

A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE GOD OF THE BIBLE AND THE TANNESE PRIMAL GODS: AN APOLOGETIC TO EDUCATE TANNESE CHRISTIANS

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ABSTRACT

Melanesians are very religious people. They have in their primal religion certain objects or spirits which they fear as gods. The people of Tanna Island (in Vanuatu) have several of these primal gods. They have supernatural beings in the spiritual realm and stone gods in the vicinity. In the supernatural realm, there is *kughen*, impersonal (unnamed) spirits, and *nanmin*. In the category of the stone gods, there is the fertility god, *nahak*, and mythical stone gods.

This poses a challenge for Tannese Christians. Often they are tempted to revert to the primal gods in times of sickness and the new yam harvest. Furthermore, one can see the outworking of traditional religion creeping into the church and resulting in either apostasy or syncretism.

The purpose of this paper is to do careful research on some of the Tannese primal gods, their nature and some characteristics of their relationship to humankind and vice versa. This will then be compared to the God of the Bible, for the purpose of educating Tannese Christians, as well as strengthening their faith in God.

INTRODUCTION

“There is no God”, the fool says in his heart” (Ps 14:1). “Yahweh is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the Israelites”, says a Jew. “Whatever you find to be true about God is your truth, but not mine”, says a relativist. “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who in these last days

has revealed himself in Jesus Christ (Heb 1:1-2), and lives in an individual's life by his spirit (1 Cor 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16) is our God", says a Christian. "We also have our own primal gods", says a Tannese.

Missionaries brought Christianity to the island of Tanna¹ in the mid-1800s. The Presbyterian missionary, John Geddie, settled on Aneityum² in 1848. However, prior to Geddie, the LMS missionary, John Williams, on a visit to the New Hebrides (as it was formally known), now Vanuatu, was martyred on Erromango³ in 1839. Missionaries have encountered many challenges over time in bringing Christianity to the New Hebrides, especially Tanna. For instance, Henry Nisbet and George Turner (1842-1862),⁴ later John Gibson Paton and the Mathiesons (1858), had to withdraw from Tanna, when their lives were threatened by the people. Despite these challenges, the church gradually flourished. In 1948 the Presbyterian church of Vanuatu⁵ became a self-governing church and has remained so to the present day. Unlike the challenges of the missionary era, now challenge encountered by the church is coming from within the church itself, namely, the continuing influence of paganism. As a result, two things are inevitable within the church: (1) apostasy, and (2) syncretism. The premise of this paper is that a genuine understanding of the God of the Bible, by way of comparison and contrast with the traditional gods, will strengthen the believers' faith in God. This introductory section will include: (i) introducing the geography, history, and people of Tanna; (ii) the purpose of the study; (iii) delimitations and

¹ Tanna is an island in the southern part of Vanuatu. It lays south of Efate, where the capital city of Vanuatu, Port Vila, is situated. The author is from the island of Tanna

² Aneityum is the southernmost island in the Vanuatu archipelago. It lays about 40 miles (64 km) south of Tanna. According to the history of missions, this is the first island to be settled by the Presbyterian missionary, John Geddie, in the year 1848.

³ Erromango is another island in the southern part of Vanuatu. It lies some 20 miles (32 km) north of Tanna. With regard to missionary history, the island is referred to as the "Martyr Island" by the missionaries. Several missionaries were killed there: John Williams and Harris in 1839. Later, George Gordon and his brother James Gordon were also killed there. With regards to trade, the island is known for sandalwood, even to this day.

⁴ John G. Paton, *John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides: An Autobiography*, James Paton, ed., London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1890, p. 229.

⁵ Any reference to the church in this paper will mostly be the Presbyterian church of Vanuatu (PCV), because (1) the author is a pastor of the PCV, (2) it has historical roots, back to the first missionaries, and (3) it still has the largest membership.

limitations; (iv) research questions; (v) methodology; and (vi) definition of terms.

INTRODUCING THE GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY, AND PEOPLE

The shape of Tanna has been described in many ways, such as “a fat crescent moon, or a Stone Age hand scraper, roughly chipped to shape, with the bulge along the west coast”⁶, or a “20-mile-long kidney-shaped island.”⁷ But, for the Tannese, it is simply their land, as expressed by the name, *Tana*, meaning “land”, “earth”, or “soil” in the South Tanna language.⁸ It is the land in which their forefathers lived, where they are now living, and the land in which their children, yet to come, will live. Hence, shape and location is unimportant to them; but a sense of belonging, ownership, and *kastom* is vital to their everyday living. The entire life of the people is governed by *kastom*.

The first recorded visitors were sailors and explorers. In 1606 Quiros sailed to the northern part (Banks) and Santo thinking it was the Australian continent. He named it “Terra Australis de Espiritu Santo” (Great Southland of the Holy Spirit). In 1768 Louis-Antoine Comte de Bougainville discovered the central part from Aurora (Ambae) to Malekula. It was Captain James Cook, who came six years later, who gave the name New Hebrides and mapped the rest of the islands to the south. In Tanna he named a harbour, Port Resolution, after his vessel. Cook was followed by La Perouse in 1798. Other visitors were the traders in the 19th century. For instance, Peter Dillon found sandalwood trees on Erromango in 1828 which attracted foreigners to the island. Another development was the recruitment of labour for Queensland and Fiji sugar plantations in 1840.⁹ In 1848 the first Presbyterian missionary (John Geddie) landed on Aneityum and, in conjunction with Bishop Selwyn (1849), constituted what later became the sequence of missionary work to the northern parts of

⁶ Edward Rice, *John Frum He Come: Cargo Cults and Cargo Messiahs in the South Pacific: a Polemical Work about a Black Tragedy*, Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1974, p. 129.

⁷ Kenneth Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia: Four approaches to Gospel and Culture*, Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 2012, p. xvii.

⁸ George Turner, *Nineteen Years in Polynesia: Missionary Life, Travels, and Researches in the Islands of the Pacific*, London UK: John Snow, 1861, p. 69.

⁹ Paul Gardissat, “Taem Bifo (The Past)”, in *Vanuatu: Twenti wan tingting long taem blong independens*, Suva Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1980, pp. 25-27.

Vanuatu (the Northern Mission).¹⁰ They contributed much in the areas of health, education, and economics. On 16 November 1887 France and Great Britain set up their joint colonial administration in the New Hebrides, which continued up until 1980 when the nation gained its political independence and became the Republic of Vanuatu.

Recently, Tanna has become the administrative centre of Tafea Province.¹¹ The provincial hospital is located in the small provincial town of Lenakel on the west of the island. It is one of the islands which has been trying to maintain its traditional ways in spite of the changes brought by Christianity, tourism, education, and globalisation. See below a map of the Republic of Vanuatu, and a map of Tanna.¹²

The land is fertile. The people are gardeners who depend on their crops for a living. They have a wealth of traditional relationships which are maintained through traditional ceremonies, traditional roads, and traditional mythology. People are required to work in their gardens, keep domesticated animals, and maintain relationships for traditional functions. Recently, gardening and the keeping of domesticated animals have taken on a commercial aspect due to changes in the standard of living.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹¹ The word "Tafea" is made up of the initials of the five islands that make up the province. They are Tanna, Aniwa, Futuna, Erromango, and Aneityum.

¹² The maps of Vanuatu and Tanna were taken from <http://www.bing.com/images/search?q=map+of+vanuatu>, accessed August 1, 2014. The names of some islands may be different to the ones used in the essay. This is because the names on the map were written in French. For instance, Aneityum in English is Anatom in French. The reason is that the British and French colonised Vanuatu before 1980. Hence, at independence in 1980 both languages were languages of education, as stated in the constitution.

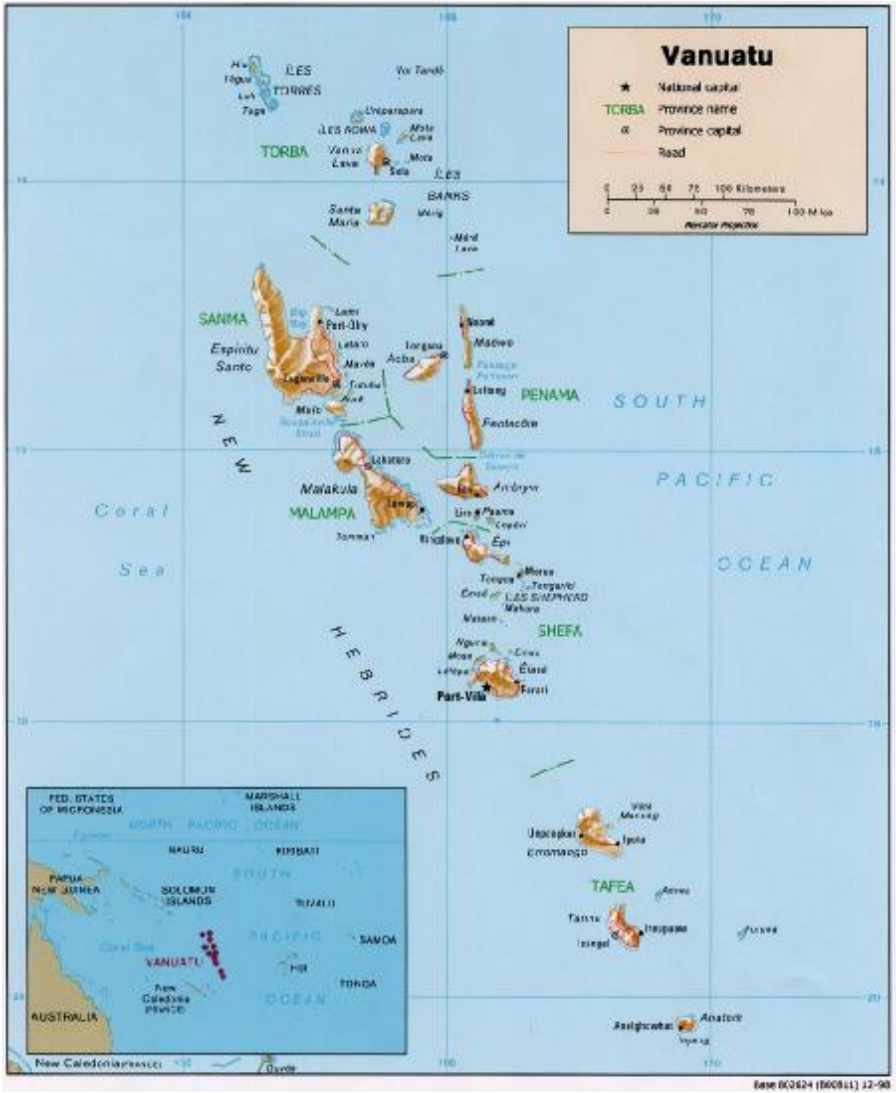


Figure 1: Map of Vanuatu



Figure 2: Map of Tanna

Recently as well, there have been significant developments in the life of the people. For example, Tanna has become a tourist destination. In particular, the famous accessible volcano, Mt Yasur, and traditional performances have attracted many tourists to Tanna. There is also the recruitment of seasonal workers in New Zealand, with the result that many have been travelling abroad. Furthermore, there has been a slow increase in the number of students going away for education. In fact, the greatest challenge for locals nowadays is school fees for their children's education.

THE PURPOSE OF STUDY

This thesis is an apologetic for Tannese Christians, which aims to strengthen their faith and to increase their ability to convince unbelievers.

As Wayne Grudem puts it, “apologetics is providing a defence of the truthfulness of the Christian faith for the purpose of convincing unbelievers”.¹³ Although apologetics is mainly for Christians, there is an evangelistic purpose to it which, according to Grudem, is to convince unbelievers. Norman L. Geisler states that “prior to establishing these two pillars [Christ is the Son of God, and the Bible is the word of God] on which the uniqueness of Christianity is built, one must establish the existence of God”.¹⁴ This thesis seeks to show that the God of the Bible is not one among many that a person may choose from, but that he is the only God. He is not only the white-man’s¹⁵ God, but he is also the God of the Melanesians. So, on the one hand, the pastoral purpose of this thesis is to inform mature Christians and to strengthen weak Christians so that they will not see God as a foreign God.¹⁶ On the other hand, it is also to put forward reasonable arguments for non-Christians to believe in God.

In the past, several attempts were made by government representatives and church workers to put an end to traditional gods, but to no avail. For instance, the colonial government tried to remove magic stones, which are an important part of the traditional life of the people. A regulation of 18 November 1918 enforced by the District Agent, Mr Nicol,¹⁷ that all magic

¹³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: an Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1994, p. 21.

¹⁴ Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1976, p. 7.

¹⁵ The word “white-man” is not used here with any negative implication. In some Melanesian languages, and especially the Tannese language, there are not many words for all the different colours. So, in order to describe something, the closest colour has to be used. Although foreigners are not really white, the people have to resort to the closest skin colour. The same is also true for black people.

¹⁶ For Tannese, there is a fine distinction between what is of the people and what is from abroad. Things from abroad include: practices, lifestyle, materials, belief, and the teaching/education system. This is referred to by the one word, *yasifa*, meaning “things that were brought from outside into the land”. This is the view that has been held by unbelievers towards the church and God, as though the latter was brought to the land via the missionary’s vessel. As a result, there are still villagers who would not allow churches to be built or their children to attend church. The missionaries, of course, brought the knowledge of God, but he was already there. The creator God is Spirit and cannot be confined to a vessel or a certain time, as though his presence is confined to the missionary’s presence.

¹⁷ New Hebrides, as it was formally known, now Vanuatu since 1980, was jointly ruled for 70 years by the condominium government of both the British and the French. Their powers

stones be destroyed forced the matter underground.¹⁸ In the same way, in the past the church has removed stones, via national and local evangelistic campaigns, but was never able to remove them all. Coercive and collective approaches seem to work only for a short time. Thus, this paper seeks to influence the minds of Tannese Christians in a gentle and loving spirit by emphasising individual choice based on a sound comparative study.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology is qualitative. The two main sources for this research were written sources in the library and my personal understanding. The writer also conducted interviews via email.

This thesis has two parts. The first part will consist of a reflection on some characteristics of the primal gods and the God of the Bible, and their relationship to humans. Several questions will be asked. How has the God of the Bible and traditional gods revealed themselves to humans? What do the people say or think they are? The second part will include an evaluation and a recommendation to Tannese Christians, for the purpose of defending the faith and informing the whole population about the true God. The writer believes that educating people in a way that they can understand may lead to growth in faith (for believers) and a change of allegiance (for unbelievers). This will be done by opening the word of God to the people because it “is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb 4:12 NIV). Only the living Word of God itself will transform them by the renewal of their minds (Rom 12:2). The writer believes that by educating their minds with the word their faith will grow. Believers live by faith and not by sight, says Paul (2 Cor 5:7).

were delegated from High Commissioners (the French head office in New Caledonia, and the British in Solomon Islands). In New Hebrides, both the British and the French appointed Resident Commissioners on October 20, 1906. Hence, District Agents were appointed to different islands of the archipelago. Mr Nicol was an expatriate, appointed as District Agent of Tanna at that time.

¹⁸ Rice, *John Frum He Come*, p. 125.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

These are the two main questions to be dealt with in this paper. What are some of the characteristics of the God of the Bible and the traditional gods? How is the relationship between them and humans different or similar?

DELIMITATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

While it would be appropriate to cover a much wider area of Vanuatu, or even Melanesia, this thesis will be limited to my people group, Tannese. For Melanesians, people are who they are because of the people group to which they belong. The traditional community is where their identity, knowledge, and a sense of belonging are, and so it is proper to focus on my people group. However, Melanesians, in general, may have some things in common. So, it is the hope of the writer that other Melanesians might find this paper relevant in one way or another, when comparing their traditional gods with God as revealed in the Bible.

It is not possible for this thesis to cover all aspects about the God of the Bible and primal gods. However, while a few specific things have been selected for discussed, this thesis is more of a general overview, meaning that, among other important things, the vital Christian doctrine of the trinity will not be dealt with. The general overview is for the purpose of comparative study.

It would be helpful to do some research or interviews among my own people, but because of distance, time, and finance the writer will rely on his knowledge, the library, and the internet.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Apologetics

This paper is using the definition given by Wayne Grudem: apologetics provides “a defence of the truthfulness of the Christian faith, for the purpose of convincing unbelievers”.¹⁹ Although the purpose is for convincing unbelievers, it is vital for all Christians to be informed and to be ready to give reasons for their faith. Therefore, this apologetic will

¹⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 21.

demonstrate the attributes of the God of the Bible in comparison with the Tannese primal gods.

God/god

The writer is aware of the fact that the term “god” is a generic term, meaning that it can be used in a plural sense, and the writer is aware of the danger that may be posed when it is used in this way.²⁰ So the writer will be using “traditional god”, “primal god”, or “god” with a lower case “g” in order to make the distinction from the God of the Bible, and use an upper case “G”, as in mainstream Christian usage, to refer to the Christian God. According to *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of the English Language*, “god” is “[a] being, regarded as possessing superhuman or supernatural qualities or powers, and is made an object of worship or propitiation; a higher intelligence supposed to control the forces of good and of evil; a personification of any of the forces of nature, or of some human attribute, interest, or relation; a divinity; deity”.²¹ Worship is an important aspect for defining god. Although anthropologists would separate gods from spirits and probably objects, this thesis uses the term “god” to refer to something that is the object of worship or is said²² to be the object of worship, both personal and non-personal.

Kastom

This paper will be using the word *kastom* as defined by Kenneth Nehrbass. He has well represented the people’s use of the term, although it may be confused with the English word “custom” because the word *kastom*²³ cannot be found in the Tannese lexicon. Often, a language borrows words from other languages, but the way that same word is used in a particular language may be different from another. The writer prefers “culture”, which means “patterns of learned beliefs and behaviour that order human

²⁰ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, Leicester UK: IVP, 2004, p. 24.

²¹ *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of the English Language*, Chicago IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1959, p. 541.

²² This is especially so of the first ethnographers, missionaries, and some anthropologists. Some of whom the writer will refer to in this paper.

²³ The word *kastom* is taken from Vanuatu pidgin, Bislama. Although it derives from the English word “custom”, it has a broader use.

activities”.²⁴ The closest we can get to that in the West Tanna vernacular is *nolan*,²⁵ “this is the way, fashion, or the manner of doing things”. It includes the way of building, gardening, fishing, relating to one another, relating to the gods, performing ceremonies, and everything that makes up a Tannese traditional society. The word also includes human attitudes. Nehrbass points out that the word should not be confused with the English word “custom” for foods, dress, language, music style, holidays, etc.²⁶ *Kastom*, for the Tannese, is totality of life. That is how the people use the word. Its use connotes a perfect harmony between the gods and the people, between the living-living and the living-dead,²⁷ and between the material and the spiritual world. Figure 3 below seeks to show Tannese cosmology.

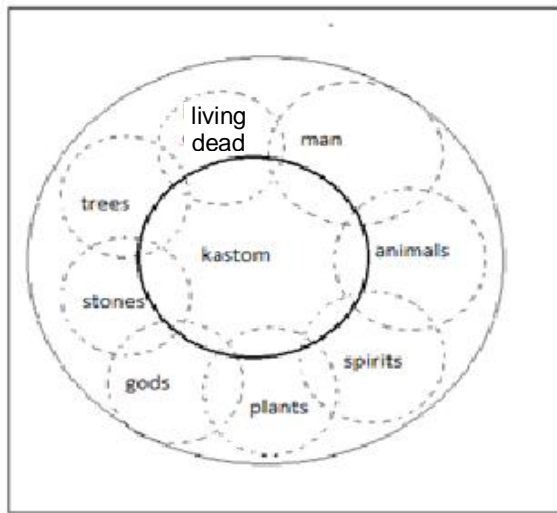


Figure 3: Tannese cosmology

²⁴ Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2008, p. 16.

²⁵ The word is from the West Tanna language (Netuar) of which the author is a speaker. The reason for mentioning the word, *nolan*, is because the word *kastom* is not a Tannese word, even in other languages of Tanna. It is an English term.

²⁶ Kenneth Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 25.

²⁷ The phrase is used to refer to dead people who are believed to be active and still around the place.

REFLECTING ON TRADITIONAL GODS

When the missionaries first arrived in the South Pacific, they discovered that the people were already deeply religious.²⁸ There was a sense of religiousness expressed through the awareness of supernatural beings. To give some examples, on Raiatea (Tahitian group) there was the worship of Oro, the war god, in which men were slain and sacrificed to this god.²⁹ On Samoa there was the worship of the spirit of the dead chiefs, birds, fish, trees, and even such inanimate objects as the war clubs of famous warriors. They also had totem gods, like sharks, birds, or stone.³⁰ On Lakemba (Fiji) the people believed that their god had actually left the island because the God of the missionaries had beaten him until his bones were sore.³¹ On Tanna (Vanuatu) the missionaries discovered that there were several traditional gods. We will now proceed to a more-detailed discussion of these Tannese gods.

INTRODUCING TANNESE TRADITIONAL GODS

The discussion of Tannese primal gods is not new. It has always been part of the epistemological process, via oral tradition. Upon arrival on Tanna, missionaries observed and recorded ethnographic descriptions of the local people and their traditional gods. Later, professional anthropologists also came and wrote a great deal about the people. This is not to say that one group of observers is more authentic than the other. In fact, the later, at one stage, relied heavily on the ethnography of the former, especially for the south Pacific. Furthermore, both groups are liable to misrepresent the culture. For instance, an observation might be based on a surface level observation and overlook deeper realities. In addition, there may be questions concerning the integrity of an informant, even for a professional anthropologist.

²⁸ Ennio Mantovani, "Traditional Religions and Christianity", in Ennio Mantovani, ed., *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions: a Handbook for Church Workers*, Point 6 (1984), p. 1.

²⁹ Basil Mathews, *John Williams the Ship Builder*, London UK: Oxford University Press, 1915, p. 45.

³⁰ V. A. Barradale, *Pearls of the Pacific: Being Sketches of Missionary Life and Work in Samoa and Other Islands in the South Pacific*, London UK: London Missionary Society, 1907, p. 49.

³¹ George Stringer Rowe, *The Life of John Hunt: Missionary to the Cannibals in Fiji*, London UK: T. Woolmer, 1860, pp. 71-72.

An Etic View

Tannese have several gods. Despite a rather short stay in Tanna, Turner noted that the Tannese had no idols, although they venerated stones. He distinguished between two categories of gods. The first are *arema*, meaning a “dead man” or “the spirits of departed ancestors”. The second are the disease makers. These people have life and death in their hands through *nahak* (*natik* in West Tanna language). They collect remnants of food, footprints, and human excrement to be burned, according to formalities, so as to ensure sickness and eventually death.³² John Gibson Paton, a missionary who landed on Tanna on 5 November 1858³³ at the same spot where Turner had settled earlier, also recorded a description of the religious practices of the people. It is worth quoting at length because his description will be referred to in the later parts of this paper.

The Tannese had hosts of stone idols, charms, and sacred objects, which they abjectly feared and in which they devoutly believed. They were given up to countless superstitions and firmly glued to their dark heathen practices. Their worship was entirely a service of fear, its aim being to propitiate this or that Evil Spirit, to prevent calamity or to secure revenge. They deified their chiefs, like the Romans of old, so that almost every village or tribe had its own Sacred Man, and some of them had many. They exercised an extraordinary influence for evil these village or tribal priests, and were believed to have the disposal of life and death through their sacred ceremonies, not only in their own tribe, but over all the Islands. Sacred men and women, wizards and witches, received presents regularly to influence the gods and to remove sickness or to cause it by the *Nahak*, i.e., incantation over remains of food, or the skin of fruit, such as banana, which the person has eaten on whom they wish to operate. They also worshipped the spirits of departed ancestors and heroes through their material idols of wood and stone, but chiefly of stone. They feared these spirits and sought their aid; especially seeking to propitiate those who presided over war and peace, famine and plenty, health and sickness, destruction and prosperity, life and death. Their whole worship was one of slavish

³² Turner, *Nineteen Years in Polynesia*, pp. 88-89.

³³ Paton, *Missionary to the New Hebrides*, p. 70.

fear; and, so far as ever I could learn, they have no idea of a God of mercy or grace.³⁴

Two things to particularly note from the above excerpt are: (1) stone idols, charms, and sacred objects, and (2) spirits of departed ancestors and heroes. In other words, the traditional belief system involves objects as well as spirit gods.

When comparing Turner and Paton, the former stated that there were no idols, although there were venerated stones; but the latter stated there were stone idols. From an etic point of view, this portrays the “fuzziness”, not only of the social structure, but also of the cosmology.³⁵ Alongside these material and spiritual gods, there are the mythical gods as well.³⁶ The question which arises here is, “Do the Tannese regard the things mentioned above as gods?” How have these gods been worshipped? These are some of the questions that this paper will attempt to answer as we seek to understand the relationship between these traditional gods and man.

Anthropologist Joel Bonnemaïson writes, “Tanna, itself, is a sort of ‘pantheon’, a polytheistic space people, with an infinite number of spirits, divinities, and cultural heroes”.³⁷ However, it is a pity that, when referring to what he called “magical rocks or stones”, he uses the generic name *kapiäl*.³⁸ For that term denotes any rock or stone, even the ones lying alongside the road, even though they are not magical stones. In fact, relation to gardening, not all stones and rocks are magical..

According to Nehrbass, Tannese cosmology includes “the hierarchy of gods, spirits, humans, animals, and plants”.³⁹ However, in this paper, we will only be dealing with the first two, gods and spirits. Nehrbass outlines

³⁴ Ibid., p. 72.

³⁵ Ron Adams, “*Homo Anthropologicus* and Man-Tanna: Jean Guiart and the Anthropological Attempt to Understand the Tannese”, in *The Journal of Pacific History* 22.1 (January-April 1987), p. 9.

³⁶ Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 47.

³⁷ Joel Bonnemaïson, “Magic Gardens in Tanna”, in *Pacific Studies* 14.4 (December 1991), p. 72.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 47.

some anthropological questions that may help to ascertain some things concerning cosmological beliefs. These are:

[w]hat are the named deities? Is there a distinction between “devils” and “dead men”? Is that distinction fuzzy? Is there a hierarchy of spirit beings? How do people enter the spirit world? Through *kava*? Singing? In dreams? Can musical instruments summon or shoo away spirits? Which ones? What else shoos away or summons spirits? Wild cane? Bathing? Bathing in coconut milk?⁴⁰

When explaining the Tannese cosmology, Nehrbass notes three different supernatural beings in the spirits’ realm. These are *kughen*, impersonal (unnamed) spirits, and *nanmin*. *Kughen* are spirits with personal names. They are mythical spirits, such as Matiktik, Taransamus, Karwas, and Karpapeng. Nehrbass quoted Capell, in making an interesting observation that,

“[h]e [*kughen*] provides them food and gave them their stones, but he is not the centre of mythology or worship. The Tannese are deists, rather than theists.” Tannese believe in the existence of eternal beings, but do not worship them. They relate more easily to a mechanistic power (*mana*), than to a personal god.⁴¹

This mechanistic power is the manipulation of the stones which were given by *kughen*. *Kughens* are only referred to when the myth is told to children or to make a point in the *Nakamal*,⁴² but *kughens* are not worshipped. It is, rather, stones (magic stones) that involve religious rituals.

⁴⁰ Kenneth Nehrbass, “Anthropological Field Guide for Vanuatu”, 3rd edn, Port Vila Vanuatu: SIL Vanuatu, 2009, p. 6, <http://www.nehrbass.info/bislama/Guidebook.pdf>, accessed April 24, 2014.

⁴¹ A. Capell, “The Stratification of Afterworld Beliefs in the New Hebrides”, in *Folklore* 49.1 (March 1938), p. 77, quoted in Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 47.

⁴² *Nakamal* (*Imayum* in West Tanna dialect, *Imarum* in South Tanna dialect), for Tannese, is the traditional meeting place for a community, and is usually under big banyan trees. It is also used for ceremonial functions, such as circumcision, payment of bride prices, traditional dedication, exchange of garden food and fruit trees, and the ordination of a chief. The *Nakamal* is also the place where men usually meet every afternoon for *kava* drinking.

According to Nehrbass, the second sort of supernatural beings are the impersonal spirits. They are non-personal spirits, totemic spirits and devils, but not ghosts. They are also feared by the people. The third group of supernatural beings, according to Nehrbass, is *nanmin*, which can mean “spirit”, “dew”, “shade”, at times, “powerful”, and even, at times, “fake”.⁴³

An Emic View

Before proceeding to an emic view, it is important to acknowledge something that might be a limitation to the writer, even though he is an insider. This can be referred to as natural limitation. An analogy to natural limitation can be observed as follows. When you are in a building, you might not realise that the roof has holes until the rain falls on the roof. You will notice through the leakage that there are problems with the roof. Insiders of a culture may think they know everything about their culture because they are in it, and so can be less concerned about the details. That is, genuine knowledge may be suppressed because of mentality, the system, or mere ignorance.. It is not until an outsider probes to ascertain knowledge that an insider finds that his/her knowledge is limited. Different people ask different questions, according to what is of interest to them.

Another limitation, so to speak, is that the writer is a Christian Tannese, meaning the environment in which he was raised may be different to a typical traditional environment. Furthermore, the influence of Christianity, modernisation, and other cultures, via several national and international movements, enables exposure to a wider culture, on the one hand, but may limit knowledge in one’s own culture, on the other. This is to restate the writers’ limitation, but the writer will seek to give the best of his knowledge on the subject matter. We will now proceed to discuss these traditional gods, especially the stone gods and the spirit gods.

Material gods are mentioned above, but we will be focusing mostly on stone gods. For clarity, these stone gods may be categorised into fertility stone gods, *nahak* stone gods, and mythical stone gods. The fertility stone

Kava is a traditional narcotic drink consumed by men. But, nowadays, it has become commercialised, and so women are also consuming *kava*, not in the *Nakamal*, but at *kava* bars. Hence, its traditional value is often questioned.

⁴³ Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 47.

gods are the ones used for agricultural, fisheries, and weather purposes. The traditional name for these stones is *kivir*.⁴⁴ They are placed in the *niko*,⁴⁵ a specially shaped piece of wood in a canoe shape. These stones are not just for garden plants (taro, yam, and banana), but also for fruit trees (breadfruit and others). Several fish in the sea would also have their stones, as well as weather stones. Each garden plant has its own stone. For instance, the taro tuber has its own stone, as do the yam and the banana. Likewise, this is true for fruit trees. Thus, one village may have several stones scattered in the vicinity. For the weather, the sunstone, is used to burn the rain away to allow a special traditional ceremony to occur. However, the rain stone is used to invite or call on rain to come. When Edward Rice was told, “we can control the weather with stones”, these are the stones referred to above.⁴⁶

The second category of stone gods is *nahak* stones. Unlike the fertility stones, these are malevolent stone gods. As Paton explained earlier, these are used to induce sickness upon someone, which eventually leads to their death. This is a way of punishing enemies, because death is slow and agonising, destroying the physical appearance, and involving complications in bodily functions.

The last category of stone gods is the mythical stone gods. Some of these are huge rocks, either on the land or in the sea. They each have myths attached to them which make that particular stone sacred.

Personally, the writer thinks fertility stones have some element of being gods (not that I believe in them). These elements are communal relationship, communal benefit, and communal awareness. The entire community is related to their fertility stone god via their *Tupunes*.⁴⁷ The whole community knows who this person is and respects him during his time of seclusion, when he enters into the sacred place. The success of his performance, his keeping of ritual rules, and the community’s abiding will result in the community’s good harvest. The stone is kept in a sacred place,

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 68.

⁴⁵ Bonnemaison, “Magic Gardens in Tanna”, p. 73.

⁴⁶ Rice, *John Frum He Come*, p. 135.

⁴⁷ The sacred man who is responsible for fertility stone gods (*kavir*).

of which the whole community is aware, and people are not allowed to enter. This is unlike the *nahak* stone which is kept in secret and no one knows who uses it. Furthermore, *nahak* stones only bring disaster to humans, including death. Tannese relate to the fertility stone more than other stones because of the need for communal well-being.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRADITIONAL GODS AND HUMANS

Traditional relationships are probably the most important thing in Tannese society. This includes a person's relationship to animals, plants, human beings, and spirits or gods. However, for the purpose of this study, we will concentrate on the relationship of traditional gods to humans and vice versa, followed by a consideration of some characteristics of traditional gods.

Traditional Gods' Relationship to Humans – Myth

The chief way in which Tannese gods reveal themselves to humans is via myth. The use of myth here refers to a story or report of what has been said, without saying whether it is true or false.⁴⁸ Tannese have a rich tradition of mythology. As mentioned earlier, locals maintain that *kughen* gave those stones for garden plants, fruit trees, and weather. Nehrbass explains “[t]he Tannese term for ‘oral narrative’ (*kwanage*) is complex, having at least five nuances: (1) stories about imminent deities, (2) geographic etiologies, (3) etiologies of living things, (4) didactic stories, and (5) funny stories”.⁴⁹ However, only the first category, stories about imminent deities, is the concern of this section. Although anthropologists differ on the function of myth, Nehrbass argues that it is to transmit *kastom* cosmology.⁵⁰ In public discussion in a *nakamal*, speakers often refer to these myths to support what they are saying.

Human's Relationship to Traditional Gods

The relationship between the local people and traditional gods is not simple or clear, not only for an outsider, but also for some insiders. As a Tannese myself, I have many questions. For instance, how would I know that

⁴⁸ Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, 2nd edn, New York NY: Scribner, 1976, p. 8.

⁴⁹ Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 27.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

something, whether good or bad, is from the gods? If a special person were to tell me, how would I know that the message is authentic? In general, Tannese people are not encouraged to raise many questions, because too many questions may provoke someone to anger. Whatever practice was passed down by the ancestors is regarded as traditional logic and normative for traditional living. In view of this, we now go on to explore some aspects of the people's relationship with the gods, such as manipulation, fear, legalism, and punishment.

The first aspect of humans' relationship to the gods is manipulation. But before discussing this aspect, I will summarise what has been said so far about the traditional gods. In the supernatural category, we have *kughen*, impersonal spirits, and *nanmin*. In the category of stone gods, we have fertility, *nahak*, and mythical stone gods. The diagram below seeks to show these two categories.

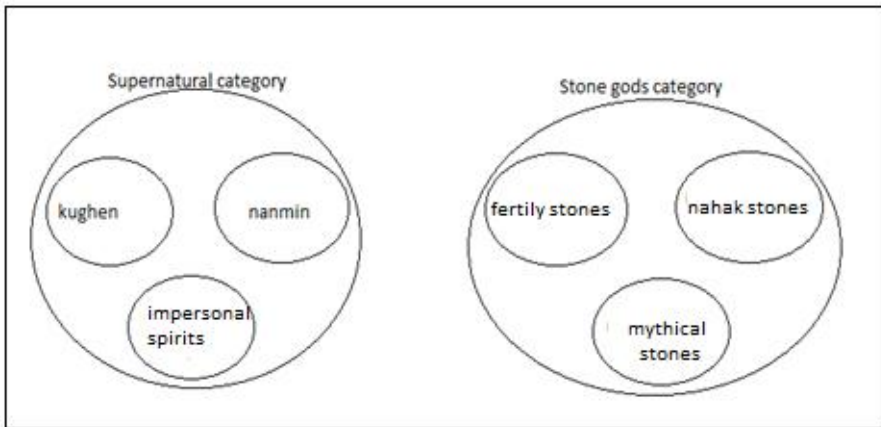


Figure 4: The supernatural category and stone gods category

This phenomenon of manipulation can be seen in nearly all the rituals of these gods.⁵¹ The following are some examples of the manipulative processes of those who are responsible. Whenever someone is sick and the sickness is believed to have been caused by a spirit, the person who is somehow related to that particular spirit will chew some leaves and spit over the sick patient to get rid of the spirit. One could question the

⁵¹ This may not include *kughen* because they are too remote from the reach of people.

relationship between the chewed leaves, the person who spits, and the spirit. Is the spirit obedient to the leaves or the person? If the power is in the leaves, then why should a particular person have to do the chewing and the spitting? However, the idea is that the spirit is somehow manipulated to leave the person, so that healing might eventuate.

In this process of manipulation, one has to do things correctly. When power is handled wrongly, it may have a negative impact on the life of the person or his relatives. For instance, a man called Nako⁵² is a sun maker near my home village.⁵³ Some of his relatives are having problems with their eyes and ears, and some have disabled children. This has been interpreted by the locals to have been caused by the inappropriate use of his power.

Another example of manipulation is that of the fertility stone gods. It is believed and said that if the *tupunes* performs well and abides by the rules, then there will be plenty of fruit at the harvest and pests will not infect the fruit. The *tupunes* will have to clean up the sacred place, the wooden canoe and the stone. It is uncertain as to what exactly he does in there. Some of the rules include that he only must eat roasted food, and that he must abstain from sex during the period of seclusion. In this process the genuineness of his performance will be publicly approved or disapproved during the time of harvest. The point is that, in all of these processes, it is the *tupunes*, a human, who is the focal point, and not the stone. It is as though the gods' actions depend entirely on the person's performance. He is the one who manipulates the gods to act according to the wishes of the community. Again, one could question who is really in control here.

The second aspect of man's relationship to traditional gods is the intense fear in society. People fear spirits, graveyards, taboo places, and *nahak* men. As stated above, Paton rightly observed that their worship was

⁵² This is a real example of someone the writer knows, but Nako is a pseudonym to protect his privacy.

⁵³ The phrase is somewhat misleading. This is not saying that the person is the one who creates the sun, but that when there is a traditional function to occur, and, those who own the function, would not like rain to disturb their function, the right person to consult is the person I refer to as "sun maker". His stone is referred to as the "stone of fire", which burns away the dark clouds for a sunny day.

entirely a service of fear. He continued by giving a list of things people are afraid of, such as evil spirits, chiefs, sacred men and women, wizards, witches, and the spirits of departed ancestors.⁵⁴ This fear is manifested in several ways. There are certain places where all noise must be reduced when passing. It is said that noise might invite the spirit to follow the person to his house and to cause sickness. There are also places which people should not approach at certain times of the day, especially in the late afternoon, when spirits are moving around and people might encounter them. There are also places where people have to utter words informing the spirits of their presence or passing, so that nothing disastrous or bad luck will be encountered on a journey or fishing or hunting trip. Again, there are times when people may give gifts of food to spirits of a particular place. The reason for all this is fear.

The third aspect of man's relationship to traditional gods which can be referred to as legalism is related to fear. Because of the intense amount of fear, people feel they ought to adhere to all the details of traditional laws and taboos in order to ensure prosperity and good health. Whenever someone is sick, people gather in the *nakamal*, doing what we call in our language *kamarisen nimisan*. The second word *nimisan* is the general term for sickness. The word *kamarisen* literally means "untying". Let me illustrate this in the context of fishing. Relationship, when harmonious, can be likened to a straight fishing line. When the fisherman is careless or panics because a big fish is on the line, the fishing line can become tangled and messy. In the process of undoing the messy part, it can become so entangled that one has to cut the line and later rejoin it. The word used to refer to sickness is the same word used for untying a fishing line when it has been tangled. The motivation for keeping these laws is worth discussing.

For humanity, in general, there may be many motivations for keeping laws, but only two will be mentioned. First, there are people who keep laws because they are slaves and so. The law was imposed on them in a heavy-handed way. Although they work very hard for their master, the question remains for these slaves, "Is our master satisfied?" All their lives they move around and do things in fear. Second, there are citizens of a free

⁵⁴ Paton, *Missionary to the New Hebrides*, p. 72.

nation. Although they have to maintain their nation's laws and regulations, they are free to go about doing their own work. In this kind of living there is no fear. Fear only comes when a person has actually committed a crime. While these people are punished, they are still citizens of a free nation. It seems to me that the way in which Tannese have been keeping traditional laws corresponds to those in the first situation.

To return to the example of the untying of sickness, whenever the discussion in the *nakamal* reaches the stage where something has to be done, the leaders will indicate what to do. Often the relatives of the sick person are required to kill a pig or chicken, depending on the weight of the offence, to put things right. The next day another rope will be followed and result again in the death of another pig or chicken. This costly practice can go on for days. Despite all of this, fear is always there. The relatives will never know whether they have appeased the spirits. They think that to be right with the spirits they have to keep all the traditional laws without breaking one.

The final aspect of man's relationship to traditional gods is punishment. The Tannese have an interpretation for almost every sickness and natural disaster that affects them. Often they may be interpreted as punishment from the gods for a broken relationship or overstepping the bounds of traditional rules or regulations. For instance, on one occasion, several aircraft of Air Melanesia had crashed. The third one was on Tanna and, during that same year, Bob Paul's⁵⁵ son died in a plane crash in Australia. According to Rice, the Tannese had two interpretations: "one (from Green Point) that the most recent crash was the result of whites' tampering with the *SemSem* stone at Laminuh . . . and the other that John Frum was punishing Bob Paul for his treatment of the Tannese".⁵⁶ Another example is that of Nako mentioned above. The disability within his relatives is seen as a punishment for the misuse of power.

⁵⁵ Bob Paul was a businessman from Australia who had settled on West Tanna. He runs a trading shop and owns coconut plantations and cattle projects on Tanna. He claimed to own Tanna and caused a lot of inconvenience.

⁵⁶ Rice, *John Frum He Come*, p. 137.

Characteristics of Traditional Gods

As in all animistic societies, the Tannese have several gods. To refer again to those covered so far, there are *kughen* (impersonal spirits), *nanmin* (supernatural), fertility, *nahak*, and mythical stone gods (material gods). The spirits of the ancestors are another, which this paper has not dealt with in detail. Furthermore, there was the mention of traditional sacred men who have a huge religious influence in the life of the society. Although this paper has not done much to study all there is to know about traditional gods, it is a fact that there are many gods in an animistic society.

The plurality of traditional gods raises many questions concerning the relationship between these gods. Although the realm of these gods cannot be visited to see their interrelationship, it can be “seen” through the experiences of humans of these gods and their allegiance to them. For instance, if *kughen* gave stones for the well-being of the society, why is the effect of the *nahak* stones on human lives only disastrous? Do fertility stones and the *nahak* stones say something about *kughen*? Could he be both a good and a bad god? Concerning allegiance, how well can it be given to those many gods? If one of these gods is not given proper reverence, what will be their reaction to humans? These are some unanswered questions which this paper does not have answers for. There is also another question which was posed earlier, “Do Tannese regard all these as gods?” As quoted by Nehrbass, Capell partly answered this question, when he states,

[h]e [*kughen*] provides them food and gave them their stones, but he is not the centre of mythology or worship. The Tannese are deists, rather than theists. Tannese believe in the existence of eternal beings, but do not worship them. They relate more easily to a mechanistic power (*mana*), than to a personal god.⁵⁷

The other characteristic of the traditional gods is their limitations. They are limited with respect to both geography and power. While almost every hamlet has their traditional fertility stone gods, these stone gods are for a particular area only and cannot be taken to another. Other areas have their

⁵⁷ Capell, “Stratification of Afterworld Beliefs”, p. 77, quoted in Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 47.

own distinct gods as well. A *tupunes* for one area cannot act for another area. They are restricted to their traditional territories. This is not only true for their physical confinement; their power is also restricted to their territory. For instance, several Tannese have migrated to different islands of Vanuatu and in the places where they settled they became successful gardeners without the influence of their traditional fertility stone gods.

As a Tannese, I have been living on Santo⁵⁸ for more than eight years. As a student at Talua Ministry Training Centre,⁵⁹ gardening was a vital aspect of living, and this was done without any influence from Tannese traditional gods. Of course, the writer is a Christian, but this is also true for anyone who is a strong advocate of traditional gods. Whenever a person boards a plane or ship for another island, the gods are left in the village. The fertility gods cannot be taken to another island, even by the *tupunes*.

REFLECTING ON THE GOD OF THE BIBLE

The previous section was an attempt to understand Tannese traditional gods. Having discussed the traditional belief system of some Tannese, the writer will now discuss some of the aspects of the God of the Bible for the purpose of seeing the similarities and differences to the traditional gods as outlined above. The discussion of God will be undertaken from a Christian point of view. The following section will include an introduction to God, and then move on to his relationship to humans.

INTRODUCING THE GOD OF THE BIBLE

A discussion of the God of the Bible is not new. There has been a constant theological battle in the history of Christianity to continue to maintain the true teaching handed down by the apostles and the apostolic fathers up to the time of contemporary Christian apologists and theologians. All through this battle, creeds have been formulated to express the confessions of these Christians. To mention a few, we have the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Westminster

⁵⁸ Santo is the largest island of the archipelago (see map). It is where Talua Ministry Training Centre is situated.

⁵⁹ Talua Ministry Training Centre is the Bible College owned by the Presbyterian church of Vanuatu (PCV). It is situated on the island of Santo towards the north of Vanuatu.

Confession of Faith, chapter 2, paragraph 1, has the following description about God,

[t]here is but one only living and true God, who is finite being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal most just and terrible in his judgments; hating all sin, and who will, by no means, clear the guilty.⁶⁰

This excerpt is a summary of the attributes of God. Nevertheless, for this paper, only a few topics have been selected, for the purpose of comparative study. The main section here is the relationship between God and humans.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND HUMANS

God, in his infinite wisdom, reveals himself to humankind (revelation), but human beings, within their limitations, seek to understand God in their own ways (religion). Although humankind cannot fully understand God, they have general revelation and so that they are left without excuse (Rom 1:20). God is a relational God. He has revealed himself to all humankind. However, his revelation is not just a past reality: it has been, it is today, and it will be in times yet to come (Heb 1:1-3). He continues to reveal himself to believers through the scripture. The Spirit illuminates the scripture for believers to see God. We will now proceed to the ways in which God reveals himself.

Revelation

According to Daniel L. Migliore, “[t]he word ‘revelation’ means an ‘unveiling’ or ‘disclosure’ of something previously hidden”.⁶¹ God reveals himself through the Bible. Although the Bible was written by men, it was

⁶⁰ *Confession of Faith, The Larger Catechism, The Shorter Catechism, The Directory for Publick Worship, The Form Of Presbyterian Church Government with References to The Proofs from the Scripture*, Edinburgh UK: William Blackwood, 1959, pp. 6-7.

written through divine inspiration (2 Tim 3:16). Robert L. Reymond explains that the Bible,

though written entirely by men, it is also entirely the word of the living God, because the Spirit of God inspired men to write it in the whole, and in the part. The relationship between the human authors and the Spirit of God, however, was not one of simple cooperation or co-authorship. Men could not (and would not) have written the Bible, apart from the Spirit's superintending activity. The Holy Spirit, then, is the author of the scripture in a more profound and original sense than the human writers ever could (or would) have been. God is the primary author of the Holy Scripture, with the human writers being the authors of scripture only insofar as the Spirit mandated, initiated, and provided their impulse to write.⁶²

The challenge for humans today is their view of or presuppositions about the Bible. If humans view the Bible as merely words of men, then they have already limited themselves to the limitations of humans, resulting in scepticism concerning the authenticity of the word. It is easy for Melanesians to want to identify the Bible with the people who brought it to their shores or the people into whose language the Bible was translated when it was first brought to them. But it is more than that. The Bible contains the word of God to humans. If Melanesians desire to know the truths of God, they have to read the Bible themselves so as to see who is this God.

For the Tannese, their understanding about traditional gods is through myth. However, the problem in an oral tradition, as in most Melanesian situations, is that there is a possibility for stories to change or be misinterpreted when they are handed down through different generations. One of the reasons for these changes is the purpose of its use. Often, when someone is making a point, he is tempted to bend the story, or interpret it to suit his point, and often the story turns out to be very different. Thus, it is

⁶¹ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian theology*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, p. 19.

⁶² Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998, p. 3.

not so much the evolution of the story that matters, but that the point has been made for that particular speaker or a people group. For instance, *Karpapeng* (*Kalpapen* in West Tanna language) is the god who is believed to reside in Tokomera.⁶³ He is the god who gave the fertility stones for the well-being of the people. Someone in a village called Yaohnanen, in the interior of Tanna, somehow got hold of some pictures of Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, which led to a story that Prince Philip is the son of *Karpapeng* and that he will one day come back to reside on Tanna. This has become a movement referred to as the Prince Philip movement on Tanna. *Karpapeng* is a Tannese god known to all Tannese, but not all are in this movement. The movement is someone's presupposition read into *Karpapeng* mythology.⁶⁴ Although Prince Philip's family background and date of birth are known to almost everyone around the globe, these people groups are adamant in maintaining this belief and it is difficult to convince them otherwise. This is a problem with oral traditions. There are also geographically- and linguistically-related reasons for these changes. The same story as told in one area may be very different in another. It is a human in-built inclination that causes people to want to be different from others. Languages diverge in different places; some are dialects of the same language, but others may be a very different language. Due to the lack of language standardisation, each language passes on the story in its own way.

Christians should not attempt to bend the Bible. They need to read it as it is and work out, through the process of hermeneutics, what it has to say about their situation. Although there are many human characters and stories in the Bible, it is the story of God's dealing with humankind. It is through the Bible that contemporary believers come to understand what Bible scholars refer to as general revelation, that is, that creation is pointing to a Creator who is God (Ps 8; Rom 1:20). In contrast, specific revelation through the nation of Israel culminates in Christ (Heb 1:1-3) as recorded in

⁶³ Tokosmera is one of the two mountains in the interior of Tanna. The other is Melen.

⁶⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince_Philip_Movement, accessed July 23, 2014. I am also referring to this group because I know that the group exists and have seen them.

the Bible.⁶⁵ In his concluding section on “inspiration and authority of the Bible”, Norman Geisler states that

the Bible and the Bible alone contains all doctrinal and ethical truth God has revealed to mankind. And the Bible alone is the canon or norm for all truth. All other alleged truth must be brought to the bar of Holy Scripture to be tested. The Bible and the Bible alone, all sixty-six books, has been confirmed by God through Christ to be his infallible word.⁶⁶

The other very important element of this God-human relationship is faith. The author of Hebrews defines faith as “being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see” (11:1).⁶⁷ He continues in the third verse of the same chapter, “[b]y faith, we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what is visible”. Paul exhorts believers saying that we are now living by faith and not sight (2 Cor 5:7), and ought to “fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor 4:18).

Throughout the history of Christianity, the Bible has been accepted as the inspired word of God, and it is still accepted as such by many Christians in different geographical locations. Although there may be several translations, they are just different translations of the same Word. For instance, Tanna has the English Bible, the Bislama Bible, and the Bible in several local languages. Despite changes in translation, the fact remains that the truths about God can still be obtained.

If religion can be defined as an attempt by humans to reach God/god, then, in a way, Christianity is not a religion because it proves the opposite. It is rather a relationship in which God himself reaches out to humans through self-revelation. Without revelation, humans would never have known

⁶⁵ John E. Schwarz, *Word Alive!: An Introduction to the Christian Faith*, Minneapolis MN: Tabgha Foundation, 1995, p. 16.

⁶⁶ Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, pp. 376-377.

⁶⁷ All scripture quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise noted.

anything about God.⁶⁸ It is through revelation that we come to know some of the characteristics of God.

Characteristics of God's Relationship to Humans

This section will deal with some of the characteristics of this self-revealed God. The selected characteristics are love, justice, and grace, all of which enable salvation. Love is an important aspect of God's relationship with humans. It raises a sense of security, belonging, and being special before God. However, overemphasising it at our (human's) end may lead to an egocentric view on God. As regards love, we also have to be ready to "see" God at his end. Several things can be mentioned about the love of God.

First, love is the very nature of God.⁶⁹ The New Testament states clearly, "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). Yet the statement could be misunderstood. As R. C. Sproul explains that the

statement is not what we would call an analytical statement, whereby we can reverse the subject and predicate and say that, therefore, love is God. That's not what the Bible means. Rather, what the Jewish form of expression says here is that God is so loving and his love is so consistent, so profound, so deep, so transcendent, and such an integral part of his character that to express it in the maximum way possible we say that he is love. This is simply saying that God is the ultimate standard of love.⁷⁰

The second aspect of God's love is that his love is unconditional. He loves because he is love, and there is nothing anyone can do for God to love any more or any less. The nation of Israel was chosen, not because of any good thing they had done, but out of God's love (Deut 7:6-8). Humans in their sin and constant rebellion do not deserve the love of God; nevertheless, he chose to love them. Although he had a special love for Israel in the Old Testament and for Christians through his Son, his love also goes out for all of the lost (John 3:16).

⁶⁸ Schwarz, *Introduction to the Christian Faith*, p. 16.

⁶⁹ David Jackman, *The Message of John's Letters: Living in the Love of God*, Bible Speaks Today, Leicester UK: IVP, 1988, p. 117.

⁷⁰ R. C. Sproul, *Now That's a Good Question*, Wheaton IL: Tyndale House, 1996, p. 6.

The third thing is that God's love is a self-giving love. This self-giving love can be seen in the way God provides for his people. For instance, in the garden of Eden, he provided clothing for Adam and Eve (Gen 3:21). In Exodus 34, when God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses, he himself made an astounding proclamation saying "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin (Ex 34:6-7). As a result, he delivered his people from slavery in Egypt and provided for the journey, while the Egyptians were punished. Furthermore, the idea of self-giving love was foreshadowed in the covenant with Abram, when God himself walked between the pieces of the sacrificed animals (Gen 15:17). The NIV study notes make the following comment, "[t]he practice signified a self-maledictory⁷¹ oath: "May it be so done to me if I do not keep my oath and pledge".⁷² This self-maledictory oath is firmly rooted in love (John 3:16) and was fully demonstrated on the cross. When humans were still sinners, Christ died for them (Rom 5:8). On the cross, we see the self-giving love in its fullest measure (1 John 4:9-10). The Greek word "ἀγάπη (*agapē*) is the regular New Testament word for love that gives even to the unlovely and undeserving".⁷³ Having seen these aspects of God's love, let us turn to the primal gods.

As discussed above, the writer is uncertain as to whether or not the Tannese traditional gods are or may have been referred to, at any point in time, as gods of love. The recurrent word in Tannese relationship to gods is "punishment" (as discussed above) in sickness, natural disasters, and bad harvests. A person rarely hears people referring to a good harvest, health, or the absence of a natural disaster as love from the gods. When there is well-being in the community, the gods are often left out of the scene and the right standing of the *tupunes* or the community is emphasised. Love is

⁷¹ "Malediction" is another word for "curse" or "calling destruction or punishment, if an oath is not being kept". In the above use, it is a self-cursing that the one engaging in the ritual, in this case God, is saying: "may it be done to me as has been done to the animals and birds cut in half". This is not saying that God was the one who did not keep the oath or pledge. It was humans, but God in Christ filled in the gap on the cross on their behalf.

⁷² *NIV Study Bible*, Kenneth Barker, ed., Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1985, p. 35.

⁷³ James I. Packer, "God", in *New Dictionary of Theology*, Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, eds, Leicester UK: IVP, 1988, p. 277.

a distinctive feature of the God of the Bible. Furthermore, if love is the very nature of God, what would be the nature of traditional gods? For a fertility god, could a virtue like love be associated with an object like a stone? If it is the spirit behind the stone, how can one be certain of the love of that particular spirit? In contrast to God who is very much concerned and is actively involved in his peoples' daily lives by his Spirit, *kughen* isolated himself from his people. He is hardly referred to by Tannese individuals in their daily life.

Another characteristic of God is that he is a just God. Justice is related to the fact that God is righteous. The *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* explains that "righteousness" is associated with the idea of individual moral rectitude. "'Justice' . . . generally signifies a right social order, that is, the proper distribution of goods and honour, including retribution for evil."⁷⁴ God's justice also involves the idea of his impartiality.⁷⁵ To refer to love without referring to the fact that God is also a just God is like doing injustice to what the Bible says about God. In using the conjunction "yet", the self-painted picture to us in Ex 34:7 continues to give another side to this God – "yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of their fathers, to the third and fourth generation". God's justice is related to the fact that he is a righteous God. He hates and will not tolerate sin. In light of his righteousness, he has to deal with sin, accordingly, with a just punishment. He will not let the guilty go unpunished, but sees to it that they receive their just punishment. The Old Testament has much to say on this particular characteristic of God (Deut 32:4; Ps 37:28). In the garden of Eden God's justice was demonstrated via Adam and Eve being sent out of the garden (Gen 3). God's justice was poured out via the flood in the time of Noah (Gen 6). The sin of the Israelites provoked God and his justice was served via the exile. This can be seen throughout the whole Bible, but the above references are enough to demonstrate God's justice. However, the positive aspect of God's justice must not be overlooked. "'[T]o give someone

⁷⁴ M. A. Seifrid, "Righteousness, Justice, and Justification", in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, eds, Leicester UK: IVP, 2000, p. 740.

⁷⁵ Donald Guthrie, Ralph P. Martin, "God", in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1993, p. 363.

justice' is to vindicate them, to grant them salvation from injustice (cf. Ex 23:7; Deut 25:1)".⁷⁶

Often when people read about the God who punishes in the Old Testament, they are tempted to think or say that the God of the Old Testament is a different God to the one of the New Testament. But the Bible is plain that he is the same God.⁷⁷ The only difference is that the just punishment for humanity's sin was fully taken by Christ on the cross; so that, through faith, believers may go unpunished. On the cross, God's wrath against sin was fully poured out on Jesus, when his one and only beloved son cried, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt 27:46). Therefore, "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1). People are now living in the period of God's grace and patience (2 Pet 3:8-9).

Nevertheless, there is also the doctrine of eternal punishment (Matt 25:46). There will come a time when the wrath of God will be fully poured out on humankind, especially those who reject Christ (2 Pet 10). Just as heaven is real, hell is also real for those who, having heard the name of Jesus, decided to turn their backs on him. Hell is where the eternal punishment of God will be on Satan and his angels (Matt 25:41), as well as those who refuse to accept Jesus as their personal Saviour. It is certain, from Jesus' teaching, that it is a place of fire, a fire that will never die out (Matt 18:8-9; Mark 9:43-49). For Tannese, the idea of unquenchable fire is not difficult to understand. You just have to walk up Mt Yasur, take a peep into the

⁷⁶ Seifrid, "Righteousness, Justice, and Justification", p. 740.

⁷⁷ The apostles maintain this truth that he is the same God in both the Old Testament and New Testament. Peter, in his address in Acts 2, portrays this. He refers to God's word through the prophet Joel and through David. It was this same God, who worked through the prophets and kings, who raised Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:14-39). The New Testament writers have shown that the God of the Old Testament is the same God whom they are serving. Matthew opens his gospel with the genealogy and birth of Jesus. Jesus' birth was understood by Matthew to be a fulfilment of the Old Testament scripture. The name "Immanuel", meaning "God with us", is important. The God, who was with his people Israel, is now with them in the person of Jesus (Matt 1:1-25). The writer to the Hebrews, in his opening two verses, maintains the truth that, although God spoke through different people, at different times, and in various ways, he is the same God who in these last days, has spoken to us through his Son (Heb 1:1-2).

volcano, and there you have a glimpse of unquenchable fire. However, it is nothing compared to the actual unquenchable fire of hell.

Again, if we refer to the traditional gods regarding justice, it is very difficult to measure justice. One of the reasons for this is because most of the gods are objects. Although there are spirit beings as well, it is difficult to be certain whether they are just, as regards impartiality, or not. Furthermore, although punishment is an aspect of Tannese religion, it is uncertain as to whether the punishment is just or not. Again, when a sacrifice is offered to the gods, it is uncertain whether the punishment has been removed or not. It is often humans who determine whether or not a sickness is a punishment. The pivotal point to highlight here is the fact that God in Christ took upon himself the punishment for sin, once and for all time (1 Pet 3:18), so that, by faith, people would not have to experience his judgment. As far as the traditional gods are concerned, people are responsible for their sin. They continue to offer traditional gifts to appease the spirits. They themselves are the ones who have to do something. But, for the Christian, God has done it all in Christ. This is the gracious act of God alone.

The next characteristic of God's relationship to man is grace. According to Philip E. Hughes,

[t]he doctrine of grace lies at the very heart, not merely of all Christian theology, but also of all Christian experience. If we have an incorrect or inadequate understanding of the biblical teaching on grace, our whole grasp of the meaning and purpose of Christianity will be deficient in consequence.⁷⁸

He defines grace as "undeserved blessing, freely bestowed on man by God and, more particularly, the blessing of salvation in all the rich significance of that term, freely given to sinful men in and through Jesus Christ".⁷⁹ In the scriptures, God's grace is manifested every time judgment is pronounced on humankind. In the garden of Eden, God's grace can be seen

⁷⁸ Philip E. Hughes, *But for the Grace of God: Divine Initiative and Human Need*, London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1964, p. 9.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

in the fact that he himself made the couple clothes to cover their nakedness (Gen 3:21). Having pronounced Cain's punishment (Gen 4:11-12), God's grace can be seen in his mark on Cain so that no one would kill him (4:15). During the flood, God's grace can be seen in the way Noah's family was saved. The whole of the Old Testament has contains occasions when the grace of God was manifested, but these examples are enough to demonstrate the matter. In the New Testament, grace is again fully demonstrated in Christ. In Eph 2:8-9 Paul states that salvation is through grace alone. In the passage Paul also uses the word "gift", which is related to grace. This relationship is well demonstrated in the Greek language. For instance, in the NIV the Greek word χάρις (*charis*) is translated as "gift" in Rom 4:4 and as "grace" in Rom 4:16.⁸⁰ Salvation is entirely God's work. Robert L. Reymond says that "God's grace not only makes salvation available; it also actually saves men".⁸¹

The final characteristic of God's relationship to mankind is salvation. Salvation cannot be separated or fully understood without three words: love, justice, and grace. They are arguably the motivating factor for God to save humanity. Notice that the three words all refer to God's character. There is definitely nothing on humanity's side. When we return to God's way of salvation, we cannot really comprehend the ways and thoughts of God (Isa 55:8-9), but can only get down on our knees in worship of God, because there is no other way in which salvation could be found (Acts 4:12; Rev 7:10). The fascinating thing about God's salvation is that he filled the gap, in Christ, between himself and humankind for their salvation. When we think about this great God, who created everything, including humankind, and placed them in a stewardship position over all his creation, who sent his son to die a criminal's death in humankind's place; and when we then think of humankind, who choose to disobey, rebel, and turn their backs on God, it sounds absurd, or foolish. But, for believers, it is the power of God (1 Cor 1:18-2:5). Because salvation is God's, he has chosen to accomplished it in his way, just as Jesus prayed, "[y]et not as I will, but as you will" (Matt 26:39).

⁸⁰ Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, eds, *The UBS Greek New Testament: Readers Edition with Textual Notes*, 4th edn, Stuttgart Germany: DeutschBibelgesellschaft, 1998, p. 716.

⁸¹ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, p. 380.

In the Tannese mythological corpus, especially the hero stories, heroes always win or defeat the enemy in the end. For instance, two myths state that *Matiktik* defeats *Taramsamus*, and *Kasasao* and *Kaniapnin* defeat *Semusemu*.⁸² For Tannese, death is defeat or loss, and being alive is victory. In the *Taramsumus* story, children were kept in a pen to be eaten by *Taramsumus*. *Matiktik* took the form of a child, freed the children, and ended up killing *Taramsumus*. Although the notion of incarnation may be seen in *Matiktik*, he does not die in the process of saving the children. In addition, the two sons, *Kasasao* and *Kaniapnin*, though they risk their lives to kill *Semusemu*, in the end their lives were spared and *Semusemu* was killed. The diagram, below will illustrate some similarities and some differences between the mythical heroes and Jesus, regarding some aspects of salvation and complete salvation, respectively.

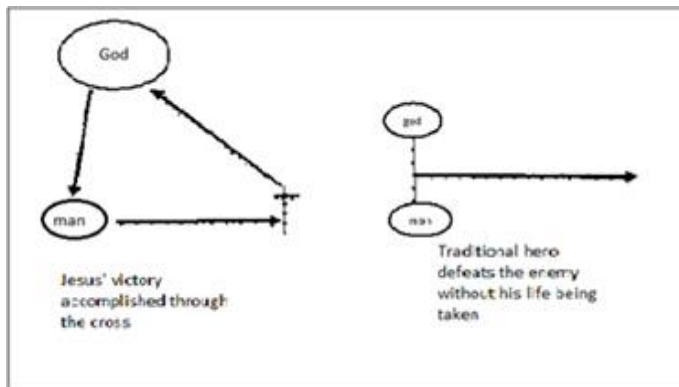


Figure 5: Heroic work of Jesus and a traditional hero

The point is that for someone to die for another person, a thing, or a principle, something of greater value, a virtue, such as love, a commitment, or a conviction to do what is right must be involved. For the creator, to die for his creatures in Christ is, humanly speaking, bizarre. But, for God, that is the way he has chosen to accomplish salvation. Even if humans tried their own ways, they could not possibly do anything to be saved. That is one of the unique things about Christianity. Unlike any other religion, including Tannese religion, in which humanity tries to save themselves through their good works, Christianity, through the scriptures, says there is

⁸² Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 29.

nothing you could have done or could possibly do to earn your salvation. Salvation is safe and secure in Christ (Eph 2:8, 9). God's anger against sin, and his just punishment, the depth of his self-giving love and grace, was fully served and demonstrated on the cross. The other thing to note about Jesus' death is that his life was not taken by anyone, although that seems to be the case. He, himself, decided, on his own accord, to lay down his life (John 10:17-18; cf. John 19:30). He could have done it otherwise, but that was God's plan for him.

Characteristics of Humanity's Relationship to God

The previous section sought to discuss some of God's personal characteristics. While there are others, such as his holiness, eternal nature, immutability, and so on, they are beyond the scope of this paper. This next section seeks to explore some of the features of humanity's relationship to God, or more especially, the status and action of persons before God. These are sinners saved by grace, sons of God, walking in the fear of God and praying according to his will.

The first characteristic of a person's relationship to God to be discussed is their status or standing before, and even after, salvation. The Bible plainly says that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). Paul says that sin entered the world through one man, resulting in death and affecting the whole of the human race (Rom 3:10-18; 5:12). Furthermore, sin affects the whole of the human person and the environment around us. Theologians use the term "total depravity", not to mean that humans are totally bad like demons, but that sin has affected their whole being.⁸³ Louis Berkhof explains this by giving the negative and positive implication of total depravity in order to avoid misunderstanding.

[N]egatively, it does not imply: (1) that every man is as thoroughly depraved as he can possibly become; (2) that the sinner has no innate knowledge of the will of God, nor a conscience that discriminates between good and evil; (3) that sinful man does not often admire virtuous character and actions in others, or is incapable of disinterested affections and actions in his relations with his fellow-

⁸³ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief*, Nottingham UK: IVP, 1982, p. 140.

men; nor (4) that every unregenerate man will, in virtue of his inherent sinfulness, indulge in every form of sin; it often happens that one form excludes the other. Positively, it does indicate: (1) that the inherent corruption extends to every part of man's nature, to all the faculties and powers of both soul and body; and (2) that there is no spiritual good, that is, good in relation to God in the sinner at all, but only perversion.⁸⁴

This is a universal reality. Having mentioned sin, it will be useful, at this point, to consider the Melanesian understanding of sin. Sin, according to Melanesians, is "broken relationship",⁸⁵ as opposed to one of the many biblical definitions,⁸⁶ such as, "missing the mark".⁸⁷ For a Melanesian, a broken relationship is a serious business, especially when the one sinned against is a greater spirit. Thus, it makes the process of reconciliation urgent and necessary. The other terms related to broken relationship in the New Testament are aliens, separated from God, enemies, and sinners. No one is born a Christian, all are born sinners, and all need God's salvation in Christ. However, to be put right with God is what the Bible refers to as a "gift" (Rom 6:23; Eph 2:8-9). It is a gift, given to us by God, to be accepted through faith alone. Faith in the Lord Jesus is all that one needs to be saved. Again, it is just an act of God's grace shown to humankind. There is nothing we can do to be accepted by God. Jesus has done it all. All we have to do is reach out and receive the gift of God's Son in faith. It is through faith in Christ that we are justified or put right with God (Gal 3:1-16). It is through faith, which also a gift from God (Eph 2:8-9), that we are granted the right to become sons and daughters of God.

The second characteristic of man's relationship to God is the right to be sons of God. This blessing follows salvation and is also a gift given by grace alone. However, it is more intimate in that believers are given the privilege to become sons of God (John 1:12). This characteristic could be

⁸⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, London UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1939, pp. 246-247.

⁸⁵ This insightful observation is taken from Syd Gould's devotional talk on Hebrews 8, delivered on 3 June 2014 at Christian Leaders' Training College.

⁸⁶ Apart from the definition of sin as missing the mark, others definitions include the breach of relationship, perversion, rebellion, and separation from the holy God.

⁸⁷ Milne, *Know the Truth*, p. 139.

controversial, because some may question whether women are included. However, if you perceive it through Christ, you will see that it is a relational privilege made certain through Jesus, his Son. It is not something of our own achievement. So we should not get distracted from the main issue with gender differences. In the scriptures the overwhelming evidence is that masculine forms are often used to cover both male and female. For example, Israel is called God's son, and there is no suggestion that the women were not part of Israel! Do not covet your neighbour's wife does not mean it is permissible to covet your neighbour's husband! Paul is clear on this issue: when it comes to salvation, gender should not be a hindrance. The most important thing is that people are baptised into Christ and clothe themselves with him (Gal 3:23-4:7). As sons, we can now come to God at any time and place, through Christ, and present our needs and worries to him (1 Pet 5:7). We can now call out to God "*Abba* Father" in prayer.

Prayer is another characteristic of man's relationship to God. Theologically there may be several questions regarding prayer. For instance, "Does God depend on our prayers to make him act"? We were not there when God created the universe, and we did not even ask for him to send Jesus. If he knows all our needs, why should we tell him? Despite all these theological questions, the Bible simply encourages believers to pray continually (1 Thess 5:17). Prayer is an important aspect of the people of God in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Although there were priests in the Old Testament, people could pray to God concerning their needs. For instance, Hannah prayed and God answered by giving Samuel (1 Sam 1). There are several other recorded prayers, especially in the Psalms. All God's faithful people are asked to pray (Ps 32:6). In the New Testament, Jesus modelled a life of ceaseless praying to his Father. He encouraged his disciples to pray for others (Matt 5:44), taught what prayer is not (Matt 6:5-8) and what prayer is (Matt 6:9). He prayed alone (Matt 14:23), and he prayed for others (John 17). In Matthew 6 Jesus taught his disciples the prayer commonly referred to by Christians as "The Lord's Prayer" (Matt 6:9-13). Prayer was also a vital aspect of believers' lives after they received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:42). As a result, God did tremendous miracles through the, and the gospel message spread rapidly to other nations.

Another important thing about prayer for Christians is that it has to be done according to God's will. This is where many have been impatient and unclear. This is simply saying that, although we are asked to pray at all times, it does not mean that answers will turn out the way we expect. God often answers prayers by either "yes", "no", or "wait for some time". Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane highlights some of these points. The cup was the suffering that he was going to go through as he bore the wrath of God (Jer 25:15-18). Although he prayed that the cup might be removed, if it were possible (Matt 26:36-46), it is clear that the answer was "no". But Jesus was also certain of the fact that it was God's will that he had come to do, and, whatever the answer was, he was willing to accept it. We know from a later chapter (Matt 27) that he had to die on the cross.

Having discussed the above characteristics of man's relationship to God, let us now turn to man's relationship to traditional gods. In Tannese primal religion mankind is left on their own to make amends for their sins. If it means sacrificing a number of pigs or chickens, the people have to do it, if they want to restore the relationship. The question of whether or not the gods are satisfied with one's offering still remains unclear. This, of course, is a costly practice. One has to accumulate these things or else buy them from other people. Human effort is definitely the focus of traditional religion. This is the opposite of human's relationship to God. Forgiveness and salvation are gifts from God. We cannot add anything of our own to gain God's salvation. Furthermore, Christ died on the cross, once and for all time. On the cross God's wrath on mankind's sin was fully poured out. The sacrifice cannot be repeated. Consider the great God, who has offered his sinless Son to die for us, once and for all time, so that through faith in Jesus believers are accepted as sons, and so that now, as sons, they can come to him at any time through prayer. By contrast, in traditional religion, only the *tupunes* enters the fertility stone god's area to offer religious rituals. This speaks loudly of the kind of gods people are worshipping.

The final characteristic of man's relationship to God, with which we shall deal, is the fear of the Lord. Among many other themes of Proverbs, the fear of the Lord is very prominent. According to Proverbs, the fear of the Lord is from where wise living emanates (Prov 1:7; 9:10; 31:30). Often when the word "fear" is used these days, the first meaning that comes to

mind, at least for Melanesians, is its negative meaning. It may be the fear of spirits, *nahak* men, or something bad, as discussed earlier. What does the Bible mean when it uses the word fear? According to Tremper Longman III, in the *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, the root word אָרַע (yir = fear), such as in Prov 1:7 (תִּירָא = yir'at), “has a semantic range that runs from respect to horror”.⁸⁸ That is, it has both the positive implication of “respect” as a response for God’s people. But, for his enemies, it has the negative implication of “fear”, especially in holy war (1 Sam 11:7; 2 Chr 17:10; 20:29).⁸⁹ In his commentary on Proverbs, Charles Bridges explains, in a down-to-earth illustration of father-son relationship, that

[fear] is that affectionate reverence by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father’s law. His wrath is so bitter and his love so sweet that hence springs an earnest desire to please him, and – because of the danger of coming short from his own weakness and temptations – a holy *fear* – anxious care and watchfulness, “that he might not sin against him”. (Heb 12:28, 29).⁹⁰

While explaining fear as “a healthy respect for the Almighty”, Derek Kidner links it to the knowledge of God (Prov 2:5) and trust (3:5-7).⁹¹ This makes sense, because how can you revere someone you barely know, or someone you do not trust. The son will trust his father because he knows him in an intimate way.

In Tannese primal religion, taking the fertility stone god as an example, it is not easy to know who to trust: the stone, the spirit behind it, or the *tupunes*? Do people really know these spirits that they are trusting? Can you really trust a human being to truly represent you and your needs? This is why

⁸⁸ Tremper Longman III, “Fear of the Lord”, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, Tremper Longman III, Peter Enns, eds, Nottingham UK: IVP, 2008, p. 201.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Charles Bridges, *A Commentary on Proverbs*, Geneva Commentary, London UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1846, pp. 3-4.

⁹¹ Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Leicester UK: IVP, 1964, p. 33.

there is great deal of fear and mistrust in a traditional society, because of the lack of knowledge of the nature of the spirits.

EVALUATION

Evaluation has been a task of this paper, especially in comparing the God of the Bible and traditional gods. The reason for immediate evaluation, now rather than later, is to help the reader see the similarities and differences. This section of evaluation will seek to take the discussion of two topics, which the writer believes are worth discussing, a step further..⁹² These are ownership and worship.

OWNERSHIP

Ownership in Tanna, and probably across Melanesia, is an important concept. Often you will hear people using collocations, such as “*kastom* owner”, “rightful owner”, or “land owner”. Ownership of something is a general principle, but, the way in which people own things, differs in different contexts. Ownership, for the Tannese, can be attributed to a people group, or individuals. Ownership also has aspects that are related to language, traditional story, value of a particular thing, and geography. Although the things mentioned may seem different, they are, in fact, inseparable. You cannot discuss one without the other. All these are packed into this one word *kastom*. *Kastom* maintains and determines who is the rightful owner. Let us now discuss this aspect of traditional ownership, where we can see the other aspects played out.

In Tannese society, there are several traditional groupings, beginning with the smallest to the largest. These are kinship groupings, tribal groupings, and geographical groupings. Each of these groupings has its own traditional name, known to the whole area. The kinship grouping is, by definition, related to blood. The language term used to describe this grouping is *namhip*, plus the name of the great grandfather. *Namhipun* is

⁹² There are several reasons for discussing ownership and worship. People generally will always stand to defend what is theirs. Ownership mentality can also differ, according to the context. For the Tannese, they own everything, even their gods. In contrast, the God of Christians owns all things and people. A deity deserves the worship due to him. These two terms, as discussed, say much about the similarities and differences of the God of the Bible and the Tannese primal gods.

the word for grandchildren. In this case, it is shortened to link to the name of the grandfather. For instance, the writer is *Namhip-Iaken*, literally the grandchildren of *Iaken*. The other grouping is tribal grouping, which includes several kinship groupings. It is marked by geography, and people know these geographical boundaries. For instance, the writer is from the *Lalan* tribe. The next tribe to the south is *Pukia*. Since these two tribes are rather small, they are normally referred to as one, *Pukiam-lalan*. The next, and a much greater, grouping is a geographical grouping, because it has natural landmarks, especially rivers. This geographical grouping includes several tribes, and many kinship groupings. The writer is from the geographical area called *Iru*. The diagram below seeks to demonstrate these groupings in circles, but a topographical map would be preferable, because it shows the geographical features of boundaries.

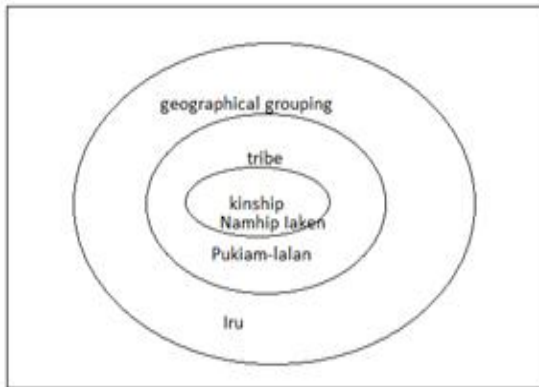


Figure 6: Traditional groupings

It is important to explain these traditional groupings, because this is where the sense of ownership lies. It is often handed down via verbal stories, *namsu*, in West Tanna language. These stories are confirmed by the naming of people, physical objects (stones and trees), or places; visible landmarks, and traditional songs, as well. For instance, since the chiefly title of the Tannese is hereditary, it is maintained within the kinship, via naming, or the kinship's decision to give it to a member within the kinship. That particular kinship owns the chiefly title. This idea of ownership also holds true for land, stories, environment, and almost everything in the society, including the gods.

The initial reason for the rise of the John Frum movement in Tanna was a reaction to foreigners, especially the colonial government and church representatives, who sought to put an end to some of the traditional practices. During the time of the missionaries, there was what was called “Tanna Law”, which prohibited *kava* drinking, traditional dancing, and several other things. Although it is unclear as to whether the law was introduced by the missionaries, or the local church leaders themselves, it is clear that this law robbed the people of some of the very things belonging to them, the things they valued in their society. But when John Frum appeared, he encouraged the people to revert to *kava* drinking, gardening, feeding pigs, and traditional dancing.⁹³ Consequently, it is said,⁹⁴ that, around 1940-1941, there were only two members left in the huge Presbyterian church building at the Lenakel mission, not, as Rice claims, that church attendance was nil,⁹⁵ for the church at Lenakel. Having given the bad side of a monocultural viewpoint, Paul G. Hiebert states “[f]ar too often the missionaries ended up as policemen, enforcing what they believed to be Christian practice on the people.”⁹⁶

The trouble with a traditional ownership mentality is that, often, there is a tendency to want to apply it to Christianity, or to the churches in Tanna, and probably to Melanesia, as a whole. For instance, if a chief, a leader, or an ordinary person was the first to accept Christianity in an area, or a village, the relatives of that person are expected to carry on that legacy, often as ordained elders, or pastors in the church. The relatives of that particular person view the church as something belonging to them. Furthermore, at times, the relatives of that person are often coerced into ordination, overlooking the fact that the call to ministry is a gift from Christ

⁹³ Rice, *John Frum He Come*, p. 3.

⁹⁴ This is orally maintained by the people that the two were Nalaus and Kamut. These were the two elders of the church at Lenakel, West Tanna. The writer is from this area. Every Sunday, they both take turns in sharing from God’s word, while the others listen. This is what the two elders, metaphorically, say to the people when they abandoned the church, “you people go, and, if you reach the peak of the rock, we will come, but if we reach the peak of the rock, you will have to come back to us”. Things turn out on their side, and the people began returning to the church.

⁹⁵ Rice, *John Frum He Come*, p. 6.

⁹⁶ Paul G. Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization”, in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11.3 (July 1987), p. 106.

(Eph 4:7-13; 1 Cor 12). This, to me, is an outworking of the traditional ownership mentality. After all, the church is Christ's body, which he owns, and takes care of, as the head, in his way, as revealed through the scriptures. The notion of ownership has expectations for church workers. As a pastor, I would not expect my son to be a pastor after me, but I would not forbid him, either, if it is a genuine call from God for him to enter full-time ministry. It is not mine to give to my son; it is for the Lord Jesus, himself, through the Holy Spirit.

Although people would not say so directly, their actions seem to indicate that they think they own God by making his word say what they want it to say and not submitting themselves to the word and allowing it speak to them. For example, when talking about *kava*, some people would refer to Jesus' words that "[w]hat goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean', but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean' " (Matt 15:11). They use the Bible to support their desire for *kava*, but overlook what the Bible says about drunkenness (Gal 5:21). Excessive use of *kava* also leads to biological and social problems, such as, stealing, greed, and excessive smoking. Having stated that contextualisation widens our understanding of God, Darrell Whiteman states that "God can no longer simply be the god of myself, my family, my community, my nation; such a god is ultimately an idol, or false god; one made according to my narrow and limited image and perspective".⁹⁷ Affirming the view of Peter Schineller,, Whiteman continues, "human beings have a tendency to create God in their own image, but we must always counter this observation with the biblical view that God has created all human beings in God's image".⁹⁸

In short, the Bible clearly states that God created and owns everything (Gen 1-2; cf. Col 1:16). When it comes to Christianity or the church, God's word has to be the ultimate standard for faith and practice. The traditional mentality of ownership should be subjected to its teaching. Furthermore,

⁹⁷ Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation*, New York NY: Paulist Press, 1990, p. 116, quoted in Darrell L. Whiteman, "Contextualisation: the Theory, the Gap, the Challenge", in Gerald H. Anderson, ed., *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21.1 (1997), p. 4.

⁹⁸ Whiteman, "Contextualisation", p. 4.

God's word can change a traditional mindset so that it can now view things with a transformed mindset. However, this has to be done with great pastoral care and love, taking into account Paul's weaker-brother principle (1 Cor 10:23-33) and with a genuine understanding of that particular context. In the scriptures we are told that we are stewards of God. For instance, we are to take care of creation (Gen 1:28, 2:15).⁹⁹ We do not own creation.

WORSHIP

We now turn to the subject of worship. An important question is, "Do the Tannese worship these gods?" To answer this question, the writer will explore the term "worship" and what it involves through the lens of Christianity. The term "worship" is often misunderstood, even by Christians. As a result, they regard certain acts, such as corporate church meetings or prayer and singing as worship, and neglect the private aspect of it. Some even refer to some songs as "worship songs", perhaps the ones with a slow rhythm and no clapping of hands or dancing, and others as "praise songs", especially the ones with a strong rhythm which arouse one's emotions to clap, move a bit, or dance.¹⁰⁰

In an attempt to define the term "worship", David Peterson gives several areas which ought to be included. These are words, life orientation, divine and human action, and engaging with God.¹⁰¹ According to Peterson, the word "worship" is derived from "to attribute worth". So, worship means to attribute glory and praise to God, because he is worthy of it (Ps 96:7-8; Rev 5:12). That does not make every form of worship acceptable to God, and the scriptures, especially the Old Testament, are full of details of unacceptable worship. Worship has to be done in accordance with the scriptures. Therefore, it is vital to examine traditional forms of worship in the light of the scriptures.

⁹⁹ This includes the environment and all that is in it, both the land and waters. Stewardship covers other areas, as well as time, money, people, and even the gospel, which is the usage of stewardship in the epistles.

¹⁰⁰ This information was taken from Henoma Ttopoqogo, a masters student of CLTC, on June 5, 2014. He is a Lutheran Renewal pastor who resides in Lae, Papua New Guinea.

¹⁰¹ David Peterson, *Engaging with God: a Biblical Theology of Worship*, Leicester UK: Apollos, 1992, pp. 17-20.

Although one may want to define the word as “worship” or “being worthy”, the Old Testament never uses such terminology.¹⁰² There are other related terms in the Bible which Peterson could have included. The first indicates the gestures involved in worship. In the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Peterson says the Hebrew word “to worship” “וָשַׁבַּח (his^ettach^avah) literally means ‘bend oneself over at the waist’ . . . as a total bodily gesture of respect before a great one (e.g., Gen 18:2; Ex 18:7; 2 Sam 14:4)”.¹⁰³ The other word is “עָבַד (‘abad), which literally means ‘to serve’, specifically the service offered to God” (Ex 12:25-27; 13:5).¹⁰⁴ Finally, this group of words, according to the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, conveys the reverence or respect due to God. This fear includes keeping his commands, obeying his voice, walking in his ways, turning away from evil, and serving him.¹⁰⁵

According to Peterson, one aspect of worship is that it is at the core of a right relationship to God. It is an integral part of God’s redemptive work. In the New Testament, it is the whole existence of Christians (Rom 12:1). Wanting to limit worship to certain places, people, activities, and times is a traditional religious mentality, not Christian. This is seen at work in the Tannese religion, regarding the fertility gods, where only the *tupunes* enters the sacred place performing certain rituals at an appointed time, while the rest of the community are inactive in the process. For Christians, there has to be a shift from a traditional mindset to a Christian mindset, and it begins with the fear of the Lord.

Peterson’s next point is that worship involves both human and divine action. For this aspect of worship, it is necessary to understand God’s part and our part in worship. It is God who draws us to himself as we respond to him in worship. In the Old Testament, he was the one who initiated the religious life of Israel, through the Tabernacle, priesthood, and sacrificial systems. It was his work in Christ that brought people to him for salvation,

¹⁰² W. M. McConnell, “Worship”, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, Tremper Longman III, Peter Enns, eds, Nottingham UK: IVP, 2008, pp. 929-930.

¹⁰³ D. G. Peterson, “Worship”, in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, eds, Leicester UK: IVP, 2000, p. 856.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

and Christians to him in worship. Our part is to surrender ourselves as vessels to be used of God as our daily worship.

Peterson's final point is that worship is engaging with God. When Christians gather for worship, the Bible says God is with them (Matt 18:20). God the Holy Spirit comes to be with his people to help them pray. However, this is also true for an individual Christian. He is not alone. God is with him/her (1 Cor 6:19). Thus, a Christian must be careful what he or she does.¹⁰⁶

Let us now turn to Tannese traditional worship. The people of Tanna have an awareness of a deity, whether object or a spirit. It may be helpful to see how they worship this deity. This is the primary task of the *tupunes*, as mentioned earlier. However, it is vital to reiterate its limitation to places, people, activities, and time. Another thing, which Tannese men do in the *nakamal*, is that, after one consumes his *kava*, he utters some words. This is referred to in the language as *damafa*. People would often say this is a form of prayer. For example, when discussing the function of the *nakamal*, Christopher Iawak states that “[i]t is a place where men commune with their god through *Damafa* (prayer), while *kava* drinking”.¹⁰⁷ *Damafa* is done for almost everything. It can be done for a new garden, a newborn baby, for circumcision, growth, health, knowledge, marriage, weather, hunting or fishing trips, and so on. However, when considering the uttered words, most of the time in translation it is as follows. For a new yam garden: “May those yams we planted today grow big and may nothing bad happen to them”. For circumcised boys: “May their wounds be healed speedily, and may they grow to become strong, healthy boys”.

There may be other expressions, but the thing to note about these uttered words is that they do not seem to be like prayer. It is more like expressing a wish. Anyone can wish for anything. The other important thing to note is that the wish is not expressed to a god or anyone. Perhaps there is an assumption that the gods are listening. For Christians, prayer is certainly

¹⁰⁶ Peterson, *Engaging with God*, pp. 17-20.

¹⁰⁷ Christopher Iawak, “*Kava* Consumption as an Issue of Gospel and Culture”, in *Women in Culture and Church and Other Issues, Gospel and Culture in Vanuatu 5*, Randall Prior, ed., Wattle Park Vic: Gospel Vanuatu Books, 2006, pp. 220-221.

directed to God, through Jesus. Furthermore, this form of prayer (*damafa*) is limited only to men because, traditionally, only men consume *kava* at a certain place (*nakamal*) and time (late afternoon). The negative side of *damafa* is that often people use it to call down disaster, harm, and death upon others. So, when discussing a sickness in the *nakama*, often you hear people referring to *damafa tat*, literally bad wishes. This is often done in secret.

In short, for Tannese traditional religion, worship is limited by geography, certain times, and certain people; but, for Christians, it is limitless. It is universal, that is, it is done by all Christians. It is a core part of the daily lives of the people. Furthermore, it is not only done in this life, but the next as well. If Tannese Christians can make this shift in their traditional understanding of worship or religion to a Christian understanding, I believe there will be tremendous changes in the lives of the people, the churches, and the society at large.

Another thing to be discussed under worship is, “Do Tannese, themselves, regard the things mentioned above as gods to be worshipped?” The above discussion is based on the general idea that Tannese do have their gods, most of which have been discussed. But no one has ever probed deeper in order to see whether or not this is a genuine claim. Earlier, the writer quoted some missionaries who gave a list of what they perceived to be the gods of the Tannese. For instance, Paton mentioned “stone idols, charms, and sacred objects; chiefs and sacred men; departed ancestors, heroes, and stones”.¹⁰⁸ Before Paton, Turner had said that there were no idols, despite the venerated stones.¹⁰⁹ This shows that although these two reflect foreign views, both differ to some extent concerning their view of the gods. We will seek to answer this question in two ways: (1) by describing how Tannese people relate to these gods; and (2) by doing a word study on the Tannese terms for these gods. Tannese relationship to these gods has already been considered above. For instance, the *kughen* is an isolated mythological god hardly referred to in the daily life of the people. Some of the beings categorised as *kughen* are, in fact, primarily viewed as heroes rather than gods. For example, when referred to by the people, *Matiktik* is

¹⁰⁸ Paton, *Missionary to the New Hebrides*, p. 72.

¹⁰⁹ Turner, *Nineteen Years in Polynesia*, pp. 88-89.

seen more as a hero who defeats *Taramsumus* and frees the little children. He is not referred to as a god which requires people's worship. Capell, quoted by Nehrbass, was right when he says that,

“[h]e [*kughen*] provides them food and gave them their stones, but he is not the centre of mythology or worship. The Tannese are deists, rather than theists.” Tannese believe in the existence of eternal beings, but do not worship them. They relate more easily to a mechanistic power (*mana*) than to a personal god.¹¹⁰

Furthermore, the fertility stone gods are not referred to as gods which all people are to worship. Rather, they are afraid of going near the place where they are kept. The people are aware that the stones are in the vicinity, but the ritual activity is performed by the *tupunes* rather than the general population. If the traditional god is for the entire community, why then is one person (the *tupunes*) representing them all?

As just mentioned, Capell says that the Tannese relate more to the mechanistic power (*mana*) than to a personal god. Paul Hiebert elaborates further on the idea, saying that there are mechanical and organic systems. According to Hiebert, the mechanical system works on the notion of equilibrium or stasis. The example he gives is of cars and computers. There is a time when these two cease to operate. They depend very much on an outside force to keep them working. He continues by referring to organic or living systems, such as body parts, including cells, heart, and liver. This system includes birds and animals.¹¹¹ If we consider the fertility stone gods, then we can see that Capell may be right. The stone has been lying there for many generations. In itself, it is powerless and inactive. There has not been any change in its size or shape. Like a car or a computer, it needs an outside force to get it active. Whether or not people worship cars or computers, there is a time when they will no longer function and another will need to be purchased. Similarly, there are times when some of these stones might go missing, especially in natural disasters, or be destroyed by men (government or church representatives), and soon

¹¹⁰ Capell, “Stratification of Afterworld Beliefs”, p. 77, quoted in Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 47.

¹¹¹ Hiebert. *Transforming Worldviews*, pp. 77-80.

you will hear people referring to another. Cars, computers, planes, medical equipment, and stones are instruments for people to achieve something, but they are not the end or ultimate goal, in themselves, for humankind. The writer is not advocating the use of a stone, as in traditional religion, but putting a general truth about mechanistic systems. It is different with the God of the Bible. Hiebert explains that the God of the Bible is

a living being, not energy, matter, karma, or any other impersonal foundation of being. In the beginning was God, not matter and laws, natural or moral. It is God, a living being, who created a material world that operates according to the order he placed in it, and he created humans as beings who can shape and use the world because they understand the intrinsic order in it.¹¹²

The fact that Melanesians respond well to mechanistic systems or something physical and manipulative could be one of the reasons for Melanesians resorting to traditional ways for healing, success, and prosperity, when there seems to be no answer to their prayers. This may also be true for others, who resort to their material possessions, rather than waiting on God. Humanity prefers shortcuts, material and visible things. But, for God, it is his kingdom first and other things will follow (Matt 6:33; cf. Is 55:8-9).

Another thing to mention is that an outsider must seek to fully understand the context, before deciding whether something is a god or not. For instance, in a traditional context such as Tanna, leaders are given special respect. This does not mean that the leader is deified. In the end, the leadership role will be handed to another, and the people will still give him the same respect. It is part of the culture. The other example is the worship of the ancestor spirits. Just because people put food in the graveyard or talk to their deceased does not make them gods. In this worldview the deceased are believed to be around with the people in the society, just as when they were alive physically. There are central meeting places, such as *nakamal* for the community and the kitchen for a family. But, for a deceased member of a family, the meeting place is the graveyard. Just because people are doing the things they are doing, it does not mean that we have to

¹¹² Ibid., p. 285.

jump to a quick conclusion which might not be accurate. It might be, as in John Pobee's idea of "*tabula rasa*, i.e., the missionary doctrine that there is nothing in the non-Christian culture on which the Christian missionary can build and, therefore, every aspect of the traditional non-Christian culture had to be destroyed before Christianity could be built up".¹¹³ The important question here is "has the people's worldview been well grasped and represented?"

A word study on the Tannese terms used for these gods will also help to answer the above question. Let us begin with the supernatural, or the gods referred to by Nehrbass as *kughen* (*whughin* in West Tanna language). According to Nehrbass, *kughen* are spirits with personal names. They are mythical gods, such as *Matiktik*, *Taransamus*, *Karwas*, and *Karpapeng*. However, in the western part of Tanna people do not refer to these spirits as *whughin*. They normally refer to them via their names, *Saramsumus*, *Kalwas* (*Kalpapen* in West Tanna language). Furthermore, to refer to the *Taramsumus* as *kughin* gives a negative connotation because, according to the myth, he was devouring all the people when *Matiktik* intervened to save them. Traditionally, the name *whughin* is used as the name of a person. For instance, in my village (Loukatai) a person is called Iaihit Whughin. The traditional leadership structure will help to see the importance of the name. In almost every Tannese village, there are two important people. The first is "*yeni*", the spokesperson of the community. He is the equivalent of a contemporary chief. The second is the "*yeremera*". The term "*yeremera*" carries the notion of headship, ownership and, maybe, some aspects of a king, although kingship is absent in Melanesia. For my village, this person, Iaihit Whughin, is the *yeremera*.

When the missionaries came, they chose the term "*Yeremara Whughin*" in translation to refer to the God of the Bible, and that is how it has been used until the present day. However, the point is that people (at least for West Tanna) are not referring to the mythical gods as *kughin*. The word "*kughin*" is mostly used nowadays by Christians to refer to the God of the

¹¹³ John S. Pobee, "Political Theology in the African Context", in *African Theological Journal* 11 (1982), p. 168, quoted in Hiebert, Shaw, Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1999, p. 19.

Bible, so to use the name to refer to a personal spirit would not be welcomed in such context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since this paper emphasises individual Christian intellectual growth, a possible course of action is as follows: for Christians, understand your culture or the host culture; for cross-cultural workers, understand your Bible and, finally, understand yourself. This process of seeking a better understanding involves critical analysis.

UNDERSTAND YOUR CULTURE

As stated above, while staying in the village, the author thought studying the culture was not a priority. But, after writing this paper, I would like to appeal to all Tannese, especially Christian leaders, to make every effort to better understand why people are doing the things they do. This is not only true for Tannese leaders, but for anyone in cross-cultural work. There are several reasons for the author not studying the culture while in the village. First, as mentioned earlier, the thought was that it is my culture, I know it because I am part of it. Just because many people are in a ship, does not mean that all of them know how it works. The captain, crew, and passengers are in the ship. For the passengers, the boat is moving, but they lack the knowledge to probe deeper as to how it is moving. We have to analyse every practice in order to seek to understand the deeper reasons for it. To use Hiebert's term, we need to "surface them – to consciously examine the deep, unexamined assumptions we have and, thereby, make explicit what is implicit".¹¹⁴ He continues that these "[c]ultural assumptions affect what we see and what we believe is true, right, and proper . . . unless they come in conflict with a set of assumptions from another culture".¹¹⁵

Second, to enable successful learning, the traditional learning system itself has to be understood. Unlike the contemporary education system, which involves confinement to the classroom, writing, and paid teachers, the traditional learning system is on the field (in the garden, on the sea, on the

¹¹⁴ Hiebert. *Transforming Worldviews*, p. 319.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

building site, in the kitchen, etc.). It is oral, and an individual has to find the time and place to learn from traditional elders. One of the great contemporary deceptions is the notion that unschooled village elders have nothing to teach us. However, if one understands the traditional learning system, one will learn a great deal. The final thing is to learn to be humble and respectful to the traditional leaders. If they can see that you are a trustworthy custodian of the traditional things, they can entrust many things to your care.

There are reasons for a better understanding of one's own culture. First, as Christians and leaders we are not called out of the world, although we are not of it. Our ministry is in a world of many cultures. Consequently, one has to better understand the culture (not just the practices, but also the underlying principles of a particular practice), so that we can offer concrete ways to enable people to come to a better solution. There also needs to be awareness that culture is not static. Some of the past cultural practices to which we are referring, may no longer exist. We also need to be aware of the new practices taken on board by the culture. In doing so, we may offer relevant explanations for the questions of the day. Second, many people, such as missionaries and anthropologists, have written and will continue to write books and essays on individual cultures. Some have well represented the people, while others have not. It is only when people know their culture, that they can rectify errors. Otherwise, they may accept anything said about their own culture, even if it is a misrepresentation, because they, themselves, do not know it. Finally, as a custodian, one has the responsibility to pass the knowledge on to the next generation. Therefore, one needs to know what to pass on and, of course, what not to.

Christians need to understand their culture, not that they may return to or discard it. Practices and principles need to be evaluated. There are some valuable practices that should be maintained, but there are others that are clearly against the gospel which, therefore, should be discarded. This has to be done in a pastoral and loving spirit. For that to happen, one has to understand his/her culture.

UNDERSTAND GOD THROUGH THE BIBLE

It is vital for all Christians to seek to understand God. As John Calvin says, "true and sound wisdom consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and

of ourselves”.¹¹⁶ He explains that “[i]n the first place, no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he ‘lives and moves’ (Acts 17:28)”.¹¹⁷ However, one cannot fully understand God apart from the means that he has provided, the Bible. The Bible has to be read or heard taught by all Christians, if they wish to grow in their relationship and knowledge of God. Christians read the Bible because they believe it contains the word of God for their walk in this life, and to prepare them for their life in the next. However, there are a few who may have read it for other reasons. For instance, some read it to know what it teaches, so that they can find ways around it or teach against it. Christians believe that the Bible is the sole standard and has answers for our questions. So contemporary Christians ought to know what the Bible teaches about God. Furthermore, the Bible is not just a book like any other book. It is God’s book or, rather, it contains God’s story of creation, sin, salvation in Christ, and the new world to be brought by Christ at his second coming. The Bible helps us to know who God is and his relationship to humanity. Although there are 66 books, categorised into 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament, it is actually one book, giving the one story of the one God of humankind. In Melanesia there are still illiterate people in communities. This places a much bigger burden on church leaders who ought to read the Bible with the illiterate in mind. That is, they ought to live out what the Bible teaches, for the sake of those who cannot read it (literally) but can read it through other’s daily lives.

UNDERSTAND YOURSELF

Understanding yourself does not mean one has to understand how his/her body functions, biologically. It means understanding yourself, with respect to your culture and your new life in Christ, through the scriptures. This involves understanding the requirements of this new life. It means giving oneself and one’s ways fully to God. It means, after examining one’s culture, if there are some things which are against or pose a threat to faith, these should be brought under the scrutiny of the scriptures. If this means abstention from certain cultural practices, there is a cost to count before following Christ. Following all traditional practices or just some, does not

¹¹⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, tran., London UK: SCM Press, 1961, p. 35.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

make you more or less Tannese because there is more to being a Tannese than following certain traditions.

However, the most important thing is to understand your spiritual state. This includes understanding your sin, how guilty you are before God, and the fact that you cannot save yourself. This makes the need for a God, who loves, saves, and forgives, according to his grace, a reality in your life. Again, John Calvin's second aspect of true and sound wisdom is the knowledge of oneself. In Tannese society, the need to understand your spiritual need is fuzzy, because of an integrated worldview, where spiritual, physical, social, and cultural needs are inseparable. Often, spiritual needs may be less emphasised, at the expense of other needs, like physical needs. Furthermore, the system itself can become a hindrance to seeing the real need. For instance, the traditional sacrificial system is thought by Tannese to be sufficient. Thus, it is vital to understand oneself.

COMPARATIVE SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Since this thesis is a comparative study, I would like to summarise the paper in a table, which compares and contrasts the God of the Bible with the Tannese primal gods, because this may help readers to see the differences more clearly. This will help review, as well as state, the main points, in a simple way. However, it is difficult to make a one-on-one comparison, because of the plurality of Tannese traditional gods. Further, they are both spiritual beings and objects, but this summary will seek to show a more general comparison (see Figure 7 below).

It is still a challenge for Christians to defend their faith, ever since the time of Paul, who committed his time to defending the gospel for which he was imprisoned (Phil 1:16), and Peter, who encouraged Christians to be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks about the hope they have (1 Pet 3:15). Two words, "defence" (Phil 1:16) and "answer" (1 Pet 3:15), are from the Greek word ἀπολογία (apologia),¹¹⁸ from which we get the word "apologetic". It is the hope of the writer to provide Tannese with some answers about primal gods to aid the defence of the truth. Apologetic has

¹¹⁸ Aland, Aland, eds, *The UBS Greek New Testament*, Phil 1:16-5:25; 1 Pet 3:15-6:22.

been mostly left to the ecclesiastical elite, but it should not be this way. It has to be done by lay people and even ordinary Christians as well.

The nature of the God of the Bible	The nature of the Tannese primal gods
Spirit	Spirit, as well as objects
One	Many
Organic	Organic and mechanistic
Eternal	Limited
Characteristics of the relationship of the God of the Bible to humans	Characteristics of the relationship of the Tannese primal gods to humans
Speaks through revelation, Jesus, and the Bible	Myth/objects cannot communicate (stone)
Love	Uncertain/Punishment
Just in his dealings	Uncertain
Gracious	Uncertain
Saviour	Uncertain
Near/Within	Distant/Confined to territory
Characteristics of the relationship of humans (Christians) to the God of the Bible	Characteristic of the relationship of humans (non-Christians) to the Tannese primal gods
All have sinned	All are corrupt, but a person can be good
God provided a way, a gift	Legalism (humans seek their own ways)
All Christians can pray	One person prays on behalf of the people (<i>tupunes</i>)
Pray according to the will of God	Manipulating/controlling gods for the wish of man
Fear – reverence, respect, honour, freedom	Fear – enslavement
Worship the creator	Worship creatures
God owns everything and humans are stewards	We own things

Figure 7: Comparative summary table

After all, Peter is writing to all “God’s elect” (1 Pet 1:1), not just some people in the church. It is vitally important that Christians ought to

understand their God, through the Bible, their culture, and themselves, in the light of the Bible and culture. The approach of apologetic that this writer is advocating, is appealing to the mind, via comparative study, done with love. Let me conclude by referring back to the main questions of this paper. The main task of this paper has been to discuss some aspects of the nature of the God of the Bible and the Tannese primal gods, and some characteristics of their relationship to humans, and vice versa. The above table helps us to see this discussion in outline. It portrays certain truths about God and gods. God is creator, living, eternal, and the God of the universe. A Tannese primal god, on the other hand, is a creature, limited, and dead/object (stone). Their relationship to humans shows God, on the one hand, to be more loving, caring, and intervening, when he sees that humanity is helpless. On the other hand, he is righteous and will not tolerate sin. However, his way for dealing with sin was on the cross, so that sinners are saved by grace alone. The primal gods seem to leave humankind on their own, by confining themselves to a territory. Punishment seems to be the mark of the relationship, leaving man in total fear. As for the God of the Bible, although humans are sinful, he provides a way for forgiveness of sin, so that believers are accepted as his children. In traditional religion, humankind has to find its way to god. Whether or not the people get to the traditional gods, the God of the Bible came to people's aid in and through the person of Jesus. Imagine you are walking on an unknown road and, at a place where two roads meet, you are uncertain which road to take. There you see Jesus standing and a stone lying on the ground. From which of the two will you seek guidance?

The recurring issue with which the writer has been grappling is, although most people say that the Tannese do have gods, both personal gods, such as *kughen*, and impersonal gods, such as stones, the gods relationship to humans, and vice versa, seems to show otherwise. This paper makes a claim that Tannese have no gods with regards to “communal worship”, a vital aspect of Melanesian society. Although fear is present, it is not healthy; rather, it is an enslaving fear. However, in the case of venerated spirits and objects, they are multiple.¹¹⁹ The important question is, “how

¹¹⁹ This paper's concern is not so much with the distinction between the spirits and material gods or where to draw the line when defining the term “god”. It is more concerned with the

are the people relating to them?” Do Tannese worship these so-called gods? People may wish to define a deity as beings or objects, but this paper is seeking to understand God/gods, via the relationship between God/gods either to humans, or vice versa. A person or thing regarded as a god, is nothing without some form of relationship. It is worship, relationship, revelation, allegiance, and conviction which makes a being God or a god. This is not a conclusion, but is the opening up a claim for further discussion and research into cultural practices, and the relationship regarding what people believe to be their gods and their undergirding principles. It calls for a better understanding of oneself as a Christian, one’s culture, and one’s Bible.

This paper is a call to Tannese Christians. Jesus’ words still stand and, for the purpose of this paper, “You cannot serve both God and traditional gods” (Matt 6:24). A Christian is someone who has totally switched allegiance from traditional gods to God, through Christ. As Christians, we have a God who is far superior in every way to Tannese gods. His superiority is evident through his relationship with us. He has chosen to reveal himself to us by his Son and the written word, so that we can know who he is and his relationship to us. In fact, he knew us first because he made us to be his. His love is eternal, and by his grace he has provided a way, through Jesus his Son, that we might be saved and become his children. He is so great that no one can confine him to a particular place. His greatness and love embraces humans of all nations. He communicates to us through his word, and we can talk to him through prayer. For a non-Christian Tannese, consider the things which are gods to you, their relationship to you, and the freedom you have in them. Do not settle for something, because the majority is for it. That majority may be a minority when compared to a much greater world and a greater reality. Furthermore, we are rational beings, meaning that we have to critically evaluate our relationship to our gods, so that we can fully understand the gods we are serving. If we are to stand for the traditional gods, let us make sure that they are worth defending. But, I doubt they are worth it, as discussed above.

relationship of who/what is thought to be God/gods, and those who are pledging their allegiance to this/these God/gods.

GLOSSARY

This glossary is to help with some of the words used in this paper, most of which are language terms.

Damafa – A word given to the uttered words of wishes spoken after men have consumed their *kava*.

Iru – The name of an area in West Tanna marked by two rivers.

John Frum – The name of a person who was said to appear to certain people in South Tanna. Later the movement grew in other parts of Tanna. The movement is referred to as the John Frum Movement.

Kalpapen – The god who gives fertility stones for food. He is said to be residing at *Tokosmera*.

Kasasao and *Kaniapnin* – In one of the oral narratives, *SemuSemu* was eating all the inhabitants of Tanna. These are the names of the two boys who killed *SemuSemu*.

Kava – A traditional narcotic drink, traditionally consumed by men of certain stages, excluding women and children. Having become a commercial commodity, it is now consumed by anyone. Some of these words have to be understood in their context.

Kavir – The language name for a fertility stone.

Kughen – The language term for god.

Kwanage – The language name for oral narrative.

Lalan – The name of a tribe in West Tanna.

Laminuh – The traditional *nakamal* in West Tanna (Lenakel), where *SemuSemu*, according to oral narrative, vomited its liver, when *Kasasao* and *Kaniapnin* were trying to kill him. There is a stone, which is there to this day, referred to as *SemuSemu*'s liver.

Lenakel – The name of a place in West Tanna, which has now become the little town of Tafea Province, where are the main wharf and the provincial hospital. In the history of mission activity, it was a main missionary centre for the whole of West and even the northwest of Tanna.

Matiktik – In the oral narrative of *Taramsumus* eating people and keeping young boys in a pen without knowing that they were his food, *Matiktik* took the appearance of a boy and was taken by *Taramsumus* to the pen. When *Taramsumus* informed the boys of their destruction, *Matiktik* freed them and led them out of the pen.

- Nahak* – The language term for the process of using sorcery against someone by collecting remains of food, footprints, or cloths and performing magic to bring about sickness or death to a person.
- Nakamal* – Traditional meeting place for the community. It is also used by men's *kava* drinking, especially in the afternoons, and for other traditional ceremonies, such as the instalment of a chief, circumcision ceremonies, bride price payment, new harvest dedication, traditional exchanges, and customary dancing.
- Namipun* – The language term for grandchildren. Often the two last letters are dropped, to join it with the name of the grandfather. For instance, the writer is *Namip-Iaken*.
- Namsu* – Part of oral narrative/stories which is different to *Kwanage*/myth and includes stories of identity. For instance, it includes the family tree, movements, and blood lines of a particular kinship.
- Nimisan* – The generic language term for sickness.
- SemSem (SemuSemu)* – The name of the beast that was said to be going around eating humans. It was *Kasasao* and *Kaniapnin* who killed the monster.
- Tafea – The name given to the province consisting of Tanna, Aniwa, Futuna, Erromango, and Aneityum (see the map on p. 82 above). The word derives from the initial letters of the five islands.
- Tannese – The word is used generally to refer to the people of Tanna.
- Taramsumus* – The name of another beast in the oral narrative in which *Matiktik* intervened to save the young boys.
- Tokomera* – The name of the highest mountain in Tanna.
- Tupunes* – The name of the sacred man who enters the sacred place to offer ceremonial rituals to ask the fertility god for a good harvest.
- Yaohnanen* – The name of a village in the interior of Tanna. It is the centre for the Prince Phillip Movement.
- Yeni* – The word means spokesperson. This is equivalent to a contemporary chief.
- Yeremera* – The person who is in charge. He is the headman or an owner. *Yeni* is subservient to *Yeremera*.

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EMAIL INTERVIEW

Some of my traditional research was done via email interviews. In this approach, I would ask questions through Mary Becky (my niece). She is currently on Tanna. The reason I chose her is because she has an email address and is working in an office where she has access to the internet, a

rare and expensive thing on a remote island like Tanna. During her spare time, she would interview people and sent me her findings. However, names have been changed to preserve confidentiality.