⊰ Introduction ⊱
Culture Change and Exchange

This book is an attempt to understand and explain cultural changes among the Napamogona, a community of about twelve hundred Bena-speaking people in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. It draws on material gathered during various periods of field research between 1997 and 2014.

The topic of culture change is a vast one. I therefore decided to specify and analyze it in regard to changes observed in confined cultural fields. In accordance with my data, I want to explore culture change in Bena primarily within the realms of life-cycle rituals, magical practices, and Christianity, as well as new beliefs and ways, and to analyze these in reference to Bena concepts of person and exchange. As I will show throughout this book, culture change in Bena can best be understood as developing in accordance with Bena ideals of *ex*-change—for Bena cultural categories are structurally conceptualized as dynamic; they are not only open to changes but also expected to change according to a concept of the person as partible and defined by exchange relationships. Further, I will demonstrate that partible Bena persons act as agents in such relationships and that they do so with the (desired) transformation of specific relationships in mind. I have found countless instances of agentive culture change in Bena that confirm this argument, ranging from the incorporation of new magical practices and ideas on witchcraft to the adoption of aspects of Christianity into Bena belief or of Western elements into preexisting exchange rituals and warfare.

The data I collected among Bena people reflect a perspective on culture change that became popular through Marshall Sahlins (1985).[1] His model of culture change is fundamental to my work, but I intend to refine it. In the following, I show how my approach to culture change in Bena builds on Sahlins in new ways. I will demonstrate how it can be analyzed deeper in terms of the New Melanesian Ethnographies, by applying M. Strathern's (1988) model of the "partible" person—that has so far been limited mostly to synchronic non-changing systems—and Mosko's (1992, 2001, 2010) idea of the "syncretic person." In doing so, I supplement Sahlins by focusing deeper on the role of agentive exchange and person in culture change.

For the analysis of the specific Bena notions of person and exchange, I found Philipp Newman's (1962b, 1965) model of exchange among the Guru-

rumba, an Eastern Highlands group neighboring Bena, extremely helpful. His analysis of a balance of personal strength and nurturance through an exchange of "vital essence" has so far remained unnoticed by ethnographers of Eastern Highland cultures—a gap I intend to fill because I found the same principle in Bena, where each single exchange is perceived as involving an exchange of *nogoya'a,* "nurturance," in order to increase personal strength (Newman 1965, see chapter 3 in this volume). This specific understanding of exchange and person is, I argue, the fundamental cultural category that is applied in the "indigenous analysis" (Kirsch 2006: 2–3) of culture change as it takes place in Bena.

I therefore position my analysis within a theoretical framework laid out by a synthesis of ideas from Marshall Sahlins, Phillip Newman, Marilyn Strathern, Mark Mosko, and Stuart Kirsch that enables me to analyze culture change in relation to what—on the basis of indigenous and anthropological analysis— appear to be the central "signifieds" of the Bena symbolic system of reference and the grounds on which it continues to grow and change: social relationships, partible personhood, agency, and the idea of reciprocal exchange of something that Newman (1965) called "vital essence" and that Bena persons refer to as *nogoya'a.*

Events and the Reproductive Transformations of Cultural Categories

I will begin my analysis of culture change with a focus on the "encounters" that trigger such change—in Sahlins's terms, the "events" that lead to culture change. Dissatisfied with the neglect of change and history in structuralism and the use of assumed dichotomies such as stability versus change or history/event versus structure, Sahlins (1985) concentrates much of his work on the relationship between structure and history (or structure and event) as it is expressed in the form of culture change. He defines "event" as the relation between a happening and an existing symbolic system according to which it is interpreted. In this context he developed his theory of history and structure, or the "relation between structure and event," beginning with the proposition that "the transformation of a culture is a mode of its reproduction" (Sahlins 1985: 138). Whenever the people who share a particular culture are confronted with new cultural categories—for example, when the Hawaiians encountered Cook and his crew for the first time—a process of reproductive transformation of preexisting cultural categories is initiated. In Sahlins's paradigmatic example, both Hawaiian commoners and chiefs were interested in building relationships with the divine strangers and went with their boats to visit the crew on board. In doing so, both parties acted in accordance with preexisting cultural categories. The commoners expressed the practice of "*imi*

haku, 'to seek a lord'" (Sahlins 1985: 139), while the chiefs hoped to establish new promising exchange relationships. Given their presumed divinity, the chiefs saw Cook and his men as equal, even superior, in their godliness, but at the same time they posed a danger as potential rivals (139). According to traditional rules, commoners had to fall on the ground, face down, whenever a chiefly person came near. Thus, when the chiefly boats on their way to Cook's vessel approached the canoes of the commoners, the latter followed this rule and therefore couldn't move their boats to the side—and it was not an option for a chief to change course because of common people in front. Further, the chiefs were not willing to allow commoners to be the first to meet the "divine" strangers. The result was that a number of Hawaiian commoners lying face down in their canoes got run over by the boats of their own chiefs. The reactions of both commoners and chiefs to the strangers and towards each other were here in accordance with their "customary self-conceptions and interests" (138), meaning that their response to the new culture was shaped by preexisting cultural categories.

There has been a critical debate around Sahlins's description of this first encounter. Especially his argument of the Hawaiian apotheosis of Cook as the god Lono raised discussions (Friedman 2016; Friedman and Ekholm 1985; Golub, Rosenblatt, and Kelly: 2016; Hacking 1999: 207–223; Obeyesekereye 1997; Yoshida 2008). Sahlins was criticized for his cultural relativist approach that seemed to deny the existence of universal human practical rationality (MacLeod 2002; Obeyesekereye 1992, 1997; Yoshida 2014: 73–128;). Obeyesekereye (1992: 3) argues that Cook's deification "is a European myth foisted on Hawaiian self-memory by British and other foreign chroniclers" (cf. Hacking 1995: 6). He doubts that Hawaiians "created their own European god," rather "the Europeans created him for them. This European god is a myth of conquest, imperialism and civilization" (see also Borofsky 1997: 256). According to this view, Hawaiians saw Cook as a chief and only deified him postmortem because they found it politically convenient. Obeyesekereye uses Cook's example to stress his argument of the practical rationality of all humans. The idea of an apotheosis of Cook would contradict this proposition since it connoted the assumption of native irrationality (and implied inferiority) versus European rationality (superiority). Sahlins (1995: 14), on the other hand, concludes "different cultures, different rationalities" and accuses Obeyesekereye of being "imperialist" himself because "by treating Hawaiians as political players not so far off from rational choice theory" he would deny the islanders "their own voice" (Hacking 1999: 211). Obeyesekereye's (1992: 19) concept of the practical rationality of all cultures—"the process whereby human beings reflectively assess the implications of a problem in terms of practical criteria"—is a valuable tool in the analysis of culture change. Obviously, humans apply pragmatic considerations when they interact with their

environment. However, "the universality of pragmatic considerations … does not explain easily or quickly how local cultures act in distinctive ways to comprehend the alien, domesticate the foreign, and appropriate the useful" (Hanlon 1994: 110). I position myself in this analysis, therefore, more to Sahlins's end of the spectrum with a focus on the cultural specificities of such pragmatic considerations.

The heated argument about Cook's apotheosis triggered important discussions in anthropology and raised most fundamental questions such as "who has the right to speak for whom" and "is … approaching a common, cumulative understanding of others possible?" (Borofsky 1997: 255). One way to answer these questions can be found in Kirsch's (2006) Wagner-derived approach of reverse anthropology (see also Wagner 1981: 31f.). Reverse anthropology's purpose is "to enhance recognition of indigenous modes of analysis, especially the interpretative capacities of … myth, ritual, magic, and exchange, and to acknowledge and benefit from the resulting insight into our shared world" (Kirsch 2006: 222). This approach adds a further dimension to Sahlins's (and Obeyesekereye's) analysis of cultural change.

As the above example of Cook shows, culture change—the transformation of culture—is, according to Sahlins (1985: 144), grounded on the reproduction of culture; but it is not *only* reproduction, because in their reproduction, cultural categories are altered and undergo transformations. Throughout this book I will give various examples of such reproductive transformations. In chapter 4, for example, I refer to changes in Bena male initiation rituals since the arrival of Western culture in the area. Today, Bena men sometimes publicly stage male initiation rituals in shows or at special events in exchange for money, while they are hardly practiced anymore in the villages. Here is a noticeable shift in the relationship between signifier—the initiation practice itself (involving cane-swallowing, nose-piercing, etc.)—and signified, the idea behind it (increase of male strength through specific exchanges). At first glance, the cultural category of male initiation itself, its "meaning," seems to change fundamentally, with the men now focusing on money acquisition in public rather than on practicing the "traditionally" secret male cleansing rituals. However, I show in chapter 4 that the transformations of initiation practices grow on the reproduction of the preexisting cultural notion of Bena exchange, which has always been open to the expansion of (exchange) relationships, thereby not only allowing but depending on personal innovations. Although a visible transformation of the relationship between signified and signifier is taking place, with the latter changing its form and context, the underlying signified (the gain of strength through practices of personal detachments and attachments in exchange) remains and even is extended.

The structural transformation of culture further depends on a change in the relationships between cultural categories. In the case of Hawaii, Sahlins (1985:

139) claims that it was the commoners' "cultural consciousness"—here in the form of "simple pragmatism"—that led them into exchange with the strangers; for the chiefs it was a matter of economic and "cosmic" meaning. The exchange with Europeans became crucial for Hawaiian commoners *and* for chiefs. In this process the customary meanings of persons, practices, taboos, and goods—cultural categories—were altered. The divine kings/chiefs of Hawaii, for example, used the cultural category or "institution" of *tabu* for their own purposes (which to my mind was no less an act of "simple pragmatism"). By declaring it *tabu* for commoners to trade with Europeans, they ensured their own and exclusive access to Western goods. When respected, the sacred restrictions of *tabu* promised divine benefits, but now they were beginning to conflict with the public/general welfare and it was merely the chiefs who benefited. This led to a "revaluation of the meaning of *tabu* that can be correlated with the emerging of class" (Sahlins 1985: 142). Like other preexisting cultural categories, *tabu* underwent a "pragmatic redefinition" (Sahlins 1985: 142) that brought with it a structural transformation because it altered the relationships between cultural categories. Especially when an unexpected "event" occurs, this process involves the transformation or functional revaluation of cultural categories, while at the same time they are reproduced.

I agree with Sahlins's understanding of the reproductive transformations of cultural categories. However, I have a different understanding of "event." What is an event really? Sahlins's Hawaiian example implies that the initial motivation for the transformation of cultural categories lies in a personal striving to find new exchange partners. In Bena, I found that every event is perceived as some form of interpersonal exchange and that the signifiers of cultural categories—for example, the formalities of male initiation—may alter through such events but remain related to the same signified, which is in Bena the idea of exchanging *nogoya'a,* "vital essence" (Newman: 1965). Ideally, this exchange is reciprocal and designed in a way that a person always receives some *nogoya'a* from others when he or she gives parts of his or her own *nogoya'a* away in exchange. *Nogoya'a* is part of every living being, every spirit, plant, and all land, and signifies "nurturance." It is and must be continuously exchanged to balance strong and nurturing aspects inside persons and in their relationships with each other. I will elaborate on this in more detail throughout the book. In this introductory chapter I merely want to point out that Bena culture works on the principles of exchange. I find that Sahlins's understanding of "event" as the relationship between happening and symbolic system of reference can be misleading because it does not reveal that every "event" is primarily an exchange between persons.

Sahlins (1985: 140) notes that "the dominant structure of the initial situation, that the chiefs distinguished themselves from their own people in the manner that Europeans were different from Hawaiians in general, became a

conceit of personal identity—from which ensued an order of political economy." Hawaiian chiefs attached to themselves parts of the new culture—for example, clothes or names (such as King George)—as crucial for their identity (expressed in their divine character that encompasses the whole society and cosmos). Sahlins's description brings to mind M. Strathern's model of the partible Melanesian person whose identity is created and shaped by an exchange of personal detachments and attachments. It further shows that "the functional revaluations" (Sahlins 1985: 140) of preexisting categories did not contradict but rather extended traditional conceptions. This is in line with my observations in Bena. I argue that the reproductive transformations of cultural categories work in Bena through attachments and detachments of parts of persons in exchange and, further, that these parts contain and signify *nogoya'a.* As I will show in chapter 7, Christian ideas—for example, the Last Supper or Christ's Crucifixion—can in fact quite easily be interpreted according to the Bena concept of exchange, and the idea of a Christian God is not only compatible with but an extension of the previous idea of an exchange relationship with the Bena founding ancestor *huma.* My Bena data confirm that the (possible) extension of preexisting cultural categories is indeed a precondition for their transformations. In chapters 5 to 7, I analyze examples of syncretism and show that culture change happens in accordance with the drive to extend exchange relationships—and, with this extension, influence the balance of nurturing and strengthening aspects of persons in ideally reciprocal exchange.

What, however, happens when new relational networks do not follow the cultural ideal of reciprocity? Kirsch's (2006: 79) criticism on Melanesian ethnography—that, when dealing with exchange, "anthropologists have emphasized the constructive accomplishments of exchange rather than the consequences of its failure"—can be extended to the analysis of culture change. To more deeply understand the cultural categories of change and continuity, one also needs to consider situations when change fails, when new cultural elements are rejected. Chapter 8 gives an example of such a case of failed syncretism.

Recent anthropological works on Melanesia widely agree that indigenous perspectives on the world are formed through social relations (e.g., Bashkow 2006; Courtens 2008; Crook 2006; Kirsch 2006; Scott 2013), that in fact "social relations determine how one sees the world, as well as what one sees" (Kirsch 2006: 78). In this book, I take social relations as the source of reference for Bena perspectives on cultural changes. They are closely tied to specific understandings and practices of exchange and reciprocity. My investigation in chapter 8 builds on Kirsch and explains failed syncretism in terms of "unrequited reciprocity" (Kirsch 2006: 95f.)—an extension of Sahlins's (1972: 195) model of "negative reciprocity."

Sahlins stresses the active role people play as agents in the transformations of cultural categories. He approaches the problem of symbolic reference—the

relationship between signifier and signified and its changes—by analyzing the ways "cultural concepts are actively used to engage the world" (Sahlins 1985: 145), how they are expressed in concurrent practices. Here, he introduces the subject and his or her "interest" into the sign in action (sign as the expression of a cultural category) According to Sahlins (1985: 150) there is a profound difference between the value of a sign in a symbolic system—its semantic relations to other signs—and its value to people when they use it. This means that the conceptual value of a sign or object additionally acquires an intentional value—in a way a pragmatic one—that may differ profoundly from its conventional value. Cultural categories (as systems of signs), Sahlins (1985: 151) rightly says, are therefore engaged by *interest in projects*. This already implies their capacity to change their structure and their values. The interested or intentional, thus fundamentally flexible, uses of cultural categories allow for innovations.

Sahlins's (1985: 144) example has shown that culture change is expressed in actions "insofar as in action the categories by which a present world is orchestrated pick up some novel empirical content" and that the opposition between event and structure is untenable. An unexpected—arbitrary—event such as, for example, Cook's arrival on the shores of Hawaii or the arrival of the Church of Scientology in Napamogona (chapter 8)—triggers the reproduction of preexisting cultural categories but may also initiate their "functional revaluation" with sometimes unexpected outcomes. In this regard, culture change is always a bit of a "gamble"—the gamble being that culture change brings with it "some unforeseen effects that cannot be ignored" (Sahlins 1985: 149). At first glance, one may indeed perceive culture change in Papua New Guinea as a gamble, and occasionally as quite bizarre. I remember, for example, how stunned I was when my relatives told me that Tom Cruise and John Travolta were on their way to the village to open a new "school," let alone how Napamogona interpretations of the Scientology ideology were formed and discussed. The arbitrariness of cultural categories allows for personal innovations with such seemingly unexpected outcomes (see chapters 5–8). The question, however, is what "the unexpected" signifies. During my research, I noticed that people reacted to unexpected events with greatest flexibility, often in ways that quite surprised me—and not only me. My observations confirmed M. Strathern's comment that "the Melanesian world is one where people constantly take *themselves* by surprise" (cf. Da Col 2013: 1, original emphasis)—and others, I would add. However, as surprised as everybody may be on occasion, the indigenous analysis of unexpected events, as I encountered it, always appeared to be structured in terms of relationships. An outside observer may be tempted to see what Eco (1992: 50) once called an "excess of wonder" and that Da Col (2013: 1) describes as a "perceptual regime which overestimates the importance of coincidences and relentlessly traces relations

between signs"; but this, of course, is not the way Bena persons perceive it. There appears to be no concept of coincidence in Bena culture. Instead, "co-incidences" or "wonders"—be they sudden weather changes, accidents, good or bad news, unexpected encounters, or deaths—are immediately positioned within the local and personal relational networks and become thus complexly intertwined with elements of the physical as well as the spiritual plane—both of which Bena sociality is the center. The old, the new, and the unexpected are related through personal links from physical/local, temporal/historical, and metaphysical/relational fields (see Bashkow 2007; Courtens 2006; Kirsch 2006; Scott 2013; Tove Stella 2007). I found that unexpected events are primarily seen as unexpected (options for) exchanges and, as my adopted Bena father Tau loves to say, one should always "expect the unexpected." He is well prepared for unexpected events that require his contributions and always has some extra pigs and crops in store. Persons in Bena indeed strategize—sometimes count on—an interference of the unexpected. In this way, nothing really is ever unexpected. Even if the contents of specific events cannot be foreseen, the fact that unforeseen events occur is an acknowledged (and expected) part of life. On the one hand, this cultural concept expresses the unpredictability of human existence as such, and, on the other, it points to a huge range of opportunities because *everything* is *always* possible. Such thinking may raise feelings of insecurity, as one can observe in Euro-American culture, where unexpected events often tend to be seen as disturbing preset plans; Bena persons, on the other hand, rather perceive them as chances that must be taken and strategically used to advance personal relational networks. Unforeseen events may bring unexpected strength or, for example, in the case of a natural disaster or personal catastrophe, they may be weakening. In any case, they are conceptually linked to exchange.

The concept of always anticipating the unforeseen is by no means exclusive to Bena; in fact it has become acknowledged as a cultural characteristic on a local and national level, often with a playful tone of self-irony. For example, Papua New Guinea's most popular Airline advertised with the slogan "Papua New Guinea—Land of the Unexpected" (later changed into "Papua New Guinea—Land of the *Totally* Unexpected").[2] For Bena I argue that the feature of being open to innovation and generally expecting unexpected events/exchanges and to adjust one's exchanges to new relationships is a cultural trait that existed before contact with white people. It is one of the a priori concepts of Bena culture that brings to mind the role of persons in the process of culture change. When taking a closer look at the process of synthesizing new cultural elements with preexisting ones under consideration of the persons who are the agents of such transformations, the apparent randomness fades and the strategic innovations of persons come to the fore—all of which are tied to (expected or unexpected) exchange. Seen from this perspective, culture change

(the transformation of cultural categories) is the product of intentional, not random, action.[3] Rather, people become the "authors of their own concepts" (Sahlins 1985: 152). Turning against theories on globalization or "world system theories" that often portray people in colonized cultures as helpless and passive victims of the dominating Western (capitalist) system that brings with it the loss or destruction of their indigenous culture, Sahlins stresses the active role people play as agents in culture change—"indigenous people are active agents in processes of change, even when the other culture represents the dominant capitalist system" (quoted in Robbins 2005: 5).[4] My example of failed syncretism clearly supports this position. The fact that the Church of Scientology did not succeed in its "mission work" in Napamogona village shows that my interlocutors are far from being easily convinced, tricked, or dominated by new potential exchange partners. Rather, a new relationship is tested and valued in accordance to the preexisting Bena notion of exchange, which involves reciprocity and a balancing of nurturing and strengthening aspects in and between persons (chapters 3, 8). In this case, the new exchange relationship did not fulfill the cultural ideal of reciprocity nor did it allow for a nurturing extension of relational networks. Rather, it represented "unrequited reciprocity" (Kirsch 2006: 79ff.) and became associated with undesired practices of sorcery and witchcraft. Culture change thus results from personal actions that follow personal motivations or interests, which (at least partly) derive from preexisting cultural categories. Underlying all change is continuity. Influenced by Lévi-Strauss, (1962, 1971) Sahlins (1976: 23) understands culture change as shaped by (structural) continuity and vice versa. Such continuity of the structure is itself a historical product (Robbins 2005: 5–6). Structure and history can therefore not be seen as "exclusive alternatives" or opposites but are in reality synthesized with each other (Sahlins 1985: 144).[5] The same goes for the opposition between stability and change. In Western thinking, they are perceived as antithetical, as "logical and ontological contraries" (Sahlins 1985: 144) and are, like other categorical distinctions such as state versus action, being versus becoming, condition versus process, and so forth (Sahlins 1985: 144), seen and treated as opposing or complementing each other. In reality, however, instead of being oppositions, the different aspects combine. "Culture functions as a synthesis of stability and change, past and present, diachrony and synchrony" (Sahlins 1985: 144). Based on this assumption, culture can be understood as the processual and continuous synthesis of different elements and categories (and their meanings) that encounter and interact with each other, acquire a new functional value that again affects other related categories, and leads to transformations in their meanings, use, and structure. Here Sahlins introduces his term "the structure of conjuncture." The structure of conjuncture is "the situational sociology of cultural categories with the motivations it affords to risks of reference and innovations of

sense" (Sahlins 1985: 152–153). In other words, it captures the situation and the process of synthesis, of the conjoining of seeming dichotomies (past/present, structure/history, preexisting/new cultural categories). It further implies the personal interests and agency of persons in such transformations. It was, after all, the personal motivation to begin a new exchange relationship that drove Hawaiians out to meet Cook's crew and that made the Napamogona try to understand Scientology ideology.

Sahlins's focus on the embeddedness of cultural categories in history *and* structure introduced the aspects of arbitrariness, flexibility, and capacity for transformation into the previously somewhat static models of structuralism and, most importantly to me, it considered personal interests and agency as important criteria for the transformation of cultural categories. He has, however, neglected the relationship between "event" and "exchange" in that any event signifies (options for) exchange. I argue that the Bena understanding of exchange represents the system of symbolic reference according to which "events" are interpreted and agentive strategies are developed. The anchor for the agentive transformation of cultural categories—meaning a shift in the relationship between signifier and signified—thus lies in the culturally specific notion of exchange as reference and with it the understanding of person.

Agents and Persons

When Sahlins talks about agency, he does not specify the term but uses it to describe the activities of persons as responsible and conscious strategies in the reproduction and transformation of cultural categories. Persons to him are per se agents. M. Strathern (1988: 268ff.) has dealt with this question on a deeper level and distinguished between agent and person. As I will explain in more detail in chapter 2, according to her, Melanesian persons are socially derived dividuals, composed of detachable bits of each other and thus "an assemblage of or the locus of relationships" (M. Strathern 1988: 272). In other words, persons define and reveal themselves through their ever-changing relationships. An agent, in this Melanesian model, is one "who from his or her own vantage point acts with another's in mind" (272). Agents are responsible for the transformation of relationships and thereby of persons (and practices and cultural categories); they appear "as the turning point of relations, able to metamorphose one kind of person into another, a transformer" (272). M. Strathern speaks in this context of cause and effect. Agents as transformers of social relationships act in reference to other persons—perceived in the relationships that constitute them—who are not active themselves but become the cause of the agent's acting. In some forms of Bena ***het pe*** exchanges that I describe in chapter 4, for example, the brother of an upcoming mother gives gifts to his in-laws and in doing so initiates long-term exchanges between

him and his in-laws as well as his children and their children and so forth. He becomes an agent that acts with (the relationship towards) his in-laws in mind, their persons being the cause of his actions and the transformation of the relationship with them the objective and intended effect. Each agentive acting—wonderfully expressed in single exchanges—therefore aims at reproducing and transforming specific relationships. This goes for the change of cultural categories as well as for that of (dividual) persons. An agent always has such transformation in mind and plans it more or less strategically. While a "person is construed from the vantage points of the relations that constitute him or her," an agent "is construed as the one who acts because of those relationships and is revealed in his or her actions" (M. Strathern 1988: 273). Thus both person and agent "occupy positions defined by different vantage points" (273).[6]

An agent's position is "intrinsically multiple" (M. Strathern 1988: 273) because each cause for agentive acting is different and represents transformations of different relationships. By manipulating the transformation of exchange relationships, an agent always redefines (or transforms) his or her own person, leading him or her again to new transformations of exchange relationships and so forth. It is like a catch-22 in that it reveals one of the most fundamental principles in New Guinea Highland societies—that the dichotomy of person and society or individual and collective does not work in the way it does in Western culture. This, of course, is by no means a new idea; but Strathern's model of Melanesian personhood has not been widely applied to the analysis of culture change, as I shall attempt to do here. With her concept of the partible person, M. Strathern has described the Melanesian view on person as social (dividual/multiple) and has shown that the analytical application of Western dichotomies is counterproductive to the understanding of Melanesian social structure. In this regard, she shares Sahlins's objection to anthropological categories that stem from Western culture, like the "individual" and the concurrent assumption of a bounded "ego"-entity which is at the center of action and relationships (M. Strathern 1988: 269).[7] In Melanesia, agents and persons are perceived as and act as dividual or multiple.

Although I take the partibility of person as the starting point for my analysis of culture change in Bena, I need to emphasize that I do not see an understanding of person as partible or dividual restricted to Melanesian cultures and agree that "the stark opposition of individual versus dividual personhood on which Melanesia's current bifurcation is premised is overly simple" (Mosko 2010: 219). The dichotomy between Western individual and Melanesian dividual cannot be withheld. As Mosko (2010: 219) has argued in relation to the conceptualization of person in Christianity, "The total Christian person … is as fully partible as indigenous Melanesians" and "the individualism that has been routinely associated with Christianity is itself a manifestation of dividuality closely analogous to Melanesian personhood" (see also Scott 2013).

It seems "we Westerners" and the Melanesian "others" are not on entirely different grounds then. I will refer to this argument and other criticism on the "essentialist and synchronic limitations" (Mosko 2010: 219) of the new Melanesian ethnography in more detail in my chapters on the Bena person and on Christianity. At this point, my intention is merely to make clear that when I use the term "dividual" to describe the Bena notion of person, I do not see it in opposition to a Euro-American "individual." Having said that, there is—as will become clear throughout this book—no doubt that persons in Bena are culturally conceptualized as dividuals, as partible agents in exchanges. Mosko has helped to clarify the similarities and differences of M. Strathern's and Sahlins's notions of agency. He counterposes M. Strathern's construction of the Melanesian "partible person" with Sahlins's model of the "heroic" or "divine" Polynesian "king" (Mosko 1992; Sahlins 1985). Mosko argues that Polynesian chiefs can best be understood and characterized in terms of personal partibility and not in terms of heroic hierarchy, as Sahlins suggested. As Mosko puts it, Strathern and Sahlins both have dealt with the same problem, namely the ethnocentrism inherent in the Western notion of the unitary individual, but they have taken different, actually opposing, directions in doing so. While Sahlins "would holistically encompass the 'person,' or merge a multiplicity of such 'persons,' within the greater social totality, Strathern partitions every 'person' into his or her composite and detachable parts and relations" (Mosko 1992: 698).[8] Both authors have on their grounds developed theories of social action that profoundly diverge. The difference lies mainly in the specific dynamics of agency attributed to persons in the different regions. Strathern sees the Melanesian person not as individual but as dividual, "multiply or plurally constituted of the earlier contributions and relations of other persons" (Mosko 1992: 698), thus developing out of other person's actions. In this Melanesian view, action consists, according to M. Strathern, of personal detachment— meaning that, in acting, a person detaches previously internal parts of him or herself, externalizes them, and exchanges them with other persons who in turn attach them to themselves and thus internalize them. Agency is then "a process of personal decomposition" (Mosko 1992: 698).[9] In contrast, Sahlins sees person as embodied in the Polynesian divine king or chief "whose heroic capacities and actions summarise, unify, encompass and thus expansively internalise the relations of society's member as a whole" (Mosko 1992: 698).[10] Here a fundamental contrast between M. Strathern's Melanesianist and Sahlins's Polynesianist model of social practice is revealed. Strathern, according to Mosko (1992: 699), portrays social practice as a "'subtractive' process" and the capacity (of Melanesian persons) for action as arising from differences and separations. Agency is then, according to M. Strathern, stemming from incompleteness rather than from completeness of person. Sahlins argues the other way round. Social practice to him is "essentially 'additive' or 'expan-

sive'" (Mosko 1992: 699). In his view, persons (chiefs) completely incorpo-rate other persons and relations in agency; and not only persons: they embody or encompass the whole society and even the cosmos (Mosko 1992: 700). Mosko does not agree with Sahlins in this respect. He proposes the partibil-ity of persons for the divine kings instead: "Where Sahlins would attribute the extraordinary agency of divine kings and chiefs to a sort of extension or expansion of the Western 'individual' to heroic proportions, I suggest the pos-sibility instead of something like its partibility, detachability and reduction" (Mosko 1992: 700).[11]

My data on the exchange of *nogoya'a* between persons in Bena support M. Strathern's argument about their partibility in Bena thinking, and I agree with her and Mosko that acting is a process of personal decomposition. By decomposing their parts (and by externalizing and exchanging them), Bena persons stimulate others' reactions. For M. Strathern, every action is therefore both conventional and innovative (Mosko 1992: 702). In other words, it is a re-production and a transformation. In Bena, as among the Mekeo (Mosko 1992) or the Muyu (Kirsch 2006), persons are measured in terms of what they are "able to elicit from others" (Kirsch 2006: 80). Exchange transactions "make people appear in particular social roles in relation to each other" (Kirsch 2006: 88); they always emphasize the (potentially new) relationship between the ex-change partners.

The Partibility of Culture and Cultural Categories

With this understanding of agency, I argue that Bena personhood follows Bena cultural logic in its transformative character. Bena persons define themselves through social relationships and transform themselves as agents through the reproduction and transformation of such relationships. As agents, persons also shape, reproduce, and transform cultural categories; and they do so with social relationships in mind. If we consider the change a cultural category undergoes through the encounter with a new culture—for example the Polynesian institu-tion of *tabu* as Sahlins (1985: 140ff.) described it in his example—it becomes clear that its transformations and changes occur with respect to their effects on social relationships. As pointed out above, the application of *tabu* had an impact not only on the relationships between chiefs and the "divine" strangers but also on that of commoners to chiefs and of commoners to newcomers.

Bearing the differences in their approach to person and agency in mind, M. Strathern's agentive transformation of relationships and persons shares a num-ber of structural features with Sahlins's understanding of the agentive repro-ductive transformation of cultural categories. Both changes—that of person and that of culture—are shaped by agents that act according to their under-standing of social exchange relationships.[12] This implies that the structural

basis for cultural change as well as for the transformation of partible persons in Melanesia (at least, as I will show, in Bena) lies in the focus on shifting networks of social (exchange) relationships. What I am saying, in short, is that, in Bena, the change of person and that of culture work on the same underlying structural principle—the focus on agency in social relationships through an exchange of detachable parts of persons. It is a theoretical alley that Mosko (2005, 2010) has opened up with his use of M. Strathern's notion of the dividual in regard to Christianity. The adoption of Christian elements into Mekeo culture, Mosko argues, may be grounded in similar concepts of personhood found in both cultural systems. In chapters 5 and 6 of this book I present and analyze data that confirm Mosko's argument. I found that the "similarity" of elements of different cultures is a precondition for their compatibility and, with this, for their conjoining. Mosko shows that the Christian "person" cannot be understood as being "individualistic," as the "Judeo-Christian West" may suppose. Rather, Mekeo and Christian culture both perceive person as dividual and partible (Mosko 2005). My research findings confirm Mosko's argument of the relation between partible person and (agentive) culture change and prove that the similarity of notions of exchange and person provide a basis on which Bena people incorporate certain elements of Western culture and dismiss others. In Bena, as among the Mekeo,

> the adoption … of elements of Christian religion or other features of modernity has not necessarily involved the kind of profound ruptures, hybridities, fatal impacts, or globalizing flows that others have reported for the region. But neither has the adoption of Christianity by Mekeo and possibly other Melanesians involved the mere continuity of pre-existing religious beliefs and practices. For it is through active interpersonal transactions conducted in terms of personal partibility and mutual elicitation which mark both cultures that Mekeo villagers have adopted some elements of Christianity into their persons while relinquishing others of their Melanesian heritage; and it is as a consequence of these personal transactions that it can be estimated that their culture or religion has changed. (Mosko 2005)

If (inter)personal transactions are the causes for culture change, it can in Mekeo and in Bena terms best be understood as culture *ex*change.

From a conception of persons as partible and consisting "of bits of one another" it follows that persons define (and reinvent) themselves as agents through (the transformation of) their relationships. In other words, they change—by their own will or by default—according to their social relationships. The latter are, at least in Bena, by definition exchange relations.

Just as persons detach and attach parts of themselves in exchange, cultural categories undergo in their transformation a process of detachment and reattachment of their parts. When I speak of the incorporation or conjoining of

certain *elements* of Western culture with those of Bena, I imply the partibility of cultural categories. Cargo cults are a good example. Here, preexisting categories are not replaced but have Western elements attached to them, elements that are detached from their context of origin but carry some of its features with them. If, for example, cargo cult leaders place telephone receivers on graves in order to communicate with ancestral spirits (as I was told was done in Bena) they detach the objects from their Western context as a tool for communication among the technically/mechanically connected living and attach them to their preexisting ideas of communication with spirits of the dead. This attachment follows pragmatic considerations and is done in reference to social relationships, in this case the relationships to the ancestors on which the living depend.

According to Wagner (1981: 34), cargo cults can be seen as the "interpretive counterpart of anthropology" and are thus a kind of "reverse anthropology." Wagner observed that "the 'cargo' is seldom thought of in the way we might expect, as simple material wealth; its significance is based rather on the symbolic use of European wealth to represent the redemption of native societies. In this usage, it resembles those other 'cargoes', the more traditionally symbolic constituents of the bride price, or the activity and products of gardening, that embodies the central meaning of human relations for Melanesians, and that we tend to interpret in materialist, economic terms" (Wagner 1981: 32; also quoted in Kirsch 2006: 105).

In other words, the symbolical merging of Western elements into cargo cults reflects and enforces a perception of the world as determined by social relations. In the Bena example above, different cultural elements—for example, a telephone receiver—are attached to and incorporated into Bena exchange systems. They become the means of connecting—that is, building social relationships. Thus, the conjoining of elements of different cultures works in Bena on the same principles of partibility and detachment and attachment of certain elements as person in Bena does—in other words, it works through exchange. This Bena perception puts theories that focus primarily on hierarchy and domination of different cultures in culture change into a different light.

I share Sahlins's criticism of globalization theories of culture change to a great degree. Globalization, according to Sahlins (1999, 2000), does not bring with it any single, homogenized global culture but movements of cultural revival or preservation and differentiation. In opposition to the assumption of world-system theories that see capitalism as a dominant and forceful system threatening to destroy traditional cultures, Sahlins introduces his develop-man theory. "Develop-man" combines Sahlins's main interests concerning culture change (the relation between structure and history): cultural integrity, continuity in change, and indigenous agency. It is a form of cultural expansion in which new elements are interpreted and incorporated into the preexisting

culture in accordance with this culture's categories in order to improve or ex-pand the options of personal agency. The agency of indigenous people as it is played out in projects of develop-man also influences the world capitalist system rather than capitulating before it (Sahlins 1989).[13] Sahlins argues that culture change should not be seen as an indicator of the death of a culture but rather as new "kinds of cultural processes" (Robbins 2005: 10). His important argument here is that cultures have always been invented and transformed and that the fact that they are doing so now does not make them less authentic than in the past. Further, even when people take one or two aspects of their tradition as central to their whole culture and use them as a means of differentiation from others, this does not indicate the inauthenticity of their culture. Quite the contrary, such reifications or "seemingly decontextualized symbols" (Robbins 2005: 8) may express cultural identity because they have a wide range of cul-turally specific connotations that come with them. This is exactly true for cul-ture change in Bena, as numerous examples in this book will confirm. So far so good—but what Sahlins dismisses is that agency in "develop-man" proj-ects signifies personal forms of exchange between partible persons, and that "new kinds of cultural processes" represent shifts in exchange relationships.

Since Sahlins, the analysis of culture change remains of central concern to Melanesian anthropology, as numerous recent works on the topic con-firm (e.g., Bashkow 2006; Crook 2007; Mosko 2010; Robbins 2007, 2013; Tomlinson and McDougall 2013; Tove-Stella 2007). These works represent a great geographic, theoretical, and epistemological diversity and offer rich comparative data. Especially the anthropology of Christianity (Barker 2008, 2013; Cannell 2006; Hann 2007; Keane 2013; Robbins 2004, 2007, 2013; Tomlinson and McDougall 2013) has contributed significantly to the analysis of culture change. An important issue it raised is whether cultural changes should be analyzed in terms of continuity, as, for example, Sahlins did, or rather by focusing on ruptures. Robbins (2007: 10) criticized anthropologists for their "continuity thinking" when analyzing culture change. According to him, "Cultural anthropologists have for the most part either argued or implied that the things they study—symbols, meanings, logics, structures, power dy-namics, etc.—have an enduring quality and are not readily subject to change" (Robbins 2007: 9).

In regard to Christian conversion among the Urapmin, Robbins (2004) found instead a view that stresses the rupture between traditional and Chris-tian life. It is expressed, for example, in the Urapmin comment "Before was before, and now is now" (Robbins 2007: 11). Here, the conversion to Christi-anity has become a temporal and moral marking point in personal biographies as well as local history (see also Bashkow 2006: 118f.; Keane 2013: 220f.). However, I wonder whether such "marking points" necessarily imply funda-mental "ruptures."

Even Sahlins, who sees "develop-man" projects as the first and initial re-action to the encounter with a new culture, at some point in his career has ad-mitted to radical culture changes. According to him, these feed on the feeling of inferiority and humiliation people experience, a feeling that can rise at a second stage in the process of cultural change: "Humiliation breaks the cycle of develop-man reproduction and expansion by convincing people of their own worthlessness and the worthlessness of their cultures. It instills a 'global inferiority complex' that leads people actively to want to change" (Sahlins 1992: 24; Robbins 2005: 11; see also Knauft 2007).[14] In many places, the in-troduction of Christianity would be an example of such humiliation-induced change. I have objections against Sahlins's idea of "humiliation." At least for my research site, I argue that "humiliation" rather signifies a state of "weak-ness," implying an imbalance in nurturing and strengthening aspects of *no-goya'a* in persons. Sahlins (1990: 93) recognized humiliation but he also implied the self-awareness of people by stressing that "around much of the world … the universalising cultural project of the West does not succeed so well in humiliating people." He further argued that an initial feeling of humil-iation may well lead to a greater cultural self-consciousness because in order to feel humiliated by one's culture one must become aware of it (Sahlins 1990: 93; 1992: 24; Robbins 2005: 12). Sahlins did not pursue his idea of cultural humiliation further, and I think he had good reasons for not doing so. It has, however, been taken on and developed further by others. Strong (2004: 123) speaks of a repudiation of traditions in the Asaroka area near Bena, and Rob-bins introduces a new model of culture change alongside assimilation (exten-sion of preexisting cultural categories) and transformative reproduction. He calls it adoption. To him, adoption is a form of culture change grounded on humiliation through "cultural debasement," a term originally used by Sahlins (Sahlins 1992: 24) with people learning to "hate what they already have … despise what they are … and want then to be someone else" (Sahlins 1992: 24; also quoted by Rumsey 2004: 584). In adoption, people take on the new cul-ture completely "on its own terms" without attempting to link it with or work it into preexisting categories of their "traditional" understanding, because of their feeling of inferiority and humiliation. Robbins thus sees humiliation as a precondition for adoption. If Sahlins's arguments—that "indigenous catego-ries shape people's understandings of novel experiences" (quoted by Robbins 2005: 12) and that new events are, at least initially, interpreted in indigenous cultural categories—are correct, and if on these grounds a feeling of humilia-tion develops, humiliation itself must be a preexisting cultural category (Rob-bins 2005: 12). In other words, "the initial humiliation must take place in traditional terms" (Robbins 2004: 9). Robbins followed this argument in the Urapmin context by showing how compatible the precontact Urapmin cultural emphasis on "moral deliberation" and on difficult moral choices in everyday

life was with the Christian notion of sin and how it led to a feeling of humiliation sparked by that of severe moral condemnation from colonial officers and evangelists. Although initiated by the encounter with the new culture (first indirectly through the building of an airstrip in Telefomin, which changed the previous centrality of Urapmin in the ritual economy of the region, and then directly through encounters with missionaries), the Urapmin feeling of humiliation—which is, according to Robbins, the main motivation for their conversion to Christianity—is rooted in preexisting cultural categories such as the morality mentioned above. Further, the Urapmin value of innovation, expressed, for example, in the creativity and innovative strategies of Big Men in order to appeal to others, and the concurrent flexibility of choices and actions, provided nurturing grounds for Christianity. Robbins speaks of two different phases of Urapmin Christianization and developed a two-stage model of conversion (Rumsey 2004: 586) that corresponds with Sahlins's assimilation and transformation-types of culture change. According to Robbins (2004: 115), the Urapmin conversion to Christianity was first what he called a "utilitarian (religious) conversion" with the motives and the initiative for change coming from traditional cultural categories—induced, for example, by the innovative character of Big-Men-ship. Conversion to Christianity was here understood as a form of utilitarian experiment (utilitarian in the traditional sense). The second step in conversion is the intellectualist conversion where the motives for change have become separated from preexisting cultural categories, "when Christian meanings have come to shape people's world to such an extent that those meanings themselves, rather than ones drawn from traditional culture, begin to provide the motive for conversion" (Robbins 2004: 115). With this second stage of conversion, adoption happens and people take on a new cultural system "on its own term" (Robins 2004: 115).[15]

I agree with Rumsey's (2004) criticism of Robbins's model of adoption as treating culture as too distinct or too sharply circumscribed.[16] The Urapmin (like all cultures) had been "hybrid" long before Christianity arrived. They did not encounter Western culture "as such … but rather a historically specific and relatively limited set of foreign people, ideas and practices, religious and otherwise" (Rumsey 2004: 591).[17] People in Bena were also not suddenly confronted with Western culture as such but got to know it through personal encounters with foreigners who visited the area for various reasons and with whom they entered exchange relationships (either through wealth exchange or violence). Like Sahlins, Robbins may have neglected the fact that culture change happens through personal exchange. My data on Bena interpretations of culture change do not point to an idea of "humiliation" that leads to an adoption of the new culture, but rather to a focus on personal agentive exchange. Although Bena persons share similar experiences encountering a dominant Western culture and belief system as, for example the Urapmin, my

data suggest that they interpret the new relationships, at least partly, in different terms. For example, although the dichotomy of "whites" and "blacks" is also engaged frequently in Bena conversations, it is referred to with a variety of attributes. Whites, *safa bo* (lit. red men), and their ways may in specific contexts be associated with strength, material wealth, health, order, and easy lifestyle, but in other contexts they conversely connote selfishness, lack of empathy and emotion, cruelty, or greed (see Bashkow 2006: 221). In some respects, persons in Bena see Euro-American culture as stronger; in others they don't. Most importantly, even if they perceive it as stronger in specific contexts, this does not at all imply that Bena culture is generally regarded as inferior, nor that the status quo could not be altered. I argue that, for Bena, what Robbins refers to as "humiliation" is the self-perception of being "weak," bereft of *nogoya'a,* inferior in exchange. In Bena language, the state of being weak is phrased as *amuya memolo a menive,* literally "strength is not there"; a weak person is described as *amuya'a menina bo nohive,* literally "strength is not with the man." Unlike humiliation, the state of being weak (without strength, depleted of nurturance) can be changed. A weak Bena person—or a weak Bena cultural category for that matter—may regain its strength through strategic agentive acting, through being nurtured (receiving *nogoya'a*) in exchange; a humiliated person—or culture—will remain in the imbalanced state of inferiority in exchange unless it changes fundamentally, with crucial parts of it being dismissed and replaced by new ones.[18] Thus humiliation leads to adoption and enforces a structural change of cultural categories while being weak does not. This is crucial because it means that in Bena, the preexisting category of exchange is not substantially altered or dismissed and replaced with Western ways. Instead I will show that it is extended because new elements are attached to or conjoined with it.

In my work, I investigate why and how certain elements of Western culture are conjoined with indigenous categories and practices whereas others are ignored or even despised, why some Bena "traditions" were abandoned and others maintained, sometimes even reinforced. I am interested in understanding the process of merging or conjoining of elements of different cultures, a process leading to a reproductive transformation of preexisting cultural categories and concurrently to a shift in the system of symbolic reference and the social relational networks. Culture change is, to my mind, the best term to capture this process.[19] My take on culture change builds on this model; however, I further argue that the best way to capture the process of culture change is by focusing on exchanges of indigenous and introduced elements of cultures and persons.

Although this book deals with questions of cultural continuity and change, I hope not to make it an "obsessive concern" (Barker 2013: 162). The reason for my analytical focus on continuity (the reproductive transformations

of cultural categories in Sahlins's sense) is simply because what I found at first glance to be "ruptures" in Bena culture often turned out to be gradual (sometimes also radical) shifts in relationships. The situation in Bena appears quite different from that in Urapmin.[20] When persons in Bena converse and leave their old ways behind to become true Christians, they seem to perceive it rather as a change in relational fields (usually an extension) than a rupture. Although Bena Christians use opposing terms such as "dark" and "bright" to describe pre-Christian and Christian times and sometimes withdraw from relationships with non-Christians, the Bena way of being Christian appears much more flexible and open to changes than that described by Robbins for the Urapmin. I know a great number of people, including, for example my adopted mother Polako, who are changing their church memberships quite often and who possess large networks in different churches as well as in political or nongovernment organizations. In spite of a conceptual "diarchy" (Robbins 2013: 207) between, for example, Pentecostal Church doctrine and politics, I found that in the reality of life, these spheres overlap. The same goes more generally for Christianity and traditional practices and beliefs. Bena persons operate and mediate very consciously in and between these different spheres. The closer I looked, the clearer it became that the underlying motivation for conversion, as well as for changing one's congregation, lies primarily in pragmatic considerations regarding personal relationships. Mama Polako put it in these words: "I gained a new family. My old family stays but I also have other brothers and sisters now, my fellow-Christians" (personal conversation). I will elaborate more on this topic and recent approaches of the anthropology of Christianity in chapter 7. At this stage, I merely want to point out that only by understanding the cultural significance of the categories of continuity and change (and the role rupture plays or doesn't play in this) through indigenous *and* anthropological analysis, can we grasp what is actually going on in Melanesia today, on personal, local, and national levels (see Kirsch 2006; Tomlinson and McDougall 2013).

The questions I am dealing with in this book arise from the theoretical and empirical understanding of Bena culture I have outlined here. Central to Bena culture and to the transformations this culture experiences today is, I argue, the concept of partible person and exchange. In which way does it affect and shape the cultural transformations we can observe today? What strategies—if any—do Bena agents apply in the process of change? How do they analyze culture change and what do their interpretations reveal about the cultural significance of continuity and change? I hope this book may shed some light on such questions and will contribute to a better understanding of what it really is about—the people in Bena and how they position themselves in changing global contexts.

Methodology

Besides participant observation and other qualitative methods generally used in anthropological research, my main methodological focus was the audiovisual documentation of events, interviews, and Bena everyday life. This approach had a number of advantages. I could approach the filmed material in two different ways: first, through feedback analyses—I investigated the reactions and remarks when the material was shown to the protagonists and could thus supplement missing information or correct things that I misunderstood—and second, it enabled me to apply a fine-grained analysis to the images following the fieldwork. The process of filming further enabled me to reciprocate something visible to my Bena interlocutors and relatives. I compiled four related films for the community of Napamogona, ***hauslain*** documentaries as they called them, which I filmed according to the requests and wishes of persons in Napamogona. During the process of shooting and editing these short films, I took on the role as camerawoman and editor but left the directing entirely to my relatives. It was most interesting to see where the priorities of my Bena directors lay—what they chose as being of importance for the documentation of their cultural heritage and what they wanted me to dismiss.[21] These films were stored in the village, survived a tribal fight and the village's destruction, and are today still screened in Napamogona on special occasions.[22] Filming had the further advantage of allowing me to collect more data than I possibly could get with any other method. After one year in Bena, I returned with eighty-six hours of footage, a great part of which still needs to be analyzed.

Of course I have conducted numerous interviews with different people on all kinds of issues. Depending on the situation, some of these interviews followed a narrative and informal style; for example, when sitting together in the evenings, talking, I would not interfere with my interlocutors' narrations or discussions but let them dictate the paradigm and topic of the interview. However, I also conducted a number of structured and more concrete interviews where I asked specific questions about particular topics—for example, on the concept of person, magical practices and religious beliefs, historical data, etc. Thus my filmed material is supplemented by transcribed interviews as well as field notes.

The greatest part of my fieldwork consisted of participant observation, maybe sometimes more participating than observing. I learned how it feels to work the gardens, carry water up from the river to the village, and take care of pigs. I also learned how important it is to contribute in exchange and how much priority Bena persons give to exchange-related affairs as opposed to other tasks or obligations; and, possibly most important of all, I gained an insight into the complexities of village politics—the competition and tensions

that arise between different influential people and their strategies for increasing their influence over others.

Finally, I also supplemented my methods by archival research at the University of Goroka and the Melanesian Institute in Goroka. For the acquisition of statistical data, I visited the Eastern Highland's Provincial Government in Goroka and consulted different NGOs, especially the YWCA Goroka, "Save the Children," and "Family Voice."

Structure

Before I outline the book's structure I need to mention that some—very few—names have been changed on request.[23] My adopted Bena mother, for example, did not want her name publicized because she, as a committed Christian, did not want it to appear in a book that also elaborates on sorcery and witchcraft (an interesting ethnographic detail that I will refer to again in chapter 7). Further, in order to protect my informants, I have introduced a fictional character, a man named Nando, and placed him in my adoptive clan. There are a number of situations and practices described in this book that I consider relevant for my line of argumentation but which were illegal or secret, including killings, kidnappings, possession of weapons, revelation of specific magical knowledge and so forth. The stories and deeds I ascribe to Nando are all true but have in reality been committed by a number of other people who shall remain anonymous.

This book consists of the introduction, eight chapters, and the conclusion. I begin by laying out the theoretical framework and by explaining my line of argumentation. Chapters 1 and 2 reveal the background of my research, give fundamental information about the fieldsite, and introduce the people of Napamogona. In chapter 1, I describe various aspects of Bena culture that I found crucial for understanding social interactions: the relation between persons and their land and the impact this relation has on the lives of people. I show that the relationship between Bena persons and their land is based on partible exchange of nurturance, *nogoya'a,* in a similar way that the relationships between people are. I further introduce the persons who were of greatest relevance for my work. Chapter 1 aims mainly at bringing the reader into contact with the situation and context in which the research has taken place and the people of Napamogona today. Chapter 2 deals with questions of Bena leadership and economy. I introduce two Bena persons, my adopted mother Polako and my adopted father Tau, who both represent strength and dominance, however in different fields of exchange.

In chapter 3, I focus on indigenous notions of personhood that I see preliminary to culture change. Since this is the crucial point of my line of argumentation, it needs to be discussed before I delve into my material on cultural

transformations. The description and analysis of the Bena concept of person helps to lay out the setting in which culture change takes place and according to which criteria it is performed. I strongly rely on M. Strathern's notion of the Melanesian dividual and partible personhood and relate it to the Bena concept of *nubune-nemehani,* "my whole being and my spirit." In this chapter I explain the Bena ideas on person as consisting of different parts that are in exchange with other persons and with other parts of one's own person. This discussion includes a description of Bena spirits—of living and dead—and body substances with their inherent powers. The central focus is on a part of Bena person that Newman (1965) referred to as "vital essence" for the neighboring Gururumba. In Bena this personal "essence" is called *nogoya'a,* and *nogoya'a* is crucial in exchange between (partible) persons. *Nogoya'a* was translated by my interlocutors literally as "body fluid" but in a more metaphorical sense as "nurturance." Thus my main argument in this chapter is that partible Bena persons depend on the exchange of *nogoya'a* in their relationships—they nurture others with parts of their own essence. Here another important aspect of Bena person comes into play. *Sikrafu'i,* translated as "strength" and "life-force," is a substantial part of a Bena person. It indicates life. In order to increase *sikrafu'i,* strength, a person needs to receive *nogoya'a,* nurturance. Thus in exchange, persons give away *nogoya'a* and in doing so strengthen others, but they also elicit a future reciprocation of nurturance by the receivers that will in return make them stronger. From these standpoints I proceed to chapter 4, where I deal with Bena life-cycle rituals and analyze the exchanges taking place during these events in relation to partible person and the transfer of *nogoya'a* between exchange partners and/or groups. The main part of chapter 4 is taken up with the important **het pe** exchanges that profoundly shape a Bena person's social identity and confirm relationships between his or her maternal and paternal lineages. I further describe main life cycle events such as birth, initiation, and courting rituals. My focus in the analysis of these rituals lies on the changes they have undergone during the last two generations. I try to explain these changes in relation to the Bena notion of person and exchange; more specifically, I investigate how new forms of exchange transactions reproduce and reshape the partibility of Bena persons and show how persons are in such transactions deconstructed and reconstructed into the relationships in which they participate (see Kirsch 2006: 94; Wagner 1989: 267). In ritualized exchanges, social relationships are made visible and nurtured. Ritualized exchanges operate in this way as "an indigenous technique of social analysis" (Kirsch 2006: 80).

My analysis of magical practices in chapters 5 and 6 confirms that Bena culture possesses an intrinsic "openness to hybridity" (Kirsch 2006: 197). I focus on syncretism in magical practices, beginning with the description and analysis of magical practices in today's Bena. Some of these practices have

been introduced into Bena from other regions of Papua New Guinea before Western contact and have undergone various transformations; others have later been conjoined with Western ideas of horror-fiction. By focusing on indigenous interpretations of sorcery and witchcraft, I investigate how new elements are incorporated or dismissed in relation to the Bena concept of person and exchange of "essence."

Chapter 7 is on Bena belief and Christianity, with focus on religious syncretism. It investigates the transformation of cultural categories, such as "*sikrafu'i/* strength" and "*nogoya'a*/nurturance," through the introduction of Christianity. I draw mainly on indigenous analyzes of religious change and may thus position myself rather towards the "local configuration end of the continuum," as Barker (2013: 155) put it, with a key focus on "what local people make of Christianity"; and, indeed, I found "the process of change as compatible with much continuity" (Barker 2013: 149). In this chapter I show that the impact of Christianity on Bena culture can hardly be seen as a sudden rupture that led to a complete change or identity crisis, let alone a devaluation of Bena culture in Robbins's sense of humiliation. Rather than finding an unbridgeable gap between Christian individualism and Bena relationality, resulting in conflict and "moral torment" (Robbins 2004, quoted in McDougall 2013: 126), my data reveal that Christianity is here interpreted in terms of extending relational networks (to other persons, spiritual beings, and to God) in order to receive nurturance and gain in strength, and handled with the same pragmatic rationality as other matters in life. In this chapter I analyze Bena Christianity with respect to cultural concepts of personhood and exchange of *nogoya'a.* I demonstrate that the reasons for the acceptance and success of Christianity in Bena lie in the indigenous perception of similarity and the supplementing (extending) nature of Christian belief in relation to preexisting Bena cultural categories of person as partible and exchange as balancing strength and nurturance.

Chapter 8, which deals with a newly introduced, non-Christian form of belief, supports this argument. Here I give an example of failed syncretism. The Church of Scientology tried to establish itself in the Bena area and, in spite of an initial enthusiasm among the Napamogona, did not in the longer term succeed in winning the hearts and minds of my interlocutors. In this chapter I investigate the Bena reasoning that led to the rejection of the new relationship and show how it builds on the cultural understanding of "unrequited reciprocity"—a "dehumanizing experience" (Kirsch 2006: 95f.) which has its roots in failed exchange. Unrequited reciprocity was the driving force that shaped specific reactions to the newcomers. The Napamogona gave the organization a chance—but after some months judged the exchanges as "draining" (weakening) people in the village. Consequently, the organization's plan to establish itself in the area failed. Unrequited reciprocity is here a result of the indigenous analysis of the new "event" in terms of exchange and personal partibility.

The main questions I seek to answer in my work are how culture change happens in Bena and how it is defined and interpreted by my Bena interlocutors. By examining how Bena agency is played out in concrete situations and practices of culture change and by drawing on indigenous analyzes, I hope to reveal Bena perceptions on change and continuity and link them with my anthropological analysis.

Notes

1. Sahlins developed his theoretical approach to the analysis of culture and culture change on semiotic-structuralist grounds and thereby relied to a great deal on the semiotic-linguistic model proposed by Saussure. Sahlins treats culture as relying on an underlying structure of cultural categories that correspond to Saussure's categories of (linguistic) signs. Cultural categories are, like signs, classificatory schemes of structural, historical, and arbitrary character. In his "Course in General Linguistics," Saussure ([1916] 1983: 67) declared, "The linguistic sign is arbitrary," meaning that there is no connection between the concept, the idea, and the sound-image of a sign or, in Saussure's terms, the "signified" and the "signifier." Each language has, for example, a different signifier for the idea "mother." In French, it is "mère," in German, "Mutter," and so on. Each of these signifiers is arbitrary because it is different from the other, but each points to the same signified. The idea of mother could have been signified by any number of linguistic representations, but it is the connection between "mother" and the idea behind it that form the sign. This connection that develops between signified and signifier is created and transformed through its use in language by people. It is a result of convention, meaning that speakers of the same language group have agreed and learned that these letters or sounds evoke a certain image. The specific meanings that signs, and cultural categories, have ascribed to them thus derive from historical processes during which the relationship between signifier and signified was and is shaped and transformed. These relationships order people's understanding of the world (Sahlins 1985: 145–148; Saussure [1916] 1983), they are arbitrary and continuously changing. Sahlins sees their arbitrariness as a precondition for the historical character of culture and, with this, also for culture change.
2. The previous advertising already pointed in this direction: "Papua New Guinea—like every place you've never been."
3. This is not to say that the change itself is intentional. It can never be fully so, because agents can never be completely aware of all the possible consequences of their actions (Sahlins 1985: 152).
4. Sahlins's structural approach to culture change shows an interest in agency that Lévi-Strauss had neglected. This new focus on the relationship of structure and agency implies that in acting, individuals follow a pregiven structure but they do not "mechanically reproduce it" (Robbins 2005: 6). By acting, people (agents) shape their cultural categories "thus subjecting those categories to risk in the event that the fit between category and reality is not a neat one, and finally suffering the transformations of categories and the relations between them when there is a mismatch between category and reality" (Robbins 2005: 7).

5. In Sahlins's (1985: 144) Hawaiian example he has shown that Hawaiian history is clearly grounded in structure—"the systematic ordering of contingent circumstances"—while the structure of Hawaiian culture is also historical.

6. Where Sahlins describes the role of the agent as somewhat autonomous (he or she as author of his or her own concepts and acts), M. Strathern sees it differently. According to her, in Melanesian understandings of the matter, agents do not cause their own acts but "they simply do them"; agency and cause are not the same. "The cause is the person with whom the agent's relationship is to be transformed, a unitary reference point for her or his acts" (M. Strathern 1988: 273). An agent has the cause in mind when acting and thus the relationship to the person he or she is acting upon, but he or she is also concerned to influence the transformation of the concerned relationship to his or her own benefit.

7. As it is pictured in various models (for example, Leenhardt's model of the "New Caledonian personage," as quoted by M. Strathern 1988: 270).

8. While Sahlins relies heavily upon Dumont's (1959) model of hierarchy for Polynesia, M. Strathern's analysis of Melanesian societies diverges from this approach. Like Dumont, M. Strathern shows a certain skepticism concerning the comparative use of the Western notions of the "individual" for non-Western societies, but unlike Dumont, she "also rejects anthropological constructions of 'society' as reifications" (Mosko 1992: 698).

9. Mosko (1992) stresses in this context that such a partible understanding of person does not depend on any hierarchical order of the detachable personal parts.

10. Unlike Melanesian dividuals, Polynesian chiefs or kings are thus "social-historical individuals" (Sahlins 1991: 63). The divine chief/king's person represents the whole community; the latter's history and current situation depend on him and are reflected in his relationships to the outside, as "precisely in these heroic politics the king is the condition of the possibility of community" (Sahlins 1985: 34f.; cf. Mosko 1992: 699). In other words, it appears "that the efficacy of the Polynesian divine hero lies precisely in his (or her) hierarchical *super*composition" (Mosko 1992: 699).

11. Although he fundamentally agrees with Strathern (certainly with her model of agency) Mosko sees some problems in her theory, at least for the Mekeo case. M. Strathern (1988: ch. 7–10) emphasizes the gendering of relations and the male-female pair, and with it the contrast of same-sex and cross-sex relations, thus relying on a notion of duality. "The 'multiplicity' or 'plurality' of relations composing the Melanesian person in her account thus seems always comprised of a duality" (Mosko 1992: 701). His main criticism of Strathern is this dyadic arithmetic. Mosko argues that for Mekeo, the "plural composition of the person consists of a four-fold or quadripartite arrangement" rather than a dualistic one (701). However, he sees Strathern's axioms for Melanesian contexts as correct. It is just the "fundamental arithmetic" that may "require minor correction" (701).

    Mosko's next point of criticism of Strathern is that she overlooked hereditary chieftainship in some areas of PNG (for example, the Massim) and, in spite of her and Godelier's distinction of Big Men and Great Men, has somewhat fallen into the trap of essentializing *the* Melanesian person. By giving the Mekeo example, Mosko (1992: 702) gives an elaboration of Strathern's theory "of sociality qua personal detachability and partibility in a Melanesian context in which she has not yet herself pursued it."

12. According to Sahlins (1985), change arises from the attempt to deal with new situations in terms of preexisting categories and not from the conscious intention to change the culture. In her book *After Nature,* M. Strathern (1992) has argued along the same lines, that one of the strongest motors of sociocultural change is the "deliberate attempt to keep things the same."

13. Criticism of Sahlins's theory has been made, the main point being that the reinvention or revival of indigenous culture has little or nothing to do with the original and "authentic" culture (see Robbins 2005). Sahlins's reply to such criticism of "invention of tradition theorists" was mainly to criticize their "powerism," meaning their bias toward functional arguments that "cannot explain the cultural content of the phenomena they analyze" (Robbins 2005: 8).

14. Humiliation can also be related to the concept of person. Silverman (2001) pointed out that Western individualism in one respect worked well for the individual and socially perceived Tambunum notion of person, but that the lack of emphasis on the social side of person in Western culture made them feel unable to follow their own cultural balance of individual and social parts of person. The inability to balance these two sides of themselves made them feel humiliated. Most of the chapters in Robbins and Wardlow's (2005) book deal with humiliation and, as Robbin (2005: 14) says in the introduction, the "in-between position" of cultures being caught between "develop-man" and development. They show how "humiliation can unfold along lines laid down by the indigenous culture and can support efforts both at develop-man and development" and in doing so emphasize "that indigenous people remain active agents pursuing their own goals even during periods of change spurred on by their encounter with the West" (see also Biersack 2005; Leavitt 2005; Silverman 2001, 2005; Stewart and Strathern 2000, 2005).

    Humiliation is further analyzed in its emotional and psychological nature insofar as people's values are rendered worthless and their self-confidence decreases. However, according to Fanon (1967), Margalit (1996), and Rorty (1999), humiliation is also a social fact and, with this, a political condition as well as an emotional one. Miller (1993) pointed out that humiliation can exist even when it is not felt—for example, when it refers to a "quasijuridical status" rather than an emotional one. Dalton (2005) gives an example of the ways in which humiliation becomes defined in indigenous terms by describing the conditions of "sori" and "les" in Rawa culture. Robbins and Wardlow (2005) discusses humiliation among the Huli in reference to cultural notions of emotion, person, and action—and finds the indigenous concept of *madane* (disappointment/resentment/righteous indignation) that relates to exchange and person. Humiliation is, in contrast to *madane,* an emotion that only makes sense in cultures with individual concepts of person. She holds that *madane* characterized early encounters with the West but has been transformed into the Western humiliation; an indigenization of humiliation has taken place.

15. The Urapmin predisposition to accept Christianity thus first depends on its cultural openness for changes and on the similar features of certain Christian and precontact Urapmin cultural categories, such as "the Urapmin emphasis on lawfulness, the need to follow an established set of prohibitions that apply to everyone … the emphasis on inward reflectiveness about these, the distinction between law and will, and the idea that willfulness is the cause of all immoral behaviour" (Rumsey 2004: 589). Robbins

sees, however, a difference between Urapmin and Christian morality in relation to the will. The latter, according to Robbins, "condemns the will altogether" while Urapmin culture aims at a balance between lawfulness and willfulness "by using the will to establish human relationships" (Rumsey 2004: 589)—in accordance with the importance given to optation in Urapmin culture.

16. See also Robbins and Wardlow (2005), who found the humiliation not apposite for Huli people.

17. Robbins further relies greatly on Sahlins's and Dumont's cultural structuralism and explains adoption in these terms. Since, in this approach, culture "is seen as fully specifying the terms in which action is framed and motivated" (Rumsey 2004: 585), Robbins creates with his model of adoption some sort of paradox: if culture provides the terms and categories for (any) action it must necessarily do so for modes of culture change—a process that takes place in relation to preexisting cultural categories.

18. Humiliation can lie in an imbalance of exchange partners, if understood as "what one experiences when one is caught out trying to convince people that one has prestige or powers that one has no right to claim" (Miller 1993; cf. Robbins 2005: 12). Westerners often "out-give" indigenous people, thus creating a feeling of inferiority and humiliation that might lead to all sorts of consequences, from adoption of Western culture to aggression against it. Exchange certainly plays a crucial role here. For example, Stewart and Strathern (2005: 13) portrayed *moka*-exchange as a classic case of develop-man, with people (as agents) actively engaging in Western market economy but doing so "in exchanges patterned along traditional lines in efforts to enhance prestige and avoid humiliation as they traditionally understood them." This has, however, not worked out as expected and as a result the moka system broke down, leading to destabilizing and unpredictable effects that function as outlets for emotions that have previously been lived out in moka.

19. I generally try to avoid the contested term "hybridity" to describe the conjoining of cultural elements, mainly because of its origin in biology and its apparent focus on the present and neglect of temporal and processual aspects of culture change. I do sometimes use the term "syncretism" in reference to cultural combinations in concrete social practices but I have decided not to make it my main phrase since it has in practice a strong religious edge to it. When I use it, I abide by the original definition of syncretism in the Oxford English Dictionary as any "attempted union or reconciliation of diverse or opposite tenets or practices, esp. in philosophy or religion."

20. One must consider, of course, that the Bena villages I worked in have several churches and are not very far from town. While in Urapmin the whole society converted to one denomination, Bena persons can choose from a large number of competing churches.

21. Although it cannot be part of this book because it is a huge topic by itself, this self-presentation of Bena people in their films gave astonishing insights into their perception of culture change. I was, for example, surprised when they told me, while I was editing the film on my laptop, that they wanted music in it—and not, as I had assumed, "traditional" Bena chants but Abba or Elvis Presley. For me, it was at first quite strange to see images of tribal warriors combined with pop music—but, after all, it was not my film, and the apparent contradiction was in my perception, not in that of the Napamogona.

22. Some of the elder people I filmed have died by now and watching them on video is a great emotional event for their descendants. Years later, the films are still screened frequently in the village.

23. When I visited Napamogona in 2016 to present and discuss the latest draft of this book's manuscript with my interlocutors, all but two people insisted that their names should be published because they were proud to be part of this work on their culture.