

ARTICLES AND BOOKS RELEVANT TO MELANESIA

Culture and Progress: The Melanesian Philosophy of Land and Development in Papua New Guinea, Nancy Sullivan, ed., Madang PNG: Divine Word University Press, 2002. Reviewed by Daniel J. Stollenwerk.

One cannot speak of world history in the last 500 years without addressing European expansion, colonialism characterised, not simply by the quest for trade and power, but also the spread of scientific, political, and religious ideas. Perhaps by coincidence or not, the children of the generation that saw Christopher Columbus sail west from the coast of Portugal, read Copernicus' theory of a sun-centred universe. And, as sea routes opened around the globe, the science of Galileo and Newton came to dominate the minds of European explorers and traders. Consequently, modern technology, that offspring of the scientific revolution, because of its complementary qualities of intoxicating attractiveness and brute force, assisted the colonials in their quest for power. Finally, triumphant Christianity sailed in the wake of European expansion, preaching a monotheistic revelation, and, unwittingly, or not, sanctifying the enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Very few cultures have been able to ignore this Western onslaught of science, technology, and political and religious ideas. Some people and cultures have embraced it, going so far as to ridicule their so-called primitive past. Others have rejected it as imperialistic, ungodly, and primitive in its own right. Most, however, have looked to adopt and adapt – with varying degrees of success.

Papua New Guinea fits into the last category. As a people, it has accepted the very idea of a nation, and even the somewhat arbitrary borders set by its colonial past, but a nation, nonetheless, of disparate languages and cultures, which it does not want to lose. It seeks economic development, but not at the expense of its cultural heritage.

It is perhaps the land in PNG that best symbolises this dynamic tension between Western and traditional ideas of economy, technology, politics, relationships, philosophy, and religion. And so, in 2002, Divine Word University hosted a symposium of academics, lawyers, business people, politicians, and missionaries, which took the land as its starting point, and asked how PNG might best preserve its heritage, yet, at the same time, partake in a world economy, and create a higher standard of living. The result of that symposium was the publication of *Culture and Progress: The Melanesian Philosophy of Land and Development in Papua New Guinea*, a study very much Western in structure – complete with meticulous and numerous footnotes and references – but also very much a product of Melanesian traditional ideas, values, and beliefs.

After a comprehensive introduction to the text, the editor, Nancy Sullivan, divides *Culture and Progress*, into four areas. Under the first, “The Melanesian Philosophy of Land”, the late Archbishop Hans Schwemmer speaks of the lack of attention for the common good. Next, in a particularly well-researched article, Michael Rynkiewich debunks a number of false assumptions concerning both Melanesian and Western ideas of land ownership, and lays much of the blame for current problems at the feet of the PNG government. Taking the Abu’ Alifes of the central Sepik region as his starting point, Otto Nekitel then explores the cosmological, philosophical, and even linguistic conceptions of land. From his missionary experience in East Sepik, Fr Patrick Gesch further investigates the religious connotations of land, through the ritual of the pig exchange. Finally Mike Douse takes the reader outside the confines of PNG; offering his knowledge of land administration and reform in Bangladesh, in order to explore some implications for the same in PNG.

Charles Benjamin, the Minister for Lands and Physical Planning, opens the second section on “Mobilisation and Customary Land Tenure” by recounting some of the attempts at, and difficulties with, PNG land administration, whose goal is to allow for economic growth, while promoting equity, employment, stability, and participation. Eric Kwa continues with a very good history of land tenure law, both before and after independence, further establishing its implications for contemporary

forestry ownership. Dr Lawrence Kalinoe, executive dean and professor at the School of Law, UPNG, claims, in the next article, that, in effect, the cash economy and the cash crop have already introduced private property – even if it is not so labelled. He goes so far as to assert that the greatest enemies of the future of customary land tenure are not the World Bank, or the International Monetary Fund, but the well-educated, wealthy, politically, and economically “well connected” Papua New Guineans themselves. He calls on the state to take the lead role in reform. The next three submissions by Loani Henaio, Francis Irara, and co-authors Ian Marru and David Manau, although admitting to problems, and the need for social mapping, all call for customary land registration. Each article, in its own way, asserts that such a system would secure loans for socio-economic development, and, at the same time, offer minimal risk of loss of rich Melanesian heritages, and no risk, at all, of loss of the land itself.

Sir Peter Barker opens the discussion on “Town Land”, with strong criticism of both those students, who spread false rumours and violence, to thwart land reform, and weak government officials, who have filed the dilemma away in the “too hard” basket. Both he and, in the following article, Lady Carol Kidu claim that the land issue demands urgent attention, especially in growing urban areas, where there is nowhere for migrants to settle legally, little room for business to expand, and no space for government to extend health and education facilities. Co-authors, Lloyd Nolan and Joe Abani, relate how landowners, residents, and investors of Alotau, capital of Milne Bay Province, have benefited from urban development, which included the landowners, themselves, in the decision-making processes. Andrew Pai and Jacob Sinne, finally, point out that previous attempts at urban development have failed precisely because of a “top-down” approach, which has not involved the landowners as genuine partners in urban progress.

In the final, and perhaps most interesting section on “Further Strategies”, Parliamentarian Bernard Narokobi appeared to best meld the religious with the political: the land is neither mine nor yours, but a gift from God to use and nurture; the state is the new social order, and those of other tribes, clans, or families are not strangers or aliens, but friends, in quest of the

common good. Culture, by its very nature, is open to change, Mel Togolo further insists. And land, as the cultural symbol of shared values, ideas, beliefs, and moral principles, must adapt to the demands of both tradition and development. Gaikovina Kula next points out the implications of land reform to marine management and conservation. And Dominic Douse, from his experience of community and economic development in Aboriginal Australian communities – a development, which considered the needs, aspirations, talents, leadership, and internal divisions of each community – then looks to apply the same sort of dynamic model to the Disobai Naori traditional landowners of Vanapa West.

Michael Rynkiewich and Hartmut Holzknecht conclude this well-structured, well-documented record of a PNG symposium on land reform and philosophy. As a student of theology, I could not help but note, however, that one of the most-fundamental Christian aspects of development was missing. The mechanistic universe of the modern age – detached as it was from the *telos*/the goal of creation, divorced from objective morality, and having assigned God the solitary role of creating *ex nihilo*, but neither of sustaining nor guiding the universe – lies at the heart of Western science and development, and, thus naturally, clashes with any, like a Melanesian culture, which has not so drastically estranged the material from the spiritual. The Judeo-Christian heritage of Genesis, Deutero-Isaiah, Paul, and John, on the other hand, incessantly links creation to redemption, the origin cannot be understood without reference to the destiny, the incarnate reveals the transcendent, Jesus' miracles point to, and bring about, the kingdom of God. In other words, parallel to traditional Christology, in Christian belief, the material and the spiritual, although distinct, form a unity. At its foundational level, Catholic social teaching is an attempt to supersede a mechanistic understanding of the universe, to correct a modern, Western, dualistic understanding of reality, as applied to the economy, to politics; the goal of all material development, it insists, is faith in God.

In sum, the contemporary PNG tug-of-war between culture and progress is, at its roots, a metaphysical/theological question. In this highly articulate, broad-based publication, Togolo, Rynkiewich, and, especially, Narokobi,

came closest to confronting the theological dimensions of the dilemma, but further development of the theme could have helped clarify this most fundamental reason for tension in PNG between culture and progress.

At the legal, sociological, and philosophical levels, nevertheless, *Culture and Progress* remains a highly-impressive – even daring – gathering of contemporary PNG thinkers, confronting perhaps the most crucial and contentious issue in Papua New Guinea today. For better or worse, the understanding of, and the decisions concerning, land and development will most certainly play one of the largest roles in determining the future society of Papua New Guinea.

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