

THE IMPACT OF PRE-UNDERSTANDING ON CHRISTIANITY IN MELANESIA

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INTRODUCTION

There is a journey that people travel as they are confronted with Christianity. It is a journey of their worldview becoming informed by scripture. Because of the role of pre-understanding, it is a journey that can be fraught with challenges. In order to grasp the challenges that Christianity faces in Melanesia, we must recognise the role of pre-understanding in comprehending information.

PRE-UNDERSTANDING DEFINED

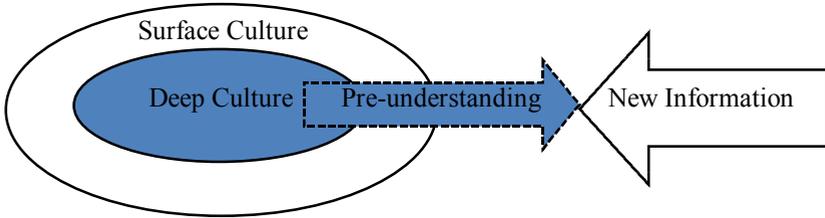
Culture is the multilayered model of reality, which determines patterns of behaviour. Culture includes both a surface layer, which are the patterns of behaviour, and a deep layer, which is the worldview that drives behaviour. Pre-understanding flows from the worldview. Duncan Ferguson provides us with a working definition of pre-understanding: “a body of assumptions and attitudes, which a person brings to the perception and interpretation of reality, or any aspect of it”.¹ Pre-understanding, then, is the “interpretive grid”,² or

¹ Duncan S. Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction*, Atlanta GA: John Knox Press, 1986, p. 6. Italics are original.

² Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2007, p. 122.

“interpretive framework”,³ through which information is filtered. When a person encounters new information in life, his or her response is to interpret it in light of his or her current worldview.

Figure 1: Pre-understanding Model



According to Ferguson, there are four types of pre-understanding.⁴ Informational pre-understanding is the knowledge a person already has, before attempting to interpret new information. Attitudinal pre-understanding is the “disposition” by which a person approaches new information (bias, etc.). Ideological pre-understanding has two aspects: general and particular. The general aspect is the way a person views “the total complex of reality”, while the particular aspect is the way a person views a “particular subject”. Methodological pre-understanding is the model a person uses to understand new information.

Figure 2: Types of Pre-Understanding

<i>Type</i>	<i>Description</i>
Informational	Existing knowledge
Attitudinal	Disposition towards new information
Ideological	Understanding of reality and subjects
Methodological	Process for understanding new information

³ Dan McCartney, and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible*, Wheaton IL: Bridgepoint, 1994, p. 14.

⁴ Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 13.

It is important to note that the four types of pre-understanding usually do not operate in isolation from one another, rather, they often overlap, with varying degrees of influence.

In Melanesia, the four types of pre-understanding are informed by traditional religion. Thus, Melanesians seek to interpret Christianity in light of their traditional beliefs and practices. A closer look at Christianity among the Mulia Dani and the Urapmin will bear this out.

THE MULIA DANI

The Mulia Dani live in the highlands on the island of New Guinea, but on the West Papua side of the border that separates Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. Our exploration of the Mulia Dani will rely on Douglas Hayward's in-depth analysis in *Vernacular Christianity Among the Mulia Dani*. In his study, Hayward describes the traditional beliefs and practices of the Mulia Dani before Christianity began to inform the people, in the 1960s.⁵ More importantly, though, he also describes the subsequent Mulia Dani Christianity. A few examples from his research will suffice.

For the Mulia Dani, all living things can be organised into eight categories, depending on whether the beings are physical (*eebe abe*) or spiritual (*kagi*), beneficial or harmful, and near or far.⁶ When the Mulia Dani became Christians, they simply incorporated Christ into their traditional religion framework, as described by Hayward,

The Dani identify Jesus and the Holy Spirit with the close and benevolent spirits. As such, they have taken over many of the functions of the guardian spirits, the ancestral spirits, and the nature spirits. Their traditional spirits have not been totally abandoned, though, and while some Christian Dani may turn

⁵ Hayward was an American missionary to the Mulia Dani for 20 years, beginning in 1967.

⁶ Douglas James Hayward, *Vernacular Christianity Among the Mulia Dani*, Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1997, p. 46.

more frequently to Jesus and the Holy Spirit for an answer to their prayers, the possibility of a continuing influence by their traditional spirits always exists.⁷

In their pre-Christian beliefs, the Mulia Dani believed that spirits (*kugi*) caused illnesses. Now, as Christians, the Mulia Dani, based on the death of Ananias and Sapphira by the Holy Spirit in Acts 5:1-11, have “added God and the Holy Spirit as possible sources for illness”.⁸

As is typical of traditional religionists, the Mulia Dani held that ancestors continued to “have an active relationship with the living”.⁹ Since becoming Christians, however, the Dani believe that the only ancestors who impact the living are those who have died as “victims of injustice or sorcery”.¹⁰ Based on their interpretation of Rev 6:9-11, the Mulia Dani believe that those ancestors can report the cause of their death to God, who will then take vengeance, as He sees fit.

The Mulia Dani have a creation myth: “A supernatural being, by the name of *Mbok*, went about forming the land into its present shape, making the valleys and the rivers. As he shaped the earth, he travelled west, and passed out of the highlands.”¹¹ Hayward comments that, in recent years, the Mulia Dani, based on Paul’s reference to the “unknown God” at Athens, in Acts 17:23, have begun to wonder if *Mbok* is their unknown God. In doing so, the Mulia Dani are seeking “to appropriate a somewhat foreign God by identifying Him as someone who really does belong to them, having been a part of their earlier culture”.¹²

⁷ Ibid., p. 66.

⁸ Ibid., p. 67.

⁹ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 68.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 27.

¹² Ibid., p. 39.

THE URAPMIN

Moving eastwards, in the highlands of the island of New Guinea, another example is found among the Urapmin of the Sandaun (West Sepik) Province in Papua New Guinea. After doing field research among the Urapmin in the early 1990s, Joel Robbins eventually published *Becoming Sinners*, which describes the impact of Christianity on the people – which is summarised below.

Christianity came to the Urapmin in force in 1977, not by missionaries, but by the Urapmin. A revival, begun by indigenous Christians, broke out in a community near the Urapmin community, and several Urapmin, who were present at the revival, returned to Urapmin, continuing its spread. The revival emphasised dramatic possession by the Holy Spirit – referred to as being “kicked” by the Holy Spirit. As a result of the revival, Robbins states that all of Urapmin were Christian by the end of 1978.¹³ As Christianity continued to establish itself, certain characteristics became part of the belief and practices of the people.

According to Robbins, the Urapmin have a deep sense of sinfulness. The Urapmin believe they are sinful because of their “failure to live up to the demands of the Christian moral system”.¹⁴ This is related, as Robbins notes, to the historic practice of following their traditional religion taboos. The taboos provided a moral system, but one that was externally focused (action-oriented). However, in Urapmin Christianity, the moral system is primarily internally focused (desire-oriented). For example, the Urapmin believe that all anger is wrong, even anger, according to Robbins, that “we [Westerners] might take to be justified”.¹⁵ And, when other desires (covetousness, etc.) are included, the Urapmin Christian feels he or she is living in a continual state of sinfulness (hence the name of the book, *Becoming Sinners*).

¹³ Joel Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity + Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society*, Berkley CA: University of California Press, 2004, pp. 122-132.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

Urapmin believe they are made temporarily right with God through confession and “sin-removal rites”.¹⁶

The Urapmin have a myth, which describes why dogs are good at hunting marsupials during the night. The ancestress Afek once asked people and dogs to cover their eyes while she hid game animals in places, such as caves and trees. The dogs, having paws, could not cover their eyes, therefore, they saw where Afek hid the animals. Robbins uses the story to illustrate “the Urapmin conviction that much is hidden, and that special powers of vision can open different worlds to those who possess them”.¹⁷

Spirit women operate among the Urapmin Christians. A Spirit woman is one who has been possessed by the Holy Spirit, and is believed to speak on His behalf. Robbins states,

Spirit women are women who are able to “work the Spirit” (*wokim Spirit*) by going into a trance. While the Spirit shakes them in a characteristic up-and-down motion, it shows them “pictures” (*piksa, vidio*) relating to the future, or to the causes of current illnesses in the community.¹⁸

On a related note, according to Robbins, the Urapmin believe that now is the time of the Holy Spirit. God sent the Holy Spirit when Jesus returned to heaven, and could no longer communicate with humans.¹⁹ Therefore, communicating with the Holy Spirit is important to Urapmin Christians.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 268-269. I believe that the Urapmin’s ongoing sense of sinfulness in Christianity, in part, is shaped by their historic effort to follow taboos – an effort that required constant diligence, marked by failures.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 140.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 135. I believe that rise of the Spirit women among Urapmin Christians resulted from the Urapmin belief that special powers can open different access to hidden information.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 343.

The cultural role of reciprocity also comes into play in the relationship the Urapmin have with the Holy Spirit, according to Robbins. One practice of Urapmin Christianity is the *Spirit disko*. The *Spirit disko* is held in a church building, and is marked by prayer, rhythmic singing, and, ultimately, dancing. The dancing is characterised by men and women shaking and careening around the dance floor, as evidence of being possessed by the Holy Spirit. According to Urapmin theology, only those who have confessed their sins can “get the spirit” (*kisim Spirit*). A successful *Spirit disko* is one in which Urapmin are possessed, which “indicates that the Spirit has looked on their community, and decided it is moral”.²⁰ Only if the Urapmin please the Holy Spirit, by living moral lives, will the Holy Spirit reciprocate by participating in the *Spirit disko*.

A reciprocal relationship also exists with Jesus, according to Robbins. The Urapmin believe that friendship with Jesus, exhibited primarily through obedience, will be repaid “along the kinds of reciprocal lines the Urapmin use to repay each others’ friendship”.²¹ Relatedly, most Urapmin discussion about Jesus focuses on His imminent return, and the rapture of moral Christians to heaven. It is important to note that Christ will only rapture moral Christians, showing a reciprocal relationship. Robbins states that Jesus’ return “was a recurrent focus of Urapmin dreams, visions, and general discussion”.²²

RESPONSES TO PRE-UNDERSTANDING

These examples of Christianity among the Mulia Dani and Urapmin highlight an additional factor that we need to explore in this discussion of pre-understanding, namely the types of responses a person can have when confronted with new information, in light of his or her worldview.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 284-287. I believe that the understanding the Urapmin Christians have of the Holy Spirit is similar to the role of ancestors in traditional religion, that of policing the behaviour of the people.

²¹ Ibid., p. 343.

²² Ibid., p. 158.

Robbins refers to this as models of cultural change, and proposes three such models, which we will build on.²³

Firstly, people can respond to new information by assimilating it into “old categories”. In doing so, the old categories may be broadened to accommodate the new information, but the process is one of integrating the new information into the framework of the old. In this model, a traditional religionist would seek to make Christ and Christianity “fit” into his or her current worldview. From my perspective, this principal of assimilation is evident in the Mulia Dani, putting Christ in the category of close and benevolent spirits, and, in considering God, along with the traditional spirits, as causing sickness. In seeing a reciprocal relationship with Christ, the Urapmin assimilated Christ into their cultural understanding of reciprocity – as it relates to both the human and spirit worlds.

Secondly, people can transform their pre-understandings, their worldview categories, into compliance with the new information. The old categories are not set aside, rather, they are united with the new information, to be transformed into new categories. I am persuaded that the Mulia Dani’s restructuring of their beliefs about ancestors falls into this model. They still believe some ancestors influence the living, but indirectly now. Also, the Urapmin Christians’ stress on sinfulness, and the emergence of the Spirit women, both relate indirectly to historical thought and practice.

Thirdly, people can adopt the new information, and set aside all old categories. In this model, there are no real attempts at assimilation or transformation. From my perspective, an example of this may be the Mulia Dani’s original acceptance of God as someone new to them. However, they eventually begin to view *Mbok* as God, following the model of assimilation. Robbins suggests that the Spirit women, and the *Spirit disko*, of the Urapmin are adoptions, with no direct connection to historical thought. Following this line of thinking, the Urapmin, prior

²³ Ibid., p. 10.

to accepting Christianity, did not know of the Holy Spirit, but, now that they do, they have adopted new beliefs and practices to reflect their new relationship with the Holy Spirit.

Figure 3: Pre-understanding Responses

<i>Response</i>	<i>Description</i>
Assimilation	Make new information fit into the old
Transformation	Make old information comply with the new
Adoption	Accept new information and discard the old

The truth is that it is not always possible to fit a response to pre-understanding snugly into one of these three models. However, the models serve as a litmus test to see the varying degrees of response Melanesians can make to pre-understanding that is informed by traditional religion.

SUMMARY

It is apparent that pre-understanding in Melanesia – which is informed by traditional religion – has played a role in how Christianity is understood. With this in mind, Melanesians (and the rest of the world) would do well to heed the counsel, found in Prov 1:5: “let the wise listen, and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance” (niv). All of us should seek to be wise in our interpretation of scripture. Many times, this includes gaining the counsel of others, seeking to mitigate the role pre-understanding may play in our interpretation of scripture. May the Lord help us to be wise in our use of pre-understanding.

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