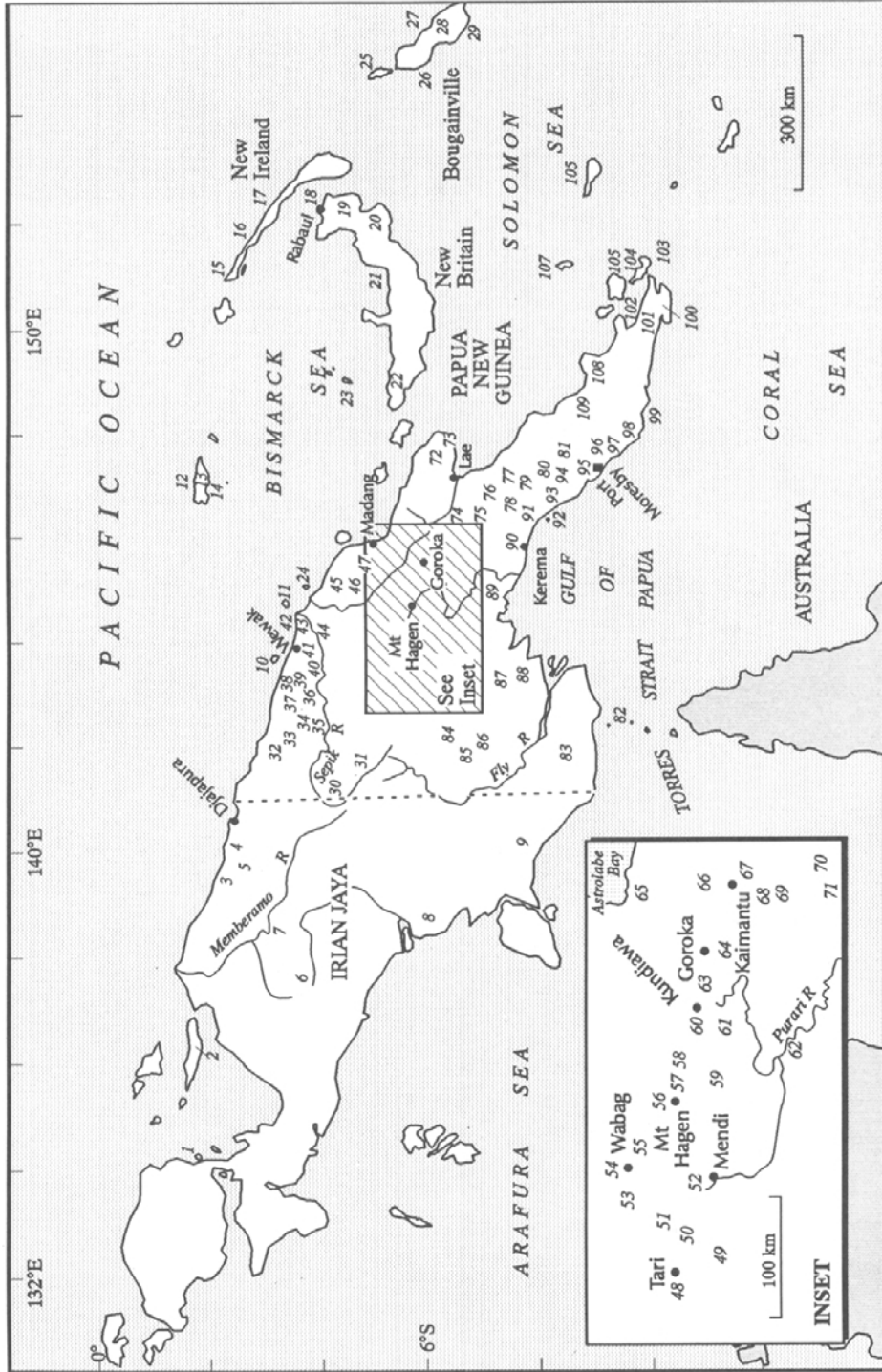


PART

1

THE

OLD TIME



UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY Cartography

LOCATION OF TRADITIONAL MELANESIAN CULTURES: NEW GUINEA MAINLAND AND OUTLYING ISLANDS
 The cultures are those cited in this book. They are shown by number and can be identified by referring to the key on the following page.

KEY TO MAPS

NOTE: This key lists the Melanesian cultures in numerical order as used on Maps 1 and 2, and then in alphabetical order (also showing the relevant map location).

Melanesian Cultures: by number

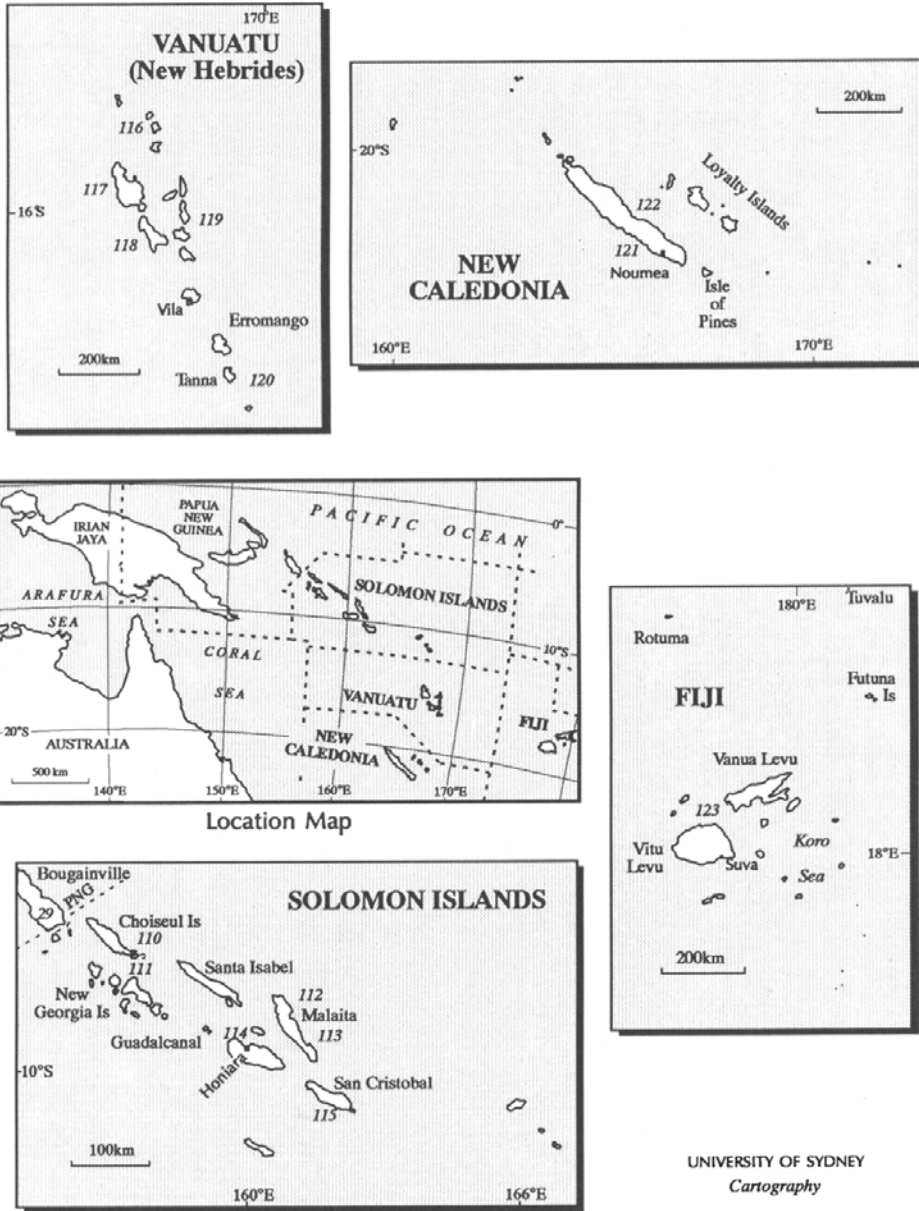
- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| 1 Biak-Numfor | 60 Chimbu |
| 2 Yapen | 61 Siane |
| 3 Nimbora | 62 Daribi |
| 4 Sentani | 63 Asaro-Gururumba |
| 5 Kume | 64 Bena Bena |
| 6 Kapauka | 65 Ngaing |
| 7 Dani groups | 66 Taiora |
| 8 Asmat | 67 Kamano |
| 9 Marind-Anim | 68 Kogu |
| 10 Kairuru | 69 Fore (Okapa) |
| 11 Wogeo | 70 Baruya |
| 12 Manus | 71 Sambia |
| 13 Usiai | 72 Hube (and Huon) groups |
| 14 Matangkor/Baluan | 73 Yabim (Finschhafen) |
| 15 Lemakot | 74 Atzera |
| 16 Nalik | 75 Menya |
| 17 Madak | 76 Mumeng |
| 18 Tolai | 77 Zia (including Seragi) |
| 19 Baining-Sulka | 78 Kunimaipa |
| 20 Mengen | 79 Tauade (Goilala) |
| 21 Lakalai | 80 Fuyughe (Mafulu) |
| 22 Sengseng | 81 Koiari |
| 23 Unea (Bali Vitu) | 82 Torres Strait |
| 24 Manam | 83 Roku |
| 25 Halia (Buka) | 84 Kaluli |
| 26 Kiriaka | 85 Samo |
| 27 Torau | 86 Etoro |
| 28 Nasioi | 87 Erave |
| 29 Siwai | 88 Gogodala |
| 30 Telefomin groups | 89 Purari |
| 31 Baktaman | 90 Elema |
| 32 Wape (Lumi) | 91 Toaripi-Moripi |
| 33 Gnau | 92 Roro |
| 34 Wam (Dreikikir) | 93 Mekeo |
| 35 Avatip | 94 Kuni |
| 36 Kwoma | 95 Motu |
| 37 Yuat | 96 Rigo |
| 38 Arapesh groups | 97 Balawaia |
| 39 Abelam | 98 Hula-Aroma-Velerupu |
| 40 Iatmul | 99 Mailu |
| 41 Yangoru-Negrie | 100 Suau-Kwato |
| 42 Murik Lakes | 101 Daga |
| 43 Buna | 102 Wedau |
| 44 Angoram | 103 Massim |
| 45 Tangu | 104 Rogeia (including Normanby) |
| 46 Begesin | 105 Dobu |
| 47 Garia | 106 Muju (Woodlark) |
| 48 Huli | 107 Trobriand |
| 49 Wiru | 108 Maisin |
| 50 Wola | 109 Orokaiva (including Jaua, Tainyandawari, Binandere) |
| 51 Nipa | 110 Choiseul |
| 52 Mendi | 111 Roviana |
| 53 Ipili Enga | 112 Toabaita |
| 54 Mae Enga | 113 Kwaio |
| 55 Kyaka Enga | 114 Guadalcanal |
| 56 Melpa (including Tumbuka) | 115 San Cristobal |
| 57 Nii | 116 Banks |
| 58 Wahgi* | 117 Espiritu Santo groups |
| 59 Kiripia | 118 Malekula groups |
| | 119 South Pentecost |
| | 120 Tanna |
| | 121 Houailou |
| | 122 La Foa |
| | 123 Fiji(an) groups |

* The Wahgi are referred to, in the literature, as 'Mid-Wahgi', 'Middle Wahgi' and 'Wahgi'. In this work the term 'Wahgi' has been used consistently to refer to these groups.

Melanesian Cultures: reference list

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Abelam (39) | Marind-Anim (9) |
| Angoram (44) | Massim (103) |
| Arapesh groups (38) | Matangkor/Baluan (14) |
| Asaro-Gururumba (63) | Mekeo (93) |
| Asmat (8) | Melpa (including Tumbuka) (56) |
| Atzera (74) | Mendi (52) |
| Avatip (35) | Mengen (20) |
| Baining-Sulka (19) | Menya (75) |
| Baktaman (31) | Motu (95) |
| Balawaia (97) | Muju (Woodlark) (106) |
| Banks (116) | Mumeng (76) |
| Baruya (70) | Murik Lakes (42) |
| Begesin (46) | Nalik (16) |
| Bena Bena (64) | Nasioi (28) |
| Biak-Numfor (1) | Ngaing (65) |
| Buna (43) | Nii (57) |
| Chimbu (60) | Nimbora (3) |
| Choiseul (110) | Nipa (51) |
| Daga (101) | Orokaiva (including Jaua, Tainyandawari, Binandere) (109) |
| Dani groups (7) | Purari (89) |
| Daribi (62) | Rigo (96) |
| Dobu (105) | Rogeia (including Normanby) (104) |
| Elema (90) | Roku (83) |
| Enga | Roro (92) |
| Ipili (53) | Roviana (111) |
| Kyaka (55) | Sambia (71) |
| Mac (54) | Samo (85) |
| Erave (87) | San Cristobal (115) |
| Espiritu Santo groups (117) | Sengseng (22) |
| Etoro (86) | Sentani (4) |
| Fiji(an) groups (123) | Siane (61) |
| Fore (Okapa) (69) | Siwai (29) |
| Fuyughe (including Mafulu) (80) | South Pentecost (119) |
| Garia (47) | Taiora (66) |
| Gnau (33) | Tangu (45) |
| Gogodala (88) | Tanna (120) |
| Guadalcanal (114) | Tauade (Goilala) (79) |
| Halia (Buka) (25) | Telefomin groups (30) |
| Houailou (121) | Toabaita (112) |
| Hube (and Huon) groups (72) | Toaripi-Moripi (91) |
| Hula-Aroma-Velerupu (98) | Tolai (18) |
| Huli (48) | Torau (27) |
| Iatmul (40) | Torres Strait (82) |
| Kairuru (10) | Trobriand (107) |
| Kaluli (84) | Unea (Bali Vitu) (23) |
| Kamano (67) | Usiai (13) |
| Kapauka (6) | Wahgi (58) |
| Kiriaka (26) | Wam (Dreikikir) (34) |
| Kiripia (59) | Wape (Lumi) (32) |
| Kogu (68) | Wedau (102) |
| Koiari (81) | Wiru (49) |
| Kume (5) | Wogeo (11) |
| Kuni (94) | Wola (50) |
| Kunimaipa (78) | Yabim (Finschhafen) (73) |
| Kwaio (113) | Yangoru-Negrie (41) |
| Kwoma (36) | Yapen (2) |
| La Foa (122) | Yuat (37) |
| Lakalai (21) | Zia (including Seragi) (77) |
| Lemakot (15) | |
| Madak (17) | |
| Mailu (99) | |
| Maisin (108) | |
| Malekula groups (118) | |
| Manam (24) | |
| Manus (12) | |

MAP 2



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 Cartography

LOCATION OF TRADITIONAL MELANESIAN CULTURES: THE SOLOMONS, VANUATU, FIJI, NEW CALEDONIA
 The cultures are those cited in this book. They are shown by number and can be identified by referring to the key on the page opposite.

 CHAPTER 1

MELANESIAN TRADITIONAL
 >>>>>>> RELIGIONS:
 <<<<<<<< AN OVERVIEW

Who were the savages?

Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895) was possibly the first great European intellectual to meet Melanesians at close hand. On his way to fame as a natural scientist, he was appointed a ship’s assistant surgeon and took off on ‘an exploring expedition to New Guinea’ under Captain Owen Stanley (from 1846). On their eventual arrival at that mysterious land, however, he had to be patient for action. Coming up on deck each day to gaze at the distant jungles of Papua from the safety of the 28-gun frigate, the *Rattlesnake*, he found himself more than often exasperated. The heat (for which Europeans were usually overdressed) was unbearable enough, but much more so was Captain Stanley’s stubborn refusal to send a landing-party ashore, so paranoiacally suspicious was he that the ‘savages’ would stage an attack. What Huxley could see of the local people at a distance made him more interested in them than in the flora and fauna so important for his researches as a young biologist; yet, it was not until mid-August 1849 that he felt he had genuinely encountered the so-called ‘savages’.

After ‘symbols of friendship’ were exchanged with the inhabitants of ‘Brumer’ (properly Bonarua) Island — and Huxley found their signals quite ‘ludicrous’ — an individual was allowed on board to be presented, just to make it awkward for the fellow, among the anchor chains. His face blackened, and in contrast to a necklace of white cowries (the string of which he had placed between his teeth) this ‘great wag’, as Huxley called him, put on a show by beating off a drum roll on a tin can. He danced and was enthusiastic about it, so much so that Huxley, evidently forgetting the man’s unmanageable position and reading into this behaviour all the old London stories about the trances of blackmen, noted in his diary that ‘the wag was like to go out of his senses, prancing about on his unstable foundation’.¹ Further encounters with the islanders of the Louisiade Archipelago were to come as the ship’s journey

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progressed, at least two episodes being not so pleasant as black hosts and white foreigners were brought close to blows. On one occasion a 'portly member' of the ship's gun room was cut off by the locals, and 'only saved his life by parting with all his clothes as presents to them, and keeping them amused by an impromptu dance in a state of nature under the broiling sun', until a relief party stopped what seemed like an ironical 'payback' for the unpaid, uncomfortable performance of the 'wag on chains'.²

More's the pity that reciprocities were limited to an exchange of iron axe-heads for some foodstuffs, water and goodwill, and that Huxley could not persuade his fellow voyagers on one occasion that they were being invited to a feast. 'To my mind', he wrote, 'the killing [of] a pig among these people is considered a great occasion, a sort of grand feast in their church.'³ This quaint reflection combines a touch of paternalism with a characteristic lunge at the Christian church he had rejected back home. As a teenager his faith had been cruelly tested through witnessing the dissection of a corpse. Yet, though by the time of the cruise he was something of an 'agnostic' (it is he who has been credited with inventing the term), there is, as he left that primal and mysterious Papua, a nice touch of residual paganism in the mind of the young biologist who found religion too much of 'one wild whirl'. 'We are fairly off', he spills out in his diary for 8 January 1850, 'blessed by all the Gods therefore. Today finished eight months since we have been in harbour — I mean of course in a civilized place.'⁴

Most of the earlier impressions that Europeans gained of Melanesia's religions are locked away in this scenario. The themes of ritualized greeting, dancing, states of possession, simple trading, feasting along with a readiness to retaliate, and savagely — all went back to the drawing-rooms of Britain (and in fact, together with the reputation for cannibalism, all were in rougher forms already there). Huxley doubtless reported on his experiences to his friend, Herbert Spencer, an early sociologist, whose attention was also drawn to a published account of the voyage by John MacGillivray. Thus, Spencer could confidently write of the 'New Guinea people' in 1874 (at the time when the London Missionary Society was beginning its work along the Papuan coast) that any one of them was more than likely to welcome you with the same standard salutation. 'Touch the nose with the forefinger and thumb of one hand, and pinch the skin on each side of the navel with the other; repeating at the same time "*maga suga*"'.⁵

The whole representation in the writings of these two Englishmen is, of course, polemically evolutionary, both scholars being the chief advocates for the Darwinian cause during the last four decades of the nineteenth century. Social Darwinists proposed that, in the overall history of mankind's social forms, including religion, there was a procession from lower, elementary, primitive forms to higher, complex, civilized manifestations, following the general law of progress. Put briefly, Spencer's position makes the point nicely: all religion begins with the worship of ancestors; ancestors, in the course of

time and in select cultures, become elevated into the gods of such pantheons found in ancient Rome and modern India; belief in one supreme being is a later development. Even monotheism, according to Spencer, moved out of cruder, more concrete approaches (the warrior's god of the Old Testament and Islam) to more subtle and abstract religions (Christianity). Protestantism improved on Catholicism, furthermore, by purging Christianity of images and magical associations; but best of all, and most civilized, was a position beyond that, one which left all outward expressions of worship and ritual behind, and simply conceded that an unknown force governed all — the great unknowable behind the law of evolution. For Spencer, then, the lowest was savage, and the highest had to be civilized, agnostic and (one justifiably suspects) English.⁶

Huxley's experiences in southern seas, it appears, influenced Spencer's formulation of this 'ghost theory of religion' (that all religion began with ancestor veneration). Significantly, Huxley was embraced by an Aboriginal chief at Cape York who took him as 'the returning spirit of his dead brother'. Even if Spencer might have later conceded there was some evidence of belief in a supreme being among New Guinea people, it never suited the theoretical preconceptions he had settled on by the late 1850s that nothing profound could come out of Melanesia, so full he deemed it to be of 'rude superstitions'.⁷ The religions of civilized and primitive were thus presumed to be poles apart, and this presumption unfortunately left its heavy imprint on subsequent popular views of the 'Oceanic tribes'.

Had either one of these British researchers possessed the opportunity to return to Bonarua Island, however, they would surely have found their snap judgements and aphorisms sorely tested. The islanders there actively honoured a supreme being and great Dweller-in-the-Sky under the name Yabwahine. He was:

the god of plants, land, seas and all creation. They believed that he saw all human beings and could punish anyone doing evil to others. They also believed that there were spiritual worlds, where the spirit of the dead person would go . . . However, they strongly believed in the pay-back system for wrong-doing while on earth and that Yabwahine also punished the wrongdoer . . . in the human . . . and in the spiritual world.⁸

This 'primal monotheism', as later theorists would have called it, at least shared certain points of principle (though perhaps not detail) in common with the Old Testament tradition and popular forms of western Christianity. As controller of crops, trees and animals, Yabwahine was understood to have imposed special laws (not to waste life while hunting, but to kill selectively; to clean the coconut tree after climbing it; to clean the gardens, and so on). Admittedly, the Bonarua emphasis was on the fear of requital if tabus were not kept, rather than on a god of love as found in the New Testament (or on an uninvolved unknowable for agnostics); yet, who would deny the role of fear among most Christians as they reckon with consequences of 'breaking the

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rules'? In any case, if Spencer considered conceptions of deity to be more profound when a divine agent was deemed to be less personal and to be high above mere mortals, he could have found such ideas — had he ever had the gumption to leave England — in various quarters of Melanesia. Aitawe, for instance, was held to be the One without whom the (Mae) Enga universe could not be sustained (central New Guinea highlands); the Ngaing Parambik (hinterland Rai Coast, Madang), who first 'put' the natural environment — 'land, rivers, wild animals, birds and plants (including totems), and even war gods' — was somehow remote and elevated beyond all else, 'all pervasive' and 'without fixed sanctuary'.⁹ There are other cases besides and, although such monotheistic-looking themes form but one part of a very complex religious scene, there is more than enough to call the lie to early cultural imperialists who have written off Melanesians (and so-called 'negrito' peoples in general) as among 'the lowest races' of humanity.

Today, over a century after these early Darwinian exercises in misunderstanding, we know better, hopefully. Melanesia has been revealed as the home of about one-third of mankind's languages, and that means — considering how languages are so crucial in defining discrete cultures — just as many religions. It is now eminently clear that accurate generalizations about Melanesian traditional religions are very difficult to make; it is also becoming more palpable that anyone wishing to assess these religions has first to gauge the effect of over one hundred years of prejudice and ethnocentricities on one's estimates. There has been a long voyage of consciousness from the time when it was acceptable to write in the official *British New Guinea Annual Report* that certain Melanesians were 'more ape-like than any human beings seen', and were 'cannibals from sheer love of human flesh' or of 'common desires', to the present situation in which there is just enough conscience and knowledge to brand such remarks 'racist'.¹⁰ It is a journey unfortunately still not over, and there is reason to be exasperated that there are still many who are simply too frightened of losing something of their own authority and self-esteem to reckon all peoples as worthy of respect and all of them as possessing certain profound insights, however strange to foreigners, about life and reality.

En route to the present, the rattlesnake of history has not only sloughed its skin but loudly rattled its tail across Melanesia. Change in attitudes to the beliefs and practices of indigenous cultures, borne out through a complex interaction between intruders and those intruded upon, colonizers and colonized, has taken shape within the wider context of imperialism. There are lots of ironies in this history: Germans, who did not trust the 'lying, thieving natives' bought great parcels of land from them for the unjust prices of mere beads; Europeans and Japanese, who looked down on so-called savages, found themselves on the Melanesian islands engaging in forms of warfare far more horrific than tribal fighting, sometimes exposing their dishonour to the locals by desperate acts (such as the looting of the bombed-out Burns Philp's bulk store in Moresby in 1942). Overall, it is remarkable how so many Melanesians

were able to adjust to very rapid shifts of the post-war era — along the path from the Stone to the Jet Age — and often coped better than the curiously motley bunch of colonials bringing the changes (or even better than the intellectuals who, coming in and out of universities and ‘the field’, wrote so much about ‘the strain’ of it all).

The missionaries were part of this saga-like voyage. They were different for having stayed very much longer among Melanesian peoples than most of the foreigners and, as I have recently written elsewhere,¹¹ despite their reputation for paternalism, those who brought the Christian message had to come to terms with the values and resilient properties of traditional religions. It was mostly through the missionaries’ written observations and their role as informants that accurate, more sympathetic accounts were given, and that Melanesians were encouraged to write about their own cultures. I say this with qualifications: even the best of the old missionaries wanted to eliminate what they considered the worst in the old traditions. A few might have believed the south seas housed some lost tribes of Israel and harboured traditions like the ‘books of the Old Testament’,¹² but most saw the horrors of heathenism, not the vestiges of veracity. Even today, moreover, there is a definite conflict of approaches between ‘conservative’ and ‘open-ended’ styles of missiology; the conservatives still play the old tune of bringing the Light of the Gospel into a dark, savage and unevangelized arena ruled by Satan, and to this day can write in mid-Victorian terms of ‘highland dandies adorned with parrot wings’ (shades of Huxley’s ‘great wag’!).¹³ The pressures of prejudice can still be found, then, even among those whose hearts are boundless with good intentions.

The Melanesians themselves have often experienced difficulties, having to come to terms with the problem of a great new Truth which seems to drive holes in so much of what they have held sacrosanct in the past. I have met many who were under the impression (conveyed by certain missionaries) that their people did not ever possess anything fine enough to be called a ‘religion’; I can remember how various young nationals at the University of Papua New Guinea expressed their astonishment that courses in Religious Studies (sponsored by the Melanesian Council of Churches) took in traditional Melanesian religions, not just Christianity (and other well-known faiths). Thus, the inhabitants of the ‘Last Unknown’ have often been made to feel that ‘nothing good comes out of their Nazareths’, and it is probably only in recent years, after various piecemeal attempts at cultural revival (by way of art and dancing) that the real issues have begun to be exposed. In any case, the Melanesians themselves have long been victims of their own prejudices, and each group found it difficult to accept as intelligible, let alone true, the beliefs of another. ‘Sheer superstition!’ shouted an adamant Fuyughe prophet as he stole a sacred pig-tusk out of a Seragi sanctuary (in the Papuan highlands); and (to take a New Guinea islands case) who among the Tolais took a Baining belief seriously when the Bainings themselves were reckoned sub-human?¹⁴ A few

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Melanesians, as with the Polynesians before them, became Christian missionaries themselves at the 'frontiers', and they were just as ready as many a white to advise the elimination of practices which they found utterly alien to their new-found faith.

One fact remains certain, however. The 'pre-pacified', 'pre-missionized' inhabitants of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands were not the ignoble savages outsiders have often made them out to be (although there is no need to re-ennoble them through a compensatory romanticism either). Those foreigners, too — who, by some providential paradox, created the conditions for Melanesians to see themselves as whole blocks of territories (rather than as small tribal groups) and form the newest nations on earth — were, themselves, only rarely untainted with barbarism, greed and discourtesy. And, from syphilitic castaways and ruthless blackbirders to certain insensitive administrators and exploitative multi-nationalists, much non-Melanesian 'savagery' abounds. One might also say that Melanesia was exposed to the world when it was 'closing time' for Western civilization, to use Norman O. Brown's phrase¹⁵ — when the old imperialisms were scrambling for remainders before going out of business. For Melanesians, when they greeted and pinched their navels before the 'whiteman', it was 'opening time'; yet, after a century in which the old proud inquisitiveness has mingled with lack of confidence, or a sense of inferiority, much business is left to be done.

Major themes in Melanesian religions

If the Melanesian religious tapestry is so variegated that generalization is risky, there is still a sufficient number of recurrent motifs or themes begging for analysis, and a good deal of ignorance and misconception to counter by disclaimers. This chapter is intended to be a general, introductory account of traditional religions; it concentrates on major features and, for sheer manageability, mainly draws on examples from Papua New Guinea and the Solomons. In this way the reader will be prepared for more in-depth chapters on themes in traditional Melanesian religious life which are of most interest to modern students.

Deities and spirits

There is no uniform pattern of belief about 'spirit-beings' in Melanesia. The number of such powers in the host of traditional cosmoi vary from the many to the one. When Ralph Bulmer lived among the Kyaka Enga in the New Guinea highlands, for instance, thorough anthropologist as he was, he uncovered as many as ten classes of spirits including a (recently imported) fertility goddess, 'nature demons', 'sky beings', a female 'forest spirit', 'cannibal ogres', 'minor native spirits' and the dead both recent and long since departed. When Maraga Momo, the Motuan pastor, found himself sent as the first missionary