In the early morning in Yakob village, all is fresh and renewed from the rains that fall almost every night. The sun beams warmly upon the drenched land, and the Fu River can be heard rushing far below. The rain forest-covered mountains begin to poke through the mists that envelop them, while smoke from morning fires sifts through the leaf thatching of houses. Gentle murmurs grow into conversations, babies cry, and sleepy dogs occasionally yelp, slapped to get out of the way. Asabano people awaken to such a scene each day, with their dreams still fresh in their minds.

On such a morning, after the mists had cleared away and the sun was shining intensely to the accompaniment of the songs of a dozen species of birds, a young woman named Lin, after finishing her breakfast of sweet potatoes baked in the ashes of the hearth, was deep in thought. She proceeded up Samlai hill, which rises above the village, to the house of the dablesebobu: the white man from America who had come to live with her people and learn about their culture. I was interested in religion, but I was not a Christian, which made me anomalous in Asabano eyes. Lin had promised the day before to come and talk with me about her religious beliefs. We sat on the floor with cups of coffee, and I asked her if she thought the Holy Spirit and angels truly exist. "In my dreams, angels come and sleep with me at night," she answered. She then continued:

Last night was my first time to see an angel; he was a man, and he said, "Do you know my name?" I said, "No." And he said, "My name is Isaac." He was a white man. He came down and said, "Let's go up." I said, "I'm afraid my faith isn't strong enough, and that God will reject me." He replied, "No, don't worry, let's go." We flew like birds without wings and came to a big door. The angel knocked on the door, and the Lord opened it, saying to the angel "Come inside." The angel entered and asked the Lord, "May this woman come inside and see your house?" The Lord said, "All right, you call her to come inside." The angel called me inside, and the Lord got a big book and put it on a table. He wrote and
said to the angel, “Take her around so she can see inside my house.” In the house I saw pictures of men and pretty flowers. The Lord is a very handsome young white man.

After we went around, the Lord said to the angel, “Show her the book I’m writing in.” I stood next to him. The Lord said to me, “I won’t take everyone, only a few will come to me.” He said the names of all the important men and women at Duramin, Onai, Wani, Mandi, Diyos [all active in the church]; and said those whose names he hadn’t called he will throw into the fire. Then he said, “That’s all.” The angel said, “I wanted to show you these things.” The Lord said to the angel, “Take this woman back to her own place now.” So the angel took me to the door and pushed me out, saying “Go back.” I protested, “We came a long way, how do I get back?” I then fell down, and I hit Semi, Walen’s little girl who had come to sleep with me. She cried, and then I woke up.

So this story the angel gave me. I thought, “I have to come tell you this.” I dreamed it only last night. I had agreed to come and interview today, so this morning I dreamed a lot. This is the first time I had this kind of dream. Now this afternoon I’ll tell others this dream in church. Now that I’ve seen this I know the Lord is there and it’s changed my belief a little. Having seen this, I think I must truly believe in this now.

Narratives such as this one were told to me very frequently during the year and a half of my fieldwork among the Asabano, in 1994–95. My research focused on religious change. I extensively interviewed virtually all adults and older children about their religious beliefs to document belief patterns remembered from precontact days, the conversion process, and current beliefs.

I concentrated my inquiries on transmission patterns and on local forms of evidence invoked in accepting and rejecting beliefs. When I asked people to describe their religious beliefs and the reasons why they found them compelling, very often dreams were given as an explanation. Asabano attribute a high degree of experiential reality to the dream (aluma). Elders and missionaries assert the existence of certain mythological beings, and when Asabano in turn have dream encounters with these beings, it is easy for them to believe that they in fact exist: Seeing is believing. Dreaming is, therefore, a catalyst for cultural transmission, providing personal experiential verification of incoming information.

To the Asabano, dreams represent the wanderings and adventures of one’s disembodied soul. As real experiences, dreams are a valued source of information. Asabano describe dreams either as actual events directly witnessed or as symbolic messages displayed by other beings. Dreamers learn characteristic forms of information from interactions with the dead, with benevolent forest beings, with malevolent place spirits, and with characters from recently introduced Christian mythology. The beings encountered can impart knowledge to dreamers by telling them in words, or by showing them images.

The use of dreams to communicate with powerful beings has not changed through the conversion to Baptist Christianity in the 1970s. In fact, dreams played a major role in the initial acceptance of Christianity, and remain important in the maintenance of faith and in the enculturation of the next generation. In Asabano thinking, dream encounters with angels, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and God provide direct evidence for the existence and power of these supernatural beings.

**The Asabano**

The Asabano are a small, ethnolinguistic group numbering about 200. They are swiddeners and small-scale pig raisers, living on the fringe of the highlands of Papua New