Human Body in Melanesian Context

Orathinkal Jose

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to understand the human body in the Melanesian context from historical, traditional and religious perspectives. In the first part, a historical development of the concept of body is attempted. In the subsequent section, since notions of body in Melanesian cultures are centered on the life cycle process and its underpinnings such as, conception, birth and death, the paper discusses some of the known conception theories and implications for the Melanesian notion of body. Furthermore, this paper tries to show the significance of skin – thought to be a direct reflection of the body – in relation to the body. Since body substances and fluids have values and meanings and are given different interpretations in different cultures, a brief discussion of the different nuances of body substances and fluids further strengthens the argument that the human body in Melanesian contexts is understood in a 'relational' perspective. In the last section of this paper, since religion has always been an agent of change in many cultures, and Melanesia is no exception to it and Papua New Guinea being Christian country, this paper further shows the significance of viewing the human body from a religious perspective.

Non-English words:
Spirit: hame, nit, nu, aune, hakeri, mi, oinya, aumi; gwondefoje, *hame , edai-egen , dinimi, oko*

Places or clans in PNG: Hua, Melpa, Gimi, Gururumba, Bena Bena, Bemi Bena, Kamano, Wogeo Islanders, Siane, Gadsup, Gururumba, Eotoro Dani, Huli, Kamea

Introduction

One thing common to every human being is the body. We eat, sleep, walk and do a number of activities with our body. Our very existence is centered around or rather our very existence itself is on our body. And yet, it is an element that we often take for granted in our daily life. However, in the recent times there is a new awareness of our (human) bodies. At least, it is no more seen as an 'axis of all evil', as it was projected in the early times by the (Christian) Puritanical thinking, but rather, there seem to be an attempt to see it, at least by some, 'as the fountain of all goodness'. 'The body is suddenly omnipresent in academic texts', reports Strathern and Lambek (1998). According to them,

> the momentum of academic fashion aside, the problematization of the body is undoubtedly linked to its increased visibility and objectification

> within late capitalist consumer society (Feathersone 1990: Turner 1995), to feminism and the rise of feminist theory (Bordo 1993), as well as to the body's increased salience as primary signifier and locus of 'home' for the uprooted, mobile, hybridized citizens of the transnational moment. Or perhaps the body is so visible now because its time is over, subject to takeover by an increasing array of technologies
>
> (Strathern & Lambek, 1998, p. 5).

Lambek (1998) in his essay, 'Body and Mind in Mind, Body and Mind in Body' argues

> 'the body is currently a topic of great interest. But, it is anthropologically relevant in its relationship to other significant categories: body and person, body and self, body and mind, body and memory (and so on). Anything less is simply biology' (p. 104).

It is not within the scope of this paper to delve deeply into the above topics separately. But, this paper will attempt to elucidate the understanding of body from a Melanesian perspective. A brief historical development is drawn up to place the study in a historical context. Since body fluids and substances are so much connected with the Melanesian life - its origin, continuity and even destruction - a briefly description of the different meanings and implications of body fluids and substances is also given. Melanesian society is a deeply religious society and, in particular, Papua New Guinea (PNG), which is the focal context of my study. It is also a Christian country, as stated in its Constitution. Therefore, we will also attempt to look at the religious themes in relation to body concept.

This topic can be said to be looked at from various perspectives, such as historical, traditional, religious, anthropological and contemporary, applying a phenomenological descriptive method, largely drawing on the historical and ethnographical materials and the reflections of the contemporary researchers.

Historical development

In 1873, Charles Darwin concluded his book, ***The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals,*** with the assertion that 'all the chief expressions exhibited by man are the same throughout the world' (Polhemus, 1975, p. 15). Darwin was primarily concerned with facial expression but others have expanded his hypothesis to include a much wider range of bodily activity. The explanation offered by Darwin and the Universalists to account for their findings is that bodily expression is universal because it is transmitted genetically. Darwin hacked up his Universalist conclusion with six different types of data: first, observation of infants: second, observation of the insane; third, galvanization experiments: fourth, observation of facial expressions as recorded in 'the great masters in painting and sculpture'; fifth, ethnographic data: and sixth, observation of animals (Polhemus, 1975, pp. 15-16). Since Darwin's writings, researchers have come up with a great deal of data that contradict his evidence and conclusions. Though this is not the place to examine the total range of these data, two categories of evidence need mention at the point: 'evidence

concerning the learnt nature of bodily expression and evidence concerning the variable nature of bodily expression' (Polhemus, 1975, p. 16).

The French anthropologist, Emile Durkheim and his nephew, Marcel Mauss stand out as two significant persons who recognized the importance of studying the social significance of the human body. Durkheim proposes that

> 'categories of thought are socially derived and that their explanation is to be sought in elucidating the social conditions from which they spring.' If we accept this proposition, it follows that categorizations that surround and define the body must be a social origin. To argue this is the reverse of the familiar proposition that the body has sometimes been taken, in an organic analogy, as the image or model of society. Alternatively, without assigning casual priorities we can study how images of the body are mapped onto society and vice versa. (in Strathern, 1996, p. 9)

Durkheim was himself largely concerned with establishing an empirical study of social facts and with arguing for the social origins of widespread phenomena such as religion. Mauss was more concerned than Durkheim with the question of the body. Two significant works in relation to the body are his essays on 'the notion of person' (1938) and 'the techniques of the body' (1935). In the latter, he insisted that 'the techniques of the body are learnt: that they are social and cultural phenomena and not natural' (Polhemus, 1975, p. 16). Every kind of action, according to Mauss, carries the imprint of learning. Since the time of Mauss's writing, several anthropologists have supplied evidence that specific aspects of bodily expression are learned: not only complicated, formalized and ritualized expressions, gestures, postures, etc., but also 'simple' bodily activities such the rate of eye blinking. Two important specific studies have been those of David Efron (1941) and Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead (l942). (Polhemus, 1975, p. 16)

However, the first anthropological evidence supporting the view that 'bodily expression is learnt' came from reports of specific, single societies. Hocart in 1927 reported on the sitting postures of the Mongolians, and Kroeber studied posture and expression of many of the tribes of the Indians of California (Polhemus, 1975, p. 16). It is important to note that Darwin (by and large) limited himself to the study of facial expression. Ray Birdwhistell (1971) studied facial expression intensively and he concluded that, like other aspects of bodily expression, it is subject to socio-cultural variation. However, Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1972), Van Hooff (1972) and Grant (1969) theorized that facial expressions which occur in situations of instinctual response (such as fright, extreme anger, etc.), are not culturally variable.

Edward Hall, in his popular book ***The Silepu Language*** (1959), defended the analogy between body behaviour and language relating proxemic behaviour to the 'design features of language' giving rise to a linguistic and communication model of study of human body. However, Hall was rated as obscure in his remarks on the arbitrariness of proxemic behaviour and many were confused

by Hall's use of the term 'arbitrary'. The Swiss linguist Ferdnanad de Saussure, confronted with the issue of the arbitrariness of language, formulated a model or frame of study wherein he distinguished a conceptual signifier on the one hand, and an expressive or material signifier on the other, to examine the relationship of these two factors.

The Saussaurian framework for the study of human body enabled many other scientists to contrast bodily expression on the one hand, with bodily imagery, on the other. It was, in fact, Henry Head (1920) who theorized that 'each person constructs a picture or model of his body'. Head called this picture or model the body schema and Seymour Fisher converted Head's term into the phrase body image. Fisher also suggests the phrase body concept as a synonym for both body image and body schema (Polhemus, 1975, p. 18).

Studies of the body, based on linguistic and communication model had such an impact that many students of the subject almost ignored the long tradition of body studies from socio-logical perspective. However, Robert Hertz (1909), and Marcel Mauss (1945) both students of Emile Durkheim, were interested in 'social bodies'. Hertz, in short, suggested that we ascribe our social values to the attributes of the two sides of our bodies. Marcel Mauss following after Hertz, zeroed in on the mechanism and processes by which the body object is transformed into an artifact: namely, the processes of the training and education of 'the techniques of the body'. He concluded that 'in every society, everyone knows and has to know and learn what he has to do in all conditions' (Polhemus, 1975, p. 24).

Building upon the work of Mauss and Hertz, the British social anthropologist Professor Mary Douglas has continued the tradition of examining the human body via a Durkheim model of society. Douglas begins with the assumption that 'the social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived'. Thus, bodily control is social control, (Strathern, 1998, p. 18). Taking up from Durkheim, Douglas further suggests that for any society there will be a drive to achieve consonance between these two levels of meaning: social meaning on the one hand, and socio-physical meaning on the other. It is important to note that the raising of Douglas' question of the 'the two bodies' is a separate and distinct aspect of research into bodily expression, which can exist side by side with other types of research on bodily expression, such as that of Birdwhistell, (Polhemus, 1975, p. 28). Birdwhistell's former student Lomax raises a question similar to that of Douglas concerning the drive to achieve consonance between the social and the (socio-) physical levels of experience. Both are interested in the relationship of the two bodies, the two systems which every human possesses. This ideal of correspondence of bodies, systems and societies is also noted by Levi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind*, while describing the Australian tribes of the Drysdale River, in Northern Kimberley (Polhemus, 1975, p. 29). Interestingly, the same metaphor is found in St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: .... 'The body is one, and has many members, and all the members of the one body, being many, are one body ... For the body is not one member, but many' (I Cor., 12:12-14).

It is a very brief sketch of the historical development, leaving behind many other perspectives, like philosophical, peligious, etc., considering mainly the scope and space limitation of this paper. However, reference to some of the prominent contemporary body theorists will figure in the following discussion.

Person and body in Melanesia

Accounts of body in Melanesian cultures have tended to focus on life cycle process and their underpinnings in local theories regarding conception, growth, nutrition, health, sickness, maturity and decline, according to A.J. Strathern (1998). This approach has helped to shift the orientation from Western oriented theories to a deeper understanding of peoples' own concepts, ideologies and rationales (Strathern, 1998, p. 76). This particular focus also has given a new way of constructing and understanding personhood in Melanesia. Therefore, this section will explore different views expressed by contemporary theorists on Melanesian understanding of body and person. In many Melanesian societies, as Bercovitch observes,

> people think and act as if persons are, from the start, a product of relationships (involving exchanges of food and valuables, as well as spirits and or bodily substances) rather than being individuals first, who enter into relationships. The fact that persons are the product of many social relationships means that persons can encompass many individual and collective identities, and that these may be differently highlighted depending on the context (1998, p. 225)

This leads to Roy Wagner's emphasis on how different relational identities can be 'elicited' and to Marilyn Strathern's insistence that the Melanesian person should be seen as 'dividual' (Bercovitch, 1998, p. 225). According to Marilyn Stratheran, Western and Melanesian concepts of person and body are strikingly different.

> While emphasis in the West is on stable, coherent, intentional subjects - unique and autonomous individuals housed in unique and autonomous bodies - emphasis in Melanesia is on 'dividuals'. Dividual persons are construed as unstable products of relationships (exchanges and encompassments) and the material influences they embody, including bodily substances variously transmitted between them (Boddy, 1998, p. 255).

Sandra Bamford (1998) while talking about taboos among Kamea of the Gulf Province in Papua New Guinea, argues that for Kamea, 'bodies go through moments of containment and de-containment, and they can appear as unindividuated and ungendered cultural forms' (p. 169). Society is not mapped onto the body, as Douglas (1970) would have it, 'because people do not put their efforts into building a society, instead, they concentrate on cultivating particular relationships.' The capacity to father a child, or to furnish a container within which it grows - are what allow one to enter into particular types of social relationships. These capabilities, however, are not given in the 'nature'

of things. They must be cajoled, teased and coaxed to appear. In this sense, the body exists only as it is elicited and acquires specific meanings only within certain contexts (Bamford, 1998, p. 170).

In Melpa1 language, as A.J. Strathern and P.J. Stewart (1998) discovered, there is no corresponding term for 'body' as it is used in the normal usage, but it signifies the part of the person that is formed through substances possessing 'strength' or 'grease' (*kopong*). The two spheres from which *kopong* arise are: 1) the mixture of female blood and male semen that combine to produce a fetus and 2) the nurturing substances, breast milk and food. The *mm* (spirit) comes directly from the ancestors, entering into the body during gestation, while *noinan* (mind) develops after birth through the socializing influences of kin and primarily through the ability to speak. The person is, therefore, a complex amalgam of substances and influence. The ancestors also give power to the living to transmit their substances (i.e. semen and female blood) in reproduction, and living in kin provide the framework in which breast milk and food are transmitted to the child. In other words, 'a person is the product of the living and the dead'. (Strathern & Stewart, 1998, p. 236)

Body, person, exchange are, therefore, linked together. Put otherwise, exchange embodies person. Traditionally, a net-bag is symbolically equated with the female womb while the pearl shell symbolizes the male element as well as standing as an equivalent or substitute for the person generally in Hagen culture (Strathern 1979 on shells as 'male' wealth). Women use the net-bag to carry produce, piglets, and infants. These bags convey multiple sets of meanings that bear on notions of the body, the skin, reproduction, nurturance, and female versus male social capacities (Strathern & Stewart, 1998, p. 240).

Marilyn Strathern (1995) begins her analysis of the Melanesian person with the critique of the Western theory of ego: 'The center is where the twentieth-century imagination puts the self, the personality, the ego. For the 'person' in this latter day Western view is an agent, a subject, the author of thought and action, and thus 'at the center' of relationships' (Weiner, 1995, p. 14). Strathern (1998) attempts to substitute for this Western theory a more properly Melanesian one:

> That the person is distributively and excentrically constituted, a sum of its relations with others without necessarily centering itself within them. In Melanesia social relations are the objects of people's dealing with one another, and hence any objects that move between them people are efficacious in so far as they personify relationships themselves (Weiner, 1995, p. 15).

According to Weiner, 'it is this relational view of human life that it (body) replicates, or acts as a small version of the Cosmos' (Weiner, 1995, p. 16).

[1] One of the tribes, also their language, of the Western Highlands Province in Papua New Guinea

What Strathern makes clear and what the Yangis (ritual)2 dancers makes evident is that insofar as such relational modalities are imagined in terms of the body's compositional features and appearances, we can say that external sensory triggers are necessary to the elicitation and formation of such relations in their conventional manifestation (Weiner, 1995, p. 18).

Devisch (1996) expresses similar ideas while describing the dance of Yakas, in Congo:

> The weaving of body, group and world makes tangible, tasteable, visible - concretely approachable - the fact that life is this world, and is lived as an interactive alignment of lingering, actual or lasting power and effect. It is the weaving, by means of the body senses, of bodies with each other and of bodies with the world (p. 97).

And Weiner (1995) echoes almost in the same tone that 'relationality is thus a capacity shaped by body's spatial, motile, and sensorial contours' (p. 18).

For African theorists, such as Boddy (1989, Devisch (1998), Corin (1998), and Weiss (1998), phrases describing the embeddedness' or 'knottedness' of persons in social relations express a similar idea, though styles of dividuality and individuality are no doubt culturally specific (Boddy, 1989, p. 256). For example, Corin Ellen (1998) observes, 'a person is defined in terms of a series of components which relate him/her to genealogical frame and to the social and cosmological order through notions of entourage, heritage and innateness' (p. 84).

While for the Yakas in Congo, according to Devisch (1998)

> To become a person is to enter interplay of multiple sensory, sexual, and verbal tissues. It is to knot those transmitter exchanges of life, emotions, forces and knowledge, and this essentially between agnatic and uterine parents, between (the living and the ancestors, between human beings and the water and forest spirits, between man and environment. Paradoxically a person's center of gravity is formed not starting from the individual and his deepest self, but essentially in the practice of exchange and 'inter-animation' (p. 129).

Describing transitional qualities of healing cult dances of Yaka, Devisch, further observes, that the music and the initiatory songs arouse traces of sensual and sensory childhood experiences engrafted in the bodily envelop: they are sensual experiences of socio-culturally encoded harmony, fusion, and variation. The themes of chants and swaying movement of the dancers introduce an important erotic element. This is to say that in a latent, sensory, sensual, and vigorous fashion, the rhythm, dance, and chants tie in body, affect, collective unconscious, and emotion, while linking them to the sexualized and socialized

[2] The Yafar and Waina people of the West Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea, perform their Yangis (ida) ritual dance to ensure the fertility of sago, the palm from which they process one of their staple food items.

body and the order of the world (the cosmological body) (Devisch, 1998, p. 130).

However, LiPuma argues that

> People everywhere operate both dividually (as repositories or relationships) and individually (as loci of agency. judgment. and intent). His point is echoed by Corin: these are modalities or aspects or persons. They are not fixed categories. Pragmatically speaking, persons in the West are no more full-blown individuals of its discourse (than living Melanesians are thoroughly and transparently dividual. West can also 'personify' relationships, as in 'she has her father's eyes (Boddy, 1998, p. 256).

Janice Boddy (1998), in an attempt to synthesize some of the contemporary reflections on body sees in many Melanesian and African societies, dividual and relational forms of personhood which seem inextricable from conventional understanding of how bodies form from the bodies of others. According to her,

> bodies encompass and expel one another, corporeal substances move between them. Movement may be continual or episodic as context and cultures ordain. Such bodies are composites, not inherently unique or autonomous entities. Internal differences may be more relevant and nuanced than external ones, and internal composition may shift with the ebb and flows of a person's life. Parts may be detached, substances fortified or depleted. In these cases bodies do not express the relations through which they are formed, so much as realize them. [Sic] (Boddy, 1998, p. 264).

Therefore, from the forgoing discussion what one observes is the emphasis on the relational-its social and cosmological- aspect of human body in Melanesia, but this in any way do not necessarily imply a total absence of 'relationality' of body in other cultures.

Conception theories in Melanesia

In Melanesian cultures, as noted earlier, notions of body are centered on life cycle process and their underpinnings such as conception, birth, death, etc., Therefore, in this section we will briefly look at some conception theories and its implications for Melanesian bodies. Conception ideologies vary greatly in Melanesia. In the Trobriand Islands, for example,

> Conception occurs through the union of a woman and a spirit child who is reincarnated from a matrilineal ***baloina*** ancestor (Malinowski 1916, Weiner 1976). The father has no role on the actual genesis of the child. He merely contributes to the outer substance and growth of the fetus [Sic] (Silvermann, 1998, p. 47).

In Tambunum,

> Conception occurs when paternal semen (*nduinhwi*) mixes with maternal blood (*verokwavn*). A single act of sexual intercourse is sufficient. During gestation, semen congeals into bones while menstrual blood develops into organs, skin and regular blood. Accordingly, the materiality of the body is male and female [Sic] (Silvermann, 1998, p. 48).

Gimi3 conception theory reveals a triadic pattern: a child is made when (1) there is an accumulation of semen inside a woman; (2) the woman has a particular dream of ancestral spirits (*kore*); and (3) the moon permits/collaborates in the overall process. Women possess the power to make plants and pigs grow by singing songs to them. They join their *auna* (spirit) with that of the plants and make them grow well, like the *korena* (wild things).

> *Auna* is the force that animates a person and, at death, it flies out of the fontanel as a new born child emerges from the vagina, or as semen emerges at ejaculation and enters at first, wind, rivers and marsupials and later entering birds of paradise, giant trees, mountain caves and every form of forest life (Silvermann, 1998, p. 76).

The Melpa believes that

> Semen binds blood and makes the body of the child, which is further quickened by the action of ancestral spirits in implanting a min, so that when the child is horn it already shows the presence of min by its breathing. The min is in a sense separable from the body, appearing as shadow or image and leaving it at death, but when the person is conscious and well the min is every part of the body, so that any bodily emission entails a loss of min also [Sic] Silvermann, 1998, p. 78).

While Telefolmin4 men were reported to have had great reluctance and embarrassment in talking about conception of a child in their culture. According to them,

> babies were formed, from penis water and vagina fluid. Several acts of intercourse were needed to build up the fetus, but after the fetus was there intercourse should cease, otherwise twins would form. In men's description however, one element was missing: blood. In the women's version this was brought in and made central [Sic] Silvermann, 1998, pp. 80-81).

Looking at the above descriptions, as Silvermann (1998) summarizes, one can see how the mind intersect with body in a number of different ways: 1) it may he equated with life force and seen as recycled into and out of bodies with the help of ancestral agency; 2) it may he seen as transmitted or acquired in a

[3] One of the districts in Western Highlands Province of PNG. Gimi is also a name of a mountain. Gimi valley is fertile ground at the foot of the mountain, inhabited by many people.

[4] One of the sub-districts in Easter-Highlands of PNG

variety of ways, some substance based and others not and aspects of it seen cycled over the generations; 3) it may be conceptualized as a separate dimension of the person, intimately linked with the body and dying with it, in contrast to a transmitted or recycled soul, or as itself turning into the soul (p. 84).

Significance of skin

Roy Wagner (1997) in the course of his essay on conception ideas among the Darihi and Barok of New Ireland Province of Papua New Guinea, tells us something about their ideas of skin and body system, ideas that mesh with those on conception itself.

> The human body contains two networks of tubes: the outer, or *agwa* system. which we call the lymphatic system and which is said to contain semen in men (in women it contributes to maternal milk) and the inner or blood system, with its veins and arteries (p.76).

Women always have enough blood inside them, but men have strictly limited quantities of semen and must augment their supply of these substances through eating meat. The ideas that semen (related to fat, juice, or water) is located in a system of 'veins' throughout the body just underneath the surface of the skin and that it is in infinite supply are not peculiar to the Daribi. There is a widespread perception that on the part of men their potential to produce semen is limited and that shortage of its results in skin that is dry, loose, or discoloured and flaky. Sexual intercourse is seen thus as inexorably sapping men's vital juices, making them old (Strathern, 1998, p. 85).

The condition of a man's skin is, therefore, a direct reflection of his current situation. The Melpa believes that a 'bad' skin is a result of overindulgence in sex or exposure to pollution. Skin therefore is not just a sign of vitality but an index also of one's personal and moral state. The Melpa go further and argue that all conditions of the 'body'-that is, skin or outer visible part of the person-are a result of the inner condition of the *noman* or mind (Strathern, 1998, p. 86). The skin is also from another perspective,

> the make of experience, knowledge and morality. Poole quotes a Binim text referring to infants who do not yet have a clearly defined basis for personhood: [the infant] has no skin (*kaar*) of its own [i.e. no experience of life, no 'shame']. The Binim concept of self is literally translated as 'skin root'. 'Self-centeredness' apparently also has to do with skin (Strathern, 1998, p. 86).

Devisch from an African perspective argues that the

> 'the body's skin is an interface, its orifices sites of transaction with other people and the world. The individual's center of gravity (*muutu*) is to be found on the skin level, with its capacities for sensory and sexual contact, that is, at the interface (*luutu*) of all exchanges with the other and the world' (Devisch, 1998, 89).

LaFontaine defined individual, following Fortes, 'as a moral human being', and the Gahuku define a part of such morality in terms of the condition of the skin in the body (Strathern, 1998, p. 89). Therefore, Strathern would say, skin and morality are connected (as clearly seen among the Melpa and Paiela). According to him,

> the link between 'pollution' (a physical concept in a sense) and 'morals' shows exactly the conjunction of body and mind we would expect to find. Actions that are the product of will and intentions have repercussions on the bodies of those involved, and the incidence of those repercussions tells us how the moral universe is structured (Strathern, 1998, p. 17).

If we pursue the topic further, we can see the theme of skin and its significance as it is used in folktales and cosmological accounts. A number of societies in Papua New Guinea (e.g. Gimi, Ahelam) believe when persons die their skin is changed: the dark outer skin is removed, and the white inner skin is revealed. It is said that the first white men the Melanesians encountered were believed to be spirits of their own dead. Strathern (1998) sees it, as 'a change of skin is revelations of inner identity, a turning outside of that which was concealed; it is a demonstration of a desire' (p. 91).

In folktales this theme occurs in a widespread set of stories about persons who take off and put on new skins. The underlying image may be that of a snake, *pukpuk* (crocodile), cassowary, or a big sea fish, depending on the region. LeRoy, who explored the theme of skin changing in Kewa society in the Eastern Highlands, suggests that it is not by chance that skin change stories reflect crucial transformations from wild to domestic, old to young, which serve also as commentaries on mortality and the transition from death to life (p. 94).

Strathern (1998) places the emphasis on the element of desire that moves the person from one part of the social space to the other. This desire is inner: it belongs to inside of a person, or to the inner skin, seen here as the opposite of outer skin. The distinction between skins is not just one between role and categories: hut also between aspects of self, and the body is not so much of a metaphor, for the spirit is a set of metonyms for the person (p. 96).

Significance of body substances and fluid

In number of Melanesian societies taboos on body substances of fluids are very strong. They attach different meanings and give strange interpretations to some of these things depending on the societies' beliefs. In the following section we consider how the people of Hua5 society look at some of the body substances and fluids, as studied by Megis. The Hua are no less aware than are we that, in decay and death, lie regeneration and life: 'Stagnant water is prescribed as a

[5] One of the tribes in the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea

cure for sick pigs: possums are thought to be engendered by leaves left to rot in the marsupial pouch: and human fertility is believed to lie in the dark, unwholesome, rotting interiors of women's bodies' (Meigs, 1984, 109). As an Indian proverb says, One's own waste does not smell bad.' This line of thinking is merely carried a step further among the Hua.

a) A man smears sweat, oil, and vomit over the bodies of his real and classificatory sons to increase their growth. Although not food, these substances are ingested through their pores. At the ceremonial termination of a food constraint, the previously tabooed food is passed to an initiate under the armpit of a classificatory father. In this way, the young man acquires some of the ***aune***[6], the positive aspect of ***nu***, from the sweat of his father's armpit and will be better equipped to cope with the dangers posed by the once forbidden food (Meigs, 1984, 110).

b) A man's hair clippings were traditionally burned and then sprinkled over food intended for his real or classificatory sons (and possibly his brothers as well). A packet of a dead man's hair or a dead woman's fingernail parings are said to have the power to increase the growth and fertility of his or her children to relieve pain if rubbed on an affected area (Meigs, 1984, 110).

c) Feces also have positive uses. One of the recommended cures for a man suffering from ***kupa*** is that he eats a fragment of his elder brother's wife's feces. It may also he recommended that a sickly or stunted person drink from Tua river, which flows at the bottom of the valley and which is alleged to be full of the ***aune*** of the valley's residents, carried in the feces washed down by rain.

d) Urine has similar curative functions. The relatives of sick man may commission a stalk a sister7 married into another community to place a stalk of ginger in an area where it will be urinated on or stepped over by the men of the village. The ginger is then returned to the sick man, who, on eating it, is thought to capture some of the ***aune*** of the members of his affinial community.

e) Semen: Human fluids in general seem obvious and trivial, even embarrassingly natural or unnatural. But in contrast to this general view, in certain Melanesian societies, semen is of considerable interest in the sense that semen as a scarce resource is among the everyday concerns of common flock. Semen is the most precious human fluid, because it is believed vital for procreation and growth. 'Marind Anim (Van Baal 1966), Etoro (Kelly 1976:45), Keraki (Williams 1969), and Sambia (Herdt 1981) initiates serve as passive parties in ritualized homosexual acts in which they consume their elder's semen to strengthen their marginally sufficient powers' (Meigs, 1984, 127). The cultural significance and implication of semen and semen transactions need to be understood, as Herdt (1989) in his essay on 'Semen Transactions in Sambia Culture' would say,

[6] Translated as vital essence or life principle
[7] Such a person is called 'ginger woman'

> as a cultural idea and semen transactions may be understood as a special language, a kind of symbolic discourse for signifying the value identities of persons, groups, and social and religious entities. Such a symbolic discourse may he trained on many objects. But because of its centrality, semen as commodity valuates and conditions basic Sambian cultural institutions – personhood, marriage, clanhood – as well as key social relationships in the family, village, and ritual cults, between men and woman, human and spirits (Herdt, p. 168).

Semen and breath, as we have seen, are potentially ***siro na*** (dangerous). Are they then to be avoided at all times? No, for a woman acquires both from a man in the act of intercourse. An in this transaction, men believe, the woman profits and the man loses, for she acquires valuable ***nit***, which contributes to her general vitality and weight, and he loses a limited resource.

f) Blood, almost in every culture, is a sensitive fluid, often associated with danger, and death. Blood is a 'tremendously a generative fluid' (Weiss, 1998, p. 178). They were also recognized as the most creative and life giving agent among Hua. The ***aune*** transfer is effected through blood more than through any other substance (Meigs, 1998, p. 38). Although there is no indication that either of these substances is used as a cure or a tonic, among the Arapesh, Mead reported to have found that they eat menstrual blood as an antidote to sorcery (Mead, 1962, 421).

Menstrual blood is the logical antithesis of semen. Menstrual blood and parturition fluids were and are viewed as the most dangerous and polluting of all substances in Melanesia. The evidence suggests that in general,

> Women in Melanesian societies are considered to be potentially, if not actually, destructive, which is chiefly associated with their menstrual blood. Women because of their 'coldness' rob a man of his heat; prolonged association, especially of a sexual nature with a woman, will injure any creative enterprise a man is engaged in (Beben, 1990, p. 66).

Therefore, as Gelber (1986, p. 69) points out, women were portrayed as 'dangerous, inferior, and untrustworthy creatures who are to be feared, kept under control, and avoided whenever possible'. In many Papua New Guinea societies, an aversion toward women was instilled by beliefs such as 'over indulgence in sexual relations with women depletes a man's vital energies leaving his body permanently exhausted and withered,' (Meggit, 1964, p. 204), and too much contact with women causes a man to 'accumulate debilitating dirt in his body' (Newman, 1964, p. 257), resulting in the same end. Women's powers of seduction were portrayed as so great that young men were warned not even to look at a young woman because 'if you look at her and she looks at you, then you will copulate' (Berndt, 1962, p. 103). In the case of women who rebelled against such attitudes or in some way interfered with the activities and plans of men, the dominant male ideology was holstered by ready use of physical violence to control women's behaviour.

However, the significance of blood in a particular culture needs to be understood from that socio-cultural perspective. Blood, Brad Weiss argues, 'is a tangible form that both embodies and signifies the process through which it is produced, and thus an icon of socio-cultural practice' (Weiss, 1998, p. 180). He further argues that

> blood is a general medium, whose precise semantic qualities are highly nuanced (hot, cold, low, increasing, etc.) and more immediately sensitive to change than are, for example, longer-term processes like growing fat or wasting away that also objectify and signify the Haya subject's sense of well-being. In this way the condition of blood can also be taken as an index of a general sense of feeling good or bad on a day to day basis. As a changing condition of the body itself, blood signifies the internalization of a subject's relation to the wider world in which he or she acts (Weiss 1998, p. 181).

In Western culture, substances detached from the body are labelled as waste and must be gotten rid of. There seem to be a negative value to all these products, whether faeces, fingernails, semen or saliva. Most, though not all, tolerate our own personal body substances and those of our infants and lovers. Among the Hua, these substances may have positive or negative value. For blood, semen, flesh, hair, saliva, sweat, body oil, nasal mucus and fingernails, positive or negative values are more or less equally balanced. This is not so for the menstrual blood, faeces, urine and vomit, which are not used frequently and regularly for nourishment or body boosting, rather they are administered in a very restricted amounts as cures for people who are seriously ill or in acute need of physical stimulation. They conform more to the western model of a drug, while other body substances are more like food (Meigs, 1998, pp. 111-112).

Significance of religious themes and concept of body

Religion is usually defined in anthropology as belief in spirits or supernaturals (Taylor 1920, Spiro 1966) or a class of metaphors and symbols whose hidden referent is the society (Durkheim 1965; Douglas 1975) [sic, Meigs, 1998]. Certainly, these two definitions have governed most studies of New Guinea Highlands religions. The search for gods, spirits, a mind-body split, cosmological beliefs, sociological functions, and symbols, dominates the standard anthology of New Guinea religions, gods, ghosts and men in Melanesia (Meggitt, 1965). Yet, among the Hua, and apparently some other Eastern Highlands peoples as well, these religious concepts appear to be peripheral to the central body of religious thought.

According to Salisbury (1965), [Sic, Meigs, 1998], among the Hua, and apparently some other Eastern Highlands peoples as well, the central religious concept is identified as *oinya,* which he translates as non-material, non-discrete spiritual essence, a 'supernatural aspect' of men, pigs and certain other animals, that resides in the blood, hair, sexual organs, breath and shadow but is

particularly identified with *oko* (white mucous secretion). This concept is remarkably similar to the distinctly non-spiritual and non-supernatural Hua notions of *aune* and *nu* (Meigs, 1998, p. 126).

Meigs (1984) in *Food, Sex and Pollution*, suggests four religious themes central to Hua beliefs in relation to their concept of body.

The first is a focus on internal body states, on the conversation and accumulation of *nu*. At menarche, the inside of the Hua girl's body is represented as a cauldron of potent and dangerous substances that not only must be conserved to guarantee the undiminished strength of the girl's reproductive power, but also must be isolated from the community to safeguard the health of males. A similar view of menarche is observed among number of societies as mentioned earlier (ref. blood).

Hua males conceive the inside of the adolescent male body in terms opposite to those reserved for females. The male is relatively devoid of fluids, odours, and textures; the inside of his body is white, hard, clean, odourless, and, in comparison to the female body, strikingly impotent. Efforts to enrich this environment through the accumulation and conversion of *mi* substances are a central theme of initiation rites throughout New Guinea. In secret ceremonies, Hua initiates are fed blood let from the veins of older men for this express purpose. They are also said to consume soups made of jungle leaves that they believe are rich in the growth-producing powers in which they themselves are deficient. While girls at menarche must observe taboos to protect those around them from the dangerous powers emanating from inside them, boys at initiation endure taboos to protect their already insufficient internal powers from any further diminution (Meigs, 1984, p. 122).

The inside of the body is the temple, the place where the awesome powers reside; internal body states are imagined in intense detail. And it is strange and baffling that they know so little about their bodies. An explanation of this Hua ignorance lies at least in part in realizing that the body, when not taken for granted, is for the Hua very largely a religious object, which may be understood through dogma and respect. It is a place where powers, defined as unknowable, operate. To attempt to understand its operation through observation and experimentation would be analogous to a Christian's attempt to know and understand Holy Trinity through the medium and tool of science (Meigs, 1984, pp. 123-125).

A second religious theme is that of purification: The notion of physical space that must be cleared of material impurities to insure the proper functioning of its resident properties. This space is usually conceived as male and as threatened by the contaminating and hostile influences emanating from affines, particularly from non-consanguine females, and from resented or hostile consanguine. When the defences provided by food and avoidance rules break down and the internal state is contaminated, rites of purification are performed. They are elaborately reported by many anthropologists, such as,

> Nose bleeding, vomiting and sweating among the Hua as reported by Meigs (1976), in Gururumba by Newman (1964) and in Bena Bena by Langness (1967); tongue piercing was observed among the Bemi Bena and tongue scraping among the Kamano by Bemdt (1965), penis bleeding among the Arapesh by Mead (1940) and among the Wogeo Islanders by Hogbin (1970) (Meigs, 1984, pp. 128-129)

All these were aimed at stimulating health and vitality by removing foreign substances, female or otherwise.

The third principle is vital essence or the animating principle, among the Hua, *aune* as a positive manifestation of *nu*. In different societies, this principle or essence of life is known in different names. For example, among the Siane it is *oinya* (Salisbury, 1965); for Gadsup *aumi* (Du Toit, 1975); among the Gururumba *gwondefoje* (Newman, 1964); for the Eotoro *hame* (Kelly, 1976); among the Dani *edai-egen* (Heider, 1979): and in Huli it is known as *dinimi* (Glasse, l965) (Meigs, 1984, p. 126).

Among the Hua, an enormous structure of ritual and taboo exists for the precise purpose of managing the community's *nu* from the birth of its individual members through to their deaths. Whether in a female attempt to reduce her inner *nit*, or a male effort to increase his, an infant being 'hardened' with *hakeri* substances or an old man being 'softened', *nu* is always at the centre of life-cycle events (Meigs, 1984, p. 130).

In the absence of a belief in a god or gods or any developed body of beliefs in the spirits of the dead, the Hua conceptualize *nu* as the source and sustainer of life. It is a distinctly non-spiritual substance, yet it provides the focus of most rituals and taboos of which I am aware; in ritual, the individual seeks to maximize his or her advantage in relation to *nit*. More significantly, *nu* is conceived as the means of saving oneself. Spiritual concepts and concerns, states of grace and sin, simply do not exist (Meigs, 1984, p. 131).

Although I cannot argue that the similar religious concepts of body are prevalent among all other highland societies, many are concerned with a concept of vital essence. For example, among the Etoro of the Southern Highlands, a central equation is that augmentation of the *hame* leads to life, growth, and vitality, while its depletion leads to weakness, respiratory illness, senescence, and death (Kelly 1976:48). Kelly focuses on sexual modes of transmission, concluding that male homosexuality was culturally approved as a means of passing life force on to boys, while heterosexuality was viewed as 'fundamentally antisocial behaviour' that depletes the vital communal reservoir of male force (Meigs, 1984, p. 131).

The fourth theme is that the way in which the males can replenish their waning supplies of *nu* and this stimulate their vitality is through rituals of imitation, adulation, and control of female reproductive power. Any *nu* is powerful, but female *nu* is most powerful. Anybody is awesome, but the female body, possessor of the mystery of fertility and nurture, is most awesome. In this

religion of the body, the female body plays the star role. Thus, although males denigrate females as ignorant and treacherous in the social sphere, they admire and laud their magnificent biological powers within the arcane enclave of the men's house (Meigs, 1984, p. 132).

Through the imitation of menstruation and the consumption of foods homeopathically related to the fertile and fast growing qualities of women, men attempt to stimulate their lagging growth and recover their waning vitality. Through their secret claim to fertility comparable to that of females, males assert physiological equality with the envied and powerful opposite sex. And, finally, through the secret prescription of possum, the abhorred symbol of female reproductive power, males gain the strength to cure themselves of the damaging consequences of mundane contact with females or with other alien or suspected persons (Meigs, 1984, p. 133). Numerous ethnographers have reported ritual attempts by males to assert their access to control over not only the allegedly female powers of growth, vitality, and fertility, but also the same powers of the soil. According to Meigs,

> Control of the soil is viewed throughout the Highlands as a female prerogative (Reay, 1959; Strathern, 1970; Barth, 1975; Buchbinder and Rappaport, 1976; Lindenbaun, 1976). New Guinea men have an uncomfortable sense of being dependent for food on a labour source over which they have insufficient control (Lindembaun, 1976, p.59-60) [sic] (Meigs, 1984, p. 133).

It is consistent with these male feelings of inferiority to female powers that initiation among the Hua as well as other New Guinea Highlands people is perceived as compensation to males for their natural physical disadvantages. According to them, the rite of initiation represents the Hua male answer to the challenge posed by the more rapid female growth and more dramatic manifestations of female maturity. The commonly known flute myth[8] and secrecy associated with it is still a best example and explanation of male-female power struggle.

It is a common male knowledge among the Hua that women of reproductive age are dirty and powerful, repugnant and dangerous to be discussed with contempt and approached with caution. Through initiation, males and ultimately females as well, enter an abrupt new world of ideas in which females and their powers are considered in a dramatically opposite light.

[8] In the flute myth, supposedly known only to males and reported quite widely in the Highlands (PNG), females are represented as the original producers and owners of flutes, and consequently the original rulers of society, and viewed by nature as superior to males. When women played the flutes, males hid their eyes and bowed their bodies to the ground in an attitude of submission. At some point in the distant past, men stole the flutes from the women. With this theft of the flute, they gained the symbol of political dominance and actual pre-eminence. From then on, it is the women who had to prostrate themselves when the flutes are played, and men guard the flute against the women from getting it back.

Therefore, the Melanesian religion of body could be viewed, as Meigs would puts it, one of physiological fitness and survival. Religious goals of heightened vitality and sexual potency are achieved without recourse to sacrifice, obeisance, mediation, worship, or prayer. Spirits, deities, and the supernatural in general play no role. Instead, the body as a sacred temple of all power is approached directly. Its contents assessed and monitored, its intake and output carefully regulated. Sexual and eating behaviours have religious significance in that they occasion transfers of *nu* between otherwise discrete and separate body interiors. A more esoteric and private level of religious practice may be described as a male search for the female principle conceived as the ultimate source of fertility, growth and vitality, as life itself. Growth and aging, sexuality and fertility, health and illness-these processes and conditions are determined by unseen organs and hidden fluids. Physical life itself, uncontrollable and frightening, is the central mystery of the religious thought of Hua and other Highland societies of Papua New Guinea (Meigs, 1984, p. 133).

Conclusion

If one were in Papua New Guinea, or in any of the Melanesian societies, at a first glance, one would get an impression that for Melanesians 'body is nothing' and 'nothing is in body'. But from the foregoing discussion and from my own lived experience in Papua New Guinea I am left with an impression that for Melanesians 'body is everything' and 'everything is in body'. It can be better summarized in the words of Devisch, who succinctly expresses about the Yaka of Congo that, 'to become a person is to be connected, bonded and tied into, and with, those multiple forms of reproduction and exchange that give form to the Yaka universe'. Therefore, primarily this paper has attempted to show the fundamental concept of Melanesian person and body is 'relational' and there are much sharper and subtle nuances and differences between the understanding of the male and female body in a Melanesian traditional and cultural context that does not seem to be adequately grasped by an outsider.

The above analysis also shows that the body in Melanesia is perceived as something that can experience and express their religious sentiments and ideas. The discussion also gives an insight that conception theories and ideas greatly influence the body thoughts and images and the body substance and fluids are perceived and interpreted from a perspective unique to Melanesian and similar societies.

It is also an important factor to be kept mind that Melanesia, particularly Papua New Guinea, with its fast changing society in all its spheres, be it economical, cultural, religious, the concept of body-body substances and fluids are also changing and do gain new nuances and well as challenges. Though many of the examples of attitudes, approaches described in this paper pertains only to a few societies in Papua New Guinea, particularly of Highland and Momase regions, most of the societies in PNG share similar pattern of attitudes, approaches and behaviours, perhaps with an exception to the matrilineal societies such as in Boganville, Rabaul and in some parts of Milne Bay.

References

Bamford, Sandra 1998, 'To eat for another: taboo and elicitation of bodily form among the Kamea of Papua New Guinea', in Andrew Strathern & Michael Lambek (eds), *Bodies and Persons: Comparative Perspective from Africa and Melanesia,* 169, Cambridge University Press, New York.

Beben, W. 1990, 'An anthropological view of sexuality', in *Point* 14, The Melanesian Institute, Goroka.

Bercovitch, E. 1998, 'Disembodiment and concealment among the Athalmin of Papua New Guinea,' in Andrew Strathern & Michael Lambek (eds), *Bodies and Persons: Comparative Perspective from Africa and Melanesia,* 225, Cambridge University Press, New York.

Berndt, Ronald M. 1962, *Excess and Restraint: Social Control among a New Guinea Mountain People,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Boddy, Janice 1998, 'Afterword: embodying ethnography', in Andrew Strathern & Michael Lambek (eds), *Bodies and Persons: Comparative Perspective from Africa and Melanesia,* 255, Cambridge University Press, New York.

Brown, Donald E. 1991, *Human Universals,* McGraw-Hill Inc., New York.

Brown, P. 1978, *Highland People of Papua New Guinea,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Corin, Ellen 1998, 'Refiguring the person: The dynamics of affects and symbols in an African spirit possession cult', in Andrew Strathern & Michael Lambek (eds), *Bodies and Persons: Comparative Perspective from Africa and Melanesia,* 84, Cambridge University Press, New York..

Devisch, Rene 1996, 'The cosmology of life transmission', in Michael Jackson (ed.) *Things as They Are: New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology,* 97, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Devisch, Rene 1998, 'Treating the affect by remodelling the body in a Yaka healing cult', in Andrew Strathern & Michael Lambek (eds), *Bodies and Persons: Comparative Perspective from Africa and Melanesia,* 169, Cambridge University Press, New York.

Gelber, Marilyn G. 1986, *Gender and Society in the New Guinea Highlands: An Anthropological Perspective on Antagonism towards Women*, Westview Press Inc., London.

Gell, Alfred 1975, *Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries: Umeda Society. Language and Ritual,* The Athlone Press, New Jersey.

Gregor, Thomas A. & Tuzin, Donald 2001, 'The anguish of gender: men's cult and moral contradiction in Amazonia and Melanesia', in Tuzin and Gregor (eds), *Gender in Amazonia and Melanesia: An Exploration of the Comparative Method,* University of California Press, Berkeley.

Herdt, H.G. 1981, *Guardians of Flutes: Idioms of Masculinity,* McGraw Hill Book Company, New York.

Herdt, H.G. 1982, *Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia,* University of California Press, Berkely.

Jackson, Michael (ed.) 1996, *Things as They Are: New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology,* Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Jolly, Margaret 2001, 'Damming the rivers of milk? Fertility, sexuality, and modernity in Melanesia and Amazonia,' in Tuzin and Gregor (eds), *Gender in Amazonia and Melanesia: An Exploration of the Comparative Method,* University of California Press, Berkeley.

Lambek M. 1998, 'Body and mind in mind; body and mind in body; some anthropological interventions in a long conversation', in Andrew Strathern &

Michael Lambek (eds), *Bodies and Persons: Comparative Perspective from Africa and Melanesia,* 104, Cambridge University Press, New York.
Mead, Margaret 1963, *Growing Up in New Guinea: A Study of Adolescence in Primitive Societies*, William Morrow and Company, New York.
Meggitt, Mervyn J. 1964, 'Male and female relationships in the highlands of New Guinea', *American Anthropologists* 66, 204-24.
Meigs, S.A. 1984, *Food Sex Pollution,* Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick.
Polhemus, Ted 1975, 'Social bodies', in J. Benthall & T. Polhemus (eds), *The Body as a Medium of Expression*, 15-16, Allen Lane, London.
Silvermann, Eric K. 2001, *Masculinity, Motherhood and Mockery: Psychoanalyzing Culture and the latmul Naven Rite in New Guinea,* University of Michigan Press, Michigan.
Strathern, Andrew & Lambek, Michael (eds) 1998, *Bodies and Persons: Comparative Perspective from Africa and Melanesia,* Cambridge University Press, New York.
Strathern, Andrew & Lambek, Michael 1998, 'Introduction embodying sociality: Africanist Melansianist comparison', in Andrew Strathern & Michael Lambek (eds), *Bodies and Persons: Comparative Perspective from Africa and Melanesia,* 5, Cambridge University Press, New York..
Strathern, Andrew & Stewart, Pamela J. 1998, 'Melpa and new ideas of life and death: the rebirth of a comparison', in Andrew Strathern & Michael Lambek (eds), *Bodies and Persons: Comparative Perspectives from Africa and Melanesia,* Cambridge University Press, New York.
Strathern, Andrew 1996, *Body Thoughts,* University of Michigan Press, Michigan.
Strathern, Marilyn. 1995, *Shifting Contexts: Transformations in Anthropological Knowledge,* Routledge, London.
The Good News Bible: Today's English Version 1992, American Bible Society, New York.
Wagner, Roy 1997, 'The end of innocence: conception and seduction among the Darihi of Karirnui and the Barok of New Ireland.' in D. Jorgensen (ed.) *Mankind,* 14 (I):76.
Weiss, Brad 1998, 'Electric vampires: Haya rumours of the commodified body,' in Andrew Strathern & Michael Lambek (eds), *Bodies and Persons: Comparative Perspective from Africa and Melanesia,* Cambridge University Press, New York.
Weiss, Gail 1999, *Body Images,* Routledge, New York.
Wiener, James F. 1995, *The Lost Drain: The Myth of Sexuality in Papua New Guinea and Beyond,* University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin.

Author

Orathinkal Jose is a Divine Word Missionary from India. He holds a PhD in Public Health from Kuleuven in Belgium. His research interests are mental health, couples' conflicts and relationship issues. He lectures in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the Divine Word University, Madang.
Email orathinkal@dwu.ac.pg