
Becoming Sinners begins with a description of a moral crisis, the “heavy Christmas” of 1991 in the Urapmin community, in the Mountain Ok region of the West Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea. Joel Robbins, an anthropologist at the University of California at San Diego, carried out his dissertation fieldwork in this community from 1991 to 1993. In Becoming Sinners he gives us an engaging ethnographic description of Christianity in a Melanesian society and challenges us to think about processes of cultural and religious change. This is an important book not only for anthropologists but also for historians of religion and for Christian theologians. Robbins investigates the process of conversion to Christianity and describes the style of Christianity adopted by the Urapmin. His book is timely. Today the large majority of Papua New Guineans are Christian; thus, it is critical for anthropologists working in the country to show how Christianity relates to culture. As demonstrated in Christianity in Oceania: Ethnographic Perspectives, edited by John Barker (1990), Christianity is no longer just a foreign intrusion in Oceania. For historians of religion, the “hybridity” of the Urapmin experience and Robbins’s larger analysis of hybridity point to directions that the study of religion might take in an increasingly globalized world, where people are simultaneously engaged with multiple religious systems. And for theologians concerned with the nature of what Philip Jenkins has called “the next Christendom” (in a 2002 book by that name), Becoming Sinners provides occasion for reconsidering the diverse manifestations of Christianity and for pondering the unhealthy as well as the healthy consequences of religious engagement.

The Urapmin, who primarily marry within their own community of some 400 people, have had minimal contact with the world outside the Mountain Ok region. The community is divided into a “top group” and a “bottom group,” each of which has its own church building and its own sports teams. A sense of unity pervades the total community. In the 1960s and 1970s some Urapmin men traveled to other areas to work on plantations, but after Papua New Guinea became independent in 1975 outside contact decreased until the early 1980s. At that time some Urapmin men obtained employment in Tabubil, a town built to service the Ok Tedi mine, a couple of days’ walk from Urapmin. When Robbins arrived among them, the Urapmin were supporting themselves largely by subsistence agriculture, hunting, and pig husbandry. They had little involvement in the cash economy and a sense that “development” had passed them by. However, in 1991 the Kennecott Corporation, prospecting for minerals on the land of the “top group,” gave paying jobs to members of the group. Operating on the principle of giving preference to landowners, Kennecott
gave jobs to one group but not the other, thus contributing to a festering discontent within the community and to the crisis of the Christmas period of that year, a crisis that the Urapmin understood in terms of sinfulness, that is, in terms of a following of desire rather than a following of law.

Although several groups of westerners visited the Min peoples before World War II, only one group—a party led by an American, Ward Williams, who was working for US and British mining interests—came in contact with the Urapmin. The Australian colonial administration established a patrol post at Telefomin in 1948 and the first patrol into the Urapmin area was made the following year. In 1952 the Australian Baptist Missionary Society, a conservative evangelical group (which had little time for Melanesian cultures but was devoted to providing medical and educational services as well as to proclaiming the Christian gospel) began building a station at Telefomin. In the following years it established Christian missions in several communities of Min peoples in the Mountain Ok region, but not among the Urapmin. As Christianity entered local communities, those communities abandoned traditional rituals. This had a demeaning effect on the Urapmin, who had enjoyed a role of relative prestige in the indigenous ritual system, which was directed to the fertility of lands and peoples. In precontact Urapmin culture, the moral domain was highly elaborated, but colonial officials “regularly conveyed to the Urapmin the judgment that they needed moral improvement and that such improvement would not come until they put aside their traditional culture, learned to follow the colonial law, and began to obey the dictates of Christianity” (15).

Christianity did not come to the Urapmin, but the Urapmin heard about it and reached out to Christianity. In the early 1960s they sent nine of their teenage sons to a Baptist mission school at Tifalmin, not far from the western edge of Urapmin territory. Some of these youths later attended a Bible school in Telefomin. The strategy of sending young people to mission schools was also employed by other communities in Papua New Guinea in negotiating relationships with western missionaries and government officials. As more young Urapmin men attended the mission schools and returned to the community, they did not want to undergo traditional initiation and they encouraged others to follow the Christian way. Meanwhile, a Telefomin man named Lemkiknnok came to Urapmin and established a school that a few years later was taken over by a Urapmin man, Antalap, who had trained at the Bible school in Telefomin. Through the efforts of Baptist trained pastors and evangelists, members of the community became well acquainted with the Bible and developed a Christian ritual repertoire. They abandoned their traditional religious practices for a style of Christianity focused on overcoming sin and attaining salvation. In the late 1970s a charismatic revival that had spread through the highlands of Papua New Guinea reached the Urapmin and led many into experiences of the Holy Spirit. By this time, they had become so committed to a moralistic and millennialist style of Christianity
that they were sending out pastors and evangelists to communicate it to neighboring groups.

The rapid religious change in Urapmin society calls for explanation and to elucidate it, Robbins turns to analyses of change in the work of Marshall Sahlins (Islands of History, 1985; “The Economics of Develop-Man in the Pacific,” Res [Spring 1992] 21, 13–25), as well as Louis Dumont and others. Drawing on Sahlins’s work, Robbins identifies three models of change: “assimilation”; “transformation” or “transformative reproduction”; and “adoption,” in which people take on a new culture on its own terms without trying to integrate it with preexisting cultural categories. “Adoption” is what Robbins sees happening in Urapmin Christianity. The Urapmin, he says, have adopted Christianity, but they have not yet integrated it into their way of life. Thus, he writes, “what is most distinctive about the Urapmin case from the point of view of cultural theory is the way people there are guided by two cultural systems that have in many ways remained distinct and between which exist many contradictions that have yet to be smoothed out through successful processes of synthesis” (327). As Becoming Sinners narrates with empathy and insight the religious struggles in one community, it paves the way for further cultural studies on ways of becoming Christian in the Pacific and makes a significant contribution to the study of culture change.

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This book is the result of long-term field research among the followers of a Christian Māori movement in the Whanganui region on the North Island of New Zealand. They refer to themselves as the Māramatanga movement, meaning literally “lightness” or “clarity,” while also evoking the connotation of lucidity or discernment. The contemporary Māramatanga movement shares its name with the following of Mere Rikiriki, the famous prophetess of Parewanui, who was responsible for introducing the New Testament into Māori beliefs at the beginning of the twentieth century. In addition, she is known as the aunt of Wiremu Rātana, who was seen as “mouthpiece” or mediator for Jehovah and became nationally recognized as Māori prophet and founder of a movement that is politically highly influential until today.

Mere Rikiriki was mainly active as a faith healer. On her death she passed her gifts and talents on to Hori Enoka Mareikura, under whose auspices she also requested that her rā wairua (commemorative celebration day) be observed. As visionary, seer, and healer, Mareikura became acknowledged head of the Māramatanga movement during the second decade of the twentieth century. Mareikura and his following saw Māramatanga as distinct from the Rātana move-