethnographic consulting company with former DWU students. The company provides a variety of services from workshop production to all kinds of ethnographic research. They have conducted research in major conservation zones, performed social and socioeconomic impact studies for different development projects, provided ethnographic training for NGO and CBO staffers, and conducted workshops in the culture of PNG for expatriate workers. They are also experts in the Participatory Rural Appraisal and Rapid Rural Appraisal. She has a PhD for New York University. In 1993 she received a Fulbright-Hayes scholarship for her work in Papua New Guinea. Email [nsullivan@global.net.pg](mailto:nsullivan@global.net.pg)

The government was obsessed with fears of damaging local businesses and of creating dependency among the Irish. However most peasants paid their rent with part of their crop and survived on the remaining potatoes. This meant they did not use money and therefore could not buy food or access credit. It is popular nowadays to argue for limited government and leaving it to the free market. It is argued that the government is the cause of most problems. The free market is proclaimed an untouchable sacred cow. When times are bad we need the government. Laissez faire in principle resulted in left to die in practice. Advertisements. Share this