

# **THE EMERGENCE OF CLASS STRUCTURE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE**

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Papua New Guinea, as a nation, has achieved a lot over a period of 21 years. Well before independence, Germany, Britain, and Australia also did much for us, when we were under their rule. Government administrators and missionaries did well in their respective tasks and duties. I have not travelled out of Papua New Guinea, yet I hear the rumour that Papua New Guinea is the fastest-developing nation in the Pacific region. I am inclined to believe this, having witnessed the ever-increasing amount of raw materials being exported, and the changes that our capital city, Port Moresby, has been going through recently. Surely government bodies, and the private sector (under the direction of our constitution, I presume), are doing a lot to develop Papua New Guinea.

In our villages, people are receiving most basic services, but there are occasional development deals, which often break down after a few years. Should we blame the government? This is the collective opinion shared by the people. Could it be the people's own fault? Is it the colonialist, who did this to us, and we have no power over our destiny since independence? These are common questions, asked today by nearly all Papua New Guineans, from the so-called grassroots (a term for people with few material possessions), the average person, those of the upper class, and even some prominent politicians. No one seems to know the answers.

The fundamental question of where we are heading has many dimensions. The reasons behind the question are truly varied. My concern here is that there is a dangerous trend appearing amid the tremendous development

buzzing around us, day in and day out, in Port Moresby, and in some other major centres of Papua New Guinea: namely, the emergence of social-class divisions. Social-class structures are an inevitable part of a capitalist society. Yet, the question of where we are heading needs to be addressed, lest these emerging divisions end up as a class struggle.

Investors still have confidence in Papua New Guinea, as witnessed in the constant influx of foreign companies coming into the country to help lift our economy from “pre-civilisation” to the “post-modern” era. We have ups and downs, for we are human, and not infallible, or immune to mistake, crime, and sin. Compared with many countries, Papua New Guinea is doing very well. Most people here are happy, and have their needs fulfilled, for God has blessed us abundantly. This is a brief summary of the situation in Papua New Guinea, as I see it.

### **Our Traditional Culture**

It is a well-known fact that traditional Melanesian society revolved around family groupings, usually called “clans” today. In some areas, these clans are further linked together to form tribes. Even though each individual had his/her own tasks and aspirations, the interest of the group, for the benefit of all, was of greater importance. Specific tasks were vital for the upkeep of all members of the group. No one complained, for all knew the sources of command, and the purposes it served. Of course, there were functional divisions as to who did what and why. These differences helped to enhance the order and survival of the group. Their philosophy was: doing something for you is helping myself. Their investments were not in material wealth and goods, as such, but in each other. As we read in scripture, “Do unto others as you would like done unto you”.

The patriarchal society of the Old Testament (Gen 18:1-8) has similarities with traditional Melanesian societies, where social inequalities were hardly possible. For whatever was valuable and available, whatever hardships were encountered, was shared. However, under the reign of King Solomon (about 10th-century BC), Israelite society grew considerably, gaining momentum, and a name for itself among the Middle-East nations. The price for the development was high (1 Kings 9:15-25). Classes emerged. Those who became wealthy were tempted to

become richer, without paying attention to the poor, among whom they lived. Coupled with the growth of the rich, poverty also developed.

In Melanesia, the chief's position as leader was sometimes manipulative, but was, to a larger degree, functional. What belonged to the chief, for the benefit of all, was utilised to preserve and strengthen the bonds of the clan. There was private property, but for the good of all. Poverty was non-existent. The system worked, mainly because clan populations were small, and we had a different system of economy, where every person was valuable and needed. There were no profit-oriented ventures, in the modern understanding of the term "profit".

Traditional bonds in immediate family units, clans, and tribes are still evident in villages, but are breaking down at a faster rate than expected. The causes are many, but the most obvious factors are population growth, and the struggle for economic and material advancement. Sharing is still a normal part of village life, but it is no longer as spontaneous as it used to be. These changes are to be expected, and are also unconsciously accepted as normal, given the form of societal structure the people are moving towards today. How can one give beyond the nuclear family unit, when they have their own needs and ambitions to fulfil. To ask whether the neighbouring friends or relatives would be in greater need of what I have, is a question rarely asked nowadays.

Obviously, we are experiencing development along the Western route, so to speak. It is harder to maintain "Melanesian traditional culture". The options open to us are either to retain ancestral institutions and convictions and renounce progress, or admit outside influences, and reject tradition, with all its human richness. We can only go forward by adapting to the outside world, yet does it also mean we have to sacrifice our traditional humanitarian values, especially the genuine concern for the common welfare of all, regardless of the status and category of a person? Even trying to hold on to a bit of tradition does not guarantee that the moral, spiritual, religious, and social support of the past will be retained. In most cases, it usually gives way to the development of new cultures.

Lihir Island society, in New Ireland Province, serves as an example here. The older generation generally seems to remain attached to rigid traditional norms and values, while the young sometimes become rebellious, and are driven further and further from tradition. Is it that young people regard the traditional methods and values as useless barriers from the past, preventing development and progress? Or is it that the older people are scared, and, therefore, resist change in a society, where change is inevitable?

The elders now have limited power, compared with before. The dominant agent, in regard to power these days, is money. Money has become the norm for power. Money should not be the measuring rod for power, but, practically, it is the case today. On Lihir, most young people earn fortnightly wages at the mine, which is operating on the island. One cannot object to what they are doing, for they have every right to work. However, they have money, which gives them power and security, but which makes them become arrogant, and ignorant of the traditions of the older generation.

While at home, during a Monday Community Assembly, which still occurs in my area, older people became frustrated, because they were duly elected as committee members, responsible for order in the community, yet their younger counterparts did not seem to pay any attention to them. Their advice is often not heeded by the younger generation. So, some young men were elected to be village committees that day, to see if the younger generation will listen to their own kind. I see this as a small attempt on the part the of the older people to adapt to a form of governing, with which they, themselves, are not familiar, but which, for the sake of the community, has to be done.

### **Can There be a Better Life for all?**

Material progress and expansion worked well for the developed (first) world in the past. Can it also be true for Papua New Guinea? Though Papua New Guinea is far from being an industrial nation, we still appear to be adopting the view that having more wealth equals progress. The genuine concern for the country to have more wealth, to effectively carry out its numerous functions is not being questioned. The query, however,

only concerns the method of achieving material progress. At what cost is the quest for material betterment? Who are the victims of the process? Generally, it is our rural population and the so-called grassroots who suffer. The formula “material expansion = progress” is not working well for us in Papua New Guinea. Rather, it is leading us into countless difficulties.

We have only to look at the history of what has happened, in recent decades, in Latin America, some African states, and parts of Asia. Many followed the same channels of progress we are following, and then collapsed. Their history could repeat itself for Papua New Guinea, if we continue to develop in the present fashion, without learning from their mistakes. They had relied too much on exporting non-renewable raw materials, and there was nothing solid for the economy to fall back on when these were exhausted. We could also suffer if, as is becoming evident today, there is inequality, because wealth is not redistributed justly.

The media, for the last four years, has publicised reports describing the state of our economy in Papua New Guinea. There are accusations, and a lot of rumours, about ambiguous deals dominated by outside interests. How much of these reports is correct cannot be determined here, but, if even part is true, then the situation adds to the burden of the ordinary citizen. The worst hit are the marginalised, low-income earners in urban areas, and the bulk of our population in the rural areas, often referred to as the “grassroots”.

Parents of poor families struggle very hard to meet the ever-increasing cost of education and medical treatment, which are among the most-essential services necessary for human survival. It is becoming evident that the lower stratum of society does not receive the same treatment as that given to the higher stratum of Papua New Guinea. God blessed this land with plenty, yet we are experiencing the emergence of all kinds of poverty, including material poverty, which produces class struggle – a disease that threatens the survival of PNG. To remove poverty altogether would not be realistic, but, at least, there should be attempts, not only by

Christian churches, but more so the government, to minimise, or alleviate, human miseries, in whatever ways possible.

With dissatisfied land and resource owners, and with criminal activities on the rise, people living in cities, towns, and even in the villages, have become fearful for their lives. The government is planning a major crackdown on criminal activities, with more firepower, and night vision equipment for the police force, to capture, or kill, those who disturb society. Is this all the government can do? Is it the best solution? What caused these “raskols” to behave in the manner they do in the first place? Do they enjoy committing crimes, and getting chased by the police and being killed mercilessly? Would they rather be dead than alive? Surely not. Then, why become a criminal at all? Our leaders seem to be saying that, “as long as the majority of the population are happy, all will be well”. But, for how long will the bulk be happy, in the face of deteriorating security, and the rising cost of living? Can this trend then be defined as progress?

In our striving for material well-being we are also witnessing a widening gap between classes of people in Papua New Guinea. Ethnic violence is sometimes given as the cause of civil disorder in Rwanda, Bosnia, and our own backyard in Bougainville. Ethnic violence, however, is only the “tip of the iceberg”. The deep-seated evil of material inequality is the real cause of division among people. Normally, such violence takes the form of a fight for recognition, aimed at overcoming seemingly oppressive structures, which have created mistrust, and lack of confidence in the leaders, who are often seen as part of the wealthy strata of society.

Every human is entitled to a decent living standard. By nature, the marginalised in society are often limited. They lack education and health, which would enable them to become creative members of society. Where do they fit in our society? Should they be mere recipients without participation? With these multi-dimensional problems pressing at Papua New Guinea’s doorstep, where do we go from here? There is no one single answer, but the gap must not be allowed to grow bigger with each passing day. Our society is already fragmented by different languages, cultural traditions, and geographical landmarks, yet we have achieved

unity. It would not be right to be divided, through material expansion. The capitalist economic system we have adopted is good, but with it comes class divisions. We need to face this, and, if necessary, change our way of thinking and acting.

We are encountering the hard, cold reality of modern economics, which creates divisions. Someone may be starving outside your door, while you have a surplus. The materially-rich advance rapidly in business, while the poor develop slowly, or sink deeper into the depths of poverty, making them seemingly to be non-existent human beings. Is the dignity of a person the birthright of the rich only?

### **Do we have Solutions to these Problems?**

How can we move away from the imbalance fuelled by an expansionist drive for more material development? If Papua New Guinea continues to grow in a quantitative sense, while producing greater output of non-renewable, natural resources, will there be enough wealth to go around? Will the wealth trickle down to those in need? Our energies should be directed, not to quantity, but toward the quality of people's lives. Changes in outlook are necessary. The current society demands a change in most areas, and we will have to wait and see if this happens.

Some hold the view that speaking of class structure in a society like Papua New Guinea, where it is not yet a pressing issue, will actually lead to promoting it. It is better, however, to raise awareness, than to remain silent. To acknowledge the reality of an emerging class society may lead to finding options to minimise the danger. The real conflict will come later, if nothing is done to treat the cause of the problem.

The fields of politics and society are always tricky and challenging, and people who struggle for social justice can be tempted to become hateful. A true struggle for equality must abstain from hatred. It should be based on Christian love, in working towards solidarity, as the gospels tell us. In the past, religion has been an influential factor in achieving success. Without the values, rooted in the religious heritage, and the commitment religion gives to human solidarity, the cause for minimising social class structures will be futile. There is a need for mutual recognition and

acceptance of persons as they are, as created in the likeness and image of God, and, therefore, worthy of respect and dignity.

### **Where Does God Fit In?**

Karl Marx tried to remove class structures, but did it the wrong way, by suppressing the rights of people, and, thereby, inflicting greater damage. However, his ideas had many positive implications. His *Manifesto* supports both industrialisation and agriculture, and a gradual abolishment of distinctions between town and country. This was a very good idea, but its implementation was another thing. The quest for a classless society is not restricted to Marxism alone. In the area of theology, there are movements, such as, Liberation Theology and Black Theology, which strive for a similar cause.

Papua New Guinea's Constitution is based on Christian principles. Our National Anthem thanks God for our land of freedom and plenty. In fact, Papua New Guinea is said to be a Christian nation. In capitalist societies, there is a tendency towards an individualistic piety, and a purely vertical form of religion, where one's life is between oneself and God. There is little concern for class equality, or for material equality, with one's neighbour. In communism, secular religion is the ideal. There is a controlled effort for the common good, but no acknowledgment of a transcendent God. However, poverty is not only material, but also spiritual, and psychological. A rich person may be spiritually poor, while a materially-poor person can be spiritually rich.

Jesus says to the materially-rich man, "You lack one thing; go sell what you own and give the money to the poor . . . then come follow Me" (Mark 10:21). The man went away sad for he was wealthy and lacked concern for his neighbour. We all are in need of one thing or another. Only God is rich in every sense of the word. The rich are preoccupied with increasing their power and possessions. We see an example in the story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21). Jesus Himself said, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God . . . It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:23-25).

Jesus' mission was to proclaim the good news of salvation to the poor (Luke 4:16-19). "You know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). There is a link between being aware of God and material poverty. Even though Jesus was concerned for the poor, for they needed Him most, He was a man for all. Jesus did not condemn the rich for being rich. He was not class conscious. In fact, He felt quite at ease with a number of wealthy friends (Mark 2:15). Jesus spoke out against some of the rich, because they were satisfied, and did not feel any need for God, or for anyone else.

A classless society does not mean equality in everything, for God has created us different, with different talents. Rather, God wants us to share with one another, and to be aware of our ethical and moral obligations towards one another. As St Paul writes to the Corinthians (1 Cor 12:12-26), in the body each part grows together, even though each part fulfils a different function. There has to be a cure for the part of the body that hurts, or else the whole body may suffer or die. Our Christian faith teaches us to disregard class barriers, and to care for the outcasts of society, yet few have the courage to implement these teachings. Some Christians, though, are brave enough to continue this effort, even in the face of escalating costs.

### **The Christian Dimension**

God wills that our relationships should be marked by openness, love, and sharing. But, alienated from God, people find themselves alone, poor, afraid, and, therefore, aggressive. The story of Abel, and his blood brother Cain (Gen 4:1-16), illustrates the alienation between man and man, resulting, initially, from humankind's separation from God. Nearly 2,700 years ago, the prophet Amos spoke against the accumulation of wealth by a few. The message has not been received, and so must echo again for us here in Papua New Guinea today.

One has only to look in the gospels to see what Jesus had to say about social discrimination. The reflection on Jesus' life and actions in the gospels, brings us in contact with His deep concern for the oppressed and marginalised. Was Jesus' situation so different from our time? Does

anyone have any real concern for the marginalised people here in Papua New Guinea? The Catholic church, in its social encyclicals, has always called on the world to improve the social order, so that people can share, and live together in peace.

In Papua New Guinea, churches, and some NGOs, are involved in trying to lessen the structural oppression in the most remote areas of the country. The churches are trying to ensure that no one is left behind, in terms of basic services. Extraordinary services include Boys' Town in Wewak, the Cheshire Home, the juvenile centre at Hohola, the Mount Sion Centre for the Blind at Goroka, the Salvation Army refuge centre at Badili, and the Sheltered Workshop at 3-Mile. The church tries to care for the unclean, the despised, and those unable to realise their own dreams in life. What is the government policy for the destitute? What are we going to do with the ever-increasing number of unemployed and unemployable?

The church is charged with the responsibility to speak out in defence of human dignity. Thus, in Papua New Guinea, the church has a political function as well. As Jesus condemned poverty, oppression, and social division, so we must do the same. To know that it exists, and let it go on, as if nothing evil is happening, would mean an intentional neglect of the mission given to us by Christ. Poverty is not part of God's plan for salvation. The scandal of division and poverty comes as a result of sin (Gen 2-11).

The Triune God is not only to be worshipped, but also to be emulated in the coequality of the Father, Son, and Spirit. The Trinity offers us a model for brotherhood and sisterhood in Papua New Guinea society. The goal of our time should be equality, despite all differences. God perceives everyone as equally human, with no one meriting better treatment than the other. Unlike the momentary relief doled out by politicians during election time, Jesus gave lasting hope, by reminding people of their dignity as persons, and their worth as God's own children.

### **Conclusion**

The forces, which have enabled people to make progress in civilisation, are also the very forces, which restrain people from achieving their full

potential. We all want progress, politically, spiritually, economically, and socially, but it must be a prosperity with peace, and without class divisions. In our country today, most people do not have the opportunity to advance, and, if they have, they still cannot use it, due to limitations beyond their control, whether it be education, health, geographical boundaries, or just sheer ignorance. Also, as human beings, we have our limitations, and participate in antisocial behaviour, which only impedes true progress, and adds to our social ills.

I am not thinking of a dreamland, where all is well. That would be wishful thinking – a heaven on earth. I am concerned to raise an awareness of what awaits Papua New Guinea, if action is not taken to limit the emerging system of inequality and class division. I see the churches as striving to be involved in this task, but where is the government and the private sector on this issue? Are these bodies interested only in the privileged sectors of society?

Jesus showed Himself to be a man for others, always ready to welcome anyone that needed rest. Jesus' own public ministry was so often filled with privation that He had nowhere to lay His head (Matt 8:20). He spent time with all kinds of people, but more so with the sick, the marginalised, the deprived (Matt 4:23-33; Luke 12:22-25), not because He loved poverty, but because He was their Saviour. They had nothing, but they were capable of, and ready to receive, everything from God.

Jesus has gone, physically, but His Spirit remains in Christians, who have become sons and daughters of God. We are to carry out His mission to share what we have, and what we are, in opening ourselves to God, and to neighbour. We are to give, in love, as Jesus did for us. As St Paul says, "If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body to be burned, but DO NOT HAVE LOVE, I gain nothing" (1 Cor 13:3).

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