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Magic, missionaries and religion Some observations from the Trobriand Islands

'It is easy to blame the missionary. But it is his business to make changes' (Stevenson 1896:41).

The church on the Trobriand Islands: a brief overview

The Trobriand Islands became part of British New Guinea in 1883-84, and were gradually brought under the administration of the colony by visiting and resident magistrates and patrol officers (*kiap*).¹ In 1921 Papua and New Guinea were governed by two separate administrations, both controlled from Australia, and in 1949 Papua and New Guinea merged as 'The Territory of Papua and New Guinea', the distinction being that Papua was an Australian territory and New Guinea a mandate of the United Nations to remain as such (Siers 1981:4-10). This status lasted up to 16 September 1975, the day of Papua New Guinea's full independence.

Together with the political-colonial occupation of the Trobriands, the Overseas Mission Department of the Methodist Church commenced work in the Trobriand Islands as early as 1894. Most of the first Methodist missionaries were Fijians.

In 1935 Roman Catholic missionaries from Australia began their work

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on the Trobriands. Up to 1988 the Roman Catholic Church was represented by two Australian priests from the Mission of the Sacred Heart (MSC). Then the bishop of the Massim diocese allowed the Italian PIME mission to start their work on the Trobriands, and moved the two MSC missionaries to Alotau and to a small island in the Louisiade Archipelago. At present there is one Italian priest and one priest from Bangladesh based on Kiriwina Island.

In the late 1970s the Seventh-Day Adventists started to perform their missionary work in a few villages on the Trobriand Islands; however, so far they have only played a marginal role there.

The church encompassing the most believers is the Methodist Church. Today all Methodist priests on the Trobriand Islands are Papua New Guineans, and every village with a Methodist church has at least one local village priest, the so-called *misinari*. The Catholics took over this policy of the Methodists and established a network of local catechists in the villages with Catholic inhabitants; these catechists are also called *misinari*.

In general, the Methodist *misinari* are individuals highly motivated towards upward mobility (Senft 1992b:33) in Trobriand society's strictly hierarchical stratification.² They undergo a few months' training at a mission school, where they study English (to a certain degree), and learn to write (in some way or another), and especially to read, interpret and expound the Gospels that were translated into (a slightly Dobu-based variety of) Kilivila (Lawton 1979), the Austronesian language of the Trobriand Islanders (Senft 1986). Thus, the *misinari* gain prestige as trained lay-priests, catechists or deacons through association with the influential mission.

In August 1992 – while I stayed on the Trobriands to continue my field research – the Methodist Church celebrated the 100th anniversary of its first missionaries' setting foot on the Trobriand Islands with a big synode in Oyabia on Kiriwina Island. This occasion is an appropriate starting point for a discussion of the effects the missionaries' work has had on Trobriand language and culture.

Magic, missionaries and religion on the Trobriand Islands

In the 1992 July edition of *National Geographic* magazine, the American 'best-selling' author Paul Theroux published an article titled 'Under the Spell of the Trobriand Islands' in which he states:

'[...] the islands were little changed [...].

Not even missionaries with their threat of hell-fire for sinners have altered the

² See Malinowski 1987 1935; Powell 1957; Weiner 1976, 1988

Tro브리anders' view that their islands are a paradise, full of magic and sensuality [...].

Most islanders claim to be Protestant or Catholic, but Christian theology does not impinge very much on their traditional beliefs [...]. (Theroux 1992a:119-20)

In the same article the author states that the Tro브리anders eat yams only at feasts (1992a:123), that there are still bachelor houses on the Tro브리ands, that the birth rate on the islands is low, and that during the yams festival spouses are given licence for sexual adventures (1992a:128). Everyone familiar with the Tro브리ands knows that these latter statements are absolutely unfounded and ridiculous.³ In what follows we will see whether Theroux's statements with respect to the Christian missionaries' influence on the Tro브리ands are fact or mere fiction.

As stated elsewhere (Senft 1992a), on my first visit in 1982 I had the quite romantic feeling as I stepped out of the aircraft that I was stepping right into the picture so vividly presented in Malinowski's ethnographic masterpieces of the first quarter of this century. However, when I returned to the Tro브리ands in 1989 and in 1992 I realized immediately that the situation had drastically changed.

In this chapter I will describe some of the changes I experienced and observed on the islands, focusing on the question: What effects has the missionaries' work had on the language and culture of the Tro브리and Islands?

Based on the observations I made in 1982-1983, 1989, and 1992, my attempts to answer this question will include the discussion of observable changes:

- in the social construction of Tro브리and reality,
- in the role of magic, magical formulae and rituals,
- in the indigenous eschatological belief systems, and
- in the oral tradition that carried the Islanders' indigenous belief systems.

Missionaries and changes in the social construction of Tro브리and reality

As Robert Louis Stevenson noted a century ago, with respect to the South Seas there 'is but one source of power and the one ground of dignity – rank' (1987:282). This also holds true for Tro브리and society, which is highly

³ I am sorry but I must say that – in principle – I see only marginal differences with respect to stylistic qualities if I compare Theroux's article on the Tro브리anders with other 'reports' like those of Isabella Tree's story in the *Evening Standard* of 11 November 1992:21-2, with the rather telling title 'Yam bam, thank you, ma'am', R. Baker's account on 'free love' on the Tro브리ands (1983, *Freie Liebe*. Rastatt Moewig), M. Oertl's 1985 story 'Was soll aus den "Inseln der Liebe" werden?', in: *PM Peter Mossleitners interessantes Magazin* 11:114-20, 122, 125, H. Ludwig's report 'Inseln der freien Liebe' in *Abenteuer & Reisen*, 1987, I:58-64, U. Pittroff's story 'eine Insel für die liebe' in *Cosmopolitan*, 1990, VI:212-4, 218-22. This criticism also holds for the chapters on the Tro브리ands in Theroux's novel/travelogue *The Happy Isles of Oceania: Paddling the Pacific* (1992b:129-95). By the way, anyone who is more or less informed about the general political situation the 'Isles of Oceania' have to face at present will have difficulties even understanding the title of this publication. Is the title really meant to be ironical, or even satirical?

stratified. The most important access to political power is membership in the highest-ranking subclans. There are other means to acquire status within the society, such as being a versatile rhetorician, a master carver, or an expert magician; however, compared to the political significance of in-born rank, these alternatives for achieving status are of secondary importance. In former times, individuals belonging to the two lowest-ranking of the four main Trobriand clans had little chance of gaining status or exercising any kind of political influence.

With the growing influence of the Christian churches on the Trobriands, members of these two lowest-ranking clans involved themselves in these new institutions of political impact. With the increase of the churches' power, being a *misinari* implies being a woman or man of rank. Most of the Trobriand *misinari* nowadays belong to the lower two Trobriand clans. People who are matrilineally born into these clans have almost no other chance to gain political influence (unless they inherit knowledge of special magical formulae). The fact that the *misinari* – still a relatively young group of social climbers – have achieved political influence within the villages is documented by the ritualized greeting formula used to start important public speeches: in this formula, the *misinari* are addressed immediately after the chief(s).⁴

This indicates that the *misinari* have 'made it' – at least with respect to official acknowledgement – to displace the magicians, traditionally the second most important representatives of social power and control, following in rank immediately after the chief. According to Malinowski (1984:93),

'[magic] invariably ranges itself on the side of the powerful, wealthy and influential, sorcery remains a support of vested interest [...] in the long run, of law and order. It is always a conservative force, and it furnishes really the main source of the wholesome fear of punishment and retribution indispensable in any orderly society. There is hardly anything more pernicious, therefore, in the many European ways of interference with savage peoples, than the bitter animosity with which Missionary, Planter, and Official alike pursue the sorcerer. The rash, haphazard, unscientific application of our morals, laws, and customs to native societies, and the destruction of native law, quasi-legal machinery and instruments of power leads only to anarchy and moral atrophy and in the long run to the extinction of culture and race.'

The insightful master of Trobriand ethnography was completely aware of the processes of culture change the missionaries had to induce in Trobriand society to achieve rank – and thus power. The missionaries had first and foremost to fight the magicians, their *Weltanschauung*, and thus the

⁴ The formula runs: *Agutoki kweguyau, agutoki misinari, agutoki lommota...*; it can be translated 'Honourable chiefs, dear village church leaders, people (from/of [name of the respective village])' (see Senft 1986:185). For the role the *misinari* play in Tauwema see Senft (1987a, 1991a, 1992a, 1992b, also 1992c). For a survey of 'Christianity in Oceania' see Barker (1990b).

model of culture they represented and guarded. Because the magicians were too powerful, the missionaries could not start directly to fight their rivals, the sorcerers who stand for conservatism, the old tribal order, the old beliefs and appointment of power (Malinowski 1984:93). Therefore, they first had to fight the standards and values the Trobriand magicians represented.

Probably the most important problem for Christian missionaries was to introduce and explain the concept of Jesus Christ being God's son to members of a matrilineal society, in which a father is by no means related to his children.⁵ This problem, however, seems to have been solved soon, and then once and for ever (see Senft 1992a:74-5). With the establishment of government and mission (MSC and United Church) schools, and especially with the opening of the government Kiriwina High School in Losuia in the late 1970s, Trobriand Islanders' children have had opportunities to get a good education. However, Kiriwina High School requires the payment of school fees. These school fees are paid by the pupils' fathers. As stated above, the Trobriand Islanders are a matrilineal society, and therefore the children's fathers have neither kin nor clan relationship with, and thus no direct control over, their children. If they 'invest' in their children, they are actually investing in their children's mother's matrilineal line. Already in 1983 we noted that some schoolchildren claimed that their fathers' given names were their surnames (Senft and Senft 1986). As far as we know, this phenomenon developed independently of the school policy found in some other provinces of Papua New Guinea where the fathers' given names were assigned to schoolchildren as their surnames. Currently, all schoolchildren on the Trobriand Islands give as their surname their father's given name.

In the Trobriand Islands as well as in the whole Massim area (Malinowski 1978:26, Map II) proper names are clan property. Thus, any Trobriand Islander hearing the given name of another Trobriand Islander can immediately identify the clan membership of the respective individual. If the members of the younger generation with school education now give their proper name (the name they inherit from their mother's matrilineal line) together with a surname which is actually their father's name (and thus the property of their father's mother's matrilineal line), this may cause some confusion with respect to the identification of clan membership in the Massim area. Now suddenly the father's matrilineal line is mentioned and thus obviously obtains an equal status with the mother's, the 'real' kinfolks' matrilineal line. We are very much inclined to interpret this observation as a first step towards a fundamental change in the complex system of Trobriand kin relationships and roles, and we

⁵ Here the Catholic missionaries were in a somewhat better position than their Methodist colleagues: they could present Mary, Jesus Christ's holy mother!

suspect that Trobriand society is in the process of changing from a matrilineal to a patrilineal one – certainly because of the changing economic situation and for economic reasons (see Senft 1992a:74-5, 83), but also in the interest of a 'Christian society'. Again, Malinowski (1984:106) already noted in connection with Kavataria, the village adjoining the Methodist Mission and the Government Station, that the missionaries' and the *kiap*'s 'European influence [...] naturally work[s] for patrilineal claims'.

That such a change from a matrilineal to a patrilineal society will have fundamental consequences for the sophisticated Trobriand construction of social reality is evident. It must be expected that the changes that affect the Trobriand system of descent, kin roles and relationships will have consequences for Kiliivila kinship terminology as well.⁶ The semantics of kinship terminology will have to change and must be redefined to the same degree to which kin roles are redefined in the political process of social change. If Trobriand society is indeed changing from a matrilineal to a patrilineal society, it can be expected that the terms referring to the father's relatives will be defined more precisely; this may even result in some neologisms. On the other hand, the sophisticated system of terms referring to the mother's relatives may gradually become less and less important – and it may become increasingly difficult for future generations to find adequate kinship terms to refer to some of their mothers' relatives. But so far this remains mere speculation.

There are also a number of areas within the social construction of Trobriand reality where the changes induced and fostered by the churches and their missionaries have been faster and more evident, though – at least at first sight – not as spectacular and dramatic as the processes of societal change just described.

I will mention only two of the more obvious changes visible on returning to the Trobriands in 1989 and especially in 1992. First, I noted the abandonment of traditional dress (see Senft 1992a:70). In 1989 almost no women wore the traditional colourful skirts made out of banana leaves. Skirts and dresses made out of cotton and, more often, synthetic fibres had replaced the traditional ones. Moreover, the traditional dress of the men, the loincloth made out of the leaf sheath of a betel palm, had also been replaced by shorts and trousers. These clothes could also be seen much more often than the waistcloth, the so-called *lap-lap* or *sulu* made out of cotton, a form of dress rather typical of Papua New Guinea and the South Pacific. As documented in illustrations in Senft and Senft (1986), this change was already visible in 1983; however, that it developed to such a degree that not even young girls were wearing their traditional grass skirts or *doba* surprised us. While in 1982 the majority of the Trobriand Islanders still

⁶ One of the more dramatic changes here is the replacement of the kinship terms *inagu* (my mother) and *tamagu* (my father) by the English words 'mama' and 'papa', a fundamental change, indeed.

proudly praised their traditional dress for its beauty, comfort and suitability for the tropical climate, and most parents proudly presented their children in traditional clothes, the majority now, while sweating in their garments made of synthetic fibres, praise these clothes as being more modern and more 'decent', especially according to *misinari* standards and criteria. In 1992 the only people we saw wearing traditional clothing were schoolchildren and students at Kiriwina High School who wore traditional clothes for the 'tradition day' held once every fortnight. Thus, during this short period, traditional dress has developed into something like indigenous Trobriand Island folklore.

The local village priests' standard of decency with respect to clothing does not apply just to girls and women wearing only their traditional grass skirts and to men wearing only the traditional loincloth; in 1992 it affected even the very young. In 1982-83 girls up to the age of approximately three years and boys up to the age of approximately five years usually roamed naked about the village, the reef and the bush. In 1992 children seen without clothes were scolded by the *misinari* and by villagers who have closer links to the church or who claim to be good Christians.

Thus, with increasing political influence, the *misinari* also change the moral standards of the society, which was always characterized by rather strict rules of moral behaviour anyhow (Malinowski 1987; also Stevenson 1987:278, 280, 284). In the eyes of the village priests, modern clothing is more decent – especially for women – than traditional Trobriand clothes. For a girl or a woman to appear bare-breasted and to wear the traditional grass skirt without a cotton skirt underneath and for little children to walk around naked has come to be denounced as indecent.

Along with the change in clothing a number of loan words from English made their entry into the Kilivila lexicon. For example we find the loan words *tara'utusi* 'trousers', *beleta* 'belt' (vs. *duliduli*, *pegala*, *segigi*, *vakala*, all different types of self-made belts), and *dores* 'dress' (vs. *dabe-* [PP IV], 'clothes, dress'), to name just a few. I have discussed these loan words elsewhere in more detail (Senft 1992b); however, in connection with the loan word *dores* and its Kilivila equivalent *dabe-* (PP IV) I would like to note the following: the abbreviation 'PP IV' represents one of a fourfold series of possessive pronouns found in Kilivila; this series indicates an intimate degree of possession; the fragment *dabe-* represents one of the nouns that cannot be used in actual speech production without possession-indicating pronouns (which are pronominal affixes). With the entry of the loan word *dores* into the lexicon we have one example of a loan word that may in the long run replace the morphologically rather complex Kilivila nominal equivalent – and may thus have important consequences for Kilivila morphology as a whole. With this loan word we also observe a closed syllable with syllable-final /s/. This closed syllable pattern does not agree with indigenous Kilivila syllable patterns (Senft 1986:20-5).

Therefore, the incorporation of loan words like the one discussed here may have consequences for Kilivila phonology as well.

Moreover, we also noticed that the *misinari* try to put an end to a number of games, to verses that accompany play (see Senft and Senft 1986; Senft 1991b:238-9, 247), and to dances that deal with the breaking of certain taboos and that 'play' with obscene language varieties. The *misinari* do not take into account at all that these games and the playful use of a certain vocabulary allow the (verbal) breaking of taboos in a clearly defined situation only. This situation permits a specially marked way of communication about something 'one does not talk about' otherwise and thus serves as a 'safety valve custom'. Such customs can be found in every society (Bornemann 1974; Rühmkorf 1967) because they actually help to secure the observance of important taboos within a society (Senft and Senft 1986; Senft 1987b, 1991b, 1992a:80).

Village priests' censorship of dances, games, and play accompanying verses may affect parts of the situational-intentional variety called *Biga Sopa*, the 'joking or lying language', the 'indirect language' that among other things provides the basis for verbal safety-valve customs and thus serves an important function in everyday social life on the Trobriands.

These examples should suffice for the aims pursued here. To sum up, we note that the *misinari* are at least partly responsible for changes in the social construction of Trobriand reality, for changes that affect not only indigenous customs, values and ideas, but also the Kilivila language and basic features that mark Trobriand society as different from European – and other Christian – societies.

Missionaries, magic, magical 'formulae' and rituals

As soon as the *misinari* realized that their attempts to displace the magicians in official acknowledgement, rank and power had finally succeeded, they could start to fight their 'natural enemies' more directly. Ever since Malinowski's masterpieces on Trobriand culture, the islanders have been famous for their magical formulae – for their garden magic, weather magic, canoe magic, carving magic, 'black' magic, beauty magic, health magic, love magic, dance magic, and magic for protection against sharks and witches. In 1983 the chief of Tauwema, Kilagola, gave me parts of his canoe magic as a present when he adopted me as one of his sons. His brother, Weyei, gave me a similar present consisting of five formulae of his weather magic as a sign of his friendship (Senft 1985a). And Vaka'ila, one of the oldest men of the village, presented me with a number of formulae of his garden magic because I reminded him of his late brother, Keyalabwala. These three men were the only persons who offered me such personal and secret information, and I was rather proud of being honoured by these men in this way. In 1989, however, more than 12 women and men

approached my wife and me and offered to sell magical formulae for money and tobacco. We felt as if we were in the middle of a big closing-down sale for magic. In 1992 the situation had escalated: some islanders offered their magic even to tourists! This is clear evidence that magical formulae have lost their importance for the majority of Trobriand Islanders. This means that they had also lost their value as personal property to be handed down to younger relatives. If the formulae have lost their value there is actually no longer any need to bequeath them to one's younger relatives, and the members of the younger generation see no sense in learning these formulae through laborious lessons from their elder relatives (see Senft 1992a:80-1).

In 1983 Trobriand Island Christians had created an interesting form of syncretism that combined traditional belief in magic and Trobriand eschatology (Malinowski 1974) with Christian ideas. In 1989 these syncretic features of Trobriand Island Christianity had decreased dramatically. Belief in magic is not denounced directly by the *misinari* as something heathen. Instead, the strategy pursued to fight these 'pagan' customs is much more subtle: the *misinari* argue that there are two ways to live one's life these days. One way is the old, traditional way which includes magic and the eschatological belief in the immortal spirits of the dead living in the underground paradise on Tuma Island. The other way is the new Christian way of life with its specific Christian beliefs and its own eschatological ideas. The two ways are mutually exclusive, or, in the local priests' words: 'one can either walk on the way of the ancestors or on the Christian way together with *Jesu Keriso*, the Lord Jesus Christ'. Women especially accept this more recent way of Christian preaching and self-presentation, and the clear and simple alternatives cause much tension in families where the husbands of pious wives are expert magicians. Magicians, whether female or male, are increasingly losing influence in the society, and accordingly the appreciation of their magical skills and their knowledge of magical formulae is decreasing. Trobriand Islanders' belief in the magical power of words included their conviction that magic is a means of controlling nature as well as incidents affecting their personal lives. Once this conviction is lost, it leaves a political and ritual power vacuum – and the *misinari* and missionaries use this vacuum for their own means and ends (Senft 1992a:79-80). The magician's ritual and political power is replaced by the priest's ritual and political power in Trobriand society. 'So simply [...] the changes come' (Stevenson 1987:25, see also p. 239).

This development manifests itself in all activities that incorporated forms of magic. One of these activities was the construction of a new *masawa*-type canoe (see Senft 1992a:75-6). The construction of these impressive and beautiful canoes involved from the very beginning a number of different experts and their magical knowledge. It also required strict

adherence to the rules of various rituals in which magic played an important part. Although it was always an individual that initiated the construction of such a canoe, namely its future owner, the whole enterprise had important social implications (Malinowski 1978:113-5). In the process of canoe construction the security and stability of the social network of a village community was continuously tested and controlled. To initiate the construction of a canoe meant a communal effort relying upon expert magicians, expert carvers, and expert sailmakers. They all had to cooperate in good spirits to ensure the success of the canoe, and they all had to be paid after certain stages in the construction process in appropriate food distribution ceremonies. These distribution ceremonies again were among the highlights of the Trobriand Islanders' year and automatically involved experts as well as the entire village community (or, in larger villages, the whole village sector community). The experts were more publicly honoured than paid during these ceremonies. In 1983 inhabitants of Tauwema owned eight *masawa*-type canoes, excluding two new ones under construction. In 1989 Tomtava and Nusai were the owners of the last two *masawa* in Tauwema.

At present, only five men in the village still know the correct rituals and ceremonies that accompany the construction of such a canoe, but they themselves are no longer able to initiate the construction of a *masawa*, and they have no one to whom they can bequeath their knowledge. The *masawa*-type canoe has been superseded by the much less splendid *ligataya*-type canoe and the rather simpler and smaller *kemolu*-type canoe (Malinowski 1978:plates 21, 23; Malinowski 1987:plates 68, 80-1); the construction of these canoe types can be carried out with a minimum of ritual knowledge and therefore without knowledge of magical formulae. Thus, not only have technologies been lost, but also the social events that were intertwined with these technologies. These social events had an important function as forms of social bonding (Senft 1987b). The only social events we observed that may be able to take over these important social functions of the rituals and ceremonies accompanying the construction of *masawa* canoes are activities such as communal prayers and hymn-singing outside of church in the centre of the village and meetings of missionaries from neighbouring villages or Christian women's associations which are conducted by the *misinari* and involve the whole village community. These get-togethers are generally also accompanied by communal meals, and sometimes there is even a kind of food distribution ceremony preceding these meals (Senft 1987a).

The loss of technologies and skills like the construction of the *masawa*-type canoes entails the loss of the corresponding expert vocabulary in the Kilivila lexicon (see Senft 1992a:78). As emphasized above, all of these experts rely in their work on the power of magical formulae. These experts are convinced that they can only carry out their work properly with the power of their magic. The construction of a *masawa*-type canoe requires the

use of a complex variety of magical formulae. With the *masawa* being superseded by the *ligataya*- and *kemolu*-type canoes this complex variety of magical formulae is being lost. I will discuss this loss of a complete Kilivila text category again in more detail below. Here, however, another observation must be emphasized. I mentioned that the construction of the *masawa* was a social event that included a number of ceremonies and rituals. All these ceremonies and rituals were accompanied by speeches that were clearly defined with respect to their appropriateness to the stage of the construction process. From what my informants told me, I infer that these speeches had their own pragmatics. The knowledge of these pragmatics has now been lost as well. However, I also mentioned that activities of local missionaries may take over the social functions of these communal events, rituals and ceremonies. In general, these church activities centred on Christian beliefs are completely different in structure from the traditional events, speeches and other forms of verbal communication within these social events, and follow completely different rules (see Senft 1987a, 1991a).

This example of a change that affects rituals and magical formulae as an important part of the social construction of Trobriand profane reality should suffice for the aims pursued here. Changes observed with respect to the Trobriand indigenous eschatological belief systems and the oral tradition that carried these systems will be discussed in the following sections.

Missionaries and traditional Trobriand eschatology

As mentioned above, in 1983 Trobriand Islanders maintained an interesting form of syncretism that combined traditional belief in magic and Trobriand eschatology (Malinowski 1974)' with Christian ideas. However, I also stated that because of local village priests' gradually increasing influence and as a result of their Christian indoctrination, the magical formulae have lost their importance for the majority of Trobriand Islanders. It is quite evident that this process will finally result in the loss of the text category 'magical formulae'. However, the change in the evaluation of the concept 'magic' not only affects a whole text category. It is, in the long run, also responsible for the loss of a complete 'situational-intentional' variety of Kilivila, the 'register' Trobriand Islanders call *Biga Tommwaya* (Old People's Language) or *Biga Baloma* (Language of the Spirits of the Dead).⁷ In 1983 this archaic language variety was very rarely used as a kind of 'sociolinguistic variable' indicating high social status in everyday discourse and conversation. In 1989 we no longer observed or documented any

⁷ When I use the term 'situational-intentional varieties' of Kilivila I refer to language varieties or 'registers' that are used in a given, special situation and that are produced to pursue a certain intention. Kilivila native speakers differentiate at least seven of these varieties. For detailed information see Senft (1986:124-9, 1991b).

such utterance in the *Biga Baloma* variety in everyday language usage. This situational-intentional variety is also used in magical formulae. I just stated that this text category will most probably be lost in the next few years. Moreover, songs that are sung during the harvest festival (*mila-mala*) and during a certain period of mourning (Senft 1985b) are also sung in the *Biga Baloma* variety (see Senft 1992a:81-2). These songs have been passed down from generation to generation. As early as 1983 the majority of the people singing these songs no longer understood their semantic content, their meaning. Nevertheless, in 1983 I documented and translated about 200 of these songs with the help of more than 25 (male and female) informants. In 1989 and in 1992 I found only four informants (all male) who could sing these songs and who could also translate the *Biga Baloma* variety into 'ordinary', profane Kilivila. These songs served two functions: on the one hand they welcomed the spirits of the dead to the ceremonies and festivities of the harvest festival. The immortal spirits of the dead were believed to leave their paradise in Tuma Island to visit their former villages of residence and to see whether the villagers living there still knew how to garden, how to celebrate a good harvest, and how to behave even while celebrating exuberantly. On the other hand, these songs were sung to make it easier for the spirit of a dead person to leave the community of her/his relatives just after death, because the songs very poetically and quite erotically describe the life the spirits of the dead lead in Tuma paradise. With the gradual replacement of this indigenous eschatology by Christian eschatology these songs are gradually losing their significance for the Trobriand society. All my observations indicate that in the near future, although these songs may still be sung to preserve some part of the ritual aspect of the harvest festival and of the respective mourning ceremony, the singers of these songs will no longer know what they are singing about. Thus, in addition to the loss of a whole text category, there is the prospect of the loss of a complete language variety – the basic means of oral tradition to carry the Islanders' indigenous belief system.⁸

I mentioned above that village priests' censorship of dances, games, and play accompanying verses may also affect parts of the situational-intentional variety called *Biga Sopa*, the 'joking or lying language', the 'indirect language' that among other things provides the basis for verbal safety-valve customs and thus serves an important function in everyday social life on the Trobriands.

It must be emphasized that these losses, observed or suspected, affect indigenous forms of ritual language. In general, ritual language can be regarded as the recognized culmination of the learning of knowledge which is basic and fundamental for the social construction of a society's

⁸ Compare Stevenson (1987:32): 'Pleasures are neglected, the dance languishes, the songs are forgotten' and Stevenson (1987[1896]:238): 'And yet in a sense these songs are also but a chatter; the words are ancient, obsolete and sacred; few comprehend them'.

reality. This reality, in turn, fosters the society's stability with the help of the relative stability of ritual language (Fox 1975:127, 130). Changes that affect these language varieties are induced by cultural change, of course. However, such a language change, once induced, will in turn have severe consequences for the organization and construction of the culture of the whole society because it escalates the dynamics of change.

Thus, it seems, the *misinari* have been very successful in changing the society they infiltrated and have been indoctrinating for the last one hundred years. The induced changes not only affect the social construction of Trobriand profane reality – a necessary prerequisite for gaining influence and power – but also the indigenous belief system of the Trobriand Islanders. These changes necessarily resulted in new European- and Christian-biased systems of social and religious values and beliefs. And that these profound changes are also reflected in the language of the Trobriand Islanders is only natural: the processes of change influenced the language, which in turn served to foster these changes! The missionaries have (almost) succeeded in replacing the indigenous Trobriand magic, science, and eschatological beliefs with Christian 'magic', 'science' and religion.

Conclusion

I am completely aware that 'It is easy to blame the missionary. But it is his business to make changes' (Stevenson 1987:41); moreover, 'the missionary [...] is something else besides a minister of mere religion [...] he is condemned to be an organ of reform, he could scarce evade (even if he desired) a certain influence on political affairs' (Stevenson 1967:274). If we lament changes that have been introduced in non-European, formerly non-Christian cultures by (Christian) 'missionaries, we should not forget to reflect upon the historical conditions that caused the activities of the (Christian) missions. There is no doubt that colonialism (with its capitalist interests) and mission must be seen as inextricably intertwined. The missionary – unconsciously or voluntarily – opened up a society for the colonial capitalist, and we all – with respect to our economic standards – still depend on the markets the missionaries opened up for the colonizers and finally for our export-oriented economies.

Almost a hundred years ago Robert Louis Stevenson (1987:41) touched upon the central problem we are confronted with in discussing these matters: 'Upon the whole, the problem seems to me to stand thus: Where there have been fewest changes, important or unimportant, salutary or hurtful, there the race survives. Where there have been most, important or unimportant, salutary or hurtful, there it perishes. Each change, however small, augments the sum of new conditions to which the race has to become inured.'

At present we are witness to a number of national and international

activities – at least in linguistics – to save, or at least document, the last bits and pieces of dying languages. Every field linguist knows that this aim also includes the documentation of the cultures in which these languages are spoken. However, in most of these cultures with dying or endangered languages the linguist – and the anthropologist – who wants to do research is more often than not dependent on the cooperation of the missionary, who, again, most often is the only person who can 'open up' the particular society for the researcher! If we meet or if we are dependent upon the cooperation of the missionary, we should always remember that it is too easy a way out to blame just him or her for the changes induced. We are more or less all responsible for what is going on in the world these days – and we can no longer claim that 'we did not know'. However, most of the missionaries I have met so far are aware of the fact that people whose cultural roots have been destroyed and who have lost their identity cannot be transformed into members of a Christian community. In my understanding of Christianity, every community that claims to be Christian must consist of individuals who are deeply rooted in their culture because this is a prerequisite for being deeply rooted in the religion itself. We all have to look for ways out of this dilemma – ways that are appropriate for the respective cultures. The loss of the diversity of human culture would certainly affect our species as a whole. We soon have to find an answer to the question 'What has to be done?' Simple-minded, publicity oriented, uninformed, romanticizing articles like the one Paul Theroux published in the *National Geographic* – which seem to be written just to make the travelogue published by the same author (Theroux 1992b) another best-seller – are of no help whatsoever.⁹ The days of the 'noble savage' myth have long gone.¹⁰

⁹ One can hardly avoid the impression that books like Theroux's travelogue are just examples of a different kind for the traditional European (here: American) exploitation of the 'South Seas' myth – a myth that has always been fatal for the area concerned, for its peoples, and for their cultures.

¹⁰ I would like to end this article with the following comment which I have elaborated in detail elsewhere (Senft 1992a:82-7): Although some aspects of culture and language on the Trobriand Islands are really dying out, most aspects and features of culture and language that are affected by the changes observed here are not just 'chopped off' from the body of a living speech community and society. Change substitutes something new and foreign for something old and traditional. If we attempt to ignore changes in our own society or see them as positive, while at the same time we notice and lament changes that affect more 'exotic' and 'original' cultures and their languages, it is difficult for us to avoid traces of ethnocentrism and ideological romanticism left over from the 'noble savage' myth of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It goes without saying that cultures and languages are dynamic phenomena – and our primary task as researchers is to document these dynamics. It is only on a secondary level of our research that we may subjectively evaluate these dynamics and their results. In this article I tried to combine these two levels, focusing on the impact of what are probably the most important agents of change on the Trobriands – the Christian churches and their representatives. For a much broader, and therefore more balanced, view of who or what is responsible for the changes observed on the Trobriand Islands I refer the interested reader to my first publication on this topic (Senft 1992a).