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# CHRISTIANITY, CARGO AND IDEAS OF SELF: PATTERNS OF LITERACY IN A PAPUA NEW GUINEAN VILLAGE

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Literacy in a small, rural, newly literate Papua New Guinean village is analysed by placing it in the context of local notions of Christianity, the self and language. Villagers' interpretations of the relationship between Catholicism and the written word are based on their Cargo-oriented world-view and on their pre-Christian beliefs about language as a powerful means by which individuals could bring about transformations in their world. Local ideas of the self and others are articulated and reinforced through an emphasis on particular dimensions of oral language use. This emphasis has consequences for the uses to which literacy is put, the structure of the writing the villagers produce, and the ways in which they attribute meaning to written texts.

Recent criticism in the study of literacy has sought to refute the strong claims about its consequences made by such scholars as Goody (1968; 1977), Ong (1982) and Olson (1977). Critical examinations of the assumptions underlying this work, and empirical studies of literacy and orality in non-western societies, have cast grave doubt on the validity of a sharp distinction between 'literate' and 'non-literate' societies, and the conclusions of much of this earlier work—that the acquisition of literacy skills transforms social relations, historical consciousness and cognitive processes—are increasingly being called into question.

One aspect of this criticism which we wish to address here is the tendency in earlier work to portray literacy as a kind of potent, active force in itself; a force that can function as an agent of social, linguistic and cognitive change. Such a view of literacy is of course central and tenaciously rooted in developed countries, and it is regularly espoused by serious and well-intentioned educationalists, politicians and development consultants. The problem, however, is that by attributing agentive power to literacy, one tends to diminish or disregard the role which human agents play in the processes of acquiring and maintaining literacy. In much of the rhetoric and scholarly literature on literacy, human beings appear as basically passive objects who become affected by literacy in ways they are neither fully aware of nor able to control.

Viewing literacy as a force which affects people in predictable ways has made it difficult for some scholars to account for situations where communities use their literacy skills in ways which do not conform to middle-class European conventions. Confronted with cultures that demand the oral embedding of written material, or with cases in which the written word plays a prominent role in millenarian activity, researchers have had recourse to negative descriptive terms such as 'restricted' (Goody 1977) or 'curiously ritualized' literacy (Meggitt 1968). The portrayal of literacy as an agent has also

permitted the development of a discourse in which it is possible to speak of the written word 'transforming' societies and individuals, or of literacy 'taking hold' of a group of people.

In this article, rather than stressing how literacy affects people, we want to take the opposite tack and examine how people affect literacy. We intend to demonstrate how individuals in a newly literate society, far from being passively transformed by literacy, instead actively and creatively apply literate skills to suit their own purposes and needs. In pursuing this argument, we do not deny that the acquisition of literacy might in itself have consequences for social groups. We are suggesting, however, that these consequences should not be simply assumed, nor should they be exaggerated. Like an increasing number of researchers in disciplines such as social psychology (Cole & Scribner 1981), history (Graff 1979; Clanchy 1979), linguistics (Stubbs 1980; Cook-Gumperz 1986) and anthropology (Finnegan 1988; Heath 1983), we have come to the conclusion that literacy has been and continues to be unjustifiably reified in current discussions and debates. By analysing empirical data in a way that shows how literacy is bound up with 'quite profound levels of belief and the fundamental concepts through which a society creates order and design in the world' (Street 1984: 114), we hope to contribute to what appears to be a growing consensus that literacy is shaped by a group's social organisation and cultural concerns in much further-reaching and more subtle ways than has formerly been appreciated.

### *The uses of literacy*

The data on which we shall base our discussion come from a small, rural village located in the lower Sepik region of Papua New Guinea. The village is called Gapun, and it is populated by about 100 people who are largely self-supporting through a combination of swidden agriculture, hunting and sago processing.

When discussing literacy in Gapun, or anywhere else in Papua New Guinea, it is first necessary to understand the rather complicated linguistic situation into which reading and writing skills become embedded. In Gapun, two languages dominate the verbal repertoire of the villagers. These are the vernacular language, Taiap, and Tok Pisin. Taiap is an isolate non-Austronesian language, probably belonging to what in the linguistic literature is called the Sepik-Ramu phylum of Papuan languages (Kulick & Stroud in press; Laycock & Z'graggen 1975). It is spoken only in Gapun and is not a written language. Tok Pisin is an English-based creole. It is the most widely spoken language in Papua New Guinea today.

A few members of Gapun village have been minimally literate in Tok Pisin since the late 1950s. In 1967, a government-run grammar school was opened in a nearby village, and since that time the majority of children in Gapun have attended school for 3-6 years. In addition to the two languages spoken in the village, the children who attend grammar school are confronted with yet another tongue: English. For a variety of social, historical and political reasons, English is the language of instruction in Papua New Guinea, and it is used in classrooms from the very first day of school. Gapun children thus acquire literacy skills in a language they almost never hear or use outside the classroom. Despite the fact that the children learn very little during the first two or three years of school, due in large measure to their inability to cope with instruction in English, most of them leave school having acquired some literacy skills. These

children are able, without any formal instruction, to transfer those skills to Tok Pisin, thus becoming functionally literate in that language.

Outside of school, however, literacy skills are almost never used. Most boys and virtually all girls who become literate in school make no use of their reading and writing abilities outside the classroom and, after they leave school at ages 14–15, many of these young people may never read and will almost certainly never write again. There are few opportunities in the course of normal village life to read or write. The only type of literature that regularly enters the village, for example, is the Sydney Morning Herald, but this is purchased in loose sheets by the villagers and is used to roll cigarettes; it is never read.

Nevertheless, most households do contain some printed matter which is occasionally looked at, and a few villagers do sometimes write. But the ways in which Gapun villagers have incorporated literacy skills into their community differ from the ways in which the written word is often assumed to be used in literate societies. Noticeably absent from Gapun are those types of reading and writing which are stressed in western societies and educational systems. Gapuners do not read to gain information about people they do not know or about events which do not directly concern them. Nobody in the village considers that one can become better informed or more competent in any way by reading (although there is a belief that the intensive reading of a text might cause one to understand its hidden message—we return to this below). Consequently, there is no notion in the village that everyone *should* read. The act of reading in itself has no value apart from accomplishing some immediate goal such as confirming the words to a hymn, preparing to recite a prayer, reading a note one has been given, or discovering a heretofore concealed truth.

One of the most common types of reading in Gapun is *social-interactional*<sup>1</sup>, where villagers read and discuss the written requests sent to them by other villagers. Another type of reading is done in *preparation for oral performances*. This type of reading takes place immediately before the Catholic mass that is said each Sunday in Gapun, and it is done only by those young men who will lead prayers or songs during the mass. These young men sit by themselves for several minutes before the mass begins, and read or sing quietly under their breath those prayers or songs that they will take the lead in performing during the church services. *Confirmational* reading is done to check, confirm or announce facts, such as the right words to a hymn or the date of a past village event (for example the date of someone's death). A few villagers read brief passages from religious literature in Tok Pisin, or from brochures from banks or foreign companies in English, in order to discover the true meaning of the text. This *truth-seeking* reading is done to discover the answer to important questions such as 'why was Jesus *really* killed?' or 'How can Gapun obtain ships and aeroplanes and factories that make money?'

The final type of reading that the villagers sometimes do is *instrumental*. Villagers never read any type of literature for temporary recreation, but they do play card games, and they have to be able to read the suits and numbers of the cards in order to play and prevent cheating. Another occasion on which reading is used in this way is when someone expresses a preference for a particular brand of some store-bought item such as batteries or razor blades. In this case, the labels on those preferred items will be read aloud and announced throughout the village.

Writing, too, has particular, circumscribed uses in the village. Despite the fact that children do some expository writing in school, none of this is carried over to the village context: villagers do not keep diaries or write letters to friends in distant villages to maintain contact. Writing in Gapun, like reading, is directed to accomplishing concrete goals. It is never talked about or evaluated in terms of aesthetics, and there is no notion that everyone should know how to write.

The most common use of writing in the village is *request-directed*. Villagers write short notes to relatives in nearby villages, or occasionally to fellow villagers requesting a favour or a loan such as the use of a hunting dog or a gun. These notes are delivered by somebody who is familiar with their content and who gives an oral elaboration of the written message. The culturally appropriate response to a note of this kind is not another note, but rather some concrete action in compliance with the request or else an *oral* message, sent with the deliverer of the original note to its writer, explaining why the request cannot be granted. In recent years, young village men have also begun sending away short letters requesting cars and speedboats to mysterious addresses in America, where it is rumoured that these things lie on the ground 'like leaves'.

Another type of writing which occurs in Gapun is writing as a *memory aid*. Only a few villagers actually use writing in this way. One senior man laboriously records selected events of importance, such as the dates of villagers' deaths, in a mouldy exercise booklet that one of his children once brought home from school. And the village prayer leader sometimes notes down in his Catholic Calendar especially violent fights or shouting matches between villagers.

Very rarely, writing is used to emphasise the *official* (i.e. non-village based) nature of an occasion or type of relationship. This type of writing is only done by elected village officials, such as the village *komiti* (a village man elected by the villagers in compliance with government demands; the name derives from the English 'committee'). In 1986, the man serving as the *komiti* once had his sixteen-year-old son sit down and write out a list containing the names of every adult in the village (about thirty names). This list was never actually produced or seen again, but on several later occasions when this *komiti* was trying to coax the villagers to work together, he reminded them all, in dark tones, that their names were recorded in a 'book'. He clearly intended this as a kind of warning to the villagers that they should respect his position, understand the gravity of his office and comply with his suggestions about work.

The final way in which writing is used in Gapun is *emblematic*. This type of writing has the character of graffiti, and it is not normally done on paper. Usually, it is scratched into a floor post or written with charcoal on a tree trunk by adolescent boys. What they write are their names or short phrases which have no clear meaning even to them, beyond having some vague connexion to *raskal* (petty gangster) gangs that they have heard about from others.

While the people of Gapun use their literacy skills in a variety of ways, it is clear that the overwhelming bulk of literate activity in the village is directly concerned either with Christianity or with aspects of the villagers' relationships with one another. Preparatory reading, confirmational reading, reading to discover the Truth, and the writing of notes to foreign companies all occur primarily in contexts linked to the Church and in relation to literature that the villagers regard as religious. And the reading and writing of messages requesting favours, lists of names, names scratched

into house posts and notes recording deaths are all part of the general flow of communication that villagers have with and about one another.

We believe that the prominence of these particular uses of literacy in the village result not so much from the restriction or misunderstanding of literacy as from the meanings that the villagers have attached to the written word. That is, the people of Gapun have creatively adapted reading and writing activities to accord with the pursuit of certain goals and to achieve particular effects which have been generated by larger cultural concerns. Adopting the two characteristic features of Gapun literacy as rubrics, we shall now proceed to examine the ways in which local conceptions of Christianity, and of interpersonal relations, have influenced how the villagers structure, use and evaluate literacy.

### *Getting the word to work*

Historically, literacy in Gapun, like virtually everywhere else in the Pacific region, was introduced in Christian contexts. The first village man to acquire literacy skills did so in the mid-1950s by spending a few months on a Catholic mission station and sitting in on lessons that the missionaries and nuns held for local children. When this man, Krooni Ayarpa, returned to Gapun from the mission station, he used his newly acquired literacy skills in Tok Pisin to say a simple mass on Sundays. He shared his knowledge of letters with other village men, and a few of these learned enough to follow along in hymn booklets and perhaps to write their names. In the early 1960s, several of the village men and women who are now in their forties were sent by their parents to another mission station for schooling. Harsh punishment drove these boys and girls to run away before acquiring any literacy skills beyond perhaps learning the alphabet.

In any case, from the introduction of literacy in Gapun in the mid-1950s, until the late 1960s, any villager who became literate did so in a context directly associated with the Catholic Church, be this through Krooni Ayarpa, the village prayer leader, or on a mission station. This link between literacy and the Church was further reinforced by the total absence from the village of any literature except booklets and pamphlets addressing Catholic beliefs and liturgy. When villagers learned to read, they did so in order to be able to read Christian literature.

*Catholicism and cargo.* Catholicism was established in Gapun in the years immediately following the second world war. This coincided with, and was in all probability reinforced by, a period of cargo cult activity in the area. The first of these cults was inspired by stories of the Rai Coast movement led by the well-known millenarian leader Yali (Lawrence 1964; Morauta 1974). In Gapun, this cult expressed itself in the destruction of traditional cult items, beliefs that money would appear in the village graveyard, and the expectation that the villagers would shed their black skins 'like snakes' and emerge fair-haired and white. Another cult, lasting perhaps as long as a year in the late 1940s and early 50s, was inspired by a Lower Sepik man named Ninga and was based on military drills and the belief that the second coming of Christ was impending. Both these movements finally disbanded, partly because they failed to produce the Cargo and partly because of rumours that colonial administrators were intent on 'punishing' anyone who persisted in performing cult activities.

Since the 1950s, there have been two more outbreaks of overt millenarian activity in the village; one in 1965-6, and the other as recently as 1987. The cargo cult activity in 1987 is particularly interesting because it was sparked off by rumours that the villagers



of Bogia (about a day and a half's walk from Gapun along the coast) had received a letter from God informing them of the exact time at which the world would end. For weeks, Gapun villagers talked excitedly about travelling to Bogia to see this letter for themselves. Although no one actually ever made the trip, snippets of information contained in the letter from God did leak out and eventually reach Gapun: the world, it was said, would end at '3 o'clock' on 'day 10'. This would be a Thursday, in 'year 13'. Nobody in Gapun understood what 'year 13' could possibly mean, but many of the villagers began to 'ready themselves' for the End anyway, devoting their time to the construction of elaborate altars and the celebration of ecstatic prayer meetings.

That this latest bout of millenarian activity was directly related to a written product, from the pen of none other than God Almighty Himself, testifies to the highly salient and vigorous associations that exist in Gapun between Christianity, Cargo and literacy. The strength of these associations is further illustrated by the type of literature which the villagers actually possess.

Of the eighty-four specimens of printed matter existing in the village in 1987, all but two of these were directly connected with Christianity<sup>2</sup>. The most common printed item in the village is the small paperbound hymn booklet called '*Niu Laip*' (New Life). If a household possesses only one item of literature, this is it. The next most common item is the soft covered '*Nupela Testamen na Ol Sam*' (New Testament and the Psalms), which several households keep in a plastic rice bag up in the rafters of their roof. The remainder of the religious matter consists of various booklets containing Bible stories, prayers and liturgical instructions, always in Tok Pisin.

With the exception of the hymn booklet, which the villagers take with them to mass and sometimes look in while singing, most of this literature is almost never read. Only printed matter containing pictures or line drawings is ever really looked at. Nobody reads the Bible, for example, but school children, or an adult and several school children, sometimes flick through it together and comment to each other about the abstract line drawings of figures they find there. This flicking through printed matter and explaining to one another about the pictures there is how villagers most often 'read' such material.

One extremely popular item of literature in the village is a soiled booklet without a cover called by the villagers '*Bel Bilong Man*' (Man's Heart; lit. Man's Stomach). This booklet contains line drawings of various animals, accompanied by a Tok Pisin text which explains that they personify different sinful behaviours: a bird of paradise represents Vanity and '*Bikhet*' (big-headedness); a dog symbolises '*pasin bilong pamuk*' (Promiscuity); a cassowary is meant to stand for Aggression, etc. The story that the booklet tells is that men must work to drive these sinful ways from their hearts and replace them with Christian qualities, symbolised iconographically by a smiling mouth (for a Christian conscience), an open eye (for seeing the Light), an open book, a burning bush, and a crucifix. If one does not replace sinful ways with Christian ways, the text warns, then one's soul will be dragged to Hell. This fate is rather dramatically illustrated in a drawing from the booklet reproduced in Fig. 1.

Village schoolchildren have added to this drawing, writing '*sinman*' (sinner) on the soul destined for the Flames, and labelling the horned figures as '*seten*' (Satan). An interesting iconographic detail of the drawing is the appearance of a book, in the hand of the man who is standing near the centre of the picture. This book, even though it has no label, is immediately understood by every villager to be the Bible, in a manner

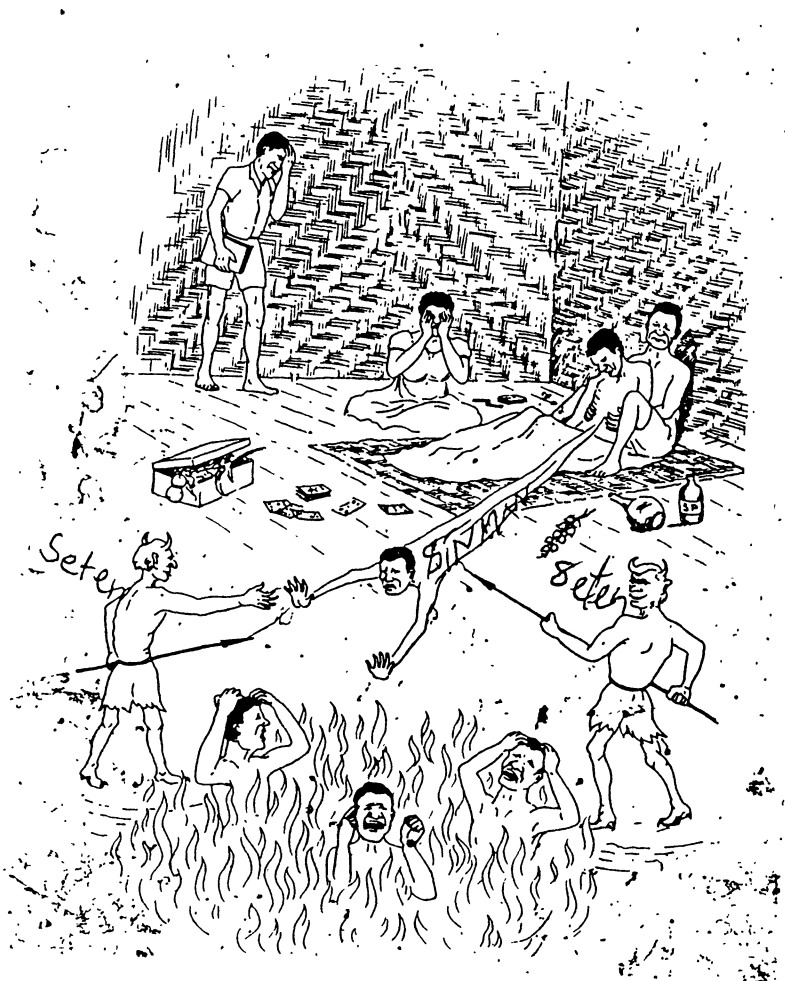


FIGURE 1.

which suggests that 'Book' is an essentially Christian concept. The man holding this book, neatly dressed in a button-down shirt and standing poignantly apart from the dead sinner, is interpreted by the villagers as representing the village prayer leader.

Another drawing later on in the booklet represents the death of another man—possibly this same prayer leader (fig. 2). The text on the page opposite this illustration explains that it depicts 'The death of a believer' (*Indai bilong man i bilip*). There are several interesting details in this picture, such as the European-style window in the man's house, but what is most relevant for us here is to note the prominence, once again, of a book. The book in this drawing is again unlabelled, but it is clear to every villager what is being represented. This picture is an uncommonly apt and powerful



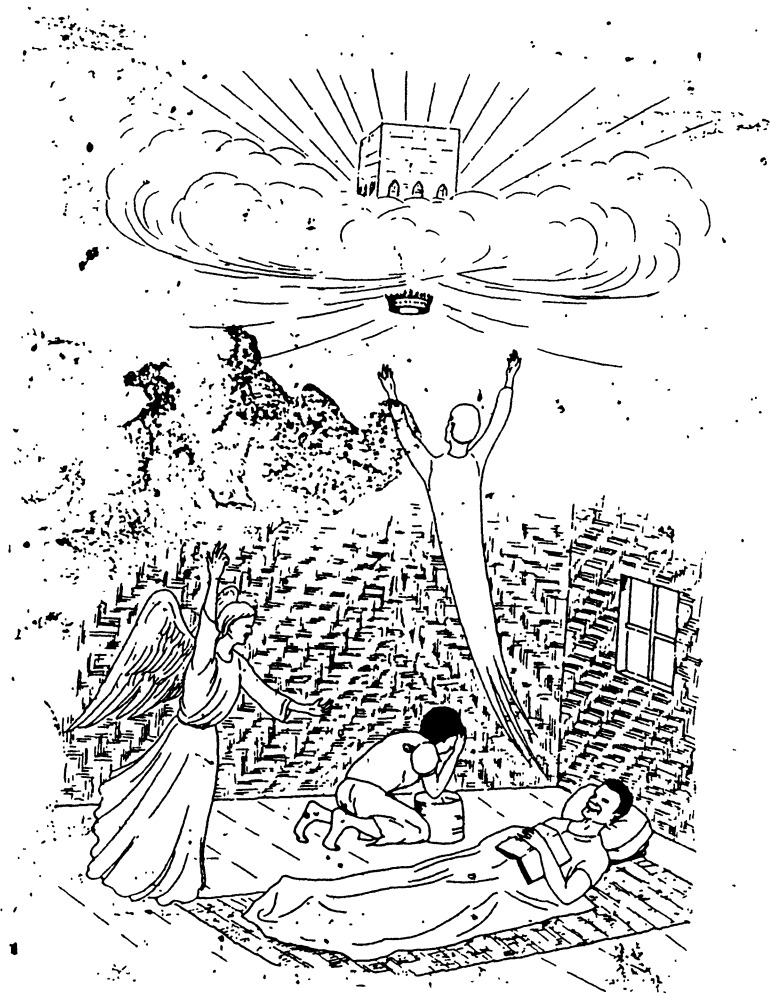


FIGURE 2.

encoding of what the villagers in Gapun believe to be the relationship between literacy and Christianity. Especially noteworthy is the colour of the rising spirit's hair (and, by association, of his skin). In illustrations such as this, the villagers continually find proof that they are correct in believing that they 'change' and become white when they die.

*The power of the Word.* In his influential and perceptive analysis of material similar to that just presented for Gapun, Meggitt (1968) accounts for the Melanesian preoccupation with uses of literacy in what is basically a religious framework by analysing it as an outgrowth of traditional belief systems in which knowledgeable men (and, in some societies, although Meggitt neglects to mention them, women) communicated with spirit powers in order directly to influence them. He explains that literacy was

originally understood by these people as 'merely one more of those inherently ambiguous modes of communication with the supernatural with which they were already familiar', and concludes that New Guineans sought to become literate 'so that they could get a grip on the mission god and force from him his secrets' (1968: 302).

Meggitt's analysis fits well with the situation in Gapun. Here words have always had power, and certain words uttered in certain contexts are seen by the villagers to have the power to bring about certain outcomes. Words constitute direct links to spirit powers, such as ancestors or *tambaran* (male cult deities), who are expected to respond in desired ways if the proper words are said in the proper manner. The Christian Word of God has indeed been interpreted by the villagers in precisely this manner, and as soon as it was discovered that 'God's talk' was marked on paper and actually accessible to anyone who could learn to decipher the marks, enterprising villagers like Krooni Ayarpa in the 1950s seized upon literacy as the 'road' to the Cargo that they had all been searching for.

But while we agree with Meggitt that traditional understandings of the relationship between language and spirit powers underlie the villagers' initial enthusiasm to become literate, we do not agree with his view of literacy as a 'developmental sequence' in which 'ritualized' literacy constitutes a stage that eventually gives way to a 'typically European secular' use of the written word. The notion of 'stages' is ill-suited to the Gapun material, where multiple uses of literacy (both those that Meggitt calls 'ritualized' such as writing letters to obtain the Cargo, and those he calls 'secular', such as writing notes to fellow villagers) co-exist. And his expectation that villagers will eventually abandon 'ritualized' literacy in favour of using it in its 'straightforward', 'European' manner appears to hinge partly on an ethnocentric definition of what literacy 'is' (Street 1987), and partly on an underestimation of the power, longevity and centrality of millenarian thought in some Melanesian cultures.

We want to emphasise here that millenarian beliefs are absolutely basic to the way in which the villagers of Gapun interpret and understand their world. A point sometimes overlooked in discussions of cargo cults is that the cults themselves are merely the 'activist' manifestations of the beliefs, to use Worsley's (1957) terminology. The beliefs which generated the cults do not just disappear with the cults themselves. They can remain strong, indeed fundamental, without any overt millenarian activity taking place at all, although this is likely to erupt from time to time. Thus despite the passage of time and the appearance of several unsuccessful cargo cults in Gapun, the villagers' cargo-oriented world-view has not been replaced by another way of looking at life. The only effect that recent innovations have had on the villagers has been to provide them with additional means by which they might succeed in bringing forth the Cargo.

For example, one of the most recent innovations in the literacy-Christianity-Cargo nexus has been the discovery of 'forms' (*ol pom*). These days, instead of repeating a string of memorised Hail Marys like their fathers, male 'grade 6 leavers' devote time to wondering how they can obtain the 'forms' which they have heard will bring the Cargo if one fills them in correctly. One of these young men in his early twenties once expressed with great bitterness and indignation his conviction that someone had stolen '7 million Kina' (approx. 7 million US dollars) from him. It turned out that he had obtained a lottery form from one of the teachers at the local school. He filled in the form and returned it to the teacher to be sent off. He was certain that he had won the money, because as he understood it, 'if you write in your name and address without

any mistakes at all then you win'. He had, he explained, taken great care when completing the form, and he was certain that he had made no errors. The fact that the 7 million Kina never turned up could therefore only be explained by thievery and fraud.

The power of the word thus persists in Gapun, and the villagers are busily trying to get that power to work for them in Christian contexts. The opening of a government-run grammar school in a nearby village in 1967 gave the villagers their first access to non-religious reading material. Schooling, however, is also interpreted by Gapun villagers in terms of their millenarian world-view, and they believe that the ultimate purpose of schooling is to reveal to their children the secret of the Cargo<sup>3</sup>. What this means is that even the secular literature read by children in school is conceptualised in an essentially religious framework. In addition to this, literacy in school, as noted earlier, is acquired in English; a language which the village children almost never encounter in any form outside the classroom. The eclectic and mysterious nature of this language, together with a growing realisation that English, and not Tok Pisin, is the white man's true *tok ples* (vernacular) further fires the villagers' suspicions that the 'meaning' of school is to reveal millenarian secrets to their children.

Our contention is that the differences in the ways middle-class westerners and rural New Guinean villagers perceive and use literacy do not reflect differences in their relative positions on a 'developmental sequence', but are rather reflections of differences in culture. These differences are not a matter of villagers having misunderstood what literacy is supposed to be, as Meggitt strongly implies. They are, instead, the result of villagers having taken an active role in shaping literacy to suit their needs and concerns. Villagers conscientiously maintain and elaborate the link between literacy and Christianity because they are convinced that they can get that link to work for them. It is necessary to appreciate this in order to understand why the people of Gapun continue to accept some types of literature into their lives whilst rejecting others. Although it is still scarce, secular literature in Tok Pisin, such as the weekly newspaper *Wantok*, does exist today. But none of this interests anyone in Gapun. The only non-religious literature ever actively read in the village consists of glossy, brightly coloured brochures from American mail order companies that have been passed into Gapun from friends in other villages. Even though they are secular, however, the villagers predictably interpret these brochures within a religious framework. They pore over them in excited groups and marvel at the abundance of goods that the brochures seem to be offering. Proclaiming triumphantly that they have finally found the 'road' they have been seeking, young men sit down and write brief letters to the addresses they find in the front of the brochures, requesting that the Cargo be sent to them forthwith.

### *Writing, the self and others*

Just as their ideas about their place in the world in relation to God, white people and the Cargo have influenced the villagers' perceptions and uses of literacy, so have their understandings about themselves as persons played an important role in shaping how they have incorporated literate skills into village life.

Gapuners have very strong and very definite notions of self. For the villagers, the self is a duality, composed of separate aspects or dimensions which they call *hed* and *save*. *Hed*, like its vernacular equivalent *kokir*<sup>4</sup>, means, exactly, head. *Hed* signifies

personal will and autonomy, the desire to be independent and undisturbed, always to do exactly as one pleases without regard for anybody else. Each individual, the villagers believe, 'has *hed*' (*igat hed/kəkəkən*). Babies are born with *hed* and are treated by caregivers as stubborn, wilful individualists. Their pre-verbal behaviour and sounds are consistently interpreted as expressions of anger and dissatisfaction, and the first word attributed to them is the vernacular *ɔkɛ* which means, approximately 'I'm getting out of here'. This word, which adults attribute to infants as young as two months, reflects the village notion that children are born with a strong sense of autonomy, and that they will go where they want and do what they want, regardless of the wishes of anyone else. *ɔkɛ* is believed soon to be followed by two words which further underscore the belief that babies 'have *hed*': *mnda* (I'm sick of this) and *ayata* (Stop it) (Kulick 1987:n.d.).

Although it is considered an integral part of the self, in village rhetoric, *hed* is bad. It is harshly evaluated as anti-social, selfish, uncivilised, unchristian, egoistic and stubbornly atomistic. As children mature and become integrated into the social life of their community, they are expected increasingly to 'suppress *hed*' (*daunim hed*) and to 'show' the other culturally elaborated aspect of self—*save* (*numbwan*). *Save* (knowledge) signifies knowledge of facts and being able to learn from experience and through doing, but it also means knowledge about appropriate behaviour and speech, awareness of social obligations and roles, and cognisance of the consequences that one's own or someone else's actions or words can have. *Save* is continually used in Gapun as a metaphor for social sensitivity and solidarity. It is the knowledge that one must sometimes 'suppress *hed*', compromise, fulfil social obligations and accommodate others even if one does not want to.

These two aspects of the self are recognised by the villagers as fundamentally conflicting, and they are used as ways of conceptualising and talking about conflicts. A major source of friction in Gapun is that while individual villagers consider themselves to be 'good' men and women, who are co-operative, accommodating and Christian, and who do suppress their own *hed* in the interest of public good, they have a deep-seated anxiety that the *heds* of their fellow villagers are really not very 'suppressed' at all; and that these *heds*, wanton and disruptive, are continually poised to violate their own sense of personal space and autonomy.

This is resisted fiercely. No relationship in Gapun, not even that between adult and child, is understood by the villagers to involve the legitimate power to order another person to do something against his or her will. Any intimation of this is interpreted as provocation, which in Gapun means any action by an individual which causes somebody else to feel put out, exploited, insulted, wronged, violated or mistreated. Provocation is conveyed by the Tok Pisin verb *pusim* (to push), or, more to the point in the vernacular, as *kəkɛnikru* (to give head). Each individual is believed to 'have' his or her own *hed*, and any attempt to 'give *hed*' to another person is risky, because that person may react against such an attempt with violence: by having what the villagers call a *kros* (a verbal genre in which the offended party sits inside her/his house and hurls long monologues of virulent abuse at people who have provoked her/him in some way); by challenging the offender to fight; or, most dramatically of all, by ostentatiously destroying her or his own possessions in a fit of rage<sup>5</sup>.

The conceptualisation of the self as 'having *hed*, together with the salience and seriousness of provocation (which of course both reflects and reinforces the idea that

villagers are independent and vitriolic) contributes to the formation of a general social climate in which almost any type of interpersonal interaction is potentially fraught with conflict. In such a context, interactions which involve the making of requests become particularly problematic, because by asking another person to do something, one comes perilously close to confronting him or her—the boundary between a request and an order is as narrow as the listener's interpretation.

To lessen this potential for conflict, Gapuners have developed ways of making requests so that they cannot easily be interpreted as infringements or demands. Speakers blithely embed their request in a mass of talk which emphasises that compliance is not necessary at all. Often, the request will be 'hidden', couched discreetly 'behind' or 'underneath' words which on the surface have another meaning entirely. Because any request may be interpreted as 'giving *hed*' to another person, speakers also rely heavily on dissociating strategies through which they distance themselves from the talk they are producing by continually retracting it even as they develop it. And, finally, villagers are careful to use language that portrays them as humble, non-threatening and self-effacing. They try to structure requests so that their listener's response cannot later be said to have arisen out of any sense of threat or force. The listener should feel moved to help the speaker out of his or her own sense of solidarity and goodwill. Villagers attempt to present their requests in such a way that, by coming to the speaker's assistance, the recipient of the request can feel that s/he is 'showing' her/his *save*.

All these strategies for making requests have been carried over to the villagers' writing patterns, and are exemplified in a note sent to Kulick by a village couple in their thirties. The note was delivered about a week before a large conciliatory feast was due to be held in the village (fig. 3).

The note begins with the formulaic opening phrase that villagers with some schooling have learned to use in letters: 'Dear'. Directly after that, however, comes a new opening: 'Yes', followed by the phrase 'I have a little worry to tell you'. These opening phrases are discourse framing devices which are strongly associated with the type of oratorical speech that takes place in the men's house. Oratories in Gapun always open with *Yes*, *Plis* (please), *Tenk you* (thank you) or *Eskus* (excuse [me]), and these words are habitually followed by phrases announcing that the speaker has 'a little talk' or 'a little worry' to deliver to his audience. Just as these phrases are used in speeches in the men's house to assume the floor and to frame talk as oratorical, so are they used in the villagers' writing. The recipient of this note is not being written to so much as orated at.

Guided by an unwillingness to appear to be 'giving *hed*', the authors of this note first make their request, only then to dissociate themselves from that request and diminish its implications by apologising for having made it at all. They spend more words in their note telling the recipient that he does not have to 'help' them than persuading him that he should. The overall effect of this kind of discourse is to make it difficult to accuse Sake and Allan of being assuming, presumptuous or pushy.

In keeping with village dislike for directness in making requests, this note contains a great deal of indirection, and no background or contextual information is explicitly given. But in order to be able to respond to the note in an appropriate manner, the recipient must be familiar with village affairs. The note assumes that the recipient is not only aware of the impending conciliatory feast, but also knowledgeable about how much rice Sake and Allan are expected to provide. In this case, the request for 'a little rice' is a somewhat forced diminutive, since both the sender and the receiver of the

Dear Don  
 Yes Don mi gat L.KLIK Wari blong  
 tokim yu. Yes Don mi Lika Lika tokim yu olsem. mi gat  
 sik nou na mi nogat taim bilong RAIDI bilong go long maket  
 Don olsem mi laik askim yu. Ju inap long helpim mi long  
 Baim LIKLIK RICE long mi. Don mi laik RAIDI  
 Long go long maket tasol bikpela pen ikisim mina  
 mi no RAIDI long go long maket. nou. Don olsem mi  
 askim yu tasol. Tipos nogat em ORAIT TASOL.  
 Don Tipos yu no laik helpim mi em ORAIT TASOL.  
~~Don Tipos yu laik helpim mi em ORAIT TASOL.~~  
 SO DON EM TASOL L.KLIK WARI blong mi  
  
 THANKU TRU BAY  
~~ALLAN KASIA~~ SAKE MARTIN

FIG. 3.

Dear Don

Yes Don

I have a little worry to tell you.

Yes Don

I want to tell you that I'm sick

And

I don't have time to get ready to go to the market

[to sell produce in order to earn some money].

So Don

I want to ask you.

Can you help me to buy a little rice for me.

Don

I wanted to get ready to go to the market but a big

pain got me

so I didn't go to the market.

Don

It's like, I'm just asking you.

If no [i.e. if you don't want to]

That's just alright.

Don

If you don't want to help me,

That's just alright.

Don [crossed out]

If you want to help, alright... [crossed out]

So Don

that's it, my little worry.

Thank You Truly

Allan Kasia [crossed out]

Sake Martin<sup>6</sup>



message knew that for Sake and Allan adequately to fulfil their social responsibilities during the feast, at least 25 kg of rice was required. Furthermore, the reader of this note is expected to be able to get 'behind' the words and understand that Sake and Allan are not requesting a contribution to 'help' them purchase rice—as they explicitly state. What they want and expect is for Kulick to buy the entire 25 kg of rice for them.

The final point to note about this short letter is the amount of work done in self-effacement and the creation of a context in which the listener/recipient can demonstrate his *save*. This context is built up partly through the use of diminutives ('a little worry'; 'a little rice') and partly by the introduction of the notion of sickness, of disability. Again, the authors of the note are seeking to avoid giving the impression of forcefulness and insistence. They are not really making a request, it is implied: they are merely bringing some compelling facts about sickness to the attention of the recipient of the note, leaving him to act on those facts. How he reacts is up to him. He may respond on the basis of his *save* and display social solidarity with the afflicted person, or he may not. In any case, the decision is his. He cannot claim at some later point to have been 'pushed' into doing something he did not want to do.

#### *Hidden talk and hidden text*

In addition to being critical to the structuring of both spoken and written requests, the concept of *save*, of knowledge and social competence, is also fundamental in understanding how villagers extract meaning from language. In this context, it is significant to note that villagers do not believe that *save* is taught. *Save* in the villagers' view, 'breaks open' (*bruk /krarara*) inside a child, like an egg. Children begin to show evidence of *save* when, aged between about 20 and 30 months, they start to use language by themselves to engage others in verbal interactions. Gapuners conceptualise a break between what they hold to be a child's early language—words such as *ɔkei* (I'm getting out of here), *mnda* (I'm sick of this) and *ayata* (stop it), which are considered to be blunt declarations of the child's true aggressive *hed*—and their later verbal utterances, which are observed to be interactive in nature and expressive of *save*. Language used in interaction with others is understood as both an indication and a result of *save* 'breaking open'. In recognising such a link between verbal interaction and *save*, villagers are asserting their belief that language is one of the chief means through which an individual may express his or her social competence.

This competence is expressed by being outwardly self-effacing, accommodating and agreeable. In informal interactions, villagers demonstrate their *save* by accommodating others in language choice (villagers who know other vernacular languages are keen to use them, in stretches at least, when talking with men or women from neighbouring villages) and by carefully monitoring the topics and opinions that they converse about with others so that all are finely adjusted to suit the general mood and opinions of those within hearing range. Cultural stress is placed on accommodating and agreeing, and not, as in middle-class Anglo-American culture, on expressing one's opinions, feelings or thoughts. What this means, of course, is that no one in the village can ever be sure of what anyone else is really thinking. And indeed, a great deal of the tension which exists in Gapun stems from the fact that no one ever knows exactly what others really think or intend to do about things, because their statements on any matter are

expected to reflect not their thoughts, but rather their willingness to exhibit their *save* and to agree.

Villagers are aware, however, that there are many ways to agree, and that people may agree with their 'mouth' but not with their 'thoughts'. So they are always on the lookout for the 'true' meaning of a person's words in any given context. The fact that language, besides being a means of agreeing, is also a subtle instrument that can express many meanings simultaneously, escapes no-one. On the contrary, in a system where one should not explicitly say what one means, attention becomes focused on ways of not saying what one means.

Consequently, utterances are rarely understood at face value. Instead, villagers try to 'get behind' a person's words. What the speaker really thinks is 'underneath' the words, or 'inside' them. Language is said to have 'little little corners' which a listener must manoeuvre around in order to discover the meaning of an utterance. There is a well developed notion of metaphorical speech in the village, known in Tok Pisin as *tok bokis* (lit. box talk). *Tok bokis* (*bokakɤna nam*) is extended metaphorical speech which contains no overt clues to its real meaning. Talk about an eagle devouring a tree possum, for example, may actually be referring to the fact that the speaker or another person stole bananas from somebody's garden and ate them. In order to understand this and decode the true meaning of such an utterance, the listener must pay close attention to the details given (the speaker may name an area of jungle in which the victim of the banana theft has a garden) and must match any clues found in the talk to a knowledge of current village affairs (recalling that one of the village women had recently had a *kros* about having her bananas stolen)<sup>7</sup>.

By concentrating not so much on talk as on what may lie inside or underneath or behind the talk, villagers extract meaning from the speech of others. These individual interpretations subsequently become confirmed or modified in later discussions in the men's house or with one's spouse, relatives and friends. The important point here is that the discovery and comprehension of the meaning of speech is the responsibility of the listener. While speakers hasten to accommodate listeners in terms of language choice, opinions and topic, they are under no obligation to make themselves clear or to facilitate listener comprehension. The full burden of successful communication in Gapun lies with the listener<sup>8</sup>.

This understanding of communication, as something which the listener or recipient must make sense of, has important consequences for the way in which literacy is perceived and used. In Gapun, it has given rise to what we referred to above as the *truth-seeking* function of reading. We noted that the villagers, despite their acquisition of literate skills and their application of those skills in Christian contexts, have still failed to bring forth the Cargo they expected to get through the precise manipulation of the Word. In such a context, the cultural emphasis placed on the role of the listener/receiver and on the 'hidden' meanings in words provides explanations. There is a widespread assumption among the villagers that the 'true meaning' of religious texts is escaping them because they lack the necessary background and contextual information to perceive all the 'little little meanings' contained in the words they read. Those who possess this knowledge, the Catholic priests and certain members of the government, are 'hiding' this necessary information from them, because for a variety of reasons they do not want Papua New Guineans to obtain white skin and the Cargo. Thus, all the villagers can hope to do is read and reread the texts they possess, hoping

that someday they may stumble onto a clue that will reveal to them the 'true' meaning of the words contained in their books<sup>9</sup>.

### Conclusion

In this article we have attempted to show that the ways in which the villagers of Gapun conceive of and use literacy are heavily influenced by the ways in which they understand themselves and their world. We began by noting how the villagers' perceptions of the Catholic religion as an instrument for obtaining the Cargo has meshed with their pre-Christian beliefs that spiritual beings could be coerced by human beings through the precise manipulation of words into providing certain goods and services. In their present Christian-oriented world, villagers have applied these understandings to the written word, and they are currently engaged in earnest attempts to use the written word to obtain access to the 'roads' they seek to the Cargo.

Following this, we went on to examine the ways in which the villagers' conception of one aspect of the self as the highly individualistic *hed* is reproduced and reinforced by a notion of provocation that makes all types of interpersonal interaction—particularly those involving requests—potentially explosive. At the same time, however, another culturally elaborated aspect of the self is expected to transcend egoistical selfishness and actively to participate in and contribute to the social life of the community. In this context, language has emerged as a means through which individuals can tone down their *hed* and display their social awareness and sensitivity, their *save*. The strong link articulated in Gapun between language and the public demonstration and evaluation of *save* has had significant consequences for how the villagers have come to perceive and use literacy. It has influenced everything from the structure of their notes to the way in which they read and interpret printed texts.

We hope to have shown, through this analysis, that the villagers of Gapun, with a characteristic Melanesian eye for the novel and the useful, have been active and creative in their encounter with literacy. Rather than literacy 'taking hold' of Gapun, Gapuners have taken hold of those dimensions of literacy for which they consider they have the most use. Throughout this process, the aims of the Church and the school concerning literacy have remained largely peripheral. The villagers of Gapun have their own ideas about reading and writing, generated from their own cultural concerns. These ideas, rather than ones externally generated and culturally foreign, have been and continue to be applied to the written word in the village. The villagers have not been 'transformed' by literacy. If anything, they themselves have 'transformed' it.

We see this discussion as fitting into the broader and increasingly more nuanced way of looking at literacy, that has been emerging in recent years in the ethnographic work of scholars such as Heath (1982; 1983), Scollon & Scollon (1981), Street (1984) and Duranti and Ochs (1986). Thanks to studies such as these, we are beginning to appreciate and explore the implications of the fact that literacy, like other technologies, is culturally shaped. We hope that this study of the way in which the people of one small village in Papua New Guinea have shaped their literacy will contribute to a more pronounced shift of emphasis away from a view of people as being passively transformed by literacy to an understanding and analysis of the active and creative role which people play in the cultural construction of literacy.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The classification of types of reading and writing presented here is adapted from Heath (1983). They are listed very roughly in order of general frequency for the village as a whole. There is a great deal of individual variation, however, and any one individual may use some or all of these reading and writing skills in a totally different order of frequency.

<sup>2</sup> One of those items was an automobile maintenance manual in English that the sons of one couple had somehow come by during a trip to the Provincial capital of Wewak. The other item was a small booklet called 'Daisy Sing-Along'. It contained a number of evergreen songs such as 'The yellow rose of Texas' and 'O du lieber Augustin'. The automobile maintenance manual was frequently passed around in the household which owned it, as adults and children enjoyed tracing their fingers along the line drawings of gears and sockets and wondering how they all fit together and made a car run. The 'Daisy Sing-Along' book was never read.

<sup>3</sup> Related to this is the belief that villagers have about schooling after death. A number of people explained in several different contexts that after villagers die, they first of all 'change skin' (*sensim skin*) and become white. Thereafter they materialise in Rome, where they spend their days *going to school*. Once they have '*kisim save*' (received/comprehended knowledge), they then go on to Heaven, where they are united with God and their relatives and ancestors.

<sup>4</sup> Tok Pisin words in this text are italicised. Words in the village vernacular are italicised *and* underlined.

<sup>5</sup> The blame for this destruction, which can be quite major (one woman burned her newly built house to the ground during an argument with her brother), is placed not on the person who brought it about, but rather on the person or persons who are seen as having provoked the destruction.

<sup>6</sup> This note was written by Sake's in-married husband Allan (Sake herself is virtually illiterate). Allan crossed out his name at the end of the note, however, in what clearly is an attempt to emphasise that Sake is the one most affected by Kulick's decision about whether or not to 'help' the couple buy the rice. In order to understand this gesture fully it is necessary to know that Sake and Allan were Kulick's adopted mother and father in Gapun, and they helped him and looked after him in innumerable ways. By presenting Sake as the recipient of the rice (and as the one who will be shamed should she not produce any rice during the conciliatory feast), the couple is subtly reminding Kulick of the responsibilities and feelings of helpfulness and sympathy that one should properly have towards one's mother.

<sup>7</sup> *Tok bokis* in Gapun is similar in structure and usage to the type of metaphorical speech used by the Managalase of Papua New Guinea (McKellin 1984). It is not anywhere near as formalised, however. And unlike the Managalase, Gapuners do not explicitly recognise *tok bokis* as a specific sub-genre of oratorical speech. Rather, it is a type of talk which anyone may use in shorter or longer stretches of speech at any time (see also A. Strathern 1975).

<sup>8</sup> This contrasts starkly with the Anglo-American view that the responsibility for successful communication lies with the speaker, who is expected to strain to 'get across' his or her viewpoints and thoughts to the listener. Reddy (1979) discusses in detail some of the implications of this notion of communication. Brett-Smith (1984) details the implications that a listener-centred view of communication has among the Bambara of Mali, and Clancy (1986) presents a lucid analysis of this type of communication among the Japanese.

<sup>9</sup> We are aware that this concept of 'truth' is far from clear-cut and uncomplicated in Melanesian societies, and we find it significant in this context that a central tenet of the ritual activities among these groups seems to turn on what Barth (1987: 70) calls the 'meta-premise...that things are not what they appear on the surface' (cf. M. Strathern 1988; Tuzin 1980). Although space restrictions prevent us from developing this point here, we think it is clear that such a 'meta-premise' is not confined to the goings-on in the men's house, but is also involved in the Gapun villagers' view of language as 'hiding' a variety of different meanings.

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### **Christianisme, cultes cargos et idées du moi: modèles d'alphabétisation dans un village de Papouasie Nouvelle Guinée**

#### *Résumé*

L'analyse de l'alphabétisation dans un petit village rural nouvellement instruit de Papouasie Nouvelle Guinée est faite en la plaçant dans le contexte des notions locales de christianisme, du moi et de la langue. Les interprétations des liens par les villageois entre le catholicisme et le mot écrit sont basées sur leur vue du monde orientée par les 'cultes-cargos' et sur leurs croyances préchrétiennes en la langue comme moyen puissant par lequel les individus pouvaient provoquer des transformations dans leur monde. Les idées locales du moi et autres sont articulées et renforcées par un accent sur les dimensions particulières de l'emploi de la langue orale. Cet accent a des conséquences pour les usages auxquels l'alphabétisation est mise, la structure de l'écriture que les villageois produisent, et les façons par lesquelles ils attribuent un sens aux textes écrits.

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