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Singing Samo Songs

From Shaman to Pastor

An Ethnohistorical Approach to
Socio-Religious Expressions among the
Samo of Papua New Guinea

R. Daniel Shaw



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*Dedicated to four women who influenced my life
Luisa Miller Stone, grandmother
Laurel Stone Shaw, mother
Karen Perona Shaw, late wife
Georgia Grimes Shaw, wife
Strong women all!*

*In memory of the old shaman who patiently taught me so much
about spirituality and God's role in human living.
He died in August 2021.*

A Female Leader Call and Response Song—Inviting a Samo
Congregation to Worship

Leader: Come—The pastor will teach us

Chorus: Come—The pastor will teach us

Leader: Listen—To the talk about Jesus

Chorus: Listen—To the talk about Jesus

Leader: Go—We will take God's talk and go live

Chorus: Go—We will take God's talk and go live

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Series Editors' Preface

The Endeavor of Cross-Cultural Translation and Indigenous Responses to Christianity

*Andrew J. Strathern & Pamela J. Stewart (Strathern)**

Accounts that incorporate the study of Christianity and indigenous culture have become practically the norm in anthropological works across the Pacific and elsewhere. These studies point to a shifting and dramatic field of changes over time in which relationships oscillate between hostility and alliance among those involved. Indigenous and introduced ideas become intertwined, forming indissoluble complexes and new pathways of adaptation. Instead of a monolithic 'Christianity,' variant forms emerge out of confrontations and compromises, in which the indigenous people themselves are prominent agents of transformation.

These topics are well worked into the ethnographic studies that anthropologists make. Missionaries also incorporate these materials into their own activities, as the work by Lutheran missionaries among the Enga speakers of Papua New Guinea from the 1960s onward shows (see, e.g., Brennan 1970). While some anthropologists have been hostile to missionaries, seeing them as destroyers of culture rather than as culture change agents, others have taken a more nuanced approach, with a special interest in how over time indigenous people create their own versions of Christianity. Combining these categories, there emerges the figure of the missionary anthropologist, who brings to bear anthropological knowledge on the question of religious change and relationships between indigenous and introduced religious practices.

On the way here it is important to note that what is 'indigenous' and what is 'introduced' is moot, because new religious practices were brought in as a pervasive feature of indigenous culture, within the spread of circulating fertility rituals such as the *Amb Kor* complex in the Hagen Area of PNG (Stewart and Strathern 2010, Strathern and Stewart 1999). In other words, 'traditional' cultures have always been subject to change through the introduction of new practices, and *mutatis mutandis* this applies also to the arrival and adoption of Christianity as a new set of ritual practices in Pacific Islands cultures. Old aims may be achieved through new means, or new values may be introduced. Pacific cultures have been open to influences of change, sometimes via the sway of chiefly rulers, who can be bastions of tradition or catalysts for innovation.

Anthropologists in the past have sometimes taken up an anti-missionary stance, arguing on behalf of a putatively stable 'traditional culture' or on behalf of people's rights to determine what changes to adopt and what not, rather than being subject to coercion, in either secular or religious terms. This is essentially an argument against colonialism. In contemporary post-colonial contexts matters have gone well beyond this point, perhaps especially since Pacific nations became formally independent. Accordingly, new inflections of Christianity continue to develop, for example in the spread of Pentecostalism.

Dan Shaw's remarkable history as an anthropologist and missionary in a tiny remote corner of Papua New Guinea cuts through conventional dichotomies. He works as both an anthropologist and a person of faith helping to transform people's lives, assisting them, in their own way of putting it, to become 'Followers of Jesus,' starting from 1970 when he and his first wife Karen entered the world of the Samo people and began as members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics to translate parts of the Bible into the Samo language. They produced an abridged version of the Bible, and this has remained a foundational part of the Samo understanding of Christianity. From the start of this enterprise, they noted the importance for the Samo of singing, and this is reflected in the songs they developed about following Jesus as a means of going to Heaven, which is found in the subtitle of the book here, 'From Shaman to Pastor.' After Karen passed away, Dan carried on the work of faith with his present wife Georgia. Over many succeeding visits they have sought to bring together Samo cultural themes with the Christian message, reshaping that message accordingly. The process is open-ended, creative and exploratory.

This search for creativity and renewal of understanding is akin to comparable quests, for example in the Catholic Church's concept of 'Inculturation' as an

integral part of Church outreach. Another approach may be found in theological efforts to discern precursor ideas to Christianity in indigenous religions. We ourselves experienced an encounter with Lutheran representatives from parts of Africa attending an event of the World Mission in Neuendettelsau, Germany, at which we gave a lecture about the revival of cultural practices in the Mount Hagen area of Papua New Guinea. Commenting on our presentation, African delegates expressed their appreciation of our positive view of connecting Christianity with indigenous cultures. One speaker spoke of recognizing the spiritual significance of trees by embracing them and asked why this could not be brought into Christian worship. A comparable spirit can be found in the works of the early Lutheran missionaries Georg Vicedom and Hermann Strauss in the 1930s onward (Strauss and Tischner 1962, Vicedom and Tischner 1943). Strauss used his knowledge of the Hagen language to craft creative baptismal names for converts. Subsequently the Hagen people themselves have shown creativity in developing new forms of wealth exchange practices surrounding the opening ceremonies for new church buildings, calling these events *moka* (wealth exchanges) with God. (Stewart and Strathern, 2021; Strathern and Stewart 2021). Another example we found in Taiwan among the indigenous Paiwan speakers. There an indigenous Presbyterian Pastor had built an initiation house for young adults just next to his church and had learned his own people's language as an instrument of cultural revival after being brought up to speak the introduced language Mandarin (see, Stewart and Strathern, eds., 2009).

Dan Shaw's work in this book takes us along an intricate and painstaking road of discovery and spiritual growth. Through the work of translation, he enters into a continuing dialogue and a search for enlightenment shared with his Samo interlocutors, including the convergence between the shaman and the pastor, and the ever-present ecological stresses that both these figures have had to combat in a difficult and precarious environment.

Another notable theme of the book is its account of the incursion of the Evangelical Church of Papua New Guinea (ECPNG) into the Samo area, in which its coastal evangelists are said to have attempted to enforce a vision of Christianity in which indigenous practices were treated as evil and 'sin.' Over time, the Samo found that this did not suit them and reverted to their own ways of 'following Jesus.' Shaw and his co-workers evidently acted as catalysts in this outcome, helping to create a vibrant hybrid form of Christianity, paying tribute also to the inspiration found in the Samo practices of initiation known as *Kandila*.

This book will generate much further debate. It is a challenging testimony of faith in both Anthropology and Christianity, and it invites readers to think further on themes and issues that emerge from the sweep of its narratives, going far beyond its immediate ethnographic focus.

Angkemam House, Scotland Branch,
September 2021,
AJS and PJS, The Stratherns

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* Pamela J. Stewart (Strathern) and Andrew J. Strathern are a wife-and-husband research team who are based in the Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh and co-direct the Cromie Burn Research Unit. They are frequently invited international lecturers and have worked with a number of museums to assist them with their collections. Stewart and Strathern have published over 50 books, over 80 prefaces to influential books, over 200 articles, book chapters, and essays on their research in the Pacific (mainly Papua New Guinea, primarily the Mount Hagen, Duna, and Wiru areas) and the South-West Pacific region, (e.g., Samoa, Cook Islands, and Fiji); Asia (mainly Taiwan, and also including Mainland China and Inner Mongolia, and Japan); Europe (primarily Scotland, Ireland, Germany, and the European Union countries in general); and New Zealand and Australia. One of their strengths is that, unlike some others working in Mount Hagen among the Hagen people, they learned the language, Melpa, and used it to understand the lives of the local people. Their most recent co-authored books include *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); *Kinship in Action: Self and Group* (Prentice Hall, 2011); *Peace-Making and the Imagination: Papua New Guinea Perspectives* (University of Queensland Press with Penguin Australia, 2011); *Ritual: Key Concepts in Religion* (Bloomsbury Academic Publications, 2014); *Working in the Field: Anthropological Experiences Across the World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); *Breaking the Frames: Anthropological Conundrums* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); *Sacred Revenge in Oceania* (Cambridge University Press, 2019); *Story of the Kuk UNESCO World Heritage Prehistoric Site and The Melpa, Western Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea: Pride in Place*. (Angkemam Publishing House, 2018); *Sustainability, Conservation, and Creativity: Ethnographic Learning from Small-Scale Practices* (Routledge Publishing, 2019); *Language and Culture in Dialogue* (Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, 2019); and *Heritage: Tradition and Contestation* (Carolina Academic Press, 2021). Their recent co-edited books include *Research Companion to Anthropology* (Routledge Publishing, 2016, originally published in 2015); *Exchange and Sacrifice* (Carolina Academic Press, 2008); *Religious and Ritual Change: Cosmologies and Histories* (Carolina Academic Press, 2009), along with the updated and revised Chinese version (Taipei, Taiwan: Linking Publishing, 2010); *Dealing with Disasters — Perspectives from Eco-Cosmologies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, with Riboli, Diana and Davide Torri); and *The Palgrave Handbook of Anthropological Ritual Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

Stewart and Strathern's current research includes the topics of Eco-Cosmological Landscapes; Ritual Studies; Political Peacemaking; Comparative Anthropological Studies of Disasters and Climatic Change; Language, Culture and Cognitive Science; and Scottish and Irish Studies. They are inter/multi-disciplinary scholars. For many years they served as Associate Editor and General Editor (respectively) for the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania book series and they are Co-Series Editors for the *Anthropology and Cultural History in Asia* and the Indo-Pacific book series. They also currently serve as Co-Editors of four book series: *Ritual Studies*, *Medical Anthropology*, *European Anthropology*, and *Disaster Anthropology*, and they are the long-standing Co-Editors of the *Journal of Ritual Studies* (on Facebook at facebook.com/ritualstudies). Their webpages, listing publications and other scholarly activities, are: <http://www.pitt.edu/~strather/> and <http://www.StewartStrathern.pitt.edu/>.

We are writing this Preface while in Scotland on study leave. We were in Papua New Guinea working early in 2020 before the global Covid-19 Pandemic. We have stayed in contact with our friends and colleagues in PNG during these Covid days and all of our contacts have been okay.

Author's Preface

The purpose of this ethnography is to answer a critical question that has developed over many years: Why did the Samo respond so positively to Bible translation but largely reject the mission approach to Christianity? The answer is of interest to anthropologists and missiologists alike, as both desire to understand people, though for very different reasons. Both increasingly overlap, not only in their interests but in their appreciation for why and how human beings respond to spiritual issues, often reflected in ritual and ceremony. The development of an “Anthropology of Christianity” at this juncture is no accident and this book with its emphasis on Samo ritual and ceremony juxtaposed to their experience of church development fits that genre of literature.

This ethnography is based on over fifty years of personal interaction with the Samo as well as my writings about them. It is reflective of much cultural change (among the Samo as well as throughout the region). It also reflects my understanding of culture as well as my spiritual pilgrimage, both have impacted my appreciation of human socio-religious systems as well as my understanding of Christian mission.

The Samo

According to myth, Samo life began amidst a conflagration of fire and earthquake coming from a large mountain, possibly Mt. Bosavi or Mt. Sisa, extinct volcanos thirty-five miles to the southeast and northeast respectively. As the Samo story goes, people at that time had no joints and moved about stiff legged and slow. The shaking of the earthquake, however, broke their bones and joints

appeared enabling them to run from the calamity and escape to their present location on the East Strickland Plain.¹

Rampant cannibalism drew Australian government officers to the region where they established a Patrol Post and built an airstrip at Nomad River in 1961. Despite initial fears based on early contact with government patrols, the Samo became accustomed to the injunctions of Patrol Officers who said “don’t kill and don’t eat” and followed up by arresting those who did. Occasional Mission patrols from more civilized areas to the west, particularly the Pare, and the Gogodala further south, reinforced the government message and encouraged peaceful interaction. By late 1969, the government deemed the region relatively free of danger to outsiders and lifted restrictions requiring outsiders to be accompanied by a police escort. I conducted an initial reconnaissance of the area in December 1969 and brought my wife, Karen, and one-year-old son, Rick, to live at Kwobi village in February 1970. Over the next several years, we learned the language, studied the culture, and translated portions of the Bible into the Samo language while also adding two more sons, Rob and Ryan to our family.²

With cultural and linguistic studies as a background, I was interested in combining anthropology and translation principles in order to ensure the biblical message would be understandable but minimally disruptive to the Samo and those who spoke closely related languages in the region surrounding Nomad River. My approach, to the extent possible, was to let the Bible speak to the Samo and encourage them to respond in a culturally appropriate manner.

1. The 7.8 earthquake in February 2018 reminded the Samo of their mythology and their fear of such events. They believe the world not only began in this way but will also end this way, thereby drawing attention to their interest in the biblical accounts of beginnings and endings—Genesis and Revelation. The many aftershocks have kept people on edge and mindful of their human frailty. Many have wondered if this could be the beginning of the end of the world as we know it (personal conversations with Boluabi villagers in August 2018 and February 2020).

2. Sadly, Karen died in 2005, and I subsequently married Georgia Grimes, a long-time family friend. Together we spent nine months on a sabbatical with the Samo in 2010 and have returned on a nearly-annual basis since. My first responsibility upon our arrival in 2010 was to mourn and pay compensation for the Samo loss of Karen. When she died, we were in America and not able to pay *sofiman*, ‘death gift.’ I had not returned since her passing, but when I showed up with Georgia in 2010 the Samo ignored her while demanding that I pay compensation for Karen. Being that Karen was a teacher who had provided literacy materials for the Samo, we decided that I would pay for teaching materials and supplies for the new elementary school at Kwobi, where we had lived for eight years. Once the *sofiman* was settled, the Samo fully accepted Georgia and she built close relationships with many Samo people who communicated with her in basic “school” English while she, in turn, learned basic Samo.

Today cannibal raids are only a memory of the elderly. However, the reality of bush spirits, the threat of sorcery, sickness and death with the need to determine a cause, still remain. How, in the increasingly globalized contemporary world, can people respond to the effects of political, economic and religious expressions introduced by outsiders while processing it all through the conceptualization of their own expectations? Faced with the reality of a harsh life in a difficult environment, Samo followers of Jesus³ sought to harmonize their spiritual concepts with the stories of the Bible and expressions of contemporary “mission Christianity.” How the Samo connected translated portions of the Bible with their needs, fears, and desires, while also processing an external expression of Christianity shaped by totally foreign cognitive categories, has been the essence of the Samo church experience and is the topic of this ethnography.

Two Audiences

Over the course of my career, I have largely published in anthropological contexts or in contexts reflective of the interface of Christianity and mission. In both, I have used my extensive interaction with the Samo and the resulting database, as a resource for illustrations. In this book, published late in my career, I seek to integrate cultural awareness with missional issues in a more interactive way.

The audience for this book is anthropologists seeking to understand the human condition, connecting people in all contexts to the reality of increasingly complex global expressions, and how it relates to the development of Christian mission. At the same time, I address this book to missionaries, and all manner of Christian workers, seeking to present biblical principles in particular cultural mazes. Inasmuch as cultures vary and anthropologists explicate principles that reflect human experience, Christian workers who come to those contexts would do well to appropriate cultural approaches to relevant communication of a biblical message. People in those contexts will respond as their language and cultural experience predispose them. How Bible translation factors into this mix, in my view, is crucial for communicative success. This in turn, has both cultural and missional implications as both insiders and outsiders process the theoretical and practical implications.

3. I use “followers of Jesus” to characterize indigenous Samo expressions of Christianity in contrast to what I will call “mission Christianity” as expressed particularly by Australian missionaries of the Asia-Pacific Christian Mission (APCM) and the now indigenous Evangelical Church of Papua New Guinea (ECPNG) which the missionaries founded.

The intentional connection with these two audiences has made this a challenging book to write. It requires an anthropological focus with integration of ethnographic data and theoretical development in order to hold the attention of anthropologists, while not losing my mission-based audience. At the same time there are significant missiological issues that I must address in order to answer the question that precipitates this writing. Furthermore, I have already published two ethnographies relating to the Samo people (Shaw 1990, 1996). Striking a balance between information necessary to appreciate the context in which the Samo received translated portions of the Bible and how they appropriated it with respect to what I will call the "mission church" is crucial to answering the question at hand. I hope both audiences will hear me out as I develop the cultural and missional principles central to understanding the Samo cognitive environment and their spiritual response. Both audiences and their respective interests are crucial to my success.

This book, then, is not a repeat of Samo cultural issues and their meaning, rather it chronicles the Samo response to the Bible in their cultural milieu. References to the earlier ethnographies will direct readers to much greater detail and context for relating cultural expectations and expressions to the development of the Samo church. My objective is to take socio-religious issues, already discussed, and develop them with respect to their missiological implications. As the Samo became followers of Jesus, they gradually blended their beliefs and practices with the larger context of Melanesia and Christian expressions (Catholic, Evangelical and Seventh-day Adventist) throughout the Nomad region. This is both a contextual as well as disciplinary duality that reflects on the progressive revelation of Christianity in this part of the world.

Recognizing cultural relevance despite inevitable change is crucial for anthropologist and missionary alike (Priest 2001, Robbins and Haynes 2014). Both groups have viewed people as objects of study on one hand, and objects for transformation on the other. Neither is appropriate in the context of a globalizing world in which people often seek their identity while adapting material and ideological assumptions. As a Christian ethnographer, I seek to make the application of anthropological insight relevant to the way missiologists promote mission. Moreover, what emerges from being missional, cycles back to impact anthropological approaches.

As an anthropologist and a missiologist, I must take both disciplines seriously. The relevance of each, with its respective foci on culture and the Bible, encourages me to integrate both disciplines as they are connected to my experience with the Samo. As Harvey Whitehouse and James Laidlaw make clear in an earlier volume in this same Ritual Monograph series, we must shift from a descriptive explanation of culture (the what) to an explication that provides

rationale (the how and why) for human behavior (Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2007, 25). Doing so accounts for cognition in a relevant and meaningful way for both anthropology and mission. Furthermore, as a cultural specialist, closely interacting with the people I seek to make known to others, I have attempted to ensure my work provides benefit for those from whom I have learned so much—it is a two-way street. This sets the pattern for the entire book.

Socio-Religious Relevance

Early in our experience with the Samo, we recognized the importance of song. Mothers sang to their children and work teams in the forest often accompanied their activity with song. Shamans interpreted their interaction with ancestors through song. Songs were frequently composed on the spot for a particular occasion or situation, and accompanied any and all activity in some fashion. Clearly songs were an important part of Samo life. It is fitting then, to utilize various song styles to typify the development of the Samo church, both in terms of the expressions people used to manifest their Christian experience, and as a metaphor of Church development. The dynamic of song in the cultural experience serves as a means to demonstrate cultural relevance for an outside expression such as a translation of the Bible.

As it turned out, songs are the means of connecting the Bible to cultural reality for the Samo. For them, the ancestors connect the living to a cosmic whole that is energized by song which resonates with Samo life-style. The book is replete with the text of songs connected to daily living, stories from the Samo as well as myself connecting the dots from government and mission invasion to processing Samo identity in the rapidly changing world that demands a social, spiritual and political⁴ response including how they deal with the current Covid-19 Pandemic.

This book, then, is not a theoretical or historical development of the literature, but rather an ethnography of relevant material necessary to situate the Samo and my treatment of their progressive appreciation of the Bible. The Samo connected the Bible with their mythology and used song to incorporate their new understanding to the way they lived. This enabled them to creatively modify their beliefs and practices. This progressive development, in turn, enhanced their appreciation of God.

4. This structure reflects the sequence of the three-day initiation ceremony that I use to organize each chapter in the book. I weave this structure with the particular song styles the Samo used to characterize the development of their “church.” This integration of ritual and song serves to organize the entire ethnographic experience.

My years of interaction with the Samo, both anthropologically (1976, 1986, 1996) and missiologically (Shaw 1981, 2010c, 2013) enables me to bring a long-term and personal perspective to this ethnography. The very nature of language and culture learning for the purpose of translating the Bible required paying close attention to the cultural details of people's lives. The Samo story is inexorably intertwined with my story. The Samo initiated me in March of 1973. It was my co-initiates who were the impetus for encouraging people to follow Jesus during the 1980s. In short, I am part of the Samo church story and I continue to encourage them to relate the Bible to their life experience.

The Bible serves as a hinge between then and now. Song was the means the Samo used to incorporate it into their context. Initially, it seemed crucial to emphasize biblical content not Christian injunctions from an external source. It was important to avoid outside influence and seek to connect the Bible and Samo culture in order to ensure they not only understood God's intent for them, but were able to appropriate God and biblical content to their lived experience. For them, song was the bridge between cosmic and social reality. This book is a story of Samo survival, a reflection of their resilience to ensure their identity as a group of people determined to be who their ancestors destined them to be while integrating with the reality of the world beyond their forest environment (Spindler and Spindler 1996, v).

Over the period spanned by this ethnographic presentation, the Samo have been transformed from a lifestyle controlled by the fear of a cannibal raid into a people who join with other followers of Jesus to sing praises to God. The story plays out as a transformation from cannibalism to expressions of Christianity that resonate with their understanding of a cosmos that is simultaneously spiritual and physical. Under the guidance of spiritual beings, the Samo benefit physically and spiritually as they live their lives assisted by shamans who have now become pastors. This transition, together with the application of translated Bible portions which they apply to daily living suggests an answer to the question asked at the beginning: "Why did the Samo respond so positively to Bible translation but largely reject the mission approach to Christianity?"

The Samo response to the Bible was in large measure an outcome of perceiving it as relevant for dealing with the reality of life as they lived it. The mission church, in contrast, preached a rules-based gospel that did not comport with Samo experience. For them, meeting human need was of greater value than adhering to an external set of rules that did not coalesce with their social, spiritual and political understanding as epitomized by the initiation ceremony and their songs. As the Samo church took root it fulfilled their human desire for life and well-being as they connected the Bible to their way of living. This

book relates the duality of cultural and missional expression among a people in a remote part of the world. It is an ethnography of a very active church in the Western Province of Papua New Guinea.

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R. Daniel Shaw
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