

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN TRADITIONAL MELANESIANCULTURES

Ellison Suri

INTRODUCTION

Melanesian religion had its roots in nature, and the veneration of ancestors. The ancestors controlled the events in the world of nature, and watched people's everyday-life activities. The people maintained close relationships with ancestor spirits. Sometimes, those ancestor spirits punished their children or grandchildren for breaking the ancestors' rules, but often they helped and protected them. A man often called on his dead father to act as an intermediary, or go-between, when he sought the support or forgiveness of an ancient and powerful ancestor. Different ancestors had different powers, when they were alive, and conferred them on their descendants. Thus, a person might look to one ancestor for powers to grow taro or yam well, to another for power to earn shell money and give big feasts, to another for power to gain victory in war, and to another to escape vengeance.

For a Melanesian, the spirit world and the material world belong together. Everything that is around him, and everything that he does, or his community does, is religious. He is born into a religious order, and his life, his work, his way of thinking, and his whole being, are devoted to that order.

Therefore, religious experiences, before Christianity came into our islands, played an important role in the life of individual Melanesians, and in the life of the community, in traditional Melanesian cultures. At this point, I would like to give a few examples, with special reference to the Lau District of Malaita, Solomon Islands.

PRAYERS

Traditionally, prayers played an important role in the Melanesian society of Lau. Both individual and communal prayers were offered to the ancestor spirits to receive assistance for daily activities in life, such as fishing, hunting, gardening, fighting, building houses and canoes, making shell money, and feasts. Here are two examples of prayers said at sea:

O you *Alidea* (name of ancestor)
Draw the canoe
Lighten and speed the canoe
That we may reach the place
Where we are bound to be
Save us on the deep
Save us from the tempest
And bring us to shore in peace.

Oe a do
Dau ana ola
Fa eli eli mako fa hala ola
Eri mika dao ana fera
Na milea fuana
Ada suli gami lao asi
Ada suli gami fasia hao
Nali gami kou i lao na
fanualama.

O you *Dela* (name of ancestor)
Bring different kinds of fish
From our bays
Put them into the net
And let them die there
Powerful you are
Man of the sea.

Oe a do
Nalia mai ia ete gi sui
Fasia fakili gi
Alu gera lao furai
Eri gera ka mae i lao na
Oe na ramo
Wane aua asi.

Usually these prayers were said by the leaders, on behalf of each group.

Prayers were intimate communion with the ancestor spirits. The people believed in the power of prayer, because, through it, they received what they asked for.

Just as in Christianity today, prayer is an act of faith. By it, power is released into our own and others' lives.

DREAMS

The people of Lau believed in dreams. If someone was sick, and, if it was supposed that an ancestor spirit was the cause of that sickness, the friends and relatives of the sick man sent for the professional dreamer to find out what ancestor had been offended, and to make it up with him. The dreamer slept, and, in his dream, went to the place where the sick man had been working. There he met a man, the ancestor, who caused the sickness, and learned of his name. The ancestor told him that the sick man, as he was working, had encroached upon his ground, the place he haunted as his own, and that, to punish him, he has taken away his soul, and impounded it in a magic fence in the garden. The dreamer begged for the return of the soul, and asked pardon on behalf of the sick man, who meant no disrespect. The ancestor spirit pulled out the fence, in which the soul was enclosed, and let it

out. These dreamers were able to visit *Anogou*, the place of the dead. Sometimes, if a child was sick, it was supposed that there was someone in *Anogou* drawing away its soul.

The dreamer, having received his fees, went, in a dream, to *Anogou*, and interceded with the ancestor. He got back the soul, and the child recovered. In the case of theft, or of any hidden crime, the dreamer went into sleep, and, when he woke up, declared that he had seen the culprit, and gave his name.

The dreams pointed to the needs of the one who dreamt. They did this in the form of a story, or part of a story. The message was hidden, and only the dreamer, who had the gift of interpretation, could interpret it. Sometimes the dreamer dreamt, and interpreted the meaning of the dream for himself, to meet his needs.

Here is one of the dreams the Bible tells us. St Peter dreamt that, out of the sky, came a ship's sail, on which were animals. Some of these were animals, which Jews were forbidden to eat. Three times, a voice told St Peter to eat them, because God had made them. Each time Peter said that he could not eat them, because they were unclean; then the sail went back into the sky (Acts 10:9-16).

Through this dream, Peter found out something for himself about his own needs. He discovered thoughts, which had been in him before the dream, but which he had not known. He was a Jewish Christian, and, up to that time, had never eaten food with Christians, who were not Jews. For a long time, he had been thinking that, perhaps, he ought to eat with such Christians, but it was through this dream that these thoughts became clear to him. Then, he had the courage to take action. He sat down to eat with Cornelius, the Roman, the non-Jew.

We can say, therefore, that sometimes a person has a dream, through which he/she sees the truth about himself/herself more clearly. It may be truth, from which he/she usually hides, because he/she does not like it. Recently, Momoe had been quarrelling with her mother. She felt very sad, and got very sick, and wanted to commit suicide. One night, she had a dream in which she saw a coffin in her room, and people sitting around it, moaning.

A priest was called in for payer, counselling, and interpretation of her dream. The priest explained the dream: the coffin was herself, because, all the time, she was thinking of killing herself. After saying prayers, spiritual counselling, and interpretation of her dream, she got well.

From this, we can see something else about a dream, that, through it, we can see what are the things in which we especially need God's help. Momoe saw that she needed God's love, care, mercy, and forgiveness in times of sadness, hardships, difficulties, and suffering.

Through a dream, we can also discover what decisions we should take. Aumae had been working in the Ministry of Finance for many years. One day, he had a dream, and in his dream he saw a white ship sinking in the lagoon at Malu'u Bay. He swam to save the lives of those who were drowning. When Aumae thought about the dream, he told himself, perhaps the ship is the church of God at Malu'u, the people who were drowned are God's people who turn away from their faith and become backsliders. Perhaps I am called by God to preach the good news of salvation to my people, to save their lives, and to strengthen their faith in God. This dream had been in his mind for many years, and, at last, he decided to go to Bishop Patteson Theological Centre at Kohimarama to train to be a priest. He is now a fourth-year student at the Centre, and will be ordained deacon at the end of this year, and priest at the end of the following year. Hopefully, he will be posted to Malu'u to serve his own people there.

The people of Lau, even today, take dreams very seriously. To them, the message of the dreams must be explained alongside the deepest truths, which we know about God and man. If the message contradicts such truths, then the message is not a true message.

The people are convinced that dreams offer practical advice, from the unconscious to the conscious. The message in the dreams, therefore, is important, especially if they are serious dreams. If there is no one to help the dreamer to explain his dream, he will be struggling to find the meaning of his dream. So, someone must help the dreamer to explain his dream. Today, people contact laymen and priests who are gifted in interpreting dreams, and, after the dreams have been explained, the people go back satisfied with peace and joy.

The people of Lau fear dreams, in the same sense that Christians fear God, a voice from the unknown. Therefore, the people respect dreams, as important gifts from God to man. It is in this sense that Christianity does not destroy an indigenous culture, but fulfils it.

SYMBOLS

In ancient Lau, natural objects, like stones, plants, animals, mountains, streams, valleys, or man-made things, like canoes, houses, images, masks, etc., were symbols. These symbols suggested meanings, which were important to the people.

For example, in Lau, the *bae* was a sacred place, and, in it, the stone altars (*eri no qwaisusiagi*) were made. These stone altars were symbols of sacredness and sacrifices. They were fenced around, lest they should be rashly trodden upon. Each of the stone altars was sacred, taboo, and belonged to ancestors. If a tree, growing in the *bae*, were to fall across a path, no one would step over it. In entering a *bae*, a man, who knew the ancestors and sacrifices, went first, those, who went with him, treading in his footsteps. In going out, no one would look back, lest his soul should stay behind. No one would pass a *bae* when the sun was so low as to cast his shadow into it: the ancestor would draw it from him.

Sharks were symbols of incarnation. People often thought them to be the abode of ancestors, as men, before their death, announced that they would appear as sharks, and, afterwards, any shark remarkable for size or colour, which was observed to haunt a certain shore, rock, or bay, was taken to be someone's ancestor, and the name of the deceased was given to it. Such a one was *Baekwa i Aruma* of Lau, in which offerings of pig and porpoise teeth (*alualu*) were made. It could be called upon to help in times of danger at sea.

Masks also played an important role in the lives of the people of ancient Lau. A person would wear a mask that was made in the likeness of a particular ancestor, to win his character, personality, and support. If a tribe was planning to go to war, the warriors would wear the mask of an ancient warrior to win his support, and to gain his power to be more courageous and strong.

Through these symbols, and many more, living persons established contact with the divine and ancestor spirits.

The Old Testament story of Jacob's dream is a typical example of how, thousands of years ago, men felt that a living God, or a divine spirit, was embodied in the stone, and how the stone became a symbol. And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not." And he was afraid, and said, "How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillow, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil on top of it, and dedicated it to the Lord. And he called the name of that place Beth-el (Gen 28:10-19). And Jacob went to Haran. And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun has set; and he took off the stones of the place to sleep. And he dreamt, and, behold, a ladder, set up on the earth, and the top of it reached heaven, and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord God of Abraham, the Father and God of Isaac; the land where thou liest to thee will I give it, and to thy seed."

For Jacob, the stone was an integral part of the revelation. It was the mediator between himself and God.

Even in Christianity, animal symbolism plays an important part. Three of the Evangelists have animal emblems. St Luke has the Ox, St Mark: the Lion, and St John: the Eagle. Only one, St Matthew, is represented as a man or an angel. Christ, Himself, symbolically appears as the Lamb of God, or the fish, but He is also the serpent, and lion, exalted at the cross. These animal attributes of Christ indicated that even the Son of God Himself (the supreme personification of man) can never leave out His animal nature and spiritual nature. The sub-human, as well as the super-human, is felt to belong to the realm of the divine. The relationship of these two aspects of man is beautifully symbolised in the Christmas picture of the birth of Christ in a stable, among animals.

The cross is a symbol of Christ, because of His sacrifice on it. It is also a symbol of Christianity. Theologically, it stands for salvation, redemption, and atonement.

VISIONS

New knowledge of events was believed to be conveyed to the people by an ancestor spirit, speaking through the voice of a person, who had the gift of seeing visions. He, himself, would be unconscious, while speaking. In Lau, men of the village would be sitting in their *beu ola* canoe houses, and discussing some undertaking, probably an expedition to attack some enemies. One among them, known to have the gift of seeing visions, would sneeze and begin to shake, and become unconscious, a sign that an ancestor spirit had entered into him. Then a voice, not his own, would be heard in his throat allowing, or disapproving, of what was proposed. This is an ecstatic type of vision, known as *Agalo qwea*. Another type of vision is known as *Mato'o*. This is the vision that is seen with naked eyes. Again, the person who had the gift of seeing visions, would see things, which convey messages of victory, defeat, warning, successful harvest, peace, and healthy lives in the community. These visions were never vain, meaningless, and lying. They always had a clearly moral and teaching content. The people always found fulfilment of truth in them.

On Mount Sinai, Moses had seen a vision of the burning bush, and he heard a voice calling him to undertake a special task, to lead the children of Israel from Egypt into the Promised Land (Ex 3).

Isaiah had experienced a vision in the Temple, when he saw the Lord high and lifted up, and heard a voice bidding him to go and bear witness to his people (Is 6).

Paul had experienced a vision on his way to Damascus, when he saw a blinding light, and heard a voice, which led him, who was an arch-persecutor, to become a heroic witness to the faith he had once sought to destroy (Acts 9).

Due to rapid change in the Pacific, we Melanesians must hold firmly to the foundation of our culture, contained in our religious experiences. If we lose our ability to express ourselves creatively, through them, we lose an important part of our cultural heritage. Our aim should be to preserve correctly, and continue with out Melanesian religious experiences. Better understanding, care, and love must be given to the Melanesian religious experiences today than has generally been the practice in the past, by our missionary churches.

Our creator God was at work in our cultures, even before missionaries and churches came into our islands. Paul, writing to the Galatians, says: “All baptised in Christ, you have all clothed yourselves in Christ, and there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:27, 28). These verses challenge us to rejoice, and enjoy the rich diversity that God-in-Christ brings to all our cultures and languages. Christ has come to fulfil and make perfect our Melanesian religious experiences.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chatterton, Percy, *Day That I Have Loved*, Sydney NSW: Pacific Publications, 1974.