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End Times Prophecies from Mt. Hagen, Papua New Guinea

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The Pacific is one of the many arenas in which are seen numerous variations on the eschatological thought that God is definitely bringing the world's end at or near to the year 2,000/2,001. Our research focuses on the Kawelka people living in the Western Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea where a millennial movement has arisen in which the individuals and collectivities involved are both observers of the various signs or markers of the impending event and active agents in their transformations.

Christianity came into the area in the mid-1930s and posed a challenge to indigenous beliefs and practices. Reactions were at first confrontational, but the missions in question, Catholics and Lutherans, tended to adopt gradualist policies towards conversion and to induce people to join the church by offering access to health care and educational facilities. At a later

point Pentecostalist churches came into the area bringing new challenges. One church, the Seventh-Day Adventists (SDAs) fell into disputes with other regional churches about whether it was acceptable to eat pork (a major cultural focus in Hagen) and about the Sabbath Day (whether it should be Saturday or Sunday). Along with the introduction of Christian practices there was a sustained perpetuation of indigenous assumptions and ideas in terms of the significance of dreams, the causes of sickness, and the underlying means to retain health and fertility.

There are approximately 2,000 Kawelka people who live primarily within the Wahgi Valley close to Hagen township. Their language is Melpa and many people speak Tok Pisin (i.e. one of the three official languages of Papua New Guinea). (The interviews in this paper were conducted in Melpa and translated into English) The land where they live is fertile and suitable to the growing of coffee and tea as well as wide range of food crops. The previous political alignments of the Kawelka have been modified over time, but the basic structure of a division between allies and enemies still exists and inter-group hostilities have been exacerbated by the introduction of guns into warfare (replacing bows and arrows). Another change is that food and clothing are increasingly bought from local tradestores or from town shops instead of being produced locally.

The Kawelka cultivate both subsistence crops (e.g. sweet potatoes and corn) and coffee gardens. Pigs are still extremely important to the Kawelka and eaten only on special occasions. They are used as brideprice payments, donations at funeral feasts, and for compensation payments (e.g. payments made to members of an enemy group after a killing of one of their members in fighting). Shells which were used as currency in the past have been replaced since the

1960s with introduced cash. The emphasis on the use and acquisition of cash is a part of what is fueling the End Times scenarios throughout Papua New Guinea. It is believed that cash will become harder and harder for people to obtain and eventually a time may come when only the followers of the Antichrist will have sufficient money to buy goods (P. Stewart and A. Strathern 1997).

In the past temporal and spacial ritual trackways existed for some Papua New Guinean groups as a means to maintain and renew the fertility of the group, its land, and the cosmos (P. Stewart 1998). That is, cult sacrifices were made at specific locations to regenerate the earth's power and these performances took place in a sequence over time and proceeded from place to place over a whole landscape. Christianity has altered notions surrounding these trackways but many of the basic themes are perpetuated and expressed in innovative ways. For example, in 1997 a young apprentice pastor among the Kawelka, Yu, laid out a Christian trackway as he led a procession of Assembly of God (AOG) adherents who were speaking in tongues through the entire settlement area in which our field house was situated. This was done at 3:30 A.M. in the morning after the local AOG service had been concluded. As Yu and his train of followers weaved their way along trails and between houses one could hear Yu calling out in English, "Let justice be done in the world! I rebuke you Satan, and all your works! Praise be to the Lord Jesus! May he protect this area and all who live in it!" Speaking in tongues is in general an increasingly popular form of direct communication with God in Charismatic and Pentecostal movements across New Guinea. The use of English in this context is thought by the people to be a sign of divine inspiration even though using English does not follow the Biblical teachings on

glossolalia as stated in the 1st Epistle to the Corinthians, Ch. 14:

“For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue, speaketh not unto men but unto God, for no man understandeth him.”

This talented youth, Yu, is described by senior men in the community as a gifted (shamanic-like) person who receives dreams and visions from God about the presence of demonic forces and is able to heal the sick. This puts him in a category of individuals whom the locals can easily recognize and appreciate as fitting into their ‘traditional’ models of community healers although Yu's dependence on God and his emphasis on visions is a new element.

In addition to Yu, one of the senior women in the community, Elizabeth, had been speaking in tongues (“Ra pa pa pa”), stamping her feet, and clapping her hands during the early morning parade. Later that same day we asked Elizabeth what had been going on. She told us that the church was praying that we as outsiders would be saved from any harm befalling us, which (she said) is so common in these End Times when thieves prey on innocent people. In addition, she probably also knew that various individuals had actually threatened us during our stay because we were unable to meet their expanding demands for money and goods. As outsiders from America we are assumed to be rich and Elizabeth was perhaps expressing some sympathy for us.

The parade that we witnessed was just one example of how Christian ideas have become integrated into the indigenous notions regarding fertility and power, replacing pre-Christian ritual trackways with Christian ones. Also, noticeable is the incorporation of singing and dancing into the Christian meetings which serve as a means of attracting the Holy Spirit and its powers to

come to people just as they had served in the pre-Christian period to attract spirits and their powers to assist the people. The Charismatic Catholic fellowship groups in Hagen sing the night through so as to obtain inspiration from the Holy Spirit. Their Christian songs are set to indigenous melodies. Often the melodies are ones that would have been sung at funerals in the past but are now speeded up and celebrate life with God. We might suggest here that the spirit world is constituted in part by singing and dancing, in both indigenous and Christian representation, and that singing and dancing are performative acts that attract spirits and thereby produce fertility through fusion of the human and spirit worlds. This fusion may allow the transfer of knowledge which humans can then use to sustain their fertility and that of the cosmos in which they interact.

Another means of acquiring valuable knowledge that is shared between Christian and indigenous conceptions is through dreams and visions. In Mt. Hagen, local visionaries and inspired dreamers are gaining prominence for themselves through predictions that the world's end is close at hand. One of these people is Yara, the daughter of one of the Kawelka's leading men. In 1997 she described to us the chronology of the End Times and then related one of her dreams to us:

"In 1998 the Antichrist will come. Some good people will be taken up at that time, the time of rapture. Their bodies and spirits will be taken up. Others [sinners] will be cast into fire. In 1999 God will return and judge people close to the year 2,000. The Pastors say this. The Pastors in their sermons tell us that this is going to happen but only God really knows. The Antichrist is a man. He will ask those who believe in God if they do and he will try to kill them

with an axe. Those who do not believe in God will be taken by the Antichrist. Signs of Satan are all around us, brothers killing brothers, fathers killing daughters, fathers and sons fighting".

Yara's dream:

"I was going along the banks of a river, going and going in a difficult place [a pilgrimage]. There I came to a place where there was a permanent materials house [not a bush house] and I came to a place where there was a man who was reading names in a very large book. He looked up and he saw me. I said that my name is Sarah, it used to be Yara. He asked me, 'what is your name?' I said, 'when my mother bore me she called me Yara but when I was baptized my name was changed to Sarah. My name will be in your book.' I stayed silent. He said, 'your name is Sarah.' He called it and I realized my name was in his book. As he called out my name I went into his house. Many people were coming and going in the house, it was the last Judgement and the people were being divided up. I went along into the wilderness place by herself and cried and sang a hymn and said, 'Oh Lord, this is the End Time what am I going to do?'

In the dream I awoke and said, 'Oh I've seen a dream of the End Times', and then I truly awoke and I was making a prayer to God. With my noman (mind) I thought, 'I know how the last times will be -- I must behave myself when the End Times come. That's the meaning of the dream that God revealed to me.' We ask God to give us dreams and show the way giving moral advice."

As described in Yara's dream it is common practice for New Guineans to take a Biblical name at the time of their Baptism and to stop using their parentally given name. People want to be called by their new names because that is the name that is thought to be written in the 'Book of Life' that God will read from in the End Times to determine who will enter into Heaven. In this case the name Yara was not written in the 'Book of Life' but Yara's new name, Sara was written in the book. Here we see that her Baptismal Christian name serves as the password into the house of God. Often in the past acquisition of a new name marked the point of initiation into many cults and marked the entrance into a new life.

We present below some of the interviews that we have conducted with Hageners about

End Time beliefs.

Interviews with Hageners

Mande-Kele is a Hagen woman who grows coffee in addition to keeping her garden and raising pigs. She is one of several co-wives of a local Hagen man (Polygynous marriages have been accepted in many of the local Fundamentalist churches although not promoted as a way of building a family for the young people today and a new challenge has recently been put forward to make polygamy illegal in Papua New Guinea (PNG Post-Courier newspaper, March 9th 1998).

Mande told us that the End Times are truly close at hand and that the earth will soon perish in thunder and earthquakes. She and those in her church fast frequently so as to be ready for the moment when God returns, at which time the Antichrist is thought to be coming among the people.

Another sign of the End Times coming is what Mande told us in 1997 is called 'Ground Place Power' (GPP) (Möi kona paua) (P. Stewart and A. Strathern 1998a). The power that she speaks of is the power that arises out of development processes around them as signs of the End Times. Mande told us that the GPP is very great in places of white men and many bad customs and behaviors come from this and that Jesus will need to come back to stop this GPP from rising up. She said, "that is why we spend all of our days in church, Monday to Sunday. Many people are urging people to join the church because the world will end soon."

Interview from 1995 with Mande

Q: I wonder if you have heard of something that many people are talking about at present: that the world is going to come to an end and I wondered if you had heard about it?

M: It is true that heaven and earth will come to an end. This talk about the world finishing is already in the talk of the apostles in fact already in the story about Noah, Noah said according to the words of the apostles that it was true that the world was going to come to an end because God had told him. Therefore Noah built a ship that's right isn't it? And Noah addressed the people and told them 'Listen you have to listen to the religious talk I'm making here because there will come a flood and if you do not listen to me the flood will overwhelm you. I think this is true for our times also now because in dreams I see it. I see that old people and young people are all involved in talking about this and prophesying. This talk is to be found in the book Revelation which is the last one in the Bible. It is true that the land will finish and the Heaven will finish. This is because there are so many bad things happening amongst us. This talk is in the Bible.

Q: Do you know if they have been saying anything about how money will change as the End Times approach?

M: Yes, what they say is that as we use this money and time goes on the money will not be sufficient for us. The money will be dry and insufficient on our hands [for something to be dry means that it is not healthy or fertile] and if a single country comes to look after Papua New Guinea, then the world will come to an end and that is why those of us who have taken Jesus into our lives have got to continue praying very hard about this. We must not change our minds or swerve away from our chosen paths because the world is going to end. It is going to happen that a

bad country will look after us. If that happens we will not be able to travel and eat and walk about in the way that we want to in a free manner. Another country, a different one will come and look after us. And therefore we must be really strong and continue to pray and those of us in the Church are saying that we do not want another country to look after us because Papua New Guinea has been called a Christian country and we want it to remain so therefore we keep praying that we will be able to continue as we are now, let no other country come inside here.

Q: What about the price of coffee?

M: Yes, they used to give 150 Kina [the currency in Papua New Guinea] or 120 Kina for a bag. Now the price keeps on going down and if it continues in that way and supplies of it are full up elsewhere, then maybe the work of government will simply go wrong and be bad and then they won't buy the coffee at all. Words such as this, prophecies such as this are to be found already in the Bible. If I had a copy of the book with me - the Bible that is -- I would lift it up and read it. As we watch things in the future we may see that the price of coffee may go down. We may see that the things to be bought will be many but the money will not be sufficient to buy them. In your packet there will not be money for you to use and when it is finally finished, that is when the world is going to end and therefore everybody has to pray very earnestly.

Another informant, Tom ---- is a mid-aged Hagen who grew up in the local community and subsequently lived in the Capital city, Port Moresby, for some years before returning to Hagen to settle. The following are comments that he had about Christianity and on the End Times.

Interview from 1995 with Tom

Q: You joined the SDA Church didn't you?

Tom: Previously I belonged to the Lutheran church and I was baptized into it and I went around sometimes going to Church, sometimes not going to it.

At the time when they [his kinsfolk] paid a brideprice for a wife for me I left the Church and just went around in my own way. Afterwards I returned here [to Hagen from Port Moresby] and when a certain time had passed I used to visit a number of the Church services and I thought that in some of them things were not really strong. Over time, God himself indicated to me that I should join the SDA Church, so I did. I decided that I would not steal anything and I would behave well. I realized that otherwise I would go around and cause trouble for people and give difficulties to them which they had not expected and therefore they would feel badly towards me and then perhaps I would get sick.

In some Churches I have seen how they take communion. They take communion but they do not take it seriously and afterwards they come away from it and they sin again. Because of this a true belief does not really enter into them. But the SDAs are really very circumspect and concerned about the question of sin and they take it rather seriously. That is why I decided to join them. I went into the SDA Church because to a certain extent I believed in it and I thought that I would join it and live a quiet life. Now that many, many people are joining various Churches perhaps trouble will not come up so much because maybe to a small extent God is looking after these people and therefore he gets rid of the tendency to sin amongst them and these people live better in the places among us.

Q: Yes, --- what do you think about this talk that the world is going to come to an end?

Tom: Well, with regard to that, there really is no date scheduled for this. Jesus did not tell people that he would come back at a specific time and that they should be ready for him. At the time when Jesus ascended into heaven he spoke to his disciples and said, "I am now going to go up to heaven: I'm going to go there and be with my father. At the time when I'm going to return again there will be some signs which you will see. So when these signs come and appear you must be very fervent and strong in attending the Church and be ready for me". That is what he said to them when he went. He said that at the time of his second coming he would take up with him the ones who had behaved well while those who had behaved badly would be left behind. He said that he would secretly take the good ones with him. At the third time he returned, he would finish off everything on the earth and in the sky and everyone who had sinned would be cast into the fires of hell and those who believed would stay with him in Heaven. These are the things that he told to those who walked along with him as his disciples and these words are in the Bible.

Q: Do you think that people consider that the time of Jesus's return is close to?

Tom: Those people who do read the Bible and read it through to its end point to the fact that certain signs have occurred. For example something happened with the moon. Something happened to the sun also, there was a fire ball in the sun and as a result there was an eclipse and the earth was in darkness. And people said that these were the signs that Jesus had spoken about. And that's why they say that the return of Jesus is now close at hand. and that's why people say that Jesus and God are going to return soon.

Q: What do you think about that; do you think the world will end soon?

Tom: Well, I do see that certain things are happening such as government is bad. Things will continue until the government does not have power and that is the time that they said the return of Jesus would occur. That is why to a small extent I do believe this and I think God is going to return.

Q: They also say things about money.

Tom: Yes, they do say that at the time when God is going to return, money will be held freely in the form of cards. On these cards there will be the number of Satan. With this kind of card with the number on it people will be able to go into stores and get what they want. They will be able to buy cars with it. They will do those kind of things but as for those who truly believe in God there will not be any numbers that emerge for them. And they do say also that the Catholics and other Churches will come and they will fight the SDA church, in order to establish Sunday Church as against Saturday church. And as a result the SDAs will have to run away and hide in the forests and wildernesses. And that's the kind of story that is repeated amongst us.

Q: These are the kinds of stories they tell. Do you think any of these things are really happening?

Tom: Yes, they are talking about these things and it is just beginning to happen. For example in Port Moresby [the capital city of Papua New Guinea] as they go around in buses they just have ticket passes: they don't buy the bus rides as they used to with money. They just have tickets and people interpret these tickets as a sign that God is going to return. People who belong to the Churches say to the others who do not belong, "God will come back soon and therefore they must join the Church now and, as a result people become converted.

Q: Will you tell us about something about the way people are getting sick and dying nowadays?

Tom: In the past when people used to get sick we hired ritual experts to make spells over them.

We used to ask people if they had stolen something or what they had done, thus they cured them [the confession cured them]. Then afterwards many people joined the Churches and yet the stealing and the ways of promiscuity have become commoner amongst us. And what happens as a result is that God who sees them doing these things makes them die very quickly within a day or two of becoming sick. This is how it happens now among people of my age.

Q: In the past people used to say when someone got sick that it was the spirit of a dead person who had come and looked at him, what do you young people nowadays think about that?

Tom: In previous times people used to say that and they brought ritual experts to deal with it.

They sacrificed pigs and said that after the saying of the spells that the spirit had been removed and they used to pay the ritual experts for doing this but those of my generation, we do not have ritual experts of that old kind. Now the Lutherans and Catholic Churches have come and the old ritual experts themselves have become converted and given up their practices. Now at this time when people who are Christians get sick, they go and tell the pastors and the pastors make prayers over them and to a certain extent the people get better. And as for those who have entered into the waters of baptism and yet do wrong afterwards, God punishes them and takes their life away from them. God does this so that these persons should not have the opportunity to teach others their bad ways so if they are sick on one day the next day he takes away their life. We see that and say, 'God has taken away the life of this person who has done wrong'. Therefore we are strong in going to the Church. As a result, the affairs of the Church have become strong.

Q: Do you think that spirits of the dead are there or really are not there?

Tom: Well, in the Churches now they say that the spirits of the dead are actually Satan. They say that it is Satan who comes and gives people a bad dream, not the spirits of the dead. People themselves say 'Oh dear, I had a dream. One of us is going to die'. And thus they suggest we make a sacrifice 'I've had a bad dream' they say and if something big comes of this they say "Well that is what my dream foretold" In the Church they say that this is something Satan produces. But the people who are members of the Church do not say anything about the spirits of the dead. They just pray to God whatever goes wrong. And as a result things that are heavy or difficult do not occur in their lives because God himself covers these up.

Through our interviews with Hageners about the End Times we have seen some of the ways in which they are attempting to cope with the new uncertainties in their lives. These coping mechanisms include fasting, prayer, and thus seeking to strengthen their mind (noman).

Fasting is seen as the counterpoint to greed which is associated with witchcraft and the decay of the earth's fertility. The act of fasting is thought to re-establish a balance between over-consumption (greed) and while at the same time announcing one's act of personal sacrifice. The total avoidance of food is an act of performative and expressive efficacy that is thought to prepare the individual making the sacrifice for the time when Jesus will return as well as acting to quell the evil powers that exist in the present context that the Hageners find themselves living through: these evils include a rise in theft, prostitution, murders, and the spread of AIDS.

Many Hageners are involved in prayer meetings on a daily basis. During our field work in

1997, Church fellowship groups could be heard at night and into the early morning using loud speaker systems to send their message across the settlement area. During the daytime we would often see sleep deprived individuals under trees for several hours recapturing the lost sleep time that had been spent in communal prayer. Through prayer, as through dreaming, one seeks to strengthen the noman (mind) which is thought to be one way of becoming a better Christian and thus worthy of salvation.

As we have seen, dreams and visions are two means by which Christian Hageners obtain knowledge about the End Times. Both of these modes of acquiring knowledge have long standing parallels in the indigenous belief systems.

The End Time as envisioned by Hageners fits well with similar Millennial preachings that are globally disseminated. Hageners localize these concepts to conform to their own immediate concerns and intertwine them with their indigenous ideas of self, life, and death. Thus global patterns realize themselves through local mutations and incorporation into existing social patterns.

We see a similar pattern among the Duna people of the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea who retain fundamental ideas about the ground (rindi) and the spirits that are linked to the specific ground where each parish is located. In the past it was thought that the ground 'finished' (i.e., became depleted) at regular cyclic intervals and this had to be attended to by periodic ritual performances (called rindi kiniya) which brought fertility back to the ground (P. Stewart 1998; A. Strathern 1998; A. Strathern and P. Stewart 1998). These indigenous notions have merged with Christian ones and when the Duna say the ground is finishing now they are referring to the apocalyptic End Times (P. Stewart and A. Strathern 1998b). The signs of the End coming are

expressed in moralistic terms similar to way they are in Hagen.

The recent drought and subsequent food shortages in Papua New Guinea have stimulated procrastinating older Hageners seriously to consider joining the Church. They are expressing a concern that the end is now shown to be upon them. One of our main informants in Hagen recently (December 22, 1997) wrote a letter to us in Tok Pisin which listed the seven ways that the End is seen to be at hand: (1) famine, (2) blood in the rivers, (3) large bleeding sores on the skin of men which will not kill them but will produce sustained pain, (4) a flood, (5) people dying and their bodies releasing corruption, (6) Jesus will return and fire will consume everything, (7) the sky and earth will end.

The severe El Nino induced food shortages in 1997 continue in Hagen although less so now (April 1998) than several months ago. With the end of the drought the rains have come and flooding has begun and continues to occur in many parts of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Associated with the drought and the subsequent wet season has been a heightening of the spread of diseases such as skin sores, malaria, and typhoid. It is not hard to see that the Hageners might believe that the Biblical prophecies are coming true at this time.

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