MEMORABLE RELIGIONS:
TRANSMISSION, CODIFICATION AND CHANGE IN
DIVERGENT MELANESIAN CONTEXTS

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Barth has argued that Baktaman religious understandings are for the most part communicated non-verbally in an 'analogic code'. By contrast, in the Pomio Kivung, a religious movement of East New Britain, ideas are codified predominantly in language, in the form of elaborate cosmology and exegesis. Whereas the Baktaman tradition is concerned with the cultivation of mystery, 'multivocality', physical sensation and emotion, the persuasiveness of kivung revelations derives from the logical integration of standardized ideology. These differences between Baktaman and 'kivung' religions are related to the relative frequency of cultural transmission or reproduction, and are shown to represent adaptations to the variable demands placed on memory in the respective societies. Moreover, the alternative principles of codification give rise to two characteristic patterns of social change: the one gradual and incremental (Baktaman), the other rapid and revolutionary (kivung).

Introduction

Jack Goody has recently stated that the fact of storing cultural materials in memory, rather than in text, lies 'at the heart of the nature of the process of "cultural genetics"' (Goody 1987: x). In drawing attention to the need for deeper consideration of the role of memory in cultural transformation and divergence, Goody's point is well taken. It seems to imply, however, that the 'cultural genetics' of non-literate traditions are, at least in respect of their characteristic dependence on memory, 'all of a kind'. Goody's remark introduces an important work by Fredrik Barth, *Cosmologies in the making* (1987), in which it is also implied that the processes of cultural transmission and transformation in non-literate cultures may be generally contrasted with cognate processes in literate traditions, where texts are used as repositories of cultural materials (1987: 75-6). I hope to demonstrate in this article, however, that the really crucial distinction is not between dependence on texts and dependence on memory, but between two fundamentally different types of dependence on memory, one of which — though prevalent in many oral traditions — corresponds closely to dependence on textual materials, as I shall explain.

Religious knowledge is transmitted or communicated more frequently in some societies than in others, and such variation obviously places correspondingly variable demands on memory. For the non-literate society of the Baktaman of inner New Guinea, Barth has described a situation in which large portions of the
religious tradition are transmitted as infrequently as once every ten years. Thus, for long periods of time, the details of initiation rituals in particular are stored in memory and, since these materials are considered dangerous to contemplate and certainly to communicate, they are rarely discussed. If one also takes into account the elaborate nature of religious communication, it becomes clear that the system imposes considerable burdens on memory. Indeed, Barth infers that each reproduction of the initiation rituals is bound to differ in various ways from the last as a direct result of failing and distorting memories. Thus, according to Barth, most culture change occurs unconsciously, that is to say unrecognized by the Baktaman themselves (e.g., 1975: 240). Moreover, in his more recent analyses, Barth has come to envisage the process of memory distortion in a particular way, likening the period of storage to Obeyesekere's 'melting pot of consciousness' (quoted in Barth 1987: 29), which endlessly 'breaks down' religious conceptions, and modifies them by incremental degrees (e.g., Barth 1987: 31).

In what follows, I shall criticize Barth's theory of memory and cultural transformation in some detail, and attempt to show that the impact on culture change of excessive demands on long-term memory is largely indirect. That is, I shall argue that the pattern of gradual or 'incremental' culture change among the Baktaman is to be understood, not in terms of a 'melting pot' theory of memory, nor in terms of the 'blocking' of certain kinds of innovation as Barth conceives of it (1975: 244; 1987: 36), but rather as resulting from the evolution of a distinctive structure of ritual communication which is peculiarly adapted to infrequent transmission, and which effectively prevents innovations from contaminating the religious tradition as a whole. By contrast, I shall also be describing the Pomio Kivung of East New Britain, at the other 'end' of Papua New Guinea, where I conducted fieldwork between 1987 and 1989 (see Whitehouse 1989; 1990a; 1990b). The Pomio Kivung (hereafter simply the 'kivung') is a religious movement which was established among the Mengan peoples in 1964 (see Panoff 1969; Tovalele 1977; Koimanrea & Bailoenakia 1983; Trompf 1990), and has since spread across linguistic boundaries to other groups in the region. Centralized control of the movement's activities is still exercised from Mengan territory. In addition to its explicitly cargoist and millenarian aspirations, the movement has pursued a number of secular programmes for change and has maintained strong representation in the highest levels of government in the country since its inception. In this article, I shall be focusing on the fact that the institutions of the kivung are subject to far greater logical integration than those of the Baktaman and are further distinguished by conditions of frequent transmission and wide dissemination. I shall attempt to show that these features are related in complex ways to the demands which are placed on memory in kivung religion. The reproduction of this tradition, I shall argue, closely resembles that of a literate tradition where successful cultural transformation is obliged to take the form of major systemic change, and cannot proceed piecemeal as among the Baktaman.

By way of introduction, it is useful to summarize some general aspects of Baktaman and kivung religions, conveying a sense of the themes which are common to both. Baktaman religion is essentially a fertility cult performed by the men, who are gradually introduced to the secrets of the religion by means of
seven successive degrees of initiation. Barth stresses the communicative aspects of initiation and describes the construction of largely non-verbal messages through positive ritual acts and taboos. A significant portion of Baktaman ritual is only enacted in the context of initiations, and each initiation is performed approximately once every decade. In the intervening period, very little discussion of initiation takes place, even in secret between initiates, and the cultural materials are silently stored in memory. The main ritual contexts for applying religious knowledge outside of initiations are the rites of worship performed by fully initiated men in three categories of temple, to which I shall presently return.

The kivung of East New Britain has the essential character of a 'cargo cult', comparable to Yali's mature movement in terms of longevity, scale and degree of centralization (see Lawrence 1964; Morauta 1972; 1974). My knowledge of the kivung is based mainly on research among the Baining who joined the movement in the early 1970s. However, I have visited the administrative and historical centre of the movement and would expect most of my observations on the kivung here to apply generally. Kivung ritual is directed towards the production of a miracle, in which the ancestors are to be reincarnated in the bodies of white people, conferring upon their descendants all the wonders of Western technology and the supernatural means of endlessly renewing them. The main categories of ritual action are the presentation of offerings to the ancestors in three kinds of temple, the cultivation of moral strength through various meetings and monetary donations, and the endurance of God's punishment for original sin through abstentions and gardening rituals. In this oral tradition, all ideas and practices are frequently repeated and their intricacies are widely disseminated within the community.

The essence of worship in both Baktaman and kivung religions is to be seen in the cultivation of bonds with the ancestors for the purpose of securing benefits for the living, whether these benefits are conceived in terms of fertility as among the Baktaman, or 'cargo' as in the kivung. Moreover, in both societies it is claimed that religion takes the specific form that it does because the ancestors so desire it. Thus, ideally, each expression of religion should be an exact reproduction of the last, in an unchanging tradition. Any interference in these conditions of continuity must be demonstrated to carry the blessing of the ancestors.

More specific similarities in the themes of Baktaman and kivung religions are to be seen in the temple rituals of both societies, and the idioms in which relations with the ancestors are pursued. In Baktaman society, worship is exemplified by the rites conducted in the temples known as Katiam and Yolam. (The third kind of temple, known as Amowkam, is somewhat inessential to the needs of worship among fully initiated men [Barth 1975: 247].) It so happens that a similar division prevails in kivung communities, where the essentials of worship are to be seen in the rituals of two types of temple, known as the 'cemetery temple' (haus matmat) and 'family temple' (haus famili) respectively. (The third type of temple, associated with the prophet Bernard [haus bilong Bernard], need not be considered here.)

Worship in the Baktaman Katiam closely parallels kivung worship in a family temple. Barth (1975: 249) tells us that 'Katiam ritual is ... largely decentralized and individual. Any person initiated to seventh degree is an authorized priest with
authority to approach his clan ancestors; so each clan shrine is the object of independent cult.' In the kivung, the religious equivalent of the seventh degree initiate would be the married man or woman, who similarly offers food to his or her own particular ancestors in the 'independent cult' of the family temple. And, like seventh degree initiates, married persons in the kivung seek personal benefits through this kind of ritual which, in both societies, would commonly be oriented towards success in subsistence activities. In such rituals, bonds with the ancestors are cultivated in the idiom of kinship or marriage, stressing common material concerns and the moral importance of co-operation. This is particularly reflected in the intimacy of invocations made by kivung worshippers on such occasions. But Barth's description of the nature of rites in the Katiam would serve almost as well as a summary of family temple ritual in the kivung. Thus Barth (1975: 250) explains that, in the Katiam,

Man relates to Ancestor through the offering of game in a relatively continuous, everyday flow of prestations, not just on special ritual occasions. In return he obtains taro fertility and plenty. This is a close metaphor to the man-woman relationship of exchange and mutual interdependence in daily subsistence.

If Katiam and family temples are in some sense theologically 'equivalent', then this is no less the case with respect to communal temples in the two societies. At the heart of communal worship in the kivung is the cemetery temple, where the most exalted ancestors of the transcendental world are said to congregate in a body known as the 'village government'. The same ancestors who come to receive offerings in family temples can only be approached in the cemetery temple with extreme reverence, and on behalf of the living community as a whole. This closely parallels the form of worship in the Yolam temple in Bakta-man society. As Barth (1975: 249) puts it, 'The Yolam ... is always the scene of communal cult – even when the cult leader alone makes small offerings through the sacred fire, he does so on behalf of all.' The sort of exchange which takes place in Yolam and cemetery temples is far too solemn and sacred to be cast in the idiom of kinship and everyday transactions, as in Katiam and family temples. Offerings presented to the ancestors in Yolam and cemetery temples are aimed at bringing the living and the dead together, by making the living more sacred, that is to say 'more like the ancestors'. In the cemetery temple, the relationship between living and dead is not analogous to the relationship among living persons. Far from expressing the shared interests of kinsmen, which are construed as pre-eminently material and which emphasize cleavages rather than a unified community, worshippers in the cemetery temple express the sacredness within them, to achieve solidarity with the ancestors based on common spiritual bonds. Barth (1975: 251) explains that in Yolam ritual, 'the commensal meal becomes a communion in which man partakes of the deity' whereas, in kivung ritual, the living strive to share their most sacred or divine aspects with the ancestors. But the effect in both societies is to make the living more like the dead, and thereby to create and express the unity of the living community as a whole.

Memory and the codification of religious materials

Having thus provided a very general orientation to the common themes of Baka-man and kivung religions, I now go on to examine some of the fundamental
differences between them, with regard to the emotional and cognitive experience of religious life. Religious understandings are cultivated by radically contrasting techniques in the two societies. These differences need to be unravelled with care, but a useful point of entry is provided by a basic disparity: the fact that, for the Baktaman, the persuasiveness of religious insights derives from a moving but confusing experience of partial recognition and mystery whereas, in the kivung, it is more deeply rooted in a sense of logical comprehension and intellectual revelation. Let me clarify these points.

Barth has shown that Baktaman religious understanding is not produced through verbal explanation or exegesis. On the contrary, religious insights seem to be constructed through the withholding of explanation, and primarily through the cultivation of mystery. The Baktaman system of initiation into successive grades has the effect of impressing upon the novice that what he does not know is more powerful and dangerous than what he does know. Excessive secrecy and taboo surround all sacred knowledge, and at every stage the novice is given to understand that behind the veils of deceit and partial truths lie ever deeper mysteries. Moreover the fully initiated men, and even the masters of initiation who know more than any other men alive, are apparently humbled by the unknowable mysteries of existence and fearful of unleashing powers which they only vaguely comprehend. The mystery, secrecy and danger surrounding Baktaman religious life is clearly associated with the absence of casual speculation and exegetical discussion.

This state of affairs is quite unlike that in kivung religion. It is true that there are elements of mystery in this tradition as well; however, they emerge out of rather different conditions. Kivung religious knowledge is distributed more or less evenly throughout the community and exhibits a high degree of logical integration. Not only is exegesis available for every detail of ritual action, but these explanations and their logical implications are discussed at great length almost every day, whether in the formal conditions of a public meeting or the more casual contexts of amicable conversation. The experience of religious understanding tends to be focused on what one explicitly knows and can articulate, rather than on what one dimly conceptualizes, profoundly fears, and cannot verbally express. A mystery in the kivung is something which is logically implied, but not authoritatively confirmed, whereas a Baktaman mystery is something which is authoritatively confirmed, but inaccessible and indifferent to logical constructions. I return below to further amplification of this contrast.

Besides the difference of cognitive orientation — that is, the emphasis on logical explanation versus the contrivance of mystery — there is also a difference in the sensual character of religious experience. Baktaman rituals bombard the senses from all directions, as Barth shows in his discussion of sacrifice (1975: 223). In the kivung, by contrast, ritual action tends to be alternately cerebral and routine, and rarely does it construct meaning out of physical sensation or seek to excite or encourage a diversity of such experiences. In this regard, kivung rituals have more in common with Christian worship than with Baktaman initiation. There is an ideological emphasis, in the kivung, on the need to cultivate particular emotional states in the course of rituals, ranging from contrition, guilt and sorrow, to generosity and altruistic love. As far as I can make out, however,
the predominant experience is either one of intellectual concentration, when a technically complex sequence is in motion, or else of boredom and discomfort when actions are routine and automatic. Certainly, mainstream kivung rituals do not assault the senses to the degree found in Baktaman initiation, where anything from sudden pain and extended torture to peculiar aromas and loud noises are unleashed upon the unprepared novices.

Barth himself laid particular emphasis on the distinction between what he called ‘analogic’ and ‘digital’ communication (cf. Bateson 1972: 372 sqq.). Digital processing is, of course, just a computing expression for the principle of binary opposition or polarity, central to the endlessly exploited idea (in formal linguistics, and structuralism generally) that values derive from arbitrary contrasts. In the 1970s, Barth was pulling against the tide of structuralism (e.g., 1975: 212-14), and wanted to stress the limitations of an approach which, for example in relation to animal symbolism, would want to envisage ‘sets’ of natural species as ‘reciprocally arranged in structures which are isomorphic with social arrangements or other features of reality’ (1975: 189). Rather, Barth wanted to demonstrate that the symbolism of animals used in rituals was to be understood in terms of an analogic code, such that natural species ‘enter individually into larger ritual contexts, each of them as a separate, more or less dense symbol carrying an aura of connotations’ (1975: 189). In an analogic code, Barth argued, the meanings of symbols are not arbitrary but derive from a resemblance between the inherent characteristics of the symbols and their referents. In other words, such symbolism is essentially iconic. A familiar example of the use of an analogic code is the conventional ‘stick figure’ by which the human being is commonly depicted in the West. Although this affords the possibility of binary contrast (as between the stick man and the stick woman in the labelling of public conveniences!), there nonetheless remains an independent relationship between the stick man and the ‘real man’ based upon shared, inherent characteristics of symbol and object. Barth’s argument is that Baktaman religion is predominantly cast in an analogic code, and indeed he does seem able to demonstrate, for example, that there is a link between many of the religious understandings of growth, increase, removal and loss, and the natural characteristics of symbolic materials such as dew, fur, running water and so on.

It should be emphasized, of course, that Barth has never subscribed to a facile view of Baktaman religion, which would see it as something really constructed out of local equivalents of stick figures. What Barth seems to be saying, at least in part, is that ideas of growth and increase need to be communicated effectively in a fertility cult which is concerned with the growth of humans and taro. A useful way of conceptualizing this process happens to be the ‘miracle’ of dew, which appears on leaves apparently out of nowhere. The link between maturing taro, and water which ‘grows’ on leaves, is cast in an analogic code. The relationship between the two types of ‘growth’ is in some sense self-contained and can occur independently of other codifications. However, the Baktaman have many complementary ways of conceptualizing growth, for example through the symbolism of domestic pig fat, fur and hair. Thus Barth (1975: 200) writes:

The Baktaman seem to be groping for something only diffusely understood, and the metaphors used are such as can provide a minimal cognitive grasp of it: Dew accumulates on leaves. Fat grows inside the pig and makes its skin hard and tight. Hair grows out where it is cut off. Fur
covers the body, like vegetation covers the ground. All these are images that can evoke the idea of increase.

These sacred images, however, are not really comparable to stick figures. Each metaphor seems to trigger multiple connotations which often have a strong emotional or sensual character. The terrifying experience of being forced into the nocturnal forest at the beginning of first-degree initiation will perhaps always be associated with the symbolism of dew, which is first applied on this occasion. Each metaphor of growth and increase will carry its own peculiar associations, and each will 'harmonize' in varying degrees with related metaphors and connotations. Thus, the image of dew is far from being merely another way of communicating the same idea as that conveyed by pig fat, namely the idea of growth. As I understand Barth's argument, to treat each image as simply standing for an idea would be to reduce Baktaman religious experience to the comparatively sterile medium of language. For taken on its own, there is nothing particularly persuasive about the proposition that taro growth and dew are manifestations of a single process. When this insight is cultivated in ritual, however, it is through the contrivance of ambiguity and multivocality based around emotionally charged connotations. Many anthropologists have drawn attention to the persuasive character of this process, and to the fact that verbal statements, such as in an exegetical commentary, could never present a substitute for the communicative functions of ritual symbols. Indeed in the Baktaman case, Barth's analysis suggests that exegesis would undermine the persuasive power of condensation and multivocality, by simplifying, trivializing and de-sacralizing the act of revelation. And it could surely add little to the experience of partial comprehension, awe, fear, and – above all – mystery which Baktaman religious symbolism sets out to accomplish.

In contrast with this state of affairs, the kivung religion transmits its knowledge through predominantly linguistic and exegetical communication. Every ritual act has a generally recognized meaning which is integrated into a complex system of logical implications, ultimately derived from a finite set of absolute presuppositions. Consider, for example, the ritual preparation of food for presentation to the ancestors in the cemetery temple. These offerings have to be prepared every day on a rota system by a team of three women. If, on one occasion, I happen to notice that only two women are preparing food, then I am likely to set off a string of questions and answers along the following lines: Why are there only two cooks? Because the third is menstruating. Why should menstruation prevent her from cooking? Because her menstrual blood is a punishment from God. Why should God punish her? Because Eve had sexual intercourse with Adam... and so on. It will be noted that each meaning associated with ritual behaviour is logically implied by other meanings which can readily be unravelled in the medium of language.

Drawing on Collingwood's terminology, Hanson has called this principle of institutional integration 'the logic of question and answer' (Hanson 1975: 11-13). Now, if I were exhaustively to pursue my line of questioning along all the various paths which are logically implied by the answers I receive, then I should discover such things as the fact that it is the moral sentiment, and not the food itself, which is 'consumed' by the ancestors, and the fact that only some moral
sentiments are acceptable to the ancestors while others are unacceptable and even cause offence. Eventually, I should discover that the miracle of returning ancestors is desirable and possible, but that its achievement depends in part on the establishment of solidarity and reciprocal relations between the living and the dead. If I ask why this is so, then I should be told simply that it is so. This idea is, in Hanson's (and Collingwood's) terminology, an 'absolute presupposition': 'Absolute presuppositions are not themselves answers to any questions; they are the ultimate assumptions which give rise to all questions' (Hanson 1975: 12). Hanson has gone so far as to assert that the logic of question and answer, emanating from absolute presuppositions, provides 'a paradigm for the institutional approach to social science' (1975: 12). For my part, I wish merely to suggest that it provides a useful framework for analyzing kivung-type religious materials, but not those of Baktaman-type traditions.

My central thesis is that the different principles of codifying and structuring meaning, in Baktaman and kivung religions respectively, can be related to the differential demands which are placed on memory in the two traditions. The analogic coding of Baktaman religious materials is consistent with conditions of irregular transmission. The tradition is insulated from the dangers of memory failure in two major respects. On the one hand, the separateness of metaphors implies that modification or elimination of any particular symbolic process, whether due to memory failure or some other specific cause, does not substantially undermine continuity in the religious tradition as a whole. This would not be true of a logically integrated structure, where interference in any one sector of the religion can have profound consequences for the entire system. On the other hand, the bombardment of various senses and the cultivation of pictorial and emotionally charged associations, which occur in Baktaman ritual, may be regarded as powerful mnemonic devices, greatly reducing the risk of forgetting and thus of the unconscious or unintended introduction of innovations in subsequent performances. In these respects, the principles of Baktaman religion may be considered as constituting an adaptation to the considerable burdens which are placed on memory by its conditions of reproduction. I shall presently attempt to identify the specific mechanisms of this adaptation.

The continuity of kivung religion, on the other hand, is not threatened by memory failure. The very frequent repetition of all the sacred rituals of the kivung is sufficient to ensure a high degree of standardization. Moreover, it is not merely the technical side of kivung ritual which is rigorously standardized through continual repetition. The exegeses of ritual, indeed all the cosmological intricacies of kivung religion, are likewise fixed by convention as a result of frequent repetition. Two afternoons of every week are set aside in all kivung communities for the purpose of public meetings, which all members of the cult (except for sick or menstruating persons) are expected to attend. At these meetings, three orators along with their assistants are charged with reiterating the details of kivung religious ideology. Admittedly, they cannot cover all the ideas at every meeting, nor indeed in the course of one week, but they do cover considerable ground and probably set out almost all the religious ideas in any given five-week period. It happens to take exactly five weeks to repeat all the doctrines surrounding the ten central tenets of the movement before the cycle
begins again and the tenets or 'laws' are repeated from the beginning. Since attendance at these meetings is compulsory for everyone, regardless of age, the effect is to 'drum home' every detail of the religion to the community at large. The explicit goal is to create a single, unified system of ideas within each individual mind.

Regular public meetings stand out among kivung rituals as a principle forum for transmission; however, temple rituals also provide a daily forum for public speech-making. On these occasions, group ideology is persuasively conveyed on the model of the sermon, and transmission takes place through a combination of collective rote-learning and schema-based memorization. However, whereas a church sermon is not supposed to repeat substantially another recent sermon but rather to reinforce or illuminate in 'new' ways principles enshrined in a written text (and is not, in consequence, particularly memorable), kivung speeches are the 'text', in the sense that they are constitutive of authoritative religious ideology and are required to sustain it accurately through regular repetition. The effectiveness of this mnemonic technique was demonstrated in the course of my fieldwork by the possession of Lagawop (Whitehouse 1990a: 184–7), a young girl, whose exposure to kivung ideology, in common with other young girls, was based upon predominantly passive attendance at meetings and other kivung rituals. In a state of possession, Lagawop was able to repeat extensive logical strings of kivung ideology for literally hours at a time in the manner of an experienced orator. This would indicate that all kivung members effectively assimilated an elaborate ideology as a result of its frequent transmission.

The degree of standardization of such an elaborate and logically integrated system as that of the kivung is only possible, in the absence of written guidelines, because of the frequency of repetition. It would be quite impossible to maintain an oral tradition of this kind given Baktaman conditions of reproduction. If a significant proportion of kivung rituals and ideas were communicated only once every decade or so, then each performance would require elaborate preparation with reference to recorded materials. Even an undergraduate student, who may be under considerable pressure to memorize the contents of lectures and who revises over an extended period, employing written records and a battery of mnemonic devices to maximize recall, is nonetheless liable to forget a very considerable proportion of this material over a subsequent decade of non-academic employment. To ask somebody to reconstruct even the most basic elements of kivung religion after a single experience of exposure a decade ago, would be equivalent to asking an ex-student to repeat a lecture from memory, ten years after graduating.

My contention, then, is that such exegetical complexity and richness is only possible under conditions of frequent reproduction. The fact of reliance on memory, in an oral tradition, means that kivung-type institutions are ruled out, unless transmission occurs continually. But my argument goes further than that. I would anticipate strong correlations between predominantly analogic coding and irregular reproduction, and between elaborate, logically integrated exegesis and frequent repetition. A plausible mechanism for the production of these correlations suggests itself, and at the heart of this mechanism are the differential demands placed on memory in kivung and Baktaman traditions.
At first glance, it may seem that the issue of memory is only relevant if one presupposes a uniform ideological emphasis on continuity in religious transmission. In the absence of this apparently ideological requirement, memory would seem to have little bearing on the matter. I do of course recognize the ideological importance that both kivung and Baktaman traditions attach to the accurate reproduction of religious institutions at each performance. I stressed this point at the outset, and it does indeed seem to introduce an element of inflexibility, opposing innovation and making legitimate religious expression contingent upon accurate recollection. This, however, is really only part of the story. One cannot say that ideological complexity, for example, is ruled out in Baktaman religion, merely because of the emphasis on continuity based on faithful recall—the argument being that too much ideology is too hard to remember accurately over a substantial period. In many ways, a much more important factor relates to the subjective experience of the validity of religious understandings.

Although complex ideology could not be accurately reproduced in an oral tradition once every decade, it could conceivably be invented or re-created in a profoundly modified form at each, rare performance. But in an imaginary system of this type, which would not emphasize continuity, it is hard to imagine how the authority of religious ideas could be generated or upheld. This is not a question about ideology itself—it is obvious that a spontaneously invented system of religious thought is no less capable than any other of invoking transcendental legitimation. Nor is it a question of what drives the innovator to make certain pronouncements, although it may indeed be unrealistic to hope that every decade some charismatic prophet will step forth to achieve feats of intellectual creativity comparable to the ideological intricacies of the kivung religion. Even that, however, is not beyond the bounds of possibility. What is really hard to envisage is how such experiences of ideological transmission might sustain any sort of religious life through the long years which separate performances. In a pattern of very infrequent reproduction, systems of logical relations will fade into virtual meaninglessness before some replacement is constructed. This would imply an oscillation between intense intellectual religiosity and a sort of expanding secular void, or at least a predominant experience of religion as a set of vague and rather dull ideas—much as an aging alumnus remembers his university courses. Such a system could scarcely be called a religion at all, and certainly it is hard to think of an ethnographic case which comes anywhere close to it.

The reason why analogic communication is so well adapted to Baktaman conditions of infrequent reproduction is that the messages which are transmitted are not concerned with something so dull and forgettable as the logical implications of ideas, but with the intense experience of mortal danger, mystery, pain and other extreme or abnormal sensory stimuli. All these elements are agonizingly cultivated in Baktaman initiation, and they haunt the initiate throughout life, by forming a complex harmony of associations with the objects and processes of everyday experience. Barth vividly describes, for example, how the otherwise ‘dull business’ of taro cultivation is transformed into ‘something of meaning and value’ through the remembrance of initiations and the powerful images, emotions, sensations and other associations which they evoke (1975: 236).
If it is accepted, therefore, that analogic communication is an adaptation to the excessive demands placed on memory in a non-literate tradition which is very infrequently reproduced, then I suggest that the converse is also true: that the systematic, logically integrated character of kivung institutions is an adaptation to conditions of frequent reproduction. A religion which transmits its messages through continual repetition is unlikely to rely on analogic communication. In order to understand why this should be so, it is first necessary to appreciate that the emotive quality of Baktaman-type symbols, and what makes each symbol different from another, is the uniqueness of the original set of associations between symbols and their referents. This requires a momentary digression.

In Baktaman religion, hair is not different from fur as a symbol of growth simply because hair is hair and fur is fur. Nor, to refer to an old joke, is the difference between hair and fur the fact that they are spelt differently. Barth is emphatic that hair and fur are not alternative symbols for the same thing, namely growth. In fact, the first set of ritual associations with hair, as these are cultivated among novices during fourth-degree initiation, relate to male sexuality and potency. In the course of fourth-degree rituals, shredded pandanus leaves are tightly bound to the hair of novices to create pigtails arranged to suggest strongly the act of coitus. Besides the phallic symbolism of pandanus and hornbill, which are both used in the head decorations, other symbols of male potency are employed. The faces of the novices are extensively stung with nettles and they are forced to dance for several days and nights before the women, during which time they are deprived of sleep, food and water. The extreme sensations evoked by these rituals provide unique and powerful associations with hair and sexuality. The heat and swelling of the face, the exertion and intense craving for physical satisfactions— all these unique experiences come together in the original appreciation of hair as a sacred image. In subsequent initiations, a deeper understanding of hair is provided and the significance of fur is introduced as a complementary but different way of conceptualizing the process of increase and growth. But hair could never be the same thing as fur, after the experience of fourth-degree initiation, and fur could never adequately replace it as a sacred symbol.

This leads me to the nub of my argument. The transmission of Baktaman-type messages depends upon the unique and intense quality of ritual experience. It is not conducive to the cultivation of such messages to repeat them very often. Repetition deprives the experience of its uniqueness. Meanwhile, the intensity is largely generated by suffering which nobody would be anxious to repeat and which, if it were repeated, would not yield up its original fruits of revelation. In conditions of regular reproduction, the essence of religious understanding—the experience of revelation—has to be cultivated by some other means. It seems to me that the obvious and most accessible means is logical persuasion, the construction of an intellectual system of absolute presuppositions which are interwoven by the logic of question and answer. Such is the essential character of kivung religion.2

In an oral tradition, persuasion by the logic and coherence of cosmology and ritual at the same time necessitates frequent repetition. That is to say, the two features are mutually reinforcing. As I have pointed out, logical structures become dull and disconnected if they are not regularly contemplated, and their
persuasive capacities are in no small degree a function of the extent to which they can be preserved as an entirety through frequent transmission. This is less of a problem in literate traditions, where neglect of some portion of religious knowledge can be repaired through revision of appropriate texts. But in an oral tradition such as that of the kivung, all areas of the institutional system must be continually reproduced in order to preserve the logical integrity and comprehensiveness of the religion, through which its potential to reveal and persuade is realized.

These issues are raised by the different mixtures of statement and action in Baktaman and kivung rituals. Clearly, although kivung religious knowledge is for the most part capable of being transmitted verbally, in the form of logical persuasion, this does not imply that exegesis could be substituted for ritual performance. The kivung is about not just knowing, but also doing. The standard exegetical commentary on the presentation of offerings in kivung temples has to do with bringing about the miracle of returning ancestors, but simply 'knowing' this meaning is no substitute for going through the actions. In this respect, kivung rituals are like productive, technical procedures, and are explicitly likened to them by participants. It goes without saying that the statement 'I am felling a tree' is no substitute for the act itself. However, whereas the felling of a tree does not require any verbal commentary in order to communicate the meaning of the act, kivung ritual undoubtedly does. That an attempt is being made to expedite a miracle could not possibly be inferred from observations of non-verbal behaviour. Thus, so far as the indigenous appreciation of religious insights is concerned, the most important communicative capacities of kivung ritual action largely result from, and correspond to, the standard verbal commentaries available.

To varying degrees, kivung members undoubtedly engage in some intellectual speculation, and experience certain emotions and sensations in relation to rituals, so that there is bound to be some variation in the subjective appreciation of the meanings of these rituals. But my impression is that these variable responses are of much less importance in the construction of kivung religious knowledge than they are in the context of Baktaman initiations. I have attempted elsewhere to outline the probable range of associations evoked by the symbols of Western culture in kivung ritual (1990a: 67-9). These sorts of connotations, however, are under-exploited due to the continual repetition of rituals. For example, placing flowers on tables in the temples may originally have been associated with colonial domestic habits, but when these flowers are arranged daily in the temples, year in and year out, they come to be taken for granted. Thus, potentially diverse metaphorical connotations are not in fact exploited, and the individual's appreciation of religious knowledge tends to converge on the standardized interpretations, which are endlessly articulated at kivung meetings.

This suggests another way of expressing the contrast between kivung and Baktaman religions. Just as kivung rituals ought to produce the millennium, so Baktaman rituals are supposed to 'do' something of material and practical value: above all, to promote the growth of humans and taro. But in one respect, Baktaman rituals are slightly more like the productive, technical act of felling a tree, because novices receive messages about growth and increase, for example,
without verbal clarification. Thus, ritual symbolism conveys religious understandings in the way that felling trees, under certain conditions, conveys the intention of clearing a garden. Let me put the contrast in the following condensed form: whereas, in the kivung, the most important things which rituals ‘say’ cannot successfully be communicated without words, in Baktaman rituals the most persuasive aspects of religious statements can only be conveyed by the actions themselves. The result, for the Baktaman, is considerable heterogeneity in individual interpretations of symbols. Under such conditions, verbal commentary becomes more or less redundant and, even if it were elaborated, it would fail to represent the variety of religious understandings which the symbolism is able to evoke in different individuals. The infrequency of ritual performances, coupled with the cultivation of emotions and sensations at the moment of first exposure to sacred symbols, produces an ongoing sense of revelation as symbolic connotations are evoked in the everyday experiences of life. ‘Doing’ and ‘saying’ in such rituals are so deeply interconnected that one can never definitively say what one has done, or share the resulting knowledge through the medium of language.

In summary, I have argued that despite similarities in the themes of Baktaman and kivung religions, messages are cultivated, structured and transmitted by two contrasting techniques. I have argued that these techniques constitute particular adaptations to differences in the frequency of reproduction and hence in the demands made on memory in the two societies. I want now to examine the implications of this divergence for cultural transformation. I find it useful to broach this topic by means of a brief critique of Barth’s approach to culture change among the Baktaman and their neighbours.

Codification and cultural transformation

Barth has long taken the view that culture change among the Baktaman is ‘largely unacknowledged’ (1975: 240). According to this view, initiation rituals are unconsciously changed at each performance, due to memory failure and the fact that only a very small number of experts are responsible for remembering the details of rituals. The minds of Baktaman cosmologists are thus likened to ‘melting pots’ (e.g., Barth 1987: 29), in which cultural materials are unwittingly remoulded. The title of Barth’s recent book, Cosmologies in the making, echoes the point.

So far as I am aware, Barth has never published any direct evidence of unconscious memory failure among the Baktaman, and there is perhaps a risk of exaggerating the extent of unacknowledged innovation. Studies by psychologists of long-term memory retention suggest that memories tend to evaporate rather than melt (see Cohen 1989: 156–9), and that such innovation as occurs may be primarily a function of the procedures of recall. Neisser (1988) has described the optimal conditions for accurate remembering, and these happen to correspond quite closely to the procedures used in the planning of Baktaman initiations (Barth 1987: 26), where ritual experts adopt the technique of ‘free recall’ at leisure, and are explicitly guided by a concern with ‘verity’, apparently in the absence of motives which might produce distortions (c.f. Neisser 1988). It should also be reiterated that the materials concerned are, by their very nature, memorable. Ritual experts are not required to recollect a great volume of verbal
exegesis or mythology, but rather a limited number of graphic actions, rendered all the more vivid by their association with powerful emotions and sensations.

Thus, unacknowledged innovation may well be the exception rather than the rule and, in the absence of empirical evidence, certainly cannot be invoked to explain the gradual and piecemeal character of culture change among the Baktaman. However, Barth also advances a theory of incremental change in relation to documented instances of deliberate or conscious innovation in Baktaman rituals. In this context, the argument turns on a concept of 'blocking' rather than 'melting', as I shall explain.

Of the nine cases of conscious innovation in Baktaman ritual which Barth collected (1975: 239-40), three concerned the symbolism of wild pig. Traditionally, it would seem that the Baktaman have been reluctant to make use of the image of wild pig in fertility ritual, because the boars in particular are notorious for ravaging crops and are thus, as Barth puts it, construed 'as primarily an anti-taro and anti-gardening force, an enemy and rival to Baktaman male success' (1975: 241). For this reason, it had long been expressly forbidden to bring the meat or bones of wild boars into the Yolam temple. However, Barth cites an occasion in the 1950s when a group of warriors, initiated merely to third degree, undertook a successful raid while carrying with them the mandible of a wild boar which had recently been killed in the act of copulation. Following this incident, the mandible was incorporated into the Yolam sacra, where it was still to be found some fifteen years later, at the time of Barth's fieldwork.

It would no doubt be interesting to discover why this instance of innovation was successful, and why a comparatively large proportion of innovations generally seemed to focus on wild pig. Barth's explanation begins with the fact that the attitude towards wild boar in everyday life is somewhat ambivalent. Whilst this beast is undoubtedly a villain, its meat has a high value and - most poignantly - domestic sows depend upon the wild boar for impregnation (1975: 201). Thus, the wild boar could quite convincingly serve as a vehicle for ideas about male virility and aggressiveness (1975: 241). In this light, the introduction of the mandible to Yolam sacra becomes intelligible. However, Barth seems to regard the ambiguity of wild pig as something approaching an explanation for the tendency to focus on the symbolic potential of the animal in ritual innovation. Thus, he formulates the general rule that 'elaborations ... occur where problems and discrepancies are felt and require a resolution' (1975: 244). This argument raises problems, in view of Barth's foregoing demonstration that the Baktaman go out of their way to cultivate discrepancies and ambiguities in many areas of their ritual life. A good example would be the failure to use the most symbolically 'fitting' mandible for the sixth-degree initiation, in place of the much less suitable species of marsupial which is actually used (1975: 185-6). As Barth subsequently puts it: 'messages are often made increasingly cryptic in the service of mystery by the veiling of insight behind layers of symbol substitution' (1975: 189). However, it would be facile to see this as a straightforward contradiction. Barth clearly envisages Baktaman religious experts as being pulled in opposing directions. On the one hand, they are concerned with clarifying cosmological themes, and on the other hand their task is to cultivate mystery. Thus, the temptation to innovate in pursuit of clarity may be counterbalanced by the need to confuse, a need
which Barth associates generally with the ‘blocking ... [of] interpretive elaboration’ (1975: 244).

In my view, the tension between clarification and mystification, which expresses itself in ‘blocking’, cannot be used to explain the gradual or incremental character of culture change among the Baktaman, because ‘blocking’ and gradual change constitute two aspects of the same ‘thing’ for which a suitable explanation is required. I have shown that the problem is not resolved or clarified by the idea of unintended memory failure. Rather, the impact of memory on culture change is, I believe, largely indirect. I have attempted to demonstrate that it is due to a combination of the strengths and weaknesses of human memory that a religious tradition, so infrequently transmitted as is that of the Baktaman, is cast in an analogic code. Now, where this principle of codification is used, culture change is likely to be piecemeal, as Barth has intuited. However, I would argue that this pattern of gradual or incremental change is not to be readily explained in terms of ideas about melting pots, clarification, mystification or blocking. What it comes down to is the fact that all the kinds of innovation which Barth has documented tend to have very limited symbolic ramifications. Since the relationship between symbol and object is somewhat self-contained in an analogic code, interference in any particular symbolic process has only a minimal knock-on effect for the religious tradition as a whole (c.f. 1975: 210-12). In particular, the lack of logical integration serves to isolate innovations and protect the continuity of the religion overall. Consider, once again, the introduction of a wild boar mandible to the Yolam sacra. Barth categorically states (1975: 241) that this instance of creative elaboration occurred ‘without changing the basic rule banning all other ... boar meat or bones from the temple. The various codifications of ... boar have still not been brought into harmony, nor its connotations as a concrete symbol clarified.’

By contrast, kivung religion is far more sensitive to interference. Innovations, in almost any area of the tradition, are likely to have immediate and profound ramifications for the system as a whole. I have elsewhere documented this sort of thing in detail (Whitehouse 1990a), showing how the possession of a young kivung member led, by a series of logical steps, to a succession of radical transformations in the institutions of two Baining villages. It might have been otherwise, had the possession been attributed to diabolical forces rather than to the ‘true ancestors’, but in that case the original innovation would simply have been unsuccessful.

My point may be illustrated with a single example. The taboo on bringing wild boar products into the Yolam can be seen as roughly equivalent to the taboo on chewing betel nut in the kivung. The ban on betel nut is logically connected to an origin myth in the kivung, linking the red substance produced by betel chewing with the first flow of menstrual blood. Thus, chewing implies ignorance of God’s punishment for original sin, and is equivalent to imbibing the very menstrual blood which God inflicted upon woman as a punishment for her sexual incontinence. However, as with wild boar among the Baktaman, Baining members of the kivung have an ambivalent attitude towards betel and menstruation. Unlike the Mengan-speaking originators of the cult, they have no traditional concept of menstrual pollution and few adults grew up with a fear of
contamination. On the contrary, I was secretly informed that Baining ancestors used betel nut and menstrual blood in traditional acts of worship. It would however have been quite unthinkable for Baining communities to adhere to the Mengan model of kivung religion, whilst leaving out the ‘stuff’ about betel nut. Certainly, there is no way such a discrepancy could have persisted for fifteen years without resulting in a re-ordering of other ideas, including the origin myth, so as to make the chewing of betel logically consistent with the wider ideology. It so happens that, during a period of institutional transformation, the ban on chewing betel was lifted for certain newcomers into the kivung (although it was still upheld by long-term members). This dispensation received ample logical justification in connexion with the peculiar circumstances of restructuring which were taking place at that time within the entire religion. My point is that, in contrast to the Baktaman religious tradition, the success of any given innovation in the kivung logically implies further and more sweeping changes. Cultural transformation thus becomes an all-or-nothing business, a process of ideological revolution. This is the price which a religious tradition must pay for logical integration, and it is not simply a concomitant of literacy.

**Political pressures on patterns of transmission**

My central thesis has been that the different types of religious experience available to the Baktaman and to kivung members ensue from divergent principles of codification, which in turn represent adaptations to differential demands on memory. However, the causes and implications of this divergence may be explored a good deal further. The fact that kivung institutions are frequently reproduced and based around extensive exegetical commentary is to be understood not merely in terms of the strengths and limitations of memory but also in terms of the political goals of religious leaders and activists. In a recent article, Barth (1990) has set up a number of contrasts between the transmission of religious materials through the teachings of Balinese Gurus on the one hand and Melanesian initiators on the other, corresponding rather closely to the kinds of contrasts which I have drawn out in the juxtaposition of kivung and Baktaman religions. It is of particular interest that Barth associates the Guru complex with verbalized, decontextualized and logically integrated materials, and the initiation complex with non-verbal analogical codification. One implication of this is that the religious materials of the Guru, being encoded and transmitted by individual operators, are well adapted to transportation over substantial distances. By contrast, the religious materials of initiators are transmitted through infrequent collective performances and thus ‘the initiator is linked to his context, and his knowledge is untransportable except to immediately neighbouring groups, or through the movements of whole populations’ (Barth 1990: 647). This is an extremely important point, and helps to account for the various kinds of divergence which I have described in Baktaman and kivung religions.

The kivung, it will be recalled, is a popular movement, formulated with the goal of expansion in mind. The founder of the movement, Michael Koriam Urekit, travelled extensively in the region in an attempt to spread his ideas and, since the death of this leading Guru, new standard-bearers have taken on the task of maintaining ideological uniformity over a wide area by means of messengers,
personal patrols and the regular invitation of local leaders to the central seat of power in the movement. The same could be said of Yali’s movement in the Madang area of New Guinea, which was likewise transmitted in the eminently transportable medium of language, along channels of dissemination opened up by the Administration (Morauta 1972: 435). It was not conducive to the goals of either Koriam or Yali to confine the transmission of their ideas to the iconic symbolism of infrequent collective ritual. Their programmes of proselytization demanded logically integrated and persuasive ideologies which could be transported by individual activists and transmitted by word of mouth.

Despite his many important insights, a problem with Barth’s recent article is that it takes the initiation complex to be characteristic of Melanesia generally and even goes so far as to assert that the Guru complex is entirely absent. I would argue, to the contrary, that the Guru complex has deep roots in Melanesia, where it has long presented a viable alternative to initiation as a technique of transmitting revelations. Lacey has recently commented on the traditional Melanesian preoccupation with leaders who resemble pioneering myth-heroes, in so far as they travel over great distances bearing elaborate religious knowledge (Lacey 1990: 187). Not only is the theme of transportable ideology commonplace in Melanesia, but such linguistically encoded revelations are also the stock-in-trade of the many prophets, mediums and messianic leaders who form such an important part of the Melanesian heritage. What I have attempted to show is that the region presents not one but two principles of religious persuasion, with divergent implications not only for patterns of transformation but for patterns of diffusion as well.

Morauta comes close to recognizing the last point in her discussion of the contrasts between Yali’s movement and the many smaller cults of the Madang area. She considers, for example, how the emphasis in smaller cults on traditional rituals inhibited their expansion (1972: 434–6). She mentions the restrictions imposed by reliance on highly localized sacred objects, and the limited opportunities for interaction with outsiders afforded by traditional ties beyond the village. The issue of language is also raised, yet only to show how smaller cults were confined by the reliance of their exponents on local languages, whereas Yali’s ideas were conveyed in tok pisin. Above all, Morauta’s emphasis is on different channels and opportunities for communication. What she does not consider is the possibility that the types of communication might have been radically different in Yali’s movement and in the many smaller cults. The members of small-scale cults presumably spoke tok pisin as fluently as Yali’s supporters, and their opportunities for using this language in interactions with outsiders were surely quite varied during the post-war period. If opportunities and channels for communication were really there for a competent leadership to exploit, then the fact that the small cults stayed small requires a fuller explanation. One hypothesis is that the smaller cults codified their religious materials according to the model described for Baktaman initiation, namely in the form of iconic symbolism cultivated in irregular ritual. The fact of their reliance on traditional ritual techniques is suggestive in this regard, but the matter requires further investigation.

My second point of disagreement with Barth concerns his argument that ‘Gurus seek knowledge from far places out of an acquired religious and intellectual
interest, and so as to achieve fame, but not so as to homogenize a regional tradition – although that will be a conspicuous result of their activity' (1990: 651). In so far as Koriam exemplifies the Guru model, all accounts of his career which I collected from his close associates suggest that he very deliberately intended ‘to homogenize a regional tradition’, and there seems to me no reason why this motive should be denied, a priori, to other such leaders. Indeed, the possibility of such a motive is an important factor in the explanation of divergent religious practices in Melanesia. Kivung members are well aware of the opportunities afforded by initiation systems for the cultivation of religious revelations, and some of them personally endured the agonies of such rituals before the kivung prohibited them and replaced them with its programme of painless, if unremitting, daily repetitions. In part, these new institutions took the form that they did precisely because they offered opportunities for proselytization and unification which the initiation rituals did not.

I want to move on now to the converse question of why some societies favour the techniques of codification and transmission which are characteristic of initiation systems. But first the problem must be re-stated more clearly. Baktaman initiation is based around iconic symbolism expressed in the performance of rituals by groups of novices under expert direction. In part, the persuasiveness and enduring impact of this type of communication derives from the infrequency of transmission, implying the avoidance of exegetical commentary and the rigorous observance of secrecy and exclusion. In part, the power of the initiation complex lies in its remorseless assaults on the physical senses, contrasting and confusing pleasure and pain but above all bombarding the novices with surprising stimuli from multiple directions. I have argued that these features are bound together as creative adaptations to the demands which infrequent transmission inevitably make on memory in a non-literate tradition. What needs to be explained is the pressure for such adaptations.

One way of approaching this topic is to focus on the capacity of the initiation complex to generate political solidarity. An undoubted concomitant of the sharing of secrets, agonies, revelations and status among novices is an intense and enduring bond based around common identity and solidarity. In Papua New Guinea, this bond is highly ‘gendered’. A number of theories have been advanced which suggest that the historical pressure behind the elaboration of initiation systems is to be found in strategies of male domination (for example Feil 1978; Lindenbaum 1984). Such arguments have recently taken a new turn in reacting to Godelier’s (1986) theory of the ‘alternative logics’ presented by ‘great-men’ and ‘big-men’ systems (Godelier & Strathern 1991). For Godelier, male initiation is a political necessity in societies practising sister exchange (1991: 277) and, along with inherited or ascribed leadership, warfare and revenge killing, these features are said to form part of an organic complex of institutions encompassed by the logic of ‘equivalent’ exchange. Godelier argues that ‘the direct exchange of women between men ... requires the construction of a collective male force to stand behind the individual (his sisters or daughters). This collective force is what is created by male initiation’ (1991: 294).

I do not propose to examine here the details or merits of this argument. What is important is that the male solidarity which ensues from a common experience
of initiation represents a potent political force, and consequently this feature of the institutional complex has become a focus of attention in the anthropological literature. On the one hand, the initiation complex is a result of experiments in religious persuasion, and my primary goal in this article has been to account for their success. On the other hand, it is necessary to address the question of why experimentation along these lines occurred in the first place, and it is here that theories of male strategies of domination may be fruitfully explored. The notion of ‘strategies’ raises the question of motivation, and this is inherently problematic when one is dealing with prehistoric developments. In the case of the kivung, I could present evidence that Koriam deliberately pursued a ‘Guru complex’ as part of his expansionary strategy; however, it would be another matter to demonstrate that Baktaman male ancestors borrowed and developed the ‘initiation complex’ with the domination of women in mind. Rather, what is suggested is a process of social selection in which the exploration of new kinds of religious experience coincided with, and was reinforced by, other social institutions founded around the control and domination of women.

**Conclusion**

I have tried to show that the broad distinction between two processes of ‘cultural genetics’ does not correspond to the distinction between oral and literate traditions in the way that Goody has suggested. This is probably so for a number of reasons beyond those which I have highlighted. For example, Connerton (1989: 72–9) makes a distinction between ‘incorporating’ practices, which are capable of sustaining communication only through physical performance (such as speech or ‘body language’), and ‘inscribing’ practices, in which communication takes place through recorded materials (such as texts, magnetic tapes, and so on). Connerton observes that inscribing practices usually (if not invariably) embody an element of incorporation. This leads naturally to a critique of theories of culture change in literate societies which ‘consider inscription to be the privileged form for the transmission of a society’s memories’ and therefore tend to overlook the ‘mnemonic importance and persistence of what is incorporated’ (1989: 102).

My contribution to this topic approaches the claims concerning literacy from a different angle. I have argued that at least some aspects of the ‘cultural genetics’ of literate societies ensue from certain forms of codification and transmission also encountered in non-literate traditions or, to use Connerton’s terminology, under conditions where ‘incorporating practices’ prevail. Thus the frequent repetition and extensive logical integration of kivung materials introduces a striking rigidity of structure, such that any departure from convention is readily apparent and, if endorsed, requires substantial modification of existing institutions for the purposes of logical reintegration. These are features which Goody long ago (1968: 2) associated with literate as opposed to oral traditions. And after roughly two decades his view remains essentially unchanged (1986: 9–10):

In the literate churches, the dogma and services are rigid ... If change takes place, it often takes the form of a break-away movement ...; the process is deliberately reformist, even revolutionary, rather than the process of incorporation that tends to mark the oral situation.
Nonetheless, I contend that these two patterns of transformation are both
discernible under non-literate conditions, in which the critical variable is frequency
of transmission.

I have also explored the implications of divergent techniques of transmission
for the construction of religious life. I have suggested that techniques of commu-
nication and persuasion must adapt and diverge to meet the limitations of
memory and to exploit its multi-dimensional capabilities. The contrasting experi-
ences of the Baktaman and of kivung members are in some sense the outcome of
different political pressures and strategies. But what I have tried above all to
convey is the sense in which these two traditions have developed out of a highly
creative process of experimentation in the cultivation of religious insights, and in
the search for revelation.

NOTES

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1 This general characterization of the divergent paths of Baktaman and kivung religions super-
ficially recalls the debate over ‘misconstrued order in Melanesian religion’, instigated by Brunton
(1980). Kivung religion is more ‘ordered’ than Baktaman religion in the specific respect that it is
subject to far greater logical integration. However, Brunton’s criteria for order (1980: 122)
amount to a constellation of variables in terms of which both Baktaman and kivung religions
would be located towards the ‘ordered’ end of the continuum. Indeed, Brunton explicitly places
the Baktaman in this position.

2 I recognize, of course, that logical integration is only one of a number of possible effects of
frequent transmission. One possibility which is not explored in the kivung is the use of incanta-
tions, chants and other principles of excessive repetition which tend to produce psychological effects
remote from the principle of ‘logical persuasion’. An effect of frequent repetition which is apparent
in kivung practices, but which I do not focus upon in this article, concerns what Connerton (1989:
22-3) has called ‘habit-memory’, in contrast to ‘cognitive memory’ by means of which logical con-
structions are recalled. The habitual character of kivung ritual undoubtedly contributes in important
ways to the religious experience of cultists (Connerton 1989: 65) and provides yet another basis
for contrast with Baktaman initiation. However, I have chosen to focus on divergent uses of cogni-
tive memory because (as will become clear in the course of this article) these incorporate particularly
salient features as far as the analysis of transformations and political strategies is concerned.


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Des religions mémorables : transmission, codification et changement dans deux contextes mélanesiens divergents.

Résumé

Pour Barth, grâce au 'code analogique', l'entendement religieux baktaman est, dans son essentiel, communiqué non-verbalement. Par contre, dans le cas du Pomio Kivung, un mouvement religieux de la Nouvelle Bretagne Orientale qui a développé une cosmologie et une exégèse élaborées, la codification d'idées religieuses est essentiellement linguistique. Alors que dans la tradition baktaman on se préoccupe surtout de cultiver le mystère, la multiplicité de sens, les sensations physiques et l'émotion, tout le pouvoir persuasif des révélations kivung repose sur l'intériorisation logique d'une idéologie standardisée. On montre que ces différences entre les religions baktaman et kivung, qu'on met en rapport avec la fréquence relative de la transmission - ou reproduction - culturelle, représentent des niveaux d'adaptation variant en fonction des demandes exercées par deux sociétés sur la mémoire. Ces deux principes alternatifs de codification conduisent, de surcroît, à deux modèles distincts du changement social : l'un graduel, opérant par augmentations minimales (baktaman); l'autre, rapide et révolutionnaire.

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