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Bringing Kierkegaard into anthropology:

Repetition, absurdity, and curses in Fiji

A B S T R A C T

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard offers two concepts that can strengthen anthropological analyses of Christianity. The first is "repetition," or the act of "recollecting forward," which provides a model of transformation that depends neither on deep continuity nor on decisive break. The second is "absurdity," the faithful but painful acceptance of paradox as irreducible to logical resolution, which challenges eudemonic understandings of Christianity as a religion oriented toward comfort and satisfaction. I demonstrate the usefulness of Kierkegaard's concepts through an analysis of indigenous Fijian Methodists' interest in repeatedly engaging with curses from ancestors as a way to overcome them. [*Christianity, Methodism, Kierkegaard, ritual, curses, Fiji*]

Anthropologists have paid little attention to the work of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55). In this article, I examine two concepts he developed that can be especially productive for the anthropological analysis of Christian discourse and practice: "repetition," or the act of "recollecting forward" to reshape old things into new ones, and "absurdity," the acceptance of irresolvable paradox. I begin by reviewing two models of temporality in the anthropology of Christianity, one associated with the work of Fenella Cannell and the other with the work of Joel Robbins. I suggest that Kierkegaard's concept of "repetition" offers a third and especially insightful perspective on Christian ideologies of change. Following that discussion, I examine Fijian Methodist rituals for overcoming curses, analyzing them within this Kierkegaardian frame. Finally, I turn to the concept of "absurdity" to make sense of a key paradox: While it may be true, as Marshall Sahlins asserts, that many Christians have long characterized "life as movement towards those things that made one feel good and away from those things that hurt" (1996:415), many communities, nonetheless, display great zeal in engaging with apparently hurtful, dangerous things as a foundational element in their Christian practice. This tendency is, I argue, not simply a matter of motivation—bringing the devil into church just so you can kick him out—but something more perplexing and not ultimately reducible to a systematic logic that separates pleasures and gains from pains and losses.

In this article, I have three main goals. The first is to begin to bring Kierkegaard into dialogue with cultural anthropology to discover new aspects of recuperative ritual action. The second goal is to illustrate my argument above by expanding on an ethnographic claim I have made in earlier publications: namely, that Fijian Methodism generates pervasive and recurrent senses of loss even as it raises the possibility of recuperation from such loss. My third goal is to use Kierkegaard to reevaluate the claim that Christian models of human action are oriented toward the "pursuit of happiness" and the avoidance of pain. Christianity is not a single, disarticulated thing, and it may shape visions and actions that actively seek suffering through an embrace of faith as absurdly compelling.

Repetition

In *Thought and Change* (1964), Ernest Gellner identified three theories of "progress," two of which have informed the work of leading theorists of the anthropology of Christianity. The first theory Gellner discusses is one he calls the "episodic," in which progress is defined by a single rupture. The second is the "evolutionist," in which progress is marked by gradual and interlinked changes. The third, the "neo-episodic," does both: Like the episodic, it focuses on a specific moment—the dominant one for Gellner is industrialization—and like the evolutionist, it frames progress as a complex process of change.

In the introduction to her influential volume *The Anthropology of Christianity* (2006), Fenella Cannell observes that Hegel, Weber, Durkheim, and Mauss each saw the development of Christianity as episodic on a grand scale. Christianity was "an irreversible moment of transformation" in which the logic of transcendence took hold: God became ultimately remote from humanity in both space and time (Cannell 2006:45). Such sociological understandings of theological principles led to a scholarly correlation of Christianity and "modernity" in which the rupture Christianity causes in previously non-Christian societies is both irreversible and nonrepeatable. On an individual level too, some ideologies of conversion "depend on a break in time. Conversion changes the individual, and however much he might backslide, the event itself cannot be undone" (Cannell 2006:38). Yet Cannell argues that scholarly correlations between transcendence, conversion, and modernity are misleading or overstated, because the idea of transcendence is found outside Christianity as well as within it and not all varieties of Christianity emphasize transcendence. She concludes her introduction by suggesting that anthropologists "stop presupposing that Christianity changes everything forever" (2006:45; cf. Tomlinson and McDougall 2013).

This concluding suggestion turns away from an episodic theory of progress toward an evolutionist one, in Gellner's terms, revealing a core assumption that Christianity, like all cultural forms, necessarily has a degree of continuity with the past. The transformation wrought by Christianity may have been a definitive moment both in personal terms (individual conversion) and world-historical ones (the birth of the modern), but it also motivates projects that do not define the break with the past as a break at all. Some societies portray their conversion to Christianity this way, such as the Piro of the Peruvian Amazon, who hold that their becoming Christians did not constitute a significant change because, paradoxically, "they were already believing Christians when they converted." Their ancestors believed in God, and "Evangelical Christianity was simply their own cosmology better explained by people who knew more about it" (Gow 2006:221–222). Sim-

ilarly, Christina Toren observes that some Fijian Methodists understand conversion as having "revealed the inherent Christianity of the Fijian people" (1988:697) rather than having overcome a non-Christian past (see also Kaplan 1995; Tomlinson 2009).

In contrast, Joel Robbins (2007) has argued that anthropologists need to take seriously alternative claims that Christianity ruptures the cultural order and introduces an entirely new one (see also Besnier 2011:ch. 8). This reemphasis on the episodic is motivated especially by evangelical and Pentecostal descriptions of radical transformation. Robbins writes that "anthropology has in large part disregarded Christianity because it has neither been interested in nor theorized discontinuity" (2007:9), and he criticizes the influential work of Jean and John Comaroff for the way "it has further refined the techniques by which anthropology has generally rendered Christianity unimportant" (2007:9). Aptly summarizing the key difference between Cannell and Robbins, Courtney Handman writes that "either Christianity's model of change is a myth (as Cannell argues) or it is central to the creation of Christianity itself (as Robbins argues)" (2010:578).

But episodic and evolutionist models need not be exclusive, and some societies might draw on both (Keane 2007:162).[1] Below, I return to Gellner's third category, the neo-episodic, in this regard. My brief summaries in the above paragraphs are not meant to critique the substantial and detailed histories of Christianity-as-culture that Cannell and Robbins have put forth but to highlight their different emphases as I introduce a third possibility that arises in the work of Kierkegaard: that of repetition.

For Kierkegaard, repetition is a slippery category—but, then, all of his categories are slippery, soaked in irony and doused with multiple meanings in various voices. In an unpublished work, Kierkegaard wrote that repetition in thought or action alone is, strictly speaking, impossible, so it needs to be understood as "a way of moving on, recreating the ideal perhaps, bringing it into being" (Hannay 2001:198). This understanding receives complex elaboration in the landmark work *Repetition: A Venture in Experimenting Psychology* (Kierkegaard 1983b), wherein, in his typical style, Kierkegaard writes under a pseudonym, crafts different voices, and blends biography, fiction, and philosophy in a way that can be maddeningly elusive for readers searching for a programmatic philosophy.[2] Despite his authorial sleight of hand, however, Kierkegaard's touchstones are clear: Repetition is his critique of Hegelian mediation, the reconciliation of a position and its negation, and his primary models are biblical figures. His argument is useful for anthropologists who aim to understand the distinctiveness of Christian temporal ideologies without overemphasizing either continuity or rupture.

Part one of *Repetition* is a "report" by the pseudonymous author Constantin Constantius. At the beginning of

the book, he spends several long paragraphs explaining what the reader is to understand *repetition* to mean. Here, I quote a lengthy excerpt because it provides the firmest foundation for understanding Kierkegaard's model of temporality, one that is structured by Christian myth:

> *Repetition* is a crucial expression for what "recollection" was to the Greeks. Just as they taught that all knowing is a recollecting, modern philosophy will teach that all life is a repetition. ... Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward. Repetition, therefore, if it is possible, makes a person happy, whereas recollection makes him unhappy ... .

> Indeed, what would life be if there were no repetition? Who could want to be a tablet on which time writes something new every instant or to be a memorial volume of the past? Who could want to be susceptible to every fleeting thing, the novel, which always enervatingly diverts the soul anew? If God himself had not willed repetition, the world would not have come into existence. Either he would have followed the superficial plans of hope or he would have retracted everything and preserved it in recollection. This he did not do. Therefore, the world continues, and it continues because it is a repetition. Repetition—that is actuality and the earnestness of existence. [Kierkegaard 1983b:131–133]

As Kierkegaard portrays it, repetition is the temporal mechanism of existence. God needed to make repetition happen as a condition of the world's creation, and now humans struggle to fashion their own lives by moving forward in the same way. Those who "recollect forward" create themselves anew and can achieve fulfillment, at least temporarily. But they do not do the creating alone—for Kierkegaard, or, rather, for the narrator Constantin Constantius, "a repetition is not something one brings about oneself; on the contrary it is something brought about by someone, another: God" (Garff 2005:234; see also Mooney 1998:300).[3]

To illustrate repetition, Kierkegaard first presents the story of a nameless young man. He appears one day, brimming with joy, to tell the narrator of his love for a girl who has indicated that she loves him too. But, almost immediately, he falls into a deep melancholy, unable to recapture the initial moment of passion, dwelling instead on what had just been. The girl still loves him, and he has not told her of his devastating realization. The narrator then proposes a solution. He offers to find an attractive girl who will agree to be seen with the young man to spark gossip that will convince his beloved to end their affair.[4] But the young man disappears instead, and the narrator laments that his problem was that he "did not understand repetition" and therefore could not enact it. The young man really loved his paramour but was trapped in the moment of recollection (Kierkegaard 1983b:145).

In the second half of part one, the narrator describes a trip he took to Berlin, which he had visited once before, with the express purpose of discovering whether repetition is possible. He offers various examples to suggest that it is impossible. They are playfully trivial: The landlord from his previous trip is now married, the café's coffee does not taste as good as it did before. One main example, discussed at length, is his disappointment at attending a theatrical farce. On the earlier trip, he had laughed uproariously and admired a young girl who came to the show every night. This time, however, he does not find the farce enjoyable or see the girl, and he soon leaves, lamenting, "There is no repetition at all." However, he then goes to a restaurant where he had eaten before and finds everything exactly the same—and, for this reason, he is again disappointed, leading him to comment that the possibility of repetition in such a banal place was "an appalling thought" (Kierkegaard 1983b:170). In a cleverly chiastic setup, the theatrical farce helps convince the narrator that repetition is impossible in life, whereas his confused and frustrated responses to ordinary life are the stuff of farce.

Kierkegaard writes a peculiar kind of comedy, but he does so for precise authorial purposes. The "overtly parodic" first half of *Repetition* sets up the "ostensibly serious" discourse of part two (Garff 2005:244), in which the comic experiment is left behind and the possibility of repetition is reaffirmed. The second half begins with the narrator updating the story of the nameless young man in a series of letters. The young man compares himself to Job, who, in the Old Testament story, loses his children, servants, and livestock and becomes horribly ill when Satan tests his faith in God. Job refuses to question or renounce God, and God eventually rewards him by giving him more children and twice the amount of livestock he had previously. At first, the young man admires Job because of his iron faith and believes that the moment of repetition comes at the end of the story, when God blesses Job by restoring and doubling his wealth. He is shocked, then, when his own ordeal ends abruptly—the girl he loved has married someone else. Now the young man rethinks repetition: By not gaining his beloved back, he has repeated his initial condition of being unknown to her. As he puts it, "She ... acted generously, if in no other way than by completely forgetting me" (Kierkegaard 1983b:220); by forgetting her lover, the girl has ended his torment and restored him to himself. He concludes by comparing himself again with Job, but now on the plane of transcendence—here, meaning existence in divine time—rather than on the immanent level:

> Is there not, then, a repetition? Did I not get everything double? Did I not get myself again and precisely in such a way that I might have a double sense of its meaning? Compared with such a repetition, what is

a repetition of worldly possessions, which is indifferent toward the qualification of the spirit? Only his children did Job not receive double again, for a human life cannot be redoubled that way. Here only repetition of the spirit is possible, even though it is never so perfect in time as in eternity, which is the true repetition. [Kierkegaard 1983b:220–221]

This statement recalls the narrator's claim at the beginning of the book: "If God himself had not willed repetition, the world would not have come into existence."[5]

I have spent considerable time discussing this single work because Kierkegaard's model of repetition—idiosyncratic and expansive as it might seem—adds a useful third option to episodic and evolutionist understandings of temporality in Christianity. Kierkegaardian repetition requires a specific moment, a concrete episode, from which the present has broken, but it also requires "positive persistence which both establishes the 'next thing' and secures the reality of the 'initial thing' in the first place" (Milbank 2009:159). The Danish term Kierkegaard uses for repetition is *Gjentagelse,* meaning "taking again"; thus "repetition is an act of faith … which connects the individual to transcendent truth to transfigure the old into something new" (McDonald 2003:72). In other words, repetition is not quite break and not quite continuity, but rather an ongoing act of transformative reengagement and reaffirmation. To illustrate repetition, Kierkegaard offers the symbol of the horn of a stagecoach, from which "one can never be certain of wheedling the same notes" (1983b:175).

Other scholars have used the term and concept of repetition in distinct ways, including, notably, Freud (1961) in his description of repetition compulsion, the urge to repeat that which has been repressed. One use of repetition that resonates especially productively with Kierkegaard's is Jon Bialecki's recourse to Deleuzian assemblage theory to articulate "virtual Christianity." Within the subfield of the anthropology of Christianity, Bialecki observes, scholars have failed to identify clearly what the object of study is; disallowing abstraction and universals, they cannot (or will not) demarcate a singular "Christianity." To begin to define an appropriate object of study, he turns to Gilles Deleuze's "virtual," the field of potentiality "which serves to constantly bring new 'actual' entities into being"; in actual expressions of the virtual, "each repetition produces something new due to the different circumstances that the operation is carried out in" (Bialecki 2012:307, 309). Repetition in this sense—the hum between potential and action, between indeterminacy and determination—evokes Kierkegaard's model of repetition in divine creation. I have not drawn on Deleuze for my own argument here but suggest that his resonance with Kierkegaard opens up new possibilities for the anthropological study of Christianity, and I agree with Bialecki's claim that Christianity "may be many things—an *unlim-*

ited number of things—but not *everything* or *anything*" (2012:313).

As I suggest above, Kierkegaardian repetition has particular resonance with Gellner's third theory of progress, the neo-episodic. Gellner wrote that the neo-episodic "possesses the merits of each [other theory] and the defects of neither" (1964:43) because it retains the episode while recognizing that the episode alone is not sufficient for explaining transformation. While Kierkegaard and Gellner live on different theoretical planets, and I do not aim to equate or reconcile them, I suggest that Gellner's claim for the neo-episodic applies well to Kierkegaard's repetition. Both constructs can help anthropologists see what their interlocutors see: neither full continuity nor complete break but moments that both change contexts and transcend contexts as they are repeated onward into the future. In the next section, I argue that this model of repetition makes sense of Fijian Methodist attention to curses more effectively than models of continuity or rupture can.

The compelling appeal of curses

In colloquial American English, *curse* has at least three distinct meanings. One is simply to use taboo language. Another is to voice one's ill will toward another, although without this expression having any effect. The third is to speak with performative force, making bad things happen to someone by uttering them into existence. Whereas the first and second are possible for anyone to do, the third meaning of *curse* depends on having the spiritual authority to change the world by speaking of it. Although Job's wife, in the biblical tale, tells Job to "curse God and die," it is obviously not within Job's power to hurt God; but when God curses people in biblical stories, they suffer immensely.

Kierkegaard's own family labored under a belief in a curse in the third sense that was caused by a curse in the second sense. His father, "as a child tending sheep on the Jutland heath, stood upon a hill and cursed God for making an innocent child suffer so" (Hannay 1996:8). By cursing God, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard apparently believed he had caused God to curse him and his family so that all of his children would die before he did. His son Søren came to believe this too and wrote famously of an "earthquake," a moment when he realized that the sins of his father had doomed the family:

It was then the great earthquake occurred, the terrible upheaval which suddenly pressed on me a new infallible law for the interpretation of all phenomena. It was then I suspected my father's great age was not a divine blessing but rather a curse; that our family's excellent mental abilities existed only for tearing us apart one from another; I felt the stillness of death spreading over me when I saw in my father an unhappy person who

would survive us all, a monumental cross on the grave of all his own expectations. [Kierkegaard 1996:117]

In consultation with his father, Kierkegaard came to the conclusion that none of the old man's sons would live past age 33, the age at which Jesus had died. When his older brother turned 34, and then he himself turned 34, Kierkegaard was amazed and wondered if a mistake had been made in recording his birth date (Garff 2005:136–138).

Like the Kierkegaards' belief in curses—at least until their unexpected birthdays took place—Fijian Methodists' ideas about curses are inseparable from their ideas about Christian ethics. In Fiji, talk about curses does not point to a dark side of faith; it is an integral part of faith.

Fijian Methodism inherited its core doctrines, liturgy, and organizational structure from British Wesleyan Methodism, the first British missionaries having arrived from London in 1835 and experienced dramatic evangelical success beginning in the mid-1850s. Interleaved with British elements are distinctively indigenous Fijian beliefs in local spiritual presences, including ancestral spirits whose evil actions can curse living descendants.[6]

Curses can originate with the words of the living. "When the hour of death is allowed to approach naturally … the dying man mentions his foe," wrote the missionary Thomas Williams, "that his children may perpetuate his hatred,—it may be against his own son,—and kill him at the first opportunity. The name of the hated one is uttered aloud, if not as the object of immediate vengeance, yet of gloomy and disastrous predictions, which never fail to reach the ears where they are least welcome" (1982:186–187). Similarly, another missionary recalled how

> the memory of a solemn vow, request, or curse would be exceedingly vivid in the Fijians' imagination, and, indeed, would become almost a voice to intimidate them, sounding from the other world. A very real conviction sprang up in their minds that, if they did not attend to the will of the dead man, the latter would assuredly be able to make the survivors suffer for their negligence. [Deane 1921:42]

Perhaps because of scenarios like this, the Methodists who translated the Bible into Fijian often translated *curse(d)* using a form of the word *cudru,* meaning "anger."[7]

Fijian curses can afflict individuals. When a 22-year-old man was charged with molesting a girl, he testified that "before my grandfather died, he did witchcraft on me" and added that the church minister had baptized him with the beverage kava (which has a strong link with ancestral tradition) instead of water. "These days," the young man pleaded, "the curse comes and makes me do strange things" (*Fiji Times* 1999; n.b., he was convicted). Curses can also be applied to the nation, although at this level it is evidently supposed to be God rather than the ancestors who are the

effective force behind them. In 1995, the Methodist Church made a formal submission to a constitutional review commission in which it argued that if Fiji were not officially declared a Christian state, then it would show that "this nation is under a Divine curse." Several years later, a Methodist minister explained to the ethnographer Jacqueline Ryle that "the curse of God to us" (2010:63) in Fiji was seen in such events as a drought, the falling price of gold, and the constitution's tolerance of non-Christians.

Most curses affect kin groups and villages. The best-known curse in Fiji is tied to the chiefdom of Navatusila, including the villagers of Nabutautau, whose forebears killed the Methodist missionary Rev. Thomas Baker and seven members of his traveling party in 1867. Villagers have formally apologized to church leaders for the murders, hoping to lift the curse, on three separate occasions, in 1903, 1985, and 2003. A journalist reporting on the third event, in which Baker's descendants were invited to the village, wrote that "villagers believe that since 1867, either Baker's spirit or disapproving gods have made sure that modern developments like electricity, a school, piped water supply and other essentials enjoyed by most Fijian villagers have been kept from them" (Pareti 2003).

Note the ambiguity in the reporter's phrase "either Baker's spirit or disapproving gods," which suggests that there is disagreement over who, precisely, is cursing the villagers. It might be Jehovah, because Baker was a man of God and, as the Methodist submission to the constitutional review commission indicates, God can curse those who oppose him. But note the plural "disapproving gods," suggesting an effective ancestral presence as well. The theologian Joseph E. Bush (2000) observed different understandings of curses' authorship in his research on Methodism, land, and communalism. In Nalotawa, Vitilevu, a minister explained to him that the local curse came from ancestor gods; the trigger for the curse was the massacre of a European plantation owner, his family, and laborers from Vanuatu in 1873 (Bush 2000:32). In contrast, at the Methodists' annual conference in Suva in 1996, the spokesman for Bureta villagers on Ovalau Island explained that their land "had lapsed into darkness and the practice of witchcraft is rife in the district to date. We believe that as a result we have been cursed by God as we have fallen short of his glory. Our land and our lives are barren" (Bush 2000:32). Yet ancestral influence was evidently still considered dangerous in Bureta, as two of the objects the congregation presented in atonement to the church were a spear and an axe "reportedly used … for invocation of the ancestor goddess, Buisavulu" (Bush 2000:29–30).

In indigenous Fiji, then, curses are often understood to be the results of evil deeds done by ancestors who acted in anti-Christian ways, and descendants of those ancestors can try to negate curses' effects by ceremonially apologizing to present-day church leaders. The authorship of a

particular curse—does it come from God, the ancestral spirits, or some other source?—might not matter as much as the apology and atonement, which are meant to eliminate the obstacles that stand in the way of people living prosperously. In the case from Nalotawa, the chief had approached the church minister for help because of "a malaise he was feeling within the community, a sense that something was wrong" (Bush 2000:31). Baker's curse was manifest not only in the missing basics of development—education, electricity, piped water—but also in "problematic relations with local government … social problems, infertile land and bad harvests," ill health, and illegal marijuana cultivation (Ryle 2010:71, 76). In another case, villagers of Kaba in Tailevu province, Vitilevu, felt that their children were not becoming well educated and businesses were not succeeding, and they attributed this poor showing to their ancestors having helped to kill Tongan Christian missionaries. Accordingly, at the 2003 annual conference of the Methodist Church, the Kaba villagers formally presented kava plants and whales' teeth in apology and atonement. The church spokesman observed that the 2003 conference was the third consecutive one to receive a formal apology from a community for its ancestors' deeds (Vula 2003).

Mistreating the Bible can result in a curse. For example, after a scandal in Namosi, Vitilevu, in 1903, in which Catholics were accused of burning Methodist Bibles, a story developed that Catholic priests had torn up the books and thrown them in the river. "The people of present-day Namosi," according to the historian Andrew Thornley, "say that they are under a 'jinx'. They claim that over the past fifty years their tribe has been dogged by continual bad luck; the present Tui Namosi, for instance, is the tenth son of his father, the other nine having died. They … attribute this curse … to the priests" (1979:311).[8] On Kadavu Island, one community has come to believe that it is cursed because an ancestor kissed the Bible after lying to a paramount chief about land boundaries early in the 20th century. The Methodist minister for this circuit told a researcher that when Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, representing the lands commission, took the man's testimony about whether a piece of land belonged to Naqeleloa or Nayavu village, the man dishonestly said Naqeleloa.

> Ratu Sukuna warned the grandfather that if he kissed the Bible and swore an oath that Nabogi [settlement] belonged to Naqeleloa, and if this was a lie, there would be consequences. But he kissed the Bible and swore the oath. This was the start of the curse, and you can see how it has out-worked. Etuate had been told the story from his mother Litia. See, Etuate's father, Tanoa Levu [the one who swore on the Bible] died at the time Etuate was born. Then Etuate's wife, one day, was fishing with some women at Nakoro, just disappeared and they never even found the body. Etuate had a stroke and now

> lies in that room every day for the last five years. Tanoa Lailai has had a stroke, Ilisapeci has died, Jokatama and Merewalesi have no children, and even Pauliasi only has had daughters and no sons. That is seen as a curse in our culture. You can see it in the family and can see it in the village. They have good land but produce nothing. They have free education but never learn. It's just like Haggai chapter 1. [Aporosa field notes 2005, p. 57, in author's possession][9]

The practice of ritually kissing the Bible is not unique to Fiji: In the early decades of Christianity in the Solomon Islands, those suspected of sorcery on the island of Santa Isabel were "required to kiss the Bible as a sign of disavowal of any further involvement. It is generally believed that if anyone were to conceal sorcery in this situation, and still kiss the Bible, he or she would likely suffer death within a matter of weeks as retribution from God. Informants recall several such cases of denial and subsequent death" (White 1988:24). The story from Kadavu resonates strongly with the other Fijian examples given above, however, in describing how various kinds of misfortune can result from an ancestor's actions.

A final example shows a new development in Fijian discourse about how curses can be perpetuated. A team funded by the evangelical Christian businessman and politician James Ah Koy produced a "New Fijian Translation" of the Bible in 2010 because Ah Koy was concerned about the standard interpretation—both in the Fijian Bible and in everyday conversation—of the word *kalougata* as "blessing." *Kalou* means "god" or "spirit," and *gata* means both "sharp" or "effective" and "snake." Translated as "blessing," *kalougata* incorporates the first sense of *gata* to denote spiritual effectiveness. However, if one reads *gata* as "snake," as Ah Koy does, one gets the ominous term "snake godded" (see also Tuwere 2002:137). One of the paramount spirits in pre-Christian Fiji was the great serpent god Degei, from the mountains of Nakauvadra. Ah Koy became convinced that when well-meaning Fijians say "kalougata" in blessing each other or read it in the Bible, they are unwittingly cursing each other by invoking Degei. His solution was to have the Bible translation changed, and his New Fijian Translation team replaced *kalougata* throughout (it appears 200 times) with *kalouvinaka,* literally "good god"; thus, the act of blessing is now "good-godding." The translators made other changes too, but the semantic slippage between effectiveness and snakes drove the project from the beginning.

In a conversation with Ah Koy in June 2011, I asked when he had first had the idea that the Fijian Bible needed to be translated anew. He explained that the idea had not come to him all at once but had grown gradually over time. He had observed indigenous Fijians' relative lack of success in professional fields, which, he suggested, was based on a

lack of sustained effort. He offered the example of a Fijian rugby team that would compete successfully in the early rounds of an international tournament but, then, in the finals round, would seem like a completely different team— like "neophytes," he said. Pondering this lack of sustained effort toward high achievement, he came to feel that the core problem was the Bible's translation of "blessing" as *kalougata.*

Ah Koy explained that pre-Christian indigenous Fijians had their own holy trinity, with Degei as the father, Dakuwaqa (a shark god) as the son, and Daucina ("the great god of seafaring" [Waterhouse 1997:256], who "steals women of rank and beauty by night or torch-light" [Williams 1982:218]) as the Holy Spirit. He speculated that early missionaries had asked village elders what their word for "blessing" was, and they had innocently replied *kalougata* because going to the snake god was how they got what they wanted in those days. In translating "blessing" as *kalougata* in the Bible, the Methodist missionaries were actually perpetuating a curse, bringing the power of Degei into Jehovah's text.

Ah Koy decided to discuss the matter with the Bible Society of the South Pacific and considered it providential that he and the society both had the same lawyer, whom he asked to set up a meeting. When the meeting was held, Ah Koy offered the society funding, including an interest-free loan, to expunge the 200 instances of the word *kalougata* from new printings of the Bible and replace it with a better alternative. He did not prefer any particular word, he said, but, in our conversation, he mentioned *kalouvinaka* (good god) and *kalousautu* (peaceful or abundant god) as possible choices. However, Bible Society board members were not interested in his offer—later, they would threaten him with legal action over copyright to the biblical text—and Ah Koy realized that he would need to lead the project himself.

The two translators who came forward to do the work were both from Bau Island, the dominant political power in precolonial and colonial Fiji. Ah Koy considered their willingness to do the work to be another providential sign, not only because of Bau's historical importance but also because the Bauan dialect is the basis for what has become the national standard language version (Standard Fijian) thanks to the pioneering work of the Methodist missionary translators. Ah Koy also appreciated the fact that the two were pastors in the Assemblies of God Church, with whose doctrines he agreed.

In our conversation, Ah Koy referred to the Bible passage Exodus 20:1–7, in which God begins to deliver the ten commandments and which includes the line, "I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me." Ah Koy believed that these verses justified his interpretation of Fijian history. Estimating that a generation could be fifty years long and that the Fijian Bible

was roughly one hundred fifty years old, he concluded that the present generation was still within the time frame of divine retribution for the sins of the fathers. This made his work urgent. Five thousand copies of the first edition of his translation were printed in 2010, and the complete text was also made available for free on the Internet (Ah Koy Christian Trust 2011). On the day we spoke, a shipment of 10,000 copies of a revised second edition with minor corrections was supposed to arrive in Fiji from an overseas printing house. Ah Koy said he planned to print 400,000 copies of the New Fijian Translation because there are roughly 400 thousand indigenous Fijians in the world at present.

The question of how one removes a curse is, in Ah Koy's project, given a simple answer: One merely corrects the Bible translation that is causing it in the first place. But in most of the cases described above, the answer is that congregations must ritually apologize and atone for their ancestors' misdeeds by presenting sperm whales' teeth to church leaders. When church leaders accept the presentations, curses are supposed to be lifted. As the linguist Paul Geraghty told Ryle, "People talk of 'bulu kina na ca'— evil [*ca*] being buried [*bulu*] by it [the whale's tooth]" (Ryle 2010:70; one of the terms used for this kind of formal apology is *ibulubulu,* which literally means "burial"). As Bush explains in relation to the apology from Bureta, when the president of the Methodist Church accepted the whale's tooth, it meant "in a priestly way that this sin is forgiven and the trouble it has caused is over. It is buried" (2000:30). At the third ritual apology meant to lift Baker's curse, held in 2003, rain began to fall after the high chief made his whale's tooth presentation, and people interpreted the rain as a sign from God of his forgiveness (Ryle 2010:67).

And, yet, as I have argued elsewhere (Tomlinson 2012), the prominence of curses in Fijian discourse—and the repetition of apologies in the Baker case—suggests that curses do not really go away. Indeed, the symbolism used in rituals of apology and atonement actually strengthens the sense that curses exist and must be addressed. Whales' teeth, a necessary part of a presentation of apology, are inextricably tied to the power and authority of the land and chiefly system, precisely the power and authority that make curses frighteningly effective in the first place. Moreover, when Ryle asked her interlocutors why the previous apologies for the Baker party's murder were not considered sufficient— why apologize a third time?—she was reminded by an evangelical leader of the biblical claim, which Ah Koy had also mentioned (made in Exodus 20:5, Deuteronomy 5:9, and Numbers 14:18), that forefathers' sins can be punished into the "third and fourth generations" (2010:74). By this logic, curses might be dampened but not extinguished until God's anger runs its slow course.[10]

Meanwhile, the Baker curse is growing in popularity. Villagers in the province of Naitasiri have come to believe that they too are cursed because of the evangelist's

murder, although their ancestors did not do the killing. Rather, a chief from Naitasiri had originally requested that Baker be killed. In July 2011, a party of 70, including seven Methodist church officials from Naitasiri, marched from the murder site to Davuilevu Theological College to formally apologize once again to Baker's descendants and Methodist Church leaders. The superintendent minister of the Naitasiri Methodist Church district, Moape Tavakula, explained that the ritual apology would "free the province from the curse for their role in killing Reverend Baker. The people of Naitasiri have to apologise for the wrongdoings of their forefathers. … The people of Naitasiri are now seeking forgiveness from the Methodist Church" (Nauwakarawa and Sauvakacolo 2011).

That Fijian curses do not really go away—notably unlike the Kierkegaard family curse—brings me back to Kierkegaard's model of repetition. Fijian curses have aspects of both rupture and continuity. They are ruptures in the sense that ancestors challenged Christian domination by committing anti-Christian acts; they are continuous in the sense that past acts directly affect people's fortunes in the present. The key point is that curses need to be reengaged with and reaffirmed as part of the project of being Christian in Fiji. Faith in their efficacy needs to be repeated—recollected forward in projects that aim at fulfillment but are never complete. Recall Toren's point, quoted above, that indigenous Fijians consider their ancestors to have had an "inherent Christianity" despite their anti-Christian behavior. Analyzing popular reproductions of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Last Supper* in relation to Fijian ideas of chiefliness and hierarchy, Toren writes,

> If the quintessentially Christian "Last Supper" can represent Fijian chiefship—which itself exemplifies "the way in the manner of the land"—then it can also imply that Fijian chiefs were always inherently Christian; that even long ago "in the time of the devils," before "the coming of the light," the chiefs embodied a fundamental Christianity—one that was obscured by the practices forced upon them by the ancestors in their malign aspect. The light made them see that human sacrifice and cannibalism, war and wife capture, widow strangulation and polygamy were sins imposed on them by their ignorance of the Christian God. But they had only to strip away these practices to stand revealed as true Christians, as people whose very tradition was at base Christian. [1988:712]

This logic mirrors the logic of curses. In other words, per Toren, if Fijians have always had an inherently Christian identity, then curses are ruptures in an overall continuity. Yet, if curses are not easily lifted and continue to affect communities and motivate ritual responses—such as the multiple apologies from Nabutautau villagers and Ah Koy's project to save Bible readers from cursing each other

when they mean to bless each other—then they are continuous with Christianity. Curses are inherent to Fijian Christianity just as Christianity is inherent to Fijian understandings of tradition.[11]

Absurdity

In the preceding sections, I have begun to develop an argument that curses are compelling cultural forms. By this, I mean to make three interconnected points. The idea of a curse (1) motivates people to act authoritatively (e.g., in conducting rituals meant to extinguish the curse); (2) while displacing their own agency (e.g., in crediting ancestral spirits or God with being the effective power behind the curse); and (3) doing so in projects of replication (per Urban 2001; see also Miyazaki 2000 on the "abeyance of agency"). In the cases described here, ritual actors (those who apologize and those who receive apologies) replicate the curse by reestablishing indexical links between ancestors' misdeeds and people's present-day misfortunes. The concept of "compulsion," as I use it, is meant to reveal that people feel that they must do something but also that they cannot really control anything (see also Tomlinson 2010). By describing curses as compelling, I also mean to challenge the English-language connotation they have as horrifying things that need to be done away with and to encourage a reading of them as things that people want to engage with repeatedly. I do not mean to minimize the pains and frustrations that motivate Fijian Methodists to speak of curses. Rather, I mean to add a new dimension to anthropological thinking about Christianity as culture.

As mentioned above, Marshall Sahlins has written that Judeo-Christian models portray humans as selfish seekers of comfort:

> At a certain period in Western history all of human society and behavior came to be perceived, popularly as well as philosophically, through the master trope of individual pleasures and pains. … Everything came down to the simple and sad idea of life as movement towards those things that made one feel good and away from those things that hurt. I say "sad" because anyone who defines life as the pursuit of happiness has to be chronically unhappy. [1996:415]

The pursuit of happiness, for Sahlins, is sad in its selfishness; the "folk wisdom of 'human nature'" (1996:400) in this Western tradition holds that we are biologically programmed to seek satisfaction. Indigenous Fijians, who have enthusiastically adopted Christian cosmology but not necessarily sociobiology, do link curses with ancestors who acted in selfish ways, such as lying about land ownership. But rather than moving away from those things that hurt, Fijian Methodists move toward them in discourse and ritual. One might object that the point of defusing a curse is to

get rid of the pain so that greater pleasures—blessedness, vitality, prosperity—become possible. Moreover, as Sahlins also observes, the idea that earthly suffering leads to "a greater beneficial order" (1996:407) is part of Christianity's promise. Indeed, the model of suffering as the path to paradise is evident in the doctrine that Christ needed to suffer to save humanity from its sins. I do not argue against these points but, rather, emphasize that suffering itself can become a focus of attention and that such attention's prospective force—its own hopefulness (per Miyazaki 2004)—leads back toward an engagement with suffering rather than transcendence of it.

An embrace of suffering is inherent in the description of Christ as the "suffering servant." This model is sometimes taken up enthusiastically by those seeking to embody Christian principles as faithfully (read: painfully) as possible. Enraged by a fawning eulogy of Copenhagen's Bishop Jakob Peter Mynster, Kierkegaard published a complaint in which he mocked the eulogist's claim that the late bishop had been a witness to Christian truth. Whereas Mynster valued ease and pleasure, Kierkegaard argued, a true "witness to the truth" should carry out his witnessing "in poverty, in lowliness and abasement … so unappreciated, hated, detested, so mocked, insulted, laughed to scorn … flogged, mistreated, dragged from one prison to another" until he "is crucified or beheaded or burned or broiled on a grill," adding, for good measure, that his body should not be buried (Kierkegaard 1998:6; see also Garff 2005:729–733). This, obviously, was not the life that Bishop Mynster led.[12] Just as obviously, it was the kind of Christian life Kierkegaard wanted to lead. Later he elaborated,

> Original Christianity relates itself so militantly to this world that its view is: not to want to slip happily and comfortably through this world but to take care to collide in dead earnest with this world so that after having fought and suffered in this way one might be able to pass in [God's] judgment … .

> Thus there is a world of difference, a heaven of difference between the Mynsterian life-view (which actually is Epicurean, one of the enjoyment of life, of zest for life, belonging to this world) and the Christian view, which is one of suffering, of enthusiasm for death, belonging to another world. Indeed, there is such a difference between these two life-views that to [the late] Bishop Mynster the latter must look … like a kind of lunacy. [Kierkegaard 1998:206]

Kierkegaard's tone is so ferocious that, in evaluating his statement, one might be tempted to focus on the last word of the quotation. But his passionate endorsement of pain and suffering is an integral part of his philosophy of faith as absurdity. For Kierkegaard, Christian faith cannot be reduced to logic; it is "suprarational" (McDonald in press), requiring acceptance of the "absolute paradox" of God becoming incarnate as a man (Evans 1989:348). Achieving such faith requires a terrifying inward struggle. "Without risk," he declares, "no faith" (Kierkegaard 1992:204).

A key example of an absurd paradox is God's temporality. As the creator of the world, God is eternal, but in the form of Jesus, he appeared within finite human history: "The absurd is that the eternal truth has come into existence in time" (Kierkegaard 1992:210). Logically, the two claims cannot be reconciled. Kierkegaard's most poignant statement of the absurdity of faith and the suffering it entails comes at the beginning of his classic work *Fear and Trembling*. After an epigraph and a brief preface, he describes how a particular man admired the story of Abraham and Isaac more and more as he aged but understood it less. The story, found in Genesis 22, tells how God orders Abraham to go to a mountain in the land of Moriah to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Both Abraham and his wife Sarah had been very old when Isaac was born—Abraham had been 100—and his birth was a miraculous delivery on a promise God had made. In Genesis 22, the miracle seems about to be undone with God's command, and a perplexed Isaac asks his father as they proceed, "Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" (Genesis 22:7). Abraham replies that God will provide the lamb, and they continue traveling to the place where God has indicated he expects the sacrifice.[13] Abraham ties up his son, places him on an altar, and draws his knife. At this point, an angel tells him to stop, "for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me" (Genesis 22:12). Abraham immediately sees a ram whose horns are tangled in a thicket and sacrifices the ram in place of his son.

The story, told straightforwardly, is horrifying. God grants miraculous life and then appears ready to take it away arbitrarily. To display his faith in God, Abraham has to submit to a command that will undo God's miraculous blessing of his family. If one tries to make sense of it logically, God seems either fickle or evil. And here is Kierkegaard's genius as a storyteller: He begins *Fear and Trembling* with his anonymous subject—the man who admires the narrative of Abraham and Isaac even as he finds it increasingly difficult to understand—and relates the man's repeated attempts to tell the story so that it resolves itself rationally and humanely. As Kierkegaard unfolds the scenes, it becomes apparent that such a rational understanding of the story is impossible.[14] He concludes the sequence of stories with a eulogy for Abraham in which he exults that he "will never forget that in 130 years you got no further than faith" (Kierkegaard 1983a:23). But this is an excruciating faith. It is far removed from a vision of Christian subjects seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, the scenarios that Kierkegaard rejects.

In his later writings, Kierkegaard moves from discussing absurdity to discussing the "inverse dialectic" in which Christianity makes it possible for a person to create a new self "by seeing in things their opposites, such as strength in weakness, exaltation in lowliness, prosperity in adversity, and hope in hopelessness" (McDonald in press; see also Walsh 2005). Kierkegaard's vision is ultimately a hopeful one: Beyond despair and persecution, a Christian can achieve limitless faith in God's love. But because a faithful Christian is expected to achieve a new self by imitating Christ, she or he "can expect only persecution and contempt from our fellows, or even martyrdom" (McDonald in press). Thus, while the goal of embracing adversity is not to enjoy it but to achieve a new kind of spiritual prosperity, it would be a mistake to reduce the inverse dialectic to a characterization of Christianity as a movement toward good feelings and away from bad ones. The pleasures and pains constitute each other.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that Kierkegaard's concepts of "repetition" and "absurdity" can give scholars insights into Christian models of continuity and discontinuity as well as the value accorded to suffering that is not transcended. I have analyzed Fijian Methodists' engagement with curses by using both concepts. Curses compel repeated ritual actions that look to the future while, as John Milbank has it, fixing "the reality of the 'initial thing' in the first place" (2009:159). They are absurd in the Kierkegaardian sense because they depend for their vitality on irresolvable paradoxes, among them, that ritually extinguishing curses does not get rid of them but remakes them for the future. In making this second argument, I broadened my scope to critique the claim that Christian models of humanity set people in metaphorical motion away from pain and toward pleasure. For Fijian Methodists, who believe they struggle because of curses, and for theorists like Kierkegaard—who believed for a long time that his family was cursed and who also characterized Christian faith by an impossibly painful standard—Christianity offers a pleasure that is emphatically not found in movement away from pain but is, rather, a sweetness in sadness.

Kierkegaard's anthropology was a distinctly theological one in which individuals struggle passionately to create themselves in relation to God. Joining this theological and individualistic model with rural Fijian ethnography makes for an unusual marriage, but, as I have argued in this article, understanding indigenous Fijian engagements with curses in terms of repetition and absurdity makes better sense of them than other theoretical approaches do: Such engagements come into focus as ongoing acts in which people constitute themselves as distinct kinds of religious subjects whose claims, which might be read as paradoxical, create a

Christianity in which pain and pleasure are not opposites. Kierkegaard's philosophy is anfractuous and obsessive, but, in its dippings and spinnings, it manages to give anthropological traction to ideas that Fijian Methodists work with repeatedly.

Notes

1. Indeed, Robbins has recently written in regard to time that "many Pentecostals make a break that is less than clean. For them, a key dynamic of the break is one of at once seeking to reject the past and at the same time curating it so that its rejection can continue to motivate commitment to the event of conversion in the future" (2010:647; see also Robbins 2011).

2. Kierkegaard uses pseudonyms to represent his author-characters' positions within "stages" of existence, so scholars of his work often take care to distinguish which pseudonymous author, representing which position, is being discussed. The author of *Repetition* is called "Constantin Constantius" ("who ... has repetition inscribed within his name" [Garff 2005:233]), and the author of *Fear and Trembling* is called "Johannes de Silentio." Both Constantin and Johannes represent Kierkegaard's stage of "aesthetic" existence, which is meant to be surpassed by the ethical stage and then the religious stage. Later in his career, the pseudonym "Anti-Climacus" was "meant to represent the ideal Christian position" (McDonald 2003:77). Despite the importance of pseudonymous positioning for Kierkegaard studies, in this article I treat Kierkegaard as a single author because my main concern is to illuminate Fijian ethnography with the set of concepts he offers.

3. Scholars who write of Kierkegaard's "anthropology" thus tend to do so in a theological vein, defining anthropology partly in terms of humanity's relationship to God (e.g., "At the heart of Kierkegaard's anthropology is the insight that a human being is a relationship of opposing forces that the self must relate together, and in turn relate to God" [Sousa 2012:37]; see also Houe 2000). My use of Kierkegaardian terms and concepts in this article is therefore not just a recontextualization of them but a transformation of them for nontheological purposes, a step toward the goal of rethinking how anthropological engagement with theology can not only critique and develop anthropology but also transform it, per Robbins 2006.

4. This may sound like a deeply problematic solution, but it parallels the way Kierkegaard handled his own broken courtship, an incident that inspired scenes in *Repetition* as well as other publications (Garff 2005:246–248; Hong and Hong 1983).

5. After the young man's story is finished, a final letter is presented, from the narrator to the reader, in which he explains that he created the fictional character of the young man as a way of illustrating the "exception," the individual who struggles for a never-possible reconciliation with the universal (Kierkegaard 1983b:227–229). Kierkegaard's invocation of biblical figures to illustrate repetition formally resembles U.S. fundamentalists' understanding of typological prefiguration, in which, as Susan Harding (2000) describes, present-day humans see themselves as living out and fulfilling characterological models from the Bible (see Tomlinson 2010

for an analysis of Harding's work and its application to Fijian politics). A key difference between Kierkegaardian repetition and Harding's analysis of Christian typology is the nature and role of the audience. For Kierkegaard, projects of repetition are made effective by individuals struggling with themselves and in relation to God; for Jerry Falwell, Harding's main subject, projects of repetition are made effective by audiences who struggle to reconcile perfect models with his imperfect (and occasionally scandalous) repetitions.

6. More than 99 percent of Fiji's indigenous citizens belong to a Christian church. In 2007, 53.7 percent of all of Fiji's Christians (both indigenous and nonindigenous) were Methodists, 14.2 percent were Catholics, and 8.9 percent belonged to the Assemblies of God (Fiji Bureau of Statistics 2007).

7. There are 227 instances of the words *curse, cursed, cursing,* and *accursed* in the King James Version of the Bible; because of translation quirks, there are 228 corresponding instances in the Fijian translation of the Bible. Of these, 70 (more than 30 percent) are terms based on the root *cudru.* Other prominent terms include ones based on the roots for "evil" or "bad" (*ca,* 40 times), "ruin" (*rusa,* 38 times), and *vatonaka* (also 38 times), which David Hazlewood defined as "to beg; entreat a favour; more commonly, that the enemy may be slain" (1850:170). During fieldwork on Kadavu Island in the 1990s, I occasionally heard people use the English term *curse.* Other terms that caught my attention were *kalou cā,* literally "evil spirit," used to describe the accursed status of the Kennedy family in the United States (I heard this after John F. Kennedy Jr.'s airplane crashed into the ocean in July 1999), and *sauji,* from the root *sau,* denoting spiritual power.

8. In February 2009, I asked the proprietor of a Christian bookshop in Suva about her bestsellers, and she mentioned three authors who were especially popular: Myles Munroe, Mary K. Baxter, and Rebecca Brown. That day, I bought a copy of Brown and Daniel Yoder's *Unbroken Curses: Hidden Source of Trouble in the Christian's Life* (1995). Three months later, as I was traveling in the islands of southern Lau, the Methodist minister posted at one island mentioned that book to me, but I neglected to ask how he had heard of it. He did tell me, however, of a specific local curse known as the "1099 Curse," so named because it prevented families on the island from growing to larger than ten members—nine was the maximum (thus, the number is to be read "10, 9, 9").

9. In Haggai 1, God, speaking through the prophet Haggai, tells the Israelites to rebuild the temple. He observes how they are languishing because they have not done this: "Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes" (Haggai 1:6). My sincere thanks to "Apo" Aporosa for his generosity in sharing and discussing his field notes with me. In the quoted excerpt, I have changed the names of places and people except for Ratu Sukuna, a famous paramount chief and statesman. An intriguing aspect to the story is that before the minister heard of the settlement's curse, he knew there was a problem because he saw the image of an eel in the water of his drinking glass. This is a classic indigenous Fijian vision of a non-Christian spirit manifesting itself in animal form (Tomlinson 2007). As the minister recounted, "I know there is something wrong with the [land], 'cause an eel is meant to be in the water, but it is coming on the land. After that, Tanoa Lailai got the stroke and I came and prayed for him. I asked him direct, 'What has happened here?' Tanoa Lailai said 'There is some curse and it is about the land'" (Aporosa field notes 2005, p. 57, in author's possession).

10. Similarly, Ghanaian Pentecostals believe that curses caused by ancestors' actions can last for several generations and be perpetuated anew in the present (Meyer 1998). A key difference between Ghanaian Pentecostals' and Fijian Methodists' understandings of curses is that the former see their past as so thoroughly demon riddled that it must be rejected completely, whereas the latter both cherish aspects of their supposedly "dark" past and see an inherent Christianity in it, as I have described in the main text. If, as I argue, Fijian Methodists' engagement with curses is well understood by using Kierkegaard's concept of "repetition," the case of Ghanaian Pentecostals might be understood even more effectively through that approach, for both Kierkegaard and Ghanaian Pentecostals train their lenses most sharply on individual subjects. Kierkegaard's anthropological theology was grounded in individual subjects' struggles with "absurd" paradoxes (as I discuss subsequently in this article), and Ghanaian Pentecostals hold that because "the Devil operates through blood ties, the Christian God severs them," freeing the individual subject to be "independent of and unaffected by family relations" (Meyer 1998:338)—an ideal decidedly foreign to Fijian Methodism. Yet, even as Ghanaian Pentecostals do seem to be engaged in Kierkegaardian repetition, they find hopefulness not in re-creating the past but in annihilating it, recollecting forward in a way seemingly meant to foreclose further engagement with the past.

11. Using Kierkegaard's terms and concepts for nontheological purposes, as I am doing here, leads to inevitable dissonances. A particular difficulty of discussing Fijian cultural practices in Kierkegaardian terms is that Kierkegaard likely would have criticized Fijian understandings of curses, human agency, and God's love. His most relevant concept here is "despair," for which he developed a general definition while also identifying various kinds: Despair is "human existence which is not conscious of itself as spirit" (Kierkegaard 1941:72). Those who lament their earthly woes, in Kierkegaard's view, fail to recognize God's power to overcome such woes and are "not … willing to hope that an earthly distress, a temporal cross, might be removed" (1941:113), a description that seems apt for the cases I am discussing—curses do not go away—but also misleading, because rituals of atonement are motivated by hope. Because Kierkegaardian despair lacks this hopefulness and because of the colloquial meaning of *despair,* I am not using that term in this article. As I have written elsewhere (e.g., Tomlinson 2009:82–84) and has been made clearer in other works (see esp. Brison 2007; Ryle 2010), a great deal of exuberant joy coexists in indigenous Fijian Christian village life with beliefs about social fragmentation, the loss of tradition, and the presence of spiritual danger.

12. William McDonald (personal communication, October 17, 2012) points out that Kierkegaard's anger was directed primarily at Mynster's eulogist, H. L. Martensen, who had been Kierkegaard's rival at university and succeeded Mynster as bishop primate of the Danish People's Church. Martensen was influenced by Hegelianism, which Kierkegaard detested, and "while Kierkegaard had some respect for Mynster as a person, and by virtue of the old family connection, he had no respect whatsoever for Martensen—and therefore no respect for the office of Bishop Primate once Martensen acceded to it."

13. This verbal exchange between Abraham and Isaac motivates Jacques Derrida's (1995:53–81) extended analysis of the story in terms of duty, secrecy, and the ethical. For Derrida, the most remarkable fact about Abraham's response to his son is that it is neither a lie nor silence but a maintenance of secrecy that fulfills his "absolute duty" toward God, even as it constitutes an irresponsible betrayal of his own family. While allowing that "the story is … monstrous, outrageous, barely conceivable," Derrida adds that it is "the most common thing" in the sense that anyone who relates to an "absolute other" ("God, if you wish," he writes drily) is put "into the space or risk of absolute sacrifice" (1995:67–69, 71) in which

different others—other people, places, languages, and so on—are necessarily betrayed because of one's relationship to the absolute.

14. He begins by telling a version of the story in which Abraham decides to rave at Isaac so that Isaac thinks he is a mad pagan; "it is better," Abraham prays to God in this version of the story, "that he believes me a monster than that he should lose faith in you" (Kierkegaard 1983a:11). In the second version, Abraham sees the ram in time but returns home in despair at the horrifying thing that God had commanded of him. In the third, Abraham goes alone to Moriah and kills himself. In the fourth, Isaac notices his father's despair and loses his own faith. All of these versions make human sense in a way the biblical narrative does not—and this is why Kierkegaard (or, rather, his pseudonymous narrator, Johannes de Silentio) judges them inadequate.

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