

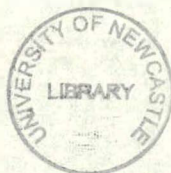
**Being Hula:  
The appropriation of Christianity in Irupara village,  
Papua New Guinea**

by

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I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the ways in which the Hula people of Irupara village on the south eastern coast of Papua New Guinea experience Christianity. I argue that ontology must be given priority in any ethnographic study of religion and that a phenomenological perspective best serves this purpose. The work of Maurice Leenhardt, the French missionary/ethnologist provides the starting point for my analysis which is developed through an engagement with existential philosophy and the anthropology of aesthetics. The role of aesthetics is fore-grounded and the importance of aesthetic description for the understanding of religious experience emerges as the central argument of the thesis.

The ethnographic focus is the United Church Women's Fellowship of which I found myself fortuitously a temporary member during a short period of fieldwork in 2001. I present an account of the history of settlement in the coastal Hula villages, the arrival of the London Missionary Society and, approximately fifty years later, that of Seventh Day Adventism in Irupara, before describing my time with the fellowship and considering its relationship to other aspects of village life.

The local form of Christianity is taken as the starting point for an ethnography which aims to disclose the lifeworld of the people of Irupara. We find that church and village are generally experienced as a complete form of sociality—an indigenous Christianity—but occasionally the contours of each become visible. Such everyday practices as gardening, fishing, sorcery, feasting, and the experience of living-with-the-sea constitute Hula existentiality. Together with the unique historical circumstances of Christian experience these aspects of village life reveal that Christianity has emerged in a form that is particular to the Hula people. Of most significance is the fact that the singing of *peroveta* (prophet songs) has become an important mode of religious expression that seems to traverse the divide between 'tradition' and Christianity and that singing-together constitutes a fundamental mode of being for the Hula.