
Dynamics of Socio-Religious Transformation in Lifou (New Caledonia): From the Traditional Drehu Order to Missionary and Post-Missionary Hegemony

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Abstract: This research offers an ethnographic and historical analysis of social and religious transformations on the island of Lifou, in New Caledonia, following the introduction of Christianity by the London Missionary Society (LMS) in the mid-19th century. The first part of the study reconstructs the foundations of pre-Christian Drehu society, which was centered around *haze* (spiritual forces), chiefly systems, rituals, and clan structures. These elements formed a coherent politico-religious system, interweaving power, territory, and the sacred. The arrival of missionaries marked a radical rupture. The establishment of the LMS led to the replacement of traditional spiritual and social references with a Christian order, characterized by the centrality of the church, the erasure of *haze*, the reform of rituals, and the institution of a new moral authority. These transformations are explored through the lenses of syncretism, acculturation, and identity recomposition. From a diachronic perspective, the dissertation also examines the contemporary impact of Pentecostalism, which rekindles tensions between Christian faith and cultural heritage. Through various life stories, it sheds light on internal conflicts, identity reconfigurations, and social fractures within clans. The research combines ethnographic observation, analysis of missionary archives, and the reflexive position of the author, a native anthropologist from Lifou. This situated perspective provides a nuanced understanding of issues related to transmission, memory, and resistance in a postcolonial context.

Keywords: Christianization, Syncretism, Postcolonial anthropology, Identity reconfiguration, Clan structure, New Caledonia.

Biographical Note: Zénon WEJIEME is a doctoral candidate in social and cultural anthropology at the University of New Caledonia. A native of the Lösi chieftaincy on the island of Lifou, he also teaches the Melanesian language *Drehu* and English at Dick Ukeiwe High School. His research explores contemporary religious dynamics in Oceania, the interplay between customary practices and Christianity, and the impact of spiritual globalization on Drehu society.

1. INTRODUCTION

The island of Lifou, situated in the Loyalty Islands archipelago of New Caledonia, provides a privileged field for analyzing interactions between local traditions and Christian missions. This study is rooted in a historical anthropology of religious transformations, blending ethnographic materials, missionary archives, and a reflexive stance anchored in the author's native background. The aim is to understand how the introduction of Christianity not only redefined relationships with the sacred, power, and territory but continues to fuel tensions in the contemporary postcolonial context.

2. THE TRADITIONAL DREHU ORDER: FOUNDATIONS OF A POLITICAL-RELIGIOUS SYSTEM

Before the arrival of Christianity, Drehu society was organized around a holistic system in which the political, religious, and social dimensions were inseparable [1]. This system relied on a hierarchical and territorially-based structure of clans (*lapa*), articulated with a worldview in which invisible forces—the *haze*—played a central role. These spiritual entities were not merely feared or revered; they structured relationships with the living, time, space, and power.

Political authority, embodied by customary chiefdoms (*hnanyijoxu*), derived its legitimacy from its capacity to mediate relations between the living and the *haze*. Being a chief was not simply about leadership—it implied sacred authority closely tied to ritual knowledge, symbolic places, and speech. Customary speech, transmitted according to precise protocols, was performative: it could “make be”—a relationship, peace, or alliance [2].

Agrarian rituals—especially those connected to yam planting—regulated social time and manifested interclan, intergenerational, and spiritual relationships. Every ritual action was embedded within a web of reciprocal obligations and taboos (sacred prohibitions), ensuring group cohesion and balance between the living and ancestors. Violations of these rules could lead to societal disorder, interpreted as disruptions in human–spirit relations.

Clanic alliances reinforced the stability of this order. They were not based solely on kinship, but on ritual exchanges, mutual services, and shared founding narratives often tied to sacred place names (*toponyms*). Each clan thus possessed a symbolic heritage—places, stories, ceremonial roles—linking it to space, ancestors, and a shared history.

The Drehu cosmology also included a circular concept of time and a strong interconnection between the visible and invisible worlds. Although physically dead, ancestors remained active in the living world, and their memory was sustained through rituals, names, songs, and daily gestures. This constant presence of the past within the present shaped both individual and collective identity.

In sum, the traditional Drehu order constituted a coherent political-religious system where power, the sacred, kinship, and territory were deeply interwoven. Any attempt at rupture—whether internal or external—inevitably triggered a global reorganization. This is precisely what occurred with the arrival of missionaries in the 19th century, who dismantled this system by introducing a new cosmology, moral frameworks, and an unprecedented hierarchy of knowledge.

3. MISSIONARY DISRUPTION: THE LMS AND THE IMPOSITION OF A CHRISTIAN ORDER

From 1842 onward, the installation of the London Missionary Society (LMS) on Lifou constituted a major epistemological and ontological rupture for Drehu society [3]. More than a simple religious conversion, the missionary process symbolically re-founded the society, redefining relationships with the sacred, authority, and collective memory. This transformative project was methodical, structured around religious, moral, and social pedagogy aimed at replacing one universe of meanings with another [3].

The missionary strategy relied on three main components:

1. Systematic denigration of the local spiritual system,
2. Centralization of worship around the temple and school,
3. Formation of a Christian indigenous elite to relay the new moral order.

3.1 Deconstructing Traditional References

From the first contacts, missionaries sought to discredit the *haze*, labeling them as “evil spirits” associated with superstition or demonry. Traditional rituals were dismissed as forms of idolatry, and sacred objects were destroyed or desacralized. Drehu spiritual vocabulary was either prohibited or reinterpreted within a biblical framework.

This process delegitimized the sacred Drehu order and severed the essential link between the living, their ancestors, and territory.

3.2 Reshaping Social Space: The Temple and the School

The LMS also reorganized social space around two centers: the temple, site of weekly worship and collective discipline; and the school, tool for normalizing behavior, values, and language. The mission school taught reading and writing in Drehu, but according to biblical grammar. It became a vector for internalizing Christian moral values: order, work, modesty, and submission to God. This spatial conversion of the sacred—centered on mission buildings—marginalized traditional ritual sites (caves, springs, promontories), depriving them of symbolic function. Thus, spatial conversion was also a political conquest.

4. ACCULTURATION, SYNCRETISM, AND IDENTITY RECONFIGURATIONS

The encounter between missionary Christianity and Drehu culture did not result in a wholesale replacement of one model by another. Instead, it involved complex processes of acculturation, negotiation, and cultural resilience, whereby individuals and communities negotiated between competing symbolic worlds. What emerged was neither intact continuity with the past nor uniform assimilation into Western Christianity, but rather a space of religious hybridity rich in tension and creative identity [4].

4.1 Selective and Differential Acculturation

Christian adoption was neither homogeneous nor instantaneous; it depended on clan positioning relative to the missions, internal rivalries, integration into missionary networks, and relations with colonial power. Some groups—especially those in conflict with established chiefdoms—saw the LMS as an opportunity to assert new legitimacy by aligning with an external spiritual authority.

This differential acculturation generated internal fractures—between staunch traditionalists and those adopting Christian norms. Adoption was selective: some elements of the past deemed “pagan” were rejected, while Christian elements were assimilated into continuities of ritual practice (e.g., funerals, reinterpreted clan chants).

4.2 Syncretism and Cultural Reinterpretation

Local populations actively reinterpreted Christian messages through Drehu symbolic frameworks. For example, Christian baptism echoed Drehu initiation rites marking the transition to adulthood and community life. Syncretic traits appeared in liturgy, funeral practices, and the differentiated use of sacred space. Christian ceremonies (marriages, burials) were often framed by customary discourse, and the temple could function with both Christian and clan dimensions.

This hybridization reveals ritual creativity and cultural adaptability, enabling traditional forms to survive in modified ways and conferring local legitimacy on Christianity.

4.3 Identity Reconfigurations and Loyalty Conflicts

However, this hybridity was often fraught. Identity reconfigurations sparked loyalty conflicts as individuals were torn between custom and Christian faith. Tensions surfaced during significant social junctures: mourning, customary appointments, religious festivals, partner choice, burial sites.

Some practices—such as refusing to attend a customary ritual deemed incompatible with faith—could provoke symbolic ruptures within clans or even familial schisms. Conversely, others sought reconciliation, arguing for full Drehu and Christian identities through contextual reinterpretation.

These tensions highlight broader issues of postcolonial identity construction, where the Kanak subject negotiates multiple, sometimes contradictory, allegiances as integral to their identity. Identity reconfiguration occurs not through imposition, but through dynamic cultural negotiation.

5. PENTECOSTALISM AND THE POST-MISSIONARY ERA: NEW RELIGIOUS TENSIONS

Since the 1990s, Lifou has witnessed a religious reconfiguration driven by the rise of Pentecostalism, part of a wider diversification of the religious field across insular Pacific. Pentecostalism, stemming from global evangelical and charismatic movements, emphasizes a break with ancient traditions—including institutional Protestantism from the LMS—an emotional, direct relationship with God, and individual conversion. It signifies not just doctrinal change but a reversal of traditional religious mediation in favor of immediate, spectacular spirituality.

5.1 Pentecostalism as a Challenge to the Established Order

Pentecostalism often presents itself as a form of “spiritual awakening,” denouncing the lukewarmness of historic churches (Protestant and Catholic) and their complicity with social structures, especially custom. It embodies a radical critique of the post-missionary order, where both pastors and traditional chiefs may be seen as complicit in a rigid social system.

Through fiery sermons, passionate singing, and miraculous healings, Pentecostalism champions rupture with the past: “The old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Cor 5:17) [5][6]. This verse encapsulates its theology of break, rejecting both *haze* and clan symbolism, accused of keeping individuals under the sway of spirits or human tradition.

5.2 Social Reconfigurations and Intra-community Conflicts

Pentecostal communities—often emerging from family or tribal divisions—introduce new lines of fracture in tribes. Conversions involve social repositioning, spatial separation (new worship spaces outside the main temple), and loyalty conflicts within clans. Field reports show families where members ceasing customary ceremonies, refusing collective offerings, or challenging customary chief authority in the name of faith. These ruptures can be viewed as spiritual liberation or disintegration of traditional solidarity structures.

Paradoxically, Pentecostalism may recreate strong moral authority in the figure of the pastor-prophet, who serves as a direct mediator with God. Thus, despite its anti-hierarchy rhetoric, the movement can reinforce formal moral leadership outside clan structures.

5.3 Ambivalent Movement: Between Global Modernity and Quest for Rootedness

Pentecostalism’s success lies in its ability to combine modernity and spirituality: its spread is facilitated by media (radio, religious YouTube channels, social networks); its rituals are intense and accessible; its message promises personal deliverance from physical, psychological, or social suffering. It addresses postcolonial uncertainties in a world where traditional anchors erode and missionary institutions appear outdated.

Yet, this engagement with global modernity is often accompanied by local rejection: vernacular languages may be marginalized in favor of French or biblical English; clan founding narratives may be forgotten or reinterpreted as spiritual burdens. This tension reflects a deeper struggle between universal salvation and cultural anchoring.

Some newer Pentecostal churches try to reconcile faith and Kanak culture by revitalizing traditional music, Drehu proverbs, or welcoming ceremonies. This trend remains marginal, but it reflects a desire to invent a middle way between Christian fidelity and cultural rootedness.

In sum, Pentecostalism on Lifou is not just another religious phenomenon: it functions as a laboratory for identity reconfiguration, reflecting post-missionary and postcolonial tensions. It revives old fractures, creates new ones, but also opens unprecedented spaces for spiritual expression, contestation, and creativity.

6. REFLEXIVITY AND SITUATED STANCE: THE INDIGENOUS ANTHROPOLOGIST IN THE FIELD

A key pillar of this research is the adoption of a reflexive and situated stance [7], inseparable from the author's identity as a native Lifou anthropologist. This positioning grants the inquiry deep access to cultural meanings and sensitivity to internal dynamics rarely accessible to outside researchers. It also demands constant methodological and ethical vigilance: the task is not merely to "observe" a society, but to write from within, at the intersection of scientific, familial, customary, and religious loyalties.

6.1 Embodied Knowledge and Privileged Access

Belonging to Drehu society enables profound immersion in linguistic codes, ritual logics, latent tensions, and unspoken norms. This embodied knowledge is not "objective" but a lived understanding of social stakes. It provides access to intimate narratives, silent memories, and local interpretations not readily shared with outsiders. Use of Drehu language in interviews, participation in customary ceremonies, and knowledge of clan genealogies create dense and layered field access. However, this proximity is ambivalent: it aids research but imposes implicit constraints, particularly in sharing sensitive information or critiquing local institutions.

6.2 Self-Analysis as a Tool of Decentering

Being an indigenous researcher also implies constant self-analysis. It is not self-display but acknowledging the lenses through which knowledge is produced. Conceptual choices, interpretive frameworks, and analytical priorities are shaped by personal experience, loyalty conflicts, and sometimes inherited wounds from colonial history. Reflexivity enables decentering from dominant epistemologies: speaking from within Kanak societies, with their symbolic references, internal tensions, and unique historicity. This does not imply abandoning critical analysis, but conducting it from a plural, situated standpoint at the crossroads of scientific knowledge and collective memory.

6.3 Ethics of Speech and Politics of Transmission

Finally, this stance raises fundamental questions about the use of speech and the transmission of knowledge. Writing about one's own society involves deciding what to reveal, conceal, or transform into objects of analysis. In the Kanak context, where speech carries performative and binding value, publishing anthropological analysis means taking a public position, sometimes exposing intra-community tensions. This requires an ethic of responsibility: being faithful without betraying, analyzing without freezing, transmitting without appropriating. It is not about idealizing an "indigenous" posture, but acknowledging that all knowledge production is situated and that this situation entails political and symbolic commitment.

This reflection on the researcher's stance situates this study within decolonial anthropology, committed to centering indigenous voices not as research objects but as sense-making subjects. It also offers methodological perspectives for rethinking anthropological writing as dialogue between forms of knowledge, at the crossroads of lived experience, memory, and theory.

7. GENERAL CONCLUSION

The study of religious and social dynamics on Lifou—from pre-Christian times to the contemporary period—reveals a history marked by deep ruptures, yet also by subterranean continuities and cultural resilience. The introduction of Christianity by the London Missionary Society in the 19th century disrupted the political-religious foundations of Drehu society, substituting traditional spiritual mediations with a new moral and ecclesial order structured around the temple, school, and biblical text.

This ontological shock did not annihilate traditional logics: it displaced, recomposed, and sometimes concealed them in transformed forms. Processes of acculturation, syncretism, and reinterpretation enabled local

actors to appropriate, adapt, or negotiate Christian categories within their own cognitive frameworks. Thus, rather than simple assimilation, the religious encounter generated a symbolic creativity within which cultural identities were reconfigured.

The more recent emergence of Pentecostalism continues this trajectory, introducing a new religious grammar—individualistic, emotional, often conflictual. By radically segmenting from both custom and missionary orders, Pentecostalism heightens intra-community tensions and revives debates over the compatibility of Christian faith and Kanak custom. It paradoxically offers a local response to global dynamics: social uncertainty, political disenchantment, and quests for personal salvation.

Finally, this research—conducted through a situated, committed, and critical stance—underscores the importance of decentering anthropological gaze in a postcolonial context. To think *from Lifou*, using its words, silences, and memories, is to account for the complexity of religious trajectories and to valorize indigenous knowledge as heuristic resources capable of generating their own social intelligence.

In this sense, Lifou is not merely a site of inquiry: it is a place of thought, where tensions between tradition, modernity, faith, and memory open fertile avenues for rethinking the very categories of religion, identity, and transmission.

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