

# Spirits

in Culture,  
History,  
and Mind

Edited by  
Jeannette Marie Mageo  
and Alan Howard

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## 8 Apparitions, Orations, and Rings

### *Experience of Spirits in Dadul*

Harvey Whitehouse

The Mali Baining live on the island of New Britain in Papua New Guinea. In the late nineteenth century, German colonists settled the northeastern coast of New Britain, which rapidly became a center of colonial government. It continues to be one of the wealthiest and most cosmopolitan regions of the country. Mali Baining communities, however, remain dispersed in the comparatively untouched rain forest of the island's interior, and along less accessible parts of the coastline. Nevertheless, because of their geographical proximity to the economic and administrative center, the Mali Baining have been subject to missionary influence since the early part of this century. In the inland village of Dadul, traditional religious practices were largely eliminated in the 1930s as conversion to Christianity intensified. In the late 1960s, a new religion spread to Dadul: a Christian-syncretic cargo cult with strong millenarian and nationalist elements. This new religion, which continues to encompass several language groups, stands firmly opposed to the Christian missions, despite its appropriation of Christian doctrines. In Dadul, certain aspects of pre-Christian ideas about spirits persist alongside Christian-syncretic conceptions of ancestors, ghosts, and devils.

This chapter concerns the people of Dadul, a Mali Baining village of about seventy persons in East New Britain. Like many other New Guinea peoples, the Mali Baining believe that they share the surrounding rain forest with capricious, nonhuman spirits. Nevertheless, these spirits, known as *sega*, do not figure highly in moral discourse. For the past twenty years, the people of Dadul have been ardent supporters of a large-scale millenarian movement, known as the Pomio Kivung, which focuses moral and religious concerns on local *ancestors*. This has led to three basic types of experience with spirits in Dadul, each with a distinctive set of psychological and political ramifications.

First is the experience of *sega*, a striking feature of which is an absence of religious salience and a sense of entropy with respect to the pre-Christian cosmological system in which *sega* used to figure. *Sega* are nowadays perceived in Dadul to be amoral supernatural agencies that have no direct bearing on religious thought, and are somewhat vaguely associated with forgotten initiation rituals, dances, and magic largely eliminated in the early phases of missionization. In the modern context, the psychological experience of *sega* is impoverished, not merely by the loss of indigenous cosmology, but because the metaphors involved in ritualized interactions with *sega* lack the poignant and revelatory character of contemporary religious ritual in Dadul. The sterility of this mode of interaction with the supernatural realm, and its neutrality in religious terms, means that it constitutes an innocuous, "neutral" field of discourse and ritual action among members of opposed religious sects.

The most heated sectarian antagonism obtains between Christians and supporters of the Pomio Kivung. The latter maintain that a great number of Christian teachings are valid, although they argue that missionaries also peddle deceits that are designed to obstruct the laity from attaining salvation. Meanwhile, Christians are highly critical of what they call the "cargo cult" element of Pomio Kivung religion, and its preoccupation with ancestors. Nevertheless, both Christian and Pomio Kivung moral systems demand harmonious relations between rival groups, and this is expressed in regular cooperation at major celebrations and funerals. The religious aspects of these occasions cannot stimulate goodwill, and what tends to be emphasized instead is a set of common "Baining customs," converging on so-called "fire dances" and divinations. These occasions, focused on relations with *sega*, provide the main contexts in which Christians and Pomio Kivung supporters cooperate.

Second is the experience of spirits (primarily ancestors) in the doctrine and ritual of the mainstream Pomio Kivung. This movement has an elaborate, coherent, and logically integrated body of doctrine that is codified in the repetitive sermons of local orators. As we shall see, the way ancestors are apperceived is to be understood in terms of specific connections between cognition and codification, which in turn affect patterns of leadership and spread within the movement.

A third mode of experiencing spirits prevails in the context of temporary splinter groups in Dadul, which break away from the mainstream Pomio

Kivung movement at regular (but infrequent) intervals. Splinter-group activities are concerned with the cultivation of sensually and emotionally arousing experiences of ancestors through collective rituals, some of which are markedly traumatic. The nonverbal modes in which ideas about the ancestors are transmitted are linked with the small scale and sporadic nature of splinter-group activity within the Pomio Kivung.

These modes of interaction with the spirit world show significant contrasts. Experience of *sega* is marginalized in the religious discourse of Dadul. Its political significance resides in the fact that this experience is shared among doctrinally opposed religious camps: the profound antagonism between Christians and Pomio Kivung supporters is temporarily put aside on occasions when rituals concerning nonhuman spirits are jointly performed.

Religion in Dadul focuses on ancestor worship, enacted in contrasting modes: that of the mainstream movement, in which there is a complex interplay between verbalization, routinization, hierarchy, centralization, and universalism; and that of the splinter group, which entails iconicity, revelation, emotionality, infrequent transmission, and particularism.

At the core of my analysis is the claim that the experience of spirits, and its articulation with politics and cosmology, is a matter not so much of "what people believe," but of the way these "beliefs" are codified and transmitted.

#### SEGA

A broad distinction can be made between individual experiences of *sega* in magic, dreams, and various types of misfortune, and collective experiences in divinations, funerals, and "fire dances." Both types of experience of *sega* lack cosmological salience and coherence, in contrast with people's experiences of ancestors which, as we see below, constitute the focal representations of religious life in the Pomio Kivung.

*Sega* are thought to look like humans, although few people have actually seen any, except in dreams. People cannot readily explain how they recognized what they had seen as a supernatural being, rather than as a mortal stranger. Those who claim to have encountered *sega* describe the experience as very frightening, which is the main evidence that they saw something unworldly. They sometimes add that the apparition disappeared when they averted their eyes, or that it had not been heard approaching. Ordinarily, however, *sega* are invisible to human eyes; many *sega* are in the forest, and they are particularly active after dark. A special kind of "sight," available to anybody while dreaming, is required to perceive them, and indeed most people have encountered *sega* when asleep. Stories are told of gifted individuals who are able to visit the *sega* at will in their dreams and thereby sustain regular relations with them. Such people are called *agun-garaga*, and their abilities are held in high esteem; they sometimes learn from the *sega* reasons for human problems, such as illness or crop failure. A typical cause of such misfortunes might be that a person inadvertently damaged the

home of a *sega* in the forest, or walked through its "garden," mistaking it for undergrowth. *Sega* are not offended by moral transgressions injurious to humans, and only punish unwanted interference in their own affairs. The problem is that, unlike dangers in the forest that can be seen (e.g., pythons, nettles, sharp objects), *sega* cannot usually be identified and avoided, and the fact that they have been disturbed or provoked only becomes apparent later, when misfortune strikes. This is when people in Dadul are heard talking about *sega* and speculating about how they may have been offended.

*Sega*, however, can be useful to humans, especially to men. Villagers think that hunting successfully is virtually impossible without the *sega's* assistance, which is solicited through the performance of magical rites. Some of the most powerful spells contain the names of specific *sega*; it is assumed they were revealed in dreams and passed down through the generations. Hunting magic and other spells are ordinarily transmitted by older men to younger men, most commonly from father to son. A youth may ask any senior man known to possess magical knowledge to teach him spells, in return for which the young man may be called on to assist in the older man's gardens, or to help with other manual tasks. The following example illustrates how spells are used to intervene in the world of *sega*.

Our house in Dadul was guarded by a dog named Kaukau, who always slept at the door and repelled unfamiliar visitors. In the daytime he was often used as a hunting dog. One day, a hunter returned to the village at dusk, and said that Kaukau had come with him in the morning but had soon disappeared in the dense undergrowth of the forest. That night, another man in the village had a dream in which he visited a "house" (*abuga*) built in the base of a large tree. This was the house of a *sega*, and around it had been planted flowers. Among these flowers, hens were digging the earth in search of food. Then Kaukau appeared, chasing a black rooster and causing the hens to scatter. Kaukau was so absorbed in the chase that two *sega* were able to grab him as he ran past, and they took him into their "house." Kaukau was unable to escape from the base of the tree.

News of this dream rapidly spread around the village, and finally a man said that he would perform a magical rite to retrieve Kaukau. He obtained some lime powder and went to a secluded place at the edge of the village. There he clasped the lime powder in his hand, close to his mouth, and murmured the following words (my translation):

Go to fetch him.

Go to fetch the named one.

Go to fetch the named one, Kaukau.

Look here, he will come wherever I am.

All will look, and will talk, ["express amazement"]

Look here, my two helpers, Basir and Sordem [names of *sega*].

All will look at me sending you with my lime-powder.

You two, go to seek him.

You must not avoid searching a mountain, or a hill, or a water source, or a tree; you both seek him wherever he is and fetch him here.

Then he opened his hand and blew off the lime powder. If it had stuck to his hand, the lime powder would have been "cold," indicating that Kaukau was dead. In this case, however, the powder dispersed on the wind. He then held up his hand. If the wrist bone made a "cracking" sound, then Kaukau would be very distant; if his elbow cracked, then Kaukau would be quite near; if his shoulder cracked, Kaukau would be very close at hand. His elbow cracked. Word would now spread among the *sega* that Kaukau must be released and shown the way home. Sure enough, that evening, Kaukau returned to the village, none the worse for his adventure.

A number of common features of spells, and ideas about *sega*, are illustrated by this example of the use of retrieval magic. The physical actions of the magician utilized the principle of bodily iconicity whereby, in this case, relative distances between the torso and points along the arm corresponded to distances between the village and the dog being retrieved. This is a typical feature of Mali Baining magical rites, wherein the body and movements of the magician mirror effects or states that are desired in some other part of the physical world (e.g., suddenness and force are required of the ropes in pig traps and are replicated in the ritualized body movements entailed in hunting magic). This may seem familiar in terms of a Frazerian conception of contagious and homeopathic magic; I will, however, examine these kinds of metaphoric processes in a very different context below. Three important points to bear in mind at present are: (a) that the rite to retrieve Kaukau was performed by a single magician; (b) that it was construed as a conventional action, rather than an innovative or "authored" one; and (c) that the efficacy of this rite depended on the correct observance of a technical sequence that anyone can learn, and that did not require a sense of the aptness or poignancy of the metaphors involved.

The story about Kaukau reveals something of the way *sega* impinge on everyday life. A misfortune occurred, namely, the disappearance of Kaukau, for which there was no obvious secular explanation. Dogs are taken hunting all the time, and it is very rare for one to be lost, unless it is killed by a wild boar or beaten severely by a hunter. In such cases, the reasons for a dog's absence are plain to see, but Kaukau's disappearance was mysterious. Inevitably, suspicions were aroused that *sega* were somehow involved. These suspicions were confirmed by a dream, which is the usual method of learning about the activities of *sega*. In this dream, a man was able to "see" the door and windows of a house in the base of a tree. If he had visited the site while conscious, it would have looked like any other tree. The dreamer could also see flowers and hens which, in his wakened state, would have looked like undergrowth and leaves. The



dream showed that *sega* are like people, not only because they live in houses and keep livestock, but because they wanted a hunting dog. They stole Kaukau because he was muscular and ferocious, in other words for precisely the same reasons that he was valued by the people of Dadul. The Mali Baining know that *sega* are unlike them, in that they operate in another dimension and are normally invisible. But nobody knows much else about *sega*. Village life and the spirit world operate in parallel dimensions, which (most of the time) are kept separate.

Nevertheless, men's activities in the bush necessarily bring them into contact with *sega*. If hunting is to succeed, *sega* must be induced to assist; if walking through the bush disturbs the *sega*, they must be dissuaded from punishing. *Sega* can be manipulated in this way only through magical rites. Since men are the ones who travel and hunt in the bush, they are regarded as the natural custodians of this magic (although there is nothing in principle to prevent women from learning it). Yet, knowledge of the *sega* is largely confined to knowing how to recognize their effects and to manipulate their behavior. There is no moral interest in the spirit world and no corpus of cosmological knowledge relating to it.

Two irregular contexts in Dadul in which *sega* directly impinge on village life, namely funerals and "fire dances," involve a mixture of Christians (mostly Catholics or members of the United Church) and Pomio Kivung supporters. It is important to bear in mind that an underlying tension or mutual antipathy always exists between Christians and Pomio Kivung supporters, in spite of their basically shared apperceptions of the *sega*.

Funerals in Dadul begin at dusk at the house of the deceased, where the corpse is laid out. Relatives and friends, often arriving from distant locations, cram into the house and, depending on their closeness to the deceased (construed primarily in terms of emotional and material dependency), either sit soberly to one side or wail inconsolably over the body. At the door of the house, a fire is kept burning to keep out the *sega*. Whether or not the death was caused by *sega*, these nonhuman spirits are thought to revel in its occurrence, indicating their fundamental enmity to humans. Mourners are reluctant to venture out of the house alone during the night for fear of encountering triumphant and malevolent *sega*. At dawn, the body is carried to the cemetery and given a Christian burial.

The evening after a funeral is sometimes devoted to the performance of a divination. In divinations, a large section of bamboo is carried by a team of boys and young men, and, in response to questions from an older man, the bamboo moves so as to indicate "yes" or "no" answers. The aim is to elicit from the deceased the reason(s) for his or her death. It usually takes some time for the dead person's spirit to gain control of the bamboo, for the earth is believed to weigh heavily on him or her. During the first part of the divination, therefore, it is *sega* who cause the bamboo to move. The boys holding on are not considered responsible for the lurching of the bamboo, but seem to be pulled along with it.

This activity is described as "playing with *sega*." It produces high excitement, laughter and enjoyment, in stark contrast to the fearfulness of the night before. The reason generally given for this change of mood is that *sega* are no longer feeling vindictive, and that the villagers are together (i.e., *sega* only attack people when they are alone, isolated from their fellows).

*Sega* are also abroad at "fire dances." The Baining are best known to anthropologists and visitors to East New Britain for their daytime/nighttime dance cycles, which involve extraordinarily large and intricate dance masks. The English gloss "fire dance" is used everywhere by Baining peoples as a catchall term for a variety of night dances, each of which has a separate local name. As a result of missionary influence, the Mali Baining night dance, part of a cycle known as *Mendas*, has not been performed in Dadul for a long time. Other forms of the night dance survive, however, and are mounted in Dadul to celebrate Christian holidays or the completion of community projects. Such fire dances have a celebratory character and, in keeping with Christian and Pomio Kivung thinking, are no longer considered by the participants to have a religious dimension. They do, however, involve ideas about supernatural agencies, notably *sega*. *Sega* are believed to follow the nocturnal dancers as they parade in the masks around a huge bonfire or run into the flames. It is even possible for *sega* to possess one or more of the dancers, so that the man inside the mask loses his control over bodily movements and (like the boys at a divination) feels himself to be pulled this way and that on the dancing ground. Like divination, this is an occasion when contact with *sega* is welcomed, when those congregated, in common with the *sega*, are supposed to share a festive and joyful spirit.

#### SPIRITS IN THE MAINSTREAM POMIO KIVUNG

The experience of spirits in the Pomio Kivung is filtered through language in an elaborate and logically integrated body of doctrines. This style of codification affects not only the way people in Dadul think about spirits, but the way the movement is spread, reproduced, and hierarchically structured. In the Pomio Kivung movement as a whole, spirits are divided into three broad classes: morally pure and omniscient ancestors, ghosts tainted by sin, and diabolical forces.

Morally pure ancestors are usually invisible to the living, but they appear to one another in the form of Europeans (i.e., white men, women, and children). Their white skins are soft and cool, unblemished by sores and other afflictions. They do not toil in gardens, enjoying free access to all the foods they desire. They experience no sexual feelings and do not produce children. They possess all the technological knowledge of the West, and can produce any kind of cargo, from radios to airplanes, by a mere wish. The home of these ancestors is often referred to as Paradise, located underground and connected to the earth's surface by invisible holes, described as "eyes." The ancestors travel widely, and every living person is under continuous surveillance by one or more of them. They constantly scrutinize not only people's behavior, but their thoughts, and

are gratified by morality and offended by sinfulness. The omniscience of the ancestors and the morality they uphold renders them close to the local conception of the Christian God. Indeed, they are often described as manifestations of God, fulfilling His will at all times and sharing the incalculable powers available to Him. God is conceptualized as a distinct being and is said to "rule" the spirit world.

Since the Pomio Kivung encompasses many language groups, it was spread in the common medium of Pidgin. A group of ancestors together forms a hierarchical body known as the Village Government (*Vilij Gavman*)—a ghostly assembly of those ancestors who have achieved expiation for their earthly sins. A special building, known as the Cemetery Temple (*Haus Matmat*) is to be found in every Kivung village. These temples are the meeting places of the Village Government. Offerings of food, drink, and money are laid out for the Village Government during its daily meetings. A particular village official (whose title I translate as "witness") keeps vigil within the temple at these times. His task is to look for signs of ancestral visitation (e.g., knocking sounds, interference with the offerings by unseen hands). If, as occasionally happens, signs of visitation are lacking, the community is assumed to have offended the ancestors, and the offerings are thought to have been rejected. Relations with the spirits of the dead have to be repaired immediately if the Village Government is to reconvene in the Cemetery Temple. This is accomplished through monetary donations.

The purpose of presenting offerings in the Cemetery Temple is to cultivate close bonds between the living and the dead. The basic idea is that the living offer food as an embodiment of their spiritual devotion. It is the moral rather than the material substance of the food that is consumed by the Village Government. For this reason, various taboos apply to the preparation of temple offerings. Ultimately, it is hoped that the continuous demonstration of goodwill and obedience to Kivung doctrine will persuade the Village Government to "break the fence" (*brukim banis*) separating the living and the dead, so that the ancestors will assume a fully corporeal form in this world. The ancestors will then establish a great industrial complex, generating enough wealth for Kivung members to "pay" for their sins, and achieve the state of moral perfection and omniscience attributed to God. This is referred to as the Period of the Companies (*Taim Bilong Kampani*). It will culminate in a Day of Judgment, after which all remaining sinners will be cast into hell (*kalibus*) and the remainder will experience an indefinite period of supernatural bliss, ruled by the Village Government. This is referred to as the Period of the Government (*Taim Bilong Gavman*).

There are many Kivung rituals besides those connected with temples, which are intended to expedite the miracle of returning ancestors. In addition to ritual acts performed in sacred gardens, and those associated with monetary donations and meetings, are a variety of taboos and "laws" that have to be observed,

including a modified version of the Ten Commandments, around which Kivung morality pivots. This should be sufficient, however, to provide an impression of the way ancestors in the Village Government are conceptualized, and the broad range of techniques for cultivating bonds with them.

In addition to perfect and omniscient ancestors are "ghosts," mostly of the recently deceased, who are tainted by sin and have not yet been granted entry into the Village Government. These spirits wander invisibly around Kivung villages and in the surrounding bush, often lingering outside temples (which they are not permitted to enter). Such ghosts are usually harmless and excite considerable pity among the living, who mount regular donations of money to "pay" for their sins. As a result, a continuous flow of ghosts into the Village Government are delivered from limbo through the altruism of their living kinsmen.

Diabolical forces, meanwhile, take a wide variety of forms. The main obstacle to the occurrence of the Period of the Companies is Satan. Until such time as Kivung members are impervious to the temptations of Satan, the miracle cannot occur. Satan is always close at hand, and people who succumb to his influence are temporarily unprotected by the ancestors. Once a sinner has been purified through the donation of money, he or she is once again secure. Until this occurs, however, Satan takes every opportunity to kill the sinner and propel his or her soul into a wilderness of loneliness and torment. Upon their death, the souls of unpurified murderers go directly to hell. Most other sinners enter limbo, and the speed with which they are admitted to the Village Government depends on the severity of their crimes. Those who remain sullied at the Day of Judgment will be damned.

Nonhuman spirits can act as agents of Satan to lure Kivung members into sin and to strike them down. The precise nature of these spirits varies according to the cultural area to which Kivung members belong. In keeping with the teachings of missionaries, Kivung ideology maintains that all indigenous classes of nonhuman spirits dwelling in the bush are potential agents of Satan. They are classified together under the catchall Pidgin term *masalai*. In Dadul, *sega*, which are everywhere construed as amoral and capricious, are seen as potentially satanic forces. In general, unintended contact with *masalai* (e.g., *sega*) is assumed to have a diabolical character; the only desirable context for interactions with such spirits is through the correct performance of benign magic. Pomio Kivung teachings endorse the use of spells intended to induce nonhuman spirits to assist the living in morally acceptable ways. This applies particularly to the manipulation of such spirits for the purposes of hunting and healing magic.

The precise meanings of Kivung rituals and taboos, and the logical connections uniting them, are far more elaborate and complex than this brief summary is able to convey. Nevertheless, the efficacy of ritual acts and observances requires a thorough understanding of the extensive ideology surrounding them. Temple rituals, for example, would be ineffective if those preparing offerings were not aware of the nature and significance of taboos applying to their work.

Likewise, a witness could not discern the signs of ancestral visitation if he did not fully appreciate the structure and purposes of the Village Government, or lacked faith in the eschatological themes of the Pomio Kivung. Monetary donations, too, are effective only if donors understand the complex nature and causes of sin and the process whereby ancestors dispense absolution and catharsis.

In these respects, the way in which Kivung members experience relations with the spirit world parallels their experience of Christian ceremonial. The meanings of mission liturgy, which were established prior to the spread of the Pomio Kivung, were accessible only because priests, catechists, and other sermonizers provided an elaborate ideological framework for Christian worship. Similarly, the Pomio Kivung provided a complex array of rituals, the meanings of which were unintelligible in the absence of extensive exegesis. A critical difference, however, was that Christian preachers derived authoritative dogma from sacred texts, whereas the ideology of the Pomio Kivung was sustained through oral transmission. Reliance on memory rather than on the written word inevitably introduced a risk of innovation. (This simple observation in other contexts has stimulated a substantial body of theory concerning the relationship between literacy and religious transformations.) But the Pomio Kivung presents a strikingly effective solution to the problem in the form of community meetings or *kivung*.

The approximate equivalent of the European priest in the Pomio Kivung is the *komiti*, "orator," who preaches to his flock (the local community) on two afternoons every week, in the formal surroundings of a special building known as the Meeting House (*Haus Kivung*). Typically, three orators in every community take turns speaking at meetings. Over time, their speeches cover every aspect of Kivung ideology, with the result that these ideas are kept alive in people's thoughts. But, unlike church sermons, which are intended to complement and clarify rather than to reproduce sacred texts, the speeches of orators *are* the authoritative ideology or "text." Since speeches are presented with great frequency, the risk of innovation is minimized. If an orator modifies what has been said at previous meetings, his audience will point this out, and he is required to seek forgiveness from the ancestors. In this way, Kivung ideology is deposited and constantly reviewed in collective memory. Everybody in the community knows as much as the orator and, as a group, they occasionally show that they know slightly more and have to correct him. This even distribution of knowledge in the community is readily acknowledged by the orators—what sets them apart is the personal confidence and skill to speak engagingly in public.

Like the mission, the Pomio Kivung provides an experience of interaction with the other world based on a verbally codified cosmology and extensive exegesis. In both cases, religious materials are sustained through regular transmission, in the form of sermons. But the transmission of Christian dogma to the local community has been incomplete. The purveyor of Christianity might at any time introduce some surprising or unexpected revelation, legitimated by texts that the indigenous laity could not read.

Frustration with this situation led to cults that preceded the Pomio Kivung in the Baining region, for example Melki's Movement, which provided the "true" framework in which to understand the sermons of Methodist ministers. In contrast, Kivung orators are unable to disorient their audiences with new or confusing pronouncements. They serve to reproduce what is already known. But to sustain a community of religious experts in a nonliterate society requires even more frequent and comprehensive repetition of ideology than that provided by the missions. With this consideration in mind, leaders of the mainstream movement insisted that their teachings be continually transmitted according to a fixed schedule. The Ten Laws were transmitted in five-week cycles, one law being covered at each of the twice-weekly community meetings by orators who took turns in fixed rotation.

This system is still in operation, nearly thirty years after the foundation of the movement. All the crucial ideas about spirits, especially the Village Government, are likewise covered on a regular basis at these meetings. In common with Christian ceremonial, Pomio Kivung rituals are highly routinized, but Kivung members stress that their ritual program is better adapted than Christianity to the maintenance of complex ideology. Church services, they point out, are brief and are held only weekly—too infrequently to sustain elaborate ideas. Christian doctrine is likened to the white shirts worn at Sunday worship, and put aside ("forgotten") for the rest of the week. In contrast, the Pomio Kivung supplies an array of daily, twice-weekly, and weekly rituals that render meaningful the sermons they accompany.

In the temples and gardens, or when preparing for the rituals performed there, Kivung members experience the "other world" in terms of cognitively elaborate models, codified and sustained in language. Day in and day out, week in and week out, their conceptions of ancestors are reproduced in routinized performances and speeches. Interactions with the Village Government have assumed a highly repetitive character. But, aside from the intellectual persuasiveness of the ideology, there is little to excite enthusiasm within this unremitting regimen. In the next section I examine some of the ways in which flagging commitment to mainstream Kivung rituals is rejuvenated through temporary attempts to restore "traditional" religious models, founded on an altogether more intense and moving experience of the spirit world.

#### SPIRITS AND SPLINTER GROUPS

In 1988, the people of Dadul combined with a Mali village to the south, known as Maranagi, to form a splinter group bent on breaking away from the mainstream Pomio Kivung. This splinter group cultivated a deeply moving, even traumatic experience of the "other world," but failed to achieve its millenarian objectives. Its supporters were finally obliged to disperse and return to a more routinized existence, under the aegis of the mainstream movement. In the light of similar outbursts of climactic ritual in the past, I argue that the splinter group



of 1988 contributed another dimension to relations between humans and spirits, and was most likely in the long term to reinforce rather than to undermine commitment to the institutions of the Pomio Kivung.

I worked in both Dadul and Maranagi between 1987 and 1989 and directly observed the events outlined below. The splinter group was founded by two "brothers" (matrilateral parallel cousins) called Baninge and Tanotka, who were believed to be acting as vehicles for the will of the Village Government and were eventually designated members of it. Their apotheosis was acknowledged only within the two villages concerned, however, and they never came close to assuming leadership positions within the mainstream Pomio Kivung movement. One reason for this was that the revelations they introduced were most effectively conveyed by collective ritual performances, rather than by words.

The initial emergence of the splinter-group leaders occurred within the constraints of mainstream institutions, since innovation could be tolerated only if it carried the demonstrable backing of the Village Government. The process by which this occurred initially owed a great deal to the use of persuasive speech, and the "voices" were many and varied.

The earliest advocate of the splinter group was an ancestor called Wutka, who spoke "through" Tanotka in a state of possession. The possession itself was somewhat ambiguous and was initially interpreted by many as a mere sickness rather than a genuine possession. Baninge, however, cultivated support for the idea that his brother had been used as a vehicle for three important messages: that a "post" (i.e., leader) would emerge; that Dadul and Maranagi had nearly satisfied the conditions for the occurrence of the Period of the Companies; and that an obscure myth relating the adventures of an ancestor called Aringawuk provided a key to understanding and expediting the imminent miracle. Each message was extended and elaborated by further messages from the Village Government, flowing through a variety of channels.

Firstly, there was Tanotka himself, who rapidly became a regular medium for ancestors, then a kind of prophetic interpreter in his own right, and finally a divinity, on a par with the leaders of the mainstream movement (see Whitehouse 1995, In Press). He was described as "the post," and his inauguration was marked by a formal installation ceremony (subsequently performed also for his brother, Baninge).

Secondly, verbal messages were received from the ancestors in the course of temple rituals, through an extension of the role of witnesses. Witnesses began to "hear" statements or "reports" from the Village Government during their vigils, endorsing the arguments of Baninge and Tanotka, persuading the orators to support them publicly.

Thirdly, some people, especially Baninge, had dreams that were likewise thought to originate with the ancestors, and the dreams were disseminated by the orators. Thus, the initial cultivation of support for the splinter group drew heavily on words, through which compelling logical arguments were expressed,

demonstrating the legitimacy of innovations and persuading doubters that they were consistent with the ideological framework of the Pomio Kivung.

Yet enthusiasm for the splinter group, and its most impressive revelations, was not cultivated in verbalized arguments, but through the iconicity of new collective rituals. These were founded substantially around the restoration of traditional religious practices, many of which had been eradicated by early missionaries who regarded them as evil. The precontact religious system had taken the form of a fertility cult, concerned primarily with the health and promulgation of the population and the staple crop (taro). Its most elaborate rituals were associated with initiations, which took up to eight months to prepare and culminated in a daytime/nighttime dance cycle known as the *Mendas*. Initiation into the male cult required a period of seclusion at sacred sites in the bush, and the transmission of knowledge concerning the construction of dance masks. This entailed laceration of the tongues of novices and painful incisions at the base of the spine. A strict taboo was imposed on contact between novices and women during this period, and violations were punishable by death. During the years separating such activities, religious life focused primarily around a sacred building or temple, ministered by initiated men and dedicated to a single deity, Kanunga (in other areas, his "sister," Morki, was worshiped). Prior to World War II, the mission effectively eradicated many of these practices. Stories are still told of the extreme hostility that European priests expressed toward indigenous rituals, and it is widely believed that Kanunga was destroyed because his relics (which are thought to have been shipped to Germany) were confiscated. Some older men also recall acts of violence on the part of one particular priest, who is said, for example, to have beaten costumed dancers with a staff.

The splinter group of 1988 determined to restore many of the practices the missions had attempted to eradicate. The old religion was described as a "fire" that the priests had attempted to extinguish ("scatter in the dust"), while Tanotka and his brother were described as a "wind" that would rekindle the flames. Favorable reports from the Village Government (i.e., those supporting the ascension of splinter-group leaders) were celebrated in large dances and feasts, attended by traditional costumed figures known as *awanga*. In this endeavor adherents relied heavily on the memories of elders. Memory gaps were filled by the Village Government, who supplied authoritative guidance through reports, dreams, and the pronouncements of Baninge and Tanotka. The rituals were planned and orchestrated in secret meetings of knowledgeable men, who assumed many of the functions of initiators in establishing the details of *awanga* construction and performance.

In addition to these traditional practices, explicitly new kinds of rituals were devised, of which the most prominent were "ring ceremonies." The inspiration for ring ceremonies was provided by a dream by Baninge in which he and Tanotka were enclosed by a circular wall divided across the center by a fence. Baninge and Tanotka stood in one semicircle, and the Village Government was

congregated on the other side of the fence. Tanotka called out to the boss of the Cemetery Temple, asking him whether the other members of the splinter group would be permitted to enter the ring. The ring represented the spiritual elect, and the idea was that when all splinter group members had entered the ring alongside Baninge and Tanotka, the fence would be broken (i.e., the Period of the Companies would commence). Following the telling of this dream, the community redoubled its efforts to achieve purification. This eventually resulted in the performance of the first "ring ceremony," at which the whole community gathered to form a wall of human bodies encompassing Tanotka, who stood at the center. One by one, people came forward to shake Tanotka's hand, indicating allegiance to him. The ring ceremony was subsequently adapted for other purposes connected with protection against evil.

The new collective rituals of the splinter group were deeply impressive. Unlike the rituals of the mainstream Pomio Kivung, they provoked a diversity of emotions and sensations. The haunting and stirring melodies and rhythms accompanying the dances, the splendor of *awanga* costumes, the athleticism and aggression of the participants, the synchrony and eloquence of collective movements, all contributed to intense feelings of solidarity and ethnic pride, consolidated by the fact that the people of Dadul and Maranagi were the main surviving descendants of Kanunga's "people." The heat, smells, sounds, and visual impact of dances created a dramatic sensual experience quite unlike that of mainstream rituals. The first ring ceremony was likewise profoundly evocative. It was performed in a state of virtual nakedness, which (in the mists of dawn, when it was performed) caused people to shiver with cold and, above all, confronted them with erotic areas of the body. People were obliged to repress sexual excitement, or "shame" connected with their own exposure, and to focus instead on images of Paradise, which their nakedness was intended to connote.

The emphasis in these new rituals was not on the codification of religious ideas in language, but on the cultivation of concrete metaphors through collective rituals acts. The dances of the *awanga* dramatically enacted the return of the ancestors who emerged from the sacred garden known as Paradise and converged on the center of the village (thus enacting the occurrence of the Period of the Companies). Female dancers (symbolizing the processes of sexual reproduction) then occupied the dancing ground but were displaced by the returning *awanga*, expressing the ancestral victory over menstruation and childbirth (and so establishing the Period of the Government). A similar pattern of iconic codification was evident in the first ring ceremony.

Beyond the obvious fact that the ring of bodies corresponded to the spiritual elect depicted in Baninge's dream, the bodies also represented the wall posts of traditional round houses (the last of these seen in the region was a temple dedicated to Kanunga). The rafters of such houses were supported by a central post, represented in the ring ceremony by Tanotka, and the obvious (though largely unstated) implication was that Tanotka would support the community (the

surrounding posts) in its pursuit of salvation. The fact that Tanotka was already referred to as a "post" encouraged such an interpretation. But the image of the post had numerous levels of meaning within the splinter group, some of which were cautiously stated to me and some of which were only obliquely suggested. For example, Tanotka was clearly associated with the post erected at the entrance to every Kivung village on which the Roman numerals I to X are inscribed (representing the Ten Laws). Part of the post is hidden (buried) underground, suggesting that only part of the "truth" was visible (like our "tip of the iceberg" metaphor). Being the post, Tanotka had access to the whole entity (or "knowledge"), including its hidden regions. Other interpretations of the post metaphor abounded. They were not given an authoritative form in language, but were creatively inferred by the participants in rituals.

Another example of the metaphorical character of the first ring ceremony is connected with the fact that it was scheduled to occur at dawn, its performance coinciding with the transition from darkness (representing ignorance and suffering) to daylight (representing enlightenment and warmth). The alleviation of coldness under the first rays of the morning sun provided an experiential taste of salvation (the removal of discomfort) and omniscience (the ability to see clearly). Thus, the conception or idea was constructed nonverbally through a collective act that was simultaneously a statement, experience, and expression of feelings about salvation and solidarity. No words, nor even the most impassioned speeches, could have cultivated as satisfactory an appreciation of these ideas.

Undoubtedly the most powerful and enduring images to come out of the splinter group were generated toward the end of its life, through a program of climactic rituals intended to usher in the Period of the Companies. What distinguished these rituals was the scale and traumatic character of their performance. The most effective of all were the nocturnal vigils held in a specially constructed round house at Maranagi. The house closely resembled the design of Kanunga's last remaining temple (insofar as elders could remember it). Night after night, the combined populations of Dadul and Maranagi, along with a few kinsmen of core members from other villages, gathered in the round house to await the Period of the Companies. These vigils frequently involved singing, and the repeated possession of a young woman by her dead father (the boss of Bernard's Temple in Dadul).

The root metaphor transmitted in the vigils obviously reverberated with ideas about the "ring" and the "post," since the layout of the house precisely corresponded to the layout of the ring. These images, however, were charged with even more intense emotional and sensory experiences than those cultivated in ring ceremonies. In part, this had to do with the scale of vigils, encompassing some two hundred persons tightly crowded into the roundhouse. The sight of such large gatherings caused many of the participants to weep, especially the elders who recalled the serious depletion of the population that resulted from bombing,

executions, food shortages, and the spread of disease during World War II. But this feeling of numerical strength also had a strong impression on everybody, young and old, because it demonstrated the intensity and scale of collective support for the splinter group program, and lent it a kind of credibility or legitimacy that reasoned arguments alone could not sustain. The gathering was rare and momentous, particularly since it comprised a bounded social universe incorporating participants' closest relatives and friends.

The power of the vigils also inhered in the suffering that they inflicted on everyone involved. Severe overcrowding, overheating, and poor ventilation in the round house was compounded by the fact that people were prevented from leaving the house to visit latrines and were obliged to urinate where they sat. Key officials in the splinter group were responsible for barring the door, and ensuring that none of the participants fell asleep in the course of the night. These restrictions had to do in part with the maintenance of unity, for it was feared that the miracle could not occur if some people were physically or mentally absent.

The suffering of participants also served to emphasize the sacredness of the post, around which people congregated, and the price exacted by its revelation. Above all, this confinement and discomfort cultivated a powerful desire for release, which was readily transformed into a longing for deliverance from all the miseries of this world. Participants were encouraged to think about all the most deplorable forms of suffering in worldly life, of pain, sickness, and bereavement, and to reflect on the implications of transcending them. In the traumatic conditions of the round house, such thoughts produced tears, moans, and an intensified yearning for salvation.

During the month of vigils at Maranagi, verbal transmission of ideology was markedly reduced. The two leaders, Baninge and Tanotka, made very few public statements at this time, and their special significance in the community was conveyed more prominently by the imagery of the central post in the round house than by their pronouncements. This initiated a shift away from dynamic, innovative leadership and toward the symbolic representation of figureheads, emerging out of the community's actions. The crucial act of transmission was tied to the context of ritual performance and imposed definite limits on the scale and longevity of the religious organization. Before the end of the month, Maranagi's gardens had been depleted as a result of the influx of people, and the community had to hunt and gather food to sustain itself. Hunger was one of the crucial factors causing the splinter group to break up. The organization was not built to endure or expand, and its real power lay in the fact that it cultivated enduring memories, which were capable of exerting an influence, in the long term, on the political and religious lives of participants.

After the splinter group was disbanded, the nonoccurrence of the miracle was accounted for by the presumed intervention of Satan. Baninge and Tanotka put aside their sacred task for the time being, but they (and many others) said it

would be resumed at a later date, probably within a few years. Some activities of the splinter group resulted in threats of legal prosecution from critics of the Pomio Kivung and, along with food shortages, effectively prevented further performances of vigils in the short term. Meanwhile, the people of Dadul and Maranagi restored the ritual cycles of the mainstream movement.

People's attitudes had clearly been transformed, however. The intense solidarity cultivated most forcefully in the vigils had left a deep impression on people's minds, and this was manifested in the way they talked about their collective identity and relations with external agencies (see Whitehouse 1995). Moreover, the performance of temple rituals and other routinized activities was haunted by the dramatic revelations of the post, the ring, and the round house. The simplicity of iconic codification, and the impressive conditions in which concrete metaphors were transmitted, rendered them highly memorable, and quite different in quality from the extensive strings of ideology conveyed in mainstream community meetings, which required continual repetition to be preserved intact. In this way, religious experience in the routinized regimen was enriched and deepened by the memory of much closer and more intense interactions with spirits experienced in the splinter group—through possession, dreams and reports, and above all, through the highly charged revelations of collective ritual.

The splintering of 1988 was but one episode in a series of similar outbursts in Dadul and Maranagi. Oral histories and patrol reports indicate that similar activities occurred in the brief years preceding independence—in 1975, again in the late 1970s, and possibly around 1982. This suggests that events of this kind occur with slightly greater frequency than the precontact initiation rituals upon which they are modeled. It is not clear that all such activities incorporated *awanga* performances; what they had in common with initiation rituals was a distinctive emphasis on iconic codification and emotional/sensory stimulation. In this respect, they contrast starkly with the language-dependent regimen of cultural transmission that characterizes the routinized movement. The fact that such climactic rituals recur every few years demonstrates the efficacy that people attach to them. The memories they inculcate, far from being productive of disillusionment or cynicism, have an enduring religious value.

#### POLITICS AND THE EXPERIENCE OF SPIRITS

The three types of spirit experience described above—individual and collective encounters with *sega*; experiences with ancestors, ghosts, and *sega* through the lens of verbalized doctrine in the mainstream Pomio Kivung; and experiences with ancestors through the performance of traumatic splinter-group rituals—each has a complex set of political ramifications.

In the context of daily life, *sega* are avoided, blamed, and manipulated through individual action. Neither avoidance nor blaming necessitates a vivid impression of *sega*. They are dimly construed as being “at large” in the forest, and probably each person, when taking a wide berth around a tree or explaining



an illness, has in mind a different and rather fuzzy image of the spirit responsible, and its motives. All people know is that *sega* are humanoid, incorporeal beings with no apparent moral inclinations of their own. When *sega*, uninvited, become involved in human affairs, it is usually in an undesirable way. Either they are retaliating, much as a cornered animal might do to an invasion of their space, or else they are stirring up disharmony or misery as agents of Satan, in keeping with Christian and Kivung understandings of diabolical forces.

Being morally neutral, *sega* can also be manipulated by human agents in a positive way, through the performance of magical rites. These rites, however, do not conjure up particularly compelling or vivid experiences of the spirit world. They are treated as technical procedures rather than as instruments of revelation. This is strongly reminiscent of J. F. Weiner's conception of the use of metaphor in Foi magical rites, which he describes as "cutting off" signification rather than "revealing" or "explicating" (1992:27). Magical rites, handed down through the generations, portray spirits as fixed in time and space, like the spells themselves—objects that can be stored, shared, or utilized.

These spells are not evocative of fresh imaginings, or what Weiner calls a "resynthesis of lived experience" (1992:28). Much the same could be said of the way *sega* are represented in dreams. For example, the *sega* who "stole" Kaukau were just like any other *sega* in any other dream. The images of their house, flowers, and livestock merely signaled that they were *sega* but afforded no novel insights into their nature or their significance for human affairs. Likewise, the iconicity used in the ritual to retrieve Kaukau operated at a purely technical level, rather like a map drawn in the dust.

On the face of it, divinations and nocturnal dances would seem capable of providing a more poignant or evocative experience of spirits. In practice, however, this is not the case. The image of the bamboo pole seems to evoke no cosmological understandings; nor do the activities surrounding the "fire dance" resonate with a coherent religious tradition. The discourse surrounding both activities is consistent with a process of cultural atrophy, in which the moving and mysterious rituals of the past have degenerated into mere entertainment. Divination is described as a "game" and the fire dance as a "party." Yet this fits entirely with the fact that the performers do not hold the same religious views. The people of Dadul disdain the prayers, confessions, and liturgies of their Catholic neighbors, and the choirs and Sunday schools of the United Church. Likewise, Christians who join with the people of Dadul in performing a divination or fire dance repudiate their ideas about "feeding the dead" and "waiting for cargo and ancestors." Since the Pomio Kivung is steeped in Christian thinking, many ideas are inevitably shared by these groups. The differences, however, loom large and prevent both sides from recognizing any common ground with the other. At funerals, for example, Kivung supporters are inclined to view their participation in mourning as a sham, for they expect to be reunited with the deceased before long. This difference in outlook is part of the hidden

agenda on such occasions, and what is openly shared among mourners (namely the "entertainment," including material gifts as well as the divination) is separated from the sphere of religious action, where real ideological conflict resides.

In short, the separation of ideas about *sega* from religion is consistent with a diminution of the cosmological importance of the former. The fact that attitudes toward nonhuman spirits are shared among Christians and Kivung supporters reduces rather than enhances their religious significance, but it provides a rare ceremonial form in which opposing groups can cultivate a harmonious exterior amid the vestiges of a once common culture.

Ideas about the spirits of dead people (i.e., ancestors) in Dadul are far more elaborate and coherent. Discourse concerning ancestors is dominated by Pomio Kivung cosmology and morality. It is considered blasphemous to refer to the dead directly, and the Mali word for "ancestor" (*wayiaikana*) is rarely heard. The euphemism commonly deployed is *amorka*, "man," or the Pidgin phrase *Vilij Gavman* (see above). Paradoxically, the term *sega* is quite frequently heard, even though ancestors rather than *sega* are the main focus of religious action in Dadul.

I have pointed out that there is a close relationship between doctrinal complexity and coherence, the codification of ideas in language, and frequent repetition or "routinization." The interdependency of these features is explicitly recognized by the Pomio Kivung leadership. Indeed, it is plain to see that elaborate, logically integrated doctrine requires language, and that such a corpus of verbalized knowledge can be sustained (in the absence of inscribing practices such as literacy) only in a regimen of frequent transmission, based around sermonizing. This type of codification has political implications I have explored elsewhere (e.g., Whitehouse 1992, 1994, 1995).

Where religious ideas are readily verbalized, they can be spread over great distances by just a few proselytizing orators (see also Barth 1990). Moreover, this is consistent with the emergence of centralized leadership, envisaged as the source of authoritative dogma. Ideological uniformity can then be sustained through the designation of a middle tier of officials, who patrol strongholds of the expanding movement, leading to the kind of hierarchical structure that is found in the Pomio Kivung, Yali's movement, and Paliau's movement.

A drawback with regimes of this type, as Steinbauer observed in relation to Paliau's movement, is that life becomes "austere and regulated almost like a military establishment" (1979:69), and ritual activities "lack spontaneity" (1979:71). However intellectually persuasive the daily sermons may be, the tendency in such movements is for the doctrines to become platitudinous and the rituals to become mechanical, humdrum routines. It is against this background that innovators sporadically succeed in whipping up support for more climactic and emotionally arousing religious action.

Sporadic breakaway cults in the Pomio Kivung are fundamentally rooted in mainstream ideas, but they introduce a distinctive way of experiencing these



ideas. In the verbalized discourse of the mainstream movement, ancestors are depicted as a corporate group (the Village Government) which exists on the other side of a cosmic fence. Orations dwell on this scenario and on the hope that the fence will one day be broken. Splinter-group ritual, by contrast, physically enacts the process of breaking the fence. In the examples given here, the *awanga* left Paradise to re-enter the village, and the people entered a ring in which they were united with the Village Government. On the face of it, this seemed to entail the same symbolic process that I described in the context of retrieval magic. In such cases, bodily movements mimic some external process or relationship. Yet the common element of bodily iconicity in magical rites and splinter group ritual belies a fundamental divergence.

Unlike the concrete metaphors of Mali Baining spells, images of the ring were collectively triggered, emotionally charged, and revelatory. What they revealed could not be reduced to a verbal statement. Revelation lay in the emotional experience of suffering and the prospect of deliverance, the visible reality of darkness transformed into light, the tactile experience of unity in the cramped round house, the voices of choir members harmonizing as one, and the feet of dancers that moved in synchrony. An important aspect of the way in which such experiences are handled cognitively is highlighted by theories of autobiographical or "episodic" memory (Tulving 1972). Splinter group rituals were extraordinary events, a major departure from the routines of everyday life. As such, they were encoded as distinctive events in the life history of each participant. Moreover, their iconicity struck resonances from rings of human bodies, from posts that formed the round house, from dancers in the *Haus Kivung*, and from *awanga* charging in a circle.

These and other representations of the ring were poignant because they were at once novel, unexpected, revealing, sensually and emotionally arousing, and expressive. The fact that such images were collectively and nonverbally triggered, rather than emanating from the mouths of experienced orators, placed constraints on the scale and structure of the political unit involved. Religious experience in the splinter group could only be spread by admitting outsiders into the ritual community or by displacing the community itself, unlike verbalized doctrine that could be transported by one or a few leaders. Moreover, the fact that revelations were eventually generated through a process of personal inference or "inspiration," rather than being transmitted by a prophet or messiah, meant that the splinter group could not (at least during its climactic phase) sustain dynamic leadership. The group itself became the source and focus of religious insight.

#### CONCLUSION

*Sega* are peripheral to religious life in Dadul, in the sense that they are not concerned with the soteriological quest for a solution to worldly suffering. This quest is construed in Dadul in terms of a Christian-syncretic cosmology that originated among non-Baining groups to the south and was disseminated

through the medium of Pidgin. Christian and Pomio Kivung thinking has fundamentally displaced a religious tradition founded around initiations and dances. The place of *sega* in this preexisting scheme has been substantially forgotten; what remains are pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that do not effectively cohere. Both Christian and Pomio Kivung doctrines have appropriated ideas about *sega* to the extent that they portray them as potential agents of Satan. Yet the *sega* are themselves construed as amoral—objects, more or less, over which control may be exerted for good or evil. The idea of *sega* as "objects" is also apposite in the sense that they are represented in magic, dreams, and general discourse as fixed entities; they are and always have been around in the bush, like sharp rocks or stinging nettles, a threat to the careless explorer, but a potential resource in magico-technical procedures. As invisible, amoral objects, peripheral to the concerns of local cosmology, *sega* are not clearly or elaborately cognized, and they are not a focus of debate and ideological conflict. This is consistent with the fact that the communal activities in which *sega* figure provide a forum for cooperation between otherwise divided religious communities. When Christians and Pomio Kivung supporters gather together around the bamboo pole at a divination, or the arena of a "fire dance," a sort of uneasy harmony is established which publicly ignores the doctrinal gulf between them. This is possible only because *sega* are part of a distant but common history, so firmly displaced to the periphery of contemporary religious thinking that it disguises more recent sectarianism.

In contrast, the people of Dadul sustain a rich and complex discourse about ancestors. If the marginality of ideas about *sega* in cosmology makes them suited to the negotiation of relations on the political boundaries, i.e., between religious communities, then the ideological centrality of ancestor worship coincides with its importance for internal political structure. I have suggested that ancestor worship is enacted in contrasting modes: the routinized, language-based, evangelical mode of the mainstream movement, and the sporadic, nonverbal, localized mode of the splinter group. My point is that the experience of spirits in Dadul is related to styles of codification, cultural transmission, and political association and cannot be reduced to a set of statements about local "beliefs" concerning spirits.

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