

“Pigs are dirty, pork makes sick”. A taboo on pork and its meaning for the new Millennium

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The scene

The case study presented concerns a village in the Kilimeri Census Division of Sandaun Province in Papua New Guinea during 1997/98. Located roughly 20 kilometres inland as the crow flies from the Provincial Capital Vanimo at the coast, it is situated in an area of tropical lowland rainforest. The traditional subsistence system relying on this environment encompasses a range of practices that involve varying degrees of cultivation, reaching from hunting and gathering over tree cultivation to swidden gardening. Of these, the nurture and cultivation of trees for food and other purposes is probably the most characteristic feature of the system. Nurtured trees include the sago palm as provider of the main staple and of a host of construction and other materials. Apart from the sago palm that is confined to swampy areas, most nurtured trees occur in fallows, their propagation and growth relying on the preparation of swidden gardens. In fact, to provide a foundation for the nurture of trees appears as the primary function of swidden gardens, the direct production of garden crops being only secondary. Correspondingly, gardening proceeds traditionally on a low scale, yielding supplementary foods rather than staples. Accordingly, the prototypical traditional meal would consist of sago jelly, accompanied by leaves and young shoots of the “tulip”-tree (*Gnetum gnemon*) cooked in coconut milk, which might be enriched by game¹. In the absence of domestic animals, all meat traditionally derives from hunting and gathering. Game animals are predominantly the pig, marsupials and the cassowary, also bats and birds. Gathered turtles,

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¹ This observation corresponds exactly with the description of what constitutes a prototypical meal, given in another village of the area with a like subsistence base though different linguistic affiliation (*pers. communication* Ch. Kocher Schmid)

crayfish, grubs and eggs constitute further sources of animal protein. Apart from these, gathering provides an array of mushrooms, fruits, and leafy greens for the diet, as well as medicines and materials for implements and construction purposes. Associated with this type of subsistence is a mobile lifestyle : traditionally, people would frequently venture into the forest in order to pursue the described subsistence activities, and would also spend days or weeks in bush camps in the forest — near a garden, a fallow, a sago patch.

Traditional subsistence practices have been called into question by the experiences people have made with a host of new conditions and concepts, introduced in the wider area (within a radius of about 30 kilometres), or even in their own village, within the last two generations. From the 1920s onwards, the Australian administration established posts, taken over after Independence in 1975 by the national administration. Patrol reports frequently depict people as lazy, complain about non-sedentariness, and mention attempts for introducing agricultural projects. The Catholic Mission, represented in the area since the 1930s, sustained similar efforts as the administration in promoting an “industrious” lifestyle, sedentariness, and agriculture, in addition to their proselytisation for the Christian faith. The introduction of “western” values was complemented by the introduction of “western” goods : metal tools and guns were brought by Malay birdhunters in the early years of the 20th century ; “western” clothing, goods and foodstuffs arrived increasingly since the second World War ; more recently, tradestores have been established in town. All these innovations went along with the introduction of a cash economy and increasing opportunity for wage labour. Economic changes culminated in a short but intensive bout of cash flow during the large-scale logging operations of the 1980s and early 1990s. Since then, the flow of cash has been reduced to a trickle again, fed by leftover royalty money that had not been spent immediately, by wages and salaries of a few employed individuals, and by proceeds from the sale of garden and forest produce at the market in town. Transport to and from town, and with it the marketing and acquisition of goods, is hampered by the decay of the logging road, which had for a few years connected the village to the outside world other than through bush paths. Neither logging, nor the previously tried — and invariably abandoned — agricultural projects, nor any of the other innovations have had a major, lasting effect on the subsistence base. Neither have people got hold of the “western way of life” of which they had caught glimpses over the last decades, which they aspire to, but which appears yet so elusive : the road is dilapidating, money is scarce, “western” goods are hard to obtain, and traditional subsistence activities seem strenuous and laborious compared to the activities of “Westerners”. Yet, the experiences with the changes of the last two generations have not gone unnoticed. Rather than impacting directly on the traditional lifestyle, however, they have become blended with the traditional world view to give

rise to a new ideology. This new ideology, in turn, carries the potential for profoundly affecting the traditional subsistence system in the pursuit of a “western way of life”, in the aspirations to a blissful future.

The new ideology

Catalyst and prophet for the new ideology is the current “bigman” and oldest living member of the community (*for this paragraph, cf. Kocher Schmid and Klappa, 1999*). Born around 1920, his lifetime spans the described major innovations. Moreover, his wartime experiences as a forced labourer for the Japanese and soldier for the U.S. forces included further contacts with “western” lifestyle and ideas ; his political activities on a national level enabled him to travel abroad and observe the attributes of a “western way of life” on a large scale. While his experiences with the “western way of life” qualify him to speak on the practical aspects of this subject, his legitimation for the presumably esoteric component of the topic derives from divine revelations he received as a young man. During these revelations, he was enlightened that the Men’s House and everything associated with it was Satan’s work and to be destroyed ; that the traditional creator being was actually the Christian God ; about the true creation story of his people in particular, and of Papua New Guineans and the world in general ; and about the means by which his people and Papua New Guineans could draw equal with other parts of the world. Subsequently, he converted to the Catholic faith and began to preach his insights. His teachings base on the notion that beliefs and customs of the ancestors were partly evil, but in their core right, with this very core corresponding to the teachings of the Catholic Church. The Church’s teachings are held to reflect what the ancestors of his people had always known, however stripped of sinful attributes. In fact, his people, and especially his clan, the founder clan of the village, had been particularly chosen at the creation and will again be so in the future. They remained closest to God and to the place of creation — near their village — when all others were dispersed over Papua New Guinea and the world, and they will become the nucleus and centre of a new nation when Papua New Guinea ceases to exist. Concomitantly with this transformation, they will enter into a paradisiacal state, devoid of sorcery, violence and crime, abounding with money and goods, and resplendent with the attributes of a “western way of life”. This blissful state of political power and self-determination, termination of evil, and “western” wealth and way of life is considered equivalent to the conditions already present in “western” countries. It is to be attained through the right belief and observation of the right lifestyle, elements of which are : a strong faith, intensive prayer and frequent worship in the sense of the prescriptions of the Catholic

Church, and a type of subsistence that is marked by sedentariness and industrious gardening. The transforming event is envisaged for the turn of the Millennium, that has been announced by the Catholic Church as the “Jubilee Year”.

The new ideology has caused a rift through the community, which in part follows denominational delineations. Proponents consider themselves Catholics and are in turn held to be such by others, including representatives of the Catholic Church itself. Yet, not everybody associated with the Catholic Church is in turn also an adherent of the new ideology. Apart from the long exclusively represented Catholic Church, small congregations of the Four Square Gospel Church and the Papua New Guinea Revival Church have been established in the community during the last decade. Members of these oppose as much the teachings of the Catholic Church, as they fight the new ideology. Membership in the Catholic Church is thus a necessary, but not sufficient requirement to determine adherence to the new ideology. Yet, there *is* a sign by which to recognise adherents and sympathisers : pigs.

The taboo on pork

One of the most salient characteristics by which proponents of the new ideology identify themselves is their attitude towards pigs and pork. People would indicate their affiliation with the camp of believers in the new faith, and their personal support for the exponent, by their refusal to eat pork. They would justify this taboo with descriptions of the detestable messiness of pigs and the adverse consequences of pork to their health, stating that “pigs are dirty” and that “pork makes sick”. Conversely, they would emphasise their opponents' high appreciation of pork. They would do so with an air of disapproval and contempt, conveying the impression of this eating habit as an attribute of heresy, even paganism and savagery. Similarly, if less obvious and widespread, proponents would show low appreciation if not disapproval of subsistence activities in the forest. Instead, they would portray village and garden as the preferred places for human activity, which in turn should be industrious and regular. Only superficially disjointed, the advocated change in subsistence activities, the taboo on pork, and the new ideology are in fact interconnected and partly representative of each other. Proponents of the new ideology can by the taboo on pork both identify themselves and call for a change in the traditional subsistence system, as will be described in the following. It will be explored how the taboo on pork illustrates and exemplifies the components of the new ideology ; and how it epitomises the advocated change in the subsistence system, which in turn is part and parcel of the new ideology.

The pig represents the traditional subsistence system and faith on a

multitude of levels, as correspondingly the rejection of pork represents their transformations within the framework of the new ideology.

In the local language, the term for “pig” equally denotes the category of “game”. It also signifies “meat” in the absence of domestic animals. This makes the pig the prototypical game animal and donor of meat. To reject pork becomes thus a powerful synecdoche for the rejection of “bushmeat” in general. In fact, the taboo on pork is extended by some to include other hunted and collected animals with graded degrees of rigour, depending on closeness to the exponent. Ultimately, as verified in the strictest case of the exponent himself, this leaves only the meat of (introduced) domestic animals, corned beef, and tinned fish. With the availability of these substituted types of meat dependent upon money, preference for them concomitantly signifies desirability of the cash economy. Conversely, the rejection of “bushmeat” becomes a metaphor for the means by which it is obtained, namely hunting.

Hunting, in turn, is traditionally the most significant subsistence activity judging from the ritual emphasis placed on it. Before conversion to Christianity, the ritual to secure the abundance of game had been the most important ritual connected with subsistence, having been associated with the Men’s House Cult and performed in public and on a large scale. This contrasts with a ritual still practised, which is directed at forest resources other than game — particularly the “tulip” tree, representative for other cultivated trees — and can be performed by single individuals privately. The ritual to secure the abundance of game was abolished with conversion. It became replaced with the ritual of the Catholic Church, that at the same time stands in for a different type of “subsistence”, namely the “western” type that is characterised by agriculture, sedentariness and a cash economy. In contrast, the traditional type of subsistence involves roaming the bush and remaining mobile, attributes which are particularly exemplified by the activity of hunting. Its ritual and practical significance make hunting the prototypical subsistence activity in the traditional system and thus a metaphor for it, much as the pig is the prototypical game animal and thereby a metaphor for hunting. Through hunting, the pig becomes in turn a symbol for the traditional type of subsistence, the taboo on pork a symbol for its rejection. This level of representation is again reflected in the diet, as the traditional meal becomes replaced with its supposedly “western” analogy — optional for most, yet obligatory for the exponent who refuses to eat any of the “traditional ingredients” : game is substituted with the mentioned versions of introduced animal protein ; “tulip” is substituted with “aibika” (*Hibiscus manihot*), the most prominent leafy green from productive gardens, decreasing in abundance with progressive fallowing ; and sago is substituted with rice (or else starchy garden root crops). While rice plus some form of introduced animal protein have generally become the ingredients of a feast day’s meal, in the context of the new ideology they take on a metaphoric quality. They cannot be obtained other than through money, thus stand for a cash

economy. On this account, they are available only to those with the adequate financial means. The same restrictions do however not apply to “aibika”, which is available in abundance to everyone with productive gardens, in contrast to those harvesting mainly from fallows. Consumption of this vegetable is therefore widely employed to signify industrious gardening, and conversely to brand “tulip”-only eaters as lazy. Industrious gardening, in turn, is regarded as an actual or potential source of major cash income, be it through the sale of garden produce or some other, not further specified process. The new lifestyle, entailing agriculture, sedentariness and cash economy, is thus reflected by the composition of the new meal, as the traditional lifestyle is reflected by the composition of the traditional meal. A synecdoche for both types of meals, and a metaphor for the corresponding lifestyles, is rendered by the refusal or acceptance of pork.

While the Catholic Church appears as one of the representatives of the new lifestyle, it acts primarily as a religious institution. As such, it fiercely combated the Men’s House Cult as “pagan”. Adoption of the Catholic faith necessarily required a simultaneous renouncement of the Men’s House Cult and everything associated with it, which included the ritual to secure the abundance of game. With all that has been set out before, a sequence is thus established, in which the pig becomes not only a symbol for game, for hunting, for the old type of subsistence, but moreover for the old faith, with the taboo on pork similarly denoting its rejection. In fact, this conclusion is reinforced from the material side, since the ritual paraphernalia in the Men’s House included pigs’ skulls. A clearout of those by the exponent was perceived as an essential activity in conjunction with renouncing the old, “pagan”, faith.

The Catholic Church exhibits a low valuation for pigs not only in the traditional context, but also genuinely in its own Judaeo-Christian tradition. Throughout the scriptures, mention of the pig indicates lowness and sinfulness — as illustrations may serve the parable of the prodigal son, who at his lowest had to hire himself out as a swineherd (The Bible, NIV 1980 : Luke 15,15), or the miracle by which Jesus sent demons into a herd of swine (The Bible, NIV 1980 : Mark 5,13). Most obviously, the perceived uncleanness of pigs is reflected in the food taboo of the Old Testament (*e.g.* The Bible, NIV 1980 : Leviticus 11,7). This taboo has been revived by the Seventh Day Adventist Church², which operates in the wider area, though not in the village itself, and an additional influence on the formation of the new ideology might well be considered. In any case, the refusal of pork for reasons of dirtiness in the described circumstances strongly suggests the adoption of a biblical motif. The taboo on pork, which signifies the rejection of the traditional subsistence system and

² I am grateful to R.F. Ellen, C. Gajdusek and P. Lemonnier, who on different occasions alerted me to this aspect of the taboo on pork. C. Gajdusek also drew my attention to another potential contribution to the present taboo : a ban of pork by the administration during the 1970s and 1980s, to prevent transmission of cysticercosis from pig populations in Indonesia. Both of hygienic and epidemiological character, this measure might have fit as well the “pigs are dirty”, as the “pork makes sick” judgement. Thus it may have alluded both to the Judaeo-Christian notion dealt with in this paragraph, and the traditional law addressed in the following paragraph, offering a link between both.

faith, becomes thus rationalised with the words of the very institution that initialised and supported the process of rejection.

The biblical food taboo finds its correspondence in a traditional food taboo, in which pork is however avoided for its totemic identity, rather than its attributes. The pig is considered child of the founder clan's original ancestor, and is therefore banned for consumption for members of this clan, and by extension for the whole village. Justification of this law appears confirmed by the occurrence of diseases whose aetiology can allegedly be traced to the contact with and ingestion of pork. Narrative has it that the original taboo had been weakened over the last few generations, and only recently become revived by the exponent in conjunction with his teachings. Apparently an innovation, drawn from the influences of new conditions and concepts, and expressed in their language, the taboo on pork thus metamorphoses into a recollection of past values. It becomes an assertion of ancestral wisdom that concomitantly reinforces the legitimation and authority of the exponent and illustrates the exceptional role of his people.

As explained by a member of the community, the exponent "makes use of the traditional laws together with the Church"³ in his teachings. The taboo on pork becomes representative for that approach, employing the images of either in the simultaneous rejection and assertion of tradition. Innovation and restoration become interchangeable, as the apparently recent taboo resurfaces as one of the many truths that had been held by the ancestors of the founder clan — those people who had been particularly chosen at the creation, whose descendants will again be so at the turn of the Millennium, and whose current representative has been enlightened with these and other insights to show his people the way into this blissful future.

The new Millennium

As hinted by the multiple meanings of pork, the advocated transformation of the subsistence system is reflected on two planes and follows two lines of justification, either of which may transform into its counterpart, and both of which are interlinked. A symbolic association of the present or future way of life with its respective attributes mutates into an instrumental association ; adoption of innovations becomes revival of traditions ; and the traditional world view that presupposes instrumentality is reproduced as an innovation. These themes shall be developed in the following to explore why and how the advocated transformation of the subsistence system constitutes a preparation for the new Millennium.

The new ideology promises to its adherents the transformation of the

³ I am greatly indebted to D. Waki, who in addition to a host of other invaluable explanations provided this crucial insight, that finally allowed me to make sense of seemingly unrelated and confusing puzzle parts, and enabled me to piece them together.

present state into a condition of bliss at the turn of the Millennium. This paradisiac condition is imagined to resemble that of “western” countries and their inhabitants, of which the Catholic Church is one representative, and presumably agent ; the date has been announced by the Catholic Church as of special significance to believers, which proponents hold themselves to be ; the transformation is considered conditional on a belief and lifestyle which seem to emulate their “western” counterparts. The future according to “western” model is thus apparently to be obtained in circumstances modelled on the “West”.

The lifestyle regarded as appropriate and necessary in the pursuit of the desired state corresponds to that advocated and promoted by “Westerners”, namely administrators and missionaries. Like them, adherents of the millenarian ideology reject the traditionally practised type of subsistence, as epitomised by their rejection of pork. They are calling instead for sedentariness, agriculture and participation in the cash economy as the adequate means of living. Hunting and forays into the forest become despised like the mobility these activities require and the products they yield. Conversely, regular and industrious gardening, based on a sedentary lifestyle, becomes both morally desirable and perceived source of major cash income. People are to stay in the village rather than venture into the bush ; hunting, gathering and small-scale swiddening are to be transformed into intensive gardening ; and game animals are to be replaced with introduced kinds of meat, which in turn have to be obtained with money, derived from gardening.

Similarly, traditional rituals have to be renounced, as epitomised again by the rejection of pork, and replaced with their “western” counterparts. As adoption of the lifestyle promoted by “Westerners” is perceived to be a vital ingredient in the pursuit of a blissful future, so is adoption of the belief system proclaimed by the same. In fact, the activities of the Catholic Church suggest that lifestyle and belief system are not merely associated, but interdependent, and ultimately instrumental for attainment of that blissful state. A representative of the longed-for “western way of life”, this institution advocates a “western” lifestyle, promises the eradication of evil forces through the Christian faith and offers a corresponding worship ritual. The Catholic ritual in conjunction with the lifestyle promoted by the Catholic Church come thus to appear as preparatory for the “western way of life” and termination of sin and evil. Christian worship, sedentariness and agriculture are therefore to be adopted as the means to attain the ends of cash economy and other supposed “western” circumstances. What might have seemed a merely symbolic association in the endeavour to attain a “western way of life” by emulating its aggregate attributes, thereby mutates into a causal sequence. Much as sedentariness enables intensive gardening, so does in turn the latter in combination with Christian worship enable the emergence of a cash economy.

As the new belief and lifestyle turn instrumental in the preparation for the new Millennium, their novelty turns tradition. Traditional lifestyle and ritual may become abolished, but their patterns are mirrored by their novel counterparts. Much as in the traditional system mobility allowed for hunting, which yielded game, so does in the new system sedentariness allow for regular and industrious gardening, which will yield money. The human activities of hunting and gardening execute what has been prepared through ritual means. The traditional ritual secured the abundance of game (since its abolition, the numbers of game animals have decreased markedly, it is perceived by the exponent); in analogy, the Church ritual will secure the abundance of money. As stated explicitly by the exponent, the ritual to secure the abundance of game has become redundant in an age of money (*pers. communication* Ch. Kocher Schmid). As the rejection of pork signifies, the ritual to secure the abundance of game is no longer practised, hunting no longer desired, game no longer cherished. In their places are now found the ritual of the Catholic Church, gardening and money, acting out corresponding roles on the scene of the new Millennium.

The new ideology, both progressive and reactionary like the taboo on pork itself by which it is represented, apparently emulates “western” innovations, yet constitutes a reflection of ancestral concepts. Focusing on the most significant aspect of the traditional subsistence system and world view to announce a radical break with the past, this ideology is in fact founded on those very traditions. As the special role bestowed upon proponents at the creation is expected to manifest itself at the turn of the Millennium, so is traditional wisdom used to explain and attain novel circumstances. The past holds the key to the future, the future is modelled on the past.

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Résumé

“Les cochons sont sales, le porc rend malade”. Un tabou sur le porc et sa signification pour le nouveau millénaire

Cet article explore, à partir de l'étude du cas du village de Kilimeri en PNG, la façon dont l'expérience de conditions et de concepts nouveaux donne naissance à une idéologie millénariste caractérisée par un tabou sur le porc. Un examen détaillé des significations multiples de ce tabou illustre le rôle que joue cette nouvelle idéologie tant dans la subsistance que dans ses interprétations.

Le cochon occupe une place centrale dans le système traditionnel de subsistance et de cosmologie. En dépit de la variété des pratiques de subsistance et de l'importance de l'arboriculture, le porc s'insère dans un style de vie intégrant la chasse, les déplacements et des activités forestières. De plus, de par sa signification culturelle, le cochon est important dans les rituels. Comme les aspects de la vie traditionnelle ont été attaqués par certains Occidentaux, y compris les missionnaires, les rituels ont été considérés comme néfastes par les représentants des religions chrétiennes. Les religions chrétiennes à leur tour tiennent elles-mêmes le cochon en piètre estime – dans ce jugement lapidaire “les cochons sont sales”. Apparemment, les représentants de la nouvelle idéologie s'appuient sur ce jugement pour exprimer une désapprobation similaire du style de vie et du rituel traditionnels comme le font les membres des religions chrétiennes. Pourtant, l'attitude envers les cochons et le porc représente une idéologie qui est non seulement tournée vers l'avenir et inspirée par la chrétienté, mais encore solidement enracinée dans le passé et fondée sur la vision traditionnelle du monde. Ceci devient apparent lorsque cette mauvaise considération des cochons se fond avec la remise en vigueur de l'interdiction du porc pour des raisons totémiques. Manger la viande d'un animal totémique est considéré comme néfaste pour la santé – “le porc rend malade”. Finalement, les jugements selon lesquels “les cochons sont sales” et “le porc rend malade” deviennent interchangeables. Ils servent la nouvelle idéologie qui recommande la transformation du système traditionnel de subsistance afin d'atteindre un futur radieux sur le modèle “occidental”, fondé sur l'amalgame des notions de la tradition judéo-chrétienne et des concepts traditionnels.

Travaux de la Société d'Écologie Humaine

Directeur de la Publication : Nicole Vernazza-Licht

Déjà parus :

L'homme et le Lac, 1995

Impact de l'homme sur les milieux naturels : Perceptions et mesures, 1996

Villes du Sud et environnement, 1997

L'homme et la lagune. De l'espace naturel à l'espace urbanisé, 1998

Cet ouvrage trouve son origine dans les X^e journées scientifiques de la Société d'Écologie Humaine (Marseille, novembre 1998) organisées par la SEH, le programme Avenir des Peuples des Forêts Tropicales et l'UMR 6578 du CNRS-Université de la Méditerranée. Elles ont bénéficié de l'appui du programme "Environnement, vie, sociétés" du CNRS et du Département "Environnement, technologies et société" de l'Université de Provence.

Les éditeurs scientifiques tiennent à remercier : Patrick Baudot (Université de Provence, Marseille), Edmond Dounias (IRD, Montpellier), Alain Froment (IRD, Orléans), Annette Hladik (CNRS, Paris), Annie Hubert (CNRS, Bordeaux), Pierre Lemonnier (CNRS, Marseille), Glenn Smith (LASEMA, Paris) et Theodore Trefon (APFT, Bruxelles) pour leur aide précieuse dans la relecture de certains manuscrits.

Cet ouvrage a été publié avec le concours financier de l'Union Européenne (programme APFT, DG Développement) et du Conseil Général des Bouches-du-Rhône.

Les opinions émises dans le cadre de chaque article n'engagent que leurs auteurs.

SOCIÉTÉ D'ÉCOLOGIE HUMAINE

c/o UMR 6578 du CNRS-Université de la Méditerranée

Faculté de Médecine, 27, boulevard Jean-Moulin

13385 Marseille cedex 5

Dépôt légal : 2^e trimestre 2000

ISBN 2-9511840-5-0

ISSN 1284-5590

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476 chemin de Bergier, 06740 Châteauneuf de Grasse

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L'HOMME ET LA FORÊT TROPICALE

Éditeurs scientifiques

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la Société
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Humaine



1999