

Expanding definitions, contracting contexts: a comment on Mosko's 'Partible penitents'

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Mark Mosko focuses primarily on the theoretical issue of how to render the New Melanesian Ethnography (NME) less essentialistic and synchronic. In order to do this, he addresses the ethnographic issue of how to explain what he sees as the rapidity of Christian conversion in Melanesia. He argues that (pre-Christian) Melanesians and the Christians they encountered shared certain fundamental presuppositions about persons, making the historical process of conversion relatively quick and easy. More specifically, not only Melanesians but Christians were (in important dimensions) 'dividuals' and, therefore, the differences between *them* and *us* were never absolute. Both talked the language of 'partible' persons. Neither recognized a disjunction between persons and things. And each constituted sociality through the 'elicitation' of portions of persons. (As, for instance, when Christians gave their souls to Christ, received the Holy Spirit, and established Christian community.)

However, in attempting to free the NME from charges of essentialism and synchrony, Mosko's argument becomes both too broad and too narrow. He broadens his definitions to the point that virtually anyone giving gifts – Melanesian or not – can be understood as a partible person involved in elicitation. And he narrows his considerations of historical process to the point that Christian conversion can be understood as taking place with little consideration of the multifaceted colonial package that linked missionization with racial privilege and differential power.

Concerning the broadening (and concentrating on his discussion of our work): Mosko argues that the language of partibility is evident in accounts of Karavaran Islanders about their conversion to the 'New Church'. These accounts 'implicated personal detachments and attachments involving Christian spirits' (p. 223). Islanders sought 'personal contact' with God; regarded His Word as a gift – as was his help and protection; believed that 'Jesus gave his healing flesh, everlasting spiritual life, and salvation' (p. 223); considered the Holy Spirit as a detachment from God which entered lives through visitations. In reciprocity, Karavarans gave up – detached from themselves – darkness, savage hearts, fighting, sorcery, and so on. And in so doing, they established unity with each other as those taking the Holy Spirit into their lives.

Because such language is familiar to Christians, not just in Melanesia but throughout the world, we are to conclude that (virtually) all Christians – *qua* Christians – are partible persons engaged in elicitation. However, in thus extending partibility in so generous (and, to be sure, non-essentialist) a fashion, the term and linked concepts become diluted. Correspondingly, who *individuals* are and what they do – how they engage with each other and the world – become murky. Indeed, the implication is that individuals do not engage in gift-giving (since gifts, by definition, convey the personal) and do not form communities. Nor do they accept the advice of one another, much less give up bad habits. This is to say, we find almost a ‘mission creep’ in Mosko’s expansive definition of individuals – a definition that caricatures individuals.

Relatedly and more generally, Mosko, in asserting the compatibility between Melanesian individualism and Christianity, does not acknowledge that Christianity can support possessive individualism, as has been documented in a changing Melanesia – and elsewhere. This possessive individualism is marked by shifts of entailment to others so that one becomes largely responsible for one’s own destiny – both spiritual and material. After all, people are often reminded that they have to get to heaven by themselves (as Robbins shows). And people are often enjoined to focus resources on themselves and their immediate family (as Knauff and we describe). In this latter regard, it becomes virtuous to sequester income from extended kin and (what are regarded as) ‘traditional’ obligations so as, for example, to provide one’s own children with educational and other opportunities. (These shifts in Melanesia are roughly encapsulated by Sahlins’s [1992] distinction between ‘*develop-man*’ and ‘development’.) While these shifts may or may not be inherent in Christianity *per se*, they are – often explicitly – conveyed in the Christianity currently promulgated in much of Melanesia. So, though Christianity can (perhaps) lend itself to individualistic thinking, it by no means always does. In fact, often quite to the contrary. In Melanesia (and, of course, elsewhere) there may be, hence, conversions and conversions – Christianity and Christianity. Moreover, to return to the Karavaran case, the conversion to the New Church on which Mosko focuses was actually a divisive reconversion: this, on the part of a well-educated and well-travelled minority who sought to displace an existing and traditionalized variety of Methodism with a novel form of ‘evangelical’ Christianity learned while working at the Bougainville mine. Therefore, Mosko’s argument that New Church converts were simply continuing to act as partible selves importantly obscures the local sense that a change of great magnitude – a sharp break from the past – had taken place.

This brings us to Mosko’s narrowing. The conjunctures between Karavaran (and other Melanesians) and Europeans – even European missionaries – were protracted and fraught. Although Karavaran eventually came to accept a darkness-to-light, mission-promulgated conversion narrative (one claiming that they had been transformed in three days from pre-cultural savages – without human language and basic canoeing skills – into waist-cloth-wearing, hymn-singing converts), this account does not accord with actual historical events. Land was alienated; neighbouring villages were shelled by German warships; natives were hanged; and labour was disciplined. And Karavaran, in their ongoing search for the reasons why white people continued to treat them like dogs, tried copra, cargo cults, and Christian revivals. This is to say, the conjunctures that led Karavaran to Methodism, much less to the New Church, were multiple, tangled, and ramifying.

Mosko’s goal is to show that NME is not inherently compromised by essentialism and synchrony. In so doing, he would provoke analysts – including those like ourselves who have long recognized the importance of exchange in the creation of Melanesian

persons – to find NME ‘postulates’ (his word) not just viable, but compelling. Though we find his essay stimulating and intriguing (and, yes, a bit exasperating), we think that, in his effort to deal with existing problems through broadening and narrowing, he creates new and significant difficulties.

REFERENCE

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