

CHALLENGES CHRISTIANITY HAS FACED IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: LESSONS FOR TODAY

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INTRODUCTION

Papua New Guinea has often been called a Christian nation, since the vast majority of the people identify themselves with Christianity. However, the people of Papua New Guinea are still heavily influenced by primal religion.¹ This begs the question as to the challenges that Christianity has faced, and continues to face, in Papua New Guinea. A brief journey through the history of Christianity in Papua New Guinea provides two answers to the question.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA: A CHRISTIAN NATION?

There is freedom of religion in Papua New Guinea, with 97 percent of the population classified as Christian (58 percent as Protestants, 28 percent as Catholics, and 14 percent as other). Evangelicals comprise 21 percent of the population, while Charismatics/Pentecostals comprise 22 percent.² Despite the apparent domination of Christianity within Papua New

¹ Instead of using other designations for the traditional religious beliefs of Papua New Guineans – such as animism, tribalism, native, or pagan – I have chosen to use the term primal religion. According to Harold Turner, primal religion is “the most basic or fundamental” religious system, and has “preceded and contributed to the other great religious systems”. Harold Turner, “The Primal Religions of the World and Their Study”, in *Australian Essays in World Religions*, Victor C. Hayes, ed., (Bedford Park SA: Australian Association for the Study of Religion, 1977), p. 28.

² Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World: 21st-century Edition* (Waynesboro GA: Paternoster Press, 2001), pp. 510-511.

Guinea, primal religion still greatly influences the worldview of Papua New Guineans. Abel Haon, commenting from an emic perspective, states, “Christians are known to regularly seek the help of traditional healers, when medical treatment and prayer fails to exhibit anticipated results.”³ R. N. Bulmer, reflecting on the historical impact of Christianity on the Kyaka people of the Enga Province, states that every Kyaka person (Christian or otherwise) “believes in the existence or powers of the ghosts and other beings in the traditional cosmology”.⁴ He argues that God, Jesus Christ, and Satan have simply been added to the existing cosmological beliefs of the Kyaka people. *Operation World* sums up the status of Christianity in Papua New Guinea, “the ready acceptance of the gospel has resulted in a superficial Christianity of the majority without a radical transformation of basic values and beliefs”, and the “fear of witchcraft and evil spirits are widespread”.⁵ This should not be surprising as Papua New Guineans practised primal religion for thousands of years prior to the arrival of the first missionaries in the mid-19th century.

A BROAD LOOK: PHASES OF GROWTH OF CHRISTIANITY

Franco Zocca highlights several challenges as part of his discussion of the growth of Christianity in Papua New Guinea. He categorises the growth into four phases. The first phase was the Period of Contact, from 1850 to 1900.⁶ Missionaries used several strategies in the first phase, which included bringing co-workers, who were indigenous Christians from other South Pacific islands, bringing goods to exchange (i.e., axes, knives), focusing first on small off-shore islands, starting schools, and obtaining large amounts of land (to build schools, health clinics, etc.).⁷ Christianity came late to Papua New Guinea, when compared to other South Pacific islands. Forman notes, “Thus, while Christianity was well-planted in the

³ Abel Haon, “The Church Impacting Melanesia: a Case for People-Centred and Participatory Ministry”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology*, 24-1 (2008), p. 22.

⁴ R. N. H. Bulmer, “The Kyaka of the Western Highlands”, in *Gods, Ghosts, and Men in Melanesia*, P. Lawrence and M. J. Meggitt, eds, (reprint, Melbourne Vic: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 159.

⁵ Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World*, pp. 510-511.

⁶ Franco Zocca, *Melanesia and Its Churches: Past and Present*, Point 31 (2007), p. 131.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-134.

Pacific by 1900, it showed very different stages of growth in different areas.”⁸

The second phase, from 1900-1942, was the Phase of Penetration.⁹ During this phase, there was a clash of ideals. Zocca writes, “When a denomination opposed the use of traditional stimulants, *kava*, or betel nut, they encountered stiff resistance, because such customs were tightly linked to other aspects of the culture, such as the demonstration of friendliness, and contact with spirits.”¹⁰ Another combative topic was marriage. A big-man often had multiple wives, and he was reluctant to limit himself to just one wife – having more than one wife represented wealth and influence. There was also questioning of the process of becoming married. Marriages, traditionally, were arranged, involved exchanges, and were a long process (throughout which sexual relations were allowed). Some missionaries felt that marriages should not be arranged, there should be no exchanges, and there should be more precision as to when a couple was considered married.

The third phase was the Phase of Absorption, from 1945 to 1975.¹¹ During this phase, Papua New Guineans redirected the teachings of Christianity to bring them in line with traditional beliefs. Papua New Guineans “often adopted Christian truths and practices as additions to, or as ‘functional substitutes’, for their native beliefs and rites”.¹² For example, angels and demons joined the good and bad spirit beings of traditional religion, and the power of the Holy Spirit was allied with the power of *mana*.¹³ Another aspect of the Absorption phase was an increase

⁸ Charles W. Forman, *The Island Churches of the South Pacific: Emergence in the Twentieth Century* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1982), p. 9.

⁹ Forman uses the same years of 1900-1942 in categorising the spread of Christianity in the South Pacific, which highlights the impact of World War II on missions in the South Pacific. Forman, *The Island Churches of the South Pacific*, p. vii.

¹⁰ Zocca, *Melanesia and Its Churches*, p. 142.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹³ *Mana* “is kind of a life force”, which manifests itself as power and strength. Darrell Whiteman, “Melanesian Religions: An Overview”, in *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions*, Point 6 (1984), p. 100.

in appointing Papua New Guineans to leadership positions in the church. For example, the Anglicans, “who were far behind the New Guinea Lutherans and the United church in indigenous leadership”, created a Papua New Guinea synod in 1971, and, by 1977, had appointed two indigenous bishops.¹⁴

The fourth phase, from 1975 to the present, is the Phase of Autonomy.¹⁵ In this phase, churches moved towards self-sufficiency. Missionaries slowly left the country, and churches became responsible for their own “organisation, finances, and personnel”.¹⁶

Reflecting on growth of Christianity, Zocca believes there are several factors that motivated the people to embrace Christianity.¹⁷ The first was the belief that Christianity could bring material benefits. This belief grew out of seeing the missionaries with so many material possessions, and the people’s desire for such possessions. Second, was the victorious nature of Christianity, as exhibited in power encounters. In power encounters, God proved Himself to be more powerful than spirits. Third, Papua New Guineans would equate education with Christianity – since missionaries ran many schools. Fourth, was the personality of the missionary. The more favourable a missionary’s personality, the more people became Christians. Fifth, was the non-existence of a priestly class in primal religion; there was no one to oppose the growing acceptance of Christianity. Sixth, was a matter of prestige, linking the new Christian with the world of the Westerners. Seventh, was the message of peace and reconciliation that Christianity brought to the tribal-fighting cultures of Papua New Guinea.

A CLOSER LOOK: THE GOGODALA OF WESTERN PROVINCE

The Evangelical Church of Papua, which grew out of the work of the Unevangelized Fields Mission (UFM), was formed in 1966. Ross

¹⁴ Forman, *The Island Churches of the South Pacific*, p. 174.

¹⁵ Zocca, *Melanesia and Its Churches*, p. 155.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 146-148. Zocca mentions these factors in relationship to the second phase. However, in many ways, they could be applied to all phases.

Weymouth has studied the history of the Evangelical Church of Papua, especially as it relates to the Gogodala people of Western Province. A closer look at this specific history will provide answers to our question.

Weymouth begins with the historical social structure of the Gogodala people in the pre-contact period – the time before missionaries began their work as residential missionaries in 1932.¹⁸ The largest political unit was the village, with further division into moieties, clans, and sub-clans.¹⁹ Each of these groups had a totem (animals, birds, plants, and other objects), while each sub-clan had a canoe, which was identified with their totem. One of the distinguishing marks of the Gogodalas was the long house. Each village had a long house, measuring 35 metres in length, and capable of sleeping the whole village. The Gogodalas were a patrilineal kinship society. Marriages were intra-village marriages, based on sister-exchange, with polygyny practised. Village government was democratic.²⁰ There were, however, two prominent men in village leadership: *kanaba* – the fight leader, *Guwali* – the chief sorcerer. The *kanaba* position was non-hereditary. The *Guwali* position was hereditary – father to son – and the *Guwali* had to be a member of *wagumiesi* or *awala* clans. Clan elders held councils, and made consensus village decisions. Warfare was an integral part of society; the main reason was revenge for a wrong (murder, trouble with women, land disputes).

Traditional beliefs in the pre-contact period were typical of those in Papua New Guinea.²¹ The Gogodala did not believe in one god, rather their focus was on relationships with ancestral spirits. Myths were used to explain cosmic order (origin, economic system, and socio-political structure). One such myth told how the ancestor *Ibali* brought Gogodalas to their present land, and determined the structure of society. The Gogodala believed that *limo* (soul or power) resided in all things. Man possessed *limo*, but could

¹⁸ Ross Weymouth, “The Gogodala Society in Papua and the Unevangelized Fields Mission: 1890-1977” (Ph.D. thesis, Adelaide SA: Flinders University of South Australia, 1978), pp. 17-24.

¹⁹ “Moieties” are divisions of tribes, normally into two parts.

²⁰ Weymouth, “The Gogodala Society”, p. 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-32.

transmit *ugu* (nature spirit) to items made – such as a canoe. *Aida* was a rattle, which contained its own *ugu*. Rattling of the *aida* produced good or bad acts by the *ugu*. During dreams, the *limo* could depart and act upon its own; however, at death, the *limo* departed permanently. Death was normally attributed to revenge by spirits – spiritual activity. Sorcerers could cause injury by adding poison to dirt from footprints of the targeted person. Sickness could be cured by paying the healer or sorcerer to perform the appropriate ritual. Seasons, rains, and the success of crops were all controlled by rituals. Public ceremonies were held for major events, such as, birth, reaching manhood, travel, warfare, building of houses, building of canoes, and death. *Aida* was used especially in initiation of males.

The first UFM missionaries arrived in 1932, at Madiri on the Fly River in Western Province.²² UFM's goal was to evangelise and establish churches along the Fly River, and its surrounding region. In 1933, Albert Drysdale, an unmarried young missionary, moved east to live among the Gogodala. Drysdale believed that the best approach to evangelising the Gogodala was to live among the people, and to adopt their manner of living, as far as possible. His strategy was to build friendships, learn the language to translate scripture and write hymns, and to teach literacy to the Gogodala, so they could read scripture. Education was, therefore, viewed as evangelistic activity. However, the reason the Gogodala people wanted to learn to read was because they believed literacy was the reason for the missionaries' material success. Other missionary methods included itinerant preaching in villages, and medical work. In preaching, the missionaries emphasised certain doctrinal tenants: God created all things; the breaking of God's law (the Ten Commandments) was sin, and it results in eternal punishment in hell; the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ, which, if accepted, resulted in eternal life in heaven. Missionaries also prayed for the Holy Spirit to bring conviction, believing it was a necessary prerequisite for conversion. Customs, such as, smoking, chewing betel nut, and drinking alcohol were discouraged.

²² Ibid., pp. 128-145.

Christianity began to impact Gogodala society in many ways. One impact was related to taboos.²³ For example, girls were traditionally not allowed to eat watermelon. Despite this taboo, one girl went ahead and ate watermelon, and broke out in sores three days later. The sores were interpreted as punishment by slighted spirits. The missionary then prayed for the girl and the sores disappeared two days later. The girl and her friends embraced Christianity, because, in their view, God had shown He was more powerful than the spirits. Another impact was related to healing.²⁴ A pig had severely gored a Gogodala man. The missionary tended to the man's wounds, and provided round-the-clock care, during which time the missionary explained the gospel to him. After recovering, the man asked the missionary to teach him how to pray to God, resulting in conversion. A third impact was related to spirits.²⁵ Imowa embraced Christianity, because his wife, during spells of madness, fell in water or fire – which he claimed was the work of evil spirits. However, after a few years, when his wife had not been cured, he reverted to traditional religious practices.

In 1936, a revival swept through the Gogodala.²⁶ One result was the public burning of idols (images of men without legs, snakes, twisted wood, broken sticks, arrows, and many other things). The burning of idols demonstrated that the Christian God was more powerful than the spirits of the Gogodala. During the following months, many converted to Christianity.²⁷ The events of 1936 became a reference point for further movements toward Christianity. Weymouth notes that there were two ways missionaries sought to interface Christianity with culture. The first was to adapt Christian beliefs and practices to cultural practices. A second was to completely break from traditional cultural practices, in implementing Christianity. UFM missionaries favoured the second

²³ Ibid., p. 149.

²⁴ John Prince and Moyra Prince, *No Fading Vision: The First 50 Years of Asia Pacific Christian Mission* (Hong Kong: Computype Typesetting, 1981), pp. 25-27.

²⁵ Weymouth, "The Gogodala Society", p. 153.

²⁶ Prince, *No Fading Vision*, p. 46.

²⁷ Weymouth, "The Gogodala Society", pp. 154-155.

method, a complete break.²⁸ As the movement to burn icons moved from Gogodala village to village, some people (namely men of influence) were ready to fight the people if they did not burn the icons. Many years later, Christians would reflect on these actions with mixed reactions. Weymouth affirms that many of the villages involved in destroying idols, “soon felt the void, which followed the suppression of their traditional religion, and turned back to former beliefs and practices. Such villages, for years after, became hardened, and even hostile to future attempts at Christian proselytism.”²⁹ The idol-burning seemed to occur too early in the evangelisation process.

In general, there were several reasons Gogodala people became Christians: the power of God proved, through destruction of idols, the hope of material benefits (cargo mentality), the freedom from fear of attack by malicious spirits, being healed from sickness, and the fear of hell (a concern that an angry God would punish with fire).³⁰ However, when the Gogodala did convert, it proved to be critical to incorporate them into the Christian community, instruct them carefully in the Christian faith, and install them in leadership positions when ready.

World War II impacted the Gogodala church. Before the missionaries evacuated the country, they instituted Gogodalans as church elders – hoping they would continue the work of spreading the gospel. During the war years, not surprisingly, teaching on the end-times led to many conversions. After the war, the church spread into other parts of Western Province and into Southern Highlands Province, mainly due to the evangelistic efforts of the Gogodalan church. In the 1960s, UFM began to give indigenous pastors more authority and responsibility in their local churches (a completely village-based church vs. mission-station-oriented church authority and structure). All support of indigenous pastors became the responsibility of indigenous church. In 1966, UFM churches formed the Evangelical Church of Papua.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 161-162.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-170.

Weymouth provides several salient reflections on the impact of Christianity among the Gogodala people. Firstly, Christianity, at the grass-roots level, at least, had proved to be little more than an integrating of Christian facts with Gogodala values and assumptions.³¹ Secondly, Gogodalas often viewed God as retributive, imposing their culture view of malicious spirits onto God. This concept was reinforced by teachings of missionaries about God's judgment on sin (the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, Second Coming).³² Thirdly, the Gogodala concept of salvation was temporal, focusing on being saved from sickness and injury. Fourthly, sin, viewed as taboos by Gogodalas, was perceived as no more than taboos, which must be obeyed in order to secure the benefits of Christianity – eternal life, freedom from spirit oppression and sickness, and material prosperity – and to avoid God's punishment.³³ Fifthly, prayer was viewed as proclaiming the right spell or formula to coerce God to act.³⁴ In summary, Weymouth noted, "Evangelicals are now belatedly recognising the fact that the process of communicating the gospel cannot be isolated from either the culture of the missionary, or that of the hearers."³⁵

A SKEWED PICTURE: NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

As Christianity has been established across Papua New Guinea, new religious movements have arisen. These movements came into being as the people had to continually respond to the changes their country was going through, which forced an on-going evaluation of their worldview.³⁶ Some of the new religious movements are referred to as "cargo cults". The term refers to an "intense religious movement, of short duration, and limited in its geographic spread", which is built around "a prophecy of the coming abundant supplies and materials, to be brought or sent by ancestors".³⁷ John Strelan rightfully argues that cargo cults are often a search for a

³¹ Ibid., p. 329.

³² Ibid., p. 335.

³³ Ibid., p. 336.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 337.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 363.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 328.

³⁷ Zocca, *Melanesia and Its Churches*, p. 165.

culturally defined salvation – that of material blessings in this life.³⁸ A few new religious movements that show an interface between Christianity and culture are discussed below – especially new religious movements with cargo expectations.

The Paliau Movement (1946-1954) occurred on the island of Manus. The movement's leader, Paliau, taught a new strict way of life, forsaking traditional practices. It included building churches, caring for cemeteries, and visualising material blessings.³⁹ The new way of life “was thought to be able to hasten the arrival of ships loaded with all sorts of goods for the indigenes”.⁴⁰ However, the ships never materialised.⁴¹ The Baluan Native Christian United Church grew out of the Paliau Movement.⁴² Instead of using the term “Trinity”, the church uses the term “Wing Wang Wong”, where “Wing” represents God the Father (and anything that does not change), “Wang” represents God the Son, and “Wong” represents God the Holy Spirit (and the government).⁴³ Further teaching is that the angels, with Wing's approval, elected Laitsan (Satan) to be their king, and Jesus to be the government. However, Laitsan failed in his duties – mainly due to lying – so Jesus “became both the King and the government”.⁴⁴ Hence, governments that lie must be overthrown.

In 1976, the Bilip Grup movement began along the Waria River in Morobe Province.⁴⁵ A SIL missionary, Ernst Richert, after 16 years of translation, published the Guhu-Samane New Testament in 1975. After Richert's departure, a man name Ubabae received direction from the Holy Spirit to

³⁸ John G. Strelan, *Search for Salvation: Studies in the History and Theology of Cargo Cults* (Adelaide SA: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977), pp. 67-83.

³⁹ Polonhou Pokawin, “Developments in the Paliau Movement”, in *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today (1), Point 2* (1983), p. 105.

⁴⁰ Zocca, *Melanesia and Its Churches*, p. 168.

⁴¹ Pokawin, “Developments in the Paliau Movement”, pp. 105-106.

⁴² G. W. Trompf, *Melanesian Religion* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 222.

⁴³ Pokawin, “Developments in the Paliau Movement”, p. 107.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁴⁵ Wendy Flannery, “Bilip Grup”, in *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today (2), Point 3* (1983), p. 156.

move his village from the mountains down to the grasslands to a “holy place”.⁴⁶ Once there, Ubabae travelled to nearby villages, teaching about Jesus and conversion. Three other leaders emerged, and the impact of the movement deepened. Characteristics of the Bilip Grup movement included an emphasis on Bible teaching, conversion, confession, community, the Holy Spirit and His gifts, prayer, worship, and the return of Christ.⁴⁷ People were to stop doing many daily activities of life to pray for the return of Christ. These activities included abandoning their gardens, not going to school, and to stop doing community work. One belief, associated with Christ’s return, was that a ship would come up the Waria River and bring livestock and material goods. Airstrips were cleared for the arrival of planes bearing material goods. People implored “the dead to send them gifts of clothes, blankets, and money”.⁴⁸

In 1988, Charles Melawa started the *Niu Laip Bilong Olgeta* movement in the Nuku district of West Sepik Province.⁴⁹ Melawa, a member of the South Sea Evangelical church, claimed to receive visions from God, instructing him to start a new church. Melawa taught that ancestors would bring money and cargo, the Bible came from white men and not from God, Jesus was just a man empowered by the Holy Spirit, Jesus died to save white men only, and Melawa was the saviour of Papua New Guineans.⁵⁰ The South Sea Evangelical church dismissed Melawa in 1989.

The early 1990s saw the establishment of the Joshua Operation. Based on the book of Joshua in the Old Testament, churches around the country were encouraged to redeem the land to “enter into an era of prosperity”.⁵¹ Redemption meant converting cultural practices, which did not honour God, into practices that did. In East Sepik Province, for example, the people traditionally appeased the gods of the yams before planting to

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 160.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 164-174.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 164-176.

⁴⁹ Sebby Wasamande, “A Critique of the *Niu Laip Bilong Olgeta* Movement”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology*, 15-2 (1999), p. 12.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 19-31.

⁵¹ George Mombi, “Impact of the Prosperity Gospel in the Assemblies of God Church in Papua New Guinea”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology*, 25-1 (2009), p. 44.

ensure a good harvest. The people were now to worship Christ when planting. Ultimately, Joshua Operation adherents expect an age of immense material blessing.

As of 2004, the Pomio Kivung movement had a presence on the northern tip of the island of New Britain. With roots in the 1950s, the Pomio Kivung movement blends traditional cargo cult beliefs with Christian beliefs. Members expectantly await ancestors to bring riches and observe a modified Ten Commandments.⁵² The movement “features extensive inter-tribal cooperation, centralisation, hierarchy, and uniformity”, which “has led to its longevity”.⁵³

The Black Jesus movement arose in Madang Province around 2003. Steven Tari, the Black Jesus, promised that, if people followed him, then goods and money would fall out of the sky.⁵⁴ He had as many as 6,000 followers, but was eventually jailed for sexual assault of minors. Then, in 2007, a Jesus cult movement surfaced in West New Britain Province.⁵⁵ People began worshipping Andrew Sebamanu as their Jesus. Sebamanu taught an altered Ten Commandments, reflecting his name instead of God’s. Sebamanu also promised that, if people gave him oil palm and fresh fruit, then they would live in nicer houses in the future.

A couple of prominent themes – as movement leaders interfaced Christianity with culture – run through the new religious movements mentioned above. We see an emphasis on the expectation of material blessings, often anticipated by following rules related to Christianity and culture. We also see a redefinition of Christ: Christ is viewed primarily as the bringer of material blessings, as a man, as government, and as replaced by a Papua New Guinean.

⁵² John Aranda Cabrido, “Sketches for a Dialogue with the Pomio Kivung: a Cargo Cult in the Merai Sub-Parish”, in *Catalyst*, 36-2 (2006), p. 121.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ <<http://www.religionnewsblog.com/14845/Cult-leader-on-the-run-in-Papua-New-Guinea>> March 6, 2009.

⁵⁵ “Cult claims surface in WNB: Witnesses claim cult leader is Jesus”, in *The National* (January 24, 2007), p. 3.

CONCLUSION

What challenges has Christianity faced in Papua New Guinea? There are many challenges that could be drawn from the history, above; however, we will just mention two. Firstly, Papua New Guineans often defined God from a cultural perspective. For example, the cultural view of spirits was imposed upon God, thus understanding Him as primarily a retributive being, one that needs to be pacified through keeping taboos and offering prayers. God was understood to be powerful; therefore, He was viewed as a source of power for living (among other sources of power). Christ was also redefined in a variety of ways (a man, etc.), which, obviously, results in a redefining of God. Secondly, the cultural view of salvation, which focused on a satisfied daily life, was merged with corrupted biblical teaching (altered Ten Commandments, altered Jesus, etc.) to meet cultural expectations. The cultural view of salvation caused people to become Christians for non-eternal reasons, such as the expectation of physical benefits (cargo, access to education, prestige, tribal peace, etc.).

These same challenges face Christianity today in Papua New Guinea, as evidenced by the continuing influence of primal religion upon the people's beliefs. The scriptural versus cultural understanding of God and salvation continues to be monumental challenges that Christianity faces in Papua New Guinea. Therefore, we must always be careful to be true to scripture – but relevant to culture – in our discussion of God and salvation within the Papua New Guinea context. Only then will history not continue to repeat itself.

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