

## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores Oksapmin church soundscapes. Investigating church soundscapes is vitally important because they are a central, and for most Papua New Guinean Christians, the most important, part of religious experience. When analysing them, certain conceptual distinctions readily suggest themselves on the basis of the elements that are present within performance. Should church worship contain the *kundu* drum, local melodies, singing styles, bodily adornment, and song structures, it is typical to assert that 'traditional' or 'ancestral' elements are employed and that there has been 'cultural continuity' amidst a context of change. Conversely, the use of distinctly Western instruments, language, and song structures are marshalled as evidence in support of arguments that Christianity, particularly its evangelical forms, has effected a break, usually moralised, with local culture and history. In this framework, congregations seek to extricate themselves from earthly desires and to immerse themselves in a spirit-centred, Biblically fundamental Christian world. In this increasingly common model of Pentecostal Christianity, traditional instruments, like the traditional religion more generally, are seen as tokens of a sinful, satanic past.

Such analyses and presuppose an ontological distinction between a 'traditional' and a 'Christian' world, two distinct systems that people may strive to keep separate or that they may creatively integrate and blend. But what happens when, long after conversion to Christianity, such distinctions begin to lose their meaning for local people? What happens when the reconciliation and mixing has long since taken place and people have ceased thinking about how to fit Christianity into their world and rather live with a reality within which the 'traditional' is not a symbol of the sinful past, the 'Christian' is no longer a symbol of something imported, and all exist together on the same ontological plane in a single, encompassing world of religious thought and experience? This is the key problem my paper explores.

### THE OKSAPMIN: MUSIC, MISSIONS, AND THE ISSUE OF 'COMPATIBILITY'

The Oksapmin are a group of around 15,000 people spread throughout a series of contiguous mountain valleys in West Sepik Province, PNG. Their large population makes them the biggest of the 'Min' groups, a culturally distinct collection of peoples living around the headwaters of the Fly and Sepik Rivers. Prior to the incursion of Western political and religious institutions from the 1960s onwards, the Oksapmin had a vibrant performative repertoire. There existed several genres of performance. There were boisterous, celebratory songs and dances that accompanied a marriage, or welcomed an esteemed visitor, typically performed in groups. Then there were mournful laments and memorials sung typically by individuals when a friend or relative had died or was departing for an indefinite period of time. The Oksapmin also sang and danced purely for enjoyment, often holding all night dances within specially built structures known as *tel ap*. Performances employed a variety of media. Men played the *kundu* and were bedecked in ceremonial string bags as well as elaborate headdresses containing feathers of various colourful local birds. Women wore grass skirts and loops of string across their bodies to which were attached luminous coastal shells that jangled and reflected as they danced. Each gender also performed rhythmic dancing,

usually in lines referred to today as the 'snake dance'. Both the drums and shells were thought to attract potential suitors. These kinds of performances can still be seen on occasions such as Independence Day celebrations.

The arrival of the Australian Baptist Missionary Society (ABMS) in 1962 profoundly altered Oksapmin culture and society. The mission's early evangelism turned on the question of what aspects of local life they considered to be 'compatible' or 'incompatible' with Christian teaching. Those institutions or customs that recognised entities apparently at odds with the 'Christian way of life' were deemed incompatible and steadily dismantled by local people under pressure from the mission. Interestingly, the performance activities of the Oksapmin were not considered problematic, mainly because the mission construed them as gatherings of an essentially 'social' and not 'religious' character. Further, the first ABMS missionary had very limited musical expertise and did not teach the Oksapmin any Christian songs. As a result, the first Oksapmin Christians had *carte blanche* to construct their own church soundscape, which they could build using not only the new instruments given to them by the mission but also the entire range of expressive mediums already known to them. Since those early days they have been free to add to and reshape the soundscape as they see fit.

The other smaller churches in the Oksapmin area have tended to follow repertoires established either overseas or elsewhere in PNG. This usually followed songs taught by expatriate missionaries of the respective church but in the case of smaller, Pentecostal churches songs have often been learned from within PNG.

## DENOMINATIONAL SOUNDSCAPES

### *Seventh Day Adventists (SDA)*

To begin with, I consider musical practice in Oksapmin SDA churches. Consistent with SDAs elsewhere in PNG, those in Oksapmin may be distinguished principally by their four-part acapella singing and by their avoidance of traditional music and dance activities. According to local SDAs I spoke with, the avoidance of instrumentation is based upon its association with Satan and *pasin bilong graun* (earthly and sexual desires). There was no moral distinction made between local instruments and those introduced from outside the area. Rather, all instruments were seen as containing this potentially corruptive influence and were all subject to blanket condemnation. Songs are taken from Adventist hymnals and sung mainly in Tok Pisin, rarely in English, and never in the Oksapmin language. Tok Pisin texts are set to the 'foreign' music and melodies brought to PNG by missionaries, the 'standard mixture for the hymnody of most churches in Papua New Guinea'.

### *Papua New Guinea Bible Church (PNGBC) and other Pentecostal-evangelical churches*

In contrast to the placid hymnody of the SDA church is the celebratory, noisy soundscape of the evangelical and Pentecostal churches in Oksapmin, as exemplified by the Papua New Guinea Bible Church (PNGBC). These kinds of churches are best known for their acceptance of the 'gifts' of the Holy Spirit, such as healing, visions, speaking in tongues, and prophecy. Another hallmark of Pentecostalism is energetic, uplifting musical performance. Built mainly around repeating cycles of major chords, their lyrical content is preoccupied with the naming of Jesus Christ, God, and the Holy Spirit, and the explicit description of the effect of this Trinity on the lives of the people. There is no dancing, though rigorous physical movement is encouraged, such as clapping and extending one's arms outstretched in a variety of ways

indicating the reception of the Holy Spirit. PNGBC permits the playing of guitars, tambourines and, keyboards but there is a strong prohibition against the use of all cultural material that is identifiably local. For the PNGBC and most other Pentecostal churches in the Oksapmin area, the *kundu* drum and associated local expressive mediums index a ‘traditional’ cosmology and ontology characterised principally by interactions with indigenous spiritual entities that contravene the paramount omnipotence of the Christian God; to play the drum is tantamount to worshipping Satan.

### *The Baptists*

The Baptists inherited the evangelical inclinations of the mission and then became truly Pentecostal as a result of a regional revival that occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s, at which point they acquired the ‘gifts’ of the Holy Spirit. Consistent with Pentecostal worship throughout PNG, Baptist musical performances are built around a core of widely known, guitar based songs with repetitive *Tok Pisin* lyrics exalting Jesus and the Holy Spirit and imploring that they lead the congregation to salvation. But there are many transformations of this configuration. It is common for elder members of the congregation, typically men but sometimes women, to accompany the singing and guitar playing with the *kundu* drum. Drumming may also be accompanied by rhythmical dancing. Both genders also regularly wear strings of shells across their bodies.

As well as instrumentation and adornment, language and singing style are two other dimensions of the Baptist soundscape that distinguish it clearly within the local denominational setting. The Baptists are unique in their regular use of the Oksapmin language in their sermons as well as their musical performances. More significant than this is the variety that occurs in the style of singing. While many songs follow Western style melodies, occasionally one hears singing styles that are distinctly local, with a restricted melodic range and pronounced rhythm that mirrors the beat of the *kundu*. The singing, together with the drumming, adornment, and use of local language, powerfully defines the Baptist church as a truly local expression of Christianity.

Here are two examples of the Baptist soundscape, one an individual performance by an elderly man from the Landslide Baptist church, the other a group performance from the Sambate Baptist church. Both sung in the Oksapmin language, the first song speaks of being washed by Christ’s blood, while the group performance rejoices in the imminent Second Coming of Jesus. (PLAY AUDIO)

When asked about the presence of ‘traditional’ elements within the group’s performance, Bulex, the group’s leader, replied that:

The shells, the bird of paradise, the *kundu*, they saying in the Bible, especially in Psalms, you can use these to praise God’s name. It is not sin, it is the way of praising God. These ways of performing are good and we’re still using them. The snake dancing that occurs in our item looks traditional. It used to mean different things. We used to dance like this on traditional occasions. But the dance here is expressing the joy we, as Christians, find in Christ. When I’m leading the songs, the spirit of God comes into me first. I feel happy and I start speaking quickly. Then everybody knows that the spirit has come and then when I sing the spirit spreads to them all. It is when it flows into them that they start dancing. All of the dancers were holding food. This shows the blessing of God and Jesus. When the dancers were in a

straight line, this represents that we are ‘straight’ and true in our commitment to God. You see the drums, the shells, our songs, the way we sing, these are from before. That is true. But we use these because we don’t have any other way to praise God.

#### POTENTIAL ANALYSES: TWO WORLDS OR ONE?

What can be said about the Baptist soundscape, particularly its diverse combination of instrumentation, adornment, melodies, and song structures? In this section I wish to explore various possibilities for analysis that lend themselves to elucidating this kind of ethnographic material.

I begin by considering the Baptist soundscape within both local and academic discourses about Pentecostal Christianity. Anthropological discussions of Pentecostal, charismatic, and evangelical Christianity revolve principally around the notions of rupture, discontinuity, and world-breaking. Joel Robbins explains how the kind of transformation involved when people convert to Pentecostal Christianity ‘is a radical one that separates people both from their pasts and from the surrounding social world’. Within this process there is little to no mixing that takes place, as the two worlds of ‘Christianity’ and ‘tradition’ are strictly separated on ontological and moral grounds.

This cut and dried, dualistic way of thinking is shared by many Pentecostal Christians the world over, including those in Oksapmin, such as the PNGBC. Local instruments and objects index a sinful, immoral past that must be broken away from in order to pursue a path to salvation. The Baptist soundscape complicates this picture and problematizes these established dualistic ways of thinking about Pentecostal Christianity. Like other Pentecostals, the Oksapmin Baptists share a recognition of the various ‘gifts’ of the Holy Spirit, including speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues, prophecy, healing, and so forth. Furthermore, their Christianity also focusses upon direct engagements with the Holy Spirit and anticipation of the imminent return of Christ. However, while they can thus be classified as Pentecostal Christians on these bases, their soundscape shows that their version of Christianity is not predicated upon a moralised opposition against the past. Indeed, their inclusion within worship of the *kundu*, the shells, and their local styles of dancing and singing, indicate that their attitude towards their historic performative repertoire is not one of condemnation but accommodation.

Supporting this critique is not only the appearance of the mentioned elements but the explanations of the performers themselves. When explaining his own perspective on the matter, Bulex explicitly stated that using these elements in church was not sinful but, rather, a good thing, a position he justified with reference to the Bible. Pentecostals, therefore, do not necessarily have to condemn the past, but they do have to think about their pasts. In this light, Michael Scott states in his excellent study of Arosi ontology in the Solomon Islands, ‘the Bible and Christian theology are equipped with as many arguments for elevating indigenous traditions as God-given as for throwing them away. If anything is written into Christianity at a general level it is, in fact, a debate about the past’ (Scott 2007:303). There is no moralised break between an immoral past and a moral present, only a dissolution of the two into an indigenously orchestrated Christian soundscape.

In light of this it is therefore possible to propose a distinction between different kinds of Pentecostals, as evinced through their respective soundscapes, but likely manifest in other

dimensions of their Christianity too. There are those who we may call ‘past-renouncing’ Pentecostals that establish a definitive break between Christianity and all that came before, the latter of which is diabolised as sinful and satanic. Then we have ‘past-affirming’ Pentecostals who, while Pentecostal, do not see aspects of their history and culture as immoral but actually compatible with their Christian faith and can justify their integration through using scripture. At the very least we can see that organising discussions of Pentecostal Christianity around notions of rupture, breaks, and discontinuities may lead us down the wrong path. Instead it appears more important to examine the details of a given group’s worship and to see more generally what kind of relationship they have with their past.

Many Oksapmin see the drum, the shells, and other performance media as being created ultimately by God for them to use. This idea of something being ‘God-given’ opens up questions of an ontological nature and I think may even break down the ‘traditional’ versus ‘Christian’ dichotomy altogether. From an analytical perspective it might be tempting to try and separate out the different elements at play within the Baptist soundscape and to classify them under the categories of traditional and Christian, those things that have been handed down from the past and those things that were introduced by the mission. But for the Baptist performers I interviewed, the diverse performative repertoire they use to construct their distinctive soundscape exists on a single, and not dual, ontological plane. The past lives in the present; but not in any simple sense. What from an analytical standpoint we might like to describe as ‘traditional’ elements of the Baptist soundscape from the Oksapmin point of view are actually creations of the Christian God; they are used to worship him; and their use is animated by the Holy Spirit. But because they are recognised as ontologically Christian entities, this does not mean a shirking of history. The performers fully understand that these parts of their worship have come from the past. The key point is that history is not encapsulated in a different ontological sphere of ‘tradition’, but is actually reimagined as ontologically Christian. The Oksapmin Baptists, therefore, are not integrating two worlds in their soundscape but are rather absorbing a reobjectified version of their history. In this context, history exists, but it does not speak with the ancestors, it now speaks with God.