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# PAYBACK

## The Logic of Retribution in Melanesian Religions

G. W. TROMPF

*School of Studies in Religion  
University of Sydney*



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In Reciprocity and in Hope  
dedicated to  
The Peoples of Papua New Guinea

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## *Preface*

This book is focused on one significant set of themes in Melanesian religious life, but it also goes some way towards providing an introductory guide to the phenomenology and history of religions in the most ethnographically complex part of the globe. Melanesia still harbours over one quarter of humanity's known and discrete religions, and this work supplements my *Melanesian Religion* (1991) as another kind of overview. Retributive logic is so crucial an aspect of Melanesian culture, and of such universal significance, that a general study of it is long overdue. While the varied indigenous 'pre-contact' expressions of retributive actions and principles require careful analysis and comparatively more space, there is now a pressing need to assess how the emergence of new religious movements (especially the so-called 'cargo cults') and the impact of the 'great traditions' (particularly Christianity) have affected this side to Melanesian life.

The research involved quarrying at an enormous granite cliff of wondrous yet multiveined materials. I can only hope that the splinters I have chipped off during fifteen years of labour will illustrate and make sense of the massive imbroglia. When James Frazer eked out his thirteen-volume *Golden Bough* (1890–1936) and Eduard Westermarck his two-volume tome on the *Origin and Development of Moral Ideas* (1906), neither of them had any idea that the southwest Pacific contained the most complicated anthropological jigsaw puzzle on the earth's face. They would have been astounded to find that in this one volume alone just as many if not more distinct belief-systems have been referred to than either one of them discussed in their great monuments of erudition. Perhaps, though, I have been too sparing in my pages and too cryptic in my allusions towards the constituents of many and differing cultures. I occasionally look in despair

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at the vast archive of notes and observations in my filing cabinets, knowing that only tiny portions of what could be put in print are condensed into the following pages. Still, I note with a mixture of gloom and impatience that few general textbooks on comparative religion give more than a page to Melanesia, and what the region has to offer is typically buried under sweeping comments about 'primitive' traditions.

Our chosen theme, that of payback or the logic of retribution, covers Melanesian ideas and practices concerning revenge, reciprocity, and the means of explaining events in terms of praise and blame, rewards and punishments. At first sight, readers might not perceive what this whole matrix has to do with the subject of religion, but one central purpose of this study is to demonstrate the connections. If one imagines that the study of revenge, for instance, has only to do with conflict theory, or research into the causes and nature of war, or the psychology of aggression, then the analysis of warriorhood religions, sorcery, punishments for *tabu*-breakage, and other expressions of retaliation reflecting religious beliefs will help correct false impressions. And if one supposes that the consideration of positive reciprocities (such as gift-giving, exchange, compensations) is really only properly a concern for economic anthropologists, then here will be challenged some unwarrantable compartmentalizations of research, because the set of social realities being addressed demands a multidisciplinary approach. The book steadily moves away from traditional anthropological concerns, in any case, to those that are more sociological and historical, at the very least.

What discipline does this study reflect most of all? I will have to explore on another occasion its implications for history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, politics, legal studies, philosophy, theology, let alone the comparative study of religions, and for such subdisciplines as oral history or ethno-history, the history of ideas, economic and legal anthropology, the sociology of new religious movements, social work, psychoanalysis, development studies, criminology, ethics, peace studies, pastoral theology, and missiology. Feeling pressed to name the discipline nearest to both my heart and intent, however, I understand myself above all to be an historian of ideas, beliefs, and consciousness, although this book reads more like historical or philosophic anthropology (which can be readily subsumed within the newer academic circuit of Religious Studies).

The subtitle of this work refers both to logic and religion, in the hope that most readers will have got beyond denigrating religion as illogical, let alone passing off 'primitive' notions and rites as mere 'superstitions'. Drawing out linkages between logic, retribution, and religion from such a vast array of traditions, and allowing myself *un grand tour d'horizon*, is not necessarily preferable to the in-depth exploration of the same connections in one given culture. I have given more space to cultures in which I have personally spent a longer time researching, such as the

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Bena(bena), the Fuyughe, the Wahgi, and select coastal Papuan peoples; but the broad survey is necessary because researchers have bequeathed us too many detached analyses of isolated societies or social problems while shying clear of the ‘general visions’ now badly needed in developing nations—indeed, needed in the very countries that hosted many aspiring Western academics.

One particularly acute problem, once a synoptic approach is adopted, is that of reconstructing worldviews. Investigators of ‘other cultures’ have the habit of writing as if they are able to render an objective account of a whole people’s ‘position’ and very often do so as if the thoughts of the best informants of a given (perhaps ‘already contaminated’) area somehow encapsulate and speak for the society as a whole. Are these investigators presumptuous? Philosophers who have broached Jürgen Habermas’s *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1972), or Donald Davidson’s notable though less accessible essay ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’ (1973–74), or Talal Asad on the problems of representing collective beliefs (1979; 1983), will know these thorny issues only too well. Some have already doubted that other minds, others’ mental worlds, let alone subjective feelings, can ever be ‘truly’ reconstrued, and transferred to the printed page. I am under no illusions about my own efforts at reconstruction (Trompf 1984a: 509–11), and about the possibility of outsiders ‘inventing’ others’ cultures (Clifford 1986). Everything presented here cannot escape provisionality. Along with other social researchers, the historian of ideas has the primary task of a glorified translator, of communicating one world or audience to another. Once these basic efforts at intelligibility look promising, then the opportunity for deeper reflection about the nature of human thought, action, and their interrelation is likely to be seized; and any historian worthy of the craft wants to find out how beliefs and ideas are modified through time, and about the consequences of such changes. In a general *Überschau*, one can only hope that the examples selected are placed in the right contexts, given justifiable emphases, and made to provide a balanced perspective. And, in this study, group views have been represented via the most esteemed local custodians of knowledge.

What about religion? The following chapters contain some surprises, because I do not always follow standard tacks. I disdain reducing religion to a narrow preserve—just to do with beliefs in spiritual beings, for example, or with palpable sacred times and places—and attempt to show how religion has been (and still can be) integrally related to war and acts of violence in Melanesia, to the economics of reciprocity, and to other features of life one might ordinarily expect to be ‘secular’, ‘mundane’ or ‘profane’. Religion has thus been conceived much more as a people’s ‘way of life’ than merely worship or approaches to the ‘non-empirical realm’ in particular. At times, admittedly, certain beliefs, rites, and customs will

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be acknowledged as *more distinctly* religious—so anticipating prevailing preconceptions—but at other times I have striven to educate readers out of circumscription. If a definition is needed for clarificatory purposes, religion in this book encompasses ‘those concerns that most dominate people’s acts, reasonings, and feelings, because they understand their cosmos to be affected by living agencies, spirit-beings, or other non-human forces, and because people regard these agents or powers as subject to human influence’. This definition shows me to be in sympathy with those scholars (such as W. A. Christian, T. P. van Baaren and very recently J. G. Platvoet), who stress the dynamic interactions between thought and action, between humans and ‘the Other’, and between the more recognizably distinct sphere of religion (or ‘the sacred’) and other dimensions of life.

This book originated from a paper I wrote for a Melanesian Institute Conference at Goroka (New Guinea) in 1978 (cf. Trompf 1991: 51–77), and at Norman Habel’s valuable suggestion I plodded on towards a full-scale study of Melanesian retributive logic. In the process the late Jan van Baal’s comments on my first draft were extremely helpful; and for so generously sharing their wisdom I offer special thanks here to Ennio Mantovani, Wendy Flannery, and Darrell Whiteman (Melanesian Institute, Papua New Guinea); Esau Tuza, Willington Jojoga Opeba, Caleb Kolowan, Sione and Ruth Latukefu, Carl Loeliger (University of Papua New Guinea), the late Peter Lawrence, Eric Sharpe, Tony Swain, and Sibona Kopi (University of Sydney), Stuart Schlegel and Noel King (University of California, Santa Cruz), Jacques Waardenburg (Université de Lausanne), Jan Platvoet and Anton Ploeg (Rijksuniversiteit, Utrecht), Patrick Gesch (then at the Anthropos Institute), and the intrepid Andrew Strathern (University of Pittsburgh), whose study comparing patterns of violence in the New Guinea highlands was being awaited as I finished this work. To acknowledge the riches of oral sources, I have employed a pattern of recognition I prefer to prevailing standards of social research by both naming my chief informants consistently and listing them in the bibliography. Investigations by my many students, especially at the University of Papua New Guinea, Goroka Teachers’ College, and the Holy Spirit (Catholic) Seminary at Bomana, have been invaluable. Many ethno-historical insights from a field of study increasingly becoming familiar to researchers in Melanesia (through Tippett 1973; Denoon and Lacey 1981; Gewertz and Schieffelin 1985, White 1991 and Carrier 1992), are manifest in the following pages.

For helping to refine my field methods I could not have done without: Camillo Esef, Umakive Futrepa, James Kai, Michael Wandel, Godfrey Yeruai, Louise Aitsi, Vincent Koroti and Tapei Martin. For their working companionship, their protection in moments of great danger, and for the hospitality offered by their families, I am deeply indebted. I gratefully acknowledge that most of the field research was funded by the Universities

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Garry Winston Trompf

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## *Abbreviations*

<i>A</i>	<i>The Australian</i>
AA	Anglican Archives of Papua New Guinea
<i>AAB</i>	<i>Austral-Asiatic Bulletin</i>
<i>AB</i>	<i>Arawa Bulletin</i>
ABC(TV)	Australian Broadcasting Corporation (Television Network)
<i>Ag</i>	<i>The Age</i>
AM	Australian Museum (Sydney)
<i>An</i>	<i>The Anglican</i>
ANA	Australian National Archives
ANGAU	Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit
ANU	Australian National University
APCM	Australian Pacific Christian Mission
ASA	Association of Social Anthropologists
ASAO	Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania
<i>B</i>	<i>Bella</i>
<i>BCM</i>	<i>Brisbane Courier-Mail</i>
BM	<i>Die Biene auf den Missionfelde</i>
BNG	British New Guinea (official statements)
<i>BNGAR</i>	<i>British New Guinea Annual Report</i>
BRA	Bougainville Revolutionary Army
<i>BRW</i>	<i>Business Review Weekly</i>
<i>Bu</i>	<i>Bulletin</i>
CFCR	Colony of Fiji, Commission Reports
CL	Catholic Liturgical Documents
CMA	Commonwealth Magistrates Association
CRNH	Constitution of the Republic of the New Hebrides

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DKZ	<i>Deutsche Koloniale Zeitung</i>
DZ	Deutsches Zentralarkiv
EA	Evangelical Alliance of the South Pacific Islands
ERU	Educational Research Unit, UPNG
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
<i>Fam</i>	<i>Family</i>
<i>FEER</i>	<i>Far Eastern Economic Review</i>
FLNKS	Front de libération nationale kanake et socialiste
<i>FS</i>	<i>Fiji Sun</i>
<i>FT</i>	<i>Fiji Times</i>
GG	German Government
<i>GL</i>	<i>Green Left</i>
GV	Government of Vanuatu
<i>GW</i>	<i>Guardian Weekly</i>
<i>I</i>	<i>The Independent</i>
IASER	Institute of Applied Social and Economic Research (PNG)
IG	Indonesian Government
<i>JO</i>	<i>Le Journal officiel de Nouvelle Calédonie</i> (Nouméa)
<i>K</i>	<i>Kanak</i>
<i>KM</i>	<i>Die katholischen Mission</i>
KPJ	Komisi Pembinaan Jemaat
LA	Lutheran Archives of New Guinea
<i>LF</i>	<i>Laws of Fiji</i>
LMS	London Missionary Society Archives
LRC	Law Reform Commission of Papua New Guinea
<i>LTM</i>	<i>Les temps modernes</i>
MA	Melanesian Alliance
MCC	Melanesian Council of Churches
MSC	Mission(naires) du Sacré Coeur
NBC	National Broadcasting Commission of PNG
<i>NGAR</i>	<i>New Guinea Annual Report</i>
<i>NGM</i>	<i>New Guinea Mission</i>
<i>NN</i>	<i>Niugini Nius</i>
NSO	National Statistical Office of PNG
<i>NT</i>	<i>National Times</i>
<i>NY</i>	<i>Nius bilong Yumi</i>
OC	Ombudsman Commission of PNG
OPM	Organisasi Papua Merdeka
OT	Oral testimony
<i>P</i>	<i>Paradise</i>
<i>Pac</i>	<i>Papuan Courier</i>
<i>PAR</i>	<i>Papua Annual Report</i>
<i>PC</i>	<i>Papua New Guinea Post-Courier</i>



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## ABBREVIATIONS

PG	Provincial Government Papers (PNG)
<i>PIM</i>	<i>Pacific Islands Monthly</i>
PNA	Papua New Guinea National Archives
PNG	Papua New Guinea (including Acts and official documents)
RPC	Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary
<i>RT</i>	<i>Rabaul Times</i>
SDA	Seventh Day Adventist Church
SDF	Sub-District Files, Papua New Guinea
SIL	Summer Institute of Linguistics
<i>SH</i>	<i>Seli Hoo</i>
SIIO	Solomon Islands Independence Order
<i>SMH</i>	The <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>
SPC	South Pacific Commission
TAPOL	British Campaign for the Defence of Political Prisoners of Human Rights in Indonesia
<i>TL</i>	The <i>Times</i> (of London)
<i>TM</i>	<i>Time Magazine</i>
<i>T-M</i>	<i>Telegraph Mirror</i>
<i>TP</i>	The <i>Times of Papua New Guinea</i>
<i>UCN</i>	<i>United Church News</i>
UPNG	University of Papua New Guinea (including documents)
<i>UT</i>	<i>Uni Taur</i>
<i>UTW</i>	The <i>University This Week</i>
<i>W</i>	<i>Wantok</i>
WMM	Wesleyan Methodist Mission Society Archives
<i>WN</i>	<i>Workers News</i>

## PLEASE NOTE

Some citations of authors in the text are not in chronological order. In such cases, the ordering relates to the sequence of topics or cultural references discussed in the preceding sentence(s).