

# The power of place: Spatio-temporality of a Melanesian religious movement

**Borut Telban**

Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, borut.telban@zrc-sazu.si

## Abstract

Over the years, several different renewal movements within Christianity have had a significant impact on Melanesian societies and cultures. In people's aspirations for total transformation, however, there has often appeared one insurmountable obstacle: a firm bond between being and place. The Ambonwari people of the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea have faced the same problem since the Catholic charismatic movement reached the village in December 1994. Their cosmology and social organization have always been inseparable from their *paths* (journeys, marriages, exchanges, adoptions) and *places* (places of mythological ancestors, old and new villages, places of other groups, places for processing sago, fishing places, taboo places, camps), and their historicity was primarily perceived and defined in terms of place. The adherents of the Catholic charismatic movement attempt to abolish their emplaced past, transcend their territorial boundaries, and simultaneously modify their places. Because Ambonwari cosmology dealt with multiple spatio-temporalities, however, Catholic charismatic leaders find it difficult to undermine this diversity. It is this multiplicity of emplaced historicities that troubles them most and not simply time per se.

**KEYWORDS:** temporality, space and time, Catholic charismatic movement, religion, Papua New Guinea

## Introduction

Recent decades have seen a rapid spread of Pentecostal and charismatic movements throughout the world, including Melanesia (Csordas 2007; Meyer 2004; Robbins 2003; 2004b). What these movements share is a drastic rejection of the past, a sharp break with collective ancestral practices, and a committed refusal to remember anything that could bring the unwanted ways of life back into the present. Dismissal of the past is combined with euphoria of the present, enchanted by the word of God and charismata (e.g. spirit possession, speaking in tongues, healing powers, and prophecy) delivered by the Holy Spirit. There is no doubt that this movement is in its origin a *religious* movement – although it comes together with the process of globalisation – and that it often attracts groups of people to whom religion is not clearly separated from, for example, politics

or the economy. Cosmology, which is situated in both places and bodies, pertains to all domains of people's lives including their social organization, kin relationships, subsistence practices, and so on, and not only to a particular domain that we call "religion". To focus on cosmology as if it were confined to a religious realm would be to misinterpret people's existence and to impose an analytical apparatus foreign to their life-world. A radical dichotomy between people's spiritual and material concerns, as well as between sacred and profane aspects of their lives more generally, moves us away from their own understanding of the cosmos as a whole. Rather, as Strathern and Stewart (2009: 12) have recently reaffirmed, the two realms are intertwined as one.

A number of anthropologists have emphasized the above-mentioned cosmological orientation of Melanesian societies. Thus, for example, writing on cargo phenomena in the southern Madang District, Peter Lawrence stated that religion was not 'a separate cultural component' (although he made it such for analytical purposes) and that cosmos was conceived as an exclusively unified physical realm (1967: 12, 31). Lawrence immediately dismissed any 'concept of the supernatural: a realm of existence not only apart from but also on a higher plane than the physical world' (ibid.). Men cooperated with gods and spirits, the latter living within the earth (in rocks, trees, and river pools near human settlements) and not somewhere above in the sky. The cosmos, even if not always visible, was a finite realm and people's transcendental spiritual world was confined to their places. Spirits of the recently dead were perceived as consociates and people's post-mortem existence was situated in the time and the place of the living. Cosmic time had no chronological meaning; distant forbearers were forgotten, socio-economic order was continually reconstructed and believed to be the same as the one of their ancestors. This, of course, also meant that the past continued to be lived in the present and the *then* of the ancestors often meant *here* of the living.

Such a perspective has been confirmed also by other anthropologists working in Melanesia. Among the Kwaio of the Solomon Islands, as Keesing (1982: 50, 56) argued, religion is neither a special domain of people's cultural life nor it is separated from social organization, economy, traditional law and politics; the ancestors are those who in all domains of people's engagement are the most powerful and have the leading role. In a similar vein historian of religions Jonathan Z. Smith wrote: "Religion' is not a native category... It is a category imposed from the outside on some aspect of native culture. It is... colonialists, who are solely responsible for the content of the term' (2004: 179). Recently Godelier re-emphasized this point when he wrote that separation between the political and the religious domains of human life is of a recent invention and does not hold for many societies around the world (2009: 146), including, one might add, those founded on Islamic faith.

A Catholic charismatic movement cannot therefore separate a religious domain from the political and economic ones in order to address only religious issues. It deals with all domains of people's lives simultaneously. But then, conversely and from the people's perspective, the Catholic charismatic movement is also perceived and dealt with in terms of all domains of people's lives. It is also because of these internal reasons, I would say, that the spread of Pentecostal and charismatic movements (also due to their relative standardisation and uniformity around the world) is tightly interwoven with the

spread of technological progression, media, world market economy and, in the case of Melanesian religious movements, with the world of “white people” and their wealth and power generally.<sup>1</sup> As mentioned earlier, there is no strict dichotomy between spiritual and material expectations of people.

The internal institutional structure of orthodox Christianity, the institution of the Church in particular, dwells on a binary opposition between a “higher” spiritual domain pertaining to the priesthood, to Heaven and to God and the “lower” place-bound issues of the everyday life of humans, clearly exhibited in its top-down hierarchy. I am not saying that Christianity does not aim at its realisation in concrete places on earth.<sup>2</sup> What I do want to emphasise is that its authoritarian and universalizing force comes from above, from God, Heaven, the Holy See in Vatican, the Pope, bishops, and so on.

The Catholic charismatic movement likewise articulates this distinction between higher and lower spiritual domains. However, the two levels become connected not only through the life and deeds of Jesus (the Christian year and calendar transpose spatial sequence onto a temporal one) but mainly through the Holy Spirit embodied in individual believers.<sup>3</sup> Robin, the first Catholic charismatic leader in Ambonwari, said this about the main difference between orthodox Catholicism and the charismatic one:

Church is one! The difference between the two is that all Church leaders look at the book while charismatic followers use only their heads. You pray and pray and thoughts will come. I will go so and so. This will happen. Even if I go and see the sick I do not look into the book. I just pray and pray. The talk will come, as if a computer has sent it. Computer will bring all the talk into your little machine (i.e. head).

Robin also distrusts the representatives of the Catholic Church and cherishes the leader of the Sepik charismatic movement:

They (church representatives) only speak on the top (superficial talk.), they just act-talk (pretend). They talk only about big things, not really going into them. On the other hand Ken Charles (charismatic leader from Kanduanam village on the Sepik River) goes inside (deep).

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<sup>1</sup> I use “white people” to denote all light skin people regardless of their country of origin, and (in particular contexts) also the spirits of the dead.

<sup>2</sup> In the fourth century when Christians came to Palestine ‘a system was formulated that could be replicated away from the place... The sequence of time, the story, the festal calendar, have allowed a supersession of place’ (Smith 1987: 94). Ritualized structures of temporality became the means of overcoming topography enabling the invention of the Christian year which could be exported (ibid.: 94–95, 114–115). Also in the fourth century, the Roman Catholic Church in accord with its traditional anti-millennialism rejected the vision of a Kingdom of God on earth, making it otherworldly, eternal, and unrelated to the secular world (Casanova 2001: 420–1). God was not emplaced in the earth as, for example, the bush spirits are, but rather lingered in a transcendental mode of existence.

<sup>3</sup> In the 1960s, the traditional Catholic position was altered by inner-worldly reorientation (spatial dimension. e.g. active participation in the transformation of the world), by acceptance of the principle of historicity (temporal dimension, e.g. God’s plans of salvation in and through history), and by embracing the modern secular world (Casanova 2001: 420). It was at that time, i.e. in 1967, that charismatic Catholicism also began rapidly to spread over the earth.

Thus, the Catholic charismatic movement is first of all a movement of God exchanging words and thoughts with the people through the medium of the Holy Spirit. This is achieved through the individual body which actually becomes *displaced* by the high frequency and repetitious nature of ecstatic séances: trance, speaking in tongues, prayers, and healing ceremonies.

Traditional cosmology, in contrast, is an ongoing circulation of *emplaced* relationships and practices with which the frequent and repetitious myths, legends, songs, chants, and other verbal expressions are neatly interwoven. Myth, for example, is thus perceived as a part of lived experience in the emplaced present and not just an isolated story form the past (see, for example, Young 1983). In this way, it deals with people's experiences embedded in their named places and numerous movements, which in Ambonwari are called *konggong* 'paths': migrations, marriages, exchanges. These paths relate their place to other places and other beings. The cosmos, as a structured but flexible inter-subjective life-world, provides an emplaced framework for dealing with both stability and change of these places. The cosmos is neither spatially homogeneous nor temporally static, otherwise it could not incorporate new groups, new relationships, and new ideas. Both stability and change depend on the paths that people decide to take: memorialisation and repetition of old paths secures durability and stability of a place; establishment of new paths provides a place with novelty and change. People's memory also greatly depends upon this cosmic system of places and movements-paths (migrations, marriages, adoptions, exchanges) from and to these places. It is this place-bound but path-opened character of Ambonwari (and I would suggest typically Melanesian) life-world that came under the impact of a radical religious transformative force, which is the main subject of my article.

## **Being of the place**

Over the past two decades, the philosophers Edward Casey (1998, 2009 [1993]) and Jeff Malpas (1999, 2008) and the anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000) have emphasised the importance of a phenomenological perspective on the place-bound existence of human beings.<sup>4</sup> In his introduction to the second edition of his *Getting Back into Place: Towards a Renewed Understanding of the Place World*, Casey (2009) writes about the intimate connection, the interdependent relationship, the coevalness between place and region. While in the first edition, published in 1993, place seemed to be over-autonomous, Casey now incorporates places in the region and vice versa. What Casey calls region, Ingold calls landscape, and argues against both a 'sterile opposition between the naturalistic view of the landscape as a neutral, external backdrop to human activities, and the culturalistic view that every landscape is a particular cognitive or symbolic ordering of space' (2000: 188). For Ingold, the landscape is an inseparable part of every being, a testimony to the

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<sup>4</sup> All three scholars have written their works also as a response to the present day technological age characterised by a systematic elimination of place, global homelessness, and the loss of "nearness". Their works can be compared with similar works in the field of ecophenomenology.

lives of past generations, and ‘the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along the paths connecting them’ (2000: 193).<sup>5</sup>

Casey defends the phenomenological approach to place which, regardless of its ‘prejudicial commitments and ethnocentric stances,’ gives priority to the actual lived experience of people and to both an anthropologist in the field and the people he or she studies (2009: 320). Seeing perception as a primary domain of human existence (as did both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty), Casey insists that only by being at a particular place is one able to perceive it. In other words, knowledge of place is neither prior nor secondary to perception but is fully experiential and already integrated in perception itself (Casey 2009: 321). It is for this reason that Casey is critical of the otherwise brilliant ethnographies of Weiner (1991) and Myers (1986), objecting that they give priority to *space* as a neutral pre-given medium, which is then ‘filled up’ with history and culture, instead of to *place* which is perceived, sensed and experienced: people are not simply *in* places but are *of* them; they are place-bound (Casey 2009: 320–2). Casey’s argument, however, has to be approached cautiously. On one hand, he attributes the merging of nature and culture to ‘old ways of living characteristic of many aboriginal societies’ (Casey 2009: xxxiv), and his ethnocentric perspective which opposes ‘European civilization’ to ‘pre-civilized life’ evokes nostalgia for primordial unity. On the other, as Myers (2000: 78, 104) wrote in his reply to his criticism, Casey totally ignores socio-political mediation, i.e. the fact that practices of place-making and experiences of place are socially and politically organized.

Many ethnographers have provided detailed studies regarding the importance of places in peoples’ cultures. When, for example, Howard Morphy writes about time and landscape in Aboriginal Australia he says: ‘Place has precedence over time in Yolngu ontogeny. Time was created through the transformation of ancestral beings into place, the place being for ever the mnemonic of the event. They ‘sat down’ and, however briefly they stayed, they became part of the place for ever. In Yolngu terms they *turned into* the place’ (Morphy 1995: 188). The sequencing in time could to some extent only become recognisable in those cases when events occurred in different places and not in different times. And even then synchronicity takes over, transforming temporality into features of the landscape. Yolngu languages also give precedence to spatial vocabulary when speaking about distance in time (ibid.). Naming system, kinship, and ritual are all closely connected to place. Changes, being a consequence of people’s action, transform the present as well as the past and construct new divisions of the landscape. In short, the past gets adjusted to the present and so does the landscape, which is a kind of mediator between present experience and the experience of the ancestors (ibid.: 205).

Looking at Keith Basso’s well-known text *Wisdom Sits in Places* (1996), we see that the Apache construction of place is also a form of cultural activity of *sensing* of place that includes their tribal past, wisdom, and morality. Location of past events in time can be achieved only in a vague way; ‘what matters most to Apaches is *where* events occurred, not when, and what they serve to reveal about the development and

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<sup>5</sup> In the present article, I use the terms region and landscape interchangeably.

character of Apache social life. In light of these priorities, temporal considerations, though certainly not irrelevant, are accorded secondary importance' (ibid.: 31). Apache do not see themselves as being simply inhabitants of their landscape but they are also inhabited by it; 'selfhood and placehood are completely intertwined' (ibid.: 146). Place-names, with their rich descriptive imagery, are not only elicitors of history but are also witnesses of changes in the landscape and society at large. Being 'an elemental existential fact' and 'inseparable from the ideas that inform it,' sense of place is 'stoutly resistant to change' (ibid.: 144, 148).

What we can immediately detect from these two separate accounts, one from Aboriginal Australia and the other from indigenous America, is that time is secondary to place in both contexts. Place gathers the past by encompassing the events that happened there and which make it not only *what* but *how* it is; individual and social memory is simultaneously constituted through a relationship between people and places. This does not mean that places are fixed and unchangeable; on the contrary, places are those that witness and incorporate change. Changes in society and culture are simultaneously changes in the landscape and vice versa. However, as these two different cultural contexts confirm, this bond between being and place makes both the people and the places more powerful and at the same time more resistant to change. Moreover, these places do not oppose change in some passive manner but – in the process of their own transformation – they reciprocally and in a very active way influence the change itself. Even a significant technologically induced change of society (e.g. the recent boom of mobile telephony in Papua New Guinea) (Telban & Vávrová, forthcoming) involves place-based strategies that shape the changes in a specific place-bound way. The exchange paths, for example, which lead to and from different places, open up possibilities for transformation of both people and places.

In a more recent study conducted among the Tlingit of northern Southeast Alaska, Thomas Thornton (2008: 8) focuses on place-making processes and identifies four key cultural structures that are central in people's relationship to and appropriation of place: emplaced social organization, language that shapes perception of places, material (subsistence) production informing how places are used, and ceremonial life that fosters spiritual ties to places. Regardless of many changes in all four cultural domains, during the post-contact era since 1800 in particular, the Tlingit continue to bind themselves and their culture to the places they inhabit. Their place-names evoke the past and provide continuous relationship between a particular group and the land that sustains them. Rather than places being named after people, a common feature of the Euro-American place-naming system where an individual is said to be the basic social unit, people are named after places. The land thus becomes a mnemonic device of and for different generations, events and activities, and it is through the land that 'the underlying order of the cosmos... is revealed' (Thornton 2008: 106).

Through the naming of a place, the philosopher Jeff Malpas (2008: 266) writes, the place becomes a place; it becomes situated in relation to other places; it becomes a place that gathers and is itself gathered. It is through the naming practice generally, 'through the way the word calls up a thing, and the place with it, that language is also

a happening of place and place a happening of language' (ibid.).<sup>6</sup> The critique of the present day technological ordering of the world, the systematic elimination of places, and the shrinking sensory experience of human beings when one 'no longer 'sees' the sky or 'touches the earth', is taken up by Malpas (2008: 297) in the second part of his book, in which he argues for the centrality of place in the later work of Martin Heidegger. The unity of places in space (we could call also this unity a place or a region or even a cosmos) is provided by movements between them, by passages and paths that connect them. These paths between places also enable these places to open up.

Priority given to an abstract space (which lacks the particularities of a living place), associated especially with the beginnings of technological advancement, is illustrative of how easy it is to misinterpret a life world of other people, who through their doings and sayings not only affirm the bond between people and place but continuously re-confirm it through their many institutions. Casey writes about the modern era and how time has assumed predominant position in physics, philosophy and soon in people's daily lives too: 'The subordination of place to space culminates in the seventeenth century; the subordination of space to time continues during the next two-and-a-half centuries' (2009: 8). In the present-day world, one might say, global time in its linear and progressive form to which values became attached, began to dominate both place and space. Although people live different temporalities, speed and the continuous drive for novelty have come to characterize many domains of people's lives.<sup>7</sup> While the power of the technological age and its role in de-territorialisation is emphasized by all earlier mentioned scholars, they were not concerned with the extreme force of the new religious movements, which spread over the world to a large extent simultaneously with technological globalisation. However, before I venture into the complex relationship between Melanesian cosmos and Christian universe and the changes brought to the former by the Catholic charismatic movement let me present some characteristics of the Ambonwari's emplaced existence.

## **Ambonwari**

A total of 784 Karawari-speaking people lived in 2011 in Ambonwari village in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea. Upon my arrival to the village in September 1990, the population was smaller: 422 villagers represented a typical Sepik society with a vast range of rituals and other customary practices. Although there was then one main men's

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<sup>6</sup> Connerton (2009: 10) distinguishes between two different place-related ways of remembering: the *memorial* and the *locus*. The examples of the *memorial* are the place-name and the pilgrimage; the examples of the *locus* are the house and the street. Thus, in the case of Ambonwari, place-names and the paths of the ancestors could be said to 'summon up immense range of associations, about history, about events, about persons, about social activities: and historical narratives are given precision when they are organized spatially, when temporal order is given shape as a sequence of localities associated with events' (2009: 13). Place-names cover the past, which is to some extent available only to the knowledgeable few who 'exercise power over land and over others: the testimony remains when the power has gone' (Connerton 2009: 10).

<sup>7</sup> I am not implying that in modernity being is only temporal and in all other contexts being is only placial. What I am saying is that in modernity temporalities and spatialities of different domains of people's lives have been highly homogenized: time in terms of a priority given to constant progress and change, and place in terms of globalizing uniformity given to public sites and roads.

house owned by the members of Crocodile-1 Clan, who claimed precedence due to the prior arrival of their mythological ancestor to the region, the members of all other clans remembered the journeys of their own ancestors (see Telban 1998). Each clan's ancestor (and his group) had his own path of arrival and his men's house. If their men's house was not actually standing the clan members at least knew its name, which was almost as good as the physical object itself. What connected different clans of the village was not their common place of origin but a variety of ancestral paths that led from different directions and converged in what became Ambonwari village. While the village was relocated several times, the paths of the ancestors remained fixed and frozen. Through the entire history of subsequent paths (travels, marriages, exchanges, adoptions), the Ambonwari created a dense web of past and present relationships between village clans, lineages and individuals and the places they occupied. These past relationships could be detected not only through the many institutions (and their actual or imaginary realizations in different periods) but also through the distribution and use of land inhabited and controlled by the spirit-crocodiles (Telban & Vávrová 2010). Every spirit-crocodile and the place he occupies has his "father"; place and its spirit-crocodile have the same name and both are owned by a particular clan, a particular lineage within the clan, and a particular individual within the lineage, called "father of the place". Moreover, such a person, and actually every member of his lineage and clan, including external classificatory members, *is identified* by this spirit-crocodile and the place. This becomes especially apparent in a ritual context, when people, places and spirit-crocodiles merge together (Telban 2008). Paths taken between lineages and between clans (e.g. in marriage or exchange) or between villagers and outsiders are at the same time perceived as movements of their spirit-crocodiles, as movements between and of the places.

The present-day Ambonwari village was formed and continually recreated as a place with a *centripetal force* impersonated by the spirit-crocodile Ibrismari who represented the ground on which the village is erected. I often heard people say that whenever they go to the town of Wewak or to some other faraway place this spirit-crocodile expands into a snake and follows them, helps them if they are in trouble, punishes them in the case of their misbehaviour, and ultimately pulls them back to the village. The power of the place, and its role in supervision of social and moral issues, was therefore nicely expressed through the doings of the spirit-crocodile. When some individuals or groups wanted to separate from the enclosure of the village (e.g. when a man built a house on the other side of the Ibris Creek or when the members of a particular clan built their men's house at the place where their ancestors had lived before joining Ambonwari) they were stricken by sickness and death until they returned to the place controlled and protected by Ibrismari. This *imunggan saki* 'bush-spirit of the village' was so powerful that it had to be kept under control, not only by initiation ritual but also by other institutions, such as for instance, the institution of three "mothers of the village" (wives of the descendants of three brothers who were first to arrive to the region), whose main obligation was to sit firmly in their houses and "press" the spirit-crocodile down beneath the surface. The usual work that women do was prohibited for them (Telban 1998). While some places in their region were occupied by supportive spirit-crocodiles and used for hunting and gathering, other places, being inhabited by vicious and destructive spirit-crocodiles, became taboo places and had to be avoided. Then the

Ambonwari began to take longer paths to previously unknown places while at the same time the outside world was forming new paths coming closer to their place.

Over the previous 80 years, the Ambonwari went through several turbulent periods that influenced and shaped their attitudes towards their life-world, towards their places and towards their time. Let me mention the most significant ones. In the 1930s, a small number of men were recruited to work on copra plantations in Rabaul. In the 1950s, the village was baptized but the external representatives of Roman Catholic Church did not remain in the village. The impact, however, was considerable as it was for the first time in their history that they radically rejected their custom and temporarily dumped their spirits and associated rituals.<sup>8</sup> In the 1970s, when six years of elementary education was introduced into the vicinity, the men's houses were rebuilt and initiation rituals brought back to the village. Although the church was built and re-built, the Roman Catholic village leaders were not in harsh contention with the majority of customary practices.

During my initial fieldwork in Ambonwari between 1990 and 1992, the Sunday mass was held in a private house and was attended mainly by a small number of women and children. It was December 1994, when a Catholic charismatic movement reached the village from its centre in Kanduanam village on the Sepik River. From then on, Ambonwari began to revise their relationships with their forest spirits and spirits of the dead on a much more fundamental level and have gradually abandoned all those practices that provided the spirits with their power (Telban 2008, 2009; Telban & Vávrová 2010). Everything was done in order to dethrone the spirit-crocodiles from their domineering positions. Ambonwari people simultaneously began to modify their attitudes towards their places. They stopped organizing male initiation rituals. The last one took place during the first months of 1994. After the year 2000, the Ambonwari abandoned divination and healing rituals, in which spirit-crocodiles and spirits of the dead played the innermost role (Telban 1997, 2001). Other institutionalised practices such as the observations of prohibitions related to three mothers of the village and of those related to taboo places were between 2001 and 2008 also abandoned (Telban & Vávrová 2010). However, the bush spirits, as in other Melanesian societies that have been affected by Pentecostal or Catholic charismatic movements, have not vanished. They remain in their places as an ongoing and persistent obstacle in people's aspirations for a thorough transformation of their place-bound cosmology.

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<sup>8</sup> During the following years several new ceremonies were introduced. In the 1960s, when the men worked on the plantations in Bogia in Madang Province, they returned to the village with a new dancing and singing ceremony called *singel wo* (single war) in Tok Pisin. From then on, the end of a mourning period or a celebration of a new year began to be marked by this kind of dancing around a decorated pole and singing only in Tok Pisin. *Aymalo* dancing and singing around a pole with a huge carved fish was purchased in 1990s from Moim on the Lower Sepik River. *Aymalo*, a well-known show all around the East Sepik Province at least since the World War I (Lipset 2009: 74 e.n.1), replaced *kambun siria* – singing and dancing of a shield, which was previously typical for the opening of a new men's house and occasionally for conclusion of a mourning period. At about the same time, Ambonwari bought in Madang for 50 Kina another singing and dancing ceremony called *mandayp*. I present these examples in order to show that the paths and relationships that Ambonwari created over time enabled them to bring new ceremonies to the village. They represented a significant change in the ritual life of the village.

Ambonwari people understand their cosmology, social organisation and all their institutions as being based on the intimate bond between people and places. Their cosmological imagery, which connects spirits, places and people, was therefore the first to come under attack during the revival activities of Ambonwari charismatics. In the next sections, I would like to examine the collision between these different orientations in the following ways:

First, in order to show how cosmology represents an obstacle for a total change, I will look at the differences between Melanesian cosmos and Christian universe. I would like to show that the Biblical concept of Heaven has a particular connotation for Ambonwari. To put it bluntly, for Ambonwari Heaven is closely connected to white people's places and their ways of life. Ambonwari do not look only for transcendental benefits of charismatic renewal but equally for the visible, tangible and emplaced ones. In fact, this is not too far from traditional cosmology in which transcendence and immanence are indistinguishable.

Second, by looking at the concepts of above and below I will argue that small-scale societies such as the Ambonwari, in accord with their cosmo-ontological perception of the world, did not necessarily perceive their gods and other deities somewhere above and themselves somewhere below (as world religions would have us believe). Ambonwari confine their existence to paths and places on the same level as the powerful spirit-crocodiles, epitomes of the powerful earth.

Third, people's activities in Ambonwari are focused not only on places but equally on paths (paths of the ancestors, marriage paths, adoptions, exchanges) which have been experientially proved as being capable of providing new relationships, of bringing benefits and desired changes. Paths are actually strategic components of social action producing events that simultaneously modify the character of their places.

## **The Melanesian cosmos and the Christian universe**

Casey writes that Christian conversion aims at 'the gradual ascendancy of the universe over the cosmos' (1998: 78). The colonising tendency of Christianity is to put the power of place (except Calvary, the hill outside Jerusalem where Christ was crucified, and other special places related either to his life or the Bible) into abeyance, to abolish it in favour of universal space (ibid.: 77). The universe, as Casey argues, is 'the transcendent geography of infinite space' (ibid.). 'In contrast, "cosmos" implies the particularity of place; taken as a collective term, it signifies the ingrediency of places in discrete place-worlds' (ibid.). Christianity, in the case of Melanesian cultures at least, comes in different forms and also realises its presence in different ways. While it is true that technological mode of existence, scientific rationalism, the capitalist global market, and Christianity transcend individual places and dissolve them together with their cultures, it is also true that people's cosmologies and socialites, which have always been fluid, appropriate and mould these domineering realms of the present-day world in their very specific ways.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Robbins (2007a: 36–37) argues that while cosmos and society were traditionally linked in Melanesia (see, for example, contributions in de Coppet and Iteanu 1995), Christianity as a culture is characterized by a split between the morally ideal cosmos (church) and the imperfect society (state).

How Christianity enters a particular area differs from one denomination to another. Generally speaking, one can say that more benign forms of Catholicism, as long as they preserve the top position on the hierarchical scale, accommodate and tolerate local customs. In contrast, the disenchanting attitude of ascetic Protestantism simply denies the existence of local gods or spirits (Casanova 2001: 437). Such a generalization, of course, misses the differences between individual denominations within Catholicism and Protestantism. For instance, when comparing United Church (formerly Methodist Mission) and Seven-day Adventist, as they have developed on Ranongga in Western Solomon Islands, Debra McDougall writes that there ‘has been a much more thorough secularization of the landscape among Adventists than among Methodist/United Church adherents’ (2009: 12). While for the Methodist converts several shrines retain ‘vestiges of their former power’ (ibid.), the Adventist Ranonggans reject any possibility of spirits retaining their powers in the landscape. It seems obvious that a combination of specific local culture, specific denomination, and specific social and historical momentum produces specific situations about which it is difficult to generalise.

While charismatic Catholicism, as a movement within the Catholic Church, is on the one hand a de-territorialized movement, it is on the other hand, by being engaged in spiritual warfare with a local culture (Casanova 2001: 437), very much locally emplaced. By “accepting” the cosmo-ontology of their places, Ambonwari charismatics find an enemy to fight against while simultaneously fighting something that is also inseparable from their own embodiment of these same places. In other words, a struggle against local spirits is at the same time a struggle against their own emplaced existence, as has been documented, for example, for the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea by Joel Robbins (2004a).<sup>10</sup>

Depending on particular societies and cultures around the globe and depending on the particular anthropologists working in them, the changes brought about by renewal movements within Christianity are perceived either as a rupture from the past (van Dijk 1998: 157; Robbins 2003, 2007c) or as a kind of continuity of tradition (where change

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<sup>10</sup> Among the Urapmin, as Robbins (2004a, 2009) writes, the new Christian cosmology rapidly and completely replaced the ancestral one after a charismatic revival swept through the area in 1977, 18 years before it reached Ambonwari. However, despite this ‘cultural rupture’, the Urapmin continue to perceive their landscape as populated and owned by traditional nature spirits called *motobil* (Robbins 2004a: 168, 209; 2009: 113, 115). These spirits continue to harm people and inflict illness on those who have violated different taboos. In order to cure the sick, the Urapmin perform traditional pig sacrifices to these spirits. Robbins argues that these practices should be understood in terms of Urapmin Christianity and a cosmological outlook structured by Christian values rather than traditional ones (Robbins 2009: 114). The Urapmin reject the spatio-temporal present, which they seek to transcend. They devalue ‘the things of this ground’ (Robbins 2004a: 179). ‘The spirit-filled nature of the local landscape thus adds to its status as an obstacle to Urapmin moral improvement. On several scores, then, that landscape is the source of as much trouble as good’ (Robbins 2004a: 180). Robbins argues that Urapmin claims about radical change are sustainable on the cosmological level although not so in regard to their social structure and means of producing their livelihood (2009: 109, 124). In contrast, in the Ambonwari example, where traditional cosmology not only permeates all domains of people’s existence including a social organisation grounded in mythology, but also makes sense of the landscape from which it emanates, it seems obvious that such a complete cosmological change is virtually impossible (Telban & Vávrová 2010: 28).

is dealt, for example, in terms of partibility of a dividual person, see Mosko 2010). In an article challenging all those who promote cultural continuity, Robbins argues that ‘people’s changing relation to their traditional ontology – a change Pentecostalism has wrought by introducing its own ontology and situating the traditional one within it – has made change rather than continuity the real story in particular cases’ (2003: 223). He calls for a development of anthropology of rupture that would address a sharp discontinuity with old practices. While nobody denies significant cultural changes in societies under the impact of Pentecostalism and charismatic Catholicism, one can critically question whether it is helpful to generalise in the epistemological and highly dualistic way adopted by Robbins. By emphasising either continuity or change, we subscribe to two extreme temporal modes of existence while neglecting a vast grey area that lies between them and a great number of cultural layers covering the ontological bond between being and place. We lose the sight of this bond, which actually becomes the biggest problem for the members of the Catholic charismatic movement in their attacks upon their ‘terrestrial’ ancestral culture. More importantly, however, we do not perceive change as a new *konggong* ‘path’ (which in Karawari vernacular denotes a movement to a new place or a marriage or an exchange, that is, a change which occurs on the spatio-temporal level through relationships between different places) but we lay our emphasis on a detached axis of time. Let me elucidate this issue further.

First, rupture as such is not foreign to those small-scale societies where every first menstruation or initiation ritual was perceived as the end of a certain way of life followed (after an indispensable liminal period) by a new beginning. Being at their core cosmogonical events, the first menstruation and initiation rituals represented a rebirth, a radical reorganization of social and spatial relationships instigated by the newly initiated women and men. The temporal passage, however, was grasped and remembered mainly through changes in people’s spatial movements. Second, what is happening under the influence of the Catholic charismatic movement is not, in my view, a replacement of traditional culture with a new Christian one (because every culture requires some kind of emplacement) but an ongoing persistence in a liminal state where a Christian present can exist only by being in continuous opposition to traditional past. Via the ongoing struggle to annul it, this traditional past is nevertheless continuously present; even more, it is crucial for the revivalists for their prognostic orientation towards salvation. Because of the movement’s rejection of the past, its persistence in a liminal state in the present (where things “still have to be done” to achieve salvation), the movement cannot develop in time but exists in an endless ritualised state of becoming. The only way for the movement to grow is to move through space, spreading its religious teachings to other places and other people.

Whenever we look at social or cultural change in Melanesia, and how people got rid of “traditional institutions” under the impact of different Christian denominations, there all too often appears one insurmountable obstacle in people’s aspiration for total transformation. This obstacle, which emerges also as a problem for anthropological explanation, is related to the question of spirits of the land, places, and the multiplicity of past and present social relationships. These relationships are created and maintained through exchange and marriage, as well as through habitual daily activities, simultaneously

prescribed by and inscribed into the landscape. While spirits of the dead can travel to and reside at the white people's places (Lattas 1998; Hirsch 2008: 148; Telban & Vávrová 2010: 24), bush spirits remain firmly situated in their places. Moreover, although many customary rituals have been abandoned they have not been forgotten (people often say that they are stored in the memory just as names are). There are also other ongoing practices and institutions that do not deal explicitly with the spirits of the surrounding places but are nevertheless responsible for a continuous creation of the landscape.

Robbins argues that rupture lies at the beginning of Christian history, in conversion and in millennial imaginings. He writes:

In all three cases, something does not just happen in time but rather happens to it. One temporal progression is halted or shattered and another is joined. It is this kind of thinking about the possibility of temporal rupture that allows people to make claims for the absolute newness of the lives they lead after conversion and of the ones they hope they will lead in the millennial future (2007c: 12).

Bruce Knauft also emphasizes intensive social and cultural change among the Gebusi of the Western Province of Papua New Guinea. Following the Gebusi perception of change as exchange of "backward" spirits and customs for those that "come up on top", Knauft writes:

When Gebusi say that they are directly exchanging their customs of the past for those of their future, however, we are presented with a different order of exchange. This is not just a reciprocity of people or valuables across time, but an exchange of very different styles of life. It is not just exchange *in* time, but an exchange *of* time itself, an exchange of different ways of relating to time, of different modes of temporality. In the process, this exchange entails new ways of relating to oneself, to others, and to material goods (2002: 38).<sup>11</sup>

Both scholars see a radical cultural change as something that does not happen *in* time but something that happens *to* time: a new time replaces the old one. However, as people's temporalities are emplaced in the surrounding landscape (in other words, there is a mutual dependence between space and time), and as people are not, as Casey (2009: 322) writes, just *in* places but also *of* places, the question arises: does a radical social and cultural change happen *to* place too? Can the place be halted and exchanged in the same way as the time was, according to Robbins and Knauft, among the Urapmin and

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<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere, Knauft writes: 'Gebusi notions of temporality, in which the future was assumed to repeat the past, increasingly emphasized the unfolding of social time as a path of anticipated progress. Whereas indigenous Gebusi temporal markers, generational naming practices, and subsistence practices had emphasized cyclicality, Gebusi activities at school, church, in sport, and at the market were increasingly evaluated against the success or failure of personal achievement or development over a finite period of time' (2007: 63). If we take into account the multiplicity of people's temporalities and the oft-questioned classical binary opposition between cyclical time (attributed to "traditional" societies) and linear time (attributed to "modern" societies) Knauft's account of changes in Gebusi notions of temporality also becomes questionable.

the Gebusi? Although acknowledging distinctive situations among the Urapmin and the Gebusi, I would suggest that by implying that temporal progression can be fully halted, and one time replaced or exchanged by another, we may overlook the fact that past is not just temporal but spatial as well. Whatever people do with their past in an attempt to eliminate it from their lives, it bounces back through their places. This is evidently also the case with radical Christian conversion among the Urapmin. Moreover, if one looks from the perspective of multiple historicities that are lived by the people, one realizes that there are never just two temporal poles, before and after, but rather a specific kind of coexistence of oscillating temporalities.

## **Above and below, inside and outside**

When Edward Casey discusses spatial orientation in terms of a universal pair above-below or up-down, he concludes that they are embedded in the upright position of the body and witnessed in language. He also says that dialectics between up and down is found in metaphysics, value hierarchies and symbolic forms. However, he then, in accord with the history of Western thought, claims that people have everywhere and always, because of above mentioned characteristics of human existence, attached a higher value to everything above and given lower and inferior status to everything below. Casey argues that people, in their continuous attempt to transcend their own gravity, privilege those places which are ‘located *up above* in what Binswanger calls the “ethereal world” (e.g. the celestial spheres of Plato, the outermost heaven of Aristotle, the Christian Heaven, the Buddhist Pure Land) while places situated *down below* in the “tomb world” (underneath *chthōn*, the eleven circles of Dante’s Inferno) are regarded with disgust and disdain’ (2009: 81). The earth then is a middle realm between above and below with good and bad characteristics. Such a claim can be questioned from the cosmological perspective of Ambonwari and other Melanesian societies and their conceptualization of a person.

The value given to everything above as Casey maintains is characteristic of all societies can be seen as a precursor to Cartesian rationalism (to which Casey, however, rightfully opposes) and its dualism of mind and body where the former is firmly situated in the head. Through this kind of conceptualisation of human existence, head, brain, and mind (which are above) have a higher value than body, legs, and feet (which are below), and thinking (being above) has a higher value than physical work (being below). But again, Ambonwari do not conceive mind as being situated in the head, neither do they separate it from the body. *Wambung*, the “insideness” of every being, which is the place of understanding, feeling and thinking, is also *everything* under the skin of a human being or under the bark of a plant or under the fur, skin or membrane of an animal or under the visible layer of a stone (see Telban 1998: 56-67). As such, *wambung* is there to do things that an empty skin cannot; but for *wambung* to be alive one needs a spirit. Therefore every being, a tree, an animal, a stone, or a human being has a spirit. Similarly, every place too has its own spirit, a spirit-crocodile, which gives life to the place, to its *wambung*, and to its surface-skin on which people, trees, and other spirits live. Without its spirit the place is dead. If the spirit-crocodile should leave its place, which is its “body”, it would take with it the *wambung* of the place and leave behind just the dead surface.

Generally speaking, there has never been any kind of worship of the above beings in Ambonwari, nor was there in Ambonwari cosmology a tripartite structure of an above realm of mighty sky gods, a middle realm of humans and other beings, and a down below realm of dark forces. If one wants to use the metaphysical language of hierarchical relationships then one can confidently say that mighty beings (mainly spirit-crocodiles) which were once both worshipped and feared, lived and continue to live in places. 'Every named place, which includes the ground and the water, is believed to be inhabited by a spirit crocodile sharing its name with the place. One could say that the place is the spirit and the spirit is the place' (Telban & Vávrová 2010: 19). The distinction between a spirit of a place and the people who dwell at that place has even been made to disappear when humans performed rituals in order to bring the spirit onto the surface and then actually to embody it in themselves (during male initiation or when they were going to fight, see Telban 2008).

Cosmo-ontological imagery, which connects spirits, places, and people, is also exemplified in Ambonwari revival practices, sayings, and anticipations (dreams, visions). Let us take, for example, the concept of Heaven. For Ambonwari Christians, Heaven is not some kind of a pure and transcendental Biblical concept, i.e. an ultimate holy place spread over spatial infinity, but rather a concept which encompasses precisely defined places: the places of white people. These are the places where the spirits of their dead are believed to go to join other "white people-spirits", a situation that resonates a common belief all over Papua New Guinea whenever Europeans made first contact.

Let me give one well-known example from another area, before continuing with the present day situation in Ambonwari. Writing about the third cargo belief between 1914 and 1933 in the Madang District, Lawrence stated that people became involved in 'reconstruction and enlargement of their cosmos' (1967: 77). The people began to extend their boundaries in order to include Europeans and Heaven 'both of which after 1914 began to be identified with Australia in general and Sydney... in particular' (1967:77, 236). God, together with their own spirits of the dead, was believed to live in Sydney or just above it, the place above being connected to the place below by a ladder. There was no shortage of wealth in this Sydney-Heaven. In the fifth Cargo belief and as a consequence of wartime experiences of people overseas, Brisbane and Rome (as represented in the Queensland Museum and also believed to be connected to Heaven by a ladder), were added to the unity of cosmos (Lawrence 1967: 238). In the first two Cargo Beliefs, which characterized the period in Madang District between 1871 and 1914, people identified Europeans as part of their environment, either as gods and spirits from their own place (cosmos limited to their own place) or as human beings from some other place (cosmos expanding to another island society). In the third Cargo Belief, as I have already mentioned, the cosmos expanded even further. But change – exchange – was not realized in material terms and the relationships between people and gods as well as between people themselves had to be redefined. The age of the cosmos, however, remained shallow, while cosmic time was not affected by contact, 'had little chronological meaning and was not associated with the concept of change' (Lawrence 1967: 226 and *passim*; see also Lattas 1998).

It is with the places of white people, i.e. the Heaven, where the spirits of their dead have in the opinion of many already gone, that Ambonwari people would like to

form different paths and relationships. Individuals quite often tell stories about having visions of their recently deceased relatives, either parents or children, seeing them as being well dressed with all those material things (shoes, a watch, a car, and so on) which for them represent white people's wealth. They are perceived as coming from the white people's places (Telban & Vávrová 2010). The spirits of their dead became a kind of conduit to the world of the Whites and everything that belongs to them. People often think of material wealth and how to get it. The first Ambonwari Catholic charismatic leader Robin, for instance, said in 2008: 'I find it hard. I pray and I see the money only with my eyes, a picture like on EMTV or on video. It is hard for me to hold it (money), to make it come to a clear place (i.e. to materialize), it is hard... I see it with my eyes, but I do not know how to get it. This makes it hard.' Some of the villagers try to ask their dead relatives for money by writing them letters, which they give to the ethnographers who are supposed to deliver them upon their return to Europe.<sup>12</sup> Other villagers asked the ethnographers if they would provide them with a white child whom they could adopt and, after he or she grew up, could return to Europe on their behalf. All these explorations of imaginary geographies beyond their living places (Lattas 1998: 100), and the relational paths which they try to create between the two worlds, enable Ambonwari people to envisage a wealthier form of existence, which would be closer to God and the white people.

## **Towards a conclusion: Paths and places**

Among the Iatmul of Kandingei from the Middle Sepik, the primal crocodile named Palingawi by one clan and Kabakmeli by another was the first living creature that appeared at the time of creation and is identified by earth (Wassmann 1991: 69).<sup>13</sup> His dual mode of existence, stationary when dealing with creation of earth and different places, and migratory when dealing with the paths of arrival of two clan founders, reveals first of all cosmological and subsequently social patterns of life as it is lived not only in Kandingei but also among several other societies in the wider Sepik region. It frames multiple levels of relationships and connections, which become disclosed through the knowledge of myths, place names, and the names of different beings, human and non-human.

According to their myths of origin, Ambonwari places did not begin by people's inscription of their sociality on them, but came into existence in primal times together with mythological beings, some of which *became* those places (other beings, for example, turned into sago palms and other useful plants). When the Ambonwaris' first ancestors arrived in the region, they were able to change into the spirit-crocodiles that *were* the places (as I mentioned earlier, such a transformation was envisioned also during male initiation ritual, Telban 2008). In this way, places and people's sociality within these places were simultaneously created and, because people live within the eternal moment of creation, continue to be so. In this way, as Ingold argues, elaborating upon Myers' (1986)

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<sup>12</sup> The situations described in this paragraph were experienced by me and Daniela Vávrová during our joined fieldwork in 2005, 2007-2008 and 2011.

<sup>13</sup> *Andi*, an old Iatmul word for earth (Wassmann 1991: 66), is the present day word for earth in the unrelated Karawari language spoken in Ambonwari.

study of the Pintupi understanding of the landscape, ‘the movement of social life is itself a movement *in* (not *on*) a landscape’ (2000: 53–54). Space and time are merged in a place. There is actually no space and no time, but only people’s experience in and of place.

Arguing against the tendency of continuity thinking in anthropological discourse, Robbins creates a radical dichotomy between continuity and discontinuity identifying habitus, structures of *longue durée*, localization, indigenization, and syncretism within the former category, and practice, history, modernity and globalization in the latter (2007c: 10). In my view, continuity can be identified in the binding character of place, while discontinuity, which in Ambonwari is equated with new connectivity (inter-subjectivity), can be perceived in the open character of paths. However, neither of them can exist apart from the other. The cosmos with its multiplicity of places and paths provides the members of Ambonwari society with the possibility to choose and favour particular places and paths during their lives while past generations had chosen their own paths and places during theirs. This is the world familiar to Ambonwari and similar societies who experience and recognize the bond between being and place in their cosmo-ontological imagery. In such a world discontinuity (i.e. inter-subjectivity experienced through new marriages, new exchanges, deaths and births, rituals) is a necessary part of continuity. In such a world, discontinuity enables continuity.

Ambonwari cosmology, culture, and sociality came out of the earth and – following not only their ritual creativity but daily practices and verbal expressions – remained firmly enplaced in their places. By moving their thoughts and sayings from earth to Heaven, and by abandoning or neglecting all those practices that created and maintained a bond between people and spirit-crocodiles, they turned their backs on their ancestors and their practices and simultaneously loosened their attachment to their place. By suppressing their own space-time, they created a situation in which they reject to be beings of the place as lived by and known to their ancestors. They are rather beings *against* the place. This undertaking, however, is not so easily realized because their social organization, kin relations, naming system, subsistence practices, and lived experiences of past and present events remain firmly attached to the places they occupy. While their powerless spirit-crocodiles are still very much in their places, however, the spirits of the dead have already begun to move from the place of the spirits upriver to Heaven, i.e. the place of the white people. In other words, their recently dead went on a journey, carrying their place to the places of the Whites, trying to establish connections and then put their newly acquired wealth (e.g. relationships, knowledge, material goods, and money) back into the place. This is their new future-oriented imaginary in the process of being materialized.

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## **Povzetek**

V preteklih letih je nekaj različnih obnovitvenih gibanj v krščanstvu imelo velik vpliv na melanezijske družbe in kulture. Ne glede na to pa se je v težnjah ljudi po popolni preobrazbi pogosto pojavila nepremagljiva ovira: trdna vez med bitjem in krajem. Ambonwarijci iz province Vzhodni Sepik na Papui Novi Gvineji se soočajo z enako težavo vse odkar je decembra 1994 katoliško karizmatično gibanje doseglo njihovo vas. Njihova kozmologija in družbena organizacija sta že od nekdaj neločljivi od njihovih poti (potovanj, porok, izmenjav, posvojitve) in krajev (krajev mitoloških prednikov, starih in novih vasi, krajev drugih skupin, krajev za pridelavo sagove moke, ribolovnih krajev, prepovedanih krajev, začasnih bivališč ob reki), svojo zgodovinskost pa razumejo in opredeljujejo predvsem v smislu kraja. Pripadniki katoliškega karizmatičnega gibanja poskušajo odpraviti njihovo krajevno preteklost, preseči njihove ozemeljske meje in hkrati spremeniti njihove kraje. Ker pa ambonwarijska kozmologija sloni na mnogoterih krajevnih časovnostih, imajo katoliški karizmatični voditelji težave s spodkopavanjem te raznolikosti. Prav ta mnogoterost krajevne zgodovinskosti in ne zgolj čas, jim predstavlja največjo težavo.

**Ključne besede:** časovnost, prostor in čas, katoliško karizmatično gibanje, religija, Papua Nova Gvineja

**CORRESPONDENCE:** BORUT TELBAN, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Novi trg 2, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia, E-mail: borut.telban@zrc-sazu.si.