

WANTOK SYSTEM

Revd Ako Arua and Daniel John Eka

Revd Ako Aru received a diploma from the Melanesian Nazarene Bible College (MNBC) in Papua New Guinea in 1994. He managed the CLC bookshops in Port Moresby for six years, and concurrently planted and pastored the first Papuan Nazarene church. He graduated from MNBC's Bachelor of Theology program in 2001.

Daniel John Eka received a diploma from MNBC in 2000. He is presently enrolled in the Bachelor of Theology program at MNBC, and is working at Victory Books. His future interest is in a radio ministry in PNG.

INTRODUCTION

The wantok system, traditionally and culturally, was meant for binding strong relationships within the family, clan, and tribes. Jannsen explains the meaning of the wantok system as, “a group of people, speaking the same language (one talk), and coming from the same area. The main characteristics of the wantok system are: common kinship, common language, common place or area of origin, common social or religious associations, and, especially, the common beliefs in the principle of mutual reciprocity.”¹ However, today, the wantok system adds new meaning and understanding, which directs it toward a different direction.

The wantok system has both negative and positive aspects. In the negative sense, it makes people become frustrated, and brings corruption. For example, when one visits a wantok's house, he or she often leaves the house with something that does not belong to him or her. The owner of the house finds out later and gets upset. The negative aspect brings a bad name to the society, the province, and the nation as a whole. This system is very dangerous, once it becomes a habit.

¹ Hermann Jannsen, “Wantok System Everywhere”, in *Catalyst* (1977), Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, p. 289.

In this particular paper, we will look at the wantok system from the Christian perspective, and examine it in detail, as it is one of the major social injustice issues that is affecting the church, people, and the nation today.

Therefore, this article will seek to help the reader to understand the wantok system, in its cultural and modern perspectives, and evaluate it from a biblical perspective. It will also help the reader to know what other people's views are on this subject. Finally, this article provides some possibilities, choices, and alternatives, which may bring help to the reader in dealing with this issue. This article is not the solution for one to follow, but a road map to help the reader see the advantages and the disadvantages of the wantok system in this age.

CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

The wantok system has been the system of people in Melanesia for hundreds of years. Every man, woman, and child knows, and lives, this system. The true wantok system is group-oriented, and not an individualistic system. This system is a culture, built into one's life. It has affected the way they do their barter system, exchanging of foods, and helping, when a family need arises, such as bride price, compensation, sickness, death, making special *moka* ceremonies, and helping another tribe in times of need, by donating pigs, etc. The wantok system has important values and meanings that bind and strengthen the Melanesian people and their traditions. The wantok system plays an important role, impacting these areas: way of life, benefits, and relationships.

WAY OF LIFE

The wantok system is a way of life for the Melanesian people. The way they live, do things, and handle every situation, is in line with this system. The life of unity and common understanding is strong. According to Bernard Narakobi, "We are [a] united people, because of our common vision. True enough, it has never been written, but has evolved over thousands of years."² In every activity of life, they needed each other's support, without which, no man could survive.

² Bernard Narakobi, *The Melanesian Way*, Port Moresby PNG: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, 1980, p. 7.

BENEFITS

The wantok system provides great and significant benefits. Because this system exists in people's lives, one does not think of hunger. The wantok system enables everyone to share whatever he or she finds, in fishing, hunting, or harvesting. Needs are met by all in the family, clan, and tribe. Caring and sharing is one important benefit this system provides. The immediate and extended family takes care of the older people, who do not have retirement benefits. People help each other care for each other's possessions, such as pigs, gardens, houses, and children. When a loved one dies, the neighbouring tribes show great sympathy by bringing food and other valuable items to the house of mourning. As far as the wantok system is concerned, asking is of no value at all. One gives to another, knowing that it will be returned again, when there is a need. Everyone benefits well in this system.

RELATIONSHIPS

The wantok system is a way of binding strong relationships with tribes, clans, and families. Michael Rynkiewich reports, "In Melanesian culture, life through community, relationship, and exchange are among the highest values."³ People do every activity together. This system operates to strengthen every aspect of life, e.g., hunting, gardening, social gatherings, and events, and helping friends in times of tribal fights. Hermann Janssen further lists the advantages of the of the wantok system as, "Fishing, defending assaulted friends (one talk), retaliating for victims of fighting and car accidents, forming small enterprises, and trying to gain prestige and political influence, etc."⁴ People-to-people relationships are the common understanding in this system.

The wantok system works well within the tribe, clan, and family, itself. Only when one marries into other tribes, does the relationship extend to that tribe. This opens the door for the tribes to know each other, and begin a new relationship. The wantok system makes the relationship in the culture become true and solid. The wantok system is unique culturally, with the

³ Michael A. Rynkiewich, "Big Man Politics: Strong Leadership in a Weak State", in *Politics in Papua New Guinea: Continuities, Changes, and Challenges* Point 24 (2000), Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, p. 174.

⁴ Janssen, "Wantok System", pp. 289-290.

understanding of strengthening each other. This system enables the building of people's working relationships, as they make gardens, build houses, pay bride price and compensation, and so on. The wantok system is important in keeping these relationships between each other intact. Relationship is the main core of the wantok system.

MODERN PERSPECTIVES

The cultural meaning, and the value, of the wantok system have greatly changed, since men have come to know civilisation and modernisation. The people's lifestyle, and their thinking are affected. The wantok system has become a personal thing, rather than a group-oriented thing. Today, the wantok system has become an unethical tool, to satisfy one's own desire for selfish gain. This system, which once was solid, has now become misused. The result of the wantok system being misused causes public humiliation, tribe and family riots, embarrassment, hurt, and imprisonment. The wantok system has become an untrusted system, because of the way it is used and lived. This system's core values and meaning have become nothing to this modernised world.

Can we blame the system for all the unethical problems we are facing today? No. Absolutely not! We have to blame ourselves for being careless enough to misuse this valuable system. Though civilisation and modernisation have brought many changes, the wantok system still exists in many lives. In the modern perspective, one must examine this system in two different aspects: the negative aspect (misused system), and the positive aspect (real system).

THE NEGATIVE ASPECT

The wantok system, in its negative form, has gotten out of hand. The livelihood of people is affected. It is like a cancer destroying the society, the Melanesian people, and the nation as a whole. The disadvantages of this system, in its negative form, are of great concern today.

Bribery

Bribery has become one of many negative aspects of this misused system. In this modern society, merit and qualifications are becoming less important. A man does not have to work hard, in order to get what he wants. As long as one has the money, and satisfies the other, one finds and gets what he wants.

One should have merit and qualifications to find a job, get appointed to positions, and be selected for other things. In the old days, one had to sweat his guts out to get what he wanted. Yet, this misused system today, makes it much easier for lazy ones to obtain privileges. Joseph Ketan explains, “There must be no room for bribes. It is morally and ethically wrong to oil the system with ‘grease’ money.” He goes on to say, “The offering, soliciting, and accepting, to speed up the process, is a criminal practice.”⁵ The Bible speaks out against bribery in Deut 10:17 that God is against bribery. Prov 17:23 explains that a crook accepts secret bribes, to keep justice from being done.

Politics

One has to know that politics is not a bad thing. The fact that the wantok system is misused in politics is of great concern. Too much politics is hindering the progress of the country. In politics, this misused system is a sickness that is producing corruption and mismanagement of public funds. The misused system allows the political party of the day to appoint its own party man, or supporter, to head executive positions. It becomes worse in many cases. The wantok system negatively uses, not what you know, but whom you know. This system, in its negative form, enables the political parties to appoint whom they know, for a job the person does not know how to do. James Chin says, “Politics is governed by ‘wantokism’, tribal, clan, or ethic loyalties.”⁶ No wonder, people often see few basic services, developments, and changes.

The real wantok system would allow for honesty and integrity, and would give fair treatment to all, even beyond one’s own party system. If only political parties would use the real wantok system, their primary goal to serve the whole nation and people would come to effective reality. The word of God, in Neh 5:14-19, explains how Nehemiah treated his people, when he became the governor of Judah. All that he did was to honour God, and meet

⁵ Joseph Ketan, “Leadership and Political Culture”, in *Politics in Papua New Guinea: Continues, Changes, and Challenges Point 24* (2000), Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, p. 55.

⁶ James Chin, “The Media in Politics in Contemporary Papua New Guinea”, in *Politics in Papua New Guinea: Continues, Changes, and Challenges Point 24* (2000), Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, p. 188.

the people's need. In Mic 2:1; 3:1-2, God condemns the rulers, who love evil, and mistreat His people.

Courts

The judicial system in this nation should remain strongly independent. The courts, from the village level to the supreme level, should not take sides. The court should not express feelings of sympathy to those convicted of guilt. Prov 18:5 says, "it is wrong to favour the guilty, and keep the innocent from getting justice". The Lord hates those who defend the guilty or condemn the innocent (Prov 17:15). The courts, in many cases, use the wantok system, in its negative form. This is common in many village courts. Often the people do not trust the village court magistrates. The wantok system, in its negative form, allows these people to accept bribes, show favouritism, and cause the innocent to suffer the consequences. In some cases, this system occurs at the national and supreme levels. The courts must uphold the integrity of their judicial office, and allow the right system to rule. Prov 21:15 says, "when justice is done, good citizens are glad, and crooks are terrified".

THE POSITIVE ASPECTS

Modernisation and civilisation have affected many. Many people are highly educated today, missionaries have brought the gospel, and many sophisticated technologies have been introduced, yet all these transitions have not stopped the wantok system. One may ask, in the modern perspective, can one live with this wantok system or not? The answer is, "Yes!" One can live with this system, as long as one is a Melanesian by birth, and belongs to Melanesian society. There are positive aspects of the wantok system that one can enjoy:

1. New relationships are built. It binds two or more people together, though they may be from different places, especially in town, or other urban areas, where there are no relatives, and feelings of loneliness are experienced. Because of Melanesian blood, the wantok system becomes an advantage to the neighbourhood. Neighbours become one's relative and friend.
2. The tribe, clan, and family ties still exist. When a relative arrives in town from the village, he or she is accepted without

question. The Western system would question the newcomer, asking for prior appointments, motives, and advance notices.

3. Contributions, in terms of food, money, and other valuable items, are also shared between each other. The townsfolk do not live without the village people's help, and vice versa. They need each other to survive, and enjoy life.
4. In special events, like bride price, compensation, defending of the tribe or culture, the wantok system shows its strength.

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

God's thoughts and ways are beyond man's (Is 55:8, 9). He has prepared His word beforehand, knowing that, one day, this world would be affected by sin, and all its well-intended, created systems would also be affected. The word of God speaks about the wantok system, highlighting both the negative and positive aspect of this system. The word of God also challenges the Christian church in how to deal with this issue.

NEGATIVE ASPECTS (FAVOURITISM)

From a biblical perspective, the negative aspect of the wantok system can be seen as favouritism. This happens, when this system is turned from its core values, meaning, and understanding. Favouritism produces humiliation, shame, dishonesty, and destruction of life. For example, when one is chosen, or selected, in leadership, by one's own wishes, without proper procedures, and according to the will of God, this is favouritism. Paul says, in 1 Tim 5:21, that one must not show favour, or prejudice, in anything one does. In Gen 29:15-30:1-24, as a result of favouritism, Rachel and Leah strived against each other to get even. Jacob, in Gen 37:1-36, humiliated his other sons, by showing favouritism to Joseph. As a result, his own brothers took revenge, by selling Joseph to a slave trader.

The Bible explains that God opposes favouritism (Rom 2:11). Often, man uses the wantok system to show favouritism to those he knows. The Bible, in Acts 10:34, says that God treats all people alike. In God's eyes, there are no Jews and Gentiles, but one people (Eph 2:14, 19). Even slaves and masters

are seen as one (Eph 6:9). The wantok system, used negatively (favouritism), can be dangerous; that is why God is not in favour of it.

Remember the story of James and John (sons of Zebedee) in Matt 20:20-28 and Mark 10:35. Their mother made a request to Jesus – for her two sons to have special places in God’s kingdom, ahead of the other disciples. She used the wantok system in promoting her own sons, without consideration of others. Jesus denied her request, because it was not benefiting to others, and against God’s will. Often this is what men do. The people, today, show favouritism, using the wantok system, without knowing the consequences it produces.

Another negative aspect of favouritism occurs when men defend those who are in the wrong, or who are supposed to be charged or convicted (Col 3:25). Bribery, corruption, and dishonesty have to be dealt with, and exposed. When one is found to be involved in stealing money, and is required to give an account in court, others must not try to defend him or her. James 2:1 explains that one should not show favouritism; if one does show favouritism, he or she sins (James 2:9).

The wantok system, in its negative form, was done away with, when Christ came and died on the cross. Eph 2:11-22 shows that the Jews considered themselves as God’s only people. Through the shedding of His blood, Christ broke their system, so that righteousness is for all.

POSITIVE ASPECTS (LOVE)

The wantok system should be practised, in terms of the greatest commandment of God, “love”. Mark 12:33 says that we must love one another, as we love ourselves. Loving each other strengthens, and brings valuable meaning, to mankind. God’s intention for man was to love his fellowmen. The wantok system was meant to be that way, the way of love. Matt 25:31-46 also gives some ways to practise the wantok system. They are to feed the hungry and the thirsty, welcome strangers (verse 35), provide clothing, care for the sick, and those in prison (verse 36). This is what a true and perfect wantok system is like. The wantok system, in its positive aspect, covers all these areas.

No matter what nationality, race, culture, or language, one must be a “true wantok” to all. The true wantok system practises a life of compassion to people, no matter who they are. It also reaches the enemies with love (Luke 6:35), and does not consider them as enemies (2 Thess 3:15). It sees people as one people, and helps carry their burdens (Gal 6:2). Deut 10:18 explains that God requires that one should care for those who may be regarded as foreigners.

THE CHURCH (THE BODY OF CHRIST)

The church, as the body of Christ, is called and chosen to live holy lives (1 Peter 1:15, 16; 1Thess 4:7). All Christians are to obey, and follow, the ways of God, and walk in them (Deut 10:12). God’s ways are righteous and holy (Deut 32:4; Ps 77:13). Therefore, the Christian’s goal and purpose is to uphold the righteousness of God.

The Christian church must not neglect the wantok system; it must strengthen its positive and righteous values, and encourage its people to live them. The Christian church’s role in emphasising the wantok system should aim to promote the primary law of God, and biblical principles.

The Christian church, in its dealing with appointments, elections, and selections, must follow biblical principles, and godly procedures. The Christian church should desire to live honourably in every way (Heb 13:18; 1 Thess 2:12). May the Holy Spirit guide and keep the church.

OTHER PEOPLE’S VIEWS

An attempt was made to interview about 20 people (including students from the Melanesian Nazarene Bible College) from the Western Highlands, Morobe, Sepik, Southern Highlands, Eastern Highlands, Enga, and Central Provinces of Papua New Guinea.

The responses received supports what has been written in this article. As a result of these views, this part of the article is divided into three different sections: (1) the positives, (2) the negatives, and (3) the custodians.

THE POSITIVES

The positives agreed that, in the old days, the wantok system was good. This system was, and still is, the people's system. This system is their way of life, and means of survival. The wantok system still plays important roles today, in terms of building relationships. Man never exists alone. One has to seek the support of the others, to exist, and be counted in society. One's strength and hope is his wantoks. One would not find confidence and boldness to strive for prestige, if wantoks were not around.

The positives agree that the wantok system is good, in terms of contribution, because Melanesian people are still a group-oriented people. They need their wantoks to pay compensation, meet funeral expenses, when death occurs, and pay bride price, etc. Wantoks would be very upset, if they were not consulted, or considered, for help. The positive aspect of the wantok system is good, and upholding it can be encouraged.

THE NEGATIVES

The negatives agree that the wantok system was good, only in the old days, and not today. The effects of the system today are not encouraging. Modernisation has now influenced the people, and their lifestyles cannot allow them to live the old system. The system, today, produces corruption in many places, covers up for those who are guilty, makes people weak, lazy, and dependant on others, cripples people financially, and encourages racial strife.

The negatives think that this system should be done away with, for good. They argue that there is no point in keeping something that has lost its meaning. They also think that it is not possible to implement a true wantok system in the new modernised generation.

THE CUSTODIANS

The custodians agree that the wantok system has both bad and good effects. Their strongest argument would be, "who are the Melanesian people?" Are they Spanish, Chinese, European, Australian, or are they American? The custodians think that one has to know that, though people live in modernisation and civilisation, they still have "Melanesian blood" in their body system. People cannot deny that.

The custodians strongly argue that the wantok system must exist, and not be done away with. This system makes the people who they really are. No matter the negative results it brings today, this system is here to stay. No one can deny its existence, and how it has shaped the people's lives from the beginning. These people say that those who deny its existence and values, and pretend that they do not know this system, may call themselves aliens from another planet. They are not true Melanesians.

POSSIBILITIES AND ALTERNATIVES

The wantok system is good, only when its values and core meaning are used in a proper manner. The wantok system should not be done away with. It is part of the people's culture, especially for Melanesian people. It still plays a very important role in society, in terms of binding, strengthening, and keeping the traditions intact. One has to do away with the negative aspects, and keep the positive aspects of the wantok system that benefits all.

There is no best solution, but only suggestions. One has to see these alternatives as a guide, and not the only way:

1. The wantok system should be applied in its cultural meaning and understanding. People should think back to how it was back in the old days, before civilisation and modernisation came.
2. The wantok system should be applied, in light of the word of God. People should use the positive aspects of the wantok system as scripture outlines, using scriptural understanding, as its basis.
3. The wantok system should not be used for selfish gains. One must not lust for that which belongs to another, in order to satisfy self.
4. The church of God should not practise a wantok system, which leads to corruption, discrimination, and sin. The church should be holy.
5. The church of God should not entertain those involved in the negative aspects of the system, but rather expose them.

6. Lastly, the wantok system should be used for strengthening and building up one another in love.

Let us think back to our roots, and think about the future. The wantok system will be effective today, when one understands its cultural values and understanding, as God, the original giver, intended.

THE MORAL DECISION (CONCLUSION)

The wantok system, in Melanesian culture, in the past, was purposely engaged in for social relationships. The system operates in all aspects of life, in contributing to, strengthening, and binding, relationships. Today, this system is used beyond its normal and meaningful way. The Bible speaks against its negative aspects, and encourages its positive aspects. As Christians, one must not tolerate the bad, but expose it. The good side of this system must be lived by all. One must also realise that, in Melanesia, even though he or she is a Christian, he or she is still a Melanesian.

The system itself is not a bad system, and cannot be condemned. It is how one uses this system that counts. This system is a gift from God, and is to be used wisely, in service for others, and used in a way that God can be glorified and honoured (Rom 4:10-11). All who do right will be rewarded with glory, honour, and peace (Rom 2:10). After all, everyone will give an account to God.

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