

CELEBRATING MOTHER'S DAY IN A MELANESIAN VILLAGE CHURCH

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Christianity dominates village sociality in the Hula villages of Papua New Guinea's southeastern coast to the extent that the United Church has appropriated and indigenized the Western custom of setting aside a day to celebrate motherhood. In the process Mother's Day has been transformed into an expression of local Christian values to which women should aspire. In many ways the events that take place invert gender roles, but we also find that certain things are always left to women. The events related here, through the perspective of the United Church Women's Fellowship (UCWF), also comment briefly on Adventism in Irupara and invite reflection on the particularities of local history.

THE IDENTIFICATION of Mother's Day as a religious ritual does not immediately evoke associations with the gender rituals most often celebrated in Melanesian anthropology. Nevertheless, in the mundane setting of the village church, anthropological inquiry reveals a great deal about local gender roles. The Mother's Day celebration held in Irupara village, viewed from the perspective of the United Church Women's Fellowship, draws attention to the role of Christianity in the construction of gender identity and gender relations. The celebration also reveals that church fellowship groups contribute to stratification among women, thus inviting reflection on the historical circumstances in which this is situated.

More than a decade ago, John Barker wrote that "most anthropologists still regard Christianity as a foreign intrusion and continue to pursue the fading vestiges of uncontaminated traditional religions" (1992:165). While

Christianity in Melanesia is increasingly given attention in anthropological literature, it continues to be constructed in terms of conflict and social change. The practice of Christianity—its lived reality—has not to date been taken seriously as a subject for anthropological study.¹ Barker also drew attention to the fact that “Melanesians have had very different experiences of Christianity. By the 1980s, for example, many peoples on the coast had been active Christians for a century while many interior peoples were still in the process of receiving an introduction to the religion” (ibid.:153).

This article results from anthropological research carried out during 2001 in Irupara village on Papua New Guinea’s southeastern coast, where the villages have been Christianized for more than a century. It is indicative that this particular part of Melanesia has been largely overlooked by anthropologists, a fact that I attribute mainly to its reputation for long-term Christianization and accompanying deficit of those things that have traditionally attracted anthropologists. Here, local identity and sociality is inextricable from Christian experience. I therefore take the Christian experience as the starting point for my research, which draws on my relationship with the Iru-ale United Church Women’s Fellowship (UCWF) into which I became incorporated.

The Hula women with whom I came to spend the most time were those who, like myself, had grown-up children, or were younger women in their early twenties who had not yet married. Those with small children simply could not afford the time to socialize.² To contextualize my relations with the fellowship I offer the following information. At the time of my fieldwork I was forty-five years of age with three grown children. I had no grandchildren and was “divorced” in the sense that village women understand the term; that is, I did not have a male partner living in my house. These are the matters that most concerned the Hula women and about which they openly questioned me. It was also important that my Christian identity—Roman Catholic—afforded a degree of neutrality in my relationships with members of both the United Church (UC) and the Seventh-day Adventists (SDA).

A Christian History and Identity

Iru-ale Emmanuel United Church draws its congregation from two western Hula villages, Irupara and Alewai. The main village of Hula, from which this group of people derives its name, is about 110 kilometers east of Port Moresby. The Hula people first encountered Christianity in the early contact period of the London Missionary Society (LMS). The society came to dominate the southeastern coast, having been granted rights to work in the area in 1890 under the colonial administration’s “spheres of influence” policy. In

1976 a commemorative plaque was erected in the center of Hula village to mark the hundredth anniversary of the society's arrival.³

Alewai village is adjacent to the western end of Hula and is small in comparison to its neighbor. Contrary to the LMS missionizing strategy, which was to establish a church in every village even if they were close together (Oram 1971:118), it has remained, in the physical sense, a village without a church. Alewai has strong ties with Irupara village, which lies about a fifteen-minute walk west along the beach. When these villages were first settled about two hundred years ago, Kopi Kila Kana, the daughter of one of Irupara's founders, married Kwamala Wari, a son of the founder of Alewai. She managed to persuade him to move to her village although this was not the custom. A close relationship between the two villages, initially built on family connections and trade and warfare alliances, was solidified with the establishment of the first LMS church in Irupara around 1922. During the period prior to World War II the LMS consolidated its position, with the church taking control of most aspects of village sociality (Oram 1968a:259).

By 1945 Adventism was also firmly established in Irupara and the first Seventh-day Adventist church was built there. The village became denominationally divided, causing problems for families, who were being split, and for the management of village life generally.⁴ Today Irupara is known to its inhabitants as "the village with two Sabbaths," that is, Saturday for members of the Adventist church and Sunday for those belonging to the United Church (which succeeded the LMS in 1968). Congregants of each church respect the practices of the other and village and family tensions are sensitively managed. Although people say that Irupara is half-SDA and half-UC, the United Church has always relied on its Alewai congregation to supplement support of the village church in Irupara, known as Iru-ale. The two villages come together regularly for worship and Bible study and, after the formation of the United Church, to participate in the church fellowships.

Full membership in the United Church is achieved through a second baptism, which designates the recipient as *ekalesia*. *Ekalesia* pay levies to the church council and, if male and married, are eligible to become deacons. In return the church may call upon the services of *ekalesia* at any time. The demands are high. UC services are held on Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday mornings; there is a general meeting held once a month, after the Friday morning service; and Bible study takes place on Sunday afternoons. Many members are also heavily committed to fellowships. Additionally, there are the matters of supporting the pastor and providing maintenance for his house, the church, and the grounds. As part of these duties the UC women also keep a garden for the pastor and his family.

United Church Fellowship

All the fellowships are based on the same organizational structure, which, in keeping with UC principles, is designed to be democratic. The men meet on Fridays, the women on Wednesdays, and the youth on Thursdays. Some younger women attend both women's and youth fellowships. And some are also Sunday school teachers.⁵ Each fellowship group has its own committee made up of a chairperson, a secretary, a treasurer, and a vice-chair. The pastor's wife also serves on the women's fellowship committee, representing the opinion of the church in most matters.

Fellowship members are divided into "foursquare" groups. These groups define the fellowship's aims: devotion, recreation, education, and service (both community service and church maintenance). Each foursquare group has its own committee. The subgroups also meet at regular times outside of the general fellowship program. Although not explicitly stated, fund-raising is another dominant aspect of fellowship activities. The fellowship is levied annually by the United Church Council and the subgroups are called on to make contributions. The Iru-ale women's fellowship also raises money for its own projects and to help other church bodies such as the Sunday school.

At the weekly meetings the groups take responsibility, on a rotating basis, for conducting the devotion that takes place at the commencement of each gathering and for organizing activities appropriate to the aims of each section. For example, the recreation group might arrange for an afternoon of sporting activities; when the education group takes its turn, a handicraft afternoon might be held. The fifth week in the rotation is given over to a general meeting conducted by the committee. Apart from the activities mentioned, the meetings are characterized by an apparent formality that seems to overshadow the purely social aspects of the gathering. It is perhaps a formality born of Christian reverence but also strongly resembles classroom protocol and the trappings of Western bureaucracy.

The women wear a blue and white uniform and usually carry an exercise book (or something similar) to take notes on various items of discussion. They also make financial contributions that are carefully recorded and cross-checked. As well as making contributions to the fellowship fund, which currently aims to provide money to build a storeroom under the existing church to house sewing machines and other equipment, the women also donate small coins to assist the church in its charity work. These donations are placed into three powdered-milk tins that occupy the committee's table each week. The contents of each tin go to designated areas and the women are conscientious about distributing their small offerings evenly. There is also a roll call at each meeting.

The details noted above begin to suggest the sense of importance that characterizes the women's attitude to participation in the fellowship. It is more than merely a social outing. It is a forum in which individual women acquire status. The structure of the fellowship, based on the foursquare groups with their own committees, allows a substantial number of women to experience the responsibility of leadership. Those who do not exhibit the necessary qualities—for example, public-speaking skills or the confidence to undertake fellowship offices—are provided with tuition in the more intimate environment of the subgroup meetings, which are held in the homes of committee members. Women who can speak and read English or Motu—the nearest Austronesian language into which the Old Testament has so far been translated—are highly regarded in the fellowship. One senior woman explained to me that God had given her the ability to speak English. She had had no schooling and had picked up the language from attending church services and fellowship meetings where a number of English prayers and hymns are usually included.

Not all UC women attend the fellowship and some attend only intermittently. Some simply cannot afford to. Others feel they cannot spare the time. I also heard that the domination of the fellowship by the old women is a deterrent to some of the younger ones, who feel they have no voice. Age and the ability to speak out publicly are certainly the main ingredients for influence. Another is connection to the church hierarchy: wives and daughters of pastors, past or present; and deacons' wives, who are deaconesses in the church, also enjoy high status in the fellowship.

Over a two-month period in Irupara I attended seven UCWF meetings and a significant number of church services and related activities. I was first invited to the meetings by an influential old widow after being introduced to a number of village women at a Sunday morning service. My close companion and instructor in the ways of the fellowship was Elizabeth Rupa, the wife of the eldest brother in the family who were my hosts in the village. As I attended the meetings as Eli's friend, I became part of the recreation group to which she belonged. I always felt that my presence was welcomed, but despite attending meetings regularly and paying my small contributions, I was never added to the roll. And the fact that, not having the equivalent of the blue and white uniform, I was dressed differently than the rest of the group also seemed to mark my participation as temporary.

It should be noted that although the family I stayed with were members of the United Church, I also made connections with the SDA villagers. I was never expected to give exclusive allegiance to either group; rather, my presence appeared to facilitate greater than usual social interaction between members of the two churches. This is particularly evident in the account

of Mother's Day, which follows. There was, nevertheless, some evidence of competitiveness expressed by UC members when I first began associating with a number of young SDA women. This dissipated once I joined the UC fellowship and it came to pass that I developed a much deeper involvement with Iru-ale Emmanuel United Church.

The fellowships are formed along gender lines that reflect church and village sociality. One reason the United Church has been viewed, by certain commentators (see Firth 1975:348), as being compatible with local tradition is because it has maintained a separation between men and women. There exists, however, an unspoken contradiction between this "traditional" practice and the idea of the Christian nuclear family, which is also evident in the UC's organizational structure. For instance, only married men are eligible for election as deacons.

Although women participate equally in the church services, with deacons' wives enjoying the same status as their husbands and sharing the right to conduct services, which they do with great flair and success, men and women continue to sit on opposite sides of the church during services. The church committee is chaired by a male, men continue to fill most important public positions—church leaders are often village leaders—and, when in mixed company, men speak first. The ethnographic account of Mother's Day at Iru-ale church that follows draws attention to certain ideas about women's roles that have emerged in the context of village Christianity. In the concluding section of this essay I will attempt to locate these ideas in a traditional and historical framework with a view to assessing the changes that have taken place in women's lives since the arrival of the London Missionary Society.

Mother's Day in Irupara

Mother's Day is celebrated on the same Sunday in Papua New Guinea as it is in Australia and the United States, the second Sunday in May. At Iru-ale it is an important event in the church calendar, as is Father's Day.⁶ In their recent book, *Emerging Class in Papua New Guinea*, Gewertz and Errington note that Mother's Day is now nationally publicized in the media "both as a time to express material appreciation (often through the gift of a domestic appliance) and as a time to express sentimental appreciation for a mother's affective centrality in a nuclear family's often inward looking emotional economy" (1999:71). They relate their observations to an increasing tendency towards individualism and elitism brought about by capitalism. This trend is not so much evident in the village, however, where communal attitudes persist. Although some families choose to celebrate Mother's Day privately and so return to their homes after the church service, the majority of the Iru-

ale UC congregation join in the community feast that takes place after the Sunday morning service. While Mother's Day is presented as a celebration of women, it also sets out the ideals to which women living in a Christian village should aspire.

The preparations for the Mother's Day service began a week before it was to take place, when the men held a meeting in the church grounds immediately following the Sunday service. As the men were to be solely responsible for conducting the service the following week, they needed to plan their presentation carefully. This was done with a great deal of secrecy and a good dose of excitement. It was already evident that the women were looking forward to the treat. My host had been charged with organizing the service and I was recruited to give a short presentation on "Mother's Day in Australia" at the end of the service, following his own account of the origin of Mother's Day in the United States, which I think had been extracted from an article in one of the national newspapers.

The following week I prepared a brief outline of the way Mother's Day might proceed in Australia: children's attempts to make breakfast, the kinds of gifts one might expect, and so on, and emphasized the fact that it was meant to be a holiday for hard-working mothers. It was arranged that Kila, Eli's husband, would translate my English into Hula. At this stage I had mastered only a few simple greetings in the vernacular, but I agreed to a suggestion that it would be an appropriate gesture to include what little I knew as an introduction to the presentation.

When Mother's Day arrived I had been in Irupara only three weeks. My attendance and participation in the UC service played an important part in establishing my relationship with the church and therefore with the fellowship and the village, as these are, in many respects, shared identities. Mother's Day, as celebrated in Iru-ale church, is unique. Like many village events it centers on feasting and the distribution of food. Unlike most occasions when this takes place, however, the food is provided by the men.

I awoke that Sunday feeling quite homesick. But the mood disappeared shortly after breakfast when my SDA friends Tani, Meena, and her aunt Bernice appeared at the house with a bouquet of native plants and a freshly picked hibiscus for my hair. We went to the verandah at the front of the house, where they explained that they wanted to sing me a song they had been rehearsing. Their gesture provided an instant remedy despite the melancholy of the tune. The song had been given to them by Meena's adopted cousin when she came to visit during the university's semester break. It was titled "Dedication Song for Mothers" and was both mournful and Christian.

Impressed with both the kindness of the girls' gesture and the appropriateness of the song, my host promptly invited them to attend the UC service

and to perform the song for the congregation. I was delighted at the prospect of their company, as was he. It was certainly shaping up to be a very entertaining service—a credit to the men who were organizing it. The girls hurried home to change into church-worthy clothing. By the time they returned, Eli was also at the house, though without her husband, Kila, who remained at home with the flu. Eli was mildly concerned about finding someone else to translate my presentation.

Our group walked the short distance from house to church soon after 9:30 A.M. We stopped at the pastor's house to arrange for another man to act as translator, then made our way to the church where we found ourselves a place at the front, on the left-hand side. As noted earlier the men usually sit on the left (facing the altar) and the women on the right. But today the women were honored by being given the front section of the church, with those males who weren't participating in conducting the service finding places at the rear. For my SDA companions this was the first time they had ever been inside Iru-ale Emmanuel United Church.

This was only the third Sunday service I had attended in Irupara, but it was obviously something out of the ordinary. Apart from changes in the conventional seating arrangements and the underlying idea that today the males were the hosts and the women the guests, the general format of the service was considerably different. The church had been abundantly decorated with palm fronds, sprouting coconuts, and red hibiscus. The opening songs were provided by the Sunday school choir, assembled at the front of the church, and were contemporary hymns, rather than the *peroveta* (prophet songs) usually initiated by the women. The women were dressed in their very best. By the time the male band of service conductors proceeded into the church, the building was filled to capacity.

The entry procession of churchmen, which began the service proper, was led by my host. He made the introductory prayers and commentary in Hula and then invited me to come forward and make my presentation. I was startled, having understood that this would not take place until the service's end. When I inquired later about the change of program I was told that my item had been "bumped" forward so as not to keep all those who had come to hear me waiting too long. This episode marked the beginning of my engagement with church politics.⁷

The deacon appointed to translate proved to be something of a comedian and added to my confusion. Already baffled by the change in arrangements, I began my introductory greetings in Hula. Before I could catch my breath to nervously plough through the English part of the oration, our clever translator offered the audience an English version of my Hula greeting. It was a great joke, which everyone seemed to enjoy, but I was too confused to fully

appreciate it at the time. My brief contribution to the service was followed by the introduction of my three SDA companions, who were welcomed formally to the service. They then performed their song for an appreciative UC congregation. Tani confided later that they had enjoyed the service immensely because the SDA church does not allow the incorporation of secular celebrations into its services. They also enjoyed the more traditional singing style that the UC has maintained.

Another aspect of the Mother's Day service that made it unique was that it was as much a memorial to the dead mothers of the congregation as it was to honor the living. Debra McDougall has observed that the United Church in villages in the Western Province of the Solomon Islands also celebrate Mother's Day: "One interesting feature of the service is that all attendees wear a white flower if their mother is alive and a red one if she has died. There is also a special procession where a white flower arrangement and a red one are carried in and put on the altar by two women (one whose mother is alive and one whose mother is deceased)."⁸ The UC does not tend to employ deliberately symbolic images as part of its mode of practice. This also held for most aspects of Mother's Day. For example, when I asked if the sprouting coconuts that lined the church walls stood for anything, I was told that they were only decoration. Yet to me they were full with suggestions of roundness, fertility, and womanhood—the things that a Western consciousness might associate with Mother's Day. But palm fronds, hibiscus, and sprouting coconuts are common objects in Irupara that are readily available and usefully serve the purpose of decoration.

There were, however, two wreaths in the church that day that bore great significance. The first hung centered on the wall directly behind the altar. It was a deep green palm frond that reached almost to the ceiling. The outer edge of one side was lined with red hibiscus, the other side tied with a row of black knots. The flowers represented living mothers and the knots, dead ones. The other wreath hung low around the pastor's neck, over his pristine white shirt. This one was made of betel nut and mustard. Towards the end of the service, the neck wreath was presented to a female congregant whose mother had recently passed away. At this point the pastor made a speech in honor of the dead mothers. He wept loudly during the oration and, following the custom at mortuary gatherings, was joined by many others.

Betel nut and mustard are traditional offerings made to dead ancestors to ensure their goodwill. The custom mirrors the sociality of ordinary life in that whenever Hula people gather, whether for an important feast or more mundane engagement, betel nut is shared (though SDA Hula are not permitted to chew betel nut). The neck wreath worn by the pastor was not symbolic in the same sense as the palm-frond wreath. The sharing of betel nut "stands

for” nothing but is highly suggestive: it is a real link between the living and the living, and between the living and the dead. The latter point is important because the Hula do not openly acknowledge the corporeality of ancestors, as they did prior to Christianization, yet the gesture described above—performed by a pastor—implies otherwise.

For many, Mother’s Day was a reminder of loss. There were those who mourned for the dead and those who remembered women who had left long ago. There were also those whose mothers were so far away they could but hope to see them again. Moved by the morning’s service, Meena made a point during the afternoon of visiting her mother, who had remarried and moved to Alewai village. Tani particularly felt the loss of her mother. She told me her mother had left when she was three weeks old and she had seen her only once since then—when she was sixteen. Raised by her paternal grandparents whom she called mum and dad, Tani regrets not knowing her mother. Her mother remarried and has seven other children. Her father also remarried and has three more children but that wife also left him. He then raised those children on his own. At age twenty-four, Tani has already married and divorced, but she does not have any children, fortunately, it seems, for divorced women and single mothers have little chance of remarrying in the village. Marriageable men are advised by senior relatives to find young brides who have not been connected with other males.

The general views of the community on women’s roles were expressed in the sermon delivered by the pastor and reiterated throughout the service by the other men. The central theme was the responsibility mothers have for the well-being of the family. Bad mothers cause problems for the family in the same way that Eve, “the number one mother,” caused problems for God’s children. A bad mother is one who neglects her family or leaves them. Leaving is often the only course of action available to a woman who finds herself in a difficult marriage.⁹ And women frequently leave. This is the real threat to family life, as social organization is patrilineal and a wife is obliged to leave her children behind.

A village household without a woman to look after it is considered to be socially bereft and invokes sympathy from other villagers. The household in which I was staying comprised four males: a father and his three sons. The mother had long ago left and remarried. The eldest daughter had married and moved away, and another daughter was in Port Moresby working. The women’s fellowship, as part of its community-service program, would visit this male-only household every few months and do some cleaning. This was much more frequent while I was there.

For people living in the Hula villages, a woman’s garden is an important aspect of her identity. The garden continues to be seen as the primary source

of sustenance despite the increase in consumption of town food. In local terms, having a productive garden is better than money in the bank. The perceived value of a woman lies in her ability to nourish her family through the production of food and also to provide for herself and her husband in their old age through the production of children. Large families continue to be the ideal in the village. The value placed on the productive and reproductive labor of women is expressed both economically, through the custom of bride-price (still acceptable to the United Church although not by Adventism), and as a sensibility, such as that related above concerning the absence of women in a household. Such a sensibility was also expressed in the orations of the men who conducted the Mother's Day service.

Each man involved in the service paid tribute to his own mother. The pastor publicly thanked his wife for doing his washing and, to compliment the female section of the congregation, invoked such metaphors as women are "the spice of life" and "the lamp of the world." During a particularly flattering section of the pastor's monolog one of the men, in an overly generous gesture, sprayed a can of perfume into the congregation. For those of us sitting toward the front, it literally took our breath away.

On important church occasions the services include prayers and sermons from the four most commonly spoken languages in the area: Hula, English, Tok Pisin, and Motu. The vernacular, Hula, dominates most services but is often sprinkled with English, and certain English terms such as "fellowship" do not have an indigenous equivalent. English metaphors of the kind already mentioned are often used to elaborate a point from the Bible. This is a mode of Western Christianity, of course, but the metaphors are culturally specific, so while I could understand the words, the meanings for Hula people were not always clear to me. The reference to Eve, for instance, as "the number one mother" is relatively easily understood, since there is a conflation between "first" and "number one" (used in Tok Pisin and PNG English to mean "foremost" or "best"). I would, though, not attempt to elaborate such complex associations as those above that refer to the nature of women. In a similar vein, the ANZAC recessional ode was creatively appropriated as a tribute to the dead mothers.¹⁰ The point I wish to make here is that the apparent transparency of Christianity, particularly when presented in English, is misleading. What I encountered in Iru-ale church was an indigenous Christianity that contained its own unique interpretations.

As the Mother's Day service continued, the women's fellowship expressed its collective identity by presenting a selection of songs they had rehearsed. Dressed in their best clothing, rather than the more usual blue uniform, they assembled themselves as a colorful choir at the front of the church. The assembly and subsequent disassembly of the fellowship choir caused some

alteration in the seating arrangements. *Wapu* (widow) Kila had decided that she wanted to be at the front where there was more going on and sat herself down in front of myself and the SDA girls. The *wapu*, although not large in stature, was predisposed to move people out of the way, or into place, whichever the situation required. Having settled in her new location the *wapu* devoted full attention to the service, nodding her head at regular intervals to express her agreement with the men's words.

At the end of the service, the mothers were ushered from the building first. They formed a line that extended all the way down the stairs. On the way out everyone else shook hands with the entire line of mothers. This was an important gesture as it is usually those who conduct the service who are thanked by the congregation. There were a lot of hands to be shaken and when it was over I commented to Eli on the greater than usual attendance. "Yes, whenever there is food" was her matter-of-fact reply.

The feast was held on the public grounds of the church. The women, as guests of honor, settled themselves in a circle on the ground. At the same time the *patapata*, a platform usually used for communal seating but now being used as a table, began to fill with food. The senior men gathered in a semicircle behind the women to sing *ute* for them. *Ute* is a traditional form of ballad that originated as mourning songs. Like the prophet songs it was introduced by the Polynesian missionaries. *Ute* is a song form designed for the male voice. While a song's structure remains basically the same, the lyrics may be adapted to a range of subjects. The first song that the men performed was, appropriately, about women and, I was told, was traditional. The second was a new composition with a strong Christian message. The emotive power of these songs was extraordinary.

The women responded with *peroveta*. A number of the senior women formed a circle and proudly danced the *peroveta*. Young women, for whatever reason—lack of knowledge or lack of inclination—did not dance.¹¹ As I had found on other occasions of communal feasting, the mood was wonderfully festive. There were, of course, some formalities—speeches to be made. Then I was asked to cut the cake, which was almost large enough to feed a village and which had been brought from Port Moresby with considerable effort, and to read the dedication that had been inscribed in icing. Once again, English metaphors were put to creative use as the Iru-ale congregation was acknowledged as "evergreen women and ever-ready men."

Before the food distribution began a small number of gifts, wrapped in decorative paper, were handed out. These were from husbands to wives but an intermediary actually made the presentations. A cash offering was made to a female guest, who was the district, or circuit, "mother" of the women's fellowship. The men had prepared the food or arranged for a female rela-

tive not yet a mother—perhaps a daughter or niece—to do so. But the men did not distribute the food that eventually filled the *patapata*. This is a skill that only women seem to acquire. It involves apparently complex calculations to ensure an evenness of distribution but it is also necessary that the most important guests receive the best food. Status is recognized through food—both in what is given and in what is received.

As guests of Iru-ale Emmanuel United Church, my party received the first food distributed. I was delighted by a bowl of *pariwa* (a highly esteemed sago and banana pudding) that was covered in plastic wrap and inscribed with my name in black felt-tip pen from Vela Kila, an old man who had shared some stories with me. He had asked his niece to make it for me and had written the inscription to ensure that I knew it was from him. This was a great compliment. We also received chicken, fish, rice, and local vegetables, which we took back to the house to enjoy in comfort.

As well as Meena, Tani, and Bernice our party included Lucy, Eli's eldest daughter, and another young woman whom I had not met previously. Lucy had realized, as we made our way to the house, that we had overlooked the cake and went back in haste to secure a portion. At the house we hurriedly laid a cloth on the floor to accommodate the food, started a fire for tea, and made sure that there were plates and cutlery for everyone. The ensuing picnic was enormous fun. The young women like to gossip and joke almost as much as they like to eat, and everyone had the opportunity to indulge in their favorite foods. For instance, Lucy enjoyed the chicken immensely. There was much joking about the identity of this delicacy, as chickens range freely around the village and are only killed for special occasions. The *pariwa* disappeared almost immediately, as did a number of other sago treats. Then the portion of very sweet chocolate cake we had procured was carefully divided so that nobody missed out.

I was pleased that Meena and Tani were there to share the feast. Although not relatives of my hosts and thus not subject to the customary requirement to bring food, they had been doing so since I first arrived. I had worried over how to return their generosity. The day was successful in many other respects as well: the men were happy with their organizational accomplishments, the women enjoyed their feast, and the United Church had given a Christian perspective to a secular celebration.

Reflections on Fieldwork and History

In this essay I have so far looked primarily at two dimensions of women's experience, that of membership in the UC fellowship, which is an exclusively female domain; and that of the celebration of Mother's Day, which

highlights village idealization of womanhood. Both experiences demonstrate that village life for women is deeply connected to the church. I now wish to draw attention to the particular historical circumstances in which this group of women experience village Christianity, with a view to making preliminary comments about changes that may have taken place in gender relations.

In Iru-ale the women's fellowship is by far the most visible and most active of the church organizations. In fact, while the youth fellowship also appeared to be operating successfully, during 2001 the men's fellowship had deteriorated to such an extent that it had been abandoned. Debra McDougall made a similar observation with regard to the UC fellowships of Ranongga in the Western Solomons Province. There, "the women's fellowship is better organized and has more regular participation than the corresponding men's fellowship."¹² No other women's groups operate in the Hula area and the fellowships provide the only exclusively female space where women can voice their opinions in a social milieu where men are accustomed to speaking first. As well as offering the opportunity for learning new skills, the church fellowships provide an avenue for women to assert themselves either collectively as a force in the church and the village, or as individuals seeking prestige.

My relationship with the women's fellowship revealed a number of themes. The first is that the women experience great enjoyment through the social interaction the meetings provide. Second, although the fellowship meets in the name of the United Church and observes a devotional component at every gathering, a great many other religious services provide this opportunity, so it is not necessarily religion that provides the greatest appeal. Having made these points, however, it must also be said that a significant proportion of fellowship time is spent meeting devotional requirements; and many women, when given the opportunity to present a prayer or sermon, take full advantage of the chance to demonstrate their oratory skills.

Many fellowship activities mirror Hula sociality and follow communal practices, particularly those related to gardening and food distributions. The fellowship provides ways for women to look after other women through its community-service program and to acknowledge the value of what women do—by making payments for childbirth and illness. The "program" endorsed by the United Church gives the women's fellowship the authority to act according to the wishes of the committee and its members, sometimes even overriding male authority.

Bronwen Douglas has, importantly, highlighted the unacknowledged role that Christianity plays in governance throughout Melanesia (2000:1–3). She has also drawn attention to the effectiveness of women's fellowship groups in village governance (p. 4), despite the fact that "women's groups and church groups are not primarily institutions of governance—their goals have rather

little to do with either formal government politics or planning development projects" (McDougall 2002:3). Speaking of the links women's groups have with local Christian churches, Douglas reminds us that "in Melanesia church women's wings and village women's groups continue to provide women's main opportunities for training, leadership, solidarity, networking and wider experience beyond the village and even beyond national borders" (2000:3). My time with the Iru-ale fellowship lends support to this litany of advantages. However, there is also reason to suggest that we need to be cautious about glossing Christian experience for women in purely positive terms (cf. McDougall 2002; Membup and Macintyre 2000:26).

Ethnographic accounts commonly express Melanesian women's experience of Christianity today as one of empowerment. The situation is often represented more as a matter of male forfeiture as traditional cults decline than as evidence of genuine gains made by women (see Tuzin 1997; Kempf 2002). Such claims presuppose a culture in which women's traditional history is one of oppression. With this in mind I make some comments towards assessing women's experience of the Iru-ale United Church, expressed with ambivalence.

In the first instance, Christianity, with its connections to capitalism, contributes to the creation of social hierarchies. The historian Nigel Oram (1971) has documented in detail the advantages that certain Hula families gained as a result of pastoral training provided by the London Missionary Society. Pastors' descendants continue to enjoy a high level of prestige and influence in church and village affairs. The long-held belief that having large families ensures that parents will be provided for in their old age is now complicated by the fact that well-educated children have a better chance of employment and are better providers. The expectations placed on children who find jobs are enormous and often lead to disappointment.

Among the most influential women in the Iru-ale church are those who have children in high-status jobs. *Wapu* Kila, the widow of a UC pastor, was able to host a headstone feast for a deceased daughter and invite everyone in the village. *Laka*, the woman who believes that God taught her how to speak English through Bible study and the women's fellowship, has a number of successful sons living in various parts of Papua New Guinea. One son, whom she describes as the "rich lawyer," has paid for her to undertake fellowship visits to New Zealand and Samoa. In contrast many women in the village find it difficult to raise the bus fare to visit relatives in Port Moresby.

For Iru-ale women, belonging to the fellowship requires cash contributions. Membership also requires that they wear a uniform and, as we have seen, make contributions of food and labor. In some respects this creates a sense of exclusivity. There are women who feel they are unable financially

to participate in the fellowship, others who simply cannot afford the time, especially those with young children. In short, not all village women have access to the advantages that fellowship membership might provide. Funding of any kind from the United Church Council appears to be nonexistent. Monies are moved around the various local church bodies in the form of gifts and fund-raising projects, but in terms of the financial relationship with the broader church it is said that “everything goes up, nothing comes down.”

Without adequate understandings of women’s traditional “oppressions,” it is more appropriate to view the success of the women’s fellowships as a continuation of female strength and influence rather than as an introduced change in gender relationships. And although it has been argued that not all women can take advantage of fellowship opportunities, the continuities between female status and food production is evident in church-based feasting and exchanges, which exist alongside the newer forms of expressing prestige brought by Christianity. Village women certainly use the church fellowships to advantage, largely because Christianity has imposed itself to such a degree that there are no longer alternative avenues for action. At least this is the way it is in Irupara and the neighboring villages, where no women’s groups or activities operate outside the church. The women are making the best use of what is available to them, as they probably always have.

The “combined” women’s fellowship meetings—which are based on reciprocal visits between church groups of neighboring villages and which include the presentation of large amounts of food and sometimes cash—are central to the social dimension of the fellowships and have a high level of patronage. Historical evidence suggests that these church-based exchanges mirror earlier female practices based on trade relationships with neighboring villages. We know that women in the Hood Bay area visited nearby villages to exchange smoked fish for garden produce. We also know that women played an important role in establishing intervillage relationships through marriage alliances. Hula men acknowledge that they would not today have the use of the land on which they build their houses and make their gardens if it were not for their sisters and daughters who married into the inland villages.

A number of stories told along the southern coast attest to the importance of women in such matters. One tells of a powerful sorcerer in the form of a snake that married a beautiful woman. As is the custom in patrilineal villages, the couple traveled to the husband’s village where they made a garden, then returned with food to the wife’s family. Oram has documented seventeen versions of a myth about the origin of the *hiri* trading expeditions that the Motu made to the Gulf of Papua area. While the majority have the Motu sailing from Boera to the Gulf in their *lakatoi* (multihulled trading vessels), several variants claim the voyages originated in the Gulf (Oram 1991). “There is also

a legend of a Gulf man who invented the *lagatoi* to take his son by a woman of the Motu village of Pari back to his mother's village," explains Oram (p. 525). This was the version I was given in Irupara. It is significant because it emphasizes the importance of marriage, and therefore the value of women, in local trade alliances.

A woman's preparation for marriage formerly included tattooing and the making of beautiful grass skirts. Neither tradition should be underestimated when we are thinking about belief in female strength. Tattooing made women strong as well as beautiful. It gave them confidence and connected them with the courage of their ancestors. Men were overawed by the beauty of a tattooed woman, particularly if she was dancing. I met a woman in Irupara who, as a young girl, had been tattooed in readiness for her first dance, but as a result of LMS policy the dance never took place. She now belongs to the SDA church and is forbidden to recognize the significance of the decorations that she cannot and probably would not remove. Similarly, old women make treasures of the grass skirts that they now wear only in their reminiscences.

In Irupara I interviewed an aging widow who had a reputation as a knowledgeable gardener and also knew some of the old stories that interested me. Before the interview began, she combed her hair and put on her shell necklaces and her bracelets. At the end of the interview, when asked if I could take her photograph she gladly agreed and promptly removed the pink blouse she was wearing to proudly reveal the tattoos on her upper body. Like many women who have grown old under the influence of Christianity, she was proud of her Western achievements. She showed me a photograph of herself as a young woman dressed in crisp Western clothing as well as a certificate that attested to her expertise in hygiene. But when it came to the matter of who she was—how she wanted to be known—her tattoos and decorations said it all.

I have recently recorded the story of the great warrior from Alewai, Kila Wari. The actions of the female characters who appear in that story have a lot to say about the traditional power of women. Kila Wari had killed a man from Babaka, the village that lies inland from Irupara. (It was likely that the man was a warrior or there would have been little to gain by the killing.) Two sisters of the dead man cried until they persuaded Babaka warriors to avenge his death, offering food to whoever would undertake the task. When Kila Wari was eventually killed, his own sister La'a, who had married the son of a chief from Makerupu (a neighboring inland village) in exchange for land, heard of the battle and rushed to her brother. Although Kila Wari was already dead, La'a took off her grass skirt and placed it over the body. Numa Nama Gure, a descendent of the Babaka war chiefs, has explained that because Kila Wari was a war chief his enemies would have customarily cut off

his head, but some women had rushed to cover him and thus nothing more could be done to the already brutalized body.

An example of similar behavior comes from Vanatinai, in the Louisiade Archipelago. There, Maria Lepowsky writes:

Women had prominent roles in warfare and peacemaking. . . . Women participated in all decisions concerning whether to fight and whether to make peace. The signal for both, interpreted according to context, was for a senior woman, or the mother or sister of a warrior, to remove her outer skirt and throw it on the ground. This could either signal an attack or, in the heat of battle, protect an enemy from being killed by placing him under the woman's protection. If her brother subsequently threw his spear, it would be like committing incest. (1993:62)

Vanatinai is an island where women were thought to traditionally enjoy a level of equality exceeding that in other parts of Papua New Guinea. This is partly attributed to the fact that they are a matrilineal society. It is more remarkable, then, that in an area such as Hood Point, which places heavy emphasis on patrilineality, we find women enjoying a similar degree of influence.

Conclusion

While it is not my intention here to make definitive statements about women's power and influence, either past or present, we must take seriously the ambivalence that some Hula women express in regard to their relationship with the church. The description of Mother's Day from the perspective of the UCWF presented in this account reveals that the United Church has placed its female members in a double bind. The church, on the one hand, idealizes women's responsibility to the family while, on the other, it makes overwhelming demands on women's time.¹³ Most women who belong to the UCWF enjoy the benefits of membership but struggle to live up to the expectations of the church, lamenting that their obligations afford little time to keep up with their gardens and housework. They make hard decisions about how their time is to be used and, although some complain that the men are lazy, many are also openly critical of the church. We must also recognize that church fellowships have contributed to the creation of an arena of exclusivity among village women.

There is little evidence that the global agendas of church-based organizations such as the UCWF have any real relevance for village women, whose concerns remain localized and for whom notions of universal and individual

rights make little sense in a village where family and communal obligations continue to dominate social life (see also McDougall 2002). The women most often heard to extol the virtues of Christian fellowship are likely those few who have benefited the most from its programs. Detailed ethnographic research is required before we can make similar claims for all Melanesian women.

NOTES

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1. There are notable exceptions to this generalization (see, for example, Tuzin 1989; Smith 1994; Otto and Borsboom 1997). I acknowledge that a substantial contribution has been made in more recent years, particularly in respect of the newer evangelical-charismatic-Pentecostal churches (see Douglas 2001). It remains relevant that Christian women's groups are nevertheless neglected in Melanesian literature.

2. This issue was recently highlighted in an article that appeared in a Papua New Guinea newspaper. Under the headline "Vabukori Women's Fellowship Successful," it was stated that one of the challenges the women's fellowship of Vabukori (a multiethnic coastal village of Port Moresby) would address in 2003 was "to try to get young married women involved in women's fellowship activities" (*The National* 2002).

3. In April 2000 the newly built Nixon Memorial Church was officially opened at Hula. The building commemorates the Rev. Nixon's work in the village from 1953 to his retirement in 1966. This is the sixth church built in Hula since the Rev. Dr. George Lawes first visited. Estimated to have cost around K500,000, the new building dominates this large and relatively wealthy village.

4. For more on the relationship between SDA and UC adherents in Irupara, see Goddard and Van Heekeren 2003.

5. For example, a young woman who had returned to the village after completing her high school education lamented, four years later, that she had become so encumbered with church work and family obligations she was unable take up tertiary education.

6. I have so far been unable to discover how long Mother's Day and Father's Day have been part of the UC calendar. Suggestions point to around the time the fellowships emerged, when the United Church was formed in 1968. It is interesting to note that although we now view Mother's Day as an aspect of Western capitalism, it actually began as a peace initiative, by women, in the wake of the U.S. Civil War.

7. Space does not allow for a complete elaboration of the political situation I found myself in during 2001. Suffice it to say, only later, when I learned that Alewai villagers were attempting to secede from Iru-ale, did I come to see the importance of my own involvement.

8. Personal communication, 8 March 2002.

9. In the 1960s Oram observed that few Hula marriages were solemnized in the LMS churches (1968b:15). This is still the case. Marriage has remained one of the few areas of social life in Irupara that is not always a church matter. In the case of the Seventh-day Adventists, few members meet the rigid demands of chastity that church doctrine requires. In such circumstances couples may be formally married outside the sanctity of the church, that is, in a secular space such as a public garden. For UC members marriage is largely a matter of traditional exchange. When it comes to divorce, Oram has noted that this is understood to occur when couples agree to separate or when one or the other partner leaves and remarries. "This may involve making a return of gifts to the man's kin if he is considered to be the aggrieved party" (*ibid.*). The matter of intermarriage between UC and SDA adherents is discussed in Goddard and Van Heekeren 2003.

10. Known as "The Ode," this is a tribute to Australian and New Zealand servicemen who gave their lives for their country. It is from the poem "For the Fallen" by the English poet Laurence Binyon: *They shall grow not old, as we that are let grow old; / Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. / At the going down of the sun and in the morning / We will remember them.*

11. When I asked a senior woman why the younger women did not dance, her disapproving response was, "Only at discos."

12. Personal communication, 8 March 2002.

13. My friendships with Eli, Meena and Tani, and Mape allowed me to experience the oppressive demands that both the UC and SDA make on their congregations. Often a very brief social meeting was difficult to organize around church schedules. Eli also pointed out that there were church social occasions that she would have forgone had I not been involved. While personal choice is involved in the more social aspects of the fellowship, other activities such as Bible study, church services, and community work carry a greater level of expectation.

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