‘Recovering the Past’ has no priority, at first glance, for the Somaip, a linguistically diverse but ritually homogeneous group of clans in the highlands fringe of Papua New Guinea. They rather seem to be pre-occupied with ‘ Rejecting the Past’. Having opted for Christianity when missions entered their area in the mid-1960s, they have since turned their back on the impressive corpus of traditional rituals. Very little of it has survived into the present. Interpreting the past in the light of the present, those pre-Christian days were the ‘dark ages’, the sinful ways of their ancestors. There is a total break perceived between then and now, and it is necessary to acknowledge this break before looking beyond it for bridges spanning the divide. For bridges there are, constructed locally in an attempt to bring together the old and the new. One such connection, as delicate perhaps as a vine bridge, is to see the past and the present related like planting and harvesting: the ancestral body of rituals and myths has not only paved the way for Christianity, but actively caused its coming. Those rituals of old were the seeds which finally bore fruit. In this sense the Somaip do not only make Christianity their own but also ‘recover their past’.

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