

CONTEXTUALISING CHRIST: THE USE OF TRADITIONAL LANDMARKS IN GABAGABA VILLAGE

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INTRODUCTION

This article will explore, through the stories of the people of Gabagaba village (a coastal village about 50 kilometres out of Port Moresby), ways of preaching Christ, based on the significance of certain landmarks. It will begin with an explanation of the landmarks, and their use today, and in years gone by. It will then conclude with scriptural references that can be used to explain how Christ can be seen in these items.

THE LANDMARKS

THE BEACONS

Many beacons stand in the waters along the Papuan coastline. They help seagoing vessels steer clear of dangerous reefs that could cause a shipwreck. A handful of beacons stand in the waters around Gabagaba.

GABAGABA ORORO (GABAGABA MOUNTAIN RANGE)

Looking back from the Lokuro beacon, about a couple of miles off shore from Gabagaba village, one can make out a range of mountains that ends right at the edge of the village. The Gabagaba Mountains are a special landmark for the village folk. Seafarers will always find their bearings by looking at certain parts of the range. It acts like the beacons out at sea; this time, however, it guides fishermen home.

MAGI AUNA (THE MAGI TREE)

As the mountain range dips towards the edge of the village, one notices a particular tree that stands out. It is the *Magi*, a rather large, leafy tree that, as far as many elders are concerned, has stood there for very many years. (It is sad to say that the tree was almost burnt to the ground about three years ago in a bush fire. A part of the tree is alive, and its battles on to survive.)

The *Magi*, and the surrounding area on the mountain, were used as a burial site in ancestral times. When the first Motuans arrived from their original village of Lakwaharu (now called Tubuseria, about two kilometres out of Port Moresby), they found a convenient location to settle. There was a nice beach with surrounding mangroves. The place was found unsettled, however, the inland villagers, who are the true owners of the area, stood peering cautiously, from the *magi* on the mountain, at these new visitors.

After initial hostilities, the barter system brought peace. Fish from the Motuans were traded for banana and yams from the Rigo inlanders. Soon, relationships were formed and intermarriage took place. Each group of people familiarised themselves with the spiritual beliefs and practices of the other. That was when it was learned that the Gabagaba Mountains, and the *magi* tree, were burial sites. Bodies of prominent people from the clan were preserved by smoking them over the fire. They were hung on the branches of the tree, and positioned in a way to look over the enclave that was to become the coastal village of Gabagaba. Other people were buried on other parts of the mountains.

Development work began on the mountain in the late 1970s, when bulldozers were sent up to build a road. It is interesting to note that the work did not get completed. Today, two rusting relics of bulldozers lie at the side of the mountain. They developed “engine trouble”, but efforts to fix them failed. They were abandoned on the mountainside, seemingly as a silent reminder that the mountain did have spiritual significance to a people of yesteryear!

UNDERSTANDING THE LANDMARKS

The beacons, mountain, and *magi* tree served the people in a variety of ways.

BEACON

As explained earlier, the *beacons* help huge liners and small dinghies steer clear of trouble in the waters. Many fishermen from Gabagaba have been saved by the beacons, not just to avoid reefs in low tide, but when they get thrown overboard, or when the dinghy sinks. If it is near a beacon, they will swim up to it and wait for passing canoes or dinghies to rescue them.

MOUNTAIN

The person who feared his enemies would simply look up to the *mountain*. His ancestors from ancient times lie buried there. That gave him confidence to go about his daily business, knowing that they watch over his affairs of life. During the *Hiri* expedition, *lagatois* from Gabagaba participated. It is said that villagers would look up to the mountain to check for the safety of the crew. If the form of one woman was seen dancing, it meant the *lagatoi* had been thrown overboard in a storm, and men had died. If two women were seen dancing, it meant the vessel was sailing safely home.

MAGI TREE

Before beacons were erected in the seas, fishermen, returning home, looked along the range for a marker to show the location of the village. The *magi* tree stood conspicuously clear atop the mountain. It seemed to beckon to the weary child of the village to return to the safe havens of home.

SEE CHRIST IN THE LANDMARKS

One can see opportunities that exist to communicate Christ to the people, using the landmarks, as explained above. Scriptural references will now be given to show how Christ serves the same purposes as the *beacon*, the *mountain*, and the *magi* tree.

Firstly, fishermen today, are guided at sea by the *beacons* (especially when they shine their lights at night), so they do not get shipwrecked. Likewise, God's Word is a lamp, which shines to show the path we should follow (Ps 119:105). It guides us away from the dangers of a shipwrecked life (Prov 6:23). Moreover, Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12). Keeping our eyes on Him will result in walking a safe path in life. And for the person who has been thrown overboard in sin, he simply needs to make his way to the cross, and feel the warm embrace of God's forgiving grace in Jesus!

In the next parallel, both the Gabagaba *Mountain* range, and the *magi* tree atop it, guided weary sailors home. In this analogy, one can again see a picture of the cross, the "tree", on which Jesus died (Acts 5:30), this time atop a mountain (Calvary or Golgotha – John 19:17). Indeed, the open arms of Jesus beckon weary travellers of life to come home (Matt 1:28). The best safe haven one can find is the Lord's presence. God beckons, yet it is up to the individual to respond. The mountains also gave assurance that all was well, because the ancestors who lie buried there watched over the affairs of their people. But Christ is the "firstborn", thus, He is portrayed as the "preeminent ancestor" of all who believe (Heb 1:6, 12, 23). Just as the people once looked up to the Gabagaba Mountains, Christians today must look up to the Cross on Mount Calvary, where the great "Ancient of Days" (Dan 7:9) watches over His people. Furthermore, one does not need to check how many ladies are dancing, to see if everything is fine! In times of anguish and doubt, one simply needs to move confidently to God's throne to find grace and mercy (Heb 4:16). God will hear His children's petitions (Ps 3:4). Indeed, all is well in Jesus!

CONCLUSION

The above is small example of how landmarks in Melanesian culture can be used to picture Christ. While most people in Gabagaba village today have a fairly clear understanding of who Jesus is, it is nonetheless important to know traditional stories, which could be used prayerfully to share another dimension of the understanding of Christ to them!