

SINGING THE LORD'S SONG IN OUR LAND: *PEROVETA* AS CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Ronnie Tom Ole

A Word About Terminology

The search for what is “Christian religious experience”, as reflected by *Peroveta* music, is the heart of this paper. The use of the phrase “Christian religious experience” is unusual, to say the least. Its unusualness may reflect the identity in thoughts – the pull between those Christians, who call an experience “religious”, and those Christians who prefer to identify an experience as “Christian religious”. Using the term “Christian religious experience” communicates that a religious experience is one that is taking place within the Christian faith community, and, at the same time, one that is shared by followers of other faith communities. For these reasons, I have chosen to use the term “Christian religious experience” to describe *Peroveta*.¹

Introduction and Background

The power of song is in the struggle for Papuan Christian religious experience – that is what the *Peroveta* is all about. I grew up in a small village call Hula in Central Province, where *Peroveta* was (is) essential for the celebration of Christian religious experience. On certain nights, one could hear the sound, and feel the rhythm, of the *Peroveta* from a distance. These were children, women, and men who would gather near a house (occasionally in front of the pastor’s or a deacon’s house), after long hours or days of church activities. They needed to express their feelings. They needed to refresh their spirits in the sound and rhythm of *Peroveta*. And

¹ The term “Peroveta” is quite debateable. Some Papuans would argue that it is associated with missionary influence – the introduction of the English word “Prophet”. Others, however, would say that it originally emerged from the most famous Papuan Hiri. The author is yet to explore the origin of Peroveta. Peroveta is a category of song. “Ute” is another kind.

they did, sometimes peaceably, and sometimes with loudness and dancing. But, chiefly, they wanted to do it, to recall what God had done to their land.

Consider the first verse of this Hula *Peroveta*:

Ia lani kunenai pe ugamagi (Kunenai ia upura mukuna aonai gealuwai)	Let us think of the old days (Before our ancestors lived in darkness).
Iei ewagomona maekamo Keriso genai	We are now with Christ, in the light,
Ie, pe laik maeka melora lak veaira	We must walk as people of the light.

To interpret the theological significance of *Peroveta* for the Papuan Christian community, “academic tools” are not enough. The interpreter must feel her or his way into the power of the *Peroveta* music, responding both to its rhythmic content, and the faith images it affirms. *Peroveta* invites the believer to move closer to the sources of Papuan Christianity, and to experience the Papua Christian community’s power to experience their God. One of my colleagues at Rarongo is fair when he observes that, “The God, sung about in the *Peroveta*, is probably not the same as the one in the *Sing His Praise*” (a commonly-used hymn book at Rarongo). Though the words of *Peroveta* may be translated, and may look alike, it is a different quality of energy they summon.

Peroveta is social and corporate music. Because it is only sung by Papuans, it is social, therefore it articulates the uniqueness of the Papuan community. It is an artistic expression of the Papuan Christian religious experience. It is corporate, in the sense that *Peroveta* is one kind of music that always occurs within the boundaries of the Papuan community, for the sake of the Papuan Christian community.

Peroveta is historical music. It is rooted in the Christian heritage of the Papuan Christian community. It passes on attitudes and ideas from the past into the present, in the hope that they will influence and transform believers’ decisions regarding their corporate future.

Peroveta is unity music.² It moves the people toward the direction of the knowledge of who is their God. It shapes and defines Papuan identity, and creates cultural structures for Papuan Christian religious experience. So, *Peroveta* is unifying, because it confronts the individual with the truth of Papuan existence, and affirms that being Papuan is possible only in a communal context.

Peroveta is eschatological music, to use the language of systematic theology. Its sense of destiny is drawn from the images and meanings located in the originating Christian events. It rehearses those past Christian events to provide the power to move into the future. *Peroveta* recalls, or reinterprets, Christian stories for the embodiment of the Papuan future.

Peroveta is sacramental music. It discloses the mystery of the God of Jesus Christ to unite with the Papuan believers. *Peroveta* becomes a holy instrument for the achievement of such union and unity. It is to be seen as the potential sacramental music of God, open to transformation.

Peroveta is ritual music. It is not music that wants to test God's existence in our land. How do Papuans know that God was in their land before the coming of the missionaries? Papuans do not ask that epistemological question. According to the Papuan viewpoint, it does not need proving. Papuans have already encountered the truth of God's existence, even before the arrival of missionaries. Instead of proving God, they "ritualise" God in song. This is what *Peroveta* is all about, a ritualisation of God in music. *Peroveta* is material for worship and praise to God, who has been present in Papuan history, despite the missionary movement.

Peroveta is also theological. It is theological in the sense that it tells the believers about a divine God, who, in ages past, has made Himself known in the history of both Old and New Testament Jews, and who is now actively moving Papuans toward self-realisation.

² A little book, written by the late Revd Dr Percy Chatterton, *Day That I Have Loved*, Sydney NSW: Pacific Publications, 1974, is very informative on the concept of Papuan community, especially the chapter on "The Melanesian Way".

My purpose is to examine the statement of Papuan Christian religious experience, as reflected by *Peroveta*. Several questions need to be raised that underline the assumption behind this concern. For example, what could it mean to sing “*Lau ane baina abia*”, when one has no connections with the origins and history of a foreign nation? What could it mean to be an “Israel *Besena*” (generation), and a Papuan surviving in a Jewish religion called Christianity brought by foreign missionaries?

Existentially, I want to stimulate discussion on *Peroveta* (especially among Papuans), because they are part of me. I sing and live them. Certain experiences, which created them, have shaped my faith journey. Moreover, *Peroveta* is a way of life. I affirm the reality of the *Peroveta* as an authentic expression of Papuan Christian identity, responding to them in the rhythms of dance. So I begin the discussion on *Peroveta*, because I am the “*Peroveta*” and my life is Christian, and religious. Without them, I cannot “sing” the Lord’s song in my own land.

For this seminar, I will examine only two significant images of Papuan faith, as expressed in *Peroveta*, as a way to begin a long endeavour.

God in the *Peroveta*

Singing about the divine presence of the God made clearer by missionaries, as if this God was known throughout the entire Papuan history, seems to be the “bottom line” in any *Peroveta*. *Peroveta* shows that Papuans do not believe that God created them to be “outsiders”. Accordingly, they sing of a God who was involved in history – their history – making right what missionaries said, e.g., “from darkness to light”.³ Just as God, Yahweh, was with the children of Israel, He is also with the Papuans – past, present, and future. It is this certainty that informs the understanding of the *Peroveta*, enabling Papuan Christians to sing:

Ia, ia lani kunena e ugamagia
U pura, amara lanira

Let us think of our ancestors
In the olden days.

³ The phrase “from darkness to light” is taken directly from a little book that came out during the 100 years’ centenary celebration in Papua in 1972. The meaning of the term “darkness” for Papuans is a concept that may not necessarily refer to “sin” (wrong-doing). It also refers to the period before the arrival of the first missionaries in 1872. Again, this is another issue the author is struggling with.

Maino auna auna na	Real peace
Maino auna auna na	Real peace
Iana pa apia	We have it now.

Even though there are *Peroveta* that record the coming of Christianity in their land, the basic idea of *Peroveta* is that “from darkness to light” contradicts God; it is a denial of His existence, or more particularly, His pre-existence. To be labelled as a person of darkness is to be declared a nobody. This form of existence contradicts God’s creation of people to be His children. Papuans believe that they are God’s children, and, therefore, they affirm their “somebodiness”. This is why *Peroveta* focuses on biblical passages that stress the beginnings. Papuans sing about Adam and creation, and the *logos*. The emphasis is on God’s pre-existence in the land where missionaries came. Papuan faith in the *Peroveta* is that God created people to be His children, not to be regarded as people of “darkness”, and later be converted to “light”.

At this point, it is important to note that one of the sources of *Peroveta* is Papuan culture. One could argue persuasively that there are elements of Papuan culture present in *Peroveta*, despite the historical missionary influence. If this is taken seriously, then there is a reason to believe that God in the *Peroveta* has historical reference. Papuans, as do any other Melanesians, view life as a whole, and do not make distinctions between the “secular” and the “sacred” that are found in Western cultures. With this perspective as a starting point, it is quite reasonable to conclude that Papuan Christians do not accept a religion that negates the historical existence of God. As one may suggest, they combine their Papuan heritage with the gospel, and reinterpret foreign distortions of the truth, in light of God’s existence in the time of “Papuan darkness”.

The other source of *Peroveta* is the experience of being regarded as people of darkness who are now living in the light. When asked where Papuans got *Peroveta*, one would respond:

Lani kunenai Palaguna Anop ra	In the beginning God created
e kalao	the world
Anopara e, Anopara e	The world, the world.
Anopara e kawa kawa o ai anina	The world was mad,

The divinity of Jesus is affirmed in the *Peroveta*. For instance, the *Amana* (Father) and *Nauna* (Son) in Hula become two ways of talking about the reality of the divine presence in Papuan history. They stand for that reality, which enables Papuans to transcend the limitations of “darkness”. The choice of name (*Amana* or *Nauna*) often depends upon the rhythm of the language rather than the intellectual content of the language.

Palagu Nauna Iesu	God’s Son is Jesus
Ma ulamagina e veneriao	He gave us through His love
Maguli, maeka, maino	Life, light, peace,
Ulamagi, verere	Love, joy.
Iesu evenirao	Christ was given to us
Amara genana . . .	From the Father.

It is as if Papuan Christians are affirming the divine presence of *Amana-Nauna* through the rhythm and the motion of language, and, more practically, through dance. To encounter this Christ is to encounter Him in mind, body in motion, emotionally, and rhythmically. So, Jesus is a practical experience in motion, moving the Papuans to self-realisation.

Furthermore, when Papuans encounter His presence, they also meet the Father, who sent the Son to give His people light.

Palaguna (amara) e ulamagirao	For God loved us
E, e, Ia Nauna e uguao	He sent us His Son
Ia Nauna e uguao,	He sent His Son,
Ia Nauna e uguao	He sent His Son
Maeka e veamai agaio	He brought light.

Peroveta also tells us about Jesus’ life on earth, and His rejection and death on the cross – His humanity. *Peroveta* does not reflect a gnostic Christ, who only appeared to be human. Christ’s suffering was real.

According to *Peroveta*, the meaning of Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection is found in identity with people of darkness, who need the light. He has come to bring them out of darkness, to restore their wholeness. He is the *Velekou*, the crucified one, who has come to bring

light to the *etena* people in their own land. This is why the Papuans want to sing:

Io kula lakai	Wake up!
Io laka etene ai	Go to the people of darkness
Ila maguli pie apai	So that they will receive light.

The death of Jesus in His own land means that He died on the cross for Papuans in “darkness”. His death is a symbol of their lives, living in darkness in their own land. They knew the life of darkness, when it crept over Jesus, hanging on the cross.

Through being told that they are *dibura taudia* (people of darkness), they transcend the limitations of space and time. Jesus’ time becomes their time, so a new historical existence is encountered. Through the experience of being in “darkness”, they encounter the theological significance of Jesus’ death. Jesus makes a close identification with those in darkness.

If this is taken seriously, Jesus was with the Papuans, and the Papuans were with Jesus. This means that Jesus was not alone when “darkness fell upon Him”, and the Papuans were not alone before the missionaries came. Christ came to put an end to misunderstandings that lead to suppression. Herein lies the meaning of resurrection. It implies that death is not the last word. Death is not the end of God’s great drama of salvation.

Ia Kwareao leana anona na	The tomb where Jesus died
Pe vamagulira . . .	Will save us.

The resurrection is the “divine guarantee” that the lives of Papuans are in the hands of the Conqueror of darkness, and they are now “free” to do what is obedient to the *Amana*, the ever-living One. Papuans do not have to be regarded as people of *dibura taudia* anymore.

Vali nama ema kwarao	The good news came
Ano lmaparana e maekao	The world was in light
Ae, Iesu arana pakunai	Because of Jesus.
Mukuna kalara pie aiki	The work of darkness will end
Maekamo kalara pe kalara e	The work of light will begin.

Raoparana e vama aiao	He brought the way.
Palagu gena ulamagi anira	The meaning of God was
Iesu na e vama airao	revealed by Jesus.
Palagu e, po vele paikina	God, You are Lord,
Gemu maeka ai maparamai po	You have given us Your light.
venimai	

While Papuans hold that Christ is ever present in their presence, they also look beyond, to the future of Jesus. This is another aspect of resurrection, as reflected by *Peroveta*. The *Peroveta* does not only speak of what Christ has done, and is doing, for Papuans. The full consummation of God's salvation will take place outside the historical sphere.

Anopara ikana	The end of the world
Lanina, lanina wa veaina	Will be like this:
Aneru pie vaemai	Angels will appear
Kala rakvara aura	The sinners,
Kala rori rori aura	
Pie ware kava lugara	The righteous will be separated
Kalova aonai pie agie	The sinners will go to the fire
Wanai ila pie agie	They will cry
Ila kari kari ra	And break their jaws.
Mapie kala koki koki	

He is coming back to complete God's will to take those of darkness home with Him.

The Papuan composer was quite certain that God's ultimate future would end darkness.

For Papuan Christians, then, Jesus is God breaking into the human historical present and transforming it, according to divine will. There is no need to worry about living in the "light", because Christ has already revealed Himself. It is already at hand, in the person and work of Jesus, and then it will be fully consummated in God's own future.

This is the "bottom line" of who God is, and who Jesus Christ is, as reflected in the *Peroveta*.

My contention is that there is a complex world of thoughts underlying the *Peroveta*. Both sociological and theological analyses are needed to uncover this thought, and the fundamental worldview it implies – i.e., missionary movement, colonialism, etc. In any case, the clue to the meaning of *Peroveta* is to be found in the Christian religious experience.