

WARTBURG THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

LISTENING FOR INDIGENOUS VOICES OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA WITH  
CONSIDERATION FOR THE 125 YEARS OF LUTHERAN MISSIONARY HISTORY

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What a joy it has been to delve into the history of the vast and amazing peoples of Papua New Guinea and of the Lutheran missionaries, both of whom answered God's call to mission. There is no way quite to describe how this particular project seemed to culminate in a most meaningful way as an opportunity to apply the theological education I have received at Wartburg Theological Seminary.

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## Introduction

In the basement of Fritschel Hall at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, is a largely unexplored room, a room that I have often wondered about, noticing it each time I head to my campus mailbox. This quite unknown room is the Papua New Guinea Museum, a place that would evoke in me a random curiosity, as I occasionally daydreamed about being an “expert” on Papua New Guinea, a curator of sorts, who would take people through this museum. It was like the photographed faces hanging in the window beckoned me to come and find out who lived there and how they lived. So when asked, several years after having these notions, if I might consider writing on Papua New Guinea, I mused at how the Holy Spirit might have planted such a notion in my mind, a gentle push of sorts, encouraging me to say “yes.”

So how does one who has never been to Papua New Guinea, let alone Wartburg’s very own museum, begin exploring a country so vast and mysterious? Little did I realize, at least until I began my research, how great the resource potentiality is for such a topic even here at Wartburg, a place that, like Papua New Guinea, shares its mission roots in Bavaria, Germany. The time is drawing near to celebrate 125 years of the Lutheran missionary work, sharing the *miti*<sup>1</sup> in Papua New Guinea. As the first recipient of the Global Concerns Committee Scholarship to write on the topic, I have a unique opportunity for initiating a dialogue in which future students and faculty might engage. It is a conversation one can have on multiple levels: with anthropologists, with missionaries, and most importantly, with the indigenous people of Papua New Guinea themselves. It is this voice, the indigenous voice, the one that spoke to me through the photos that peeked out of the window at me, that I have sought to hear in my research and the one least accessible to me. The voice does not seem to break forth much in written form until

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<sup>1</sup> The indigenous word for the Gospel.

more recent years, and real conversation with these people I cannot have since I, myself, cannot have the luxury of visiting Papua New Guinea as part of my research.

A particular dilemma ought to be acknowledged in my hopes to highlight the indigenous voice of Papua New Guinea in this thesis. Because a plethora of cultures and languages exist in this limited region and because each voice speaks from a unique perspective, it is impossible to sieve out a singular, resonant voice. Resonance among these richly diverse peoples is neither their reality nor likely. However, one might accept that the Western and indigenous perspectives differ much more so than cultures originating in the Western world and cultures originating in Papua New Guinea. It is also difficult to identify an indigenous perspective that hasn't been affected to some extent by the 125-years plus of Western world influence.

My method, then, is first to gather information to begin establishing a perspective, a particular worldview from which to hear the indigenous voices of Papua New Guinea (PNG) emerging. Various origin myths abound greatly in this diverse land and so to begin by looking at these stories, one can imagine how they might shape the identity and practices of the various PNG culture groups. Then, looking at the important aspects of culture such as how many indigenes regard the dead and practice magic may also extend one's understanding of the indigenous worldview.

The next step in the process is to engage the Lutheran missionary perspective exploring the question, "How did the missionary regard the indigenous peoples?" The ELCA Global Mission Unit has adopted in recent years *accompaniment*, as "a lens and methodology for mission today" as the way we are "walking together in solidarity that practices interdependence and mutuality" in the mission work in which we engage.<sup>2</sup> Over the course of the 125 years of

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<sup>2</sup> Rafael Malpica Padilla, "Accompaniment: A Lens and Methodology for Mission Today," *ELCA Global Mission: Resources: Learning About Accompaniment*

Lutherans in PNG, characteristics of accompaniment seem to emerge within PNG mission work. Three snapshots of this history that reflect this movement include: the first encounters with the indigenous peoples in the experiences of the first Lutheran missionary, Johann Flierl; then a growing regard, particularly for the indigenous Christians during World War II; and the transitioning to an organized, autonomous Lutheran church in PNG during the 1960s and 1970s.

Through the emergence of an independent nation and a growing sense of missiology and ecumenism, there is much the voices of PNG are saying today. The worldview from which they come still shapes their voice as they hold two worlds in tension. A particular look at the formation of the Melanesian Institute, the work of several contemporary PNG authors, and at the Evangelical Lutheran Church-PNG today brings into view the value of these voices, their perspective and their struggle as a people of Papua New Guinea with a rich history which is both distinctly indigenous and for many indigenous people, a Christian history. What results in this movement shows a depth of complexity that highlights a distinctly different people who are deeply struggling to hold onto both their histories—that of unique tribal diversity and their unity, whether as a country or as Christians.

## 1. The Papua New Guinean Worldview

The power of cultural traditions that arise within religious practice is often underestimated. A brief definition of culture to illustrate this point is such: “Insofar as it is specific to a particular group of people, a culture tends to be conceived as their entire way of life, everything about the group that distinguishes it from others, including social habits and institutions, rituals, artifacts, categorical schemes, beliefs and values.”<sup>3</sup> What is not included in this definition is from where these practices derive. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz pulls culture and social system apart. “On the one level there is the framework of beliefs, expressive symbols, and values in terms of which individuals define their world, express their feelings, and make their judgments; on the other level there is the ongoing process of interactive behavior, whose persistent form we call social structure.”<sup>4</sup> What is worth pondering as one enters into another worldview is to consider the difference between culture and simply the system of ordering that communities reflect from their culture. The starting point for much of this may be found in the stories that a community shares. Could a key to understanding a culture be in the story that tells of their beginning?

### 1.1 Myths of Origin Shape Worldview

To commit to listening for the voices of the Papua New Guinean peoples themselves and appreciating the perspective from which these voices are speaking, one might first unfold their particular worldview, which like many cultures, can be shaped significantly by myths of origin. Listening to these stories can inform the way one enters into a cultural group with greater sensitivity, particularly in thinking about how these stories shape a cultural group’s worldview.

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<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture A New Agenda for Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1973), 144-145.

What remains a limitation in studying the stories that shape particular cultures in PNG is that worldviews still vary among the indigenes, but these few stories illustrate an overarching difference in the experience of time and space that those coming from a Western worldview may want to consider. The gift in hearing these stories from PNG is to develop a respect for the different perspective inherent within them and to challenge oneself to consider new ways of thinking.

Unlike Christians entering PNG over 100 years ago, who shared a biblical creation story, the people of PNG did not; they in fact had many different creation stories as each cultural group shared their own story. Their stories take on a different shape and have different concerns than the Judeo-Christian and scientific explanations have. How might their stories of origin have been affirmed or reshaped with the missionary introduction of the biblical story? What was their reaction to Adam and Eve and the story of original sin in Genesis? Was this story contrary to their stories or was it in some ways resonant? By beginning with the PNG worldview of origin, missionaries may have considered how the indigenes would hear the biblical story of creation. A question to ponder in the midst of this is if these peoples would have heard the biblical story as one that dismissed their worldview shaped by their own stories *or* one that broadened the meaning of their existing stories, inviting them to consider how both could contribute to their identity.

When looking at indigenous creation stories, one will notice that they do not begin at a point before time or under the Western Christian theological concept of *creatio ex nihilo*. The stories are unique to particular regions and villages and often give a foundational *place* for the identity of a community. The elements come from the very environment in which the various peoples live. Also interesting, is how the stories combine landscape, animals, and plants in such



a fluid and interrelated way. The stories speak to a reality of the present with a seeming unconcern for how long ago; it is as if it were always so, certainly for those to whom this story belongs. Myth fashions a worldview for the many PNG cultures in which people live as it is “‘a speech form,’ ...[a] fluid matrix through which people fashion their universe. Myth manages to be both ‘of the past,’ from which it derives much of its force, and ‘about the present,’ providing a reflexive social commentary to its audience while furnishing other observers with a register of intended and unintended insights.”<sup>5</sup> The myth can both contribute to the establishment of a worldview and inform cultural practices.

Origin myths in PNG establish a spatial and ancestral identity by incorporating land species or contextual climatic experiences as key symbols and characters in the story. From the various indigenous perspectives:

the starting point is the coming into existence of a community derived from a founding ancestor. There are various assumptions about the place and time of origin of the ancestor. The ancestor might have come from a bamboo, or a bird or he or she might have descended from the clouds or arrived from some unknown place. Whatever the origin, human persons are born from that first person or persons.”<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, “the myth seeks to effect a transformation in people’s perceptions of a speech event... We must see myth, and the voices it fashions, both for the imaginary actors in its stories and the speakers of myths themselves, as part of the repertoire of manipulatory strategies available to New Guineans.”<sup>7</sup> From these anthropological insights on the value of “voice” in myth, one might deduce that myths, particularly origin myths, might just be a starting point not only for language but surely for indigenous identity, too.

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<sup>5</sup> “Preface,” *Fluid Ontologies: Myth, Ritual and Philosophy in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea*, eds. L.R. Goldman and C. Ballard (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1998), xi.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Narokobi, *Law and Custom in Melanesia, Point Series, No. 12* (University of the South Pacific: Institute of Pacific Studies and Goroka, E.H.P., Papua New Guinea: The Melanesian Institute, 1989), 9.

<sup>7</sup> J.F. Weiner, “Hand, Voice and Myth in Papua New Guinea,” *Fluid Ontologies: Myth, Ritual and Philosophy in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea*, eds. L.R. Goldman and C. Ballard (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1998), 17.

Myths establish a reality for people as cultural groups “originate in experience of some kind,” and over time, even in the midst of changing events, myths continue to order and can even re-order a cultural group’s reality.<sup>8</sup> When considering these myths and that they had been passed down orally for generations, how were the indigenous cultures able to keep them in the collective memory? These stories would have had to carry a meaning from one generation to the next. As anthropologist Donald Tuzin describes it, “some myths function as ‘charters’ authorizing present day social arrangements and entitlements: totemic categories, status hierarchies, property tenure, ritual prerogatives, and the like. Thus was myth objectified and neatly inserted into the conceptually manageable field of social action.”<sup>9</sup> Myths, then, may be seen as forming a culture’s identity and reality through the social ordering that can come from myth. Without knowing the origin myth, one might miss out on understanding why various groups of people do what they do.

Another feature characteristic to localized mythology in addition to the establishing of identity and social ordering is that of rendering truth through place, perhaps more aptly named as worldview.

In Melanesian societies, mythological events are often articulated with places in the landscape. Geographical features are instrumental as sources of living tradition that inform, modify, and are modified by ongoing relations. Moreover, such physical markers of the past may serve as mnemonic devices for individuals and groups, thus helping to establish their identity (Harwood 1976). These landmarks then have two functions: they mark the ancestral itinerary, and they serve as a physical memorial.<sup>10</sup>

Undoubtedly, such diverse landscape and remoteness that the indigenous peoples have experienced for thousands of years influence their particular worldview and a way of

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<sup>8</sup> Donald Tuzin, *The Cassowary’s Revenge*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 157-158.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 157

<sup>10</sup> Miriam Kahn, “Stone-faced ancestors: The spatial anchoring of myth in Wamira, Papua New Guinea,” *Ethnology* 9, no. 1 (January 1990): 51. *MasterFILE Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 5, 2011).

experiencing story quite differently than Western peoples. Imagining any changes in landscape, like that of natural disaster or that which would have happened with the coming of Europeans to mine the land, how might myths have been re-ordered to explain or reflect these changes? Identity, truth and experience are wrapped up in the *physical* as opposed to the *temporal* plane to which the Western world binds itself.<sup>11</sup> So one entering into the PNG context who attempts to share “truth” experienced in a temporal sense may not bring it to any form of reality for indigenous peoples until it can be experienced or understood within their own physical surrounding.

Likewise, to hear the indigenous voice more clearly would be to value their relationship to the land and location, really listening to what they would have to say about that. It means taking very seriously the sacred “place” into which one enters this context and accepting that a worldview is shaped by what is plainly in front of you instead of by a temporal shaping, particularly defined only by that which comes before or after you, perhaps leaving very little to experience in the present. It would have likely taken a very long time for any person, particularly missionaries and undoubtedly anthropologists, to have understood this when they first entered into such a place that conflicted with their realities.

The final element to consider is the cosmic sense of PNG mythology as well. Ennio Mantovani, an Italian missiologist who spent over 20 years as director of the Melanesian Institute<sup>12</sup> provides a framework from which to understand various Melanesian religions which are derived from symbol and enacted through “stories, rituals, and celebrations.”<sup>13</sup> First he calls

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<sup>11</sup> Kahn in “Stone-faced ancestors: The spatial anchoring of myth in Wamira, Papua New Guinea,” in *Ethnology* 9, no. 1 (January 1990): 51.

<sup>12</sup> Ennio Mantovani, SVD, “Dialoguing With the Biocosmic Aspects of Melanesian Religions: A Missiological Perspective.” *International Review of Mission* 91, no. 361 (April 2002) Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed January 5, 2011), 211.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 211

“the Melanesian religions cosmic” as the indigenous lives “in a relation of mutual dependence upon the whole environment; they influence and are influenced by it...The cosmos is part of Melanesian religions in a way that is not to be found, for instance in Christianity or Judaism.”<sup>14</sup> The term he uses to identify many of the indigenous stories is “biocosmic” by which he distinguishes these myths as ones that “shows no concern with a *theos*—a god—but with a *bios*, with the fullness of life, a life which is not limited to humans but is shared by the whole cosmos.”<sup>15</sup> He notes special local symbols perceived uniquely by PNG cultural groups in regard to these stories and shares a “pattern” of this story:

...people live in a situation of extreme need; what makes life worth living is missing. Usually, but not always what is missing is symbolized by the staple food people eat. A member of the community—older brother, sister, mother—who is more than human, asks to be killed by a member of the community and buried. Out of the grave comes what was missing, what makes life worth living. This type of stories does not mention creation. The world exists and so does society with its basic structures like the family.<sup>16</sup>

There would be a vast number of myths of origin or creation stories from which to tell, but two particular places of interest include the Wantoat peoples with their emphasis on land/space and lineage and the Simbu region with the biocosmic elements of their mythology. Even in the midst of these two areas, the elements of myth overlap with one another. First, the Wantoat, a people of about 6,000, live on the slope and open savannah in the Huon Peninsula, a place where the landscape and climatic conditions certainly shape their worldview and story.<sup>17</sup> People live in divided out “patrilineal lineages” in which “the total of all the territories owned by the lineages forms the homeland of the Wantoat culture.”<sup>18</sup> Their stories of origin take place in bamboo groves from where the first humans come, and the grove “is deemed to be still inhabited

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<sup>14</sup> Mantovani, “Dialoguing With the Biocosmic Aspects of Melanesian Religions” in *International Review of Mission* 91, 215.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 211

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 216

<sup>17</sup> Carl A. Schmitz, *Wantoat* (Melbourne, Sydney: Paul Flesch & Company and Paris: Mouton & Company., Publishers, 1963), 11-13.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 23

by a special spirit, usually in the form of a snake.”<sup>19</sup> These areas of sacredness are to be approached with great caution as the “grove is the visible sign that the territory where it stands is the property of a particular group of people.”<sup>20</sup> Even in the midst of the need for a group to emigrate, a new grove will be planted and even “after only two generations, this grove fully and in every way exercised(s) the function of the mythical place of origin of the lineage.”<sup>21</sup> Here one can see the relation the people have to the land, into a way to be connected to a physical locality. The action of replanting allows for the myth’s significance to continue connecting people to a particular spatial reality even in the midst of change, not to mention the necessity to stake claim to an area in which to feel safe. One can easily see that the bamboo holds a special symbolism of human origin and the following story seems to shape that symbolism:

There is the story of an old man and grandson who live alone in the Wantoat valley. The old man tells the boy go out to a tree and shoot with bow and arrow a pigeon fitting a particular description. The boy lies in wait and spots the bird, shooting it. It turns out the old man had changed himself into the now injured pigeon and returns to human form, greatly upsetting the lad. He instructs the boy to gather all kinds of bamboo and every kind of vegetable, bringing them to a hut they have built and then in which they enclose themselves. Then, they proceed by filling all the bamboos with the man’s blood, and after both the old man and boy have suffered in the midst of a hot fire, the first woman and man are found at the foot of the bamboo. The old man then sends out these varying men and women with bags of food for cultivation that the boy had gathered earlier. And for the Wantoat, each bamboo represents people of different lands.<sup>22</sup>

This story shows then why the bamboo, itself, holds such significance for the Wantoat lineage groups, becoming a symbol that represents their reality and relation to their origin. These bamboo groves marking territory for each lineage group is their spatial reality, where time seems to hold no bearing, which explains why even after a couple of generations a new location with a new grove of bamboos can be seen as if it were always so. Another element of this

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<sup>19</sup> Schmitz, *Wantoat*, 24.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 24

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 24

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 57

Wantoat mythology is the focus more upon the origin of humans and not necessarily of creation.<sup>23</sup> There is even an essence of the biocosmic, as people put themselves forth as a sacrifice for the greater cause of the humans as in the old man and boy.

The Simbu story features the biocosmic elements of myth in the willing sacrifice made for a necessary daily provision from which the people receive their greatest sustenance:

Two brothers from heaven come to the ground--Mondo, the elder and Gande, the younger. The elder makes a headpiece called an "arigl" and goes into the bush all day, leaving the younger brother curious. He follows him the next day and watches his older brother, seeing him hang his "airgl" headpiece on a forked stick and then digging in the ground "like a pig." The elder returns home suspicious that his younger brother was there because his "airgl" doesn't seem to stay on right, which leads him to confront his brother about it. The younger brother admits he had been watching him. The elder brother then instructs him to kill and bury him at the place where he had hung his "airgl" and then when the grass grows back to return and look at the spot. After the killing and the grass grows back, the younger brother takes the whole family to burial site where they find all different colored pigs and take them home to raise and breed. Through the older brother's sacrificing his life, the Simbu have the pigs as their sustenance and make and wear the "arigl" headpiece.<sup>24</sup>

The way that Mantovani interprets this myth, particularly in how the older brother sacrifices his life for the greater good of the community, is that the pig is deeply symbolic in addition to being a source of food for a people. "The pig is what keeps Simbu society together...stands for good and stable relationships...[and]...wealth, prestige...what a Simbu heart desires most."<sup>25</sup> There are variances of such a myth with "fluid" movements between human and animal, with "killing," "burying" and "results."<sup>26</sup> Again, the connection to elements within the environment, that which is cultivated or used, has a deeper meaning within a PNG perspective. These snapshots of myths provide a hint of how those coming from a Western

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<sup>23</sup> Schmitz, *Wantoat*, 57-58.

<sup>24</sup> Ennio Mantovani, "God's Word and the Ancestors' Response," *Christ the Life of Papua New Guinea*, eds. Ennio Mantovani and Mary MacDonald (Goroka, E.H.P., Papua New Guinea: The Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service, 1982 and 1988), 12.

<sup>25</sup> Mantovani, "God's Word and the Ancestor's Response" in *Christ The Life of Papua New Guinea*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 13

perspective might begin to understand and consider a particular indigenous person's perspective, thus, building sensitivity and appreciation for understanding indigenous perspectives over time.

## 1.2 Myths of Origin Shape Cultural Practices

Gaining perspective about how Melanesian origin stories shape the indigenous peoples' worldview further prepares one to consider, then, the cultural implications of this. One particularly interesting aspect of PNG culture is the indigenous experiences and rituals surrounding death and their deep sense of a spirits in their environment. Bernard Narokobi, a former Papua New Guinean Parliament member and author, explains the Melanesian worldview as horizontal, that

“whatever the origin, human persons are born from that first person or persons. They grow up, marry and die...After death, Melanesian life-span continues on the same horizontal plain...Death does not terminate life nor end social relations, but it transforms one life and continues social relationships...The dead and the living inhabit the same horizontal plane.”<sup>27</sup>

The line is vertical, he points out, in the Western perspective of one's death, which generally distinguishes between being good or bad and whether one is going to heaven or hell.<sup>28</sup> This helpful distinction explains why experience with spirits would be so ordinary and natural for the indigenous, for “not only do the spirits of the dead oversee the conduct of the living, but the living are the custodians of the dead and are guided in their actions and inactions by them.”<sup>29</sup>

It also helps to understand that the “Melanesian community exists in a web of relationships” and “consists of living relatives, of dead relatives or ancestors, and of land: garden

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<sup>27</sup> Bernard Narokobi, *Law and Custom in Melanesia: Point Series No. 12* (Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific and the Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service, 1989), 9

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 10

<sup>29</sup> Narokobi, *Law and Custom in Melanesia*, 9.

bush, river, sea.”<sup>30</sup> The indigenous cosmological worldview is actively expressed in the ritualistic pattern that the Duna people follow at the time of death. The experience with their dead “can be seen as parts of a continuum of being within a cosmos, in which the dead and the living are tied by ongoing relationships, expressed ritual, and belonging often to the domain of kinship” which also includes unique “connections within the wider landscape.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, their burial practices especially reflect a deep sense of connection to the sacredness of the land they inhabit.

The Duna build platforms on which to place the body so that the bodily fluids might drip into the earth while “distinctive clothing” is placed by the grave. Pig sacrifices might be made when the bones are ready to be removed and placed in higher places in hopes that the spirit might go to the “high” places and not remain in the area and cause sickness. Women skilled in the knowledge of the task build fires on which the fluids have fallen and cook sweet potatoes in the ashes and eat them. Songs are sung, as the “women directly address the spirit of the dead telling it to fly away to the limestone shelters in the mountains.”<sup>32</sup>

The redistribution of the body into the landscape reflects the close relationship of the indigenous to their particular habitat and to their continuing relation to the dead. The ritualistic pattern the women follow seems to reflect that even as the women are involved quite physically with a birthing process, so too, the women of the Duna seem to engage in a dying process, ensuring continued movement of the dead, for these “death conversations ...serve to affirm the new phase of existence through repetition of emotive utterances.”<sup>33</sup>

In terms of the ongoing relationships the indigenous has with the dead, sacrifices can be made to appease the dead. It is understood that the dead remain “concerned about the actions of the living such as quarrels and unpaid debts, and their way of communicating their displeasure is

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<sup>30</sup> Ennio Mantovani, “Traditional and Present Day Melanesian Values and Ethics,” *Catalyst* 21, no. 1, (1991), 68.

<sup>31</sup> Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, “Cosmology, Resources, and Landscape: Agencies of the Dead and the Living in Duna, Papua New Guinea,” *Ethnology* 44, no. 1 (Winter 2005): *MasterFILE Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 6, 2011), 35.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-40

<sup>33</sup> Stewart and Stathern, “Cosmology, Resources, and Landscape” in *Ethnology* 44, no.1, 40.



seen as non-verbal, enacted directly on the bodies of their living kin.”<sup>34</sup> Customs that convey this understanding are seen in the practice of death compensation, which had been a common cultural practice before Western law and Christian values were practiced. If there is suspicion or reality that this death was caused by someone else, that death might need to be equalized with another death or with appropriate due sacrifices.<sup>35</sup>

A story of a Highlands man, Wasun, reflects the fear and suspicion that often surrounds any death and ritual.

His uncle had eaten pig meat a man from a neighboring tribe had offered him. He soon fell ill and died several days later, which led his family to assume the man providing the meat had poisoned it. “Revenge...murder of the man Tulipa was the only right answer...” The family mourns the death while the “dismal cadences of wailing had been audible on the breeze.” The body was “suspended from a horizontal pole...his widow had cut off a finger joint ...and coated her body with a thick grey clay, a sign of mourning.” All this was necessary, for Wasun’s uncle “had entered that unseen but very real world of the spirits...it was advisable nonetheless for his close relatives to take every precaution and to do nothing that would anger him. Days later, Wasun’s brothers went to kill Tulipa for poisoning their uncle, but missed, killing two other men instead.”<sup>36</sup>

This story exhibits the worldview of ongoing relationships with ancestors in connection to the larger spirit world. In many ways, this spirit world becomes the source of people’s secret knowledge of practicing magic or witchcraft, a practice that has pervaded and still does pervade most PNG cultures. Interesting to note the assumptions made in 1920, as a Western anthropologist studying witchcraft practices of the indigenous peoples thought that “as the native grows increasingly familiar with causes and effects as we (Western peoples) see them, we may expect him little by little [to] find out and correct the falsity of his own ideas.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, this has not happened, even as “the practice of witchcraft... has dramatically increased throughout Papua

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<sup>34</sup> Stewart and Stathem, “Cosmology, Resources, and Landscape” in *Ethnology* 44, no.1, 44.

<sup>35</sup> Gairo Onagi, “Witchcraft, Spirits and Christianity: A Case Study of the Mailu Society,” *Catalyst* 37, no. 1 (2007): 84.

<sup>36</sup> Margaret Reeson, *Torn Between Two Worlds*. (Madang, PNG: Kirsten Press, 1972), 49-52.

<sup>37</sup> F.E. Williams, *Orkivana Magic*, 1928, fore. R. R. Marett (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969), 225.

New Guinea...in recent times.”<sup>38</sup> This experience in indigenous cultures is not erased in daily life even among indigenous Christians, and could a look at symbols and myths of origin shed some light on the reasons why?

From many indigenous perspectives, there is good (white) and bad (black) magic where the white “serves the purpose of protecting people” and is helpful towards the overall health of person, livestock and crops.<sup>39</sup> Black magic is meant for ill of another. Among the various regions, different ways witchcraft is used for evil often serves as an explanation for anything that goes wrong or out of the ordinary. For example, the Mailu people will understand that “all sickness and death are attributed to” a sorcerer. A falling star might indicate that there goes a sorceress, who must be “flying to some village, a rather bad omen, for it signifies the death of someone from the direction of her flight.”<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, cultural practices of many indigenes reflect their worldview of a particular spatial reality, a place that for such peoples as the Mailu, is “related to a whole range of spirit beings living in different environments: in the sea, on sacred lands and shrines, in certain trees...Attributed to these beings are powers that vary in intensity and potency.”<sup>41</sup>

This vast “potent” and spirit-filled landscape is the indigenous worldview in which this reality is deeply embraced through experience and practice. For example, spirits and ancestors are thought to communicate to humans through dreams, perhaps in the form of an animal.<sup>42</sup> Some Wantoat practice witchcraft and sorcery though those accused usually deny the accusations, and many people will explain death and illness as acts of witchcraft. Witchcraft is thought to be “passed from father to son” or next male kin. The Wantoat use *kwaak* ceremonies

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<sup>38</sup> Onagi, “Witchcraft, Spirits and Christianity: A Case Study of the Mailu Society” in *Catalyst* 37, no. 1, 53.

<sup>39</sup> Onagi, “Witchcraft, Spirits and Christianity: A Caste Study of the Mailu Society” in *Catalyst* 37, no.1, 56.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-59

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 61

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 66

to bring about peace in the midst of accusations and warfare and seek to bring about an end to the sorcery and be blessed by the spirits.<sup>43</sup> Even in a culture exposed to the Western world today, though, “it has been and continues to be a firm belief that all deaths in Wantoat are caused by witchcraft and sorcery.”<sup>44</sup>

The story of Sond, a man from a clan living in the Mendi Valley of the Highlands in the 1950s reflects how one might experience healing, a source of good magic. As a boy, Sond had cut his arm working for a missionary and was sent to an infirmary, all the while thinking that his ancestral spirits were upset and caused the cut. He received Western medical care, and the arm heals. White man’s medicine might indeed work, he considered.<sup>45</sup> Years later, as a young man, he felt the sudden stomach pangs of illness, he immediately thought of the possible cause, perhaps his mother’s spirit, or another spirit, or maybe even being poisoned by an enemy clan. He searched out his clan’s medicine man for remedy. Through the ritualistic incantation over a plant that this magic man then gave to Sond to eat, Sond vomited and hence felt much better. “How thankful he was for men of wisdom who understood the ways of the spirits and of magic and could be trusted to act correctly” and planned to pay him “and share with him a pig he would kill as a thanksgiving sacrifice.”<sup>46</sup>

Certainly, there are customs that might be played out in negative ways, particularly in death compensations, yet an ethical level is played out in relationships that remarkably reflect an ideal for reaching a “fullness of life” as far as missiologist Ennio Mantovani has been able to understand it.<sup>47</sup> Relationships with ancestral dead, the living, the landscape, and the spirit world

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<sup>43</sup> Sam Kaima, “Kwaak: Witchcraft, Sorcery and Dispute Settlement,” *Catalyst* 35, no. 1 (2005), 34.

<sup>44</sup> Kaima, “Kwaak: Witchcraft, Sorcery and Dispute Settlement,” in *Catalyst* 35, no.1 (2005), 49.

<sup>45</sup> Reeson, *Torn Between Two Worlds*, 23-24.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-66

<sup>47</sup> Ennio Mantovani, “DIALOGUING WITH THE BIOSCOSMIC ASPECTS OF MELANESIAN RELIGIONS; A MISSIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE,” *International Review of Mission* 91, no. 361 (April 2002) *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 20, 2011), 211.

must be in balance and fully reconciled. If something is awry in the community such as a sickness or death, then something is out of “alignment”; relationship needs to be restored. Reciprocity must be initiated to bring back that balance in hopes of achieving that “fullness of life.”<sup>48</sup>

Attempting to gain a better understanding for the various indigenous perspectives by establishing a worldview based on story and cultural practices brings to light the contrast from what a Westerner might expect and what actually is.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, to listen carefully for what the indigenous peoples in PNG are saying is to consider what the various cultures do and why. “In Melanesia, actions often replace words in communicating. One does not say thank you; one does it.”<sup>50</sup> Most cultural practices derive from attempting to achieve the ideal, and that can happen in helpful and harmful ways.<sup>51</sup> Inherent in every culture’s social ordering, no matter what the worldview, are negative ways to achieve an ideal in which the customs invoke a fear and promote an imbalance of power within the group. At the same time, there is something worth *listening for* in a culture when actions are saying far more than outsiders may give credence and validity.

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<sup>48</sup> Mantovani, “Dialoguing with the Biocosmic Aspects of the Melanesian Religions” in *International Review of Mission* 91, no 361 (April 2002), 216.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 211

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 214

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 212

## 2. History of Missionary Regard for Indigenous Perspectives

Exploring the PNG worldview through research-dialogue from anthropological, missiological, and indigenous perspectives provides particular insights on PNG that missionaries entering this land even 50 years ago may not have had. Understanding this indigenous worldview is a building block for understanding the missionaries' challenges in bringing the Gospel to this mysterious land. In three snapshots of the 125-year history of the Lutheran mission in PNG, the story unfolds with a bit of dramatic irony. Those of the 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective have the opportunity to observe with a built-in base of knowledge gained through missionary, indigenous, and anthropological insights. One might feel compelled to judge the actions of the missionary, but it is wiser to consider the various times and realities shaping this 125-year story. Through these time periods, as the missionary grew to understand the complexity of the culture and to regard the indigenous perspective, there occurs a particular movement toward an accompaniment model of missionary work. This growing regard for the other is seen in the indigenes teaching missionaries even as the missionaries are sharing the Gospel and teaching the indigenes.

These time periods build upon one another, expanding the field of vision through which the work of mission has now been encouraged. One today might view mission through the lens of accompaniment, "a lens and methodology for mission today." In the mission work in which we engage, we now seek "walking together in solidarity that practices interdependence and mutuality."<sup>52</sup> Fascinating to discover are the ways in which not only the missionary but

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<sup>52</sup> Rafael Malpica Padilla, "Accompaniment: A Lens and Methodology for Mission Today," *ELCA Global Mission: Resources: Learning About Accompaniment* <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Global-Mission/Engage-in-Global-Mission/Resources.aspx> (accessed January 27, 2011), 1.

especially the indigenous peoples begin to reflect the elements of accompaniment over the 125-year history.

## 2.1 The Call and Early Years of Johann Flierl

The year 1886 begins the 125-year history of missionary work in Papua New Guinea that we celebrate in this year 2011. The deep connection that the Lutheran Church in PNG and Wartburg Theological Seminary share is their beginnings coming from the mission seminary in Neuendettelsau, Germany. The story of missionary work in PNG certainly begins with God at work in PNG long before missionaries ever arrived. At the same time, its beginnings include the deep sense of call to a little schoolboy in Germany, Johann Flierl, who finds himself thoroughly intrigued while looking at printed pictures of “heathens” from distant lands in the missionary tracts brought to his school.<sup>53</sup> Flierl’s voracious interest in learning about the *other* is an important trait in missionary work and seems an early reflection of accompaniment. The intensity of his desire is such that no obstacle keeps Flierl from answering this call to serving the New Guinea territory--not others encouraging him to go to America instead, not his having been teased about it in grade school, and not delay nor lack of resources.<sup>54</sup> Flierl’s determination evokes a sense of idealism, for his endeavor is to be among such an “untouched heathen people, not yet trampled on, oppressed and pushed aside by white settlers.”<sup>55</sup> From the very beginning, he has a deep concern for the injustice of colonialism in both the Americas and Australia, which fueled his conviction that the Gospel be shared all the more with these peoples.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Johann Flierl, *Forty-Five Years in New Guinea*, trans. Prof. M. Wiederaenders (Columbus: The Lutheran Book Concern, 1931), 12-13.

<sup>54</sup> Flierl, *Forty-Five Years in New Guinea*, 18-23.

<sup>55</sup> Herwig Wagner, “Beginnings at Finschhafen,” in *The Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea: The First Hundred Years*, ed. Herwig Wagner and Hermann Reiner (Adelaide, Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1986), 35.

<sup>56</sup> Flierl, *Forty-Five Years in New Guinea*, 18.

He built the first mission station in Simbang, despite indigenous unrest, remaining positive no matter the setbacks. Permission was granted from Germany<sup>57</sup> but not necessarily from the local tribe. Due to Flierl's misunderstanding "local customs," he neglected to "seek the explicit permission of the village leaders to settle on their land." He received fierce rejection as the indigenous voice spoke loudly in action as one man raised an axe and charged at Flierl, whom Flierl was able to thwart off with some physical effort. The action of one local person prompted another. The son of the attacker picked up the thrown axe and ran away with it, securing that nobody would be using the axe to kill that day. It was the action of a child that settled the dispute for that day.<sup>58</sup>

There seemed an indigenous intrigue toward Flierl that was mixed with fear and anger because of the assault on their land by the German business ventures. It was challenging for Flierl to disassociate himself entirely from the negative influences the German Company had already asserted on the people.<sup>59</sup> The indigenous people's determination to be rid of the stranger seemed to match that of Flierl's determination. Even when they stole from him, killed his goats, and defecated all around his house, Flierl remained.<sup>60</sup> This patience without violence was probably the only way to disassociate himself with the Europeans who had "ascribe[d] an absolutely inferior status to" the New Guineans."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Flierl, *Forty-Five Years in New Guinea*, 36-37

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 29

<sup>59</sup> Mikloucho-MacClay, *New Guinea Diaries: 1871-1883*, translation and biographical comments by C.L. Sentinella (Madang, PNG: Kristen Press, 1975)

<sup>60</sup> Sila Kamungsanga in *The Birth of an Indigenous Church: Letters, Reports and Documents of Lutheran Christians of Papua New Guinea*, ed. Gernot Fugmann (Goroka, EHP, Papua New Guinea: The Melanesian Institute, 1986), 160-161.

<sup>61</sup> Gernot Fugmann, *The Birth of an Indigenous Church: Letters, Reports and Documents of Lutheran Christians of Papua New Guinea*, ed. Gernot Fugmann, ed. (Goroka, EHP, Papua New Guinea: The Melanesian Institute, 1986), 159.

Both the necessary time and patience required for Flierl's and other missionaries' early efforts were extensive, for it took 13 years for the first New Guineans to be baptized.<sup>62</sup> Perhaps as much as Flierl's idealism might be considered a hazard and infringement on indigenous customs and worldview, enduring for this amount of time for successful conversion experiences was necessary. Flierl's autobiographical writings reflect the very challenge he encountered in that missionaries did not have the ability to change the indigenous people's worldview.

Anyone who believes that the natives of New Guinea have no religious conceptions of their own, that their heart and mind are like empty vessels that can easily be filled with Christian content, are badly mistaken. On the contrary, as rank and abundant as the growth of the tropical forest that almost completely covers New Guinea, so rich and manifold is the world of ideas and opinions of its inhabitants. And the thoughts and views that lodge in the heathen hearts and minds of these children of nature must first be expelled before the thoughts of the gospel can find room there.<sup>63</sup>

The contemporary mind may have some difficulty with Flierl's assumption that one can expel the identity of another so completely, forcing upon the indigenous peoples a sort of conformity to the Western Christian worldview.

While feeling a pang of frustration about the severity that Johann Flierl regarded the indigenous worldview, the contemporary observer is wise to regard the time and culture from which Flierl would have come. What he could value was an indigenous type of piety, seeing how they prayed to all kinds of spirits for every single thing they did, "compared with many white people [who] do everything without prayer and without considering the higher powers."<sup>64</sup> At the same time, he saw much challenge to overcome in the local sorcery practices and named the belief evil in two ways: that it was the cause of "distrust, fear, and strife throughout the land

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<sup>62</sup> Flierl, *Forty-Five Years in New Guinea*, 41.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 58

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 52



and...[and that] it made the people entirely indifferent towards all cautions and measures to prevent sickness, wounds, accidents, etc.”<sup>65</sup>

Flierl’s gift for the missionary work was truly administrative, for in his memoirs he describes many projects with gratefulness for the goodwill of the various mission supports from America, Germany and Australia. All these efforts would be necessary to reach the important goal that the indigenes would be doing much of the missionary work themselves, for “in time, the native helper will take the place of the white missionary.”<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, he touches upon the prejudice of his time, that “for some people are still of the opinion that anybody is good enough for the mission field, that anything is good enough for the blacks, that it is a pity to send gifted men.” He retorts that “the very best is not too good” and that the mission needed “men who the native helpers can look up to, whom they can take for examples.”<sup>67</sup>

His idealism for the people of PNG and the mission hits very real obstacles inherent in their own culture, limited resources, and not least of all, his fears of the negative influences from the Western world toward unbelief.<sup>68</sup> His seeming intent on subsuming the indigenous custom and practice with that of idealized western Christian practices could be critiqued. However, his educating the local peoples may have been what helped them endure the invasion of their land by the modern world’s way of warfare years after the European conquest and Christian conversion of many New Guineans. Despite hardship, illness, and length of time, Flierl’s and many other missionaries’ commitment to sharing the Gospel with the New Guineans, especially through education, was a reward when they could witness how the Gospel was transforming a people who had been ever at odds with one another and fearful of death.

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<sup>65</sup> Flierl, *Forty-Five Years in New Guinea*, 53

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 178

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 178

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 180

Flierl's regard for the indigenes was for their own endurance in the Gospel, as he wisely foresaw that "times of trouble will no doubt come to the Mission Church in New Guinea, and the better our Christians have comprehended the central truth of the Christian faith, the better they have apprehended salvation in Christ, the better they will stand in the day of trouble."<sup>69</sup> Some ten years after Flierl retires from the field, those days of trouble would come to pass when the largest Melanesian island would become a battlefield during World War II.

## 2.2 The Emergence of Indigenous Voices in Post-World War II

World War II was a time that tested the resolve of the mission, and perhaps more so, the indigenous Christians, themselves. Now there are several things to acknowledge about World War II. First, the Australian government forced all German missionaries from their mission stations as they distrusted any German person as a threat. Then when the Japanese invaded New Guinea, they imprisoned those Australian and American missionaries who had remained at their posts. Sadly, the many air raids and bombings caused immense destruction of virtually all the missionary stations, homes, hospitals, schools and churches.<sup>70</sup> For several years, missionaries had no contact with the local evangelists and churches, "thus left to themselves for years in the confusing storm of the war incidents."<sup>71</sup> What would be the fate of the New Guinean churches in the midst of these challenges now that a "fire had broken over the world whose devastating power threatened to wipe out everything that had been built up so diligently over the past

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<sup>69</sup> Flierl, *Forty-Five Years in New Guinea*, 179.

<sup>70</sup> Kurt-Dietrich Mrossko, "Missionary Advance to the Highlands," in *The Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea: The First Hundred Years*, ed. Herwig Wagner and Hermann Reiner (Adelaide, Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1986), 203.

<sup>71</sup> Christian Keysser, *A People Reborn*, 1950, trans. Alfred Allin and John Kuder, fore. Donald McGavran (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1980), 266.

years”?<sup>72</sup> What came to pass was a new acknowledgement and respect for the indigenous evangelists and churches. This trying time revealed their resolve and commitment to the Gospel which left an indelible impression on many an American and Australian service personnel. The servicemen could see that the people had established deep relationships with their missionaries and longed for their friends to return.

The lack of contact with the indigenous churches during war time surely brought concerns for all. What would happen to this mission field? How would the New Guinean people react to this war without the leadership of the missionaries? However, what comes to be seen are the results of the early missionaries’ strategy to equip the New Guinean church leaders. “It cannot be emphasized often enough how much the Lutheran Highlands Mission [for example] [had] been the work of the New Guinean missionaries right from the beginning.”<sup>73</sup> In the Highlands region, when the mission had just begun and war destroyed the Ogelbeng station, “regular Sunday services were held at the station school by former pupils... All on their own, ...the older school pupils had gone out, gathered the children together, and held classes.”<sup>74</sup> Similar commitment despite the destruction and loss was revealed in a letter that missionary family Victor and Ida Voss Koschade received from a former native friend in 1945.

He wrote from KarKar Island that “there was nothing left of the Gonob and Amron Mission Stations...how all the missionaries were gone.” However, a message from a native teacher included in the letter revealed this: “The work of God carried on by your hands and the Word of God through books which you missionaries prepared for us has ceased. Therefore we are just going around preaching the Word of God as it is in our hearts, nothing more.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Mrossko, “Missionary Advance to the Highlands” in *The Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea: The First Hundred Years*, 202.

<sup>73</sup> Mrossko, “Missionary Advance to the Highlands” in *The Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea: The First Hundred Years.*, 212

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 202

<sup>75</sup> Paul and Eleanor Knie, *To the Ends of the Earth: The Life Story of Ida Voss*, (Printed in China: Everbest Printing Co. Ltd., 2004: Published by the Knie Family Trust) 131-132.

God's Word had been imprinted on the hearts of the people, and despite the destruction of their books and the printing press, the Word still was living among the people.

The indigenous Christians' commitment to continuing the work of the mission in worship, baptisms and schooling on their own made an impression on those serving in New Guinea during the war. An American professor who visited New Guinea for post-war studies revealed excitement at the faith of the New Guineans: "The brown Christians' sadness over the removal of their missionary is easily understood. This removal meant a testing of their faith. However, you would be more than delighted at the magnificent work that many of the people are doing if you could only see what I have seen."<sup>76</sup> Lt. Col. Chaplain Arnold Maahs reveals a deeper appreciation for the New Guinean Christians as he acknowledges that "it is true that the Christian natives were our staunchest friends and helpers, and no one will ever know the many deeds of mercy and kindness which they performed during the war."<sup>77</sup>

The indigenous voice of New Guinean Pastor Ud reveals a bitter irony when he preaches at a worship service that Theodore Fricke, the Commissioner of Foreign Missions of the American Lutheran Church attends with other American servicemen. Pastor Ud compares himself to a wild pig that the missionary hunts down and helps, and if he had not, "when you soldiers came to New Guinea, you would have found me a strange, wild creature, and you would have shot me and killed me."<sup>78</sup> The underlying indigenous assumption is fear of what the soldier might have done to the indigenous peoples had they not had the missionaries who educated them and preached in the name of Jesus Christ to them. They would not have known how to trust or encounter the white soldiers, nor could the soldiers have known how to trust the natives.

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<sup>76</sup> Keysser, *A People Reborn*, 266.

<sup>77</sup> Arnold M. Maahs, *Our Eyes Were Opened*, (Columbus, Ohio: The Wartburg Press, 1946) 8.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 71

It is most interesting to see a respect for the indigenous Christians arise out of the increased exposure that New Guinea received from the Western world. This is particularly seen from the Americans and Australians who were stationed in Papua New Guinea during World War II, warding off the Japanese invasion of the island. What is more, it seemed that those who came from distant shores to this island would find that it was the indigenes who had something to teach them about the bond Christians may share, no matter the color of one's skin. Lt. Col. Chaplain Andrew Maahs recalls great hospitality shown him over and over again in his book recalling his post-war observances. He is overwhelmed by an elderly woman from the village of Nadzab, who took his hand, saying,

*“Sie sind ein Christ”* (You are a Christian). ..As I trudged through the mud and the water I couldn't get her words out of my mind...This woman recognized the bond which exists among all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. She is a Christian, and never had anyone paid me a greater compliment than [she]...she had cut through the barriers of color and civilization and the many other things which separate us to that faith which sets all believers apart from the rest of the world.”<sup>79</sup>

Likewise, Pastor Ud shares the same sentiment in the recorded sermon at the army chapel, one indigenous voice profoundly sharing what is to be true among those in Christ:

“Before this you had not seen me, and I had not seen you. You lived in your village, and I lived in mine. We thought of each other as different people because we had different colors of skin. But underneath, our hearts are very much alike. Both of us have a common heart and have worshipped together here for the first time. This has been made possible only because we both have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ.”<sup>80</sup>

Consequently, it was noted that “many a soldier from America and Australia who had fought in Papua...was so impressed by the nationals that he decided to engage in mission service after his discharge.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Maahs, *Our Eyes Were Opened*, 84-85.

<sup>80</sup> Theodore P. Fricke, *We Found Them Waiting*, (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1947), 71-72.

<sup>81</sup> Keysser, *A People Reborn*, 266.

These experiences brought to light the depth to which the indigenous Christians were indeed committed to the mission work, bringing about a call for stronger commitment than ever before for the continued efforts of the Lutheran missionaries. What those who were listening to the people heard was a cry for the return of their missionaries. They wept bitterly over the loss of some of the missionaries who had died during the war. They warmly welcomed the American missionaries who came to serve in New Guinea after the war.<sup>82</sup> In indigenous symbolic expression, the Ogelbeng people of the Highlands presented returning missionary John Kuder “a rope with 19 knots, symbolizing 19 places where churches and houses of prayer had already been set up...But on the rope were another 22 knots symbolizing places possessing churches, but no one to preach the Gospel...there were numerous villages waiting for missionaries to come, but which had not yet set up any houses of prayer.”<sup>83</sup> The displayed needs seemed endless in similar situations: thousands were gathering in Asaroka for worship”<sup>84</sup> In the next decade, much growth would be seen along with many challenges, including the rise of the cargo cults and continuing cultural discrepancies with Christian and Western customs.<sup>85</sup> This period of time indicated the need for a deepening sense of mutuality toward which the local peoples and missionaries seemed headed.

### 2.3 The Growing Sense of Accompaniment in the 1950s/1960s

Through intense rebuilding and missionary efforts following the war and the indigenous evangelists at work in new parts of New Guinea, the Lutheran church had grown rapidly,

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<sup>82</sup> Keysser, *A People Reborn*, 266.

<sup>83</sup> Mrossko, “Missionary Advance to the Highlands,” in *The Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea: The First Hundred Years*, 204.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Keysser, *A People Reborn*, 267-272.

claiming about 200,000 members by 1960.<sup>86</sup> An interesting dynamic to consider in the missionary history is the convergence of missionaries from three different continents, each with particular evaluations and observations of the New Guinea mission field. Missionaries reflecting connections from three continents include: Dr. Vicedom, a German pre-war missionary, who returned after the war and assessed the broad picture of the field, and Ron and Else Schardt-- Ron, an American who came to New Guinea in the late 1950s as a builder, meeting and marrying Else Helbig, the daughter of Australian missionary, Martin Helbig.<sup>87</sup> Their collective insights shed light on how missionary work evolved over time, reflecting elements of the ELCA's Global Mission statement. Looking through this lens at what Vicedom and the Schardts recount about their missionary work at this time, one can observe elements of accompaniment in their experiences: *walking together*, practicing *interdependence* and *mutuality*.

*Walking together* with the indigenous peoples was a most necessary experience in the missionary work of this and most certainly earlier times. How would any missionary on his or her own begin to know what path to take through the dense forests and ever-changing landscapes of Papua New Guinea? Vicedom's description of a day's hike in some mountain gorges seems to reflect his impression of missionary work in Papua New Guinea: "The ranges are cut by countless deep gorges; in consequence at the end of a day's march through the mountains the traveler may be only a few miles distant, as the crow flies, from his starting point."<sup>88</sup> The Schardts' punctuate this point well, of never knowing how far you have come in knowing the Melanesian way, in that for most, "the longer you are there, the more you realize you don't know."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> G.F. Vicedom, *Church and People in New Guinea*, (New York: Association Press, 1960), 10.

<sup>87</sup> Ron and Else Schardt interview by author, 25 January 2011, Dubuque, IA, written notes.

<sup>88</sup> Vicedom, *Church and People in New Guinea*, 7.

<sup>89</sup> Ron and Else Schardt interview

Vicedom acknowledges the mistakes of the early missionaries who initially fell back on doing what they had always done. Upon learning the language, the missionaries would translate the bible stories and hymns and share them with the young students who attended their schools.<sup>90</sup> At first, they would persuade individuals to accept Christianity without awareness that the livelihood of the baptized was bound up in their clan and would leave them eventually ostracized.<sup>91</sup> It was necessary for the entire village to become baptized together, and the event would be full of symbols and drama.<sup>92</sup> He pointed out what seemed to work, like the value of dialogue in sermons where questions would be asked and people would answer questions to ensure they would understand what was being preached.<sup>93</sup> Only by spending a long time with the people would these discoveries be known, but now the move was for a more independent church. Impending was the need to *walk with solidarity*, meaning that unity would be necessary on multiple levels.

Indeed, Vicedom's pre- and post- war experiences indicate how solidarity was necessary, not just with the missionary walking alongside the New Guinean, but among "the Churches and missions in the West." The convergence of "the Lutheran Mission, New Guinea came into being...[which] did a great deal to promote the unity" of the indigenous congregations, eventually leading to the writing of a Church Constitution and formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of New Guinea.<sup>94</sup> So at this time, the missionaries especially needed to practice mutuality and interdependence with the New Guineans, as it was then understood that "the missionary shall not undertake duties which could also be undertaken by a native office

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<sup>90</sup> Vicedom, *Church and People in New Guinea*, 14.

<sup>91</sup> Vicedom, *The Church and the People of New Guinea*, 16.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 54-55



bearer or by the congregation. The goal of all his activities should be the autonomous Church.”<sup>95</sup>

While building autonomy was important, Vicedom described the relationship between the Lutheran Mission and the new church as “one of mutual confidence.” Their Church constitution read that “The Evangelical Lutheran Church of New Guinea recognizes that it has developed out of the work of the Lutheran Mission as sponsored by various sending Churches. It desires that the service of the mission continue in its midst so long as this service is possible or needed.”<sup>96</sup>

As Vicedom describes various New Guinean customs, something poignant is reflected about the local Christian people. In these stories are lessons that the indigenous peoples are teaching that the reader today who is looking for it will find, namely, lessons about an accompaniment model for mission. In one instance when missionaries are thought to be closing up a conversion ceremony in Mt. Hagen, the people ask the missionary to follow them. “When we (the Mt. Hagen people) are making a promise that must now in no circumstances be broken, the two partners must plant a little tree together. Here are the seedlings. You must plant one of them in the earth with each of the chiefs.”<sup>97</sup> They are the ones initiating another form of communicating by “doing,” hence, seeming to exhibit a hope for mutuality and solidarity with the missionary. Vicedom also shares how one experience taught him the value of building relationships in New Guinea:

I was sitting in one of the huts, and eating the meal that had been provided for me. As I was doing so, the people began to weep. When I asked them why they were doing so, they said, ‘Tell your people there at home that we want to have missionaries who will show us that they love us by really entering into fellowship with us the way you do.’<sup>98</sup>

Vicedom further considers the fact that many missionaries raised their children in the midst of the people: “Looking back, it is possible to say that a missionary was never completely

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<sup>95</sup> Vicedom, *Church and People in New Guinea*, 74.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 73

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 22

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 12

accepted by the people, unless his children were born and could grow up among them.”<sup>99</sup>

Perhaps the same could be said for the missionary child who grew up among the New Guineans.

Else Schardt who has experienced much of her lifetime in Papua New Guinea sees the missionary work she witnessed as always reflecting accompaniment characteristics. “Right from the very first years, the missionaries were accompanying the Gospel with taking care of the physical needs” through providing medical care and education.”<sup>100</sup>

The Schardts responded to the ELCA announcement of the accompaniment model itself by writing the 2009 book, *Mission in Motion: Walking Together with God’s People in Papua New Guinea*. It truly reflects *motion* in the constant walking the Scardts describe in their journeys from village to village which covered so little territory at a time. It is that part of accompaniment, walking in solidarity with our neighbor, which is evident in the work of not only the missionaries but also the indigenous people who would guide them. How often it is seen that the Schardts in their wearisome travels, sometimes to the point of tears,<sup>101</sup> must rely on the goodwill of the indigenous peoples who provide for them shelter, food, and water time and time again. The people walk with them, too. The very task of the 1960s missionary at this point is accompaniment, often walking into the situation with uncertainty about the journey as Ron recalls: “Though eager to begin our missionary calling, Else and I don’t really know what that means in practical terms. We do know our first task involves getting acquainted, learning the local language and culture of the people, and simply observing God working among the people.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Vicedom, *Church and People in New Guinea*, 13.

<sup>100</sup> Schardt interview 25 January 2011.

<sup>101</sup> Ronald and Else Scardt, *Mission in Motion: Walking Together with God’s People in Papua New Guinea*, (Mansfield, Ohio: BookMasters, Inc.), 70.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 14

The Schardts must observe the way that these local churches resolve conflict and live in community, that “whatever affects one affects all. Nothing is secret...One person’s woes become everyone’s woes, and one person’s joys evoke everyone’s rejoicings.” Furthermore, “Consensus must be reached, though often not full agreement. This happens by literally “talking it out,” meaning that everyone who has anything to say gets a chance to speak.”<sup>103</sup> It is these observations of village custom that inform them when entering into challenging situations, and would require patience in dealing with conflict with village churches.

The Schardts experience first-hand the influences of how Christianity, the uninformed observation of Western wealth and culture, and PNG worldview through myth had merged into the cargo cult. Traditional practices of appeasing the spirit world in order to experience a particular wholeness of life through material wealth are some elements of the cargo cults.<sup>104</sup> What is valuable in a particular encounter with the cargo cult phenomenon, though startling no less for the Schardts, was the turnaround of the Gonggan people in Boana from the cultic practice. Unable to convince them that the cult departs from the very truth of the Gospel, they leave the people who won’t be persuaded by the missionary. It is the indigenous pastor who remains patient with the people and is equipped to patiently guide the people to a repentance ceremony performed for the invited leaders of Boana circuit. It is a time of immense drama, re-enactment, crying and weeping and demonstration that at first has Ron Schardt wondering at their genuineness of repentance, but indeed, it reflects their cultural practice. This is where understanding the indigenous worldview is imperative as Ron explains that the PNG “people often do things in symbolic and dramatic ways, and they love to act out stories and ideas that

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<sup>103</sup>Schardt, *Mission in Motion* , 32.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 74

have deep meaning.”<sup>105</sup> Part of accompaniment is sharing in the joys and sorrows of the people, as evident in the invitation to celebrate the people’s turnaround.

Another example of a regard for the indigenous perspective is when Ron recalls the appearance of a spirit at a boy’s dormitory at a school, and how for the students, the appearance of the apparition was very real. For them, they believed it to be a sign of something evil that had happened to one of them from their home areas. Ron treated the situation as seriously as he could, though this kind of experience he was not akin to. He was able to allay their fears by reminding them of the promise of the protection of the Holy Spirit.<sup>106</sup> Valuable to the situation was Ron’s ability to recognize that a reality exists for the people unlike his own and instead of trying to convince them they were wrong, he “accompanied” them in their fears speaking the truth of God’s promise to them in that moment.

Ron and Else Schardt take the opportunity to look back in time through the lens of an accompaniment model of mission, reflecting their sentiments about the people of Papua New Guinea: “We have been privileged to learn how the people minister to one another in their own ways, keeping their Christian faith and hope alive, and to accompany them briefly on their respective faith journeys.”<sup>107</sup> They also acknowledge a spirit of mutuality and interdependence, regarding their “many Papua New Guinean friends and fellow church workers, who patiently taught us their languages and cultures, and shared with us the realities of their lives, their dreams, and their aspirations. These mentors greatly blessed us by including us as members of their families and their communities.”<sup>108</sup> A valuable addition to the book is an invitation through questions at the end of each section inviting others to imagine themselves in this setting and to

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 76-81

<sup>106</sup> Schardt, *Mission in Motion*, 145.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 140

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 7

listen for the similarities and differences in the experiences of the church in PNG as compared to their own cultural and regional experience. Whether in the accompaniment model's most idealized sense or not, we do know that it is Christ who walks in solidarity with all, working through the power of the Holy Spirit, inviting us into a mutuality and interdependence among those joined together in the Body of Christ.

### **3. The Voices of Papua New Guineans Today**

Over time, the missionaries' deep engagement with the indigenous peoples likely evokes concern for the dramatic worldview shift the indigenes have endured. Experience and anthropological study surely have informed PNG missionaries about this dilemma. Chapter 1 unfolds how dramatically different the indigenous and Western worldviews are, and it seems quite apparent that the vast culture and reality cannot be erased from the peoples nor entirely from their Christian practices. The Melanesian Institute addresses and wrestles with this situation. Furthermore, indigenous Christians who are writing today seem to be clearly stating that they will always be fully Melanesian and fully Christian. They seem to implore of their readers an acceptance for their struggle that they in their own right are working to reconcile this within themselves and for other Melanesians.

#### **3.1 The Melanesian Institute Engages Indigenous Perspectives**

After the Second World War, "the challenge of nation-building prompted church leaders to work together for a united and Christian independent country."<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, the expatriate Christian missionaries from both Protestant and Catholic churches acknowledged that "it would

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<sup>109</sup> Brian Schwarz, "The Ecumenical Setting," *The Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea: The First One Hundred Years*, eds. Herwig Wagner and Hermann Reiner (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1986), 342.

be morally indefensible simply to pass on to indigenous heirs the divisions which Western Christianity had undeniably introduced into the total fabric of Melanesian society.”<sup>110</sup> What had been left unresolved was the fierce contention among the Christian denominations present in PNG, Protestants and Catholics alike, especially when it came to claiming mission territory. Hence, Catholics, Methodists, and Lutherans, in particular, made an intentional move towards building an ecumenical relationship within PNG in the years leading up to the country’s declaration as an independent country in 1975. With over “820 language groups” and “even more political units,”<sup>111</sup> for these diverse peoples to merge into Christian or political unity while continuing to claim their individual tribal traditions would be a challenging attempt.

By 1965, in efforts to be more regionally effective than an overall pan-Pacific Islands council might be, the “Anglican, Baptist, Evangelical Lutheran, Methodist, and Papua Ekalesia Churches” formed the Melanesian Council of Churches (MCC). However, the absence of Catholic involvement meant that “the Council lacked the voice of the largest church in Melanesia.”<sup>112</sup> This would not be the case for long since changes were happening within the Catholic Church. Both the growing awareness of the Catholic missionaries regarding their lack of knowledge of PNG culture and especially the Second Vatican Council crafting a bold statement about the Church’s missionary activity prompted the founding of the Melanesian Institute (MI) in 1968.<sup>113</sup> The time was ripe, and the convergence of the Protestant and Catholic churches’ efforts came about as the MCC invited Catholics to join in 1971. Likewise, Protestants were met with mutual invitation from the Catholics to participate in the work of the Melanesian

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> *Politics in Papua New Guinea: Continuities, Changes, and Challenges*, eds. Michael A. Rynkiewich and Roland Seib. *Point* No. 24. (Goroka, EHP, PNG: Melanesian Institute, 2000), 6.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 343

<sup>113</sup> Alphonse Aime, “The Melanesian Institute,” *Catalyst* 21, no. 1, (1991), 8.

Institute.<sup>114</sup> Undoubtedly, the direction of missionary work in Papua New Guinea reflected a growing sense of mutuality among Christian leadership. This began the collective movement toward understanding the indigenous perspective and making space for the Melanesian voices to emerge, both particular objectives of the Melanesian Institute's overall mission.

The aim of the MI is “that the peoples of Melanesia may have abundant life in Christ, and give witness to that life within their own cultural contexts.”<sup>115</sup> Much of the MI activities are didactic and informative in nature and include the following: seminars and courses about changes both in society and “in the theology and pastoral approaches in the churches”; orientation courses for “new missionaries from overseas”; research in the areas of local theologies and problems of “migration and urbanization”; and publications including a quarterly magazine, *Catalyst*, “POINT, a twice-yearly forum on Melanesian affairs,” and *Umben*, a magazine designed for church workers.<sup>116</sup> In both the *Catalyst* and *Point*, there is a definite movement to include the indigenous voices, and representation of indigenous contributors from the 1980s to 2000 in these publications increases over time. These indigenous writers share the tension of living into both their traditional and Christian heritages. It is in the symbol for the Melanesian Institute that reflects this deep desire for the development of a more indigenous understanding of Christianity:

The snake, frequently humanized, is a group representation of everlasting life in Melanesian cultures. The cross, of course is the symbol of the fullness of Christian life. In the combination of both, we wish to portray our aim—which was Christ's—that through our efforts, ‘they may have more abundant life’—Christian, Melanesian life’. Further, the enclosure of the two figures within the unbroken circle expresses the hope, and the goal that the traditional religious concepts proper to Melanesia will one day be truly synthesized with the message of Christ.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Scwartz, “The Ecumenical Setting,” in *The Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea: The First Hundred Years*, 346.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Aime, “The Melanesian Institute” in *Catalyst*, 8-10.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 11.

The work of the Melanesian Institute includes highlighting cultural dimensions of indigenous life while considering how these practices might be reconsidered in light of the Gospel. Consider the aspects of culture discussed in Chapter One: origin myths, death, and magic practice. That the PNG peoples have been trying to make sense their indigenous cultural practices within Christianity indicates a need for a distinct Melanesian expression of Christianity. Take for example origin myths like that of the Simbu peoples, which Ennio Mantovani explores in *Christ the Life of Papua New Guinea*. Recall the story about the younger brother being asked to kill his older brother bringing about the gift of pigs, which to the Melanesian “represents physical well being, fullness of life and happiness...a symbol of true life.”<sup>118</sup> Mantovani explains that the particular understanding of this biocosmic myth, which is “the giving of true life through death—is expressed in ritual too.”<sup>119</sup>

Mantovani also explores this myth informing the common ritual of a pig-kill which is enacted in many Simbu tribal celebrations. Outsiders have often rationalized the ritual as a “sacrifice to the ancestors.”<sup>120</sup> Ancestors are indeed invited to be a part of it because most Melanesians consider them a part of the “extended family” and “are present at the feast....There is no other way to get true life but by making present the life-giving-event of the death which occurred at the beginning of the present time.”<sup>121</sup> From the indigenous perspective, the dead, who exist on the same plane as those still living, need to experience the life-giving aspects of the ritual, too. “Through its ritual killing the pig gives health and growth of everything. It keeps life flowing...It comes to symbolize everything that is positive.”<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Ennio Mantovani, “Christ the Life of Papua New Guinea,” (Goroka, E.H.P.: The Melanesian Institute, 1988), 13.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 13



Through the understanding of this ritual and the myth connected to it, the pathway to enriched understanding of Christianity for both expatriate missionaries and Melanesians themselves can lead to some interesting conclusions. For example, as Mantovani explores this myth, he in retrospect sees that the starting point for Melanesians to understand the revealing of God's self in Christ might not be to start with the "creation and the fall" as those "coming from theistic cultures" thinking temporally would have done. Rather, "the Paschal Mystery" would be a more fitting place to start, as Christ "is the one who freely offered his life so that we might have true life. He made it possible for our communities to make present his life-giving death (in the Eucharist) whenever we feel the need for it."<sup>123</sup> Understanding that some Melanesian ritual may have been that with which God has gifted the indigenous peoples might inspire Western Christians to re-embrace God's gift of *experience* in the Sacraments as informative and not relying solely upon knowledge to inform. At the same time, it may evoke a deep loss of understanding and connection Western Christians may feel in not knowing why they do what they do. Sacraments are rarely connected to any other cultural practice in Western culture, thereby, limiting the experience of being a Christian solely in the domain of worship.

Aspects of PNG death customs considered in light of Christianity are also explored in MI publications. Catholic expatriate missionary, Phillip Gibbs, explores Enga tribal death practices and considers Christian pastoral care in light of these traditions. He believes that "the event of serious illness and death is the least evangelized dimension of people's lives" in the Enga churches. From this observation, he encourages strong pastoral presence and prayer both in the time one is sick and in the time of the funeral. Being present can bring comfort and "quell" concerns about witchcraft and other forms of sorcery that people use to explain death and illness. Inherent in these traditions is both an animosity between and an expectation of gifts from clans

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<sup>123</sup> Mantovani, "Christ, the Life of Papua New Guinea," 45.

of the wife/mother along with elaborate mourning and funerary practices. Gibbs suggests that writing liturgy to observe the end of the mourning practices “followed by a simple meal to celebrate the beginning of normal life for both the family and the clan” might be helpful.<sup>124</sup>

He explores how the Catholic tradition in “the communion of the saints,” provides another alternative to “sending the spirits away,” an indigenous tradition practiced out of fear of the vengeance of the deceased’s spirit.<sup>125</sup> For example a widow might pray and use “blessed water,” speaking directly to her deceased husband, asking in the name of Jesus that his spirit be with them only for doing God’s will and never for harm.”<sup>126</sup> Gibbs also recognizes that limits in language and cultural images have posed further challenges. For example, Gibbs feels that prayers should not be ones simply translated from Western prayers into Pidgin or another local language. Rather, he suggests that they might reflect locally familiar images like that of “a broken fence” or “a collapsed house.”<sup>127</sup>

Magic practices and sorcery are issues PNG churches face as there is a resurgence of witchcraft practice in the New Guinea highlands region.<sup>128</sup> In a 2006 *Catalyst* article, the fluidity of how people hold both worldviews is explored. Indigenous contributor Gairo Onagi conveys the “point of view of the Mailu society that, sorcery and witchcraft is strongly held by the people. They still want to hold on to both [Christianity and their good healing traditions] because they see the benefits of and in both. They easily shift to either of them as they wish. When people want both worlds there has to be the process of blending,” he suggests.<sup>129</sup> He explains that “the rural villager who respects and loves the Church...views that the knowledge he possesses

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<sup>124</sup> Gibbs, “Kumanda: Death and Pastoral Care-a Christian Enga Perspective” in *Catalyst*, 96.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 97

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 97

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

<sup>128</sup> Gairo Onagi, “Witchcraft, Spirits and Christianity: A Case Study of the Mailu Society,” *Catalyst* 37, no. 1, (2007), 53.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 77

about witchcraft has been given to him by the Big Spirit [the same God of the Bible] and that he should hold on to it.”<sup>130</sup>

Onagi challenges current Christian theology with a line of questions that seems to point toward a need for stronger indigenous church leadership and clearer guidelines for contextualization:

“Is there a Melanesian Christian way to deal with this contradiction and paradox that confronts us today? Would we renounce all our traditions in the name of Christianity? What does contextualization of the gospel mean when we come to our traditions? Should we allow Melanesians themselves to create their own Melanesian Christianity and use their traditions as a basis to worship God? If that is the case, then who should define those traditions?”<sup>131</sup>

The questions bubble forth for the Melanesian struggling to find a balance in which to hold their reality. And so who rearticulates traditions for culturally diverse groups of Christians who truly have a Melanesian worldview? For Onagi, the Gospel could not speak more clearly to a situation such as the deep fear of sorcerers using bad magic, and appealing to this, he calls for the Church “to pray for those who are against us and bless those who are cursing us.”<sup>132</sup> For Onagi, the Gospel seems to inform him how to stand in the face of evil as it is experienced in his culture.

The contribution of the Melanesian Institute to a Melanesian “synthesis” of Christianity is certainly noteworthy, particularly in the genuine desire for both missionary and indigenous leadership to foster this. It provides the continual forum to discuss difficult issues, arising from a country that seeks unity in spite of the diversity of culture and language. While there is a separation of church and state in much of the secularized Western world, the MI publications address significant political and land issues that abound in PNG. The invitation for the indigenous view is consistently present and all the more necessary to encourage the on-going

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<sup>130</sup> Onagi, “Witchcraft, Spirits and Christianity: A Case Study of the Mailu Society,” in *Catalyst*, 74.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 75

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 78

dialogue of what it means to be people of Papua New Guinea representing a vast diversity of cultures.

It can be observed through these MI publications that questions persist about how Christianity can be more fully expressed in the Melanesian way. The move in missionary work has become more dialogical in nature in which “reciprocal enrichment” is most always experienced.<sup>133</sup> Mantovani boldly states that “God’s self-revelation in and through creation must aim at the final revelation in the God-man, in the Logos who became flesh, in Jesus Christ. This is one reason more, then, for sharing one’s understanding of the cultural understanding of God’s self-revelation. It is the gift for the whole of humankind.”<sup>134</sup> Learning and listening more so than assuming and forcing an understanding paves the way for such “reciprocal enrichment,” and so what are the indigenous voices saying?

### 3.2 The Tension of Claiming A Christian and Indigenous Identity

At this point, it is not only necessary but also exciting to delve into “dialogue” with indigenous writers from PNG. Having a background in their worldview with snapshots from the history of Western influence may serve to train the ear to listen more sensitively to what indigenous people have to say about various aspects of contemporary life in PNG. There is a notable tension in attempting to deal with living in both indigenous and Western worldviews. Examples that explore this tension include indigenous writers featured from the Melanesian Institute’s publications, from two Wartburg Theological Seminary 2006 graduates, and from an aspiring female author of Melanesian descent. They present only a limited array of indigenous

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<sup>133</sup> Mantovani, “Christ the Life of Papua New Guinea,” 9.

<sup>134</sup> Mantovani, “Christ the Life of Papua New Guinea,” 8-9.

voices, but all of them have very fascinating things to say about living fluidly within two worldviews in the political, church and personal arenas.

An intriguing indigenous voice is that of Bernard Narokobi, a man who no longer identifies himself with being “of Wautogig village, Arapesh country.” He states, “I am a Papua New Guinean. I am the Chief Legal Advisor to the National Executive Government.”<sup>135</sup> There is a particular wisdom in how Narokobi enters into his writing in which he compares Western and Melanesian histories of law and custom, explaining that “the person who attempts to record history often describes what is essentially a passing shadow...The meaning of the shadow is influenced by the way in which the author portrays it with the power of words, and the meaning the reader derives from them.”<sup>136</sup> He captures the essence of limitation in telling history, as if the one telling history is like one of the old storytellers who might share in their own interpretive way an origin myth. He names what is often overlooked, that fluidity of historical interpretation depending upon who is telling the story from generation to generation.

Narokobi has the unique experience of participating in the writing of the PNG Constitution, and speaks to the principle that it was written upholding both the “good values of our people” and the “Christian principles... [which] would be the bases from which we can build our new society.”<sup>137</sup> Narokobi states that:

For me those have been the guiding principles [that is, PNG and Christian values], and will always remain so. And anyone who attempts to make a serious assault on ancient values of our people will invite himself to be my personal “enemy”. Equally so, anyone who makes a serious assault on Christian values, will also invite himself to be my personal “enemy”.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Bernard Narokobi, *Law and Custom in Melanesia: Point Series No. 12* (Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific and the Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service, 1989), ii.

<sup>136</sup> Narokobi, *Law and Custom in Melanesia*, 1.

<sup>137</sup> Bernard Narokobi, “The Old and the New,” *Ethics and Development in Papua New Guinea*, ed. Gernot Fugmann (Goroka, E.H.P.: The Melanesian Institute, 1986), 5.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

In his trying to come to terms with holding two worldviews, he conveys viewpoints on the Bible and notions of God. He points to the very fluidity of Western interpretation and how people might “just use [God] to justify some of the wrong things that have happened in civilization.”<sup>139</sup> On the other hand, he speaks of what he hopes of God, that the Melanesian God “is personalized, private...who speaks to me through my ancestors—through the instruments of communication we have with the other world.”<sup>140</sup> Narokobi will not dismiss his tradition in the midst of his commitment to Christianity; the two are not contradictory in nature. He unabashedly articulates how he understands God, and as he does so, he refers to the singular plane of existence in the indigenous worldview. For Westerners “God is upstairs, the humans are downstairs, and the devil is down under. What I am saying is that human beings and God are together. And if they are together, there is no hell nor heaven. It is worth thinking about. The ancestors live right here.”<sup>141</sup> He seems to point to ways Westerners have created distance from God and from the dead from old philosophies that have influenced culture and in turn, Christianity, for years.

Back in 2007, two Papua New Guinean students who had come to Wartburg Theological Seminary to study in the MATDE program were required to complete a research project addressing an issue about the church in their context. Yasam Aiwara Iumdanya wrote his project on issues of stewardship in the ELC-PNG by looking very closely at the PNG context. He points out huge growth in the midst of church resources and tries to uncover why this is so. One pervading problem has been that a few people and the government have been using up land resources while the indigenous peoples seem only empowered to watch. He further indicates that

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<sup>139</sup> Narokobi, “The Old and the New,” in *Ethics and Development in Papua New Guinea*, 14.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 15

the missionaries had fostered a dependent system from the beginning.<sup>142</sup> This may have come about because the missionaries may have forced a “premature” unity before the indigenous church was ready to support a larger, comprehensive structure.<sup>143</sup> Further issues reflecting weakness in structures surface for Iumdanya, with weak communication due to unclear financial reports and a lack of transparent leadership possibly to blame for the people’s reluctance to give.<sup>144</sup>

This seems to reveal the tension of the indigenous church being truly independent and autonomous. Iumdanya draws a bleak picture of PNG dependence in which he compares ELC-PNG to:

an old man with a huge stomach; very thin legs and hands, bald-headed with white hair and toothless due to its age of 120 years, and yet it is still breast-feeding. This old man is lying on the floor of the house, cannot sit, eat, talk or participate and be involved with the rest of the family in the house and with the rest of the community.<sup>145</sup>

For Iumdanya, there lacks a clear voice in the indigenous leadership of ELC-PNG in the midst of the supporting Lutheran church bodies of other countries and among its own people. He shows a strong desire for the ELC-PNG to be independent and have its relevance in Papua New Guinea culture. He expresses a deep desire for a stronger sense of independence and functioning and especially hopes that Papua New Guinean Lutherans might recognize their “potential” and feel empowered.<sup>146</sup> Suggestions he makes to improve the sense of stewardship in this area of PNG are: improving land management to alleviate poverty; encouraging the small offerings that poorer, rural members can give; and encouraging the sense of community akin to the PNG

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<sup>142</sup>Yasam Aiwara Iumdanya, “Christian Stewardship of Giving Time, Talent, and Treasure as a Responsibility of Every Christian Member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea,” (Wartburg Theological Seminary, May 2007), 5.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 20

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 24

<sup>145</sup> Iumdanya, “Christian Stewardship,” 35.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 7

culture.<sup>147</sup> Through the distribution and compilation of questionnaires, Iumdanya hopes to “guide the church as it carries out its mission of proclamation of Word and deed in holistic ministry.”<sup>148</sup>

Gigmai Okuk carefully considers context within Papua New Guinea as he explores the reasons for decline in church attendance in his study. What is interesting to learn is that most everyone in PNG belongs to some denomination, many being Lutheran. His concern is for why worship attendance reflects less than 70 per cent of membership, which those reading from an American context might think reflects fairly substantial representation.<sup>149</sup> This is not America, though. It is Papua New Guinea, and when one considers the deep connectedness of everyone in localized cultures particularly reflected in the inclusion of ancestors at their celebrations, that 30 percent of the people might not be there is alarming.

Okuk gathers and synthesizes data from several regions which would represent urban and rural locations, various “male and female, inactive and active ELC-PNG member” reactions to the church inquiring why Papua New Guineans would or would not be attending worship.<sup>150</sup> He recognizes the variances between urban and rural settings and varying worship styles and holds a deep concern for the real state of the ELC-PNG asking, “Is it a fact that there are 1.5 million ELC-PNG members or just a dusty official assumption?”<sup>151</sup> Okuk’s approach to the project is his compilation and synthesis of material, but he is forced to rely on American resources and the resulting interviews and surveys in order to consider strategies that address the decline in worship attendance. There is a lack of material available to study this issue in PNG, and Okuk would have had to take it a step further by presenting his findings to church leadership when he

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<sup>147</sup> Iumdanya, “Christian Stewardship,” 29-30.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. 72

<sup>149</sup> Gigmai Kawage Okuk, “Church Attendance in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea: With Reference to Selected Rural, Settlement and Urban Congregations in Simbu, Jiwaka, Hagen and Papua Districts,” (Wartburg Theological Seminary, 2007), 58.

<sup>150</sup> Okuk, “Church Attendance in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea,” vii.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 4-5



returns. What is interesting is that some suggestions from the American resources that deal with a different context than his own are to be found in his recommendations. At the same time, these American resources actually seemed to name similar problems to those found in his survey results. These resonances in Okuk's study were the need for more engaging sermons, stronger leadership, and more intentional pastoral care.<sup>152</sup>

Both Yasam and Okuk struggle with the perceived weakness of the ELC-PNG administration. The problems they address in their reports do not sound so unlike the struggles of many congregations in the ELCA today. These two church structures share a common struggle to make the Gospel relevant and to empower Christ's mission in each context's new time. Could this not be a more relevant time for shared dialogue in the church's struggles? The gift of mutuality, of empowering one another by learning more deeply about the struggles within both contexts, has great potentiality to broaden perspectives that would remind leadership what is consistently needed and what new questions might be worth asking.

Deborah Carlyon has been an up-and-coming author of mixed descent as her grandmother was from a village in the New Guinea Highlands and her grandfather an Australian. She lovingly retells the story of her grandmother's life, as her grandmother remained firmly grounded in her indigenous upbringing while being thrust into the Western cultural influences of her time and place. Carlyon reveals aspects of the "timelessness" of the New Guinean perspective as she returns to Goroka after her grandmother's death. "I felt a stillness I had not experienced for many years-- an emptiness, and yet a oneness: timeless...[Carlyon's great aunt] Umbaikin says, 'Time? I don't know time, they [the elders in the village] also don't know time, and only now those at school know time.' In the village time stands still."<sup>153</sup> Carlyon can fluidly

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<sup>152</sup>Ibid., 51

<sup>153</sup> Deborah Carlyon, *Mama Kuma* (St. Lucia, Queensland, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 2002), 170.

navigate from her modern world into the world of her grandmother and highlights the distinctive difference in the lack of temporal concern.

Carlyon writes in verse an ode to her grandmother that reflects the elements of the Melanesian worldview, that of the biocosmic story evident in the participation in life and the spatial and environmental connection:

Mama Kuma was held by many hands, suckled by many breasts,  
And loved by many mothers.  
Her soul drew from the fountains of fresh air, nature,  
And timeless wisdom, from traditions  
and rituals which were believed and alive.  
The customs of her tribe did not hunger or thirst;  
They ate and drank of life itself.  
Serving as a living and guiding strength,  
Her physical and mental environment  
Nourished a stability neither stale nor stagnant.  
As only those who hold many hands know,  
Growth is the fulfillment of affection.  
Mama Kuma was of those who knew how to give fully.<sup>154</sup>

Carlyon further reflects upon how she interpreted her grandmother's expression of Christian faith. Her "lifestyle had taught us that Christ lived in her extended hands."<sup>155</sup> At the same time, Carlyon, who only spent the first thirteen years of her life in the Highlands,<sup>156</sup> considers her grandmother's life teaching: "how the souls of our ancestors remain the heartbeat of the universe today. Their love and the wonder and magic of life have always belonged to the hearts of the people who feel and yearn for harmony."<sup>157</sup> Carlyon depicts a particular reality that there is no separating the Melanesian way from their Christian expression of faith.

The theme seems quite clear to me in the weaving in and out of the different voices, the different experiences of various Melanesian peoples, is that there is no way to erase the

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<sup>154</sup> Carlyon, *Mama Kuma*, xv.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 147

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 173

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 176

Melanesian identity of PNG Christians. They long to express the beauty of their traditions and continue to see their validity even looking through the lens of Christianity. They move from questioning the Western worldview to questioning how theirs can be valued in light of it.

### 3.3 The Contribution of Papua New Guinea Perspectives

Looking at both the indigenous worldview and missionary history brings forth a true tension that the indigenous Christians, in particular, are reflecting. They are attuned to their context in a unique way and seem to actively wrestle with the gift of the Gospel and the Western culture that came along with the Gospel. This convergence of worldviews brings to light the work of the Holy Spirit in that there is much that the indigenous peoples of PNG have taught and continue to teach Western peoples. Perhaps the questions that they ask about Christianity in their culture might just be questions worth asking in an American context. What are Western Christians assuming about their traditions? Understanding how the indigenous Christians are making meaning of the Gospel in the PNG context beckons the American Christian to consider doing the same in their own ever-changing context. The study in origin myths and cultural practices is important to consider as one reflects upon their understanding of being a Christian in their particular context.

Consider, for example, people from the Western Christian context who share both a creation story, biblical and yet a shared origin story in its own way, while over time encountering varying scientific explanations and rationale. Worldviews vary considerably across the boundaries of denomination, socio-economic status, not to mention, across generations over vast time spans, say, for instance, 125 years. Some even consider Western science to clash with the biblical perspective so much that people are left either to defend or re-discover how that story

shapes their worldview or theology in a new time and place. Are Western Christians willing to acknowledge the fluidity of this story as people have understood it and its influence in their own social ordering?

One might ask how people would know about Jesus dying on the cross and rising from the dead because it happened so many years ago, yet it is the event that shapes a Christian's reality, as Christians share in the hope of resurrection and imminent sense of the Kingdom of God. The story is told over and over again as Christians celebrate Easter each year and regularly share in Holy Communion in worship as the promise is one that covers all time: past, present, and future. In Melanesian time and reality, they do not let go of all that their ancestors shared with them. The fluidity of their worldview broadens Western perception of the temporally-unrestrained love of God, the *Big Spirit*, as the Melanesian might name God. Might the love of God shown through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus be a promise for their ancestors, too, as those relationships still matter and influence their present lives?

The cosmological dimension Melanesian worldview further challenges the individual experiences of Christianity which focuses on personal salvation sometimes over and against the very cosmological significance of Christ's death and resurrection, that all creation is fulfilled through the Incarnate Son of God. The mystery and beauty in God's creation is exhibited in the diversity of both human culture and plant and animal life on this island. The indigenous people sought to experience a fullness of life in the beauty of their surroundings, though for thousands of years they sought it in the midst of deep fear of the other, reflected in the dark side of warfare among the varying cultural groups of people that exists even today. All conflict among people ceases neither there nor anywhere else in the world because fear of those unknown remains among all people. Through the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, the cosmological

significance of the God's grace and mercy in Christ has the power to diminish that fear and makes space for all to receive and learn from the *other* among us.

There is the gift in the call that Flierl had to Papua New Guinea 125 years ago in the calls to serve and be affected by peoples unknown. Surely, this time period of missionary work has many more stories to be told. Some could surely unfold mistakes but also beautiful surprises. All along the way, the people have had their affect upon the missionaries and the ways many denominations are changing their approach to global mission. What also must be acknowledged is that indigenous Christians did not completely adopt a Westernized worldview in the growth of Christianity in PNG. To erase the Melanesian way from their lives could erase the relevance and power of Christian Gospel in their lives.

What is easy to forget is that God has always been present in Papua New Guinea and anywhere else in the world. I am reminded of this as I watched a PBS special with my children on the paradise birds of Papua New Guinea. Each bird had its own particular beauty and distinctive features beautifully highlighted in the mating antics of the male birds. A featured Parotia Bird of Paradise was shown and described "with his six needle-like plumes with black pendants on the top of his black head and with an iridescent gold and green chest."<sup>158</sup> My daughter said to me in sheer delight, "Oh wow! God must've worked hard on those!"

And indeed, God was and has always been hard at work in Papua New Guinea, creating this beautiful and unique place in the world through the landscape, the wildlife and the very people themselves whose voices have much more to say and demonstrate about God than one never encountering people from Papua New Guinea might have ever imagined. This broad diversity surely is delightful to our Creator, who seeks not to conform us to one another, but

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<sup>158</sup> "Birds of the Gods," *Public Broadcasting System*, aired January 23, 2011.

invites us to know one another as God fully knows each of us, that people might also long for each other this fullness of life through Christ.

## **Conclusion**

The mission school in Neuendettelsau, Germany sent leaders to America and to Papua New Guinea, and the Spirit converged leaders from these roots years later in Papua New Guinea. That over a 100 people are expected to celebrate the missionary history in Papua New Guinea March 31st and April 1st of 2011 in Dubuque, Iowa at Wartburg Theological Seminary reflects the deep power of this connection. Much more about this intricate history has yet to be studied, including the Wartburg-PNG connection. In what ways was the Spirit drawing PNG church leaders to come to Wartburg to study for a year and drawing Wartburg Seminary graduates to serve in PNG? What would it be like for a Wartburg Seminary student to study abroad in PNG for a year as some of PNG leaders have studied at Wartburg? What would it be like for a PNG pastor to serve as a missionary in America as American pastors serve likewise in PNG? These questions are meant to push the edges of the accompaniment model of mission. Is a true sense of mutuality experienced in ELCA's and ELC-PNG's connection to one another? Do PNG Christians feel compelled or empowered to accompany Americans or Australians in their contexts? Have American or Australian Lutheran Church leaders ever extended such an invitation?

Another interesting aspect to the history is the museum in the basement of Wartburg Theological Seminary, which holds some fascinating artifacts with stories of their own to tell. What hidden treasures exist in this museum, and how does the seminary begin to build awareness for its connection with PNG through that museum? Concentrated study on a particular aspects of

PNG culture would prove compelling, as starting with the origin myths sheds only a minimal perspective. What further understandings of the PNG worldview would be uncovered by delving into a singular aspect of cultural practice? Comparing two or more remotely different regions to illustrate just how different the cultures really are within PNG would prove similarly intriguing.

Admittedly, there is a limitation in studying PNG when one has no opportunity to travel there. What is striking, though, is the courage of the early missionaries who went and committed years, full lives of ministry, to living and serving in PNG. Johann Flierl had the call and trusted it, and many others like him followed as well. Likewise, the indigenous missionaries answered calls to travel to the unknown parts of their island. The call into being with others for the sake of the Gospel is one of being called from the known into the unknown. The PNG story reflects courage among those, missionary and indigenous evangelists alike, who were willing to move from their known language, culture, habits, and family to those unknown. It is a story that poignantly reflects of the power of the Holy Spirit at work, the power of God in Christ coming to all, of the power of the Word in each time and place. It is a story that begs to hear both the missionary and indigenous voices in dialogue.

Western and indigenous worldviews collided 125-years ago when colonization and missionary work began in Papua New Guinea, and it might be prematurely assumed that the Western mindset subsumed the indigenous. Quite the contrary! An indigenous voice has emerged that holds the two worlds in tension, which is the point to bring to conclusion. In many ways, missionaries have tried to gain an understanding of this worldview, but just as they encountered a new *place* as the indigenous encountered a new *time*, surely both have been on a journey of shared discovery. People from both cultures in the encounter have had to learn how to live embracing new ways of considering the *other* in the midst of careful dialogue while

walking with one another. As the indigenous are changed so too is the missionary, moving toward a shared and newfound respect for the *otherness* in the midst of the encounter.

The indigenous voices, all humanity cries out to God, and God hears all. This is expressed in a Melanesian prayer by Besac Tiriec, “a man who wanted to know what the place looks like where heaven and earth touch each other.”<sup>159</sup>

Come, Spirit of the Lord,  
Let us talk while you are with us.  
Whatever we say, You will understand us.

We have often failed in the past  
And we still fail.  
Free us from our failures,  
You, our Lord and Savior!

Hold our hands  
On the way you lead us,  
On the way home.  
O Spirit of the Lord,  
Enrich us,  
Enrich us our hearts.

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<sup>159</sup> Wilhelm Fugmann, *A Cloud of Witnesses*, (Treuchtlingen, Germany: Verlag Walter E. Keller, 2000), 152.



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