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Baptism as Initiation

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Introduction

The purpose of my study is to look at the sacrament of baptism. Theologians, in the Western church, tend to develop their ideas of the sacramental work of God, by building on previous writings, in this field of inquiry in their own culture. It is the author's aim, in writing this essay, largely to break from this tradition, and to see what theological insights can be gained from the cultural beliefs, and practical experience, of the people of Melanesia. In particular, I will talk mostly about the people of Keapara, in the Central Province of Papua New Guinea. The study is mainly aimed at the meaning and theology of Christian baptism, within the Melanesian cultural context, and, specifically, in relation to traditional initiation rites, concerning which there are two major problems. Firstly, there is a lack of general and clear understanding of baptism, and, secondly, a lack of interpretation of baptism by Melanesians, so as to understand it, within the cultural context.

The early missionaries from the West misled our people, by condemning, as demonic, some of the most important Melanesian traditional initiation rites. The Melanesian people have been tossed here and there like puppets, which has made them feel and behave strangely. At times, they have become confused in their Christian life. The foreign teachings, pronounced by the Western people, have impacted the minds and hearts of Melanesians. This has made them become as foreigners, ignorant of the fact that traditional experiences, practices, and beliefs in initiation rites may help

[1] This article is extracted from a sub-thesis presented at Rarongo Theological College, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Divinity degree. The entire work may be consulted in the College library.

them very much to understand the most important factors of Christian baptism.

Traditional Rites of Initiation

Initiation rites were traditionally practised in almost all cultural groups of Papua New Guinea. Within its rich diversity of customs, they were an integral part of renewal, and affirmation of growth, life, and belonging. Some important rites were carried out, as initiation into the community, while others were as initiation into adulthood. We shall consider examples of each of these, in turn.

In Keapara, Central Province, when a woman gives birth to a baby, she was not allowed to be seen by relatives, except those who have helped at birth. The baby is washed with water by the grandmother, or other elders on the maternal side. The ritual washing always went with words, or ritual sayings, for example: *Inaku e Amaku palagura raka au aumai*, meaning "The spirits of my mother and father come back to me." It was a belief that, once the baby jumped, or moved in fright, in cold water, the spirit left the baby's body at the same time. Therefore, the spirit had to be called back quickly, before it was too late.

After washing, a fire was made, and the grandmother would dry her hands over the fire, and then press them gently all over the baby's body. It was said that the power of the fire would keep the child warmed, and safe from being harmed by any evil forces or sorcery.[2] Feasting followed, after three weeks, when the relatives, and others, would take turns to nurse the baby.

This initiation into the community, by water and fire, was intended to use the power of these natural elements. Water was believed to have power over any sorcery or magic spells, according to their religious belief. It has its natural power, because it is pure, and can wash away anything. Water gives life to people, plants, and all other living animals and creatures. In the

[2] Information received through interviews at Keapara, in December, 1995.

initiation ritual, the pure water washed away the sexual impurities, or any contaminating substances from the bad blood of the woman. The child was understood, and believed to have been purified, and made clean, to enter into the community.

Fire was naturally an important element in daily life. It protected people from any harmful creatures or insects. It would also frighten off wild animals, because of its heat, and would be used for cooking, burning grass for hunting, and so forth. As a symbol for initiation, the fire protected the child from being harmed by evil spirits, or sorcery, from the beginning of life.

The naming of the child was done by the elder man, if it was a boy, but, in the case of a girl, the elder woman would give the name. The naming of the child was also very important, for their identity in the community. The child's growth, care, teaching, and discipline were all in the hands of the parents, grandparents, and kinsmen.

Some other examples of initiation will illustrate the diversity of practices, and, although there are similarities, it is difficult to make broad generalisations. These parallels may, however, give us some general understanding of Melanesian rites.

In Keraki village, in Western Province, the naming of a baby was always done, when he began to babble, or stand up. The naming of the baby became the responsibility of the *tahori* (god-parent). In the case of a boy, this was usually one of the kinswomen on the paternal side, and in the case of a girl, it would be a kinsman on the maternal side. The child was then named after the god-parent, and the two continued to have a special relationship, with consequent rights and obligations.[3]

The most significant thing in the ceremony was the dedication of the child to be named by the god-parent. The naming and feast symbolised the Keraki's initiation of a child into the family or community.

[3] Francis Edgar Williams, *Papuans of the Trans-Fly*, London UK: Oxford University Press, 1936, pp. 175-177.

In New Ireland Province, a *garamut* (drum) was always sounded, when a child was born. This announced to the community the arrival of a new member. An uncle of the new child would climb a coconut tree, and cut down some fresh coconuts for the ritual. The women would gather, and make a fire, placing special ferns over the burning wood to create smoke. The grandmother, or another older woman, would sway the baby to and fro above the smoke. An empty coconut would be broken over the child, and all the women would shout together the new name of the child. They would then nurse the child in turns. A communal feast would follow, involving the whole village.[4]

The most important things to be noted in this ritual are as follows: Firstly, the *garamut* announced the arrival of a new member to the community, and, also, the sound drove away any evil spirit at the time of birth. Secondly, the swaying of the child over the smoking ferns was believed to give purification, and cleansing of the body from sexual impurities of contaminated substances from the blood of the mother. Then, the shouting of the name awakens the five senses of the child. Also, the nursing of the child symbolised the acceptance of the child into the community.

These, then, have each been examples of birth rites, through which the baby is accepted into the community. We shall, secondly, consider some rites of initiation into adulthood.

For the Keapara people, initiation into manhood required a period of seclusion and transition, after which they were asked to wash in the sea, before dawn. The elders would prepare them by rubbing coconut oil all over their bodies. Armlets and the perineal band *ivi* were worn, before they were all paraded in the village to be witnessed. A feast followed, involving the whole community.

[4] A. Oliver, et al, "The Theology of Word and Sacrament in a Cultural Context", unpublished thesis, Rabaul PNG: Rarongo Theological College, 1982.

There were two important symbols used in this ritual: the perineal band and the coconut oil. The *ivi* visualised the maturity of a person. He was to be called a man, and must be respected as such. Also, he was now ready to be married. The coconut oil was connected with religious thoughts and practice. As coconut was used as one of the sacrificial foods for the spirits, oil was commonly used in dancing and feasting, as well as for curing stomachache, and putting the spleen back to its position. Coconut was also a visible symbol for man's responsibility in all of life. The future of the community was always in the hands of men: in defence, in the search for food, and general well-being.

In New Ireland, initiation into manhood was imperative, for recognition of maturity by the society. It was a custom that, if a boy was not initiated, he would be regarded as nothing more than a woman. As Oliver noted, "This remark gives some indication of the firm roles that men and women have in this society."[5]

This initiation involved certain tests of stamina, for example, in killing a wild pig, making gardens, or fishing. These tests had to be proved to the elders, towards his maturity, and total being. The successful candidates were initiated by the elders, or leaders, by the liquid, sprinkled from coconuts, broken above their heads. The candidates were then announced as mature, recognised men.

It is to be noted that the initiation strengthened, and reinforced, the traditionally-vital role of the men in society. Men became the breadwinners in the life of the tribe, as well as being responsible for obedience to the rules, or norms, of the society, and ancestors.

For the people of Wamira, in Milne Bay Province, initiation required the boys, and young men, to build their own huts, at the outskirts of the village. They lived there, in seclusion, for about four months, especially avoiding direct contact with women. They would also spend most of their time gardening, hunting, and fishing. During the seclusion, the youths were

[5] Ibid., p. 40.

neither initiated into secrets, nor instructed by the elders. At the end, they went through ritual bathing in the sea, wore a new perineal band, placed a comb in their hair for the first time, and returned to their father's home.[6]

The interesting things, to be noted, are the ritual bath in the sea, and the wearing of perineal bands, which are similar to the belief of the Keapara community. The ritual bath symbolised their changing of status from youth to men. The old self was washed away, and new self was put on, by wearing new perineal bands. They became men, and would be recognised, and respected, by all.

Traditional Initiation Rites and Christian Baptism

Turning now to compare Melanesian traditional initiation rites with Christian baptism, we can identify the relative meanings, or similarities. It will also give us some general understanding of what Christian baptism is, in the light of a Melanesian cultural context. This approach towards an understanding of baptism will help both new and old Christians to commit their lives fully to Christ, and to become totally new beings, filled with the Holy Spirit.

Firstly, in this comparison, there are some similarities, or related meanings and understanding. The following are some examples, which will enable Melanesians to determine how closely baptism can be understood in the light of their own society's traditional initiation rites.

(a) Symbolism

Symbols play an important part in religious life, and there are many different objects, or images, that suggest, or represent, people's beliefs, in Papua New Guinea. Many rituals have a symbolic nature, for example, the inauguration of special people, such as, elders, leaders, or chiefs, and also initiation of novices. All these become Melanesians religious sacraments.

[6] M. Allen, *Male Cults and Secret Initiation in Melanesia*, Melbourne Vic: Melbourne University Press, 1967, p. 88-89.

Symbolism gives a spiritual atmosphere to the Melanesian world by attributing to it a sacred and mystical quality. That is, visible realities are symbols of the invisible world of the spirits. For example, Eliade stated: "initiatory death is often symbolised by darkness, by cosmic night, by the telluric womb, the hut, the belly of a monster".[7]

The symbolism of transition rites is often that of rebirth: in the eastern Torricelli Mountains (Sepik) in Papua New Guinea, once the boys are all inside the *haus tambaran* (cult house), they disappeared from public sight for three months. In a special sense, they were swallowed by some mysterious creature: the ancestor – crocodile, monster, a pig, and so forth. Theologically, we may say that they die, in their seclusion, until, after having been fed carefully by the elders, they return as proud, healthy warriors, for the final and colourful ceremony.

This can be understood as similar in meaning to Christian baptism, although that is symbolised by immersion in water. The immersion represents the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, as well as our own death to sin, and rising to righteousness. According to the theology of Paul, we go through water, and are buried with Christ. We die with Him, and then rise with Him, to a new existence; in a rebirth, we became new men (Rom 6:2-4).

In the society of Keapara, initiation into community, as we have seen, is symbolised by washing with water, and providing protection by fire. That is, washing by water cleansed the body from impurities, with the belief of being a new person. This can also be understood as providing a parallel with the Christian rite. The fire, also, as symbolising protection by a deity over the child, may be seen as having a Christian parallel. That is, the laying of hands on the child's forehead by a minister may be understood, theologically, as imparting of the Holy Spirit, dedicating the child to God, and accepting it into the family of God. The child becomes a new member of the covenant community of God, through the faith of the parents (1 Cor 12:12-13).

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[7] Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, New York NY: Harper & Row, 1965, p. xiv.

(b) Rites of Passage

According to the language of cultural anthropology, rites of passage express the understanding, and meaning, of transitional rituals, as found all over Melanesia. A change takes place, which can be thought of as a passage from one stage to another, in the status of individuals and groups: the entry of a child into the community, the admittance of a young man into the meetings of grown-up men, marriage, death, and so forth. All such important events in life can be seen as going out and coming in, but there is always a rite in between. The three main traditional phases of separation, transition, and resocialisation may be seen as related to Christian baptism.

The rite of separation, where candidates for initiation are separated from the community, can be seen as related to a pre-evangelistic stage of a minister with the people. Here we are addressing unbelievers. The aim is to arouse interest, to prepare the ground. We enter into a dialogue with the people, listening, to understand them, and, also, creeping into their frame of reference, by discussing relevant life themes with them. It is a very difficult task for a minister, in the first stage of pre-evangelism. His approach must be more anthropocentric, taking men as and where they are. His personal knowledge of the people, their language and culture, and his Christian witnessing, and empathy, and understanding is most important. In this way, man becomes prepared spiritually to accept the message of the word of the preacher. He is inwardly separated from his old status. The change over to Christianity should not be too smooth and gradual, though the actual separation must be prepared very carefully.

The traditional transitional rite is where the actual ritual is performed on the person going from one position to another. He is on the doorstep, neither in nor out, and, during this time, he has developed, mentally and spiritually, to fear the spirits or deity. In Christianity, an evangelistic stage is somewhat similar. We know people are well prepared, now, and are challenged, in this new stage, to come for true conversion. People will hear about God's revelation, His love for us, shown in Jesus Christ. The essence of the Christian message is proclaimed. The expected result of this confrontation is conversion. There is nothing magical about this stage,

though there is a deep mystery involved. The convert comes into personal contact with God, through Jesus Christ. Here, it is seen that the person has already left his previous status, but has not arrived, as yet, at his new status. He is neither in nor out.

Finally, there is the rite of resocialisation, in which the new status is formally confirmed or created. For example, the infant was to be seen and nursed for the first time; a young man or woman was welcomed back home, after a period of seclusion, with a feast of dancing and joy. However, that is not all; further teaching, caring, or supervision are maintained by the parents, elders, kinsman, and clan, until he or she is well fed, and becomes matured mentally, physically, and spiritually.

These rites of resocialisation can be seen as a parallel to the catechumenate stage in Christianity; that is, the one who is receiving instruction to prepare himself for baptism. For example, in the Methodist tradition, they used to run class meetings, as preparation before baptism. The Congregational tradition of the *Papua Ekelesia* have the "seekers' class", or "torch bearers", to prepare people for baptism. Youth will arrive at a new status. The mystery has taken place, but they will still have to be instructed, and initiated, into a fuller Christian life and witness. We are building up their faith. They will have to respond more fully to the call of God in their lives. During this catechumenate stage, we develop the whole message in detail, always orientated to its core, and answering special difficulties arising in the Melanesian scene.

When these young people respond, they will be baptised, or else confirmed, to become members of the church. The rite of baptism will be a celebration of what has been there, of what the catechumens have gone through, as all sacraments are a celebration of life.

Contextual Theological Interpretation

It must have been a real challenge to the early missionaries to explain, in a concise way, what baptism was all about. It was, no doubt, frustrating, at times, for the missionaries, who were teaching the concepts and ideas behind

the symbolism of water baptism. However, they did build a stepping stone for us today. The task is still an integral part of Christian education in Melanesian churches.

As in the society of Keapara, and many others in Papua New Guinea, the theology of baptism can be understood, according to their education and social status. In response to the question, "What do you think baptism means?", Keapara village people made the following comments:

- "Giving a child to God. Sometimes a baby is baptised. God has marked the child to be in His family."
- "Children are baptised, so that they can be cared for, and blessed at the end. They will become future members of the church when they grow up."
- "Bringing a child to God. It is the responsibility of the believing parents to bring the child up correctly. They must have a place in the church."
- "Baptising a child means giving it to God, as thanksgiving for His many blessings upon the family. God cares and blesses those who continue to give."
- "New life in the community needs to be dedicated to God. Giving to God makes us closer to Him."

Some of the significance of baptism may be pointed out from these comments.

Firstly, ritual or ceremony is an important part of the life of the people of Keapara. Baptism, despite being an act symbolising one's entry into the fellowship of the church, is considered as a protective means against sorcery and magic, or simply as a means to good health. Because of its connection with the power to protect, it is becoming a compulsory initiation for all children in the village. The theological meaning of the sacrament is not very important. What is important, is for the minister to drip water on the forehead of the child. By baptism, a child is said to have all the blessings that

will help him to resist whatever comes to him in life. When an unbaptised child is sick, the obvious reason for his sickness is due to his parents failing to baptise him. Children, who are born outside normal marriage, are taken into the church by relatives to be baptised. By baptism, the chance of encountering sickness, or death at an early age, becomes avoidable. It gives people the guarantee they will live longer, for death will only come at the time God has fixed, which, according to people, is at old age. Evidently, it is in viewing baptism, in the context of protective rituals against magic and sorcery, that the people mostly need the sacrament. They are less concerned for what it means theologically, as for the power that is believed to be in it.

Secondly, baptism, for them, seems to represent a spiritual belonging, when the child is given to God by parents and sponsors. The child (or adult) is marked by God to become His family. Dedicating a child to God seems to be drawing God closer to them, and it also signifies a sacrificial act to God, in the form of thanksgiving for His many blessings. God cares for, and blesses, those, who continue to give willingly. This kind of mentality, or concept, is seen in their cultural practices, and traditional beliefs. The cultural awareness of the fear of spirits, makes people emphasise the fear of God in a Christian community.

Furthermore, baptism makes the people aware of being a new person, initiated into a new life in the community. In Keapara, as in other societies, conversion means both joining, and becoming, a new group or clan, turning toward, and into, those people, who repent and believe. It means taking on a new identity: the people of God. In the New Testament, the outward mark of entrance into the people of God is baptism, which is regarded as the sacrament of incorporation. In passages dealing with the unity of the people of God, Paul invariably refers to baptism in this way, for example, in 1 Cor 12:13: "all of us have been baptised into the one body".

If the biblical concept of the people of God has links with the Melanesian understanding of the clan, then baptism relates to initiation. Conversion is incomplete without baptism, just as, traditionally, growth to maturity was incomplete without initiation. Baptism, as the sacrament of

initiation, signifies a new status. In the process of conversion, there must be the recognition that, in the eyes of God, they are also strangers, having no special status, in comparison with other groups, in His eyes. So, conversion means a change in the group's pride, which views others with condescension. But, at the same time, conversion also brings with it the realisation, and experience, of a new status, based not on any inherent, or achieved, superiority of the group, but on their acceptance by God in Christ. Conversion is a turning to accept this new God-given status.

This new status, signified by baptism, results, firstly, in a new relationship with other groups of people, and persons, who together form the people of God. In baptism, the individual and group affirm that the identity of the people of God extends far beyond the borders of their own group, and that their own identity, as a clan, is now secondary to their identity as the people of God. Paul's words, "In the same way, all of us, whether Jews or Gentiles, whether slaves or free, have been baptised into the one body, and we have all been given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Cor 12:13) could be contextualised, "all of us, whether coastals or highlanders, whether Chimbus or Keaparas, have been baptised into one tribal group or clan".

Such an affirmation must result in reconciliation with any Christian groups with whom the newly-converted has had a fractured relationship.

Conversion to Christ also means the adoption of a new attitude to those groups, and persons, who do not yet belong to God. Baptism signifies the replacement of the old attitude of superiority, by a desire to identify with other groups as equals, with a concern to communicate the good news to them, so that they, too, may turn and become the people of God, and be willing to forgive, and be reconciled, where relationships are broken.

Becoming the people of God, through conversion, in Melanesia, means that the maintenance of right relationships, so important in village life, is carried across into the community of God. Jesus' command that His people should love one another (John 13:34) is, of course, the basis of this, and, indeed, Melanesians have always understood the importance of love between

brothers. Conversion adds new directions to the brotherly relationship, the dimension of forgiveness. Traditionally, relationships could only be kept in balance by the continuing fulfilment of obligations, or the application of retributive justice, when obligations were not met. The behaviour of God, in Christ, is the model for interpersonal and interclan relationships, and this means that Christians must turn to forgive one another, as God has forgiven them through Christ (Eph 5:1).

Turning, to become the people of God, also brings a change to male-female relationships. The traditional male view of women, as inferior beings, who are not to be trusted with the secrets of rituals, is revised, by the realisation that God accepts women, in exactly the same way, and on exactly the same basis, as men, and that there are no special secrets for men only in the Christian way.

The theology of Christian baptism can be understood more clearly, only if it can be explained, according to the Melanesian cultural context. What we have noted, and discussed, theologically and biblically, can, perhaps, become a guiding light for this task.

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