

THINKING THROUGH IMAGES: *KASTOM* AND THE COMING OF THE BAHÁ'Í TO NORTHERN NEW IRELAND, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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We can learn a lot about religious ideas by studying not just the impact on them of missionization but also how religious beliefs and practices are translated into local religious forms. In this article I draw attention to the case of the Baha'i faith in the Nalik area of northern New Ireland (Papua New Guinea). In discussing how the faith became strongly associated with the ability to harness ancestral power, I argue that this relationship emerged through Nalik people's ability to think through images, in other words through transforming forms in order to create new understandings. This study not only underlines the importance of localized studies into the technology of image production but also fills a gap in anthropological studies that, up until now, have systematically ignored the Baha'i movement and its place in the contemporary Pacific.

One of the most fascinating ways in which we experience the world is by thinking through images, by which I mean the artful process through which we transform images in order to create new understandings. Much of the way we learn – as well as the intuitive means by which we form conclusions or solve problems – involves thinking through images. As young children we are encouraged to explore basic mathematical concepts using the world around us so that, for instance, we can come to understand ratios by using glass jam jars filled with varying amounts of water. It is often forgotten that, within the scientific community, Watson and Crick's discovery of DNA involved the physical manipulation of cardboard models and forms which led to the famous 'double helix' model and helped push them towards formulating the abstract calculations required for their scientific discovery.

Thinking through images is of considerable importance to anthropology as this process evidently relates to the way in which people formulate and shape concepts about their world. As Barbara Stafford (1996: 22) points out, analysis of the link between image and concept is central to an anthropology of the senses, yet such consideration has been sidelined because Western thought has traditionally conceived of images as inferior and deceptive substitutes for written communications. To begin to redress this, this article highlights one way in which thinking through images plays a significant role in processes of social change in Melanesia, where images are presented through forms such as artefacts, bodies, or performances (Strathern 1990).

The question of the nature of images capable of eliciting intellectual responses has been a central one in the arts and humanities (e.g. Bateson 1973; Gombrich 1982). What images appear to do, what they are expected to achieve, and why there is such expectation at all are recurring questions in recent work in both history of art and anthropology. These themes play a central role in the work of the art historian Barbara Stafford (1994; 1996; 1999), who traces out how, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, a sophisticated form of visual education developed which involved experimentation with hundreds of images in order to uncover connections between them and to form new categories. In this sense, Stafford sees images as artworks and artefacts. Drawing on Western art history, she explores these more subtle and sensory forms of knowing in a series of studies that delve into the mind-shaping powers of sensory skills in the history of education, science, and technology.

For Stafford the term 'analogy' expresses the capacity to think through images. She argues that analogy is inherently visual and consists of the power intuitively to create connections and inferences in order to solve problems. Analogy consists of the capability to disassemble and reconnect countless numbers of images, creating links between known and unknown forms: '[T]he capacity to generalize to new objects from those already encountered is based on perceiving common traits and matching them according to a shared category' (Stafford 1999: 61). Though Stafford points out that thinking analogically has virtually been ignored in the Western arts and humanities since the eighteenth century, non-literate societies such as New Ireland (Papua New Guinea), the focus for this discussion, are still especially adept at thinking through images. Indeed, Küchler (2002) and Kingston (2003) have shown how in both northern and southern New Ireland the articulation and disarticulation of ritual images provide means of thinking about kinship and rights to land as well as about invisible assets and resources. Here this study will demonstrate how the examination of images as forms leads to a better understanding of religious belief in northern New Ireland.

Stafford's assertion that part of our human capacity for consciousness is the ability to transform images in order to create new connections and categories has remarkable congruency with Alfred Gell's anthropological theory of art. Gell treats images as artefacts, contending that they are thought-like in nature. For Gell (1998) they are material manifestations of the workings of the mind that possess the capability to engender social relations. Gell proposes that images are like *exuviae*, or reptile skins, that are shed, leaving traces here and there. These hollow skins (as representations) are gathered (as perceptions) and internalized (as memories) by persons before being reconstituted again (as images) later in time. Gell posits the technical capacity of the image to contain within itself the potential to harbour memories which both reach into the past and extend, as possibilities and aspirations, into the future. He argues that images are the workings of the 'extended mind', which, objectified in external form, can be displaced both spatially and temporally. Gell states that ritual images articulated in the form of objects, performances, or bodies act as vessels through which thought itself is conducted. He borrows from Munn (1986) to exemplify this: *kula* shell valuables from the Massim (Papua New Guinea)

take on their own trajectories through trading networks across the island and carry with them the biographies of former owners as they circulate through generations and across ocean expanses. According to Gell the shells are loci for thought itself, serving as devices through which exchange partners direct thought:

The operator must be able to comprehend the manifold innumerable past histories of exchanges, and evaluate their outcomes. He must construct 'what if' scenarios that anticipate the future with precision, guiding strategic intervention. His mind, in other words, must work as a simulation device – and this indeed is what all minds do, more or less – presenting a synoptic view of the totality of Kula transactions, past, present, and to come (1998: 231).

Of considerable importance to this discussion is Gell's exploration of style as a system of associations (1998: 155–220). Gell conducts a formal analysis of the Marquesan art style of Polynesia and shows that a set of common relations exists between all the basic elements within the Marquesan system. This set enables all past, present, and future stylistic relations to be generated and functions, in effect, as a system of parts and wholes. Gell argues that Marquesan artists maintain an 'oeuvre' (the whole) in that they adhere to a rigid set of basic principles in the technical process of creating artworks. However, this set of principles also allows the individual artist enough leeway to create minute variations in style based on a prototype. This process that generates slight variations between one artwork and another gives rise to a sense of individualized works within Marquesan art. Artists are acutely aware that any radical innovation may render the artefact that they are creating useless, impotent, and ineffectual, so they adhere to stylistic principles to render their art recognizable as a part of the whole. Gell contends that these stylistic relations evidence conscious intentions to create social difference within a society that places stress on conformity.

Gell's discussion of how stylistic relations act as potent vehicles for the conscious articulation of ideas relating to identity and land resources is particularly telling in northern New Ireland. Küchler (2002) has shown how formal relationships between various *malanggan* – carved symbolic representations of the dead used in funerary rituals – are akin to relationships between clan groups and their rights to land. She explains that *malanggan* are composed of a set of clan motifs – emblems such as birds, fish, and snakes – carved into the wooden funerary sculptures to articulate social and historical ties between groups engaged in exchange relations. This process of assembling and disassembling clan motifs to reflect ever-changing social relations brings into focus Stafford's work on analogy and on how consciousness itself is directed through the transformation of things (Stafford 1999). This is precisely why Küchler (2002) argues that religious forms become powerful instruments for thinking about social relations; it is the transformative capacity of various elements within the *malanggan* that enables northern New Irelanders to think through these sculptures and reconstruct genealogy, memory, and place.

The question that I want to address in this article is that, if images as artefacts and performances act as potent vehicles for the articulation of kinship

relations and of rights to land and resources in northern New Ireland, to what extent has the success of the various missionary organizations in establishing themselves there been influenced by the capacity of northern New Irelanders to think through images? Drawing on Stafford's ideas on visual learning and Gell's perspectives on the capacity of the image to direct thought as well as exert social effect, this article examines the role of images in the emergence of the Baha'i faith in northern New Ireland since the 1950s. It concentrates primarily on the practices, performances, and images produced by the seventy or so followers of the faith in the village of Madina in the heart of the Nalik-speaking area in northern New Ireland.¹ In particular, it focuses on the strong connection between the faith and the specialized ability of its followers to enact *kastom*, the so-called 'traditional' activities understood to have derived from the pre-colonial past.² In northern New Ireland, in order for ritual events to be deemed 'according to *kastom*', meet local approval, and thereby be construed as ritually effective, *kastom* activities must achieve a desired sense of ancestry primarily through the rendering visible of ritual images following a discernible pattern of events.³ While followers of the Baha'i faith have gained a reputation as arbiters of *kastom*, Baha'is claim that their Christian counterparts lack *kastom*. I argue that this is because the Christian missionaries actively opposed the production of traditional ritual forms, disrupting the capacity of northern New Irelanders to think through images; whereas Baha'is have successfully learned to engage with images so that *kastom* activities orchestrated by the Baha'is actively demonstrate their power to create ritually effective forms, enabling them to renew links to land and resources. In essence, thinking through images helps us to explain how *kastom* works as a form of belief that people act towards rather than, as Foster (1992) asserts, a response to political and economic change. Let us now turn to the Baha'is in northern New Ireland for a fuller understanding of what I mean by this.

The Baha'is and the mission⁴

The Baha'i faith is a world religion originating in the Middle East in the nineteenth century which was founded by a Persian nobleman called Baha'u'llah (Arabic for 'glory of God'). The faith advocates a 'one world' philosophy and is free from the schisms that have fragmented religions such as Christianity and Islam.⁵ No priesthood exists; rather, an elected circle of decision-making representatives operates at global, national, and local levels.

Baha'is deem that God has made himself known to us through messengers manifested as prophets – Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, The Bab, and Baha'u'llah⁶ – sent to educate us about the knowledge of God and written about in the major world religions. The writings of the last prophet, Baha'u'llah, are seen to be the modern-day words of God containing not only past revelations but also new truths for the modern world.

The fact that the Baha'i faith presented itself as a modern-day interpretation of the words of God had great appeal to Naliks in the 1950s as it offered an escape from the teachings of evangelical missionaries, which appeared to Naliks to be at odds with their own beliefs. Most significantly, whereas

missionaries openly opposed traditional funerary art and performances, Baha'is encouraged their production as a form of worship. Thus while Nalik followers of the Baha'i faith are regarded by other Naliks as arbiters of traditional knowledge and practices, the Christian missions and their followers are seen as antagonistic to *kastom* because of their negative stance on ritual image production.

The tensions arising out of the proscription of ritual image production by missionaries are no doubt the reason for the long history of conflict between the Christian mission and local people in northern New Ireland. Until the Baha'i faith established itself in Madina in the 1950s, from whence it spread to neighbouring villages in the Nalik area before eventually establishing itself in other mainland provinces of Papua New Guinea, both the Catholic and Methodist missions⁷ maintained exclusive control in New Ireland (although Madina had a reputation for unruly behaviour and the Methodist mission experienced difficulty controlling its congregation). Both Catholics and Methodists battled against each other for land and campaigned fiercely against new religious groups entering New Ireland. Rivalry between the two missions was so intense that the German administration had instituted a policy of zoning missionary activity in New Ireland and New Britain which resulted in the landscape being divided along denominational lines (Hassall n.d.: 1-2). Hassall states that 'belief was prescribed by location, and correct allegiance secured access to such mission facilities as schools, clinics, and wage labour on mission plantations' (n.d.: 2). Census figures indicate that villages in the Nalik region were either totally Methodist or totally Catholic (Hassall 1990).

The Nalik Baha'is claim that Christian missionaries were very unpopular as they attempted to force teachings on the Nalik people in an over-zealous manner. Christian teachings centred on a set of contrastive relations between traditional practices and Christianity mobilized through powerful dualisms such as light and dark, good and evil, and so on. In areas under strong mission control, missionaries established a mandate to censure and punish locals who failed to accept their religious beliefs and conform to the new moral order. Traditional performances and funerary art (such as *malanggan* carvings) were particular targets for recrimination by the mission. On the opening of a Methodist church in the village of Losu in 1920, Reverend Ira Mann wrote 'teachers were detailed to watch the dances and, if any unseemly thoughts were expressed in the songs, to stop that particular dance-group' (7 August 1920; Mann 1919-41). Punishments were meted out to those who challenged the missionaries and feelings of resentment on the part of New Irelanders ran high.

Anger and ill feeling often led to conflict with local missionaries. W.C. Groves (1932-4), an anthropologist based in the Nalik village of Fissoa, describes the feelings of animosity and contempt felt by both missionaries and the village community. In one episode, a fight broke out in the village, and Groves is sensitive enough to register the bitterness felt by the Fissoa people when some of them were forced to kneel in front of the mission's altar during a service. He writes 'Some most undignified and (I think) unworthy things have been done by the missionary at which the native himself questions' (28 August 1932).

Missionaries held little regard for the value of traditional religious beliefs and responded aggressively to *malanggan* carvings. According to Naliks, only in villages where mission control was weak were they able to continue to carve the wooden sculptures. Groves observes:

Then to the recent malagan affair to which the local European missionary is violently, openly and uncompromisingly opposed, he [the missionary] stating in chapel that it represents a thing of Satan and insulting those concerned in organisation by calling them 'wild pigs' – a thing of anathema to these people (28 August 1932).

For Naliks, *malanggan* carvings serve to remove traces of the dead from the land. The souls of the deceased are said to inhabit the gardens and hamlets in which they once resided until a mortuary ceremony is organized, usually some five to ten years after death, for which *malanggan* are specially commissioned. The carvings are temporarily housed inside specially constructed leaf shelters and revealed at the feast which closes the ceremonial sequence. The sculptures act rather like vessels in which the souls of the dead are caught to be eventually released on a journey to the ancestral domain while the carving is left to rot in the forest, away from the public gaze (see Küchler 2002). In the absence of *malanggan*, Naliks faced the prospect of not being able to complete the rites for the dead and renew links to the land and to local resources.

The coming of the Baha'is

If Highland Papua New Guineans had been expecting the arrival of Europeans (see Strathern 1990), then the story of the coming of the Baha'i faith to New Ireland was certainly known by some as it was foretold in a prophecy by the Iranian prophet Baha'u'llah. Drawing an arrow pointing towards the Bismarck Archipelago on a map of the world, he predicted the emergence of the faith from a great ocean. Nalik Baha'is argue that Baha'u'llah was in fact pointing at Madina, adding that it is more than mere coincidence that Madina is homonymic with the resting place of the prophet Muhammad – one of the nine main prophets in the faith.

When Madina became the spiritual home of the faith in Papua New Guinea, it promised many opportunities for Nalik converts. Most importantly, the faith became strongly associated with the power to produce traditional forms of ritual imagery. The arrival of the Baha'is signalled a renewed interest in the production of *malanggan* carvings, funerary images, and dance performances, all of which are activities that may well have been referred to as '*kastom*' at the time. The faith's success as an alternative to Christianity is indicated by the way Baha'is came to be considered as arbiters of *kastom*.

The manner in which Naliks narrate the coming of the Baha'i faith resonates with Sahlins's (1985) argument concerning history and structure in the Pacific. In northern New Ireland, the story of the coming of the faith is structured within localized ontological frameworks so that it is recalled as though

it were a local myth. As with the myth of the giant pig Lununga who ravaged his way across the mountains and beaches of New Ireland forcing villagers to flee in all directions (providing an ontological explanation to kinship networks in northern New Ireland), the story of the origins of the Baha'is in New Ireland is expressed in terms of movements across the landscape and connections between various kin groups.

During the early 1950s, the teachings of Baha'u'llah reached Madina, which became the first place in Papua New Guinea to convert to the faith. Up until then two Baha'i missionaries, Rodney Hancock and Sister Violet Hoencke, had had little success proselytizing partly due to the fact that Papua New Guinea was under Australian rule. Colonial rule enforced a separation between colonial whites and the native black population that made teaching both difficult and risky; Hancock, for instance, was detained for mixing with locals on several occasions and was subsequently deported. (He often stayed overnight in local villages without the permission of the colonial authorities.) On the other hand, Christian missionaries maintained their distance from local people by building their own houses; they ate separately from converts and, according to Naliks, they often washed their hands after coming into contact with local people.

It was a chance meeting between Sister Hoencke and Apelis Mazakmat, a Nalik teacher in Manus (the Admiralty Islands), that changed the course of New Ireland history. Having learned about the Baha'i faith from Hoencke, Mazakmat returned home and started educating people about it. He met resistance from the Catholic and Methodist missions and was branded a political agitator (Hassall 1990). Undeterred, he continued with his teachings until he met up with an old friend, Michael Homerang, who was a highly respected *malanggan* carver and clan leader (*maimai*) in Madina. Mazakmat and Homerang were both educated Naliks concerned with the decline of traditional customs in the region and the role of the Christian mission in promulgating this; Homerang's father had fled from the nearby village of Lugagun after the Catholic missionaries had imposed a ban on the carving of *malanggan* sculptures.

After discussions with clan leaders and senior persons, the Madina people declared their interest in the Baha'i faith. Hancock and Hoencke were quickly summoned to New Ireland to consolidate the teachings and help set up a framework for promoting them. Over the next few years, the Baha'i faith became so popular in Madina that according to informants, the congregations outnumbered those of the Methodists.

Angered by the mass conversions and alarmed that the faith might spread to neighbouring villages, the Methodists employed strong-arm tactics to win back their congregation. According to Naliks, a delegation from the provincial capital, Kavieng, travelled to Madina in the 1950s and threatened former Methodists with damnation, monetary fines, and expulsion from the Church. Tensions ran high when a fire that started in Madina's Baha'i Centre was blamed on arsonists loyal to the Methodist mission. Baha'i attempts to convert others failed as they were physically blocked from entering villages. Local police and villagers connected to the rival missions turned the Baha'is away, fearful that further conversions might ensue. In one incident, a Nalik clan

leader who had converted to the faith was temporarily imprisoned under suspicion of political agitation. These events frightened away many newly converted Baha'is, who returned to the Methodist mission. For other Baha'is, these actions simply consolidated their belief that they were a persecuted religious group; the first missionaries had told them how Baha'i messengers had suffered at the hands of enemies and they were aware that in Iran Baha'i followers had been executed.

In 1958, amidst local unease in Madina, the first elected body of Baha'is – the Local Spiritual Assembly (LSA) – was formed to administer the faith with nine members elected from the local community. This heralded the formal start of the Baha'i faith not only in New Ireland but in the whole of Papua New Guinea. With the independence of a locally elected body, Nalik Baha'is could freely practise *malanggan* unhindered, which led to their becoming strongly associated with the ability to enact *kastom*. Baha'is express this association through the metaphor of a bird. Two wings support a bird in flight; one wing denotes *kastom* and the other the teachings of Baha'u'llah.

The Baha'is and *kastom*

The power of the Baha'i faith to appear religiously efficacious and to offer an alternative to the doctrinal rituals of Christianity relies on more than just metaphor, however. The success of the Baha'i faithful in demonstrating their beliefs is expressed quite clearly in their capacity to create tangible forms of imagery which Naliks recognize as drawing on ancestral power, such as *malanggan* carvings and ritual performances. Yet to state that ritual imagery acts as a cohesive force around which followers concentrate their efforts, as Whitehouse (2000) does in his analysis of cult movements across Papua New Guinea, is to understate radically the image's power to create associations. Indeed it is the ability of the Baha'is to translate their religious beliefs into ritual imagery that convinces Naliks of the capabilities of the Baha'is to harness ancestral power at mortuary feasts and persuades many to convert.

The Baha'is in Madina concentrate their religious activities around a purpose-built centre. This architectural feature – a modest-sized brick building standing alongside the Boluminski Highway – resonates with a mixture of Middle Eastern, Nalik, and Christian ideas. Walking inside, one is struck by the tangible evidence of the Middle Eastern influence on the faith.⁸ Arabic texts accompanied by photographs of Baha'u'llah cover the walls together with pictures of Baha'i temples from various countries of the world. The interior is laid out rather like a Western Christian church with two rows of benches covering the floor space and an aisle running down the centre. At the front a blackboard is fixed to the wall for writing notes during meetings. The blue-green paint on breezeblock walls has a sobering effect, but it is the varnished wooden ceiling, adorned with several brightly painted stars with locally collected seashells, that immediately catches the eye.

At first glance, one might be forgiven for thinking that the stars on the ceiling reinforce a Baha'i sense of place. On closer inspection, however, it can be seen that one of the stars exhibits *malanggan* designs in shell and paint

while many of the others exhibit traditional *malanggan* colours (red, yellow, black, and white) which imbue them with a Nalik sense of materiality. Ali, a *malanggan* carver from Madina, explained that the stars are both Baha'i and Nalik, and thus best conveyed a local sense of spirituality. The nine-pointed star is generally used as a symbol of the Baha'i faith as it relates to the nine years after the announcement of the Bab, when Baha'u'llah, the last prophet of the faith, received intimation of his mission in prison in Teheran (Fathea'zam 1992). The star is also a prominent symbol in Nalik funerary art; it symbolizes the morning star (*mangellus*) and can be seen painted in relief on wooden *malanggan* carvings as well as carved into the clam- and turtle-shell breastplates (*kapkap*) worn by clan leaders during mortuary feasts.

Even more captivating are the nine-pointed stars that have the names of the prophets written on their points. At first this appears purely decorative, but if we consider the morning star symbol in Nalik funerary art then the display of prophet names appears quite logical. The symbol of the morning star is one of a set of religious images that knowledgeable Naliks point to when recalling transitions in the lifecycle. These images are inextricably linked to the articulation of a sequence of cosmogenic events that are deemed to occur in order for a mortuary feast to be perceived as ritually efficacious (see Were 2003). The Baha'i stars are analogues to the Nalik image as not only do they create a Baha'i sense of spirituality but they also help converts to articulate the sequence of Baha'i messengers and their associated stories as they appear at various times and locations in Baha'i history. Although these forms are not considered *kastom* by Naliks, we can see how their presence in the interior of the Baha'i Centre in Madina suggests connections between the faith and the Nalik cosmic order.

The ritual space of the Centre also aids the spiritual transformation of followers for it is here that religious meetings, performances, and teachings take place. Baha'is place special emphasis on local prayer meetings and teaching groups to transform the body spiritually and ready the journey of the soul after death. There are nine holy days which Baha'is celebrate as well as a series of spiritual meetings (called 'the nineteenth-day feast') which take place every nineteen days in the Baha'i calendar, usually on the first day of each Baha'i month (there are nineteen months in the Baha'i calendar). These special days are celebrated by Baha'is all over the world and form an integral part of Baha'i community life. As a spiritual occasion, many Nalik Baha'is congregate at the Centre to worship, discuss issues, and eat in the same way as Naliks converge on a village hamlet for mortuary feasts.

The rote recital of key texts is one of the various ways of transforming oneself spiritually, which Naliks believe increases the chance of a place in the afterlife at death. Special emphasis is laid on the recitals of key events in the lives of the Baha'i messengers during all Nalik Baha'i gatherings. Known as 'deepening', this recital process aims at giving Baha'is a deeper spiritual understanding of the world in which they live through an approach to truth and knowledge. As with the recital of key texts in Islam (see Bloch 1998), emphasis is placed on rote learning with its rigorous discipline and lack of explanation since Baha'is believe that truth can be found in the very words of Baha'u'llah. The process of deepening entails memorizing texts. During

gatherings at the Centre prayers and readings are read out in a sober and monotonous manner. Little intellectual effort is expended on consideration of their meanings. The purpose of learning through rote recital is to preserve the message of Baha'u'llah among Baha'is. Since the mind of Baha'u'llah is believed by Baha'is to be immeasurably superior to those of ordinary men – as are the minds of all the key prophets – the message that Baha'u'llah is conveying has to conquer the undisciplined self, make the mind of the follower its own, and mould the self in the form of a model pupil.

Important accessories for Baha'i worship are specially printed prayer books, produced in English, Nalik, and pidgin. The books, which contain dozens of prayers and texts, are suggestive of the way in which Naliks translate religious ideas into imagery through the creation of potent religious forms. Nalik Baha'i prayer books are covered in the same diamond-shaped patterns (*avaarala*) that appear on Nalik funerary art; there these are found either carved in relief on *malanggan* sculptures or cut into turtle-shell on the *kapkap* breastplate. These diamond designs denote objects of extreme potency that are revered in Nalik society, and the Nalik term *avaarala* signifies religious power. In the same way that *malanggan* carvings and *kapkap* are hidden away, only to be revealed at mortuary feasts, so too are prayer books kept in the dark recesses of dimly lit houses rarely to be opened or read. Prayer books, as beliefs translated into potent forms, have the effect of reinforcing the strong connections between the Baha'i faith and the Baha'i ability to create ritually effective forms.

While regular meetings held inside the Baha'i Centre are not deemed as *kastom* activities by Naliks, events organized by Baha'is that go on outside the Centre certainly are.⁹ The most important Baha'i activities are held outside either in the open space surrounding the Baha'i Centre (used during Baha'i New Year celebrations) or in village hamlets during mortuary feasts involving Baha'is. Whereas many Bahai's, especially senior adherents, do not feel obliged to attend religious meetings inside the Centre, they attach extreme significance to the New Year celebrations or mortuary feasts, where religious images are rendered visible.

The most important aspect of the faith for Naliks is the continued production of ritual images in the way they believe the ancestors produced them. The Nalik Baha'is are therefore regarded as the arbiters of *kastom*, having earned a reputation for successfully organizing mortuary feasts, where a desired sense of ritual efficacy is achieved through the use of *malanggan*, *kapkap*, and performances. Indeed, it is the Nalik Baha'is creation of a sense of ancestrality at mortuary feasts through rendering visible images that ultimately attracts new converts to the faith. This production also heightens the esteem of the Baha'i followers due to the high status associated with performances in the ancestral realm. It is for this reason that Nalik Baha'is take the opportunity to enact their idealized vision of the future by celebrating the New Year outside the Baha'i Centre in Madina every year and inviting visitors from New Ireland and beyond to join in. It is through performances such as these that Nalik Baha'is reinforce their relations to the land, its resources, and the ancestors through the rendering visible of images in the form of *malanggan* carvings and performances.

The Baha'i New Year celebration

The main event in the Baha'i calendar is the holy day (21 March) of *Naw-Ruz* which celebrates the advent of the New Year when a feast marks the end of nineteen days of fasting and spiritual purification. This New Year celebration also doubles for what Nalik Baha'is term 'the Traditional Teaching Project'. A large colourful banner unfurled outside the Centre proclaims 'Celebration of Baha'i New Year. Traditional teaching project. *Tòk aut long Baha'i. Lotu long pasin tumbuna*' ('Proclaim the Baha'i Faith: church of ancestral ways'). The Baha'i New Year coincides with the end of the monsoon season and the start of the dry season on the east coast of northern New Ireland. This change in weather is marked by the exposure of the reef during the day. As the reef dries, small springs of underground water surface on the exposed sandy beaches and bubbles of fresh water eddy in rock pools on the reef. Naliks perceive the synchronization of the most important event in the Baha'i year with the changing in Nalik seasons as more than mere coincidence. They refer to the holy day as 'New Rus' since, in Nalik, *rus* refers to the freshwater springs that appear on the reef.¹⁰

The New Year celebration of 2000 marked the passing away of four Nalik Baha'is who had died over the past decade. The festivities commenced on the eve of the New Year with the *abot*, a dance traditionally performed at night during mortuary feasts in which men and women link arms and rotate in short lines around a man beating a drum. Early the next morning, at sunrise on New Year's Day, Baha'is gathered in the Centre for a prayer meeting breaking the nineteen-day period of fasting. After the prayers had finished, Baha'is and guests gathered outside the Centre for a round of speeches by Baha'i dignitaries who extolled the virtues of the faith and its importance in reinvestigating Nalik identity.

What followed was a pattern of events that emulated precisely a traditional mortuary feast, what Naliks acknowledge as *kastom*. The celebrations began with a series of traditional performances. The first of these saw a group of young men decorated in leaves and headdresses burst out from a coconut-leaf shelter constructed outside the Baha'i Centre. As the drum beat and women sang, the male dancers performed a traditional dance called *bual*. Women rushed forward and threw lime powder on the dancers' backs, shoving a *kina* (coin) or a small string of shell money into their hands. Then a group of four masked performers made their way from the beach. The performers, dressed in brightly coloured carved masks (*maru*) featuring clan designs and wearing red sarongs (*laplaps*) decorated with leaves, slowly paced their way up to the Baha'i Centre. A group of men and women followed behind, singing as the performers shook shell rattles (*induluk*) in their left hands while firmly holding wooden spears (*arol*) in their right. The group moved across the feasting space towards the coconut leaf shelter erected close to the Baha'i Centre. A senior Nalik clan leader, a 'first Baha'i' (one of the original converts), cried out loud and the leaf enclosure was torn down to reveal *malanggan* carvings hidden inside. After viewing the carvings, Nalik Baha'is formed a queue and laid down money (*lalahau*) for the four Nalik Baha'is who had died. Afterwards, feasting began with roasted pig and taro distributed to those gathered outside.

Events such as these are crucial to the success of the Baha'i faith in northern New Ireland as they translate religious beliefs into religious forms. The key factor in the transmission of the Baha'i faith is the rendering visible of traditional artefacts and performances that Naliks recognize as *kastom*. It is the familiar ordering of these *kastom* activities, such as the orchestrated performances and the presentation of the *malanggan* carvings, that Naliks perceive as religiously efficacious. The New Year celebrations allow Naliks to connect traditional practices drawing on ancestral power with the beliefs and practices of the Baha'i faith. This connecting of forms with ideas through the rendering visible of funerary art and the enactment of performances is recognized by Naliks as *kastom*.

Kastom activities organized at the Baha'i New Year celebration demonstrate not just the strength of Baha'i belief in images achieving the desired ritual effect but also how they think through images, since Baha'i beliefs are articulated through performances in the ancestral realm. One of the most strongly held beliefs expressed in Melanesian ritual is the notion of 'coming together' or 'unification' (Strathern 1988; Wagner 1986; 1991), which is central to both Nalik mortuary rites and the Baha'i faith. For Naliks, mortuary feasts are the culminating point in work for the dead and the occasion when land transactions, marriages, and exchanges take place. They are also a time of renewal; clans linked through common social relations converge on the village hamlet of the land-holding clan organizing the feast and participate in competitive exchange which acknowledges their shared links to the past. Nalik Baha'is also place special emphasis on the binding nature of humanity, so that people of all races and denominations should come together as one. In order to achieve this unity and fulfil the vision of Baha'u'llah, New Year feasting is aimed at transmitting the message of Baha'u'llah not only to New Ireland but also beyond its borders to address, and body forth the image of, a unified world.

One of the major factors in the emergence of the faith in Madina was the Baha'i unification of the Christian god with the Nalik creation god Nakmai and the Baha'i prophet Baha'u'llah (as well as with the other divine figures of world religions known to the Nalik). As an antidote to the divisiveness promoted by mission activity in northern New Ireland, the Baha'i teachings of unification persuaded many Naliks to convert. Naliks could embrace the Baha'i faith and build on their existing knowledge of the Bible. Since the rivalry between the Catholic and Methodist missions had long perplexed the Nalik people (for instance, Catholics could not marry Methodists), the emphasis on unification made sense to them. Moreover, the teachings of the Baha'i prophet Baha'u'llah confirmed the Nalik people's suspicions that the Christian missionaries had been wrong to proscribe ritual imagery. By embracing the Baha'i faith, Nalik people were able to practise *malanggan* unhindered, believing that they had found a new set of ideas that were more effective in exerting the desired ritual effect. Renewed activity in the ancestral realm made public the ability of the faith to harness ancestral power and demonstrated the strength of their ideas through the revelation of potent ritual imagery. The freedom of Baha'is to practise *malanggan* unimpeded (in contrast to the Nalik experience of the Christian missions) evidently led to the spread of the faith.

As the Baha'i faith became strongly associated with *kastom* activities, Naliks converted to the faith in increasing numbers. By presenting itself as a new religion based on images, the Baha'i faith appealed to Naliks, who could see *kastom* activities as forms of belief that could renew their links to the land and the dead. For instance, Naliks share with the Baha'is a concept that the body separates from the soul at death. Naliks believe the disembodied soul roams the places it knew in life, such as hamlets and gardens, and sometimes performs malevolent deeds. It is not until the carving of a *malanggan* figure for a mortuary feast that the soul can be arrested, contained (within the figure), and then released (as the figure decays) to begin its journey towards *liaa*, the ancestral world (see Kuchler 2002 for details on *malanggan* figures). *Malanggan* carvings thus act as vehicles for articulation of the Baha'i faith's power to harness the ancestral realm and finish the work for the dead.

Moreover, Nalik Baha'is believe that by enacting *kastom* (considered as a form of worship) during one's life, they are safeguarding the future prosperity of their soul and ensuring its place in the afterlife. Baha'is believe that God remembers each act and that it is God's judgement that can bring about the speedy progression of the soul into the afterlife. In fact, so concerned are they with the future that Baha'is not only regard the work put into enacting *kastom* (such acts as readying sago and crops of taro or fattening pigs) as a form of worship that helps the soul progress towards the afterlife but also consider activities (such as copra production) that raise money for competitive exchange or for offerings at spiritual meetings to be means of paving the way for future prosperity. They believe that *kastom*, which re-creates in the present what they believe to constitute the past, prepares the pathway towards the afterlife.

These activities, as strategies orientated towards securing long-term future rewards and possibilities, go beyond the spatial limits of New Ireland. In 2000 many Baha'is made monetary donations to the Ark Fund so that their names would be placed in a purpose-built temple in Haifa, Israel, the spiritual centre of the Baha'i faith. Nalik Baha'is believe that, by making monetary donations (*lalahau*) and enacting *kastom*, they will unite their souls with the dead of all races and denominations and will thus share in the assets and resources of those others. Nalik followers of the faith also hope that by safeguarding their names in the Haifa temple they will one day profit both spiritually and economically from the unification of the world under the leadership of the Baha'is.

Conclusion

The way in which religious ideas are translated into material forms and performances tells us much about the role of the image in change. The renewed interest invested by Baha'is in the production of ritual imagery demonstrates how local people cast into tangible form emerging ideas about the changing world in which they live. Alfred Gell points out that 'we are able to grasp "mind" as an external (and eternal) disposition of public acts of objectification, and simultaneously as the evolving consciousness of a

collectivity, transcending the individual *cogito* and the coordinates of any particular here and now' (1998: 258). In northern New Ireland, this evolving consciousness of a collectivity – objectified in material form – not only pinpoints how images as artefacts and performances operate in highly localized and dynamic ways, but also emphasizes how *kastom* can be understood as a form through which people think.

Yet despite the special interest that revival movements in Melanesia generate, the relation between *kastom* and religious thought remains largely unexplored. For anthropologists concerned with the relation between revivalism and the production of imagery in the Pacific, discourses of *kastom* continue either to be steeped in the rhetoric of legal and moral claims to images or else to revolve around debates about authenticity (Bolton 2003; Leach 2003). Foster (1992) positions *kastom* in tension with commoditization in Tanga (an island off New Ireland). The few anthropologists who concentrate on the imagistic qualities of *kastom*, such as Whitehouse (1995), ironically detract from any investigation into the materiality of the image in Melanesian society, preferring instead to privilege psychological states and sensory phenomena in the transmission of religious ideas. This article has, however, shown that northern New Ireland enactments of *kastom* are profoundly intertwined not only with religious ideas but also with thinking through images. In order for Naliks to acknowledge something as *kastom* and achieve through it a sense of ancestral power, they must first be able to understand it properly.

Barbara Stafford remarks that we need to understand the history of our culture's relation between image and concept in order better to equip ourselves for change (1994: xxv). An understanding of the local specificities of the workings of Melanesian *kastom* is similarly vital to a full appreciation of the association of ritual forms and new religious ideas. In tracing the changing form of an image as well as the ideas and associations that it entails, we are engaging with the minds of the people of northern New Ireland. Images in funerary art and performances are not a mere product of *kastom* but rather things through which people think; *kastom* is thought process in visual and material form. The case of Baha'i and *kastom* in northern New Ireland demonstrates that, as James Clifford (1988) has aptly commented more globally, we are not dealing with a simple loss of tradition in indigenous societies. We are instead witnessing emerging forms that enable societies to deal in highly localized, specific, and efficacious ways with the impact of colonialism, missionization, and global market forces.

NOTES

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¹Nalik is an Austronesian dialect closely related to that of the adjacent Tigak and Kara speakers. Together these groups form the Tikana, renowned for its set of religious beliefs and

practices called *malanggan* (see Küchler 2002). Madina is a comparatively large village (with a population of around 450 people) located just over one hundred kilometres south along the east coast road, the Boluminski Highway, from the provincial capital Kavieng. The village is comprised of a set of hamlets straddling either side of the highway, both in the forest and along the beach. Owing to the geography of New Ireland – it measures over three hundred and fifty kilometres in length while being, over most of that distance, little more than ten kilometres wide – most people live along the coastal regions away from the steep mountain ridges of the interior.

²The colonial period in the Pacific led to the disruption and upheaval of many islanders' lives, arguably the most far-reaching being the imposition of Western burial practices. Over the past few decades and especially with independence, however, there have been concerted efforts by many political and religious movements in the Pacific to revive traditional knowledge, practices and skills once thought forgotten or destroyed. Known by the Melanesian pidgin term '*kastom*', such forms are deemed to rekindle visions of a pre-colonial era, whether imagined, invented, idealized, or revised.

³Following Hirsch (2003), this study illustrates the shortcomings of Whitehouse's (1995; 2000) theory of religiosity in which he makes a categorical distinction between the 'imagistic' and 'doctrinal' styles of transmission: *kastom* activities are as much imagistic forms as they are doctrinal procedures.

⁴Baha'is have followers from over 2,100 ethnic groups in the world. What is surprising, though, is just how little research has been conducted into the Baha'i faith. Velasco (2001) reveals that Baha'i studies remain an academic irrelevance, systematically disregarded not only in the social sciences but also, remarkably, in Middle Eastern studies as well. Ruff goes as far as to call them the 'invisible community' (1974: 665). Almost all the research carried out on the faith is dominated by Baha'i scholars themselves. MacEoin (1990) accuses their work of lacking objective criteria and of showing signs of heavy emotional involvement. As one of the few non-Baha'i academics to publish in this field, he faces constant hostile reviews from Baha'i scholars. Velasco underlines this by adding that specialization in this field invites one to be 'either naïve, reckless, or rather brave' (2001: 189). For more information on the Baha'i faith, online papers and bibliographies are available at <http://www.bahai-studies.org/resources>.

⁵Baha'is believe that God is so great that he is unknowable; God is the creator of everything, omnipotent, limitless, and infinite in power. Humans as mere mortals are unable to comprehend his immensity.

⁶The Bab was the leader of the Babi movement that swept Persia in the nineteenth century. The divine messengers reflect not only the image of God in their moral teachings but also their humanity in the way they suffered in their lives (for example, Baha'u'llah realizes that he is a prophet whilst he is chained up in a prison cell in Tehran). Each of the prophets comes at a different stage in history, but, according to Baha'is, cultural distinctions between the prophets conceal the inherent unity of them all. Baha'is believe that the prophets are in fact teaching the same thing – the word of God – so that God's will is communicated through the Torah, the Qur'an, the Old and New Testaments, and so on.

⁷The Methodist Mission is now known as the United Church in New Ireland. In this paper, Methodist refers both to the Methodist Mission and the United Church in its contemporary context.

⁸Baha'i temples reflect the integration of religious symbolism with parochial conceptions of architectural form. New Delhi's Baha'i House of Worship is inspired by the lotus flower, its design composed of twenty-seven free-standing marble-clad petals arranged to form nine sides.

⁹In Nalik society, *kastom* activities take place outside, usually in an open space adjacent to a burial site.

¹⁰I thank the Nalik socio-linguist Craig Volker for pointing this out to me.

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Penser au travers des images : la *kastom* et l'arrivée des Baha'i dans le nord de la Nouvelle-Irlande, en Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée

Résumé

Pour étudier les idées religieuses, il est utile d'analyser non seulement l'effet que l'action missionnaire a eu sur elles mais aussi la manière dont croyances et pratiques sont transposées dans les formes religieuses locales. L'auteur met ici en lumière le cas de la foi Baha'i chez les Nalik, dans le nord de la Nouvelle-Irlande (Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée). En montrant comment la foi est étroitement liée à la capacité de maîtriser le pouvoir ancestral, il fait valoir que ce lien est né de la capacité des Nalik à penser au travers d'images, autrement dit en transformant les formes pour créer de nouvelles conceptions. Cette étude souligne l'importance des études localisées de la technologie de production d'images, mais elle comble par ailleurs une lacune des études anthropologiques, qui ont jusqu'à présent totalement occulté le mouvement Baha'i et sa place dans les nations contemporaines du Pacifique.

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FIGURE 1. Front cover of a Baha'i prayer book featuring geometric designs and *kapkap* imagery. (Courtesy of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahai'is of Papua New Guinea.)



FIGURE 2. The Baha'i Centre, Madina, New Ireland as seen from the Boluminski Highway. (Photo: Graeme Were.)



FIGURE 3. Interior of the Baha'i Centre, Madina, New Ireland. (Photo: Graeme Were.)

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