Giving (up) a traditional problem-solving ritual: materialisation of power and self-transformation amongst the people of Awim, East Sepik Province

*Faire face à la résolution des problèmes rituels traditionnels : la matérialisation
du pouvoir et l'auto-transformation parmi le peuple Awim de la Province du
Sepik de l'Est*

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Giving (up) a traditional problem-solving ritual: materialisation of power and self-transformation amongst the people of Awim

by

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ABSTRACT

The village of Awim is situated in the south of the Sepik basin of Papua New Guinea. In 2012, the village had been introduced to a Pentecostal movement known as the Angel Michael Ministry, which is locally considered as being key to the realisation of peoples desires for change and development. This article analyses the last of a series of failed attempts of the people of Awim to materialise power by receiving the statue of the Virgin Mary from the Angel Michael's hands, and considers the relationship between power's materiality and the possibility of Awim people's self-transformation. Although Awim people failed in their attempts to secure the statue, which leads me to consider also the less studied reality of failed exchanges, this very failure brought up a new power by way of exchange: they exchanged their traditional problem-solving ritual for an enhanced presence of the Angel Michael in their lives.

KEYWORDS: Power, materiality, self-transformation, Pentecostal movement, New Guinea

RÉSUMÉ

Le village d'Awim est situé au sud du bassin de Sepik en Papouasie Nouvelle-Guinée. Le mouvement pentecôtiste connu sous le nom de Ministère de l'Ange Michael y fut introduit en 2012. Ce mouvement est considéré par la population locale comme une réponse à leurs désirs de changements et de développement. Cet article analyse la dernière tentative d'une série d'essais entrepris par les habitants d'Awim pour acquérir une statue de la Vierge Marie des mains même de l'Ange Michael afin de donner corps au pouvoir qui leur permettrait de combler leurs désirs. Cet article réfléchit en outre sur la relation entre la matérialité du pouvoir et la possibilité de transformation de soi du peuple Awim. Bien que la population d'Awim ait échoué dans ses tentatives d'obtenir la statue, ce qui m'amènera aussi à considérer la réalité moins étudiée des échanges manqués, cet échec a mené à la possibilité pour la communauté d'acquérir un nouveau pouvoir par le biais de l'échange. En fait, les Awim ont échangé leur rituel traditionnel de résolution de problèmes contre une présence accrue de l'Ange Michael dans leur vie.

MOTS-CLÉS : pouvoir, matérialité, auto-transformation, mouvement pentecôtiste, Nouvelle-Guinée

I conducted my fieldwork for 12 months between 2013/14 in the village of Awim, which is situated in the Arafundi area, in the southern part of the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea. The Awim people speak the *lingua franca* Tok Pisin (TP) and Tape (T), one of the four languages spoken in the area (Hoenigman, 2015: 46). Today's village has around 200 people and is the result of the merging, under the influence of patrol officers (NAPNG ABN, 1963: 10-11; NAPNG ABN, 1964: 2; Roscoe

and Telban, 2004: 99), of two moieties or major clans – the Mukumbae and the Wandukumbae (Telban, 2001: 5; Roscoe and Telban, 2004: 103).

During my stay Awim people encountered significant problems; a young boy died and several people were sick. The cause of these problems was at first placed in people's relations, which were deemed to be problematic. Attempts were made to solve these relations and bring an end to their effects by making use of a problem-solving tech-

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nique that has the ritual form of a handshake. The ritual proved to be unable to solve the problems in the village and the people started to suspect that at the root of their problems might be *sanguma* (TP) and *poison* (TP) instead. In such cases the handshake ritual is not effective and Awim people decided to resort to other means: a Pentecostal movement called the Angel Michael Ministry.

The Angel Michael Ministry originated in the Blackwater area (west of the Arafundi) and was brought by the neighbouring Yimas people to Awim and other Arafundi villages of Yamandim, Warlamas and Imboin in 2012. After only one year, however, the Awim Ministry ceased all activities because of problematic relations amongst its members (sexual demands and temptations).

The absence of problems was a prerequisite for Michael conferring his power, which in turn was a prerequisite for the power of the healing rites practised by the Ministry (Robbins, 2004, 2013). These problems were supposed to be solved through the traditional handshake ritual, but this did not come to fruition – at the time power was not needed and so there was no real incentive to solve the problems in the first place.

Finding themselves under *sanguma's* and *poison's* attack, while lacking Michael's power, Awim people turned to the Yimas Ministry, which is said to be the strongest of all. The Yimas Ministry has first identified the culprit in the figure of the *poison man* (TP) and later solved Awim problems by way of performing a large scale ritual, which consisted in the unearthing and cleansing of objects that the *poison man* had previously buried throughout the village ground.

The main focus of the article resides in what was to happen next and has to do with the revival of the Awim Ministry as well as with Michael's power and people's capacity to transform. Awim people were relieved and inspired by the success of the ritual performed by the Yimas Ministry, but they were also humiliated due to a traditional competition between the two villages. In witnessing the power of the Yimas Ministry, Awim people became most interested not only in re-acquiring Michael's power, that is, in the revival of their Ministry, but also in achieving something they thought Yimas had achieved – the permanent acquisition of an otherwise intermittent and occasional power. They sought to achieve this goal by way of acquiring the statue of the Virgin Mary from the hands of the Angel Michael, which was promised them by Michael himself.¹ The Yimas Ministry had already acquired the statue of the Virgin Mary and as Yimas stands as a model of a developed and powerful village, the Awim people hoped to achieve the same status once in possession of the statue.

In Awim, power is conceived as a *mana*-like phenomenon as described by Keesing; it implies being efficacious, successful, and realised (Keesing, 1984). The reason why people desire power, however, resides in this being conceived as a vehicle for personal, social, but also ontological, change. In short, Michael's power allows people to self-transform and to transform the world they live in. To achieve power, however, one has to begin and carry out a self-transformation beforehand, which is, Awim people say, also a form of power. In other words, one needs power to gain power. People's proper behaviour and conduct, which amount to the absence of problematic relations in the village, are pivotal in securing power as the Angel refuses to confer power in case of unsolved problems.

I suggest that behaviour and conduct have a substantiality of their own because these can be exchanged for Michael's power. Awim people elicit this exchangeability when referring to Michael's judgements, but also wants, by saying that Michael likes good behaviour and dislikes no-good behaviour. The exchangeability of behaviour for power is made visible also in practice and the attempt to retrieve the statue of the Virgin Mary is a case in point, although a negative one, because Awim people never secured the statue due to the presence of problems within the Ministry. Following Kirsch, this fact leads me to consider the reality of failed exchanges, which has received less attention compared to the more traditional study of performative contexts of exchange (Kirsch, 2006: 2).

While the exchange of behaviour for the statue failed, a less evident exchange occurred and this brought significant and appreciated changes. The very night the Awim people were the closest to securing the statue – two members touched it and held it in their hands for a moment, Awim people gave (up) their problem-solving ritual for an enhanced presence of Michael in their life. With the problem-solving ritual the people gave to the Angel also something else, namely, "pity and mercy". I show that pity and mercy are the condition to perform the ritual and the guarantee of its success, as well as a form of knowledge of the world that is inherently lacking because it is not full, but only partial. This partial knowledge is at the heart of all people's problems, including the precariousness of their world – people never know with certainty what an interaction with a thing or person might bring about. By giving up their problem-solving ritual, however, the people have changed this. From now on it is Michael himself who with his power makes this partial knowledge full by way of advising the people on all forms of

1. Of the three people in Awim who speak with Michael it was Jacob who communicated the promise to the leaders who later relayed the message to all the members.

interactions, but also by punishing them for any infraction.

In this instance power is a form of knowledge that is, however, volatile, because oscillating between its partial and full form. This volatility between partial and full power could be discerned in powerful things. While Keesing argues that *mana*-like phenomena do not have the status of things (Keesing, 1984; see Kolshus, 2013), and Holbraad (2007; Henare *et al.*, 2007) claims that they do, I would suggest that in Awim things are power only temporarily, or more accurately, things are power only when new. As I show below, the newness of the thing is predicated both upon power being ephemeral and upon the decaying matter of things. A thing is power only and till it is new, but with the passing of time a thing ceases to be power. Power decomposes like things and things lose their efficacies like power. Incidentally, it is precisely the ephemerality of power that allows Awim people to reconsider their behaviours and conducts and thus to set the conditions for attaining, again, new power. I argue that power is ultimately grounded in and is about Awim people's capacity to transform themselves as well as their world.

Before presenting the attempts made by the Awim people to secure the statue of the virgin Mary, I introduce the Christian history of Awim in order to evince the relation between power and people's desires for change. In the next section I show why the Awim world represents a problem for the people and how power is seen to be the answer for it. I then proceed to show how Tony acquired power as well as how Michael's power could be considered an extension of a traditional hunting and fishing power. I finally present the failed exchange and materialisation of power and I conclude by way of suggesting that the partiality of power is the possibility for people exercising their freedom of transformation.

MAP 1. – Maps of Papua New Guinea and part of the Arafundi area with Yimas
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The power to change

The Awim people acknowledge, but also contest, experiencing significant social, cultural and economic changes in the last 50 years. Patrol officers registered the presence of Catholic missionaries in the area in 1963 (NAPNG ABN, 1963: 10), and the establishment of a mission at Amboin station a year later (NAPNG ABN, 1964: 8). The officers' impression in 1963 was that the missionaries' influence was not deep and that people appeared to be nominal Christians only (NAPNG ABN, 1963: 10). While conversion to Christianity might not have brought about far-reaching changes in people's beliefs and practices yet, the influence of missionary activity was profound. Missionaries prohibited the use of cult paraphernalia and burnt them (Telban, 2001: 4). Today, the Awim people talk about Christianisation with mixed feelings and say that this occurred in the form of a procession going through the area carrying a statue of the Virgin Mary (see Telban, 2009: 133). Subsequent missionary visits to those already listed above were probably sporadic at the time as they are still today (see Telban, 2009: 134, footnote 2).

The relative absence of the Church represents a concern for the people of Awim because the Church is deemed to be vital. The Church is conceived as a healing, deliverance and miracle service that is compared or even equated to governmental services such as those providing education and health. The lack of services evince sentiments of abandonment and frustration, because although these had been promised to them, they have never been fully delivered.

The partial and sporadic presence of the Church have encouraged, rather than prevented, people in testing out other forms of Christianity. Besides regularly attending Sunday services, which are led by the village priest,² the Awim people had previously embraced first and for a short time only until 2011, the Charismatic movement introduced to them by a Papuan New Guinean man called Ken Charles (see Telban, 2009; 2013). Then, in 2012, they embraced also a Pentecostal movement called the Angel Michael Ministry. Awim people differentiate between them on the ground of the amount of power each form of Christianity procures and as the Ministry provides more power than the Charismatic movement, power also works as an explanatory for the transition from one movement to the other.³

What people sought to achieve with each form of Christianity was a mean to secure complete and full power, a form of efficacy that would once and for all fulfil their hopes for a better life.⁴ These hopes were reiterated in their own life-project motto: “change and development”. Awim is a relatively poor village, sometimes designated as a one-kina⁵ community. The amounts of money and goods circulating are meagre and only two men possess a canoe. The people hoped for and professed change and development, but not to, as Sahlin (1992: 13) says, become just like us, but rather, to become more like themselves. At the base of the motto, I argue, is the idea of changing and developing their customs (*kastam*, TP) by way of making these powerful and consequently to change the world they live in.

Awim people constantly voice their concerns about the world they inhabit and describe the world as uncertain and unpredictable in a way that goes well beyond what they deem to be conventional. They say that interactions with things, persons and relations in the world are especially problematic, because “sometimes they bring up good things and other times no-good things”. The core of their concerns could be said to lay in the unpredictability in interactions that is voiced in the phrase “sometimes and other

times”, which points both to the lack of power and at what power in this context might be.

In order to avoid problems in the world, Awim people rely on prohibitions and advice, which include instructions regarding proper conducts and behaviours that most of the time have the form of prohibitions. One could see prohibitions and advice as simply conventions applied upon an existing world. This is not, however, how Awim people see their world. I suggest instead to see prohibitions and advice as defining the world, making it and being made of it. Also, prohibitions and advice are not seen by Awim people only in their negative sense as instances of constraints and taboo, but also in their double positive sense: as definitions of what things are and as what things could become or bring about (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017). Therefore, when Awim people talk about their customs, especially prohibitions and advice, I suggest that they are in fact talking about their world and vice versa. In this context power is conceived as definitions of what there is, what things, person and relations might turn into and the knowledge about the outcomes of any kind of interaction.

For Awim people, however, the main concern remains the fact that there is never enough power. They differentiate between two kinds of prohibitions: more powerful or stricter prohibitions that are more likely to predict the outcome of an interaction, which are less prone to be tested, and less powerful or lenient prohibitions that are less likely to predict the outcome of an interaction, which are more prone to be experimented with. Both kinds of prohibitions are similar in that neither of them contain all of the possible transformations of things and the outcomes of interactions with people or things. For them, prohibitions and advice are, like the world before, uncertain, because the effects of their infractions are uncertain. Awim people do not perceive that prohibitions have failed them and never blame the uncertainties of the world, but take the responsibility, and with it the failures and uncertainties, upon themselves. In so doing they denounced their own limited awareness and lack of knowledge in respect of judgement, decision-making and problem solving.

The handshake ritual

Attempts to straighten relations were made through a problem-solving technique that has the form of a ritualised handshake (*sikan*, TP; *kores-*

2. The village priest is not fully ordained, but has received a month of training in Wewak.

3. I lack more substantial data about the Charismatic movement that a comparison with the Ministry would require precisely because by having less power than the Ministry the Charismatic movement is not even worth talking about.

4. This rather pragmatic statement does not imply, however, that the people are not true believers.

5. PNG currency.

spendo, τ, lit. “their two hands are screwing”). I show in this section that people’s limited awareness and lack of knowledge in respect to problem solving was, counterintuitively, what enabled them to solve their problems. In this context, limited awareness and lack of knowledge are tropes for the uncertainties in relations that bring about problems to the community. Most obviously, uncertainties in relations lead to the performance of the ritual, because its goal is to overcome these uncertainties. Less obviously, uncertainties in relations make such an overcoming possible.

Having witnessed four rituals and being told about a fifth one, here I provide only a short and general account of it. In the case of a problem concerning exclusively the village of Awim,⁶ all the villagers meet at a specified day and time in the meeting house (*win haus*, τρ). The ritual begins with talks that have the goal of identifying problematic relations and with them the people that are to take part in the ritual. This is the first point at which the uncertainties in relations constitute the conditions of an efficacious ritual. It is in fact uncertain whether the identified relations had actually brought adversity and this is why, for reasons of precaution, the number of participants in the ritual is always greater than the number identified by the initial talks.

The second point concerns what people actually do in the ritual. All the participants form two lines (*lain*, τρ) opposite each other while at the centre, two, usually important, men, called *witnes*, τρ or *kores-moko*, τ (lit. “those two who hold hands”), stand and hold their hands for the whole duration of the ritual. Two branches of areca nuts are placed hanging over the two men’s hands. The participants from both lines shake hands with their respective handshake partners over the two men’s hands. This is the point at which uncertainties in relations make the overcoming of uncertainties in relations possible. While shaking hands, the participants express their regrets for *any past thoughts, words and deeds that might have brought about the adversities*. Not even during the expression of regrets people are certain of what relations brought adversities to them, but exactly because they do not fully know they can forgive each other and the ritual is said to have worked. This is what people call

pity and mercy, which do not refer only to the fact of forgiving by being compassionate, but contain within themselves also the conditions of possibility of such compassionate forgiveness. In a way, compassionate forgiveness is to not fully know, or not knowing with certainty, what brought about hardship upon the people. Alternatively put, compassionate forgiveness is based upon a knowledge that is not full or does not encompass the whole of what there is.

Once all of the handshakes take place, one of the two branches of areca nuts hanging over the two men’s hands is taken and broken in half. One half is given to the other party and the other half is passed behind the person’s back to his supporters.⁷ When the other party does the same with the other branch the ritual is concluded. Finally, the empty branches of areca nut are hung in the meeting house as a memory of the ritual, inspiration for stories, and as reprimand for others.

The handshake ritual allows, however, only to solve problems between people, but not problems related to either *sanguma* or *poison*, because these are thought to be exogamous to the community and therefore not reducible to people’s relations.⁸ When Awim people were confronted with the death of a boy and a series of sicknesses, all in a very short time, the handshake ritual was performed without success as *sanguma* or *poison* were to blame and not relations.⁹

Power is structure and eagle

What Awim people needed to counteract *sanguma* and *poison man* was power. Attaining power is a constant, although intermittent, enterprise in Awim that touches upon people’s relation to customs and Christianity. Sebi, the former leader of the Charismatic movement, told me that:

“People need power because *kastam* [rituals] are not enough.”

At first, people sought to achieve this power through the Catholic Church, and then through the Charismatic movement. However, it became

6. I have witnessed a ritual by way of which Awim solved a problem with a neighbouring village. In order to make the ritual powerful enough another four neighbouring villages from the Arafundi area were invited and they also attended.

7. A supporter is called *panga*, τ, and it implies making someone strong as well as making ones talk become true.

8. I consciously avoid making use of terms such as sorcery and witchcraft, which I find problematic in the Awim context, and rather retain the Tok Pisin terms used by Awim people. The categorisation first proposed by Evans-Pritchard (1976), which is still widely used today, does not reflect Awim’s ideas because the ground on which the people differentiate between the two is the killing modality rather than the derivation of power (spells and paraphernalia or heredity). In Awim, both *sanguma* and *poison man* use the knots made of a *Cordyline fruticosa* or its analogues (bones, stones) to perform, what I propose to call, a count-down to death. While in the *sanguma*’s hands the *Cordyline fruticosa* and its knots count the days until the victim’s death, in the *poison man*’s hands the *Cordyline fruticosa* counts a series of people who are going to die, each knot standing for one of them.

9. *Sanguma* and *poison man* are at once subjects in their own right because the counter-activities of the community are directed towards nullifying their powers and someone’s else deeds. Although never revealed publicly out of fear of retribution, their acts are privately attributed to particular persons.

clear that neither were strong enough, and also, as Sebi said:

“We could not understand how the Holy Spirit acts on people. We would still use *kastam* [rituals], even though we already had the Church and the Charismatic movement.”

With the advent of the Ministry this has changed for two reasons. Firstly, the Awim now receive power or, as people call them, power-gifts in the form of instructions and techniques – the Angel provides not only the power to do things, but also the knowledge associated with the procedures of making things. Secondly, power is given directly from the Angel, without the mediation of or interference from other people, like the centers of Christian power in Rome, who would either diminish the power or distort the knowledge that comes with it. In other words, directness implies the possibility of the full acquisition of power as no intermediary (person) participates in its partibility (see Mosko, 2010; see Telban, 2009: 133-134, 147).

Power makes one strong (*strong*, TP, *kepiye*, T), and this strength is not limited to physical qualities alone (Read, 1980: 70) – but it also entails the efficacy of any act, talk and thought. Michael's conferred power as a form of knowledge (instructions) structure the Ministry and organise the work of its members. Each of the six Ministries in the six villages are subdivided into sections called “small Ministries”, and each of these are composed by: The *Leaders*, who pray and lead other sections, *Mama Ministry*, who heal by extracting objects, *Music Ministry*, who play instruments and sing Michael's songs, *Defence Ministry*, who make sure that no external disturbance affects the work, and those who speak with Michael (three in Awim: Jacob, Michelle and Aganis). Michael gives people instructions, power-gifts and techniques during an event called *marking*. During the *marking* the leaders of the Ministry disclose to each member what their powers will be, and in turn the reception of powers gives each of them a specific role in the Ministry.

While every Wednesday the Ministry members partake in Ministry fellowship, in which people pray, dance and sing with the goal of securing Michael's power and creating the conditions of possibility for an efficacious healing to take place, every Thursday, one day after the fellowship, the members meet for an event called *evaluation*. During this event, experiences are shared, possible problems as well as their solutions are discussed and people who are identified as people with problems are prohibited from partaking in further

Ministry activities until these problems are solved. If a person with a problem were to take part in the work of the Ministry, Michael would send a sign:

“The power will come and touch us only once and then will go. Touch and go!”

When I asked the people what was the word for power in Tape language they told me this was *nayum* (T) or eagle. The eagle is a hunting and fishing power that rests on the idea of the bird's eye view and on a force that draws game and fish to a proximity and to a surface allowing the hunter or fisherman to exercise themselves.¹⁰ Young men experience the eagle first as a story that is gifted to them. My brother Tony told me that:

“This story [about the eagle] itself is a kind of gift. This gift becomes your flesh and blood. This gift has to enter your blood system.”

By using the imperative “and has to enter” Tony evinces a small albeit important detail: the eagle does not enter automatically into the person and so the gift is not automatically realised as a gift. Only when the person hunts and fishes efficaciously and gives the catch to others (first kills must be given to grandparents and maternal uncles), does the eagle enter into the person's blood system and the gift is actually gifted and thus realised as gift. If one fails in killing or gifting, the eagle is said to become ashamed. The hunter has no efficacy and the people would deny that the hunter had ever received the gift. The materialisation of game and fish, through technical procedures of hunting and fishing (both referred to as *mingi-eyom*, T, lit. “something/meat/fish-making”), and the appropriate distribution (*kongo nongo enan*, T, lit. “offer cut give”) of these actualise the eagle as gift.¹¹

The gifting of the eagle, as well as of Michael's power, occur neither easily nor automatically, because the execution of the acts that the two gifts allow remain in the domain of the person's performance.

While people say that Michael's power-gifts are instantaneous forms of knowledge acquisitions, a closer examination reveals, similarly to the eagle-power described above, that the acquisition of power-gifts has to undergo an actualisation of the various techniques provided by the gift itself, at which point only the power as gift is said to have been actually and successfully acquired.

Tony, for example, was marked as one of the leaders. His power enabled him to publicly perform prayers. When he was proclaimed leader, Tony had no experience in practising the ways of the church (*rot bilong haus lotu*, TP). Initially, when his power was conferred to him, he still did not trust

10. The Angel's power is similar to that of the eagle in that: the Angel by gazing from above can spot the movements of spirits, *sanguma* and *poison*, which are then revealed and communicated to the people; in terms of change and development the Angel's power can make entrepreneurs successful by pulling or attracting money and goods towards them.

11. Sharing the fruits of one's success is essential for a village entrepreneur to preserve his or her business power.

his thoughts nor did he know how to pray. Tony received power in the form of a gift from Michael, but his power-gift was not yet fully realised. Michael's gift enabled him to start exercising himself in leadership, but it was Tony who actualised power and rendered it possible. Tony's thoughts and strength developed in this short time however, and he felt that he could achieve whatever he wanted to. During his first fellowship, he told Brian and Lawrence, two leaders with previous experience in church and the charismatic movement, that he would start slowly or with shame, because he was ashamed and afraid. Shame and fear are usually an indication of the lack of power, while this lack, together with shame and fear, has been brought by the power-gift. People simply do not talk about the lack of power outside the frame of power. As Tony says:

"When there is no power you feel shame, you do not feel good and you are afraid. When the power comes you feel neither shame nor fear."

In this sense shame and fear are essential ingredients in the actualisation of power, because they mark the initial stage that leads towards the potential realisation of power.

Tony was eventually able to do a whole prayer by himself. At the beginning, he was still a little afraid, though by progressing he became stronger and his voice became louder:

"Now I had the power to move, so the [Holy] Spirit was acting on me."

People say that at this stage one stops acting in the way of the man, but rather in a Godly way.

By actualising Michael's power, Tony was able to self-determine himself as both a speaker and a leader. While Michael posited the conditions of possibility of Tony's transformation by gifting him power, it was still onto Tony to actualise it. Michael could be said to have determined Tony as a leader and a speaker, *in potentia*, in both meanings of potentiality and power, but it was Tony who brought this potentiality into existence.

When comparing to Yimas, Tony always reminded me that although they did not possess all the power in the form of knowledge that they did (education, business, etc.), they nevertheless possessed skills. Skill is not identical to knowledge in that skill is a potential or dormant knowledge. If Awim people acknowledge having skills, but not knowledge, then Tony could become a speaker and leader because he has always already been one. However, what he has always already been was brought out by Michael's power and thus by

what he could become. Awim people do question whether one has been determined by the Angel or one has determined oneself, but they never choose between the two, because they know that every possibility of attaining power, although begins with Michael, rests on themselves.

Also, Michael's power is erratic and inconstant, precisely because it is concomitant with and reflective of the conduct and behaviour of people. Tony said that:

"I ask God for protection for this particular day and if I use the bush knife I will not cut myself, if I climb a tree I will not fall down. The devil cannot touch me, he cannot give me sickness."

People strive to achieve power, because, as Tony says:

"If you have protection, *sanguma* or *poison man* will respect you, will not touch you. But he [devil/spirits] can still work other networks and if there is a little road, he will enter."

Whenever invoking God or Michael¹² and asking for power, people either explicitly ask for new power or they implicitly ask for new power by a temporal specification:

"Give us power on this day, on this morning, on this night."

Tony says that they ask for new power each time because they are not faithful enough, however, Tony implicitly points at the power's constitution:

"Example! This shirt is torn, it has holes. Will you wear it again? You will throw it away. It is the same with power. You will not make use of this spiritual gift. You have to do it by yourself, stop some habits. You invite a new [Holy] spirit. Because your spirit is weak."

The newly acquired power is power-full because it is new. During every fellowship, prayer or healing, people ask Michael not for power, but for new power or a new shirt. And when Awim people attempted to secure the statue of the Virgin Mary they were looking for an ever new shirt.

Power and the statue

Although Awim people are conscious that power, like a shirt, has holes and is not whole, they nevertheless hoped to attain full and permanent power by receiving the statue of the Virgin Mary from

12. The relationship between God and Michael was explained to me through the analogy of the working environment in a bank. The God/Boss sits with his arms crossed and controls his employees, while the workers do the actual work; in the Angel's case his work is fighting.

the Angel's hands. Every attempt, however, failed and the people found themselves empty-handed, in a literal sense. During the last of the attempts, Michelle and George held the statue, touched it and were touched by it, but the statue was subsequently taken back by Michael. People said that: "Michael *mande yimum* (τ)" a phrase denoting both an interrupted act and anything tightly held in one's hands without being released. For the people of Awim one touch of power is not yet proper power. The presence of power is registered by touch, but in this case, one touch does not imply the power's presence but is instead its absence. One touch of power is no power at all, but rather the mark of a lack of power. What people try to achieve is a recurring touching of power or its repetition. Power is not constant and permanent, but repetitive, and seen through Tony's analogy of the torn shirt, power is also not-whole or full, or as people would put it, power has holes.

People said that Michael was indeed right in touching the people only once with the statue because there were problems amongst the Ministry members. Mark told me that before their last attempt to secure the statue they had received new instructions from Michael: George, the leader of the Mama Ministry, would be gifted with the power to communicate with Michael, one of the only people able to do so, besides Jacob, Michelle and Aganis. George's new gift would have greatly enhanced the Awim Ministry's power, because up until then Awim had lacked a mature and strong big-man in this function, which reflected on the overall power of the Ministry. In fact, Jacob and Michelle were still young, while Aganis resided most of the time in Imboin. As Mark said:

"When George will receive the power to communicate with Michael, he will rule Awim, like Felix [the man speaking with Michael] rules Yimas."

Jacob, the most active in communicating with Michael, was compared and he compared himself to Felix, who as a mature man with strong thoughts, was, Jacob said, less prone to cause problems related to jealousy and gossip. George, on the other hand, like Felix, was a calm and married big-man. George, however, refused to accept Michael's gift and his new role in the Ministry. He told me that previously Yimas had had six people communicating with Michael at once, which resulted in confusion and that they only recently decided to keep only one, Felix. Neither Michelle, who announced George's gift, nor the others, accepted George's decision. Mark was optimistic and related George's eventual acceptance with the reception of the statue while eliciting the ontogenesis of power:

"He has already received this! And the statue will come too! George still has to grow a little bit yet."

Mark said that during the last attempt to secure the statue something had happened:

"Something changed! The handshake!"

People prayed, played and sang. They prayed first to the Holy Spirit and they asked the Holy Spirit to come down with the prayer called *destroy* (TP):

"People were strong, but they could not feel the power. We offered 3 or 4 rounds of prayers in vain. Something has changed. George has not received his power. One day prior to this, Michael had told us that when we would play the guitars, the power will come down, the Angel will appear to George, the noise will stop, the prayers will stop, the noise of the guitars will stop and the ground will shake. And he will come at this time."

Mark told me that when the people were in the middle of the prayer *destroy*, his guitar fell from his hands, he stood up and the ground shook. Everyone stopped and stood motionless. Only Michelle and George had the power to continue:

"They looked at what happened in this moment. Our eyes went black, but the two of them knew what happened. George has been rejecting the gift and the statue came."

The Angel came, released the statue into his hands, but George said:

"No, I am not able to get it so fast."

The statue went also into Michelle's hands and, Mark exulted,

"Michelle was holding it, Michelle was holding it! But in that moment, when George rejected it, the statue was released from their hands and it went back to Michael. We were so close to a change, something new would have come up."

Mark said that the following day they had carried out the evaluation during which they discussed the experiences of the previous day and found out that two members had made a mistake. Two young men had smoked marijuana, which was "something illegal". Because of this, Michael's power had turned into a malevolent one:

"Suppose George had Michael's gift and the statue, these two men would have died. If this gift had been released into his hands, these two men would have been dead now, because they made a problem."

George's refusal to accept Michael's gift and with it the statue was at first considered unfavourable, but during the evaluation his same choice became life-saving. There was, however, another change. Together with the failed deliverance of power, the handshake transformed as well, a change which

was expressed through Mark's example in which Mark intends to explain why Michael would try to kill the two men.

"If I make a problem with Tony, I say sorry to him. I shake hands in front of the Angel's eye and I release my wrongdoings. This system was cut down now. Now, whatever I do or Tony does, there is no more handshake. You will get pain only. Now, after Michael's punishment, you follow the leader's instructions. Penance or sacrifice. You abandon smoking, areca nuts, sago, water. This is your offer [tribute]. When you make something wrong Michael will let you know. Once you have met the cost, this thing will abandon you. Michael does not give you a chance anymore."

The handshake has been abolished by Michael, Awim people gave it up, and instead a series of penances performed mainly by young males secluded in a house without water, areca nuts and tobacco commenced. From that point on, when a problem is committed, it is Michael who will "solve" it by either taking away one's powers or refusing to further confer powers to the person, by inflicting pain and by giving instructions to determine the tribute that the person has to pay in order to redeem the Angel's benevolence. By negating power and by inflicting pain on the Awim people Michael has come to encompass within himself the problems that he previously had been sought to overcome and solve.

Mark and Tony further explained why this "new system" is better than the handshake ritual. Besides Michael's increased activity and presence in people's lives:

"When we make [do] something, we do not realise whether it is wrong or not. Michael has changed this now. Before we had to figure this out by ourselves and then we would shake hands. But we would lose a lot of money. Now we can say to ourselves that we made something wrong. From now on we will do fine. Now, when I do something wrong, Michael will tell me. I cannot ignore his words."

Michael has transformed the precarious world of Awim. Instead, the stable and certain world that Michael created is a world that he is responsible for and the knowledge of this world is guaranteed by Michael as well, because, from now on, Michael will tell the people whether they have done something wrong. The abolition of pity and mercy, which imply a lacking, limited or partial knowledge about interactions and the world, coincided with Michael making knowledge full and absolute. Through this transformation in knowledge, Michael himself became absolute, and he now is the actor who is punishing the people. The Angel has come to encompass within himself the Awim world that had previously been the source of punishment. The handshake, which was now abolished, was also, like pity and mercy,

grounded on a partial knowledge as people participating in it expressed their regrets for things beyond their conscious knowledge, because they never fully knew whether they did something wrong or what effects their words, thoughts or deeds had on others.

Conclusion

The Ministry Leaders, when speaking of the abolition, say that the Angel has indeed changed things. They say that before, when people did something, they did not know whether what they did was good or not. They had to figure it out for themselves and if what they did was not good, they had to perform the handshake. But now they are knowledgeable and conscious of their acts because their acts can now be informed by the knowledge from the Angel. The Angel inflicts pain upon them for any wrong-doing, demands penance and in doing so forces on people a process that will make the world consistent.

If Awim had obtained the statue, they would have had the power to solve their problems and achieved their goal voiced in their motto "change and development". However, like the statue, power is never brought into full existence, but always into a partial one, as for instance, when the actualisation of power is accompanied by the excuse of its full completion being postponed for the future. People told me many times that if a healing ritual proves to be inefficacious they will use full power next time instead. In short, power and future never become fully present, because the former cannot fully contain the latter. Power has holes, like Tony's shirt and so it cannot be worn again but a new one is needed. As Tony said when referring to the shirt as an analogy of power, in these circumstances one has to take responsibility for oneself and stop some habits. In this case the people stopped performing the handshake ritual, and by giving it up or giving it to the Angel Michael, they were able to invite a new power, the Angel Michael himself.

I would suggest that the statue that was touched and held by the two members of the Ministry had holes, or rather cracks, as well. This incomplete materialisation of the statue postponed the full realisation of power for a future exchange. The material deformations of the statue and the shirt are, however, indices of possibilities for Awim people's self-transformations through future exchanges with the Angel. The Angel's power is historically open-ended because it is worked out and carried out by people themselves. It is precisely because power cannot contain everything that exists (persons, things and relations), that the people have the freedom to realise themselves

and to transform through further and additional transactions of their behaviours and conducts.

It is true, as the people say, that Michael became absolute or full in the sense that it is he now who punishes the people and not the uncertain world anymore, but his power and he himself remain nevertheless partial, because he has to intervene into people's lives each time anew and also because these interventions still rely on people's behaviours, techniques, relations and work, in short, their ability to actualise power. The Angel Michael too is one of those things in the Awim world that are good and no-good, and by previously helping people to solve their problems and now by punishing and therefore causing them problems himself, he demonstrates his own precariousness, a state that was previously attributed to the world. Ultimately, Michael is the Awim world and at the same time he is the people of Awim, and so both world and people are One, marked by a crack, just like the statue, or by a hole, just like the shirt.

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