PACIFIC STUDIES

THE DOMESTICATION OF CATHOLICISM ON TOBI

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In this article I examine public dimensions of the religious life of the
people of Tobi, an island in the then Palau District of the United States
Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, as I found it a quarter of a century
ago. I present this examination in the belief that, whatever might have
been the immediate particularities of the Tobian situation, in its general
outlines it had much in common with what might be called neotradi-
tional sociocultural organization in many parts of colonial Micronesia
and beyond.

Of course, contemporary Palau is a quite different place than it was
twenty-five years ago, and the situation of Tobians in it is also very dif-
ferent.[1] As Nero (1987) makes clear, though, the present in Palau is
always grounded in the past. This holds no less true for Tobians than for
ethnic Palauans. This article, then, can be seen as a contribution to the
study of an obscure part of Palau's past that in turn may help to shed
light on its present and future. Beyond this ethnographic goal, however,
there is the comparative or ethnological.

The Tobi of this essay was a neotraditional society. In this context
"neotraditional" means a way of life focused on Christianity and copra,
with modified elements of the precontact adaptation still important,
especially in the subsistence system and local political arrangements.[2]
Thus, an analysis of the religious pole of that way of life in one such
society may well prove useful in understanding the general historical
phenomenon.

After laying out the ethnographic and historical context, I sketch the
outlines of ancient Tobian religion before turning to the conversion to
Roman Catholicism in the 1930s. I conclude with an analysis of the role

Tobian Catholicism played in the life of the island community during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Organized religious activity on Tobi was primarily an external, social phenomenon rather than an internal, individual or private affair. My focus here is on the use of religion for society's ends—a focus that accords well with Tobian religious attitudes. I trace the continuities in Tobian religious attitudes over time and demonstrate that as surely as they molded the prehistoric religious life of the island, they shaped Roman Catholicism on Tobi. This is the explanation for the title of this article: Tobian conversion *to* Catholicism was at the same time a conversion *of* Catholicism. Even though neotraditional Tobian Catholicism contained strong traces of pre-Christian Micronesian religious tradition, Roman Catholicism did not completely yield to the constraints of its new island home. Furthermore, some of those features that resisted change caused a good deal of difficulty for Tobian society. Thus, I will argue that, along with the social benefits brought by conversion (and they were considerable), certain characteristics of the introduced religion brought new problems.

Neotraditional Tobian Society

Tobi, along with Merir, Pulo Anna, Sonsorol, and the usually uninhabited islet of Helen, is one of the Southwest Islands of Palau. Approximately 120 people called the island home during the early 1970s. At any one time, about half of these people were living on Tobi itself while the rest were in Palau proper, 380 miles north. The entire Tobian population was Roman Catholic, having been converted soon after the failure of a brief period of secularism forty years earlier. Politically and economically part of Palau, Tobi, like the other Southwest Islands, was culturally and linguistically much more closely related to the Trukic low islands and atolls of the Central and Western Carolines to the east—places like Ifaluk (Lutz 1988), Lamotrek (Alkire 1966), and Ulithi (Lessa 1966)—than it was to Palau (Parmentier 1987; Smith 1983).

On Tobi, people lived by gardening and fishing; they also produced some copra for export. The cash brought in by copra sales (along with the government salaries attached to the positions of health aide and schoolteacher and cash remittances from relatives working in Palau) was used to purchase the few necessities Tobians did not produce themselves. People lived in thatch-roofed houses clustered along the island's western shore. Public buildings included a meetinghouse, school, and a dispensary. The most important public space in the community was the

were, in fact, the same twice-daily prayer services of which the priests were so approving.

This interpretation, as well as the interpretation of other features of Tobian Christianity, rests upon an understanding of the ecological, cultural, and historical matrix in which they arose. It is necessary at this point, therefore, to turn to that setting.

The Island Context

Tobi's small size (about fifty-nine hectares, or less than one-fourth of a square mile) and remote location (about 150 miles from the nearest inhabited island) were important, for they provided the parameters within which the Tobians created their way of life. Also important was the geological and biological simplicity of the island. Unlike a coral atoll, Tobi possessed neither a lagoon nor an extensive reef system; there was only a single low island, fringed all around by reef. At the center lay a depression, once completely reclaimed for gardens but slowly reverting to swamp as population pressure eased. From the center, the land rose up on all sides before sloping off to beach and reef. The soil was sandy and, except where humus had been created by gardeners, not very fertile. Plentiful rainfall gave the island a lushly green appearance, but this appearance was somewhat deceptive—only a limited range of plants and animals occurred on the island. In this sense, the island was impoverished. Yet many of the species that did appear were so well adapted to the island's conditions that they flourished in abundance.

Much of Tobi's abundance resulted from the activity of its people. From the artificial fish habitats built out on the reef to the coconut plantations and gardens of the interior, the Tobians had reworked their island ecosystem over time to create a more sustaining habitat. In this sense, the island was almost as much an artifact of their culture as were the skillfully designed and carefully built thatch canoe houses that lined the shore or the even more complex and functionally elegant outrigger canoes with which Tobians exploited the resources of the sea.

Over the years, each of Micronesia's colonial powers also left traces of its presence. Towering over the island were several ancient coconut trees with Imperial Germany's double-headed eagle carved deep into their trunks. These trees were the survivors of extensive (for Tobi anyway) coconut plantations mandated by the Germans to provide an export crop during their brief rule in Micronesia from 1898 to 1914. These plantations required that other vegetation be cleared from a considerable area of the island. They also provided the first regular source of

Roger Keesing (1993), also is inadequate. But given the island's remoteness and size (or lack of it), I find it useful to build into my model of the postsettlement, precontact trajectory of Tobian history a tendency towards equilibrium seeking, a bias towards system maintenance, a striving for balance.

This brings me to a larger point: In my view Tobian history has been lived out in a series of major epochs punctuated with major junctures. The challenge for the historically minded ethnographer is to discover and then specify what transversed those junctures from one epoch to another and what did not (see White 1991, 1992). In other words, such junctures were only partial ruptures of cultural and experiential continuity. This is what makes "neotraditional" a workable category—as I am at some pains to demonstrate in this essay.

A further task, then, is to sort out the power of continuing culture to organize people's experience during major junctures and beyond. This question rapidly leads to discussion of fundamental issues for history and anthropology, demonstrated, for example, by the very interesting debate over the interpretation to be put upon the death of Captain James Cook at the hands of the Hawaiians (Sahlins 1981; Obeyesekere 1992).

The Tobian historical juncture that I am attempting to understand had as its focal point a 1931 walk taken by the newly arrived first missionary between two rows of smiling and welcoming Tobians. As I hope to demonstrate, all parties to this first encounter brought to it their particular views of what was going on, yet no one was trapped in an inescapable system of symbols that allowed no room for learning and creativity. By all evidence everyone involved (on the Tobian side at least) immediately began busily turning the story of what had occurred to their own political/ideological ends. It is there, in that process of memory and story, that one can see the threads created across historical junctures from one epoch to the next. To understand the indigenous pattern of values and cultural truths into which Catholicism was drawn, we therefore must turn to a consideration of the context in which that pattern arose.

Ancient Tobi

It is not known when the ancestors of the present population arrived on Tobi. Genealogies and chiefly chronologies make it unlikely they reached the island (which in all probability was uninhabited) any less than two hundred years before the first recorded sighting of the island

in 1710 (Eilers 1936:1). The people who settled Tobi brought with them cultural knowledge, skills, and techniques refined through countless generations of island life. The challenge faced by the first Tobians was to learn how to modify their knowledge, skills, and techniques to the specifics of their new home. That they successfully did so is proved by the survival of the society they founded.

Tobi, as an ecosystem, presented some remarkable challenges to its first settlers. Its remoteness seems to have kept it isolated from the kind of interisland system with which they were probably familiar.[3] That same remoteness also meant that their descendants would be more at risk from disease on those rare occasions when their isolation was breached—the lack of regular contact with the outside world gave the Tobians no chance to build up immunities to diseases endemic in the region. Most important of all, this remoteness meant that the social system that arose on the island was remarkably self-contained. In other words, the response of that social system to the adaptive challenge posed by the Tobian ecosystem was limited almost entirely to the resources immediately at hand.

Over the course of succeeding generations two complementary processes unfolded. On one hand, the cultural tradition the first settlers brought with them was modified to fit the particular opportunities and limitations of the island. The accumulated wisdom of centuries of experience, stretching all the way back in time and space to the neolithic in Southeast Asia, provided a cultural template that was fitted to Tobi and produced a Tobi-specific variant of the Oceanic pattern. On the other hand, the island was progressively modified through the application of that Tobi-specific cultural pattern to increase its usefulness as a human habitat. Thus, over time a uniquely Tobian adaptation arose.[4]

Religion seems to have contributed greatly to the success of this adaptation, just as it had in the ancestral social system from which the first colonists had come. It was through the sacred that the balance between society and resources was monitored and reinforced, and it was through the sacred that the value of cooperation—upon which the successful exploitation of those resources depended—was mandated. In other words, part of creating a successful Tobi-specific application of the ancestral Micronesian pattern entailed ensuring that maladaptive behaviors were minimized and environmentally sound practices encouraged; this is what religion *did*.

The adaptation reached by ancient Tobian society was a kind of system, and like any system it could spin out of balance. It was highly vulnerable to environmental fluctuation, for example. Rain could fail,

local fish populations shrink, typhoons devastate the island, and the lack of complexity in the resource base left little room for alternative sources of sustenance. Human action could also have devastating effects on the system. Broadly speaking, there were two classes of activities that could threaten the adaptation—unrestrained intensification of resource utilization and uninhibited conflict. Religion was central in meeting both these threats by providing the needed restraint, the necessary inhibition.

Any attempt to create new methods of resource utilization, especially activities designed to intensify exploitation of existing resources, could easily lead to unforeseen and highly negative consequences. For example, it might be to the immediate advantage of individuals or groups to clear as much land as possible to make way for plants with high day-to-day value. If unchecked, however, this activity could denude the entire island of the various indigenous plants, shrubs, and trees that had only occasional but important utility (mostly as medicines or building materials). This danger was averted by maintaining the north end of the island as a kind of sacred preserve from which building materials and medicinal plants could be taken along with naturally occurring foods, but only as necessary and only after various religious regulations and proscriptions had been met.

Another example of religion's role in providing restraint was to be found in an extremely efficient technology for capturing large amounts of fish, which was regulated through religious means. Huge fish traps, complex structures of sticks lashed together, were lowered many fathoms deep over the outer reef edge. When retrieved several days later, they contained vast numbers of fish. Such a technology, if overused, could have had serious consequences for the reef fisheries that provided much of the island's protein. This did not happen, however; these traps were used only as part of a religious cycle, a cycle that also regulated the use of the sacred northern lands.

Conflict, at least its disruptive dimensions, was also subject to religious control. A prerequisite for the success of the Tobian adaptation was the maintenance of cooperative and mutually supportive relations between all Tobians, regardless of any disputes that might trouble society. Tobian strategies for survival depended on achieving a high degree of cooperation and sharing of resources. A wide range of subsistence activities—from gardening to house building and maintenance to fishing—were governed by this necessity. At the same time, relations between individuals and groups of individuals could hardly remain untroubled given the island's finite resources and small area. In fact,

under some circumstances, disputes over resources, especially multiple claims to plots of land, served the interests of society as a whole: Such conflicts guaranteed that needed resources would not sit idle for lack of legitimate owners. The challenge was to prevent disputes and the hostility associated with them from disrupting the cooperation and mutual support upon which life on the island depended. Tobian culture contained a whole array of values, beliefs, institutions, and techniques to meet this challenge, and religion was foremost among them.

A sacred aura seems to have suffused the entire adaptation; thus "traditional" ways of behaving partook of the holy and deviation from them was seen as wrong. The sacred, in turn, was largely a matter of public morality, a morality that demanded cooperative and mutually supportive relationships and a kind of determined cheerfulness no matter what the provocation. Like uninhibited resource exploitation, overt interpersonal conflict was morally abhorrent and spiritually sanctioned via supernatural beings, myth, and ritual.

Traditional Tobian Religion

On precontact Tobi, as on the other low islands of the Carolines, a wide range of supernatural beings, ritual practices, and beliefs permeated daily life. A detailed reconstruction of traditional Tobian religion is not possible since the few surviving accounts are vague, contradictory, and in some respects highly implausible. Nevertheless, the general picture derived from oral tradition and early descriptions is clear enough for present purposes.[5]

Magical and divination practices were probably the most common manifestations of what could be labeled religious activity. Specialists as well as ordinary folk no doubt used magic to foretell and control the weather, diagnose and cure illness, detect thieves and protect property, and promote safe voyages, plentiful catches, healthy births, and fertile gardens.

Related to the use of magic were the numerous religious prohibitions and restrictions that surrounded many activities. The performance of magic ritual, house building and major repairs, canoe building, various medical treatments, many kinds of fishing, the physical processes of menstruation, birth and death, all seem to have been hedged about with various restrictions. Many of these restrictions served to limit resource exploitation or to minimize occasions that could trigger the expression of conflict.

Use of the sacred northern land, and its useful and coveted materials,

was tightly constrained by religious restrictions. In addition to the large number of prohibitions governing its use, this district was known to be densely populated by dangerous ghosts and people ordinarily were very reluctant to venture there. This land was associated in ritual and in daily life with the island's chief. The chief gave or withheld permission to those who wished to exploit the sacred land's resources. He also officiated at the great annual feasts in which surplus coconuts from this land were distributed to the entire population. This role raises an important point.

The central chief of Tobi was as much a religious as a political figure and he was regarded with some awe by his fellows. His semisacred aura was linked to his descent from a line of chiefs that traced itself back to the mythical "mother of the island." This woman, with her father and husband, was said to have been the first person to live on the island and to have been the founder of the Tobian social system.[6] She was the subject of the major myth cycle, which among other things described how she set down the rules that governed many important features of the island's life. Each chief was said to have inherited this woman's special ritual knowledge and paraphernalia from his predecessor. With this inheritance, he served as the living exemplar of public morality, the most important ritual actor, and the intermediary between spirits and community.

In his role as intermediary, the chief communicated through the vehicle of trance with ancestral and other spirits. He possessed the ability to call the spirits into a small replica of a canoe, which hung, covered in offerings, in the spirit house—the main center of worship on the island. Once in the canoe, the spirits spoke to the assembled population through the chief.[7] Most likely, these communications had to do with maintenance of harmonious cooperative relations among people and the regulation of resource exploitation within traditional parameters—the two fundamental concerns of Tobian society. Two of the three kinds of supernatural beings known to ancient Tobians, ancestral spirits and gods, were part of this system of communication. The third, evil ghosts, served other purposes.

One cannot discuss Tobian religion either ancient or contemporary without attending to that class of spirit beings called *yarus* (or "ghost" by Tobian English speakers). As a general postconversion category, *yarus* came to include all supernatural beings, including the figures of the Christian supernatural order (the Trinity, the Virgin, angels, Satan, etc.), beings who seemed rather remote from the daily life of the island and from the immediate concerns of the islanders. Much more salient

was the class of malevolent, evil ghosts who infested the island and the seas surrounding it. These beings were feared and hated for their innate evil. As such they served an important psychosocial function, representing as they did culturally constituted figures onto which socially unacceptable fears and hostilities could be displaced. The concept of evil ghost also served as a powerful metaphor for a variety of disasters, both natural and man-made.[8] In my view, controlling those ghosts and the disasters they stood for was the main focus of Tobian religion, both ancient and contemporary. Furthermore, this pragmatic feature of Tobian religion helps explain the processes that led to the collapse of the indigenous religious system and its replacement by Roman Catholicism.

Briefly, oral histories seem to indicate that in the early years of the Japanese era, tensions rose on the island and ghost sightings increased dramatically. I shall return to this point shortly, but for now it is sufficient to note that the old rituals were clearly no longer effective in controlling ghostly activities. In other words, the old religion was failing to protect the island and its inhabitants from disaster and the old rituals were increasingly revealed as inadequate in their intended effect on everyday life. As this failure became generally acknowledged, the restrictions that were an integral part of the old religion began to be seen—especially by the young men—as onerous and unnecessary. Finally, these young men, apparently with the at least tacit agreement of the resident Japanese, the elders, and the man claiming to be chief, one night destroyed the spirit house and all the ritual paraphernalia on the island (Black 1978).

Of course, this abrupt movement into public secularism did not confront the fundamental beliefs and values that had been implicated in the crisis. Tobians continued to believe that communal religious behavior had consequences for all of society, that the sacred and secular worlds were inextricably connected, and that the relationship of the island to the supernatural, especially evil ghosts, was critically important in daily life. Yet now, during the period of secularism that followed the burning of the spirit house, they found themselves with no rituals at all with which to manage their relationship to the supernatural. The persistence of this pattern of beliefs and values together with the absence of any ritual within which to embed them explains the rapidity with which the entire population accepted Catholicism when it was offered to them about one year after the burning of the spirit house. To understand how the Tobian social system had reached this impasse, it is necessary to look at several processes that characterized the island's postcontact history.

Prelude to Conversion

During the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a series of severe blows disrupted the Tobian adaptation. Beginning with the appearance of the first sailing ships and the creation of demand for metal, cloth, and tobacco, the fundamental requirement for successful human occupation of Tobi changed. No longer was maintaining a tried and true complex of behaviors and attitudes within well-known parameters the best possible strategy. New situations, in which those established and traditional ways of doing things were inadequate, cascaded upon the island at an increasing rate.

Three interrelated trends developed that made much of the indigenous adaptation at best irrelevant and at worst maladaptive. These trends were a decline in social isolation, an erosion of political and economic autonomy, and a steady decrease in population. Demographic collapse (from 968 in 1909, the time of the first census, to less than 200 in the early 1930s) was caused by introduced disease, which in turn was related to the progressive integration of Tobi into the larger social systems created by the colonial powers.

Thus, by the late 1920s Tobians found themselves in a grave situation. Not only were they facing a precipitous population decline, but they also had to contend with intensified Japanese efforts to exploit the island's meager resources, efforts that led, among other things, to the forced division of the sacred northern lands into individual holdings to increase copra production. Furthermore, a quarrel had erupted between claimants to the chieftainship, a quarrel made worse by the death of the previous chief while living at a German phosphate mine in Angaur in Palau. His death had led to a disruption in the flow of ritual power from generation to generation.

Given the highly pragmatic orientation of Tobian public religion—in which collective ritual was used to control social and ecological disaster (symbolized by evil ghosts)—it is not surprising that confidence in the ability of traditional ritual to accomplish these ends finally eroded away as one disaster after another struck the island. It is less obvious, perhaps, that the increasing stress of the situation very likely was reflected in an increase in ghost sightings—an increase that confirmed people's worst fears about their ability to retain control of the fate of their society. To develop this point, we need to look a little more closely into the psychology (and sociology) of ghost sightings.

Ghost Encounters

An encounter with a ghost was a horrifying experience for a Tobian, with the power to bring even the most self-confident adult close to panic; such an encounter also had a strong communal dimension. As soon as a rumor flashed through the community that a ghost had been sighted, the entire island was plunged into a kind of nervous terror, which took days to dissipate. Whatever else was occurring during a ghost encounter, a tremendous amount of fear and hostility was expressed not only by the poor unfortunate who had met the ghost, but by everyone else as well. As I indicated above, it seems to me that a good deal of that emotion was a result of the frictions of social life, frictions that were allowed no other expression.

In my opinion (and I closely investigated a number of sightings that occurred while I lived among the Tobians), to "meet" a ghost was to interpret amorphous sensory stimuli as a ghost. Beliefs about ghosts (creatures of the twilight and the night, weirdly shaped, and incredibly dangerous) facilitated the interpretation of poorly perceived, eerie shadows, shapes, sounds, or smells as a ghost from which one must flee as quickly as possible. Yet, obviously, not every amorphous stimulus resulted in a ghost sighting.

At different times individuals were more or less predisposed to see ghosts and this depended on a number of factors. I think the primary variable was the amount of anxiety present. The more unexpressed anxiety and hostility a person was experiencing, the more likely it was that he or she would encounter a ghost. Increased rates of unexpressed anxiety and hostility, in turn, were at least partly a function of rapid social change. In a society in which traditional patterns and strategies had been valorized as sacred, the old ways of doing things were failing and new ones were being tried out in a context of rapid population decline, economic change, and political instability. Of course, this process probably was mediated through social structures, especially families, so that it was in intimate experiences with close kin that the rapid social change was translated into interpersonal tension and thus intrapsychic hostility and anxiety. Those who, for whatever reason, were less able to sustain that tension were those most at risk for ghost encounters. This was the pattern that obtained in later years and it makes sense to extrapolate it to that earlier era, especially given the existence of oral tradition.

By the first decades of this century, then, a vicious spiral had been set in motion in which traditional ritual became ever less capable of meet-

ing the needs of the community. An ever increasing rate of change and, hence, anxiety probably led to an ever increasing rate of ghost sightings, which then led to an ever decreasing confidence in the existing social mechanisms for dealing with either change or ghosts. It is thus understandable why, by the late 1920s, Tobians had come to the decision to do away completely with public religious ritual, its associated onerous prohibitions, its no-longer-awe-inspiring religious artifacts such as the sacred canoe, and even with the very buildings in which it had been enacted.

The dynamic that resulted in the ever increasing number of ghost sightings was not eased by this radical decision, however. In fact, quite the contrary must have occurred; this was a consequence of the persistence of the complex of beliefs and attitudes about the supernatural, about religious ritual, and about the self. People still believed in ghosts and their evilness. Ghosts were still disasters, in and of themselves, and symbolic of disaster in general. Ghost sightings still reflected anxiety and fear closely related both to the loss of autonomy, isolation, and population and to the continued recognition of the necessity of cooperative and mutually supportive relationships. Overt expressions of hostility towards one's fellows were still strongly sanctioned. And people still saw ritual as a kind of technology for suppressing ghosts and preventing disasters. During the period of secularism, therefore, the lack of such a technology and the persistence of all those other factors meant that the frequency of ghost sightings most likely continued to increase.

Small wonder, therefore, that when that Spanish Jesuit stepped ashore in February 1931, about a year after the burning of the spirit house, and began to teach a new set of rituals associated with a new supernatural order, he met with great success. It took him less than a week to convert and baptize many of the island's men, women, and children, and over the next few years the entire population became members of the church. The impact of this event was so profound that to this day the vocabulary of religion on Tobi is largely derived from the missionary's mother tongue. The words for the deity, for angels, for the seventh day of the week (the day of rest and worship), for the great holidays of the liturgical year, and for the church itself are all borrowed from Spanish. Tobians became devout and faithful practitioners of Catholicism. Furthermore, they used their new religion as the centerpiece of the neotraditional way of life they shortly thereafter synthesized. It is appropriate, therefore, to ask what is known about the events of that conversion.

Conversion to Catholicism

Three separate versions of the conversion of the Tobians are known to me. Two are contained in Tobian oral histories and the third in mission documents. The three accounts do not agree in all details, nor do they lend themselves equally to the same reading. I have published an analysis based primarily on one of the Tobian versions—what can be thought of as the mainstream or perhaps chiefly version (Black 1977, 1978, 1988). The other Tobian version forms a sharp counterpoint to that chiefly version and represents the point of view of a family that regarded itself as the dispossessed true holder of the title of chief. The mission version, the third, is recounted by Hezel and is based on mission publications and archival material (1991:215, 217–218).

Space is not available here for a full discussion of these three versions, let alone an attempt to reconcile them into an authoritative account. Certain features, though, must be noted. The chiefly version (call this Version I) names the missionary who carried out the initial mass baptisms as "Father *(Pasre)* Marino"; both of the other versions (Versions II and III) name him as "Father Elias." Now, among the documents unearthed by Hezel is a reasonably detailed first-person account of this episode by a missionary named Father Elias Fernandez (Fernandez 1931). Thus, it is highly likely that in this particular, at least, Version I is mistaken. It is not accidental, I think, that this error entered the tales told about the conversion by the chief and his loyalists (who in the late 1960s and early 1970s included most of the surviving participants in those events). After all, there was a Father Marino associated with the mission at the same time as Father Elias and, furthermore, the chief who told this tale was himself named Marino.

Given that the local understanding of the history of the conversion was at the same time a history of the creation of the moral basis of the social order, one can understand the process by which the chief and his loyalists incorporated the chief's name into that history. But since I inadvertently have inscribed this error into written history by publishing several accounts based on that chiefly tradition, I think it important that this error be corrected here.[9]

Another area in which Version I can now be shown to be probably counterfactual has to do with the conditions under which the conversion proceeded. At first glance, this appears to bear directly on the argument being developed in this essay. Version I presented the visit of the missionary as a bolt from the blue. The missionary is presented almost

as a deus ex machina, arriving on a Japanese steamer one day and sweeping the entire society into the arms of the church by the force of his arguments and the symbolic power of his acts. In fact, the corpus of those statements and acts forms the basis of what seems to me to be a kind of theology that the chief and the elders used to justify their Catholicism.

By 1968, the Catholicism of the people who led the neotraditional Tobian order (many of them participants in the great events of 1931) was based on a kind of quasi-theological foundation expressed in a myth built around the figure of the man (Marino/Elias) who converted them. This myth both justified and perpetuated their faith in the protective powers of Catholic ritual. Furthermore, it revealed those Tobians at their most creative; whether consciously or unconsciously they used the missionary's actions and statements to create a way out of the crisis in which they found themselves.

Just as the myth of the founding of Tobian society had grounded the aboriginal adaptation in the sacred, so did this new myth serve to validate many of the shifts in social life that resulted from the loss of population, isolation, and autonomy by grounding them in the new dispensation—Roman Catholicism. The new myth, like the ancient one, acquired its force from the way in which it expressed fundamental Tobian assumptions and values. However, it is now clear that here too the memory of these events encoded in Version I had been shaped at least as much by the ends to which this tale has been put as by the actual events themselves. Versions II and III agree that substantial preparation, carried out by Tobians who had earlier returned from Koror where they had already converted or had at least gained considerable knowledge of the new religion, preceded the visit of the missionary.[10] I find these two accounts, in this respect at least, convincing.

What is the import of this revision for the analysis being developed here? The claim that conversion resulted from conditions particular to the island seems subverted by Father Elias's report of marching to a "chapel" between lines of welcoming, reverent islanders and by his surprise at the remarkable amount of knowledge they already possessed about the new faith (Fernandez 1931). This is not necessarily the case, however. According to Father Elias, and there is no reason to doubt this, that knowledge and that chapel were the result of the activities of Tobian Catholics who had preceded him to the island (he states that there were seven baptized people there when he arrived). His account also makes it quite likely that the mission had been receiving requests from Tobian converts in Koror to bring Catholicism to their home

island. The Tobians in Koror lived in the same community with people from the other Southwest Islands and the mission had already had considerable success among the other Southwest Islanders in Koror and especially in Sonsorol the previous year.

Clearly the conversion to Catholicism was part of a wider social movement, grounded ultimately in colonial power and its locally produced dislocations. Yet, this movement worked itself out differently in each human community in which it unfolded. On Sonsorol, for example, an early missionary effort had come to grief in 1710, when no trace of a pair of Belgian Jesuits from the Philippines could be found by the ship that finally relocated the island several years after the two priests had more or less inadvertently gone ashore. The martyrdom of those missionaries came to be associated with Sonsorol's rapid population decline of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and especially the drastic decline in the number of live births. At some point, significant opinion on Sonsorol came to accept this connection. I suspect that acceptance played a large role in the subsequent conversion of the Sonsorolese.

On Tobi, on the other hand, the despair that resulted in the overthrow of the local religion and the ferment that followed were manifest in the continual encounters of people with evil ghosts. This, I think, was the problem people were trying to solve and this was the use to which they put the news that Sonsorol had converted. (Indeed, although there is no way at present to verify this, it may well be that the news of Sonsorol's conversion played an important role in the decision to rid the island of the burdensome remnants of the old religion.) In any event, the people who returned to the island as Christians could promote Catholicism as a set of rituals with which to protect the island from ghosts. In this case, the building of the chapel can be seen as an attempt either to bring the new religion into play even before the priest arrived or to at least prepare for his arrival. That a local agenda, as well as the priest's, was served by the conversion can be seen in the last entry of Father Elias's account of his visit. There he recounts the erection on the Tobian shore of a cross ten meters tall, other crosses at each house, and still others for a Via Crucis (Way of the Cross) in order, he says, "to chase off the demons."[11]

The Uses of Tobian Catholicism

Whatever the mix of motives and desires, confusion, and manipulation that led to the conversion of the Tobians, it proved remarkably durable.

Six years later, for example, when a Japanese scientist visited the island, he was moved to remark on the devotion of the islanders to the priests as well as the impressive amount of money (to him at least) the priests collected from the Southwest Islands on their pastoral rounds (Motoda 1939:103–104). In the following years, Roman Catholicism became central to the Tobians' way of life. As indicated earlier, time itself came to unfold to a Catholic liturgical rhythm. Days, weeks, and years were segmented by collective religious activity that structured the life of both individuals and community. Birth, marriage, and death were all deeply marked by the Church's sacraments.

At the same time, much of Tobi's pre-Catholic culture remained part of the island's religious life. The chief played a major role in ensuring Tobi's character as a Christian place just as his predecessors had acted to maintain the sacred quality of life in the ancient past. Rituals were still used to suppress ghosts. Even the northern land was still sacred—it was home to the island's cemetery.

Catholicism proved highly useful in the Tobian social system once it had been domesticated and incorporated within the neo-Tobian cultural meaning system. Among the other ends to which it was put, Catholicism was used to validate local understandings of ghosts and disasters, and its rituals were appropriated as ways for dealing with them.

Over time, however, many of the conditions that had led to the crisis resolved by the conversion no longer obtained. Yet because the solutions to these earlier difficulties were themselves now embedded in the sacred, they were resistant to ordinary processes of debate, negotiation, and change. By the early 1970s, several of those solutions had threatened to become obsolete, and one in particular had become severely disadvantageous. This had to do with marriage.

One of the major difficulties facing Tobian society at the time it adopted Catholicism was the loss of the homestead as the basis of social organization. All economic and political activity once had been predicated upon the existence of homesteads, which appear to have been the fundamental residential unit in precontact Tobian society. Homesteads were composed of sets of married sisters, their children, and their husbands. Each married couple and their young children lived in a separate household. These households were clustered into homesteads that exploited the lands belonging to the sisters' lineage (subclan kinship group). This system rested on the sibling bond between sisters, which was much more durable than the extremely fragile marriage tie.

Traditional rules governing marriage allowed a wide variety of "mar-

ital" relationships, which involved varying numbers of people and varying lengths of time. Seven exogamous matrilineal clans were the major factor that structured marriage. They divided the populace into seven intermarrying categories of people. The clans traced their ancestry back to the incestuous unions of the children of the woman who founded Tobian society. They were thus part of the sacred inheritance, and the bonds between siblings (and mothers and children) upon which the clans rested were given supernatural sanction.

As the population shrank in the early years of this century, finding a marriage partner became increasingly difficult. At the same time, individual households (based on marriage) replaced homesteads (based on sisterhood) as the crucial structural unit in the organization of political and economic life. The old system of subclan lineages and hamlets (homestead groupings scattered around the island) that had yielded residential clusters of closely related homesteads was no longer viable. The Japanese-mandated relocation of everyone into one village and the decline in population that left many lineages either extinct or too small to be active left the household as the single viable unit remaining in the society. Yet the traditional marriage bond was too fragile to bear the weight that circumstance now placed on it. Christianity, by sanctifying marriage, strengthened that bond at least in the sense of endowing it with a sacred character.

The impact of Christianity on Tobian marriage was perhaps the most profound and far-reaching of all the transformations brought by the conversion. In place of a secular and highly flexible system, in which each person could expect to be married to a number of different people during his or her lifetime, an extremely rigid and restricted system was adopted. Although the initial problem—the weakness of marriage—was solved by making it a sacred institution, the adoption of Catholic marriage rules created severe social problems over time. Three features of Catholic marriage rules were at issue: the requirement of lifetime monogamy, bilateral incest avoidance, and the necessity of a church-sanctioned wedding.

Lifetime monogamy in the Tobian context translated into a prohibition against establishing a household with anyone but one's first spouse as long as that person was alive. This rule was crucial in the transformation of marriage into the central structural element in Tobian society. It gave the marriage bond a strength it had never had before. However, it also exacerbated the difficulty that getting married posed for many people. Given the small pool of potential spouses and the necessity for marriage before one could set up a household and become a central political

and economic actor, the rule requiring lifetime monogamy made the cost of each marriage very high to every unmarried person. Acquiring a spouse, therefore, became a highly competitive and difficult process and the source of much communal tension and conflict.

The difficulty was intensified by the requirement of adherence to the Catholic incest rule that prohibits marriage between both patrilineally and matrilineally related people who are closer than what are commonly called fourth cousins. This rule contrasted sharply with Tobian pre-Christian incest rules, which allowed patrilineal cousins of all degrees to marry. Further narrowing the circle of potential mates was the retention of the clan system with its rule of clan exogamy.

Finally, there was the rule that no marriage could occur without the sanction of a priest. Examination of this requirement shows most clearly the manner in which marriage had changed from a secular to a sacred institution. It meant that every marriage required a priest's blessing, which in turn meant that the parties involved had to convince the mission that their proposed union met the Christian requirements of monogamy and incest avoidance. It also meant that the possibilities for modifying the institution of Tobian marriage to meet the exigencies of the social situation were quite limited. In other words, the rule made the mission an unwitting accomplice in the many bitter struggles over marriage that ran beneath the pleasant surface of Tobian social life. Sometimes it even made the priest an unconscious pawn in one of those struggles as individuals tried to disrupt a proposed marriage by convincing him that the match violated one or more of the church's regulations.

A more positive feature of Tobian Catholicism can be seen in the three ways in which Tobians used it to ease their situation in Eang, their community in Palau. Catholicism provided them with a strong and ready-made component in the creation of a pan–Southwest Island identity, with a vehicle for connecting to an important sector of Palauan society, and with a powerful institution to protect and advance their interests.

The Eang community, comprising people from all the Southwest Islands, was encapsulated within the much larger and very different Palauan society. Just as all Tobians were Roman Catholic, so too were the people of the other Southwest Islands. Thus a common religion (along with versions of a common language, culture, and political situation) provided the basis for building a Southwest Island sociocultural system and identity within the Palauan world. In this light, the reconstruction of the church in Eang can be seen as both an expression and a reinforcement of Eang's character as a Catholic community.

Southwest Islanders were not the only Catholics in Palau. There was also a large and active group of ethnically Palauan Catholics. In the same way as Tobians used Catholicism as an element of their identity as Southwest Islanders, so they also used it to connect to people and groups in the larger society of Palau in which they were embedded. Many Tobians who succeeded within the Palauan social system did so at least partly on the basis of connections they had established with Palauan fellow Catholics through the church.

In my opinion, and in the opinion of many Tobians, the most beneficial consequence of their Catholicism was found in the many efforts of the Catholic mission on behalf of the islanders. Priests were often very helpful to Tobians attempting to cope with government and commercial institutions in Palau and beyond. Several Tobians even found employment with the mission, while others received excellent educations in mission schools. Any Tobian in Eang trying to deal with sickness, personal or family difficulties, or just the complexity of life in Koror could always count on the mission for a sympathetic hearing and the offer of help and advice. Thus, when Tobians talked about the virtues of their new religion, they stressed two things: the power of Catholic ritual to suppress ghosts on their home island and the compassion of the priests.

Conclusion

I have focused here on the public dimension of Tobian religion, rather than on the internal, private worlds of the Tobians, primarily because religion traditionally had little to do with such internal worlds on Tobi. For Tobians, issues of being and becoming, of self-maintenance and self-transformation (Goodenough 1988) were dealt with through interpersonal relations rather than through religion (and as far as I could tell, always had been). Thus, Tobian society was sharply distinguished from the much more familiar cultural pattern in which such issues are dealt with through religions—institutions organized around conceptions of the supernatural.[12]

Tobians have never been mere passive objects of change. They have always responded actively and energetically to their gradual and not so gradual entanglements in the world beyond their island—as their ancestors had responded to the challenge of creating a self-sustaining adaptation to the less-than-bountiful Tobian ecosystem. That original and successful adaptation had been thrown out of order by the impact of the various colonial powers. The Tobians of the 1930s adopted Catholicism and began to use it to deal with the acute crisis in which they found

themselves. It provided them with a new set of rituals and a new means for relating to the supernatural—both of which they saw as essential and both of which had been lacking. In adopting (and adapting) Catholicism, they enshrined solutions to difficult aspects of the 1920s crisis within their new religion. Unfortunately, much later, when those solutions themselves became the source of new difficulties, they had become sacred and that sacrosanct nature rendered them impervious to profane arguments for their modification. In other words, the cultural maneuver of the 1930s, in which Catholicism was appropriated by the Tobians as a means of escape from an acute social contradiction, contained its own hidden contradictions, which only became apparent much later.

One can think of Tobian religion as acting like an outrigger on a canoe—a necessary balancing weight lashed securely but flexibly to Tobian society. In the ancient past, religion acted as a balance against the twin dangers of overexploitation of resources and the disruption of interpersonal cooperation. Catholicism was appropriated and crafted into a distinctly Tobian phenomenon at a time when overexploitation was no longer a threat to social equilibrium, but the danger of the loss of interpersonal cooperation remained. Just as in pre-Christian times, cooperation was threatened by the hostility reflected in those evil ghosts whose suppression and control was managed through the technology of ritual. The need to maintain checks on resource utilization was replaced by the imperative to deal creatively and positively with rapid economic, political, and social change.

Tobians used Catholicism for social balance with mixed results. In the area of marriage, the new religion created a difficult situation. In the equally critical situation in Eang, however, where it was necessary to create and maintain a viable way of life vis-à-vis people from other societies, Catholicism was highly successful.

As any Micronesian sailor can testify, changing outriggers in midcourse is no easy task. And having to refashion the new one at the same time that you are lashing it into place creates an even more precarious situation. The Tobians successfully replaced their ancient religion with Catholicism. The fact that this produced negative as well as positive consequences is, in the end, less remarkable than the fact that they managed to do it at all.

NOTES

eral faculty development grants from George Mason University. Between 1967 and 1973, a total of two and a half years was spent with the Tobians: six months in Eang and the rest on Tobi. In 1990 I spent four months with the Tobians living in Koror, studying their adaptation to life in that rapidly changing port town, and in 1993 I made yet another, shorter visit. Other data have been collected from various museums and archives. Final changes in the manuscript were made while I was in residence in the Program on Cultural Studies at the East-West Center, Honolulu, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and George Mason University.

Even though it is possible that several of them will object to some statements I make here, I am happy to acknowledge, as always, the cooperation and assistance of the people of Tobi, by now extending over several generations. K. Avruch, B. Black, G. White, and an anonymous reviewer of this manuscript provided useful criticism and insights. I want to particularly thank Father Francis Hezel, S.J., who generously provided copies of documents that he discovered in the course of his own research, as well as a close and very thoughtful critique of an earlier draft of this article. That critique and those documents significantly deepened my understanding of certain crucial features of the story I tell here. My interpretation of that story remains my own, as does the responsibility for any errors it contains.

One final point: In the process of arriving at a new constitutional arrangement within which to organize their affairs, the people referred to here as Tobians renamed their island (or at least the Palauan state government centered on it) *Hatohobei*, just as the word *Palau* was changed in the creation of the new entity called the Republic of Belau. As for that larger entity, the usage that seems to be emerging among Tobians is to keep the earlier form when using English and to use the new one when writing or speaking in the local language. I follow that usage here.

1. The reader interested in learning about the contemporary Palauan scene, dominated as it is by protracted status negotiations with the American government and related constitutional struggles, could start with Aldridge and Myers (1990), Black and Avruch (1993), Kluge (1991), Leibowitz (n.d.), Rabbitt-Roff (1991), and Wood (1991).

2. Oliver provides a description of many prewar societies in the colonial Pacific to which the adjective neotraditional, as I have defined it here, could be usefully applied (1989:87–251). I specify the term in this manner to avoid muddying waters already clouded by its occasional appearance in the discourse around *kastom* in Melanesia, where it occasionally calls up a self-conscious retraditionalizing of postcolonial, indeed postmodern, societies; see, for example, Keesing 1982:298. But even here, the more common use of the term seems much closer to the usage I am employing (Babadzan 1988:203; Howard 1983:179). If a genealogy of this term is required, one could begin by noting that Howard grounds his definition of the term in Hooper's 1982 work and then go on to an inspection of the term as it appears in a variety of sources, for example, Macnaught (1982) or, working backwards in time and out toward the margins of Oceania, Willner (1966). But compare with Thomas who appears to move back and forth between the two usages (1992).

3. The reasons leading me to think that Tobi probably did not form part of any regular system of precontact interisland exchange are set out in Black 1977:91, n. 15. But see Hunter-Anderson 1992 for a report of what seem to be Palauan pottery sherds from an early time period.

4. See Bellwood (1978), Terrell (1986), and Irwin (1992, especially pp. 117–132) for recent ideas on Pacific prehistory. Hezel (1983) is useful for the early contact period in the

Carolines. It should be noted that Palauan culture seems to have its immediate origins south and west in Island Asia and not, like Tobi, in the Trukic culture area to the east. Finally, mention should be made of Tobian narratives that refer to occasional voyages to New Guinea and more regular trips to the uninhabited atoll on Helen Reef, forty miles east.

5. Eilers (1936) contains most of the available material on ancient Tobian religion. Black (1978) also discusses this topic. Alkire (1977) gives a good general introduction to Micronesian culture. The earliest substantial accounts of Tobi date from the captivity of a group of New England whalermen on the island from 1832 to 1834. See especially Holden ([1836] 1979), Bernard (1980), and Browning (1885). All three sources contain valuable material on the pre-Christian religious life of Tobi.

6. Oral histories from both Tobi and Fais (approximately 775 miles to the northeast) raise the strong possibility that this woman was from Fais. Donald Rubinstein, who has carried out ethnographic research on Fais, has recorded a genealogy in which a woman appears with a name very similar to the name of the woman Tobians claim first found their island and from whom they claim descent (pers. com., 1993). In that genealogy she is said to have left Fais on a voyage from which she never returned. One version of the Tobi myth also has her (if she is the same person) departing from Fais.

7. Sources differ on whether nonchiefly spirit mediums were participants in this class of events. All are quite clear, though, that the chief controlled the ritual and provided the interpretation of the uncanny speech and noises produced by those possessed by the spirits in the canoe, whether himself or another medium.

8. Spiro (1952) contains a neo-Freudian functional analysis of such ghosts on the culturally related atoll of Ifaluk that has become a classic. Black (1985) adds to that analysis a focus on the Tobian metaphorical use of the concept of ghost.

9. The contested nature of Version I was certainly pointed out in that earlier work, and where the probability of distortion was demonstrable, it was noted (Black 1978:325–328, 329–331, 333–336, 341–342). Since that earlier analysis, however, I have had access to Versions II and III, enabling me to see more clearly the selective workings of political memory. The three accounts are not in total disagreement, however. And among those things that they all agree on, two points stand out: the issue of ghosts was addressed by becoming Christian and marriage was reconstituted by the missionary (with difficulty).

10. Versions II and III disagree about the ground out of which that local initiative arose. Not surprisingly, in this respect the two Tobian versions are much closer to one another than to the missionary account. The subtext for both Tobian versions refers to local politics, especially the struggle over chiefly succession and the premissionary movement away from traditional religion. Father Elias's account has as its subtext, naturally enough, the miraculous workings of God's grace in the world. And, of course, one imagines that he was probably not privy to all the ins and outs of local Tobian political struggles.

Another strand of the story emerges from Lehmann 1908, which recounts the tribulations of a Sonsorol man who lived in Yap during the German administration (sometime prior to 1914, that is) for a number of years before moving to Tobi. This man had been baptized in Yap during a serious medical crisis. A man said to have lived on Yap with the Germans appears in many Tobian stories of the introduction of outside material culture to Tobi, for example, eating utensils and plates. Lehmann's man is named Mafateng; the person in the oral histories, Johannes (Hannes). This latter figure was not, at least in any of

the material I have collected, said to be either Sonsorolese or Christian. Nevertheless, the possibility exists that these were the same individual and thus raises the further possibility that Christian agitation on the island began a good number of years earlier than any of the other sources indicates.

11. It is interesting to observe that Version II claims a locally controlled disempowerment of ghosts; one of the early, pre-Elias Christians rendered the ghosts powerless by the liberal use of holy water that he had brought with him from Koror. Version I attributes the triumph to the missionary's actions.

12. In recent years this aspect, among many others, of the Tobian situation has changed through their increased involvement with Palauan and American cultures, the decay of their densely interconnected social system, and the growth of a cash-based economy. These factors have served to intensify the exposure of the lone self, to make self-preoccupation and introspection more prevalent, and to raise questions of self-worth and meaning. The whole character of ghost encounters, for example, has begun to shift in recent years into a much more individualized and often "romantic" mode.

Recent changes in Tobian experience, all of which indicate a shift into a heightened concern with the disconnected self, mean that concepts such as sin, salvation, grace, and redemption will probably acquire greater and greater salience for Tobians over time as will the ritual and theology associated with them in religion. In another paper I consider these issues in more detail, paradoxically enough in the context of an attempt to understand the recent drastic decline in Tobian church attendance (Black n.d.).

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