

# UNDERSTANDING MELANESIANS

**Joshua Daimoi**

*Joshua Daimoi is President of the Christian Leaders' Training College. He holds a Masters degree in Theology from Fuller School in World Missions, and is currently writing his doctoral thesis on the concept of community. This article is from a presentation he made to CLTC faculty.*

## **Introduction**

“[O]ne of the first duties of a missionary (regardless of nationality) is to try to understand the people among whom he works” (Codrington, 1891, p. vii). As conversion and disciple-making are the primary tasks of Christian mission, advocates of the Christian faith cannot afford to ignore the people they seek to serve. Unless we understand how the people think, what they believe, and how their societies function, our best efforts will be like loose soil crumbling down with the first drop of rain. Understanding people is a very taxing exercise, and demands the very best of a man or a woman, especially one involved in cross-cultural missionary enterprise. The missionary can only know what people assume about the world by digging it out, through painstaking effort, patience, and participation (Reyburn, 1958a, p. 173). For the gospel to take permanent root in a new culture, the missionary must fully identify with the people, thinking their thoughts, eating their food, speaking their language, living incarnationally, until the people eventually accept him as one of their own (Wagner, 1979, pp. 203, 205).

In Papua New Guinea, with over 750 tribes inhabiting the islands, understanding the people is a formidable challenge. In spite of their similarities, “each community is unique, an identity comparable to no other” (Knoebel, 1/1972, p. 35). Although present Papua New Guinean societies have experienced, and are experiencing, dramatic changes, the lives of the people are still rooted in the traditions of the past. The past is still with the people. In times of crisis, the people

turn to their past. The past is the people's foundation for the present, their hope for tomorrow.

The past, we want to look at in this paper, covers these areas – the people's belief system, their thought patterns, and the structure of their communities.

### **Understanding the Melanesian Belief System**

The Melanesian or Papua New Guinean belief system is centred in the spirits. All Papua New Guineans believe in the existence of spirit beings. From conception to the grave, Papua New Guineans live with the consciousness of the spirits. They know that the spirits are real. “[T]he Melanesian is born to the knowledge that he lives and works within a spirit world” (Narokobi, 1977, p. 9). These spirit beings, while possessing their own distinctive “beingness”, live on the same plane as human beings. They are within the reach of anyone, if the conditions are right (Narokobi, 1977, p. 9).

### **Spiritual Authority**

This awareness of intermingling with spirit beings led people to believe that the birth of twin babies was due to activities of the spirits. One of the early students at CLTC, now a respected church leader and Bible teacher, was deeply troubled when he learned that his wife was to have twins. It took some time for the staff to convince him and his wife that sometimes a woman can have twins. The consciousness of spirit beings gave traditional priests, magicians, and witchdoctors their spiritual authority. The Siwai people of North Solomon Province believe that when the *Mumiaku* – the clan leader – performs the rituals, the clan god – *Hagoro* – is actually present, and will give power to the *Mumiaku*. The people believe that *Hagoro* knows what the people need, and, therefore, *Hagoro* will grant *Mumiaku* the petition of the people (Dawia, 1980, p. 28).

### **Categories of Spirits**

In the mind of the people, spirits exist in different categories. Robertson writes:

For the Melanesians, the spirit world consists of autonomous creative spirit beings – cultural heroes, gods and goddesses, who established the cosmos; autonomous spirit beings – demons, *masalai*, which inhabit the earth; ancestral spirit beings – the spirits of the recent dead, and the remote dead, who are still part of the living; and impersonal occult forces, which can be controlled, so as to cause some good or evil (1982, p. 2).

### **Life-force**

Melanesians believe the life, or the life force, is something that survives death. Death does not destroy, or annihilate, the life force that separates itself from the body. Death gives the life force the opportunity to shed the old skin, and put on the new one, like the snake (Narokobi, 1977, p. 10).

The existence of the life force beyond death prepared the Melanesians for the reception of the gospel. The Danis of Irian Jaya have a myth that is related to a fight between a bird and snake, the outcome of which would determine their future happiness. The bird lost the fight, man is doomed to die. To this day the Danis believe that, one day, the cosmic order will be changed to allow them to slough off the old skin and continue to live on (Groves, 1982, p. 6). When the missionary, for the first time, uttered the words *Ki wone* – “the words of life”, the Danis responded with deep awe. They saw in the missionary, the embodiment of their traditional myth.

When immortality returns to mankind, those who learned its secret first will come over the mountains, and tell you that secret. Their skins will be white, because they are constantly being renewed, like the skin of a snake. Be sure to listen to them, when they come, otherwise *nabelan* – *kabelan* – my skin – your skin – or “immortality” – will pass you by (Richardson, 1975, p. 328).

At the heart of Melanesian spirituality is the idea that life is sacred. Melanesians live with the consciousness of being surrounded by life, or life force, generally referred to as *mana*. *Mana* is both good and bad. It is good for the one who uses it, but bad against the one it is

worked on. *Mana* functions in ensuring harmony, good relationships, and abundance of food supply or harvest. True harmony and wholeness are associated with *mana* (Dye, 1982, p. 3). *Mana* can be obtained supernaturally; transferred from father to son, or from an older person to a younger person; passed to others, through initiation, or other ritual rites.

### **Understanding Melanesian Thought Patterns**

To believe in the existence of the spirit beings for Melanesians means to live in constant interaction with them. Another way of saying this is Melanesians believe and think in terms of spirit beings. In the final analysis, “to believe” and “to think”, for Melanesians, are inseparable. To believe in, and be dependent on, spirit beings is to think about spirit beings, and to constantly adjust one’s life to maintain harmonious relationships with everyone, and everything that surrounds life.

### **Melanesian Concept of Relationships**

Melanesian thought patterns, in general terms, operate in terms of relationships. The Melanesian thought pattern is synthetic, rather than analytical; community-oriented, rather than individualistic; harmony-conscious, rather than antagonistic; operates from the known to the unknown.

While Westerners are more analytical in their thought process: dividing life and matters into segments and units, Melanesians see everything interrelated and interdependent. Melanesians see the world as a totality, a unity, and homogeneous (Koschade, 1967, pp. 115-116).

For Melanesians, religion, economics, politics, and education constitute one integrated, interrelated, interdependent unity. In the words of a former missionary,

The totality, of which we speak, embraces the overt, as well as the covert, responses, the manifest, as well as the implicit, the

theoretical, or ideal, as well as the actual or real, the universal, alternatives, and specialities (Luzbetak, 1970, p. 62).

The Melanesian community is integrated, and consists of people, animals, the environment, the spirit world, and the dead (in particular, the ancestors). The Melanesian situation is quite similar to the African. What is said concerning the Bantu is applicable also to the Melanesian.

Bantu psychology cannot conceive a man as an individual, existing by himself, unrelated to the animals, and inanimate forces surrounding him. It is not sufficient to say he is a social being; he feels himself a vital force in actual, intimate and permanent rapport with other forces – a vital force, both influenced by, and influencing them (Smith, 1962, p. 20).

When Samana was Premier of Morobe Province, he was called to preside over a dispute between two groups. A foreign timber company made payments to one group and not the other. The argument was solved, not by Samana, but by a dragon lizard.

We were meeting under a mango tree, Samana recalls, and a dragon lizard fell from the top of the mango tree, right into the centre of the village meeting. It startled them all. Everybody was scared, and started running in all directions. Samana's secretary reached down, and picked up the dragon lizard. Slowly the villagers returned. When they came back, I told them you realise you were all arguing over timber resources, and arguing how you were going to benefit monetarily. But you forget that the animals also own those resources as well. You forgot to invite them to this meeting. You forgot to indicate to them where they fit in, how they are being affected. They are trying to show you that they are not happy, that you have not invited them here, too, to hear their views about how you are disturbing the environment, and destroying their habitat. Samana says that solved the problem! The people did not argue any further. They understood that kind of a sign. They came to

terms, and decided to make sure the distribution was equitable (Dorney, 1990, pp. 19-20).

### **Impact of Western Thought Patterns**

It is important to point out the impact Western thought patterns are having on contemporary Papua New Guineans. Many educated Papua New Guineans are becoming more and more fragmented in their thinking. They view religion as something for Sunday, or village life. Church buildings are seen as very sacred places, reserved for Sunday services only. Church buildings cost a lot of money and energy, but are used for not more than ten hours a week. Many institutions are unrelated to each other, schools, hospitals, universities, colleges, Bible and theological colleges, are fenced off from each other. The secular and the sacred are kept apart. Government institutions don't always value religious disciplines. Bible and theological colleges, on the other hand, make very little room for secular subjects. As a result of this dichotomised thinking, many educated Papua New Guineans see little significance in organised religion. Many are nominally religious, but they follow neither the Christian, nor the traditional, belief system. "It is truly sad that a people, who were once always spiritual, have suddenly become apathetic, indifferent, and often quite antagonistic, toward any form of organised religious experience" (Narokobi, 1977, p. 11).

### **Melanesian Concept of Community**

The idea of homogeneity is seen more clearly in the life of the community. Melanesian communities provide security, support, and care for all the people. In these community-oriented societies, the concerns of the community take precedence over the individual. The individual exists for the community. This does not mean individuals are not important or ignored. We will return to this idea, further, below.

The concept of community solidarity stems from the fact that, for Papua New Guineans, "to be" means to be a unity, a totality, not a fragmentation of disconnected and "isolated components" (Koschade, 1967, p. 122). To put it in another way, "I am", because "they are" –

to be a person in Papua New Guinea is to belong to the community. A man may lose his *mana*, but he cannot afford to lose his community.

### **Melanesian Concept of Sin**

This leads us to another important concept – sin. Sin in Melanesian society has to do with broken relationship with human beings and the gods. Papua New Guinean community, as noted above, consists of people, gods, ancestors, the environment, and the animals. Sin, to them, is the breaking of relationship with any of these entities. Natural disasters, sickness, and death are due to the breaking of relationships.

The principle that governs these relationships is called *Lo*, a Pidgin version for “law” in English. In general, *Lo* is the visible, and invisible, ethical and religious standard of the community. *Lo* stands for the right religious rituals, social patterns of behaviour, and legal and religious obligations (Fugmann, 1977, p. 124). Sin, therefore, is the breaking of *Lo* that governs relationships within the community. Personal sin is sin against the accepted community standard of behaviour. As Wayne Dye points out, “disobeying husbands and leaders, refusing hospitality and inter-clan payments, and expressing anger are, to them (Papua New Guineans), far more serious ‘sin’ ” (1976, pp. 28-29).

*Lo* is directly related to *i stap stret*, that is “he, she, or it stays straight”, a Papua New Guinean equivalent for righteousness or righteous living, which, in this case, means living by the *Lo* of the community, *i stap stret* within the community. Traditionally, an individual, who transgressed against the *Lo*, had to pay for it with his own life. From the moment of his birth, the individual knows to whom he belongs, and what is expected of him.

He (the Melanesian) is given a culture and autonomy, within a defined community territory, and in terms of human relationships. The concept of community solidarity has its negative aspects as well. This is seen in the area of harmony, rather than antagonism. The positive side of harmony, rather than antagonism, is better demonstrated by the individual’s reluctance to reveal community secrets. Since the

community provides “salvation” for everyone within the society, no Melanesian would openly conceal anything that is related to the community. To do so, is to betray the community, to break the *Lo*, thus disturbing the harmony of the community. Melanesian politeness guards the people from speaking out their mind and heart until a trusting relationship is established. In Melanesian society, one must earn the right to be listened to, and obeyed. A stranger (Melanesian or expatriate), as an outsider, will not be trusted with community secrets.

### **Melanesian Concept of Ancestral Spirits**

Melanesians welcomed, and accepted, outsiders with different skin colour, because they associated them with ancestral spirits or ghosts. Their myths and legends assured them that, one day, the long-departed ancestors will return with the secret to eternal bliss. The people “received them peacefully as they would receive a ghost” (Codrington, 1891, p. 11).

The return of the ancestors, or ancestor, is associated with the ushering in of material goods, the arrival of the millennium, a time of universal prosperity. This is the time, marked by youthfulness for the aged, disappearance of sickness, death, hunger, poverty, and all other deficiencies (Thimme, 1977, p. 35).

The reluctance on the part of Melanesians to give out community secrets is because it will prevent the arrival of the millennium. When the Melanesians heard about eternal life, *laip i stap gut oltaim oltaim*, they interpreted it according to their cultural understanding.

A father and son ate together. They were eating a taro. Then the father picked a flower, which the son wanted. But the father said, “No, you have the taro, that should satisfy you. I am the stronger, therefore, the flowers belong only to me”. The people said to the missionary: “You have given us the taro, i.e., the gospel. When are you going to give us the flower, the secret of strength and cargo?” (Frerichs, 1957, p. 109).

I can still recall the shock that came over me, as I sat talking with one of the pastors in a village in the Sepik. “What did the people think



about the message I preached yesterday?”, I asked. “They liked it very much,” came the answer. I asked, “Why?” “What else did they say?” The pastor responded, “Well . . . the people attended all three services yesterday, because they wanted to know the secret you have for them. You are one of us. Your skin is like our skin. You have been educated in Australia. When you preached about Jesus raising Lazarus from death, we realised that you have come to tell us the secret that the missionaries have been holding back from us all this time.” I had preached three messages on the resurrection of Lazarus from John 11. I decided to speak on the same passage three times, because I did not want to confuse the people. This serves to highlight the difficulty of understanding the way the people interpret the message they hear. It is even more difficult to correct the misinterpreted truth, without personal follow up.

### **Melanesians and Harmony**

Papua New Guineans value harmony more than confrontation. They would rather follow a half-understood truth than argue over it.

When people value harmony more than confrontation, it affects their relationship with each other. Many times, the people will not speak up, or correct, someone who slips back in his/her Christian life.

Human beings everywhere are very much experience-oriented. Experience validates belief or practice. What Melanesians experienced, in the past, becomes the basis for judgment and decision-making. This universal characteristic was the basis, on which Melanesians made their decisions, as they confronted new ideas. When Melanesians met white people for the first time, they took them for their ancestors, returning from death. Not only did they listen to them, but their mistaken understanding, in many cases, saved the lives of the newcomers.

When the wife and children of the pioneering missionary arrived in Baiyer River, the Engans, who carried the children to the mission station, pinched their skin to satisfy their curiosity, to be doubly sure that they were real human beings, like the brown children.

The arrival of white people, with their personal belongings – *cargo* – bewildered the people. They looked on the missionaries, and the government officers, whose *cargo* they carried over the mountains and the valleys, as people of wealth. They became convinced that, one day, when the time is right, they would discover *rot bilong cargo*, “the cargo road” – the secret to wealth and well-being.

The villages assumed that government law, and Christianity, with its ritual, operated in the same way as traditional religion, but that the government and Christianity would supply the material success, growth and prosperity, connected with the way of life of the expatriates, which the villages saw and desired, just as their traditional religious ritual has assured them of fertility, growth, and continuity in their traditional way of life (Knoebel, 1/1972, p. 40).

What the people observed, and touched, also influenced their traditional belief system. The new Christian rituals, such as baptism and communion, came to be associated with traditional rituals. Concerning the African attitude to communion, Reyburn observed “communion Sunday is the only one, which is attended in force” (1958a, p. 171). Melanesian societies operate under duties and obligations. It is not difficult to imagine that the people viewed communion as an opportunity to establish favour with God. Some people in Papua New Guinea have seen the idea of being a Christian as putting God under obligation. They attended church services, helped the minister, and carried out church activities, in order to put God under obligation.

### **Summary**

To summarise this section, we note that Papua New Guineans and Melanesians, in general, think synthetically, rather than analytically. They think more in terms of communities, rather than individuals. Unless they know and trust an outsider, they will not reveal their minds and hearts, but respond in ways they think the outsider wants them to. They understand, and explain, the new in terms of the old and familiar.

These four categories of thought patterns have been purposely divided for clear presentation. In reality, Papua New Guineans think in totality. Even making statements like these do not fully represent the total situation. For, clearly, there are distinct differences from place to place, from individual to individual. As Koschade puts it,

New Guinea society, like any other society, also has its mystics and “scientists”, its conservatives and its liberals, its opportunists, quacks, intellectuals, and visionaries. It has its men (and women), who were born before their time (1967, p. 115).

### **Understanding the Structure of Melanesian Communities**

The Papua New Guinean belief system, and thought patterns, are clearly influenced by the structure of the communities – the way the people respect and relate to each other.

An important aspect of village life is the way people make decisions, and the importance of these decisions for the well-being of their communities.

The coastal and the highlands’ villages are structured differently. While the coastal people, on the whole, live together as a community, many highlands’ villages are scattered through the jungles. To an outsider, these villages consist of buildings, with no relationship to each other. The people in the village, or the community, however, do know their relationship to each other. They know their family members, their clan, tribe, and the people group to whom they belong. A Papua New Guinean village represents the history of the people, their customs, and religious practices. The village offers the people security, and a sense of destiny. The tribal groupings are political, and social units, within which marriages, and other intertribal interactions, takes place.

### **Melanesian Concept of Leadership**

The village elders represent the authority of the villages. The elders consist of chief/s, and the heads of each tribe, clan, and family. A

tribe consists of a number of clans, a clan represents a number of families. The chief/s, as heads of the tribes, are decision-makers. The clan, and family, heads are working leaders. They, and the young men and women, are responsible to carry out the decisions made by the chiefs.

Leadership patterns differ from place to place. On the coastal areas, leadership is hereditary, by nature. In this case, leadership is passed from the father to his first-born son, the first-born son to his first-born son. Normally, there is no argument as to who should be the leader. This male leadership is characteristic of patrilineal communities. In these communities, all property rights are held by the male leaders. All the members of the tribe, clan, and families know the property that belongs to them. All property is community-owned. It is the responsibility of the first-born of the family to allocate family property to the members of his tribe. Once the allocation is made, the clan, or the family, members are responsible to develop their piece of ground. This becomes their clan, or family, heritage.

In matrilineal communities, male members hold leadership responsibilities, but the right to property belongs to the female members. The first-born daughter of the family inherits the family property. She allocates the property to her brothers and their sons. Without her blessing, the brothers cannot sell or give away land or fishing waters.

In some of the highlands' communities, leadership is by achievement. "A man becomes a community leader by his ability in war and/or oratory, community leadership and/or organising exchange of goods with other villages or clans" (Dye, 1982, p. 13). In other highlands' communities, leadership is hereditary. The first-born inherits leadership from his father, and passes it on to his first-born son, who, in turn, passes it to his first-born.

### **Melanesian Concept of Decision-Making**

Consensus of opinion is the most common decision-making process in the villages – a multi-individual, mutually-interdependent, decision-making. This process of decision-making calls for participation from

all members of the community. This does not take away the chief's right of making the final decision.

There were times, when the leaders, and or the chief, made decisions, without consulting the community, for the good of everybody.

The authority and power of the chief include the responsibility to maintain harmony and order, to direct the common operations and industries, to represent his people to strangers, to preside at sacrifices, to lead in war, to inflict fines, to order trouble-makers be put to death (Codrington, 1891, p. 47).

### **Melanesian Concept of Authority**

The elders/leaders are custodians of community *Lo*, and regulators of community well-being. The authority of the leaders or the chief is derived from the spirit world. No leader can take up his responsibility without being properly introduced to the spirit world, through initiation. The leader is expected to enter into a personal encounter with the community spirit before taking up his office.

As noted before, the Melanesian community is a community of the living and the dead. Accordingly, no community decision can be made without consulting the departed members of the community. If the community decides to move to a new location, it must first consult the ancestors. Nothing can happen without ancestral consent.

In a homogeneous society, decision-making extends to every part of life, without obscuring the distinctive part of life.

The idea of totality of homogeneity does not mean that the New Guinean is unable to distinguish between the various aspects of existence, or activity, but he is acutely aware of the interrelatedness, and interdependence, of all things, which have been obscured in Western thought, because of the analytical, fragmentary point of view. Man and nature, seen and unseen, living and dead, past and present, fragment and whole, natural and supernatural – all belong, as a homogeneous totality of life. All of existence is, therefore, brought together into a cosmic

totality. The individual, the community, nature, spirits, are all aspects of the whole, and representations of it. Everything is interrelated, and interdependent, so that nothing can be isolated, without losing its identity. There is existence, only within the framework of this cosmic totality (Koschade, 1967, pp. 116, 117).

In Papua New Guinea, the individual is an integral part of the community. The individual's identity and rights are interwoven with the identities and rights of the community, but are not obscured by it. Because an individual's action can either invoke the blessing, or the curse, of the spirit beings, he must operate within the accepted standards of the society. This is especially important, when it comes to the transfer of allegiance from spirit worship to Christianity.

### **Melanesian Concept of Conversion**

Traditionally, no Papua New Guinean could ever consider becoming a Christian without involving the community and the elders. Transfer of religious allegiance is a matter of life and death. No transfer of religious allegiance can be affected, without fully discussing its consequences in relation to gardening, hunting, family lives, ancestral spirits, etc.

Conversion, in Papua New Guinea, in a real sense, is the conversion of the society. Missionaries, both foreigners and nationals, in their eagerness to see instant results, have encouraged individuals to make decisions, at the expense of the community. The result has been either antagonism from the community, or a shallow religious life, or both.

In terms of the parable of the sower, the results are like seeds falling on all other soil, except the good soil. The community, in Papua New Guinea, is the soil, in which Christianity is to grow. Unless the soil is properly ploughed, the rocks removed, and the thorns uprooted, it will not bear abundant fruit.

## **Importance of Consensus Decisions**

This highlights the importance of the consensus decision-making process in Papua New Guinean communities. Consensus decision-making is a social mechanism that controls group interaction and interdependence. Interpersonal relationships, and community loyalties, matter more than personal rights. Consensus decision-making ensures security and harmony.

Human beings, as human beings, experience a need for a home, for a place of belonging, where they share with each other, and care for each other. It is paradoxical that security in a group gives people the courage to reach outside the group, to a wider community (MacDonald, 1982, p. 134).

Consensus decision-making can well be termed the “soul” and the “eye” of the community. It is at the heart of all community activities. It builds the community together, strengthens interpersonal relationships, and offers security and stability to everyone.

The group does not exist as a living organism, unless the individuals act and interact, each according to its specific role and right. The total group is really the decision-making body. Although it may be for one individual to make pronouncement, as the representative of all. In many communal societies, there is no decision without unanimity of the village, or tribal council (Tippett, 1971, pp. 199-200).

Papua New Guinean communities have been shown to have well-defined structures. Many villages consist of several clans and family units. The heads of the tribes and clans constitute the final decision-making body for the total community.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has highlighted several important factors toward understanding Papua New Guineans. The core of Papua New Guinean communities is the spirit world. Papua New Guineans believe, and

think, spirits. The idea of homogeneity influences the total cosmic community, of which they are part.

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