

## **Melanesian Indigenous Knowledge and Spirituality**

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### **Abstract**

Together with its social, political and economical growth, Papua New Guinea is challenged to pursue a spirituality of transition which can transform its people to live authentic lives. The transition from a traditional subsistence life style to a modern and sophisticated one has a crucial impact on Papua New Guineans, both the old and young and the success of the transition depends very much on the quality and ownership of their own Melanesian roots and values. This paper explores some aspects of Melanesian Spirituality, and delves into its origins, the ways it has been lived-out in the past, and how it is being lived out today. Specifically, the paper attempts to contribute positively to the on-going study and appreciation of indigenous knowledge in the lives of Papua New Guineans. It describes the possible effects of its expression: examines the changes of values and practices; highlights the imperatives for discovering, acknowledging and developing indigenous knowledge and Melanesian Spirituality. Furthermore, the paper identifies the mechanism of how indigenous knowledge and Melanesian Spirituality influence the development of its people.

### **Introduction**

Papua New Guinea is profoundly unique for its array of different cultural groups. The indigenous population speak a total of over 800 distinctive languages (Grimes, 1989) and have distinctive cultures and traditions (Tivinarlik, 2000). Against this backdrop, Christianity, as a formal religion, was introduced. In Papua New Guinea, the culture that was the object of the first evangelisation no longer exists as it was at that time. People today live in a completely different world. How does one deal with the transition from a subsistence life-style with its spirituality to a modern sophisticated one in a time of rapid change?

This paper attempts to discuss some aspects of the link between indigenous knowledge, traditional religions and spirituality. It describes their origins, past practices and how they are changing today. The paper is based on personal experiences, a review of literature and findings of a research conducted with students of the University of Goroka.

The discussion will commence with an examination of the concept of indigenous knowledge and Melanesian spirituality. In examining Melanesian spirituality, four fundamental aspects of traditional Melanesian beliefs and

value systems will be discussed. These include an ideology that portrays an integrated worldview, a lifestyle that emphasizes the value of community and harmonious relationships, and the importance of rituals. These elements provide a background for Melanesian spirituality and indigenous knowledge. The influences of Western value systems especially Christianity and formal education, will then be explored to determine how these 'agents of change' have influenced and are perceived and lived-out by Papua New Guineans. This will be followed by an examination of the implications of the different value and belief systems and some practical ways in which Papua New Guineans can derive the best of the different knowledge systems. The paper concludes with practical suggestions on how to appreciate, acknowledge and develop indigenous knowledge and spirituality.

### **Indigenous knowledge**

From the outset, it is important to note that within the context of this paper, indigenous knowledge and Melanesian spirituality are not entirely separate entities. They are integrated in a sense that Melanesian spirituality is a part of indigenous knowledge.

A key feature of indigenous knowledge is that it's got to be viewed within a particular context (Mwadime, 1999). In essence, indigenous knowledge is contextual. It is a information base for a society which facilitates communication and decision making (Warren et al, 1995). Furthermore, indigenous knowledge is holistic in a sense that information, skills, and values are rooted within a particular environment and this is inseparable from the day-to-day living or experiences of its inhabitants. Such information includes the history of the society and experiences, traditions, and wisdom of its people. The knowledge is well suited to the daily needs and requirements to the local conditions like, physical, environmental, social, cultural and personal conditions to the extent that it becomes a way of life (tradition). This knowledge is dynamic and gives the people of that society life and is highly influenced by external systems and internal creativity (Mwadime, 1999).

### **Melanesian spirituality**

Before discussing Melanesian spirituality, an exploration of the notion of spirituality warrants mentioning to ground the concept of Melanesian spirituality.

Contemporary understanding of the term spirituality views it not only as a lived experience but also as an academic discipline. The latter has been explored extensively by different writers in an attempt to improve the understanding of spirituality in order to enrich the lived experience as well. According to Tomlinson, 'spirituality is deeply informed by family, teachers, friends, community, class, race, culture, sex and even by our time in history, just as it is influenced by beliefs, intellectual positions, and moral options' (1994:3).

Positing a more sociological definition, Warren (1993) asserts that in spite of the impression sometimes given by Christian writings, spirituality is by no means an exclusively Christian reality. He views spirituality as a systematic approach to the presence of God. It is a way of walking, a particular way of being in the world. As such, it is very much affected by the life structure of the person and the society. Furthermore, Warren postulates that 'every human being, as an embodied spirit, is a being whose spirit has been shaped by commitments, choices, hopes, use of time and so forth' (p. 71). In essence, spirituality is not a thing to achieve but rather, it is the life within one's being – it is a relationship. This contention follows Treston's (1993) assertions who described spirituality as 'a life process, not a series of good works. ... It is a religious response to the question: what does it mean to live, given the fact that one day I will die?' (p. 96)

Melanesians have a spirituality that permeates the whole cycle of life with its web of relationships. What their ancestors experienced has been passed down orally from generation to generation. Narokobi, who has written about Melanesian spirituality, defined the concept very well when he claimed that

Melanesians do not hold the secular belief that [the human person] exists of her/his own power and for her/his own ends... Thus, s/he is born into a spiritual and a religious order... The Melanesian is born with the knowledge that s/he lives and works within a spirit world (Narokobi, 1977, pp. 8-9).

Narokobi's assertion demonstrates the link between the Melanesian indigenous knowledge and their spirituality. The link is that the living are aware of their relationship to the spirit world. For Melanesians, life is one and the knowledge of it is an intimate part of it. Essentially, Narokobi is emphasizing the oneness with both the living and dead. Most of the traditional Melanesian societies try to maintain a harmonious relationship with the cosmos, that is, they have to maintain a good relationship with the spirit world as well as the world of the living.

### **Key elements of traditional Melanesian spirituality**

As suggested above, four key concepts are very fundamental to Melanesian spirituality. These four concepts, integrated worldview, community, relationships and rituals, are so intertwined in the life of Melanesians that they are almost taken for granted until questioned. For example, in a workshop on Melanesian spirituality, a twenty-five year old male participant asserted that he had undergone a number of rituals in his home of upbringing, but had not really thought through the significance of them until that workshop. During the workshop, the participants were challenged to reflect on some of the rituals that they have in their communities of upbringing.

A female research participant also reiterated similar sentiments in the following assertions:

I am a Melanesian woman and proud of that and that I know my culture. However, when I was asked to present that culture to

others, I felt a sense of incompetence because I know the practices and live my culture, but the thing is I did not know the reasons as to why we do the things we do in a particular way.

Such comments only highlight the lack of a deep understanding many Papua New Guineans have of their cultural roots, let alone the essence of Melanesian spirituality. This is a marked change from the past where the young were schooled into their cultural roots at an early age. Needless to say, references will now be made to each of the above mentioned key elements.

The spirituality of Melanesians is deeply embedded in their traditional culture. Together with Mwadime's (1999) claim that indigenous knowledge is contextual, Melanesian spirituality is such an integral part of life that it is often not so easy to take it out of context and examine it. Melanesian spirituality interconnects with nature and the way people live. Spiritual beliefs are closely linked with all aspects of life. So, an awareness of Melanesian spirituality is an essential part of any understanding of Melanesian social life and culture. This is synonymous with Zocca's (1997) writings where he asserts that there is no separation between the empirical and non-empirical, natural and supernatural within the cosmos. The interconnectedness between the natural and supernatural would be a concept in contrast to modern Western Christianity, which presents a dichotomic worldview where the natural and supernatural worlds are clearly separated.

Furthermore, traditional religion for Melanesians is not as formal as Christianity and Islam. These religions have set laws, practices and established organizational structures in the living-out of their respective faith stance. Melanesians, rather, have a relationship to supernatural beings that are a part of their cosmos, giving their existence a sense that everything is related, is important and, is part of the whole cycle of life. Together with Mwadime (1999) and Warren et al, (1995) who postulate the interconnectedness of indigenous knowledge and spirituality, Religion, for Melanesians, is not looked upon as separate; instead, it is what gives meaning to their livelihood and a sense of identity.

Attesting to this ideology, Gaquare (1985) wrote that 'Melanesians were and are a religious people. Traditional religions play an important role in the people's spiritual affairs and the total life of the community' (p. 207). In essence, Melanesian spirituality does not have a set day to observe a weekly religious worship like Christianity. Traditionally, the peoples' entire lives were acts of a relationship with the supernatural - the spirit (s). When, for example, families gathered to prepare a vegetable garden, the elders invoked the blessings of the spirits on their preparations, planting and harvesting of the crops. The invoking of the spirits at this situation, i.e. in the garden, is for the growth and abundance of the food crops to ensure there is a rich harvest.

The drive for an abundance of life here on earth is a major concern for Melanesians (Zocca, 1997) and is a sign of great blessing. Traditional Melanesian spirituality is viewed as a people's expression of their totality in

relationship to the great spirits of the land, forest, mountains, rivers, birds and animals. In brief, Religion is a way 'To Be' (Mantovani and MacDonald, 1988 & Aime, 1990). An artist who was also a research participant reflected his perception of spirituality thus.

My work is based on an inner vision aroused through my experiences and sufferings. It is a desire within me to share with you a collection of visual responses based on my research theme, 'Thinking Spiritual'. I drew my inspiration from most popularly held ancient Papua New Guinea Religions to rediscover our roots linking those to a new religion (Christianity). It is not an anthropological viewpoint, but an expression of the creative energy in me as an artist. My intention is to bring the power of ancient ideas into existence where man searched and reached out beyond the boundaries of his senses in search of a creator.

Melanesian spirituality has emerged from the experience of its people. This is clearly reflected in the lives of the people where there is no dichotomy in how they treat sacred or profane, religious or non-religious. There is integration between the sacred and the secular for the Melanesian who holds everything as integral (Mercado, 1988). Spirituality for Melanesians is a relationship with the whole cosmos and the knowledge that their world is one and integrated.

Community is a key element and value in Melanesian culture (Mantovani, 1991) and everything is done for the well-being and joy of the community. The community is there to support and care for the value of life. Often individual interests and needs are ignored because community needs take precedence. The traditional Melanesian code of ethics is community based: 'What helps the community is ethically good, what harms the community is ethically bad and what is indifferent to the community is indifferent' (ibid, 72). This concept would give some insight to the frequent tribal fights that occur in different areas of Papua New Guinea. Community members are there to protect and avenge any wrongdoing against clan/tribe members. For example, fighting and killing the enemy of a warring clan/tribe were believed to be sound and acceptable practice as a payback. If retaliation did not happen for a killing in the clan/tribe, this would be considered ethically wrong, a sign of being a traitor to one's own clan/tribe.

Balance and equilibrium in all relationships is a constant Melanesian concern. It involves special rites, gift exchanges, words and sometimes fighting and killing. The whole experience of Melanesian society indicates there is no dichotomy in life, everything is related and in connection to each other to form the whole (Narokobi, 1977). This resonates with O'Murchu's (1992) definition of holism when he asserts that, 'everything thrives, not in isolation and competition, but in mutual co-operation' (p. 22). For example, when someone is hurt, he/she is also obligated to examine how his/her relationships with the community, the cosmos, and the dead are affected. In this situation, it is not a call to exact the same penalty, but rather it is a call to reconciliation, to renew some damaged or broken relationship with the cosmos, the dead and the living

members of the community (Fugmann, 1977, MacDonald, 1988, & Mercado, 1988).

The experience of community is central to Melanesian spirituality. Traditional beliefs influence the ways in which people as a community, as well as individuals attempt to understand themselves and articulate this understanding. This is done through myths, stories, symbols, rituals, taboos, beliefs, arts and dances. The religious knowledge is imparted to members of the tribe/clan according to age, sex and status. Traditional Melanesian Religions are full of rules: different rules for different people, gender taboos, food taboos, etc. This knowledge is complex and it includes ideas and interpretations of life and codes that influence behavior. In the East Sepik province of Papua New Guinea, for example, a sago dance is an expression of the remembrance of the past, appreciation of the present, and a restoration of relationships of the future. Therefore, the sago myth tells people how a deity or spirit gave them sago. Hence, the sago dance is an expression of a way 'To Be' in relation to the deity or spirit who gave them sago (Aime, 1990). Sago is the staple diet of the Sepik people.

Melanesian spirituality resembles a web of relationships. Everything in life and death has some connection with traditional religion. Sickness and disease, for instance, are seen as an interference with harmony in the cosmos and often is interpreted as some form of punishment. It represents a damaged relationship with the cosmos, which means, with the living, the dead, and the spirit world. Non-Melanesians, and in particular those in the medical field, have often questioned why sick people are not brought to hospitals when they fall ill. The patients or their relatives, in many cases, first seek out the local healers for a prognosis of the ailment and possible cures. Healing processes are also believed to be connected with harmonious relationships with the cosmos.

The relationships with the non-empirical world (deities, spirits and ancestors) mirror the relationships between persons, families and clans. The ancestors are seen as the guardians of the clan/community; hence the obligation to maintain a harmonious relationship with the ancestors. Failure to adhere to maintaining good relationship with the ancestors may result in something unfortunate befalling on an individual or members of the community. This creates an underlying sense of fear. Thus, an aspect of relationship is about fear, which warrants some attention.

'Fear' has been a prominent factor in Melanesian spirituality and is a problematic issue. A closer examination of the relationships that are believed to exist between Melanesians and the cosmos indicate that they are governed by a strong element of fear - fear of breaking the customs and rituals and of being punished by the spirits. At times, fear controls the way Melanesians live their lives and their relationships with others. For example, when individuals – even well educated individuals for that matter – return to their communities of upbringing, they may be scared about what they do and where they go. They may never feel entirely free, because any behaviour contrary to societal norms could have negative consequences for them and their families. When away

from their villages, they seem better able to be themselves without the feeling that they are being watched. Because of this fear, people can live according to a very closed system that protects the society and its web of relationships.

The sense of fear can have a significant control over people. Even unconsciously Papua New Guineans can be fearful of the unintended consequences of their actions. This opens a way for manipulation in the different relationships that exist in traditional religion. For instance, the logic that operates is 'if we do this for you, then you have to reciprocate the deed, otherwise, the favour may will not be returned and/or something might happen to you or your family'. This logic seems to perpetuate fear in people.

Linked with fear is the manipulation of the spirits. This is a significant feature in traditional Melanesian religion. The aspects of fear and manipulation are still evident in Papua New Guinea cultures even after the adoption of Christianity. For example, if someone goes fishing on Sunday instead of going to Sunday worship and a shark attacks him while fishing, the people will conclude that he was attacked because he did not go to Sunday worship and so God has punished him for that action. This example highlights a direct transfer of that mentality of manipulation which is perpetuated within Melanesian spirituality to Christianity – a manipulation of the spirits to manipulation of the Christian God.

Thus, in the above discussion a harmonious relationship with fellow human beings and the cosmos was made. However, the harmonious relationship may at times imply an underlying sense of fear of reprisals. The indigenous knowledge about relationships has spiritual, sociological, intellectual, and ethical implications. It is not compartmentalized, which is what Papua New Guineans need to appreciate about indigenous knowledge and spirituality.

Rituals are seen as the means to tap into the supernatural and get what they (rituals) are aimed at (Zocca, 1997). However, faithful observance of the prescribed performance is necessary. For example, a story is told about a warrior who was wounded because he broke a taboo by having sex with his wife during the warfare. Knowledge of rituals is considered real knowledge and also has power. There are rituals connected to the rites of passage. For example, initiation is a rite of passage and almost every society has a ritual for all members, particularly the males. Furthermore, initiation was also a test of spiritual character – not only a rite of passage. For instance, prior to a significant event, many cultures have a period of isolation from the community in which there is the imparting of knowledge skills and values appropriate for the next stage. Part of this is a period of fasting and abstinence. Such practices are no different to those in Christianity where retreats and fasting are practiced. Thus, in rituals, there are elements of spirituality present.

On the other hand, the girls do have some form of initiation during their first menstrual period. There are certain rituals the girls have to undergo during this time. There are rituals to mark the birth, marriage, sickness, and death etc. as significant phases in the life of the community as well as the individual. Some

of these religious rituals are highly emotional. For example, in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea, when a husband dies, the wife has to mourn his death by wailing the loudest, or cutting off a finger to show great sorrow for the loss. If she does not display any emotions, then people may draw different conclusions about her, which in most cases would be negative. For instance, a likely conclusion that could be drawn would be that the wife might have contributed to the cause of death.

Rituals are not only performed during significant phases in the cycle of life but also to mend and renew broken relationships. This is very important within Melanesian spirituality because of the belief Melanesians hold that their world is integrated. For example, one of the research participants recalled an incident during the recent Bougainville crisis.

As a sign of protection and some other things that we heard only our grandparents talking before like one thing I can remember I saw my grandfather doing something to some boys. They drank blood, blood of the chicken then, they said it's to make them strong because at that time, any family member especially boys that didn't train Bougainville Revolution Army, they would suspect us. So there was no choice. So whether they like it or not they would have to just join them so as a kind of protection or to make them strong, I saw these old people making some rituals over them to make them strong.

Hence, the obligation to maintain peace and harmony at all times with each other and the cosmos. This is also important for healing purposes. For example, in the Patpatar society of the New Ireland province, if a young woman falls pregnant outside of marriage, this brings great shame to the family and relatives. One of the things the pregnant woman is obliged to do before she delivers her baby is to tell the midwife, who the father of the baby is otherwise she would have a prolonged labour with other complications, which could be fatal. So there is a confession that is required for a smooth delivery process.

In the event that harmony is broken in any relationship, the mending and renewal of that relationship is binding and obligatory for both the community and the individual. These are articulated either in public or private ceremonies depending on the situation. These ceremonies may take the form of either rite or ritual, which may involve sacrifices offered to appease the spirits and so win back their favour (MacDonald, 1988).

Culturally, Melanesians express feelings and attitudes through action and ritual. For example, one does not say 'thank you' but feels an obligation towards the giver. An offence is not compensated by words such as 'I am sorry' but through an action. Only this time it is an exchange. Giving and receiving through ritual exchange will express repentance in a visible and accepted way. The exchange will express communion and establish good relationship for everyone to see. For example, in a newspaper article titled 'Clans strike peace deal' reported in the January 5<sup>th</sup> copy of *The National* newspaper (2001, p. 5),



it was claimed that in the Talasea district of the West New Britain province, a peace ceremony involving two groups engaged in a tribal conflict four months before included a church service where clansmen splintered spears before the pulpit to signal the end to hostilities and establishment of peace.

This incident reflects change in its form but the meaning remains the same from the traditional peace ceremony, which would normally take place in the village or some neutral ground agreed upon by the warring clans/tribes. The peace ceremony reported in the newspaper article took place in a Christian church service where the clansmen splintered spears at the pulpit. Indeed this ceremony is significant and clearly shows how Melanesians are combining the different value systems in their lives. In this case they are combining their traditional peace making ceremony with Christianity because they have embraced Christianity and its beliefs and values. Such a combination of the traditional and the Christian practices signify the direction for Papua New Guinea to move into in the new millennium.

Rituals are restricted to the members of the clan. They tend to be kept secret and there are certain members of the clan who would have knowledge and the power to perform rituals within the clan (Zocca, 1997). The objectives pursued through the rituals are concrete and immediate. Melanesians like to see the results of the rituals here-and-now and if these results are not forthcoming, and according to expectations, then the rituals are changed.

In the above discussions, an attempt was made to describe some aspects of Melanesian spirituality. Whilst the authors discussed integrated worldview, community, relationship, and rituals separately, in reality, all four elements are intertwined in Melanesian spirituality and culture. This, according to Warren (1995), Mwadime (1999), Moshia (1999) and Adams (2001), forms the basis of indigenous knowledge. Everything that is thought, said and done is done in relationship to the whole of life experience and everything that is known, is known in the context of the entirety of life and for the purpose of furthering intellectual, moral and physical growth (Moshia, 1999).

### **Implications for the future**

Melanesian spirituality needs to be critically looked at in order to fully understand its origin and to see the direction in which the Papua New Guinean struggles to embrace life today in the communities of their upbringing, in the towns and cities. One may ask what is the vision for Melanesian spirituality and indigenous knowledge? Gutierrez's (1984) point is that everyone must drink from their own well – that is, they must go back to their sources of spirituality. In Gutierrez's case, it is the experience of the poor, which gives way to a spirituality of finding Jesus hidden in the faces of the poor (p. 38). What about Melanesian spirituality, where is the source of our spirituality?

Melanesian spirituality holds that people are part of the cosmos and that their world is integrated. People suffer because of broken relationships with the cosmos; misfortune is also seen as the punishment for any broken relationship.

There are rituals in place to appease the spirits and renew relationships. Whilst this is acknowledged, Melanesian spirituality does not invalidate the notion that harmony with the cosmos must be the primary concern. Spirituality is lived within the community. The community is there to care for and support its members. The four elements, integrated worldview, community, relationships and rituals are all part of Melanesian spirituality. Each concept is related to the other however, for the purpose of this paper, the authors discussed each concept individually – a difficult task to do because they know that the four elements are all integrated and forms the basis of their own indigenous knowledge.

It is inevitable that outside influences have played and will continue to play a significant role in the lives of Papua New Guineans. Some of these influences like formal education, modern western influences and Christianity will contradict some of our traditional values and practices. However, the authors are convinced that there are other values, which are challenging and lead more towards a positive direction for Papua New Guineans. These are the values that need promoting. An example of this would be the concept of sharing within the community. Melanesians support and care for each other. When there is someone in need they share whatever they have so that there is no one without and this practice should be promoted and encouraged. This communal aspect of sharing among members of the community is slowly being replaced by a more individualistic mentality, which is a reflection of the capitalistic ideology. The communal aspect of sharing is within Melanesian spirituality. There is an obligation of care and support within the community for one another so that everyone is taken care of and there is no one in need.

There are others that are not worth taking on and these should be discarded. For example, the payback system whereby the members of the clan/tribe are obliged to avenge any killings within the clan to even things out. It often happens that the killings continue and there does not seem to be an end to this type of behaviour resulting in ongoing unsettlements among tribal groups. Melanesians are better judges for these outside values – both positive and negative as to which they should make their own and which they should discard.

Finally, we are convinced that Papua New Guineans can only do this confidently if Melanesian spirituality and indigenous knowledge are developed and rightfully acknowledged. Papua New Guineans can have a sound knowledge of their own cultures and appreciate their roots if there is a course of study provided in the school curriculum.

The findings have shown that young Melanesians today do not know their own traditional value and belief systems. Some of the contributing factors as highlighted in the findings are; education, western influences through the media, and Christianity, being the predominant religion in Papua New Guinea. Globalisation is a new concept that Papua New Guinea is part of whether it chooses to or not. Papua New Guinea is undergoing rapid changes, which are too sudden and for which Melanesians are not ready. Changes are a part of life

and the process of growth and development. However, not all changes are good, some can be threatening to some people while to others it may be positive. The authors are convinced that a sound knowledge of one's own roots can help in dealing with change. Hence, if Papua New Guineans know their indigenous roots, and if they value and own their spirituality as a people, then the future interaction between traditional, Western and Christian ideologies could be enhanced.

Social anthropologists have tried to identify the key elements of Melanesian spirituality. Some aspects of what anthropologists have written are in line with the culture and traditions of Melanesians, but the author is convinced it is crucial for indigenous Papua New Guineans to start writing about their spirituality and traditions as the indigenous writers would be more aware of the subtleties and nuances that exist within their cultural settings.

### Conclusion

In this paper, the authors have attempted to define the key elements of Melanesian spirituality and indigenous knowledge. Different aspects of Melanesian life were discussed with a view to understanding the elements that constitute Melanesian spirituality and indigenous knowledge. Admittedly, Melanesian spirituality as lived out in Papua New Guinea traditional societies in the past is constantly changing due to a variety of factors. These, among others, include the fact that there are many different cultures which are rapidly changing and that the notion of spirituality cannot be analyzed as an individual entity and separated from the other aspects of life. This implies that Melanesians will have to give up certain aspects of their cultural norms which do not promote growth in people, while at the same time they will have to take on some new values that are more positive. Such changes warrant extensive studies and commitment to implement and a great deal of time to be put into such processes because change does impact fundamental values and will involve a lot of people. Melanesian spirituality is constantly changing because people are changing. To change just for the sake of change and throw out indigenous knowledge with their traditional values and beliefs may prove disastrous. Hence, each individual in particular, the young Papua New Guinean would have to make such choices according to the situation and context.

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