Vol 27, No 2 2011

# MELANESIAN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY



Journal of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools

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ISSN 0256-856X Volume 27, Number 2 2011

This journal is indexed in the *ATLA Religion Database*, published by the American Theological Library Association, 250 S. Wacker Dr., 16th Flr, Chicago IL 60606, Email: atla@atla.com, Internet: www.atla.com

This journal is abstracted in *Religious and Theological Abstracts*, 121 South College Street (PO Box 215), Myerstown PA 17067 USA



**ADDRESS** (Editorial, Subscriptions, and Manuscripts):
*Melanesian Journal of Theology*
PO Box 382
Mt Hagen WHP
Papua New Guinea
Email: deanofstudies@cltc.ac.pg
Phone: (675) 542-1003

# MELANESIAN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

*Journal of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools*

The *Melanesian Journal of Theology* aims to stimulate the writing of theology in Melanesia. It is an organ for the regular discussion of theological topics at scholarly level by staff and students of the member schools of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools (MATS), though contributions from non-members and non-Melanesians are welcome.

The *Melanesian Journal of Theology* is committed to the dialogue of Christian faith within Melanesian cultures. The Editorial Team will consider for publication all manuscripts of scholarly standard on matters of concern to Melanesian Christians and of general theological interest.

The opinions expressed in the articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Editor, Editorial Team, or the member colleges of MATS. All articles have been edited to meet the requirements of the journal.

The *Melanesian Journal of Theology* normally appears twice yearly, in April and October.

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# EDITORIAL

This volume covers a variety of topics related to Melanesia: dreams, theological education, and pre-understanding. Each topic, in its own way, adds to the on-going discussion of applying God's Word in a Melanesian context.

In the first article, John Hitchen champions the need to develop a well-rounded contextualised theology of dreams for Melanesia. His article lays the groundwork for such a theology by exploring the role of dreams in traditional Melanesian thought, and then comparing his findings with the understanding of dreams found in Melanesian Christianity. Dreams are an integral part of Melanesian life, and, therefore, John's article is an important mile marker in the drive to create a contextual theology of dreams.

Kenneth Nehrbass, in the second article, examines formal theological education in Vanuatu. He provides the results of research he conducted at three institutions, in which he interviewed faculty and students, to garnish what each thinks should be the purpose of such education. From this, Kenneth puts forward what the schools are doing right, and the challenges they face, concluding his article with recommendations for moving the schools forward, in the cause of Christ.

In the final article, I explore the impact of traditional religion on Christianity among the Mulia Dani and the Urapmin, on the island of New Guinea. I synthesise, and build on the work of others, as I seek to show that pre-understanding influences the interpretation of scripture, and the practice of Christianity. The challenge, then, for each of us, is to moderate the role that pre-understanding may play in our practice of scripture.

Not everyone will agree with the conclusions reached by the authors. However, we hope that, as you grapple with the issues, the thoughts of the authors will help you grow in your understanding of what God's Word says to your life and culture.

Doug Hanson.

# DREAMS IN TRADITIONAL THOUGHT AND IN THE ENCOUNTER WITH CHRISTIANITY IN MELANESIA

**John M. Hitchen**

*John is a Senior Lecturer in Mission Studies at the School of Mission and Ministry at Laidlaw-Carey Graduate School, Laidlaw College, New Zealand. This article is a previously-unpublished paper, first presented to the Postgraduate Seminar, Religious Studies Department, University of Aberdeen, Winter Session, 1980. John holds a Ph.D. from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, in which he focused on Mission in the Pacific.*

[In this article, reference is made to the Kuma and the Kuman. They are the same tribal group. – Revising ed.]

## INTRODUCTION

In Melanesia, dreams have always been thought of as a way of communicating between the unseen spiritual world and the world of humans. Papua New Guinea's first Prime Minister, Sir Michael Somare, in his 1975 autobiography, refers quite naturally to a recurring dream, which advised him of the deaths of near relatives. He gives specific details of its coming at the time of his father's death.[1] Many anthropologists have written articles focusing on dreams, or have given considerable attention to them in their studies of ethnography, and the traditional religions of Melanesia.[2]

[1] Michael T. Somare, *Sana: Autobiography of Michael Somare*, Port Moresby PNG: Niugini Press, 1975, pp. 20-21.

[2] See Bibliography, particularly works by Meggitt, Reay, Wagner, Burridge, Firth, Malinowski, and Blackwood, and the article by Michelle Stephen. This paper was written before Stephen's paper became available, thus only footnote reference has been made to her important work.

In the churches, while most Christians are deeply interested in, and concerned about, the significance of dreams, little official attention has been given to this part of the traditional heritage, and its place in present-day religious experience. Following calls by Matthew Kelty for a fresh consideration of the pastoral significance of dreams, and by Harold Turner for a new look at the phenomenon of dreams in Melanesian religions,[3] this paper looks briefly at the place of dreams in traditional thought, their place in the encounter with Christianity, and in new religious movements. We then raise some of the theological and practical pastoral concerns arising in any discussions of dreams in the church in Melanesia today. The study is in no way meant to be an exhaustive treatment, but, rather, seeks to open up the issues for continuing discussion.

## DREAMS IN TRADITIONAL MELANESIAN THOUGHT

We shall explore the common explanation of the phenomenon of dreaming; some common kinds of dream; some general beliefs about dreams; characteristics of dreamers; and make some comments on dream interpretation.

### THE COMMON EXPLANATION OF DREAMING

The common, if not universal, explanation of dreaming is that the dreamer's soul or spirit leaves the body during sleep, and actually experiences the events in the dream. As in so many aspects of Papuan ethnography, missionary James Chalmers could possibly claim to be the first to draw attention to this characteristic belief in Papua. In 1886, he wrote,

> All natives are great believers in dreams. In sleep, the spirit leaves the body and wanders, and, if it meets with those that are dead, it is that it has gone to spirit-land, and, if the living, it may have seen something of use, heard something likely to take place,

[3] Matthew Kelty, "Dreams, Visions, and Voices", in *Christ in Melanesia: Point* (1&2/1977), pp. 7-12; Harold W. Turner, "Old and New Religions in Melanesia", in *Challenges and Possibilities for Religion in Melanesia: Point* (2/1978), p. 17.

> and so returns to the sleeping body. Such are dreams, and are often noted upon.[4]

The early Pacific missionaries, like John Williams, were familiar with this understanding of dreams, and Chalmers' missionary contemporaries, in other parts of Melanesia, like Robert Codrington and Lorimer Fison, wrote about it before Chalmers.[5] But to restate it in a more modern setting, as Wagner explains:

> Daribi say that the soul leaves the body during sleep, passing out, as at death, through the *borabe* or coronal suture (or, as some informants maintain, through the nose), and travels about experiencing the action that we perceive as dreaming. The later return of the soul causes the sleeper to awaken, and, if awakened beforehand, he [sic] will be dull and drowsy until it arrives.[6]

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[4] James Chalmers, "On the Manners and Customs of Some of the Tribes of New Guinea", in *Proceedings of the Philosophical Society of Glasgow* vol XVIII (1886), pp. 57-69; and *Pioneering in New Guinea*, London UK: Religious Tract Society, 1887, pp. 169-170. For Chalmers' contribution to Papuan ethnography, see John M. Hitchen, "Training 'Tamate': The Formation of the Nineteenth-century Missionary Worldview: The Case of James Chalmers of New Guinea", Ph.D. thesis, Aberdeen UK: University of Aberdeen, 1985, pp. 97-109, 795-813.

[5] John Williams, *A Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Sea Islands*, London UK: John Snow, 1837; Lorimer Fison, "Notes on Fijian Burial Customs", in *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute* vol X (1881), pp. 146-147; Robert H. Codrington, *The Melanesians: Studies in their Anthropology and Folk-Lore*, London UK: Oxford University Press, 1891, pp. 249, 266. Both John Lubbock, *The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Condition of Man: Mental and Social Conditions of Savages*, 2nd edn, London UK: Longmans, Green & Co., 1870, pp. 143-146; and Edward Burnett Tylor, 2 vols, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom*, London UK: John Murray [1871] 5th edn, 1913, pp. 1:441, had documented the same belief from many parts of the world at an earlier date.

[6] Roy Wagner, *Habu: The Innovation of Meaning in Daribi Religion*, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1972, p. 68; cf. C. G. Seligman, *The Melanesians of British New Guinea*, Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1910, p. 734; W. J. V. Saville, *In Unknown New Guinea*, London UK: Seeley, Service & Co., 1926, p. 28; Mervyn Meggitt, 1962, p. 218; Glasse, 1965, p. 30; Dawn Ryan, "Christianity,

Meggitt shows that, among the Mae Enga, this idea has been thought through in depth, so that they:

> do not regard the dreams simply as a kind of "thinking", or as a process going on "inside" the individual, his heart, or his spirit. Rather the individual (or, more accurately, his spirit) is thought to be "inside" the dream, behaving *in* a situation, just as he does in waking life. That is to say, the dream is taken to be essentially a context of action, not simply its cognitive accompaniment or content. Nevertheless, people have no doubt that dream events also differ qualitatively from waking events. It is not that they think the former are more or less real, but they recognise that dream events may lack the "veracity" of waking events, that, in some way, situations in dreams are often redefined, so that their outcomes are more compatible with the desires of the dreamer.[7]

At the Christian Leaders' Training College, Papua New Guinea, students are often reluctant to wake sleeping fellow students, lest their souls may be travelling somewhere in a dream. It is commonly held that to awaken them at such a time may be harmful.[8] We also find the activity of the dead ancestors closely connected with this common dream explanation. Beatrice Blackwood, for instance, received the following explanations:

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Cargo Cults, and Politics among the Toaripi of Papua", in *Oceania* XL-2 (December 1969), p. 99-118; Raymond Firth, 1934, p. 65; Michelle Stephen, "Dream, Trance, and Spirit Possession: Traditional Religious Experiences in Melanesia", in Victor C. Hayes, ed., *Religious Experience in World Religions*, Bedford Park SA: Australian Association for the Study of Religion, pp. 27-28; Walter G. Ivens, *The Island Builders of the Pacific*, London UK: Seeley, Service & Co., 1930, p. 230. For African parallels, cf. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, 1937, p. 136; Taylor, 1963, pp. 58-59; for Chinese parallels, Berthold Laufer, "Inspirational Dreams in Eastern Asia", in *Journal of American Folklore* 44 (1931), p. 210; and Indian examples, Elwin, 1955, p. 506.

[7] Meggitt, 1962, p. 215; cf. Firth, 1934, p. 66.

[8] Cf. Tylor, 1871, p. 1:441.

> "When we dream, the people who are dead come and talk to us." "In dreams, we go and stay with people who are dead." "I think, when we dream, our *abin* go and stand up with all the men who fought in the old days" (*abin* is the word used for a man's shadow, his reflection in a glass, or in a pool of water, or his "spirit", while he is alive, but never for the spirits of the dead, the word for which is *urar*).[9]

There has also been a more pragmatic recognition of the relationship between overeating, or eating of certain foods, and dreaming,[10] but the primary explanation has focused on the soul leaving the body during sleep.

## FOUR CATEGORIES OF DREAMS

Without trying to give an exhaustive list of the many different kinds of dreams, trivial, humorous, or what might be called "significant", I would like to draw attention to four broad, overlapping categories of dream.

### *Prophetic*

Prophetic dreams have some predictive interpretation. While Meggitt hints that the Mae Enga may, at times, use dream interpretation as a general kind of fortune-telling,[11] the more normal prophetic dream foretells of impending danger, death, or awesome occurrence – or, perhaps, even just the coming "danger" of a visit from the patrol officer or anthropologist! Among the Enga, these are regarded as especially significant, when dreamed by youths involved in initiation rites.[12]

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[9] Beatrice Blackwood, *Both Sides of Buka Passage*, Oxford UK: Clarendon Press, 1935, pp. 546-547; cf. Stephen, 1980, p. 28; Fortune, 1932, p. 181; and, for Hawaii: Handy, 1936, p. 120; for Africa: Taylor, 1963, pp. 58, 61. Again, Tylor, 1871, pp. 1:442-445, had made much of this explanation found in several societies.

[10] Blackwood, 1935, p. 546.

[11] Meggitt, 1965, p. 108.

[12] Wagner, 1972, p. 68; Meggitt, 1962, pp. 220, 223; R. N. H. Bulmer, "The Kyaka of the Western Highlands", in Peter J. Lawrence, and Mervyn J. Meggitt, *Gods,*

Within this group, also, are dreams that are regarded as advising on a particular course of action, such as the right time to go on a hunt, inspect a trap, hold a feast, or set out on warfare.[13]

### *Communicatory*

Communicatory dreams are ones in which spirits or ghosts of the recent dead communicate with the dreamer. This kind of dream is widely attested in both highland and coastal areas of Melanesia.[14] It may be that the spirit of the deceased comes to indicate the cause of death, and thus assist in retaliation. Or a group of the recent dead may be seen as encouraging a sick person. There may be a more-vindictive purpose to warn of the consequences of neglecting the dead, or to give prophetic advice, such as that mentioned in the previous section, or even to teach a song commemorating the dead person.[15]

Fison records a standardised dream experience by the peers of a young chief, or girl of high rank, who dies. The young people slept in a certain house, and observed the progress of the spirit of their dead friend on its way to *Mbulu*, the abode of the dead. There was no direct

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*Ghosts, and Men in Melanesia*, Melbourne Vic: Oxford University Press, 1965, pp. 152-153; Teske, 1978, p. 83.

[13] Kenelm O. L. Burridge, "Cargo Cult Activity in Tangu", in *Oceania* XXIV-4 (1954), p. 246; "A Note on Tangu Dreams", in *Man* 56-130 (1956), p. 122; *Mambu: A Melanesian Millennium*, London UK: Methuen, 1960, p. 179; "Tangu, Northern Madang District", in Lawrence, and Meggitt, 1965, p. 241; Bulmer, 1965, pp. 152-153; Ivens, 1930, p. 230; Bronislaw Malinowski, *Sexual Life of Savages in North West Melanesia*, 3rd edn, London UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1932, pp. 327ff; Blackwood, 1835, p. 548; Seligman, 1910, pp. 653-654.

[14] Ronald M. Berndt, "The Kamano, Usurufa, Jate, and Fore of the Eastern Highlands", in Lawrence, and Meggitt, 1965, p. 86; Burridge, 1954, p. 246; 1956, p. 122; Glasse, 1965, p. 30; Peter Lawrence, "The Ngaing of the Rai Coast", in Lawrence, and Meggitt, 1965, p. 207; Meggitt 1957, p. 51; 1965, p. 110; Malinowski, 1932, pp. 327-329; Blackwood, 1935, pp. 553-555; Parratt, 1976, pp. 44-45; Seligman, 1910, pp. 173, 190, 192, 734-735.

[15] Glasse, 1965, p. 30; R. F. Salisbury, "The Siane of the Eastern Highlands", in Lawrence, and Meggitt, 1965, p. 58; Meggitt, 1962, pp. 223-224; Burridge, 1960, p. 241; Ryan, 1969, p. 104.

communication between the spirit of the dead person and the dreamers, but this standardised "incubation" dream assured the living of the safe arrival in *Mbulu* of the spirit of the deceased.[16]

***Explanatory or Divinatory***

These are dreams, in which the people deliberately attempt to gain hidden knowledge – be it the whereabouts of a lost pig, the cause of a persistent illness, the identity of the person responsible for a death, or the name of the sorcerer, who is believed to be troubling the person or their family. As Burridge puts it: "For Tangu, dreams are not simple fantasies, woven from sleep. They are a normal technique for finding a way out of a dilemma."[17]

For Mae Enga "big men", some expertise in this kind of dream is an accepted part of the normal qualification for leadership. Such dreams were often linked with careful, practical investigation of the situation, and were sometimes accompanied by sacrifice, or payment, to the dreamer. On occasion, a potion might be taken, or other ritual followed (such as rubbing with special leaves or lime), to help induce the divinatory dream.[18]

Among the Ipili of the Western Highlands of New Guinea, a few men and women, on the basis of proven ability, are believed to be capable of foretelling, by dreams, the misfortunes of other unrelated people.[19] Another common divinatory dream advises of sickness, or other calamity, befalling a relative, while the person is absent on a fishing trip or trading expedition.[20]

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[16] Fison, 1881, pp. 146-147.
[17] Burridge, 1960, p. 179; cf. Burridge, 1965, p. 235.
[18] Meggitt, 1962, p. 217; Parratt, 1976, pp. 44-45; Codrington, 1891, p. 20; Stephen, 1980, p. 30; Seligman, 1910, p. 182; Ivens, 1930, p. 230; Saville, 1926, pp. 283-284; and, in Hawaii: Handy, 1936, pp. 119, 120-122.
[19] Meggitt, 1957, p. 51.
[20] Seligman, 1910, pp. 113, 653-654.

***Creative***

Creative dreams are ones, which impart a new skill, or set the stage for some kind of innovation. Traditional tribal skills, rituals, and myths were often believed to have been given to tribal founders, through dreams.[21] Wagner shows how new skills were often attributed to dreams:

> The talents and skills involved in a number of craft specialities, including the decoration of arrow shafts, the making and playing of bamboo flutes, and the weaving of belts, armbands, and string bags, are all thought to be acquired in dreams. Of course, anyone can try to learn these techniques, but real talent, like hunting luck, can only represent something additional to ordinary effort, and must be obtained through a dream.[22]

This category includes dreams which teach a new charm, or new *singsing* song;[23] dreams which confirm or authorise a person's appointment to a new position;[24] and especially, dreams, which have precipitated, or provided, the spark for *cargo cults.*

Gunson's account of one early such movement in the Pacific, the Mamai'a Heresy, leaves no doubt as to the importance of dreams.[25] Turning to an arbitrary sampling of such movements in Melanesia: the dreams of Pariakenam stimulated a new wave of cargo activity among the Tangu;[26] Philo Asia's dreams enabled her, an insignificant teenage girl, to become the focal point of the Inawai'a Movement among the Mekeo;[27] at least some explanations of Etoism see dreams as a

[21] Cf. Lawrence, 1965, p. 208.
[22] Wagner, 1972, p. 74; cf. Malinowski, 1932, pp. 328-329; and Laufer, 1931, p. 212, for Chinese parallels; and Elwin, 1955, p. 499, on India.
[23] Burridge, 1965, p. 246; Teske, 1978, p. 87.
[24] Meggitt, 1962, p. 221; Stephen, 1980, p. 31.
[25] W. Neil Gunson, "An Account of the Mamai'a or Visionary Heresy of Tahiti, 1826-1841", in *Journal of the Polynesian Society* LXXI (1962), pp. 214, 218-219.
[26] Burridge, 1954, p. 244; and, for further elaboration, 1960, p. 218.
[27] Fergie, 1977, pp. 147-173.

significant factor in the movement;[28] and Kai Fo'o's dreams were integral to his preparation for cult activities among the Toaripi.[29] For an example from the Highlands, where many other features, common to millenarian movements, were not present, we still find dreams involved both in the conception of the Ain cult, and at key points in its transformation.[30] So, we could go on, as the last footnote shows. But we have shown sufficiently that dreams have played a significant part in a majority of the new religious movements in Melanesia.

## THREE COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

From anthropological writings, we can note the following general characteristics of dreams in traditional thought in Melanesia:

### *Revelations from the Supernatural World*

Dreams are widely accepted as *revelations from the supernatural world*. To quote Burridge again: "Dreams are considered to proceed from the divine . . . both myths and dreams, as entities in themselves, may be considered to belong to the divine".[31] Whether or not an ancestor ghost appears in it, the dream is, as a dream, endowed with authority as being supra-human in origin. While most societies differentiate between the trivial and meaningful dreams, those in the

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[28] Alan R. Tippett, *Solomon Islands Christianity: A Study in Growth and Obstruction*, London UK: Lutterworth Press, 1967, p. 226; Esau Tuza, 1977, p. 145.

[29] Trompf, 1976, Part 3, Option I, Topic 19, "Dreams, Visions and Healings"; Part C, Option III, Topic 16, "The Diffusion of Cargo Cultism along the Papuan Coast", p. 60; cf. Ryan, 1969, pp. 112-113.

[30] Meggitt, 1973, pp. 20, 25, 31-32. For examples of the role of dreams initiating and continuing cargo movements, see: John G. Strelan, *Search for Salvation: Studies in the History and Theology of Cargo Cults*, Adelaide SA: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977, pp. 15 (Mansren Movement), 28 (Anggita), 37 (*Skin Guria* Movement), 38 (Isekele on Goodenough Island), 40 (*Tanget* cult, 41 (Paro of Toaripi, and the Upper Asaro Movements), 43-44 (the Story cult), 51-52, for a summary of the role of such dreams in cargo movements.

[31] Burridge, 1965, p. 242; cf. Ryan, 1969, p. 103; and, for Africa: John S. Mbiti, "Gods, Dreams, and African Militancy", in J. S. Pobee, ed., *Religion in a Pluralistic Society*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976, pp. 38-47.

latter category carry value as "signs", or communications from the unseen world.

In some societies, there is a direct link between dreams and magic. Malinowski shows that, for some Trobriand Islanders, dreams were believed to be caused by magic, either directly or indirectly:

> The natives have a definite theory of magic acting through dreams upon the human mind. . . . All true dreams are in response to magic, or to spiritual influence, and are not spontaneous.[32]

Generally, however, the characteristic belief that the visible and invisible worlds interpenetrate each other to form the whole experience of reality is so much taken for granted that there does not seem to be any need for theorising about "how" the dream communicates. Though, as we shall see, when considering the interpretation of dreams, some peoples do have well-developed ideas of analogy, and a metaphoric correspondence between the dream images and the real world.

### *Cause for Action*

Arising from this aspect of the divine in dreams, the next characteristic is that they are a *cause for action.*

> Whatever the dream may be, it appears patent to Tangu that a man cannot lie down and dream what he might like to dream; and that, when he does dream, it is up to him to take notice. He must act on the dream. For a dream carries an imperative, is never experienced for nothing, and tends to realise the future.[33]

[32] Malinowski, 1932, pp. 330, 332; cf. also, Codrington, 1891, pp. 208-209; Meggitt, 1962, p. 219; Burridge, 1960, p. 179; and Evans-Pritchard, 1937, p. 135, for the link between witchcraft and bad dreams in an African society.

[33] Burridge, 1965, p. 242; cf. 1956, pp. 121-122; Blackwood, 1936, p. 547.

Or, as Meggitt emphasises, in a reference already quoted, "the dream is taken essentially to be a context of action".[34] Even when the dream is resorted to as a formal means for problem solving, or is deliberately induced, it still brings this motivating pressure for action.

***Evil Connotation***

In many societies, dreams have *an evil connotation.* In Meggitt's study, he shows that, of 28 standard dream symbols used in interpretation, 21 are associated with unfavourable circumstances, and only seven with favourable.[35]

In Marie Reay's brief, in-depth analysis of Kuma dreams, *The Sweet Witchcraft of Kuma Dream Experience*,[36] she explains that:

> The Kuman's term for "dream" is *wur kum banz*. *Wur* is "sleep", *kum* is "witchcraft", and *banz* is "honey". We can translate the phrase freely as "sweet witchcraft as you sleep". The idea they have of witchcraft is very far from being sweet. Witchcraft is the only real crime, and the grossest of evils – a danger may strike at the community, or a poison, which may seep into it, through the traitorous agency of one of its members. So, the designation of "dreams" as "sweet witchcraft while you sleep" carries an incongruous implication of evil, which is sugar-coated.[37]

She goes on to show that the standard dreams, experienced by most Kuma men, are, in fact, "sugar-coated evil", and are experienced as nightmares, which Reay sees as an accepted way of dealing with the

[34] See note 7, above; cf. Handy, 1936, p. 119, "In the old native culture, dreaming was a controlling and directive influence in the Hawaiian's life, particularly in fishing and planting, in house and boat building, in love and war, in relation to birth and naming, to sickness, and to death."
[35] Meggitt, 1962, p. 226.
[36] Marie Reay, *The Sweet Witchcraft of Kuma Dream Experience*, 1962, pp. 459-463.
[37] Reay, 1962, p. 460.

personal strain of social tensions. Beatrice Blackwood also showed that, for the Buka, dreams, which made a person feel frightened or ill, most dreams about the dead, and any dream, in which a mother dreaded of her children, were all considered very bad.[38] An Ipili, likewise, takes striking dreams to signify anger aimed at oneself, or one's family, by a related ghost.[39] The evil aspect of the dream may be seen in connection with some other evil power. We have already noted the relation between dreams and magic in the Trobriands. Codrington noted the power of a ghost was, in one case, associated with certain stones, which, when placed under the head of their owner, can cause the death of the persons, of whom the owner dreams.[40]

But, as we have noted, this is not a universal feature, as many societies regard many dreams as trivial or amusing, or as a standard way of useful divination.

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DREAMERS

Some groups, such as the Kuma, already referred to, expect all male adults will have significant dreams from time to time.[41] Among the Mae Enga, while all "big-men" are expected to have some routine experience in divinatory dreaming, and "every adult is potentially a producer of significant dreams, in fact, the range of people, whose dreams are consistently accepted as significant is limited".[42] These tend to fall into the following categories:

- Young men, while undergoing ritual seclusion;
- "Big-men";
- Married women of strong personality (e.g., wives of "Big-men");

[38] Blackwood, 1936, pp. 577-578.
[39] Meggitt, 1957, p. 51.
[40] Codrington, 1891, p. 184.
[41] Reay, 1962, p. 460.
[42] Meggitt, 1962, p. 219.

- Elderly male diviners;
- Widowed female diviners; and
- "[O]ne or two, otherwise nondescript, men, whose dreams, for no easily ascertainable reasons, have often proved significant in the past, and continue to be given weight."[43]

In other societies, particular people may be recognised as having skills in particular kinds of dreaming, e.g., divining the name of the sorcerer who is causing illness.[44] Or, it may be, as among the Daribi, where:

> certain individuals are recognised . . . as good dreamers (*na-iai-bidi)*, persons gifted with a talent, through the perceiving of power. Some of these are specialists, who possess a particular skill, revealed to them in dreaming. . . . A man, who has seen in his dreams, where a dog has hidden an animal it has killed, is selected to hold the pole used in divination for *kebidibidi* sorcery, for the pole first leads to the place of killing, and the ability to trace the route of the carnivore in a dream is believed to confer a particular efficacy in following the trail of a human killer. Other *na-iai-bidi* (good dreamers) . . . are felt to have a more generalised ability to foresee future potentialities in their dreams.[45]

Wagner notes, however, that he did not find, among the Daribi, a correlation of dreamers with "Big" or elderly men. Thus, each society has its own criteria for recognising, authorising, and thus controlling, the social influence of their dreamers.[46]

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[43] Meggitt, 1957, p. 51; 1962, p. 220; cf. Firth, 1934, pp. 67-68, for the greater significance of chief's dreams; and Shorter, 1978, p. 285, for African parallels.
[44] Burridge, 1965, p. 235; cf. Codrington, 1891, pp. 108-109.
[45] Wagner, 1972, p. 73.
[46] Cf. Meggitt, 1962, p. 221, for a would-be dream expert, who was ignored, even after some consistently "true" dreams.

## THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS

Within each of these societies, there exist accepted ways of interpreting dreams. One basic form of "interpretation" takes place as soon as the dreamer decides whether or not to share the dream with others. For, while the individual may receive personal motivation and guidance from a private dream, as soon as it is shared, a much wider interpretation procedure commences.[47]

At this level, as Meggitt shows,[48] sometimes dreams are not communicated to others, because the meaning is patently obvious and trivial, and sometimes, because they are too confused, or fragmentary, to have significance. No doubt, too, the individual's own suspicions about the possible meanings, and their acceptability, or otherwise, in the society is a major interpretative factor.

But, where the dream is shared (and as it is further interpreted privately), there are often standardised procedures for interpretation. Such interpretation can perhaps be analysed into two main categories. There are some dreams, in which the dream experience is taken as a direct prediction of events, which will happen to the dreamer. The second category is those dreams, in which some symbolic reinterpretation is necessary to explain the meaning of the dream.

It is interesting to note that Evans-Pritchard uses this same two-fold analysis in summarising the place of dreams among the Azande in Africa:

> There are stereotyped explanations of dreams. These are generally straightforward affirmations that, what happened in the dream, will later happen in waking life, but, sometimes, dream images are regarded as symbols, which require interpretation.

[47] Firth, 1973, pp. 216-223.
[48] Meggitt, 1962, p. 219.

> Nevertheless, in such cases, the interpretation is often traditional, and it is merely necessary to find someone who knows it.[49]

### *Straightforward Interpretation*

In the first kind of straightforward interpretation, we would put the kind of dream, to which Burridge refers:

> When Tangu dream of pigs, they go hunting, optimistic for a kill. When a man digs a deep hole, and covers it with leaves and branches, or if he builds a more-complicated trap above ground, a dream will tell him if either stratagem has been successful, and it will provide the directive to go and look. . . . When Tangu dream of sorcerers, they waken, and take precautions, because the dream has come as a warning.[50]

### *Symbolic Reinterpretation*

When we turn to the second, symbolic reinterpretation kind, our Melanesian material offers many examples. I shall refer to the interpretative systems mentioned by Reay, Meggitt, and Wagner as three increasingly-complex patterns of interpretation. In the examples given by Reay, the Kuma have a small number of recurring dreams, in which there is a close link between the thing dreamed and its meaning. In Meggitt's examples, there is a wider range of standard symbols, and the relation between symbol and interpretation is less direct. With

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[49] Evans-Pritchard, 1937, p. 379 [1976, p. 174]; Handy, 1936, p. 120, uses the same two-fold analysis for Hawaii, but Seligman, 1923, pp. 186-188, suggests a three-fold analysis.

[50] Burridge, 1960, pp. 179-180; and 1956, pp. 121-122, for examples; also Blackwood, 1936, pp. 547-548. For African parallels: cf. Calloway, 1868-1870, pp. 228-246. Calloway records another kind of straight-forward-but-opposite dream, where, e.g., the dream experience of a wedding feast would signify a coming death, and that of a funeral would signify the person will recover. Rattray, 1927, pp. 195-196, notes both straightforward and opposite interpretations among the Ashanti. Seligman, 1927, p. 20, comments on the same Ashanti dreams. Tylor, 1871(i), pp. 121-123, discusses such "straightforward" and some "symbolic reinterpretation" principles of dream interpretation.

Wagner's examples, a much more sophisticated pattern of metaphoric symbolism is involved.

According to Reay, there are certain apparently-recurrent dreams, which most Kuman males are expected to dream from time to time. The *Dream struggle*, where the individual fights a great crowd single-handed, signifies the common fear of being left alone by the tribe to try to struggle on unaided – an unlikely, but very fearful, possibility in actual life. In the *Dream of pork*, the eating of pork signifies robbing a grave, and eating human flesh, which is the symbolic way of referring to witchcraft among the Kuma. In the *Dream of the strange girl*, there is a direct link with the fear of conflict with *masalai*, or evil spirits, masquerading as a strange lover.[51]

The next level of interpretation is seen in Meggitt, who notes, "The Kara clansman's immediate and unanimous interpretation of the various dreams suggests that the people construe at least some dream events in a consistent way, that they have some kind of accepted vocabulary of dream symbols."[52] He then goes on to list 28 standard dream symbols, and their accepted interpretation, e.g.:

- The dreamer plucks or breaks a gourd on a vine: he will suffer misfortune;
- The dreamer sees lightning: there will be a violent quarrel within the clan-parish;
- A sick man dreams of plucking *imperata* grass: he will recover from his illness (he will live to thatch or build another home).[53]

Meggitt suggests these common symbols refer to a limited range of common cultural activities – exchanges of wealth, frayed tempers, and

[51] Reay, 1962, pp. 460-462.
[52] Meggitt, 1962, p. 224.
[53] Ibid., pp. 224-226.

sudden violence in disputes, and attacks by ghosts – all distinctive features of Mae Enga culture. Thus, the people have their own way of attributing latent content to the manifest content of the dream. Meggitt would want to go beyond this, and account for the absence from their dreams of certain other culturally-significant features, such as father-son and male-female tensions, by suggesting a third level of "true latent content" underlying the Mae Enga's own explanations of the latent content. However, when the investigator begins to reinterpret the accepted interpretation, they run the risk of revealing, through their suggestions, more about their own presuppositions and psychological predilections than about the dreams they are analysing.[54]

When we turn to Wagner's description of Daribi methods of interpretation, we find, however, something akin to this multilevel-meaning approach, with Wagner's use of a system of metaphoric explanation. Wagner sees the importance of dreams in the way they enable the Daribi to gain a new power, or, as he calls it, "capacity", "capability", or "affinity", through proper interpretation of the dream. He sums it up thus: "A dreamer is valued because of his ability to perceive power, or capability, which is revealed to him through a metaphoric link between two experiential areas, and would, otherwise, remain unknown."[55] It is worth following this through more fully in Wagner's own words:

> The actions performed by the soul, while it is out of the body, indicate . . . a kind of capability or affinity for certain undertakings, which need only be interpreted correctly, after waking, to bring results or knowledge. The ultimate origin of this affinity is obscure, an irreducible fact. Like the dream itself, the important thing, insofar as man is concerned, is its interpretation.

[54] Meggitt, 1962, pp. 226-229.
[55] Wagner, 1972, p. 74.

> This interpretation, moreover, must take place, if the dream is to be of any help; a literal acceptance of the content of the dream would be useless . . . the interpretation of a dream must involve some transformation of its content, and yet, Daribi insist that the content of a dream itself represents the actual experiences of the soul, and not some distortion of them.
>
> The seeming paradox is resolved when we realise that Daribi interpret their dreams metaphorically . . . the correct interpretation of a dream reveals a metaphoric link between the action experienced in the dream and the successful performance of some other activity, such that the affinities and capacities, shown by the soul, in accomplishing the former, can be successfully brought to bear on the latter.[56]

Wagner then gives a table of "a series of standardised formula (sic)" for the interpretation of dreams, in which he gives examples of the way in which the subject of the dream links together two areas of activity, which, through an interpretative metaphor, refer to a power or capacity in everyday life. To cite just four examples:

| ***Subject of Dream*** | ***Separate Areas*** | ***Metaphoric Link*** | ***Capacity*** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Intercourse with a dark woman | Hunting/sex | Skin colour/male act | To kill a black pig or cassowary |
| Cleaning cordyline leaves | Human/plant | Preparing male rear covering | To beget a son |
| Cleaning reeds | Human/plant | Preparing female rear covering | To beget a daughter |
| Being given a pearl shell | Animal/cultural | Curls around neck | To kill a constricting snake |

While these, and the 22 other examples Wagner gives, are standard ways of linking the dream experience with ability in real life, Wagner points out that these standard interpretations are not inflexible:

[56] Wagner, 1972, pp. 68-69.

The practice of dream interpretation allows improvisation, and here, too, the standardised formulas provide models. Specifically, the interpreter uses his skill in metaphorical construction to discover new hidden "meanings" in the content of a dream, along the lines of existing interpretative paradigms.[57]

While Wagner's explanation may be influenced, as Victor Turner suggests,[58] by the "symbolic system" mode of analysing symbols, he, like Meggitt, has given clear evidence of the rationality and meaningfulness of both the dream, and its means of interpretation, within the local culture. Thus, the dream's dynamic and motivational power for action within these Melanesian societies is abundantly clear.

### *Dreams and Myths*

Kenelm Burridge shows the close relationship between dreams and myths. They are both regarded as revelatory and truth bearing.[59] They are both "experienced, irrespective of particular intentions", and so are not regarded as the direct result of the will and purpose of man.[60] But Burridge particularly links dreams with what he calls the "myth-dream" of a people:

> As a concept, "myth-dream" dos not lend itself to precise definition. Nevertheless, myth-dreams exist, and they may be reduced to a series of themes, propositions and problems, which are found in myths, in dreams, in the half-lights of conversation, and in the emotional responses to a variety of actions and questions asked. Through this kind of intellectualisation, myth-dreams become "aspirations".[61]

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[57] Ibid., p. 70.
[58] Turner, V. W., 1975, p. 148; Turner cites Wagner as one of many scholars influenced by the theoretical approach to symbolism championed by David Schneider of the University of Chicago.
[59] Burridge, 1965, pp. 226 [quoted above at note 31] and 240; cf. 1960, p. 219.
[60] Ibid., p. 240.
[61] Ibid., p. 148.

In other words, a "myth-dream" is some basic aspiration or aspect of the worldview of a people, which focuses their hopes and desires; "a community day-dream, as it were".[62]

Burridge uses this "myth-dream" concept as a key to interpreting the power of dreams in a cargo cult. Insofar as the cargo dream stirs up, or seems to fulfil, basic desires of the "myth-dream", so it will carry effective power in the community:

We have seen something of the pragmatic nature of dreams in Tangu, and there is no evidence to show that the dream that triggers a cargo cult should be thought to be of more, or less, pragmatic value. A cargo dream takes place within a context set by the notions regarding dreams in general. Unlike everyday dreams, however, a cargo dream is not a private communication. It concerns the community. It is made public, and it finishes by being effective for all. It is effective, one may hazard, because it echoes the myth-dream.[63]

Burridge also hints that the myth-dream may be a causative, as well as an interpretative, factor in Tangu dreams: "The dreamer is, in fact, the vehicle of a collective dream – a communication for the direction and benefit of all, and not for the individual alone. It comes, and is acted upon, because the community concerned wants it to come, and wants to act upon it."[64]

### *Means of Ascertaining the Interpretation*

Some societies have standard ways for someone, troubled by a dream, to ascertain the interpretation. Meggitt's summary of the three ways, used by the Ipili, may be regarded as representative.[65] These people of the Pogera Valley may interpret the dream themselves. In that case, they will seek to verify the interpretation by some other form of

[62] Ibid.
[63] Burridge, 1960, p. 218.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Meggitt, 1957, p. 51.

divination, such as the flicking of an arrow into the ground, and, if it impales certain things, they have a standard meaning – e.g., an earthworm means death, while white tree moss means bearded old age. Or the dreamer may enlist the assistance of a diviner, who, for a fee of pork, will indicate which ghost needs to be placated by a pig offering. The third approach is to consult a medium, who, by contacting her "control" ghost, can confirm which ghost is troubling the dreamer, and how he or she should restore a right relationship – again, normally, through a pig offering.

Thus, at least in Ipili society, the methods of ascertaining a correct dream interpretation are closely interrelated with other aspects of divination.[66]

### *Validating Dream Interpretation*

Several of these writers also comment on the question of the validation of dream interpretation, and what happens when the expectation is not fulfilled, or the interpretation is manifestly wrong.

A tentative interpretation of a dream may be corrected, or confirmed, retrospectively. As new events come to pass, they may be seen as the key to explaining a previously puzzling dream.[67]

The fact that a particular interpretation proved wrong does not undermine the general belief in dreams, as Burridge shows clearly:

> The fact that sometimes a dream is misleading . . . does not detract from the general efficacy of dreams as guides to the future, and future activities. Such particular exceptions are of small importance when ranged against the dogma of a general truth. When a dream is not realised, it is considered to have been

[66] Stephen, 1980, shows the relation of dreams to other forms of divination, and to trance and possession states.
[67] Meggitt, 1962, p. 219.

> a trick: "*Bengemamakake*", say Tangu, "It is a trick. We are deceived."
>
> The information and direction, bequeathed through a dream, may be deceptive or misunderstood, but this confirms, rather than denies, that dreams can inform and direct. Tangu have sufficient evidence of the efficacy of dreams to support them in their contention that dreams are not experienced for nothing.[68]

Others attribute such wrong interpretations to the activity of deceptive spirits, or simply to the fallibility of the human interpreter, but, in both cases, the general validity of dreams is confirmed.[69]

## SUMMARY

In summarising this section on the place of dreams in traditional thought, we can note that anthropologists tend to draw attention to four possible functions of dreams in these societies:

- For some, like Meggitt, and Reay, the dream is seen as an expression of tensions, inherent in the social structure of the group;
- For some, they are also, and perhaps at the same time, a way of confirming the expected social behaviour;
- For others, like Wagner, they are an expression of the symbolism and metaphoric explanation, inherent in the cosmology of the people;
- For some, like Burridge, they can stimulate, reflect, and explain basic communal aspirations in a dynamic way.[70]

[68] Burridge, 1960, p. 181; cf. pp. 218-219; and 1954, p. 246.
[69] Firth, 1934, pp. 71-72, 74; Saville, 1926, p. 284.
[70] Stephen, 1980, pp. 31-32, 43, develops this emphasis of Burridge to describe dreams as a basic mechanism (along with trance and possession states, etc.) for cultural innovation.

Dreams have thus been motivational, explanatory, and deeply meaningful experiences of traditional society. The church must take seriously these aspects of the significance of dreams in its teaching and practice. We shall return to this, after considering the place of dreams in the encounter of traditional thought with the coming of the Christian gospel.

## DREAMS IN THE ENCOUNTER WITH CHRISTIANITY

As we turn to consider the place of dreams, in the encounter of traditional thought with Christianity, we note, firstly, the lack of documented study of dreams in the churches. Apart from the significant attention to dreams in the adjustment movements, or "cargo cults", and discussions, such as Firth's on the place of dreams in conversion experiences of chiefs in Tikopia (see below), there seems to have been very little serious attention to the place of dreams in the experience of Christians in Melanesia.

We shall draw attention to a number of classes of dreams, of which we are aware, and then make general comments on the characteristics of dreams in the growing church situation.

### SOME KINDS OF DREAMS OCCURRING IN THE CONTACT AND CHURCH SITUATION

#### *Dreams of Preparation for the New Age*

In some areas, dreams have been attested, which have created an expectation for a new age soon to arrive. Such dreams can be seen as belonging to the traditional "myth-dream"-type, expressing the deep longings of the community. As Lacey shows in his discussion of the way different groups responded to the coming of foreigners, dreams have been influential in deciding whether the strangers were welcomed as returning spirits, or whether some alternative method of adjusting to the changed situation was followed.[71]

[71] Lacey, 1978, pp. 194-197.

To give just two examples of this kind of preparatory dream, let us look at the way James Chalmers' arrival in Iokea in the Gulf of Papua in the 1880s, and the arrival of Baptist missionaries at Telefolmin in the1950s, were both anticipated by dreams.

Diane Langmore records an oral tradition about Chalmers' arrival at Iokea:

> Long ago a man dreamed about a white man. In that dream, a man said to him, sometime you will be watching on the beach and a man will come to you. He will bring you good tools to use for the garden, and to change your minds with. His skin will be different to yours. Then, in the morning, he got up from the bed and told the Eravo people about his dream. The man's name was Koete Lorou. The first one came to our village, we called his name Tamate . . . some of them said to one another, "This is not a true man, he is the spirit of a dead body." Then Koete said to these people, "No, this is the man I dreamed before." So that man made a good friend to Mr Tamate.[72]

In Telefolmin, it is claimed that, before there had been any contact with Europeans, a respected leader had a quite specific dream indicating that a light-skinned, different kind of person would appear carrying something in his hand, from which he instructed the people in a new way – the new way for which the people had yearned for many generations. When missionaries arrived, teaching from the Bible, they were welcomed as fulfilment of this dream.[73]

Similar preparatory dreams have been recorded for various parts of Africa.[74] Such expectations, though not always associated with dreams, have been influential in many "mass movement"-type conversions to Christianity in various parts of Melanesia. For

[72] Langmore, 1974, p. 58.
[73] Informant Wesani Iwoksim, while a student at CLTC.
[74] E.g., Davis, 1966, pp. 240-241; Cotterell, 1973, pp. 114-115.

example, the expectation of *Nabalankabalan,* or eternal life, was a major factor in the conversions among several groups of the Dani in the Baliem Valley of Irian Jaya.[75]

This class of dreams brings into focus the communal longings and "search for salvation" (to use Strelan's phrase[76]) of a people. It is an important index of their self- and communal-evaluation. We have already cited references to a number of records of dreams with a similar "preparation for the new-age" significance in initiating cargo cults.[77]

This kind of dream also highlights the question of the gospel of Christ, as the fulfilment of the heart-longings of men and women worldwide, and the question of the continuity, or discontinuity, between previous aspirations of Melanesian peoples and the gospel announcement of Christianity. These issues cannot be discussed further in this paper, but they represent the wider context for a Christian appraisal of dreams in Melanesia.

***Dreams Associated with Conversion***

The second kind of significant dream in the contact between traditional life and the Christian gospel is the dream, as a factor in a person's or group's conversion. This variety is closely linked to those we have just discussed. Again, however, there seems to be a minimum of documented information.

At the theological college, at which I previously worked for 15 years, students have often made reference to a significant dream as a contributory factor in testimonies about their conversions. It is a

[75] Cf. Hitt, 1962, pp. 216-223, for conversion of the Dani; and Richardson, 1977, pp. 154-157, for the impact of such expectations; cf. Strelan, 1977, pp. 14-15, for the New Age expectations in other parts of Irian Jaya. The early Pacific missionaries recognised the importance of such "Golden Age" expectations in their evangelism; see Hitchen, 1984, pp. 682-683, and the references cited.

[76] Strelan, 1977, pp. 68-70.

[77] See footnotes 25-30 above.

matter of regret that we have made no attempt to collate or document this information.

While it may be debated whether Tikopia can be properly included in Melanesia, or whether it is strictly Polynesian, since Firth's writings give special attention to the kind of dream we are considering, we shall discuss them here. In *Rank and Religion in Tikopia*, Raymond Firth shows that the experiences of dreams in conversions demonstrate that the conversion involved more than simply economic or social motivation:

> Such dreams were often remembered as vivid and dramatic, often disturbing, and often embodying figures of authority, who commended or threatened the candidate, and were interpreted as traditional gods, or ancestors, or representatives of the new order. Often the god, or ancestral spirit, reproached the dreamer for deserting his ancient faith. . . . So conversion, to the Tikopia, involved not merely an act of faith, and a change of a system of practice. It also might involve traffic with unseen powers, confrontation with them, argument between a person and his tutelary spirits, and a final agreement on their part to come to him no more. Yet, even such agreement did not mean always that they passed out of his life: some continued to molest the convert or his family. Thus, in symbolic form, the Tikopia had to work out the change of their religious allegiance. Such were the experiences, particularly of men, who held ritual office in the pagan religious system, or were, otherwise, in positions of some status.[78]

And again, later: "Empirically . . . such dreams . . . followed a fairly regular pattern . . . the 'conversion syndrome', as part of the solution process for the stresses involved in the process of religious change."[79]

[78] Firth, 1970, p. 325.
[79] Ibid, p. 391.

From the testimonies, I referred to above, it is clear that this Tikopian pattern has been repeated in many Melanesian situations. My colleague, Ross Weymouth, in his careful discussion of the factors involved in the conversion of the Gogodala in Western Province, documents the impact of one dream, involving a fearful vision of hell, and cited it as an example of many such dreams, which were influential, as the people discussed their response to the gospel.[80] Codrington, likewise, refers to powerful ghosts appearing to heathen in dreams to threaten the Christians, who desecrated their sacred places at Florida, in the Solomon Islands.[81]

Another more personal example of a dream being the means of the dreamer making a decisive break with a local custom, and thus taking a significant step along the pathway of conversion is recorded of the Vanuatuan, Lomai, and his decision to stop *kava* drinking.[82] Likewise, the crippled Malaitan, Foteware, is helped to a point of commitment through his dream of Jesus Christ.[83]

Sundkler has recorded many conversion-type dreams from Africa, and claims: "The importance of dreams, in the crisis of conversion, is well established from the experience of missions in Africa."[84] He has also shown that dreams are not only significant in turning from traditional religion to Christianity, but also in turning from a Christian "mission-church" to independent churches, such as the Zionist churches.[85] When, in Melanesia, the "mainline" denominations are concerned about

[80] Weymouth, 1978, p. 170.
[81] Codrington, 1891, p. 176.
[82] Paton, 1903, p. 76.
[83] Young, 1925, p. 230.
[84] Sundkler, 1961, p. 267. In this, the modern African churches, like those in Melanesia, are continuing a pattern commonly accepted in the 3rd century, as shown in the writings of Cyprian, Eusebius, and Jerome. See Kelsey, 1974, pp. 18, 121.
[85] Sundkler, 1964, pp. 66-67; 1976, p. 76; cf. Shorter 1978, pp. 282-283.

the attractions and loss of members to charismatic groups, this African experience may have salutary lessons.[86]

Thus, dreams, at conversion, are an indication of the depth of inward encounter and decision involved in the change of loyalty. They also reflect the role of dreams as an arena for resolving spiritual conflict, and for direct communication with spiritual forces. Whether we should expect dreams to continue to fulfil these functions within the church is an urgent issue for Melanesian Christianity today.

***Dreams Associated with a Call to Christian Ministry***

A common and important dream experience in Melanesian churches is the dream, calling a person to prepare for, or to move into, the ministry of the church.

Again, there is no documented study in Melanesia, comparable to those of Sundkler and Daneel on call-dreams in Africa.[87] The critical and cautious attitudes they found in some churches can be paralleled in Melanesia, as can the widely-accepted respect for the significance of such dreams. There is also a similarity in manifest content. I have heard testimonies of both the "bright-person-calling", and "climbing or struggling-to-the-top" imagery, in dreams, calling a person to equip for Christian ministry. But, to my knowledge, there has been no gathering or analysing of this kind of dream-call material in our Pacific churches. One would suspect that the influence of strong personalities, the ambition of the dreamer, the desire for reward, and compensation for frustration, which Daneel notes, could all be paralleled in Melanesia.

Among the theological students with whom I have worked, written testimonies on application papers sometimes refer to a dream as a major reason why they wish to train for the ministry. For example, one

[86] Cf. Oosterwal, 1973, pp. 41, etc., and 1975, for discussion of the challenge of messianic and new religious movements to the established churches.

[87] Sundkler, 1960, pp. 25-31; Daneel, 1971, pp. 139-167. Cf. Davis, 1966, pp. 166-167 (Ethiopia); Shorter, 1978, pp. 282-283 (Africa, generally).

student, after relating his varied work experience in teaching; in private enterprise, and as an officer in his provincial government, writes,

> Then, one night, the Lord spoke to me in a dream. I saw the Lord leading me in one hand to a shore, and He commanded me, "Go into the deep!" I knew the Lord had a plan for my life, therefore, when asked if I wanted to go to the Christian Leaders' Training College, I truly realised the path, into which the Lord was leading me.[88]

References to such dreams are more common in spoken testimonies, when students are relating how they came to College. They are more freely referred to in personal discussion between students, and with a little less freedom between students and staff. I would safely estimate that over a quarter of the more than 200 theological students, passing through the College in the decade of the 1970s, has had a significant dream in relation to their call to ministry. The willingness or reluctance to discuss such dreams can be directly attributed to the expected response of the hearers – it is expected that Westerners will be less sympathetic than fellow Melanesians.

Such "vocation dreams" fulfil a number of functions for Melanesian Christians. A dream of this kind confirms, and personalises, the individual's sense of call to Christian service. Where churches are rightly concerned to accept their corporate responsibility for selecting men and women for ministry, the call of the group, or group leaders, is both powerful and authoritative in setting a person aside for service. The dream plays a significant role in internalising the group's challenge. Thus, the dream is a strong motivational force for the individual.

Such a dream is also a sustaining and encouraging factor, when the trainee, or Christian worker, finds the going tough. In counselling students, who are struggling with personal or study difficulties, they

[88] CLTC, 1980.

have, at times, referred back to their initial call, and the associated dream, and have been stimulated by this reminder to keep going through the difficulties.

Two other aspects of such dreams are illustrated from an occasion, when, in a time of "revival" in one particular church area in 1976, a particular person was named in another person's dream as a definite candidate for a special training programme, proposed to follow through the enthusiasm of the revival. When, two years later, this person failed to meet the church leaders' entrance requirements for the course, there was considerable concern and ill-feeling. This shows both that such call dreams are not necessarily experienced by the individual concerned, and that the national church leaders, while respecting the "authority" of dreams, do not submit to them, without applying other necessary checks on their authenticity. In the case in point, the refusal showed up other deficiencies, which confirmed the person was not a suitable candidate at that point in time.

"Call-dreams" have a direct continuity with the "creative" type of dream, referred to earlier. As a means of challenging, and perhaps authorising, a person for specialised responsibility, on behalf of the community – be it church or village – the dream continues to play an important role.

***Dreams of Discernment or Divination***

We choose this double description for the next dream type, as they can be evaluated either positively or negatively, from a Christian point of view. We shall explore this more fully later. Here, we simply illustrate another kind of dream in use, openly or in secret, in Melanesia today.

Dreams are regarded as authoritative in *explaining misfortune or sickness*. A well-qualified and carefully-selected theological student had undertaken Bible training against considerable opposition from non-Christian relatives. Soon after commencing study, he began having severe headaches, which did not respond to medical treatment.

Despite personal counselling, special care, prayer and encouragement from the scriptures, by both staff and students, the condition grew steadily worse. He had to return home and discontinue his training. Soon after the headaches began, he had a dream, in which he saw one of the relatives, who had opposed his theological training, threatening to work sorcery against him if he did not return home and "straighten" obligations to his relatives. It took three months of further medical treatment in his home area, after sorting out the obligations, before the headaches disappeared. Without trying to explore all the other factors involved in such a situation, for this Christian young man, and for many of the other responsible church leaders involved, this dream was regarded as authoritative, and there could be no healing until its directives were obeyed. Dreams, at times of sickness, especially if apparently spontaneous, are commonly accepted as important for diagnosis and treatment.

Another kind of "dream of discernment", sometimes linked with other forms of immediate "prophetic revelation", has occurred in *revival movements* among Papua New Guinea Highland churches. Some people have been "gifted" with the ability, through dreams or prophecy, to discern another person's wrongdoings. When this dream information has been made known, it has led to confession and restitution. Local Christians sometimes claim this ability is a spiritual gift, directly comparable to the "gift of knowledge", referred to in the New Testament spiritual gifts, listed in 1 Cor 12. When discussing with sincere Christians the way such a "gift" could be abused, they showed a clear grasp of the dangers of false accusation, the danger of interposing another mediator between the individual and Christ, and the temptation to use such an ability for monetary gain, and they maintained they were constantly on their guard against such dangers. They were also deeply concerned about the responsibility resting on them to use such ability appropriately for the pastoral care of others. They were concerned that, if they had been made aware of some hindrance or evil in another person's life, then they would be at fault to neglect this information, and not to warn and help the person

concerned. In other words, while being sensitive to the possibility of deception in such a practice, they regarded it as a genuine form of revelation, to be administered in love, with deep concern for the spiritual well-being of those involved.

One particularly significant, continuing use of divinatory-type dreams of a predictive nature is in the interesting attempt by one Lutheran congregation in the Enga Province to *Christianise their traditional initiation ceremony* (*Sangai*) for young men. The local evangelist, Masoo, who has been largely responsible for this innovation of a functional substitute for the traditional rite, takes a pragmatic approach to the continuing use of dreams. When asked why they continued the dream practice,

> Masoo's one-line response was, in essence, dreams work, so we keep them. He told how, in the previous *Sangai*, one of the youth had correctly predicted the death of a man, and, also, they had correctly dreamed the outcome of the last council elections. The reaction was that dreams tell the truth, they don't lie, so they retain a place in our *Sangai* rite.[89]

It is not difficult to see the direct continuity between those dreams, in the traditional religions, described above, as "explanatory or divinatory", and these dreams of discernment or divination. One of the questions, this raises, is whether this continuity leads to syncretism, or whether a genuinely Christian understanding and use is being made of the traditional phenomenon.

This kind of dream usage shows the importance for Melanesian churches of a Christian "theology" of both dreams, specifically, and of "revelation" and "divination", more broadly. We shall return to these issues below.

[89] Teske, 1978, p. 93.

***Revelatory Dreams – Especially in Revival Movements***

By way of introduction to this next group of dreams, the reader will have noticed there is something of a continuum from each of these kinds of dreams to the next, with no clear dividing point between them. For example, the last "divinatory" examples could as well have been called "revelatory". While, theologically, the distinction between revelation and divination is important, in practice, it is often difficult to distinguish the two functions in dreams. A note on the historical interrelationship of some revival movements in Melanesia in the 1970s may also be helpful. "Revivals", in the sense used by Harold W. Turner, as renewal movements within existing churches, have occurred repeatedly in many parts of Melanesia.[90]

Hilliard shows how the "Danielite" movement on Pentecost, New Hebrides, in the 1930s, which was fuelled, in part, by dream revelations, began as a revival movement.[91] If handled more sensitively by the church authorities, it may well have stimulated church life in positive ways. Henkelman and Strelan discuss such a movement on Karkar Island in the early 1940s.[92] Rob Robin, one-time regional psychologist for the Highlands Region of the Public Services Commission of Papua New Guinea, claimed, at a sadly-biased, but influential, public seminar in Port Moresby in January, 1979, to have documented 20 different revivalist movements in the Southern Highlands alone since 1964.[93] His definition of "revivals" would probably include the whole spectrum of Turner's "New Religious Movements".[94]

One significant group of genuine revival movements was associated with movements in the Solomon Islands in 1970 (although these, in

[90] Turner, H. W., 1978, p. 8.
[91] Hilliard, 1978, pp. 285-287.
[92] Henkelman, 1942; Strelan, 1977, pp. 27-28.
[93] Swincer, 1979, p. 5; Robin, 1979, pp. 2-3. The report, referred to in Robin's introductory paper, was not made public at the time, nor was it made available to the churches concerned.
[94] Turner, H. W., 1978, pp. 7-8.

turn, have historical roots reaching back at least to 1935-1936, as Alison Griffiths shows).[95] Following the continuing spiritual renewal in South Seas Evangelical church (SSEC) congregations in the Solomons in 1970-1971, a team of their pastors visited Papua New Guinea in 1972, travelling widely among churches associated with the Evangelical Alliance of the South Pacific Islands. Some of this group joined other SSEC pastors in attending a six-month Senior Pastors' course at the Christian Leaders' Training College of PNG, from July to December, 1973. A second group of SSEC pastors from the Solomons attended a similar course from February to June, 1975. There are direct links between the visits of these Solomon Islanders and, at least, the following documented revivals around that time: among SSEC churches in the East Sepik Province in 1972 and 1976;[96] among Evangelical Church of Papua congregations in the Southern Highlands Province at Kutubu, Orokana, Erave, and Tari during 1974-1976;[97] among Baptist churches in the Baiyer, Lumusa, Lapalama, and Kompiam areas of the Kyaka- and Sau-speaking Engas from 1973-1975,[98] and again from 1978-1980; among Christian Brethren churches in the Koroba area of the Southern Highlands Province during 1975-1976;[99] and among Baptist churches in the Telefolmin and Oksapmin areas of what was then the West Sepik Province during 1978-1979. Sanders documents incidents from a number of these pre-1975 movements.[100] An integrated definitive history of these movements still needs to be written.[101] During the same period, a number of other revival movements occurred (e.g., among United church congregations on Bougainville), which had no direct links with this wave of influence from the Solomon Islands. All of this sequence of movements pre-

[95] Griffiths, 1977, pp. 106-116, 169-204.
[96] Ibid., pp. 199-204.
[97] Robin, 1979, refers to some events, indirectly connected with these movements.
[98] Kale, 1975; Arndell, 1973.
[99] Fountain, 1975.
[100] Sanders, 1978, pp. 113-120.
[101] Orr, 1976, pp. 197ff, does not refer to mainland PNG movements as recent as these, but does refer to the Solomon Islands precedents. Price, 1979, pp. 400-401, refers to the PNG movements only in passing.

dated the more widely-known movements, related to visits by international Pentecostal missionaries in the 1990s.[102]

Within most, if not all, of these revival movements, dreams played a significant part, along with other outward evidences of spiritual life and power. Visions, signs in natural phenomena, physical shaking, speaking in tongues, prophetic utterances, and well-attested cases of healings have commonly occurred. But, those involved, regarded these phenomena as the peripheral evidences, and saw the core of the movements' vitality in the confession and public restitution for wrongs done in the community; the reconciliation of long-standing disputes; the new sincerity and joy in worship; and the new willingness to become involved in spontaneous Christian service to those beyond their immediate tribal communities. Thus, dreams featured as one aspect of movements, which brought in-depth communal transformation.

Again, we can note a variety of kinds of dreams in these revival movements. I group them all under the general heading of "revelatory dreams". There have been continuing examples of the *discerning* or *divinatory* dream, to which we have already referred. Griffiths records the example of a senior policeman, who, after wrongly convicting a man of stealing, had a dream, in which the name, face, and house of the true culprit were revealed to him. The guilty man confessed, and the innocent man was released, when the policeman followed through on his dream message.[103] We referred, above, to similar discernment dreams among the Kyaka Enga during revivals in the early 1980s.

*Encouragement* or *warning* dreams were also commonly attested. Kale saw a woman's dream, concerning her lack of faith, as the spark for the Kyaka Enga movement in 1973.[104] Henkelman had described dreams, warning about sin and half-heartedness, and dreams of encouragement

[102] Ernst, 1994.
[103] Griffiths, 1977, pp. 182-183.
[104] Kale, 1975, pp. 1 and 21, for similar examples.

to persevere in the Karkar movement.[105] Such dreams have often been the catalyst to change a sceptical critic, or neutral observer, of these movements, into an active participant, as in the case of David Irofanua in the Solomons.[106]

Another group of dreams could be described as *prophetic*, or claiming to reveal information about coming judgments or physical catastrophes, or about the return of Christ. The leaders of these movements have commonly shown scepticism about such dreams, and have quickly adopted procedures for testing their validity, along the lines summarised by Kale:

> There was a method for testing the validity of dreams, which included discussing it with others, after having thought about the meaning, oneself. If the dream was consistent with biblical teaching, it was regarded as relevant. If there was no resemblance with the Bible view, it was discounted.[107]

Another dream category, in these 1970s revivals, was dreams *revealing new songs or hymns*. Kale gives examples in an Appendix.[108] Likewise, in the Solomons, in the Koroba area, and in movements in the Evangelical Church of Papua Highland congregations, the singing of songs composed in a dream was a spontaneous and lasting feature. Again, we can note a direct continuity between these and the dream songs referred to by Teske, occurring in traditional initiation practice, but with appropriate transformation of content.[109]

The final group in these revival dreams could be described as those *giving an imperative for decision.* While the same could be said for many in the earlier categories, some dreams have particularly brought the individual or group to a point of decision and action, in the face of

[105] Henkelman, 1942, p. 3.
[106] Griffiths, 1977, pp. 184-185.
[107] Kale, 1975, p. 21.
[108] Kale, 1975, Appendix: pp. 1-4.
[109] Teske, 1978, p. 87.

uncertainty about what to do. Though not in a revival situation, a good example of such a dream was shared with me by a high school student, who had a vivid dream, in which he was involved in starting up a lighting generator in the midst of a storm, together with the appearance of a radiant person in bright clothing. For him, this brought the confirmation and stimulus necessary to start a Christian Bible study group in his high school in the face of considerable opposition and indifference.

In summary, we have seen various categories of dreams occurring in missionary contact and regular church-life situations in Melanesia. We have grouped them under these different categories:

- Preparation-for-the-new-age dreams;
- Conversion dreams;
- Call-to-ministry dreams;
- Discerning or divinatory dreams; and
- Revelatory dreams, in revival situations.[110]

To conclude this aspect of our study, we shall summarise leading characteristics of these categories of dreams, and their significance in Melanesian church life.

## SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF DREAMS IN THE MELANESIAN CHURCH SITUATION

Without repeating the various obvious implications of the above examples, we would draw attention to the following features.

### *Dreams are Treated with Respect, and are Regarded as Having an Inherent Authority*

The traditional reverence, and even awe, of dreams has not been lost in the new age of the church. One senses a reluctance to question, or

[110] Cf. Shorter, 1978, pp. 282-283; and Mbiti, 1976, pp. 44-47, for African parallels.

doubt, the authority of a vivid dream. This authority is assumed as a given by a majority of Christians in Melanesia.

### *Dreams Stir Up a Sense of Relevance, Immediacy, and Spontaneity in Church Life*

Melanesian Christians expect their faith and worship to touch and permeate the central aspects of daily life. Dreams do this in a way some church rituals and formal practices seldom do. Dreams are seen as an active, present intervention by God. They create the interest and excitement, which accompany direct encounter with spiritual reality.

### *Dreams Personalise Religious Experience and Transcend Significant Divisions in Church Life*

Sundkler points out that, in some African Zionist churches, the dream balances the strong communal emphasis of African values with a distinctly-personal involvement: "The dream experience is the individualised and interiorised continuation and adaptation of corporate worship. Here is, of course, 'spirituality' in Zulu or Swazi Zion, in that inner, more-luminous world of the dream."[111]

In Melanesia, this personalising of spiritual experience, through the dream, resolves a number of potential areas of tension. Especially, in the revival movements, the dream experience is not restricted to any clerical or special class of Christian. Here is a way in which any Christian can have direct contact with God. In societies, which have traditionally avoided role specialisation, but which have become subject to much role specialisation, in their encounter with the West, the dream is one way the least to the greatest in the church are on an equal footing. Thus, self-respect, and a personal sense of value, have been restored, in some cases, by the experiencing of dreams.

Kale's observations about the central role of women in the revival movements could be taken further in regard to dreams.[112] We could

[111] Sundlker, 1974, p. I:1.
[112] Kale, 1975, pp. 6-7.

suggest that, through dreams, those on the periphery of social life can find a way of contributing meaningfully in the group.[113]

Intergenerational tension areas have been resolved, or reversed, through dreams. There have often been tensions in Melanesian churches between the older, less-educated church leaders and the younger, biblically-literate graduates of theological and Bible colleges. But dreams are no respecters of persons, or of age. Educated and uneducated, literate and illiterate, old and young, all have equal access to dreams – and to God through dreams. There is no doubt that, in the revivals in the Solomons, and in the Baiyer and Koroba areas, the older and less-educated have rediscovered a sense of personal value, and of the significance of their particular contributions to church life through their dream insights.

The similar distinction between any apparently-superior experience, or knowledge, of expatriate Christians, when compared with local believers, also soon dissolves when God is heard speaking through the local person's dreams. The 1970s revivals, referred to above, came at significant points during the transfer of leadership and responsibility from mission and missionary control to national leaders, and dreams contributed new levels of encouragement and assurance in the transition.

### *Melanesian Christians Recognise that Dreams Need to be Evaluated and are not Necessarily Self-authenticating*

Some missionary writers have recognised the need to reconsider the common, modern Western scepticism towards dreams.[114] But, more often, Western missionaries conveyed, either by direct teaching, or by attitude, that dreams are not to be relied upon in church life.[115] The

[113] Gunson, 1973, makes this point in reference to the "Redcoat" movement in Tonga. Others make similar points regarding other phenomena, such as spirit-possession: cf. Walker, 1971.

[114] Strelan, 1977, p. 94; Osborne, 1970, p. 14.

[115] Cf., e.g., the implications of comments or teachings, such as those recorded in Teske, 1978, p. 93; Henkelman, 1942, p. 16, etc. See Shorter, 1978, p. 283, on

Lutheran church "Statement of Faith to Correct False Ideas about Cargo", circulated before 1964, says categorically in Point 7:

> Sometimes a person says: I have heard the voice of an angel; or he says that a message came to him on the wind, and he heard it when he was praying; or he says that, in a dream, he received a prophetic message, or that he communicated with a spirit. This is a trick of Satan himself.[116]

Some Melanesian Christians may also reject dreams as a valid means of communication from God. Sundkler shows that some East African revival adherents rejected dreams as demonic.[117] But a much more common Christian Melanesian attitude is a willing acceptance of dreams as valid and meaningful communication from God. But, at the same time, dreams demand testing and evaluating against other criteria. The consensus of the church, and the teaching of the scriptures, are the commonly-accepted criteria for such dream assessment.[118]

As we have already shown in our discussion of Malinowski and Firth, Melanesians have always been sensitive to evil, magic forces, and deceptive spirits, working through dreams.[119] This cautious evaluation has not only been retained, but also increased, as Christian leaders have studied the scriptures for themselves. But such study has also confirmed the potential validity of dreams as a means by which God has regularly communicated with His people.

Thus, Melanesian Christians today do not just accept, nor just reject, dreams. They recognise the importance of both respecting the potential

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missionary attitudes in Africa. Hitchen, 1984, p. 695, refers to differing opinions between missionaries about dreams in the West Indies as long ago as the 1830s and 1840s.

[116] Cited in Strelan, 1977, p. 93.

[117] Sundkler, 1960, pp. 25-26.

[118] Mbiti's suggestions 7 and 8, in Mbiti, 1976, p. 45, are often applied in Melanesia as well.

[119] Malinowski, 1932, pp. 330, 332; Firth, 1934, pp. 71-72.

value and evaluating the actual authenticity of any dream. This careful evaluative approach is to be encouraged through continuing biblical and theological reflection on dreams, and their place in our churches.

### *There is Both Continuity and Discontinuity Between Traditional and Christian Attitudes and Practice Regarding Dreams*

Another of Mbiti's comments on Christian attitudes to dreams in Africa can be applied directly to the Melanesian scene:

> The fact that dreams have a recorded (but not doctrinal) prominence in the Bible, legitimises their value and place among African Christians. The fact, too, that dreams have importance in African traditional life provides for a high degree of continuity between the traditional and the biblical experiences of dreams. This makes it almost compulsory for Christians to dream, and take dreams seriously, in order to be true to the biblical witness concerning this experience of man (sic).[120]

## CONCLUSION

We have shown that each of the categories of dreams found in the churches has a parallel in traditional Melanesian religious experience. If religion is a true experience of the inner depths of a society's life and culture, it would be strange if this were not true in Melanesia. But, at the same time, our churches are aware of differences, tensions, and dangers in just taking over into the church, unchanged, the old attitudes to dreams. This awareness highlights the importance of ongoing discussion of the issues raised in this paper, and calls for serious theological and biblical work to develop a well-rounded, contextualised theology of dreams, and further guidelines for their appropriate use within the church, such as Matthew Kelty hinted at, back in 1977, and, towards which, Stillwell took another step in 1986.[121]

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[120] Mbiti, 1976, p. 46.

[121] Kelty, 1977, pp. 7-12; Stillwell, 1986.

I conclude by suggesting that some further steps could be to restate the significance of Jeremiah's warnings about the misuse of dreams among God's people (Jer 23), but to move positively beyond the warnings to seeing Joel's promises (Joel 2) fulfilled, as they were at Pentecost (Acts 2), as authorising both the expectation and reality of dreams as a feature of the work of the Holy Spirit in the current church age; and, therefore, the New Testament guidance for proper use of spiritual gifts (as summarised, for instance, in 1 Cor 12-14) as the proper place from which to continue formulating our applied biblical theology of dreams for Melanesia today.

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# FORMAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN VANUATU: HOPES, CHALLENGES, AND SOLUTIONS

**Kenneth Nehrbass**

*Kenneth Nehrbass, Ph.D. (Biola University) is an anthropology and translation consultant with Summer Institute of Linguistics in Vanuatu. In addition to advising the translation of the New Testament into a language on Tanna Island, he teaches courses at various theological institutions in Vanuatu. He is the author of "Mixers, Transplanters, Contextualisers, and Separators: Four Approaches Towards Gospel and Kastom in Vanuatu" (forthcoming: Pasadena CA: William Carey Library). Contact him at nehrbass@wbt.org.*

## INTRODUCTION

Ni-Vanuatu speak of Christianity as "daylight", in contrast to the animistic ways of their ancestors, who lived in "too dark". Daylight is a time when the church brought political stability, knowledge, and participation in the wider world, whereas "too dark" was a period of isolation, ignorance, and cannibalism. While traditional ecclesiastical metaphors, such as "the body of Christ" or "the herald of good news", are meaningful to ni-Vanuatu, they often describe the church by using these other images of daylight, development, or the bearer of superior *save* (knowledge, power, ability). For Melanesians, the church has been crucial as an agent of cultural transformation, bringing education, hospitals, economic development, and empowerment.

Since the church has been engaged in so many "this-worldly" pursuits in Melanesia, stakeholders may be unclear about the purpose of theological education. Is it a means towards community development, and empowering leaders? Is it about instilling denominational doctrine?

Is it about transmitting the content of the Bible, and getting people saved?

There are numerous TE (theological education) institutions throughout Melanesia, and just as numerous (sometimes-contradictory) ideas about what TE should accomplish. Some see it as a means for asserting agency, or achieving political independence. Writing about the Presbyterian Training Institute in Vanuatu, Ian Smith argued that "education should lead to self-awareness, which, in turn, will lead to liberation" (1991, p. 57). Smith showed that this goal was realised in Vanuatu precisely because the Presbyterian and Anglican churches led the way to political independence. Their ministers were the cream of the educational crop, having benefited from their churches' rigorous training institutions. Pacific Islanders, being suspicious of secular government leaders, have argued that the church should raise up leaders of integrity from within their own ranks to bring about justice, improve the standard of living, and yet shield people from succumbing to capitalism (Siwatabau, 2002, pp. 16, 20). Others have suggested that TE must help people in the Pacific deal with globalisation, without becoming spiritually impoverished (SPATS, 2000). Evangelicals in Melanesia, embracing a more Christocentric worldview, envision TE as a means for inviting students to make Christ Lord of their lives, to know the word of God, to develop a regular prayer life, to be part of a regular church fellowship, and to witness and serve others (Daimoi, 1989).

These divergent views of TE have been emerging in Melanesia for decades; however, little has been written about the history, hopes, challenges, and strategies for TE in Vanuatu. Theses have been written, describing how the ni-Vanuatu church has engaged in "ordinary" education in the country (Campbell, 1974; John, 1973; Smith, 1991), but no study has focused specifically on formal theological education. This paper shows how stakeholders at institutions in Vanuatu define the goal of formal theological education. It also describes the challenges, which stakeholders face in achieving

those goals, and reports on solutions they are enacting to mitigate those obstacles.

To perform this research, I interviewed 18 faculty members and students (both current and matriculated) at three theological schools: one trains laymen in a rural village; another trains pastors in the capital city; and the third works at a well-established mainline college in a rural setting. Below, I give a brief overview of the history of Christian missions and theological education in Vanuatu. I then report on my methodology in the study, and present the research questions that guided the interviews. Next, I analyse the participants' responses about their goals and challenges for TE. Lastly, I show how these institutions are trying to mitigate those problems, in order to become more effective in the 21st century.

## HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN VANUATU

The establishment of Christianity in Vanuatu followed a pattern similar to the rest of Melanesia: The gospel, which was heralded by expatriate missionaries in the middle of the 19th century, became well-established at the turn of the 20th century, went into serious remission, because of nativistic movements and cargo cults around World War II, and then enjoyed a resurgence as the church became enculturated, often resulting in syncretistic movements (Nehrbass, 2010, pp. 147-182; cf. Whiteman, 1983, pp. 274ff).

Today, more than 94 percent of ni-Vanuatu identify with the Christian church (Mandrick, and Johnstone, 2011), while maintaining beliefs about their *kastom* (traditional) cosmology, and engaging in animistic rituals, such as shamanism, *kleva* (divination or clairvoyance), and imitative magic (e.g., to produce rain or good crops). The church is respected by most, and Christians have enjoyed a great deal of religious freedom, but it has been difficult for church leaders to bring people out of animism into a truly contextualised faith.

In addition to the well-established mainline churches, in the past three decades, scores of Christian denominations, such as the Neil Thomas Ministry (NTM), Foursquare church, Assemblies of God (AOG), Apostolic, and Christian Outreach Centre (COC), have taken root, as well as cults, such as the Latter-day Saints (LDS) and Jehovah's Witnesses (JW).[1] Additionally, Baha'i and Islam are also establishing a presence. While the era has passed where the church was the only avenue for people to receive an education in Melanesia, it is more pressing, now than ever, for islanders to receive quality theological education, which is biblically grounded, so that they can sift through competing worldviews.

## HIGHER EDUCATION IN VANUATU

About 90 percent of Vanuatu's population are engaged in subsistence farming, making formal education out of their reach. However, urbanites, who seek jobs in tourism, the business sector, or the government, typically receive tertiary training. There are a handful of tertiary educational options within the country for them to do so: the University of the South Pacific (USP), various teacher-training colleges, and the Institute de Technologie (INTV). The brightest students desire, or are recruited, to complete their education at more-prestigious institutions overseas. Since many use their tertiary education as a stepping stone for further education overseas, accreditation becomes essential to ensure cross-crediting (Crocombe, and Crocombe, 1994, p. 96). Tertiary education in Vanuatu presumes that the brightest students will complete their studies elsewhere.

In the first half of the 20th century, the Presbyterian church's educational system was viewed as cutting edge, since it produced the nation's most qualified graduates. In recent decades, however, church leaders have noticed that their formal educational institutions have lost that footing, and are not keeping up with the times. Malcolm Campbell

[1] The Seventh-day Adventist church (SDA) came much earlier – as early as 1930, in some of the islands in Vanuatu.

(1974), a long-time administrator at the ministerial training institution for the Presbyterian church, argued that the regress was the result of the institution spreading itself too thin. It was trying to offer too many educational tracks, rather than focusing on what it did best: training teachers and pastors. Whatever the reason for the shift, government schools are now seen as prestigious, while Christian institutions are considered second-rate by faculty and students. One principal lamented, "There's a gap between what USP produces, and us. The government gets highly-educated people, and we get the leftovers from the secondary schools. We want a university . . . we need to catch up." As I show below, stakeholders are planning to do just that.

## FORMAL THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS IN VANUATU

There are two large Protestant formal TE institutions in Vanuatu: Joy Bible Institute (JBI) in Port Vila, and Talua Ministry Training Centre (Talua) on Espiritu Santo. The Anglican church has recently opened a training centre in Vanua Lava, where the AOG church has a rural Bible institute. The Presbyterian church also has some rural training centres on Malekula, Tanna, Epi, and North Efate. The French Protestant church has a rural training centre on Espiritu Santo. For a short time, the Foursquare church maintained a Bible college on Tanna. Many of the other Protestant denominations also run periodic TE courses on the outer islands, as they secure funding and personnel to do so. In this study, I have limited my research to JBI, Talua, and SIPBC, but I believe the results are representative of stakeholders in other institutions.

When the Assemblies of God began planting churches in Vanuatu, pastors were sent to the South Pacific Bible College in Suva, Fiji, for their theological education. As the denominational leadership saw a need for an institution within the country, they opened Joy Bible Institute in 1979. The school is located in the nation's capital, but most students live on campus, and do not need to work, since they receive scholarships to offset the tuition costs. The school has the infrastructure for expanding significantly, however, the enrolment

remains at around 20, and there are only two full-time teachers, plus some administrators. Students study for three years to receive a theology diploma.

Talua was only established in 1986, but its roots go back to 1895, when the Presbyterian church set up the Teachers' Training Institute (TTI). The name implies the school was only for training teachers, but "there was very little 'teacher training' in the modern sense. The academic programme was centred around Bible and Christian theology" (Campbell, 1974, p. 127). "The purpose was to produce faith and religious commitment" (p. 109). In 1960, TTI's name was changed to Tangoa Training Institute, to accommodate the fact that TTI was now training ministers (Smith, 1991, p. 78). Aulua Theological Training Centre on Malekula Island merged with TTI in 1986, and the school moved to mainland Espiritu Santo to form Talua Ministry Training Centre. Today, it offers a three-year diploma in theology, and a B.Min.

In the 1990s, the Presbyterian church of Vanuatu (PCV) encouraged presbyteries to become proactive in the theological education of their lay people on the outer islands. The Southern Islands presbytery explored possible site locations throughout the five islands in Tafea province, and sought out a potential principal for a Bible College. They eventually decided to establish the school in a remote village called Enafa, on Tanna. The school offers a two-year, lay-leader training course, a one-year missionary course. Short seminars are also held regularly for laypeople.

The future of these three institutions looks bright: the enrolments are stable, the faculty have positive attitudes about the schools. They face challenges in reaching their goals, but they are strategising about how to overcome those hurdles, as I show below.

## METHODOLOGY OF THIS STUDY

My research methodology for this study was based on the qualitative techniques for developing a grounded theory (GT), described by Charmaz (2005), and Strauss and Corbin (1990; 1998). I participated in theological education at the three institutions in the study, performed interviews, selected the data, which seemed most salient, and, finally, put the data into general categories, which summarise the goals, challenges, and solutions that stakeholders described.

I guided my interviews with four open-ended questions:

1. What is/was your goal in studying/teaching at a theological school?
2. Does the school meet those goals?
3. What are the challenges to meeting those goals?
4. What is the school doing to mitigate those challenges?

While the responses were multi-faceted, there was a great deal of homogeneity in how stakeholders perceive their TE institutions.[2] I have summarised their responses in this essay.

## THE GOAL

As church leaders throughout Melanesia are developing their particular theologies of TE, I wanted to discover how faculty and students at Vanuatu's TE institutions define the goal of TE for themselves. It turns out that faculty and students agree that their primary goal is transformation. As I show, below, they want their schools to teach the Bible so the next generation of disciples can know Christ, live godly lives, and make Christ known.

[2] The responses were so homogenous, in fact, that, after six or seven interviews, I reached "theoretical saturation". That is, I was not hearing anything particularly new from the responses.

## WHAT THE FACULTY WANT

When I interviewed faculty about their goals for TE, the most common response was that their institutions should be turning people into disciples of Christ. Faculty members almost unanimously emphasise discipleship over scholarship or book learning. They want their students to model the Christian life. Some indicators of an exemplary Christian life included: practising the spiritual disciplines of fasting and prayer, and refraining from alcohol, smoking, and kava. This emphasis on discipleship indicates that the primary task of TE is seen not as transmitting doctrine, but, rather, spiritual formation. The academic dean at one school said the goal was to "send out students with proper knowledge of the word of God, so they can expound the Bible in its proper context, and live a life worthy of the calling".

A second, but related, goal is to send out a ministerial workforce that will change the world, preach, and combat heresy. An expatriate, working at one institution, said that formal TE is necessary to achieve this, since exegesis and apologetics require high-level critical thinking skills, which lay people in Vanuatu do not acquire without tertiary education.

Thirdly, since TE institutions are funded and governed by denominational bodies, the faculty sees it as a priority to work within the framework of the denominational requirements, and to pay attention to the standards of their accrediting body.

On a fourth point, faculty are divided. Some desire their institutions to be sufficient enough that students would not need to go out of the country for additional training. They want to bring their institutions up to international university status, so that they may be competitive options, compared to other institutions in the Pacific (participants specifically mentioned schools in PNG, the Philippines, and Fiji). On the other hand, some faculty believe their best bet is simply to prepare students to complete their higher education overseas. Many students agree with this plan, since Melanesians, who have studied in another

country achieve a status, which cannot be achieved by staying within Vanuatu. Whether or not faculty expect their TE institution to become the final step in people's education, most want their institution to keep up with the times, and be taken seriously in the global community.

Lastly, it is notable that faculty at the three institutions, where I interviewed, are endeavouring to make their schools more interdenominational, not only to increase the student intake (and thereby ensure the viability of the school in the future), but also to be more relevant to a larger audience. This interest in ecumenism seems to be based on the fact that faculty are not as focused on their institution, or denomination, in and of itself, rather, they see their institution as a means of achieving their ultimate goal of making disciples.

## WHAT THE STUDENTS WANT

As could be expected, students were a bit more myopic than the faculty, in their responses to my research questions. They focused more on how the school could meet their personal goals, rather than what the school's goals should be for equipping the nation. For instance, when I asked Julie[3] what the purpose of TE was, she said it helped her in her youth-ministry work. This is highly practical and valuable, but is significantly less comprehensive than the response of faculty members, who saw the goal as raising up a generation of disciples, who could preach Christ, live exemplary lives, and combat heresy.

While faculty fear that students only come to TE institutions for a "piece of paper" – to get a certificate, and, hopefully, a better job – none of the participating students said the diploma or degree was their goal. They wanted to be trained to do God's work. As one student said, "Theological education should help those of us who have a calling to preach and teach, to help, to preach in a way that's relevant, to help people know Christ and honour Him." Most students in TE will be

[3] Names of participants have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

preaching and ministering. They want practical training. Some, in fact, had a strong calling to ministry, and see TE as necessary preparation. Pastor Sonia had a Macedonian call to the ministry. She dreamt that a man asked her to come lead his church, and handed her the Bible with John 15:16, "You did not choose Me, I chose you." Interestingly, she said that, a year after this calling, she was converted, and began pastoral studies.

Sonia's call was rather personal. On the other hand, since Vanuatu is a group-oriented culture, many students end up in TE at the behest of the village elders, regardless of personal desires, or a sense of calling. There are many anecdotes about young men, who were sent to TE institutions by their village for personal reform. One man I interviewed was sent away to a training institution so his wife would have a break from his physical abuse. Fortunately, he was converted at the institution, and experienced personal reform, as the village elders had intended.

Most students said that TE should give them the tools to accurately handle the word of truth. This may seem obvious, or even trite, but it is also impressive, because it means the nation's future elders and pastors are placing a premium on the Bible, and it indicates that they place "this-worldly" goals, such as development or empowerment, beneath the Christocentric goals. The emphasis on God's word and practical mission, as the primary purpose of education, is in line with Talua's goals for Vanuatu more than 100 years ago. "The emphasis on the whole program was biblical" (Campbell, 1974, p. 109). Campbell argued that the sentiment that "academic excellence in secular studies was never a goal" has persisted at Talua from the beginning, for better, or for worse (ibid).

Related to the goal of knowing God's word better, students' second-most articulated desire is that TE will help them combat false teaching and cults. They recognise that this will involve, not only knowledge of

the Bible, but of apologetics, critical thinking skills, and exposure to what the new religious movements are teaching.

Finally, students (especially urban ones) feel that TE is necessary to lend credibility to their position in the church. Pastor Carlos said that those with only diplomas are preaching below the education level of the congregation. "Congregants can go get college training, or earn university degrees, so the pastors need to keep up with the times. . . . It's the educated who will influence society." Formal TE in Vanuatu is, in part, anyway, about achieving the status necessary for making a difference.

## WHAT THEY ARE DOING RIGHT

When I asked stakeholders what actions they have been successfully taking to achieve these goals, most of them responded that they were teaching the Bible effectively, offering ample opportunities for practical implementation of the skills they've learned, charging reasonable fees, and becoming more interdenominational. I expand on each of these below.

### *Teaching the Bible*

The curriculum at each of the three institutions I researched is heavy on biblical content, exegesis, and doctrine. The libraries at the two well-established schools are impressively up to date (and equally impressively well utilised). Students must write term papers, and take exams on the content of the Old and New Testaments. The Bible is central to TE in Vanuatu, and the schools are giving it prominence in their curriculum.

### *A Mentoring Relationship in a Practical Setting*

Graduates responded that the most-effective and enjoyable part of their theological education was the practical component. The schools are not only teaching content, but are also sending students into the field for up to a year (or longer) towards the end of their studies, as apprentice ministers. The fact that many graduates continue on in ministry after

matriculation is a testimony to the effectiveness of the mentoring and practical component.

### *Charging Reasonable Fees and Offering Scholarships*

While no institution would turn down offers for funding, faculty and students rarely see finances as a hindrance to their school achieving its goals. Fewer than half of the participants in this study even mentioned funding at all. Of those who did speak about funding, here is a summary of their impressions:

- The well-established denominational institutions rely heavily on scholarships, secured overseas, to offset tuition costs. Expatriate faculty receive their salaries from overseas donors. While these institutions are well established, they are certainly not self-reliant.

- Rural institutions are more self-reliant, since they have almost no running costs, no permanent buildings, and very low salaries. Unfortunately, this benefit of self-sufficiency comes at a cost. The extremely low budget means the quality of staff and curriculum is limited.

### *Partnering With Other Denominations*

Stakeholders were pleased to report that their interdenominational attitude is helping them achieve their goal of raising up disciples. Specifically, faculty said that, encouraging people from other denominations to attend to the school, increases the pool of applicants, which means the school can be more selective in the admission process. Also, this sort of interdenominational cooperation means that graduates may potentially minister at any number of denominations.

## CHALLENGES

Being situated in one of the world's poorest countries, one might expect stakeholders to list funding as one of their major obstacles to achieving their goals of TE in Vanuatu. However, as I mentioned above, funding

was barely on the radar for many participants in this study. Instead, the challenges were related to the intake of students, education level of the faculty, and feasibility of attaining accreditation standards.

### *Intake of Students*

Faculty mentioned three concerns about the quality of incoming students. Firstly, many lack a sense of calling. Secondly, students use TE as a stepping stone to a better career, or a last resort. Lastly, but probably most significant, since the nation's best students are recruited (or sent) to USP, or even overseas, incoming students at the TE institutions do not have the English, or critical thinking skills, necessary for performing higher-level exegesis, theology, and apologetics.

Faculty members' primary concern about the intake is the number of students who lack a calling to the ministry. One teacher lamented, "Many students won't use their education for the Lord – they are just taking up space here." Understandably, if faculty invest their lives in training ministers of the gospel, they want their students to be engaged in that work as well. The sense of a calling should also help students persevere through the three or four years of training. One student explained, "If you don't have a sense of call, you'll struggle to complete the program."

The lack of calling is part of a larger problem that one principal sees in some incoming students. "We aren't getting the young people we should be getting. . . . If schools were discipling their people before they ended up in Bible College, that would help them be prepared. We want to take disciples, who want to become pastors, but, instead, the school has to go back and explain the fundamentals of the faith to them."

Faculty are also concerned that students are using TE as a stepping stone, just as they would use any other formal educational opportunity in the country. An academic dean told me, "Some students come here when all other doors are shut to them." One student said, "Many want

to come, get a certificate, and then go work in a restaurant, hotel, or in the government." A teacher told me, "Theological education is seen as a last resort, when they can't get into any other school."

The degree to which this accusation is imagined or real is unclear, since TE institutions do not keep a record of how many graduates actually go on to serve in the ministry.[4] Interestingly, faculty at TTI noticed this trend back at the turn of the 20th century. Students were required to take a solemn oath that they would not use TTI as a stepping stone, but would become Presbyterian teachers themselves. Unfortunately, the oath "did not stop all those who were trained from taking up subsequent employment in other fields" (Campbell, 1974, p. 119).

Another challenge, related to the intake of students, is education level. Faculty said that many don't have the English, or other study skills, necessary to perform well in the school. Vanuatu's linguistic situation is unique, because it was a colony, simultaneously under both France and England. Half the population was educated in French, while the other half was educated in English. It is notable that all of the Protestant TE institutions are conducted in English. Protestant Francophones must go to nearby New Caledonia for formal TE training in a *lingua franca* they understand.

Since the goal is to disciple, rather than to have students achieve a bachelor's degree, it is acceptable to admit students with only a grade 8 education. There is no need to reject applicants, based on education level. As I mentioned, above, faculty would much rather turn away students, who show no interest in living a life for Christ, than students who have a lower education level. However, it is problematic to admit students from such varying education levels. The classroom will inevitably have students, who can barely read, sitting alongside students, who are at university level.

[4] It is also difficult to determine exactly what "serving in the ministry" entails.

### *Education of Staff*

The training institutes cannot become competitive at the international level unless the faculty have master's degrees or doctorates. Participants said that, when they attended training in PNG, Fiji, or the Philippines, their faculty came with a lifetime of ministry, and had advanced degrees. Many faculty at Vanuatu's institutions are young, and only have a B.Min.

Faculty want their institutions to be competitive, so they can be taken seriously in the global community. One principal told me,

> We need to train men and women, so they can go to the USA and Australia – where our partners are – and be heard. . . . We want to send our ministers to teach in other universities in other countries. We need to replace our staff with doctorates – with university people. . . . We have always been a receiving church, we want to be a sending church – part of God's mission worldwide.

The education level of the staff is a significant challenge to achieving this goal.

### *Accreditation*

Accreditation is bittersweet. It raises the standards, and lends credibility to the institution, but the standards can be irrelevant, or unrealistic, in a nation that is less developed than the nation where the accrediting body is established. One faculty member said, "They [the accrediting body] don't know our real needs. They haven't been here – they haven't seen how things are here!"

## SOLUTIONS

Stakeholders are aware of the above-mentioned challenges, and have been strategising about how to mitigate those obstacles. To summarise the main challenges, faculty wants their institutions to compete at an international level, so that their graduates will be taken seriously, and

may have a maximum impact for Christ, not only within the country, but throughout the world. However, a portion of the incoming students either lack a sense of calling to the ministry, do not intend to use their training as professional Christian ministers, or simply lack the educational background necessary for attaining the level of education that faculty and accrediting boards want to deliver.

To mitigate these problems, stakeholders at all three institutions believe that, if they can increase awareness of their school, they might draw from a larger pool of potential students. And, if they can limit their enrolment to only the most-serious disciples, those with a calling, or those with at least a high-school education, their student intake would be substantially enhanced.

***Awareness***

Stakeholders at the TE institutions in this study would like to tell communities and churches, "Send us your best!" If the school can show that their institution is superb, and that the graduates will be engaged in valuable work, perhaps parents of high-quality students would be persuaded that TE is worth pursuing. Stakeholders also want communities to be aware that they desire students, who are already Christians, and have a calling to the ministry.

It is unclear what criteria communities in Vanuatu use to determine who will attend theological training, but the decision is clearly group-based, not individual. Anecdotes suggest that churches choose young men and women for a number of unrelated reasons, such as:

- The candidate demonstrated success in other projects or activities;
- Other members of the candidate's family have gone into the ministry;
- The candidate has a bad reputation, and needs guidance or personal reform; or

- The candidate has a good reputation, and leaders believe he will return to help the village.

These criteria are broad, and even contradictory. Outer-island awareness campaigns are meant to redefine, for the communities, who should be given the opportunity to study at formal TE institutions. If communities can be informed about what kind of students the institutions want, perhaps they'll send their best.

### *Stricter Admission Standards*

As with any educational institution, stakeholders at TE institutions desire to get enough applicants to their schools so that they could reject those who lack a calling to the ministry, or who may not lead exemplary lives. Talua has this privilege. They received 70 applicants in 2007, and accepted only 15. On the other hand, JBI had 15 applicants, and accepted 10 for 2011. SIPBC took in its five applicants in 2011.

Some faculty suggested that it would be helpful for the admissions committee to receive confidential letters of recommendation from pastors or community leaders. This would ensure that chiefs or pastors could confidentially notify the committee beforehand, in the event that a community chose a certain individual to attend TE, who lacked personal character.

### *Shift Paradigms About Who is Being Trained*

Another way to solve the student intake problem is to broaden the scope of educational opportunities offered at these institutions. If a substantial portion of the student body wants to attend the school for additional education, but does not want to engage in full-time ministry, perhaps the school should diversify its educational tracks. If they offer training for other careers, such as teaching, technology, or health care, they can take in students, who do not plan on going into the ministry. Perhaps, the faculty can recognise that they are training Christians to do other valuable jobs. This would require a perspective that goes

beyond the denominational needs, since the institution would no longer exist specifically to train ministers for the church, but to meet a broader need in the country.

Other stakeholders are opposed to this strategy. They feel they should focus on what they do best: theological education. However, it is clear that, if Vanuatu's institutions are going to focus specifically on TE, they need to be more stringent about whom they admit to the school.

Regardless of whether formal TE institutions decide to broaden or tighten their scope in the future, I can summarise what this research has revealed about student intake:

- Schools must recognise the reality that not all students will become Christian workers;
- Schools must recognise that many students will develop a sense of call during the course of their study; and,
- Some graduates may not go into full-time ministry, but will still go on to live Christian lives, and be lay evangelists.

One student, Joe, told me that he will use his B.Min. to go back to his island and work in Bible translation, or in community development. He said he is under pressure from staff, pastors, and denominational leaders to change course, and become a pastor. But he prays to God to stay the course of his own calling. He added, "That doesn't mean I won't preach, or won't work in church. I'll still do that." Indeed, Joe is a success story for the school, not at all a failure.

## CONCLUSION

This research has shown that stakeholders at TE institutions in Vanuatu define their goal as teaching the Bible, and modelling the Christian life, so that students will be transformed from disciples of Christ into effective ministers of the gospel. To reach that goal, they are teaching the Bible, mentoring their students, charging reasonable

fees, and working with other denominations. The main obstacles to attaining their goals include the students' lack of calling, low education level, and faculty members' lack of higher degrees. In order to mitigate those obstacles, the schools are redefining who should be trained in TE, endeavouring to implement stricter admission standards, and are even broadening their definition of who may study at their institution.

What the research did *not* turn up is equally remarkable. I was surprised that no interview data suggested TE should reflect local pedagogical methods. Bazzynu (2001) suggested that Melanesian TE should be holistic, free, community-based, informal (based on the apprentice relationship, rather than coursework), should implement rites of passage, and should involve stages of learning throughout one's life. It is also important to note that none of the TE institutions in this study is exploring online technology. Numerous young people in Vanuatu want to receive online theological education, but must pursue an overseas institution to do so. These lacunae, in the interview data, confirm, as participants in this study indicated, that TE institutions in Vanuatu are a bit behind the times.

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# THE IMPACT OF PRE-UNDERSTANDING ON CHRISTIANITY IN MELANESIA

**Doug Hanson**

*Doug is an American, who lectures at the Christian Leaders' Training College in Papua New Guinea. He is currently in the United States, in order to complete a Doctor of Missiology through Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon. His doctoral research focuses on contextualisation.*

## 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

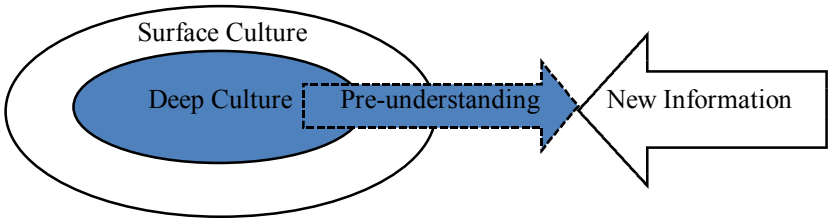
Culture is the multilayered model of reality, which determines patterns of behaviour. Culture includes both a surface layer, which are the patterns of behaviour, and a deep layer, which is the worldview that drives behaviour. Pre-understanding flows from the worldview. Duncan Ferguson provides us with 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**

| ***Type*** | ***Description*** |
|---|---|
| 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]

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[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.

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[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**

| ***Response*** | ***Description*** |
|---|---|
| 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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