

University of Bergen



Department of Social Anthropology

Bergen Pacific Studies Research Group

Workshop

‘New Christian movements in Old Christian contexts in Melanesia’

Hotel Terminus, Bergen, 19th September 2008, 09.00-17.00

The background for the workshop is the need to explore the emergence and re-emergence of important indigenous movements in 'old Christian contexts' in Melanesia. Christianity has become a much discussed topic in anthropology generally and in particular in the anthropology of Melanesia. Some of the more recent debates, however, have centred on the consequences of fundamentalist Christianity in previously non-Christian contexts. The present workshop will aim to shed light on those contexts in Melanesia where Christianity has a long history, but where Christian movements and indigenous churches take on new significance in encounters with waves of new forms of Christianity or with new social, economic and cultural challenges.

The workshop is part of the Bergen-based research project 'Pacific Alternatives: Cultural Heritage and Political Innovation in Oceania'

Convenor: Dr. Annelin Eriksen, University of Bergen

Workshop Chair: Dr. Knut Rio, University of Bergen

09.00 Introduction by Dr. Annelin Eriksen

09.15 "On Christianity in Melanesia: Taking the Long View", by Professor **John Barker**, University of British Columbia

10.00 Discussion

10.15 Coffee break

10.30 "Seeking Unity: Pentecostal and other Millenarian Movements in Vanuatu", by Dr. **Annelin Eriksen**, University of Bergen

11.15 Discussion

11.30 Lunch

12.30 “100 years of Adventism, 50 years of New Life: Land, Logging, and the Power of Churches in Marovo Lagoon”, Professor **Edvard Hviding**, University of Bergen

13.15 Discussion

13.30 “Melanesian Christianity and Cargo Cults”, by Dr. **Andrew Lattas**, University of Bergen

14.15 Discussion

14.30 Coffee break

14.45 “Conflicting Christianities: The contemporary Methodist Church in New Georgia”, by Dr. **Cato Berg**, University of Bergen

15.30 Discussion

15.45 “Sleeping Church vs Clapping Church: conversion and counterreformation in the Anglican homeland”, by Dr. **Thorgeir Storesund Kolshus**, Oslo University College

16.30 Discussion

16.45-17.00 Summing up

20.00 Dinner (venue to be announced)

Abstracts:

John Barker

On Christianity in Melanesia: Taking the Long View

Christianity is now recognized by most anthropologists as a legitimate object of ethnographic research. This shift has been marked by an outpouring of dissertations, articles and monographs on the subject, especially from former colonial territories. In Melanesia, much of the new research has been based upon ethnographic fieldwork within small rural communities rather than urban areas, regions, churches, or nations. While ethnographic research can and does open important insights into the local impact and configuration of Christianity, it is not in itself enough. This is particularly important for our understanding of the social impacts of “Third Wave” churches—the mostly Pentecostal and Fundamentalist sects that have swept through much of the region in recent years. In this presentation, I argue for approaches to Christianity in Melanesia that are both historically and regionally informed and whose ethnographic focus is not solely village-based.

Annelin Eriksen

Seeking Unity: Pentecostal and other millenarian Movements in Vanuatu

In this paper I will suggest a frame of analysis for the understanding of new Pentecostal churches in Vanuatu by comparing these churches to other millenarian movements in the past. I will point to one particular social dimension of religious movements, namely the ability to create temporary social unity. Based on fieldwork in Port Vila in 2006, I give ethnographic accounts of two new churches of the Pentecostal and Charismatic kind operating in Port Vila, the Bible church and the Renewal church, and I outline the genealogy of these churches and compare them to other religious and social movements in the area.

Edvard Hviding

100 years of Adventism, 50 years of New Life: land, logging, and the authority of churches in Marovo Lagoon

Unlike in many others parts of Melanesia and the wider Pacific where the Seventh-day Adventist Church tends to be late-arriving splinter movement or recent evangelist pioneer, the SDA faith and its fundamentalist tenets and egalitarian institutions was introduced to Marovo Lagoon of Solomon Islands already in 1916 during intense rivalry with the Methodist Mission. Marovo society then developed according to a dual structure with SDAs and Methodists (later United Church) leading separate lives reinforced by mutual distrust and regional endogamy. About 1960, the Methodists of New Georgia split with the emergence of the Christian Fellowship Church (CFC), a prophetic movement which under its mantra of “New Life” led a secretive communalist life in remote parts of New Georgia, until quietly moving into central economic and political positions in the late 1990s when the nation was in a situation of government collapse. I wish to bring discussions of “old Christianity” and “new movements” down on the material ground, by looking at the two churches from the vantage point of the logging boom of late 20th century New Georgia and examining the divergent implications of logging: for the CFC areas, massive financial accumulation and durable hierarchical organisation, and for the SDA areas, little economic gain and the fragmentation and erosion of customary forms of authority. The SDA church, once the pre-eminent modernist movement in Marovo Lagoon, rivalling the “Industrial Mission” of Methodist strongman J.F. Goldie, has fallen into obscurity (though not as badly as the deeply troubled United Church) – while the CFC, once denigrated as a cult with heathen proclivities, now successfully pursues unprecedented large-scale development agendas across rural New Georgia.

Andrew Lattas

Melanesian Christianity and Cargo Cults

This paper will explore the local forms that Christianity assumes in New Britain; the various ways Christianity has been indigenised and how this sustains and merges with local cargo cult experiments in beliefs, practices and social relationships. Local clandestine forms of Christianity have created their own Melanesian theologies of sin, punishment and redemption and, through the cargo cults, they have informed the creation of new pastoral regimes and practices which experiment with positing and realising the utopian promise of government, now formulated as a future Heavenly government of the dead.

Thorgeir Storesund Kolshus

Sleeping Church vs Clapping Church: conversion and counterreformation in the Anglican homeland

Mota, in the Banks Islands of north Vanuatu, was the cradle of Anglicanism in central Melanesia, and remained exclusively Anglican for almost 150 years. However, following a land dispute with political overtones, one village converted wholesale to the Pentecostal Assemblies of God in the year 2000. The choice of this particular denomination was not deliberate – ‘anything but Anglican’ seemed to be the guiding principle – but the consequences of the conversion have nevertheless been considerable. In this paper, I present the rationale behind the conversion as well as its impact on village life and the island’s social fabric more generally. The two churches’ approaches toward personal spiritual engagement are outlined, together with the response from the Anglican establishment to counter the impact of this new form of spirituality. Finally, these issues are put in the context of recent developments within the loosely defined anthropology of Christianity

Cato Berg

Conflicting Christianities: The past and contemporary Methodist Church in New Georgia

In this paper I address the contemporary Methodist Church in New Georgia, through a historically and empirically based analysis of the waxing and veining of this religious movement. The Methodist Church was established in Roviana lagoon in 1902, and through the works of the renowned missionary and leader John F. Goldie grew to cover most of New Georgia. It later changed the name to the United Church, with firm relations to Methodist Churches in Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Tonga. It was only the Seventh Day Adventist Church (SDA) that was any real contender in this part of the Solomon Islands. More importantly, SDA only stemmed the growth into new areas and never gained in popularity in the areas where the Methodist Mission was supreme. It was only the later advent of the Christian Fellowship Church (CFC) that really shook this hegemony. CFC sprang from within the Methodist Mission itself through the works of the gifted Silas Eto, and as the Methodist Mission had in the past, spread to areas such as Vella Lavella and Rendova, although being firmly based in Marovo. With this as a background I discuss how orthodox Christianity in Western Solomon Islands today still finds itself in an unsure position and how religious affiliation is very much dependent upon wider mechanisms such as group membership, marriage and various strict cultural norms, founded in reciprocity and kinship. I will primarily describe how the United Church in Irigila in Vella Lavella can be seen as a curious mix of Methodist and CFC rituals, due to the social history of this village. I will follow this argument through by using the case of the centenary for the Methodist Mission in Munda in 2002 as an example and background to discuss the past and the future of this religious movement in Vella Lavella and beyond, as entangled in the particular cultural and social history of the region.