

Lepe: An Exercise in Horticultural Theology

Philip Gibbs

Three decades ago the most sacred possession of young men in the Enga Province in Papua New Guinea was a plant called the lepe. This small insignificant-looking plant which reaches some half a meter out of the ground was the focus of attention in the sangai initiation rites. Scientists call the lepe 'sweet flag' (*Acorus calamus*). The Enga say it is more than a mere plant for it helps young men to mature, ensures the well-being and prosperity of married couples and is a means of establishing desirable relationships.

Today the sangai initiation rite has generally been abandoned and though this saddens many older people, the young ones seem unconcerned. Whether it has ceased due to mission pressure or in the over-enthusiasm of newly-baptised Christians thinking that they had to abandon all traditional ceremonies, is hard to determine. It means now that there are no major ceremonies to culturally recognise boys as having matured into men fit for marriage. New-found wealth and the wonders of video and stereo may glitter, but do not satisfy their need for symbols which will link their past to the present and the future. The formerly strict code of moral behavior is being exchanged for a consumer mentality in relationships with resultant debilitating diseases. Many finish primary school culturally illiterate with seemingly little appreciation or concern for their cultural traditions.

New symbols and rites will no doubt emerge, but it takes time. We cannot remain idle and simply wait for this to happen. We must seek to recover symbols from the past which can be given new relevance and new meaning. This is a religious task and is a challenge for theologians. In this paper I am suggesting the symbol of the lepe as one place to begin.

Lepe Origin Story

The Enga people have many fascinating stories (tindi pii). One of these is the story of the origin of the lepe.

Once there lived a poor ugly bachelor. When he tried to follow the handsome young men of his clan into the forest, they beat him and sent him back home again. At home an elder told him to go off into the forest in a different direction, which he did. He went up into a clearing with a gate formed from tree branches. He went through this to discover two more gates and then a house. It was a clean,

well built house, and he wondered whose it could be. He summoned enough courage to go inside and sat near the fire. Suddenly there was a shaking like an earthquake and he heard footsteps coming around the rear of the house. Then a beautiful woman appeared in the doorway. She stared at him and then asked, "Who are you, and what have you come for." He answered, "My grandfather told me to go and somehow I ended up here." The woman gave a smile which was like a flash of lightning, then took an axe and went to cut pandanus nuts. She cooked the nuts for him and then disappeared. At dusk he again felt the earth-shaking footsteps and she returned. As they sat eating the nuts the woman suddenly took hold of the ugly bachelor and forced him to have sex with her. In the morning she was gone, but she returned the next two nights and they slept together. On the third morning the woman remained and asked the ugly man if he wanted to join his handsome brothers. He agreed, so she took him to a high mountain and pointed down to where his brothers were sitting making human hair wigs. On returning to the house in the forest the beautiful woman dressed the ugly man with the best decorations. As she did so he turned into a big handsome man. His name was Lelyakali. The next day she provided him with a cassowary claw spear and sent him off to dance with his brothers. On arrival at the dance-ground the people were amazed at his appearance. Young women even fell on their knees beside him hoping to be touched by his decorations.

In the crowd was another ugly bachelor. He saw the handsome man and thought to himself, "If only I could be like him, then people would like me." After the dancing had finished he followed the handsome man and asked him if he would reveal the secret of his appearance, but he would not. After five months Lelyakali felt sorry for the ugly man and told him his secret about the place in the forest where he had become a big handsome man. The ugly bachelor went up to the house in the forest, sat by the fire and waited. Shortly the whole house shook and the same beautiful woman appeared at the doorway. She asked why he had come and then went to cut pandanus nuts and to cook them. As they ate the nuts the woman tried to seduce the ugly man as she had before with Lelyakali, but he resisted. He pushed her away, and she felt ashamed and ran away. Several more nights she tried and each time he resisted. Finally he got very angry. "I did not come for you. Why do you tempt me like this?" he said. She ran outside, and clutching his bow and arrows he ran after her and shot her. She gave a scream and fell with an arrow piercing her side.

Meanwhile Lelyakali was dancing with his brothers and when he looked up towards the secret place he heard the roaring of wind in the trees and the crashing of thunder and

lightning, and the whole area was enveloped in dark clouds, and he knew something was wrong. He ran there and found the beautiful secret place abandoned and decaying. He stood wondering what had happened and then he heard a faint voice and on investigating found the beautiful woman lying with an arrow piercing her side. Lelyakali was overcome with grief at the sight and cried for a long time. Then the woman told him, "Before you remove the arrow, go into the forest and cut lengths of taiyoko bamboo. Collect my blood in those bamboo containers and cover their tops with lymbi and metai leaves." Then she told him to go and bury the containers in a swampy place. "You may think you are wasting your time, but what you are doing will be very important for you and your descendants", she said. She taught him some secret words to say so that she would always be present at his side, and then told him to dig a grave. Then she said, "Three days after you have buried me, return and see what is growing here. Whatever appears you should take and plant where you buried the bamboo containers." Then she gave a weak smile and died. Lelyakali cried and then buried her and went home. When he returned he found two lepe plants growing, one at her head and one at the other end. He carefully removed them and went and planted them in the swampy place where he had buried the bamboo containers.

We have here a story of life and death, union and alienation. There is a progression of three transformations. First the ugly bachelor enters into a union with the beautiful woman, which results in physical maturity and fullness of life. The next transformation is a paradox where death is the result of the second bachelor's rejection of the woman. In the third transformation we see an inversion where the changed man encounters the woman again, but this time powerless and close to death. At the end of all this he is left with two lepe plants. The transformation may be summarised as follows:

1	2	3
ugly bachelor	ugly bachelor	handsome man
goes to forest	goes to forest	goes to forest
union with woman	rejects woman	finds woman dying
result: physical maturity and life	result: death	result: gift of <u>lepe</u>

The lepe plant which the beautiful woman bequeathed to Lelyakali became the central symbol in the sangai initiation rites for Enga boys. I will now explore the symbol of the lepe in the origin myth and in the initiation rites and some of its implications for theology. I will consider four meanings: moral goodness, mystery, life, and right relations.

Symbol of Moral Goodness

The lepe in the sangai initiation rites is a symbol of moral purity (mana tolatae) and goodness (mana auu petae).³ This might not be obvious from the story, especially since seduction is a central part of it. However the story has been acted out in the sangai initiation rites in which Enga boys come to be recognised as men after periods of seclusion deep in the mountain forests.⁴ They go for several weeks before to prepare a house and to clean the area surrounding the house so that nothing is out of place. The boys remove all clothing and put on a covering of fresh fern leaves. They wash themselves in the cold clear waters of a forest pool and cleanse their eyes for long periods in water issuing from pandanus leaf spouts. All the time there are nemango (spells) to assist this process of purification. At one stage they are forced to swallow pieces of sweet potato without chewing, and if they start to choke, this is taken as a sign that they have been imprudent in their eating habits at home. Having cleansed the outside of their bodies during the day, the evening is spent in public confession of breaches of conduct. This purified state is maintained during the days following by strict discipline and custody of the eyes and attention to proper speech. Normal terms for waste products or for common domestic items are not used as even verbal reference to such things is regarded as contaminating and improper. In this purified state it is believed that some of the young men can safely enter into the most important part of the rites which is to visit and tend the lepe plants which have been planted in special secluded places in the forest.

This was a morality based on a sense of both individual and communal responsibility. On the communal level each boy felt a very real pressure to conform to the standards of behavior expected of young men especially in relationships with women. He knew that if he transgressed it would be obvious in the appearance of his lepe plant which would sicken or die. If this was the case he would have to compensate his brothers and buy a new plant from somewhere else or risk retaliation from his brothers. This sense of communal responsibility for the lepe plants was sufficient to influence the behavior of most young men. One Christian explained his feelings to me recently. "Now when I'm tempted I think back to my baptism and this helps me to resist temptation," he said. "Before I used to think back to my lepe plant and this helped me to behave properly towards women."

There is another factor operating too in this morality-fear. There is an Enga syndrome in which the attitudes of men reflect unease and anxiety towards women. They believe that contact with women weakens male strength. Above all they fear menstrual blood. Why? Some explain it in terms of 'pollution' or 'contamination'. However this does not take the rich symbolic meaning of blood sufficiently into account.⁶ Although contact with menstrual blood may be thought dangerous to men, it is not simply polluting. Even a woman can be

endangered if it is not treated properly. In Enga society menstrual blood is equated with life and growth. It is dangerous because of its potency. Yet on the other hand it connotes 'weakness' because it is obvious that though women give birth, they are small and physically weaker than men, age more rapidly, and begin to lose weight from the birth of their first child. This dialectic of the potency of feminine blood, a principle of vitality, coupled with the predominant feminine characteristic of weakness is a feature of the origin story of the lepe. Both growth and death come from women. Women 'make' men and yet they are intimately associated with aging and death. We see this paradox not only in the myth, but also in the initiation rites where it is acted out. The stated aim of the rites is to make boys into men, yet there is the paradox of them being brought into ritual contact with female cult objects (the lepe and the bamboo containers) in order to promote the boys' growth. Boys have been covered with mother's blood at birth and sustained by mother's milk for the first three years of life. Thus the underlying logic of the rites is to symbolically 'kill' the (feminine) bodies of the boys so that they may begin a new existence as male beings.

Is fear such as that explained above a sufficient and desirable basis for Christian morality? I think not. This is a case where the Gospel must challenge the culture to re-examine the basis of its mores. With co-educational schooling and other changes modern youth are not nearly so influenced by those fears. Education may reduce fears yet leave young people in a moral vacuum. Fortunately a solution may be found in 'right relations' which is central to the myth. A morality based on right relations will be Christian yet based on important values in Enga culture. I will return to the theme of right relations in a later section of this paper.

Symbol of Hiddenness and mystery

The lepe plant in the forest is an exemplar of hiddenness and secrecy. The Enga term is yalo petae. No one is permitted to view it outside of ritual circumstances. Its appearance and location are shrouded in mystery. Similarly, symbols in their concealing/revealing function lead us to deeper realities often closer to the truth, where 'literal' thinking cannot penetrate. In this way the lepe is like an archetypal symbol: hidden, secret, concealed, yet once revealed to initiates it opens up a new world of meaning. The lepe as a symbol of the hidden and mysterious leads the young men on a quest not only into the forest, but also beneath the surface reality to that which is expressed in indirect language and rooted in the unconscious; the world of symbols found in myths and dreams.

In fact dreams are an important part of the sangai rites.⁷ Some dreams appear significant because of the emotional effect of the dream or because of special symbols which are recognised in the dream. The dreams of young men during the rites are considered particularly important because they are thought to foretell the future. Dream and myth symbolism are often similar and the myth of the origin of the

lepe is open to interpretation using insights from Jungian psychoanalysis. Using Jung, it is not difficult to see the myth as having to do with individuation. (One might expect this in a myth used as a basis for initiation rites.) The unknown forest is surely a symbol of the unconscious. The house which separates the wild from the domestic, the unknown from the known is a symbol of mediation between the known and the unknown standing for the establishment of relations between the conscious and the unconscious. There are a number of symbols of transformation. At the beginning the ugly man separates himself from his brothers (beginning of differentiation) and with the help of the woman changes into what he wishes he could be. The second ugly bachelor is a shadow figure. The woman can be seen as an 'anima' figure. In relating to her, she takes him up to the high mountain where he can see everywhere (a symbol of the 'Self'). I have not exhausted the rich psychic symbolism, but this is sufficient to indicate how the origin myth and the accompanying rites are meaningful at deeper levels than that of conscious experience. At this psychological level it is a myth about individuation where the young man journeying in a search for truth comes to terms with his mature Self. This also coincides with the Enga interpretation of the sangai rite. A young boy is called a 'no good boy' (wane koo). Through the rites he becomes known as a 'bachelor' (wane patange). The rites are to help the bachelor to mature enough to be declared fit for marriage when he will be called a 'man' (akali).

Besides the quest for personal maturity revealed in the origin myth, the lepe in its hiddenness reflects the presence of mystery and so acts as a mediator of the sacred. The small plant of finite reality takes on a transcendent dimension when it becomes a symbol of mystery. Thus the lepe opens up religious questions to do with revelation, sacramental consciousness and the sacred expressed through particular symbols. How does God use culture as a medium to speak to humankind? To what degree can myths like the origin myth illumine new areas of understanding? How essential is ritual in opening humankind to the presence of mystery, the transcendent meaning of which we call God? One of the principal mysteries revealed in the lepe is the mystery of life to which I will now turn.

Symbol of Life

In the sangai origin myth we have the paradox of a man receiving life from a woman who dies. It is a story about mortality and immortality, life and death. The lepe becomes a symbol of life for those in a right relationship to it. In the story there is the transition from an ugly, small, stunted, immature figure to a big, handsome figure of the mature man; an image of virility and vitality. Furthermore Lelyakali is able to relate to the woman in a mature manner, unlike the second bachelor whose inability to relate to the sangai woman resulted in her death. The bachelor remained living but only partly living, from the Enga male point of view.

It is interesting to note that the myth of the origin of the

sangai does not exist independently, but is similar to the 'Dema' myths which are to be found in many parts of Melanesia.

A dema is an ancestor who because of some difficulty is either killed violently or chooses to die. But its body is hardly in the ground when something miraculous happens. From the body of the dead ancestor grows a coconut tree, a yam, sweet potatoes or taro, or pigs come forth from the grave, or some other plant or animal essential for the livelihood of the community appears. The interesting principle here is that through the death of one we have life for all; the death of one brings life to the community.

This theme of life was a recurring theme in the sangai rites. The primary concern of the boys was to ensure that their lepe plant was thriving, which would in turn mean that they themselves would thrive. There was a mutual life-giving relationship. In this relationship the symbol of the lepe was treated as though it was human. It is said to have a heart (mona). Even animals are not referred to in this way, so they are referring to the lepe in human terms. What the bachelor does affects the lepe and correspondingly the state of the lepe affects the well-being of the bachelor. It is said that when a bachelor eats pork, the mark of the pig's intestines will appear on the leaves of the lepe. If the bachelor eats beetles, small brown marks will appear on the leaves of the plant. If the bachelor acts immorally, his plant will sicken and die. In this way they say that the plant feels like a human does and so has a heart.

The lepe is said to have powers of thought (masingi), and a spirit or life force (wayange). It is the spirit of a lepe which enters into a man and stays with him to bring him good fortune. There are stories of how a lepe plant, suffering some misfortune, journeyed to a nearby mountain to call for the bachelor to come and help. One man said that when his plant died he felt as though he was attending a funeral. There is a relationship between the bachelors and their lepe plants so that if another steals the lepe it will do him no good because in another's hands the lepe has no power. In the right hands it helps the young man to grow physically, personally and morally.

There is a well-known Enga story which illustrates the life-giving properties of the lepe. This is the story of the youngest boy who saved his brothers (Akali dupanya kaiminingi nena kaya dokome dupa pyoo nyia).

Once there was a family of brothers. Each brother went into the forest never to return because there was an evil man there who killed and ate them. They could not defend themselves against this evil man because he had removed his heart and hidden it under a taro plant, so arrows and other lethal weapons had no effect on him. When it came to the time for the youngest brother to go into the forest, the boy

found a way to trick the evil man and found the place where the jawbones of his dead brothers were hanging in a tree. He pulled the taro plant from the ground and the heart of the evil man was exposed and he died. Then the younger brother prepared a fire and put the jawbones of his brothers on top and covered them with leaves from the lepe plant. When he lit the fire, flesh returned to the bones and his brothers were restored to life.

In this story the leaves of the lepe in the fire are instrumental in restoring life to the bones of the murdered brothers similar to the story of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37. The Ezekiel vision is one of hope and exhortation to listen to the word of God. The Enga story is more a reassurance of the power of the lepe in the right hands. We are not told what happened to the brothers. Presumably they live happily ever after. There is a well-known saying in Enga: Akali lepe wai dokonya baa tata doko kumao etelyamopa mendai mende lenge tao mee singi, which means: Most of the men of a clan may die, but always one will remain to continue the life of the clan, like the new shoots which spring from the lepe plant.

Enga people, like most Melanesians, have a wholistic view of reality so that what is in western thought divided into sacred and secular is seen and experienced as one, and the division of the two is not an issue. Thus, presenting the life which Christ brings in terms of a dualistic western worldview of sin/grace = death/life = natural life/supernatural life, can be problematic.

One of the difficulties lies in interpreting Melanesian myths and rituals in terms of a 'theistic' symbol system. The theistic symbols which we find in the Old Testament sources view God as the giver of everything including moral laws. God intervenes in daily life with gifts and punishment. The human response is one of obedience and adoration. In contrast, the Melanesian symbol system, more appropriate to horticulturalists has been called 'biocosmic'.¹³ Life is shared by everything that lives. Decrease and increase of life affect not only humans but the whole cosmos within which they live. To live, people must manipulate nature: burn, dig, plant. Sex and garden work share the same purpose of producing life. As seen in the origin myth, which is similar to the dema myths, violent death and the shedding of blood produce the symbolic item of culture which stands for life. Thus, as Mantovani puts it, "The link between the garden, the womb and the tomb is obvious in everyday life and in religious life. Garden work, killing of animals, and sexual activity form a unity which is both economic and religious."¹⁴ So blood-shedding and sex, from the point of view of Melanesian religion, are not so much acts of violence or pleasure as rituals connected with 'life'.

Such a view helps us interpret the meaning of the origin myth and the meaning of the lepe plant which comes from the grave of the sangai woman. Furthermore we can see it as the Melanesian equivalent of the Fall and of Redemption. The typical Fall story in Melanesia is about

two brothers who fight and go their separate ways. One finds the fullness of life and the other does not. The search for 'salvation' is the search for the healing of that broken relationship. There are traces of these motifs in our story of the two bachelors and the different turns of events in their lives. This can have implications for the way Melanesian Christians view the purpose of the Incarnation. If one sees humanity not so much as it is, but from the divine intention, then the unfallen state rather than the fallen state is the truly human condition. From this point of view Christ intervened to restore this condition and to free humankind from the unnatural inevitability of death. The life which Christ brings is not a 'higher' (supernatural) state so much as a perfection and a restoration of human nature. If Jesus' death is seen not so much as a satisfaction for sin, but really an at-one-ment, then we may establish life-giving relations in all aspects of our lives. This restored (new) life which Jesus brought does not have to be expressed dualistically in other-worldly terms, but in terms of our everyday human search for ways to reconnect with the flow of life which keeps the cosmos in existence.

Symbol of Right Relations

The ability to relate successfully or not, a theme found in the origin myth, is a continual source of concern in Enga life. Successful relationships are not only with other human beings, but with all the elements of the integrated universe: animals, plants, physical environment and the non-empirical realm. This is the key to maintaining the flow of life. The person able to establish right relations with this integrated universe will experience well-being which can be seen in health, wealth, fertility, and growth. These different aspects of well-being are interrelated. So while a major theme in the story is physical growth, the Enga also see it as being about change from an ugly man who is poor, weak and impotent to one who is prosperous, handsome and strong. Cosmic symbolism abounds in the story. Besides the image of lightning, thunder and clouds, there is a below-above movement from domestic life down in the valley to the cold, wild, lonely mountain forests. There is also the mortal-immortal tension of the human condition and the interaction between human creatures and the woman, who to the Enga is one of the 'skybeings' which are semi-human beings dwelling in the sky.

Enga symbolism can best be understood in terms of the connections between these different realms. By converting ideas into material objects, one aspect of life may be 'coded' in terms of a different aspect in a way that it can be dealt with. For instance, the opposition good-bad may be coded in terms of sky-ground, or male-female, and thus be projected onto the external world. This is often the case with fertility rituals which symbolically re-enact the union of male and female flesh, using a different code, transforming it from the physical to the cosmic level.¹⁵

On the surface the origin story is about male and female, but

underneath there can be many meanings. Even at the linguistic level there are hints of how male and female can represent a whole range of states of being. The Enga language has no word for 'to be' as such, but has several words which fulfill this function. The two principal terms are katenge and petenge (literally: standing, and sitting, respectively). Men are always 'standing' (katenge). Women are always 'sitting' (petenge). These terms do not refer to physical position so much as an ontological state. Even though a man might be in a physical position of sitting he would normally still be referred to in terms of katenge unless one wanted to stress the fact that he was sitting. Celestial bodies, animals with long legs, houses, physical structures made by human beings and newly planted sweet potato mounds can only collocate with the term katenge, while in opposition, women, old people, animals with short legs, most birds, and liquid in containers collocate with petenge. We see in the origin myth the interaction between these two states. Lelyakali is able to resolve the opposition while the second ugly bachelor does not. Lelyakali's ability to relate on the level of male-female is symbolic of his establishment of right relations in the other aspects of his life too.

When discussing the meaning of the lepe plant, I found it hard to get consistent answers to the question of whether the plant is 'male' or 'female'. The sangai lepe was tended exclusively by men and reputedly would die if seen by women, so it is linked to maleness, yet it came from a woman which is indicative of its feminine character. Some said it was both male and female. I think the reason for this confusion is that the lepe plant is a mediating symbol. In this case it is a symbol of the mediation of the opposition of male and female and so shares in characteristics of both. Because of the female, the lepe becomes a symbol of the resolution of many of the oppositions of Enga life: mortality-immortality, domestic-wild, authentic-inauthentic, poor-prosperous, weak-strong etc. This is why it was so important for a young man to have a proper relationship with the lepe plant because this was symbolic of his successful relationship in many other spheres of his life. A proper relationship with the lepe would mean well-being in terms of health, prosperity and vitality. An improper relationship with the lepe, evidenced by the lepe dying, was a sign of improper relationships, ostensibly with women, but symbolically with all aspects of life.

Is a mediating symbol such as the lepe plant in opposition to Christ as mediator? Can we think of the life-giving power of Christ coming through the mediation of a symbol such as the lepe? Can Christians think of the death of the 'dema' (sangai woman) and the gift of the lepe as pre-figuring the life-giving power of Christ's death? In this case participation in the eucharist becomes the new sacrament of life and right relations in Christian terms. I think the lepe has been a rich symbol because it became a symbol for the mediation of a whole range of oppositions associated with myth and ritual. If we think of Christ as a mediating symbol, what aspects of life does Christ mediate? If the mediating power of Christ is expressed simply in terms of God/humankind, it will not have the

richness of a symbol such as the lepe which mediates a whole range of oppositions. So it is important to express the mediating role of Christ in terms of oppositions such as bad-good, poor-rich, dark-light, inauthentic-authentic, invisible-visible, false-true, mortal-immortal etc. Images for Christ incorporating both aspects in himself and so acting as mediator are plentiful in scripture. For instance: John 9:39 "I came that the blind should see and those who see should be blind." Or Galatians 3:28 "So there is no difference.... between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus." This would mean that we think of Christ less in terms of the forgiveness of sin and guilt and more in terms of Christ as reconciler, mediator and healer of broken relationships. Right relations with Christ result in the fullness of life because it is inextricably part of the new way to right relations with people, the environment and the non-empirical realm. In Christian terms, Christ is not simply the symbolic means to fullness of life, but is the source of that life.

The Power of Symbols

What is the source of the power of the lepe? Does it come from the sangai woman of the origin myth? Do people believe that she is still alive and helping boys to grow through the medium of the lepe? There is some basis to this as there are references to the woman in the stories, and I heard her name in one or two of the nemango spells, but these references are rare. Besides I think such an explanation is too simple and risks treating symbols literally. Is the source of power some 'magical' property in the lepe itself? This is the more common indigenous explanation. It is said that the lepe brings taki or the power of good fortune. One who possesses ipa taki from the sangai rite is said to be akali taki katapae (literally: taki power stands on him). The possession of taki results in yombone or help. People look for a clan or groups of individuals who are prospering and request to buy a shoot from their lepe plant. The yombone of the lepe resulting in the prosperity and fullness of life of the clan is obvious so that others want to share in that prosperity.

The explanation above is on the level of indigenous explanation. There are other ways of looking at the power of the lepe. One theological approach would be to think in terms of the ritual 'making present' the original life-giving death which began the flow of life. Thus the lepe is the principle symbol of the life-giving power bequeathed by the sangai woman, and tending the lepe opens the way to that life-giving power.

Still another approach is to focus on the mediating power of the symbol. I think that the more oppositions it mediates the more powerful the symbol. I have tried to show how the lepe as symbol mediates a wide range of oppositions. By relating to both sides of these oppositions it provides a means of resolving them. However this is only meaningful if one can appreciate the symbol and in order to do this one must firstly 'enter into' the symbol; believing in it so as

to appreciate its meaning.¹⁸ Secondly one has to take into account the mytho-religious context of the symbol, and thirdly one must appreciate the mytho-symbolic logic which is not always the same as analytical logic. Popular secularism which tends not to appreciate mytho-symbolic logic, thus strips symbols of their power. A proper appreciation of Christian symbols also requires a developed symbolic consciousness. The secularist may ask whether the prayer of exorcism in the rite of Baptism is 'real'. Is there really the departure of an evil spirit? It depends on one's appreciation of symbols, for the exorcism is as real as 'evil' is real. It is only when one enters into the Eucharist with a heightened sense of symbolic consciousness and an appreciation of the significance of the mytho-ritual context that one can appreciate how Jesus' presence can be 'mediated' through the symbols of bread and wine. For one unable to appreciate symbolic causality, Jesus is the symbol rather than the bread and wine. Take a simple example. Giving flowers may be a sign of love, but not simply a sign because understanding the meaning of this gesture serves to make love 'present'. Similarly material objects act as mediating symbols in Christian sacraments. For some this may be too 'magical' but the non-sense of mytho-logic can make sense so long as one can enter into the metaphysical time and space from where they come.

Conclusion

What I have tried to do with the symbol of the lepe is to let the symbol 'speak' so as to be able to appreciate its many shades of meaning. I have described the mythical and ritual context of the symbol and offered an explanation of the logic by which we can understand the power of the symbol. With the help of the social sciences I have gone beyond the indigenous explanation to a more structural interpretation, which is possible for the more objective observer.

This is the starting point for local theology. It is important to start with the culture in order to avoid paternalistic tendencies which would mould a local theology into foreign categories. Moreover the local theologian must try to discover Christ in the local culture rather than being so concerned with bringing Christ into that situation. Having begun at the point of cultural symbols, theological reflection involves a dialogue between these cultural symbols and the established symbols of the local theologies which form our Christian heritage.

This paper may not have much direct relevance to today's disenchanted youth. However it is one attempt in what must be a continuing effort to promote discussion and dialogue so that the richness of traditional symbols may be appreciated and appropriated in new ways. The appropriation of some of these symbols must help satisfy people's hunger for meaning in their lives. This is a religious task.

Already there are moves in this direction. There have been some

attempts to incorporate elements of the sangai ritual into the liturgy and to use the image of the lepe as a symbol of purity and new life on religious articles. How this will develop and how such symbols can be appreciated beyond the liturgical and religious context remains to be seen.

Notes:

1. I write this paper after nine years working as a priest with the Catholic Church in the Enga Province of Papua New Guinea. I am grateful to many Enga people who have taught me a lot. More specifically for this paper I wish to thank Anthony and Luta Yongapen, William Kwakatae, James Balos and Joseph Lakane.
2. Story told by Isingi Temba of teh Kombane clan near Yambu in the Ambum Valley. Recorded by Mrs Polly Larsen. The English text given is a shortened version. The original text in Enga is about six times as long.
3. Two other possible Enga terms are: wandyu katenge which carries the meaning of avoiding wrong, and lakya soo katenge which refers to the gate made of tree branches in the story. In the sangai rites everything contaminating had to be left outside the gate. Only what was purified could remain inside.
4. There is a good account of the sangai setenge in G. Teske, "Christianising the Sangai", Point 2 (1978): 71-102.
5. A fuller account is in M. Meggitt, "Male-Female Relationships in the Highlands of Australian New Guinea", American Anthropologist. Special Publication 66 (4) Part 2 (1964): 204-224.
6. See P. Gibbs, "Blood and life in a Melanesian context", Christ in Melanesia, Point (1977): 166-177.
7. See M. Meggitt, "Dream Interpretation among the Mae-Enga of the New Guinea Highlands", Southwestern Journal of Anthropology 18 (1962): 216-29.
8. D. Whiteman, "Melanesian Religions: An Overview", in E. Mantovani, ed., An Introduction to Melanesian Religions. Point Series 6, p. 106.
9. "Sangai ongo naimanya ongo mona palenge mende kaita akali yangenge ongo endakali joo mona palenge mende . . ."
10. "Akali ongo lepenya wayange tole ipambini lamo lenge."
11. "Yanu pee lenge, masepae tuti lenge, wai pii tuti lenge, matena ulu lyoto jingi."
12. This is a summary of a long fascinating tale told by William Kwakatae at Par, Wabag.
13. See E. Mantovani, "What is Religion", Point Series 6, (1984) 23-47.
14. E. Mantovani, "Comparative Analysis of Cultures and Religions", Point Series 6, (1984): 76.
15. For example, in the Enga language the word for the moon and a stone are the same (kana). The moon is thought of as female; living beings having come from the union of the moon with the male sun. Moreover women are linked to

the moon by their monthly period. Ritual stones were a central feature of Enga ritual and they were symbolic of the moon and of women. In these rituals the stones were united with male symbols such as male (phalus-shaped) stones, basket work (male) figures, or pigs. So the logic of this coding, in which elements from one side of the opposition are contrasted symbolically with the elements of the other side, is: male/female = sun/moon = male symbol/stone.

16. I do not agree with Brennan in Let Sleeping Snakes Lie, Australian Association for the Study of Religions (Adelaide, Flinders University Press, 1975), p.24, where he says that the major semantic component of petenge is 'sterility'. A child in the womb collocates with petenge, as does pandanus fruit in its early stages of development. Both of these are 'pregnant' with life.
17. Other researchers have referred to these categories of being in Enga. They include: M. Meggitt, "Male-female Relationships in the Highlands of Australian New Guinea", American Anthropologist. "Enga Referential Symbolism: Verbal and Visual", in P. Brennan, ed., Exploring Enga Culture: Studies in Missionary Anthropology, Wapenamanda, New Guinea: Kristen Press, 1970), pp. 17-50. A. Lang, The Semantics of Classificatory Verbs in Enga (and other Papua New Guinea languages), Pacific Linguistics, Series B., 39, (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1975), pp. 41-62. P. Brennan, Let Sleeping Snakes Lie, Australian Association for the Study of Religions (Adelaide, Flinders University Press, 1977). R. Neich, "Western Enga Religion: Ancestors and Mediation", mimeo'd, n.d.
18. See P. Ricoeur, The Conflict of Interpretations (Evanston: North-Western University Press, 1978). Interpretation Theory (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976). The Rule of Metaphor (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978).