

Chapter 3

Pre-Christian Religion in Melanesia

This chapter looks at the traditional religious belief system in Melanesia before Christianity was introduced by missionaries in the mid 19th century. The focus is to look at the factors that enabled Melanesians to accept Christianity and to accommodate it to Melanesian culture. Since the time of encounter with Europeans, Christianity has become dominant over the traditional religion. The question arises whether there were similarities which Melanesians could identify with or was there a religious and spiritual vacuum in Melanesian society which Christianity easily filled?

When the missionaries first arrived, they encountered some forms of resistance from the Melanesians, but the resistance was not because the missionaries were different in terms of belief, language and lifestyle. Rather, Melanesians were concerned that the intrusion of foreigners into Melanesian society would defile their religion. That is, before the arrival of the missionaries, Melanesian society had its own religious and belief-systems.

Nevertheless, it must be stated that Melanesia is a heterogeneous society. The people of the Solomon Islands alone speak about eighty different languages and if we include the other Melanesian countries, there would even be more. This demonstrates the cultural diversity of the islands. It is, therefore,

Christian villages, they advised people not to destroy traditional shrines, but to bless them. This practice became adopted in Melanesia as a way of using the 'old ways' as the foundation of Christianity. Geoffrey White describes the approach taken by the Melanesians as follows:

Rather than destroy or desecrate shrines, the indigenous specialists attempted to transform them ritually with Christian practice. Acts of 'blessing', 'anointing' and baptizing were (and still are) the weapons in the spiritual arsenal of indigenous Christians. Local catechists and priests were sympathetic to the substantial continuities of the past in the present, of the old in the new. Their model of transformation was not one of rupture but of reformulation. They perhaps understood that the meaning and vitality of the 'new' practices depended upon the continuing reality of the 'old'.¹⁰⁹

The blessing of ancestral shrines re-iterated the Melanesian belief that in death there is only physical separation. When the shrines were blessed, the ancestral spirits which were believed to occupy those sacred places were also believed to have been Christianized. Another way of looking at the blessing of the sacred shrines was that it was like converting a heathen village to Christianity. Those places were initially feared and only certain people were allowed to visit them. After they have been blessed, they were no longer restricted. There was no more fear of being attacked by the spirit-beings which believed to have lived in those shrines.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 108.

appropriate to say that making generalizations about Melanesian religion is unrealistic. In the Solomons, even the bigger islands like Guadalcanal, Malaita, Ysabel, Choiseul, New Georgia, and Makira cannot be said to be homogeneous entities in their own setting. Each island is demarcated by different language groups that are unique in themselves. If language is a main factor in determining a culture, then in the Solomon Islands alone, there would be about eighty different ways of doing things, let alone religion. Garry Trompf has made an accurate observation when he described the situation.

Melanesia has been revealed as the home of about one-third of mankind's languages, and that means — considering how languages are so crucial in defining discrete cultures — just as many religions. It is now eminently clear that accurate generalizations about Melanesian traditional religions are very difficult to make.⁸⁶

Deities

The main characteristic of the heterogeneity of Melanesian religion is found in the diversity of the deities Melanesians worshipped. Different islands and tribal groups believed in different spirit-beings, but often they included a male spirit, a female spirit, a spirit of the forest, a spirit of the sea, a shark, a snake and so on. Whatever deity they worshipped it was believed to have the 'mana' to render protection, strength and guidance the people needed in their daily life

⁸⁶G.W.Trompf, Melanesian Religion (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 10.

and in particular in the celebrations of birth, marriage, death, fishing, hunting, gardening and healing. All forms of celebration were communal activities. A particular spirit-being was responsible for a particular need.

There was also a dichotomy between good and evil. For instance, there is a myth from Kia on Ysabel about the sharks which their ancestors worshipped. There were sharks that could save life and there were others that could kill. They had magic names and it was important to call the right magic name when the people needed help. 'Totogo' was the magic name for life-savers and 'saulele' was the magic name for killers. If one was drowning or in danger at sea and 'totogo' was called, one could be rescued and taken ashore. If, however, one was in a panic and accidentally called 'saulele', that person could be killed.

Rituals and ceremonies also varied from island to island and there were different ways to observe 'tabu'. A certain food or behaviour may be 'tabu' in one area but not in another. For instance, in Kia, turtle hunting involves many rituals. During the hunting period which was normally two to three weeks, the hunters would set up a camp away from the village and it would be out of bounds to any others in the community. For the entire period, the hunters would refrain from eating pig, clams, breadfruit, etc. The word 'pig' would not even be mentioned because pigs live in the bush and it is believed that they can

bring bad luck. Clams were not allowed to be eaten because they live in the bottom of the sea and it would prevent the turtles from surfacing.

Creator Beings

While there are differences, there are also similarities between Melanesian religious traditions. For instance, in the Solomon Islands, different islands have similar myths about the creation of their respective islands. These myths resemble the creation story in Genesis. According to a myth on Vella la Vella Island in the western Solomons, the creator-being was a male called, 'Banara'. He created the island from nothing and then created animals, vegetation and human beings. Similar creation stories are told on Choiseul, New Georgia and Guadalcanal. The creator-being on Choiseul was called 'Banara la'ata' while that of New Georgia was often referred to as the 'Great Spirit of Roviana'. 'Koevasi' was the creator-being on Guadalcanal, but, unlike the others who were males, she was a female. She was married and her husband SivatoHu was the "great warrior of the sky"⁸⁷. The fact that Koevasi was the creator and SivatoHu the warrior seemed to be the basis for the division of tasks between male and female in Guadalcanal.

The life-style in the islands is based on subsistence farming and fishing,

⁸⁷Whiteman, 56.

making it necessary for the men to do the more demanding tasks such as fishing, hunting and clearing the bush for gardens. The women are responsible for planting, maintaining and harvesting the garden, plus caring for children and other domestic duties. This does not mean to say that men do not play a part in caring for the children. They do have a fair share of that. When the women go to the gardens or to the bush to collect pandanus leaves to make mat and umbrella or to the sea to collect shells, the men look after the children.

Ancestral Spirits

If one is to understand the place of religious beliefs and rituals in the Melanesian society, one needs to know what human life means in the Melanesian context. Generally speaking, Melanesians regard life as part and parcel of the whole cosmos, which is "part of the whole humanity in a given locality"⁸⁸. Darrell Whiteman has rightly stated that life for Melanesians is "an animistic continuum of living and dead men, animals, plants and spirits"⁸⁹. Often there is no clear distinction between religious and secular activities. They are more or less integrated and it is only the emphasis that shifts according to needs and situations. Loyalty to ancestral spirits is the most common characteristic of Melanesian religion. The ancestral spirits are revered and

⁸⁸Tippett, 3.

⁸⁹Whiteman, 66.

worshipped, and "are perceived as the living dead, playing an active role in this cosmic life."⁹⁰ This is reflective of the society's belief and understanding of death. In death there is only physical separation, but the spirit continues to live and play a part in the life of the community. Darrell Whiteman quotes Robert Henry Codrington who served the Melanesian Mission under Bishop Patteson as saying,

... in all the islands, it is plainly believed that power of a spiritual character belongs to the dead, and may be obtained from them by living men. Whatever power of this kind a man possesses in his life time, though it may show itself in bodily excellence, is conceived of as supernatural, and attaching to that part of his nature, his soul, by whatever name it may be called, which not only survives the dissolution of the body, but is even enabled to act more effectively by death.... A Melanesian, therefore, whether it be in the islands where spiritual beings, not the ghosts of men, are much regarded, or in those where the lately dead have almost the worship that is given, moves always in a world of which great part is invisible; his body is not all himself; the grave does not close altogether the future for him. By one means or another, by stones or leaves, he can put himself into communication with the unseen powers; he can please them by sacrifices and he can gain their help by prayers.⁹¹

Each island group has a place where they believe the spirit of the dead would go to reside. It is normally a small inhabited island close to the main

⁹⁰ibid., 4.

⁹¹Bernard Narokobi, "Christianity and Melanesian Cosmos: The Broken Pearls and a Newborn shell." In G.W. Trompf, The Gospel is not Western. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 37.

land. On Ysabel, the spirits of the dead are believed to go to San Jorge Island; those on Guadalcanal to Malapa; Malaita to Ramos Island and Makira to Three Sisters Islands, etc. The local name for San Jorge Island is "Tuhilagi" which has a parallel meaning to that of Paradise. There have been stories on Ysabel that villagers near San Jorge Island have heard people singing hymns and beating drums in a joyous manner at Christmas time, and whenever a person dies on Ysabel. A particular area on San Jorge is said to be always kept neat and tidy as if people kept sweeping away the falling leaves and remove scrub and bushes regularly. Similar stories are told on Malaita, Guadalcanal and Makira.

From those resting places the spirits are believed to continue to keep watch over their communities and pay regular visits to rivers, mountains and other places where they used to live, work, fish and hunt. But as spirits they become sources of 'mana' for protection, strength and healing as well as source of curse and punishment. Spirits of dead ancestors who were known for bravery and other gifts and talents such as skill in fishing, hunting, gardening, or healing would often be called upon to provide 'mana' so that the living could be successful in those different tasks in their daily life. Maintaining a good relationship with ancestral spirits is therefore important in Melanesian religion because Melanesians believe that there are regular intrusions of ancestral spirits into the daily routines and activities of the living. It is believed that to offend the

ancestral spirits could result in the community experiencing misfortune.

When a person dies, certain ceremonies and rituals are performed to ensure that the person's spirit rests in peace and becomes a source of "mana". Failure to perform acceptable ceremonies and rituals will disappoint the dead person and the spirit could return to the village to harm or haunt the members of the community. When a person is dying, relatives must be present in a state of vigil day and night. In the case of an elder, the relatives would be anxious to hear the last words the person says before the last breath. Those words are believed to communicate to the relatives the person's will in regard to inheritance of land and property rights. As soon as the person dies, the female relatives start wailing and expressing loss and self-pity — why has the person gone away from them? If the dead person was a chief or a person of high standing in the community, male mourners would also have a chance to wail and normally they say an eulogy and ask the dead person for forgiveness, reconciliation, protection, support and guidance.

Burial could take several forms. The corpse could either be placed in a cave, on a shrine or on a bed on a tree-top so that when the body is decomposed the bones may easily be retrieved and placed in sacred shrines. The relatives would put on a large feast after the burial to celebrate the life and work of the dead person and also to thank the members of the community for

the support they have rendered during the time of vigil and in the preparations for the burial. As a symbol that the relatives miss the physical presence of the dead person, two or three betelnut trees or almond nut trees that she or he planted would be cut down. For three consecutive nights, relatives and friends would stay in vigil in the house of the dead person. This is to show that the community is united with the relatives in coming to terms with the vacuum that has been created by the physical absence of the deceased. The belief in ancestral spirits is in a way parallel to that of the doctrine of life after death in Christian teaching and the place where the spirits would go to reside is parallel with the idea of Paradise.

Mana

Melanesian society is pragmatic, and so is Melanesian traditional religion. Melanesians believe in a spirit-being because it has 'mana' to provide practical results. A Melanesian question of enquiry or analysis is not, "is it true"?⁹² Rather they would start by asking if something was happening. If so, then it must be true.

Truth is associated with 'mana'. A spirit-being that has 'mana' provides visible results, while one with no 'mana' does not produce results. Loyalty to spirit-beings is based on their effectiveness. But 'mana' has a dual purpose.

⁹²Whiteman, 79.

Positively, it was used to heal the sick, defeat the enemies, to have productive gardens, to help fishermen catch plenty of fish, to enable hunters catch plenty of pigs, to calm storms and so on. Negatively, it was used for sorcery.

When the Missionaries first encountered the Melanesians, the shift from traditional religion to Christianity was based on this understanding of 'mana'. The conversion story of the people of Ysabel is a classical example. In 1886, Bishop John Selwyn visited Ysabel. At that time Soga, the Big Man, was very sick and close to death. Before Selwyn arrived, Soga had just raided a near-by area and killed about forty people.⁹³ Then suddenly he became sick with influenza. Selwyn told him to refrain from head-hunting activities and then mixed quinine and brandy, blessed it, and then gave it to Soga to drink. Not long after that, Soga recovered fully. He was jubilant about his healing and his attitude towards the bishop and the mission activities changed from being suspicious and hostile, to being receptive and hospitable. He sent some men with presents to the bishop and requested that a school be built in his village.⁹⁴ Later he sent away all his wives except one and asked for baptism.⁹⁵ He became a great supporter and defender of the activities of the Melanesian Mission on

⁹³Fox, 35.

⁹⁴Whiteman, 360.

⁹⁵Hilliard, 88.

Ysabel. The island population of Ysabel had no choice but to follow their leader and accepted Christianity.

In this conversion story, we can see Soga's understanding of Christianity and the Christian God through Bishop Selwyn. History does not say this, but it is highly likely that the traditional healers might have failed to heal Soga and it was only a last resort that they gave Selwyn a chance. Soga and his people might have been curious about Selwyn's God and were waiting to see if Selwyn's rituals would have any effect. Since Selwyn's simple rituals healed Soga, they believed that the Christian God was true. This prompted a change in loyalty from the traditional deities to the Christian God. The fact that Selwyn healed Soga was an adequate proof for them to believe that the Christian God was more powerful than their ancestral spirits and thus must be the true God. The change of allegiance meant, adopting Christian methods in healing rituals and thus turning to prayer, anointing and blessings, and priests and catechists became the healers.

Magic and Sacrifice

One important point that needs to be mentioned is that Melanesian religion was associated with magic and magic was the source of 'mana'. That is, to draw a line between religious and magical rituals was not easy, because they tended to over-lap. The main purpose of performing a magical ritual was to

receive 'mana' from the spirit-beings. The dwelling places of spirit-beings were associated with mountains, trees, rocks and shrines. These areas were often restricted, and only certain people such as custom doctors⁹⁶, fishermen, hunters and elders who could pray to the spirit beings could go there when they had to perform rituals and offer sacrifices. Other men, women and children were prohibited from going in those areas. Those who defy the 'tabu' rules could be in danger of misfortune.

A common ritual to please spirit-beings was the sacrifice of pigs. When a pig was sacrificed, the priest took a piece of meat, dipped it into its blood and then entered the custom house and placed it on the sacred fire. It is claimed that the aroma of the meat would please the spirit-being who in return would respond positively to the petitions offered.

In the pre-missionary days, people who were taken captives from other tribes or islands were used for sacrifices. Human sacrifice was offered on an altar (sope) that was built with flat stones. The structure was raised from the ground with the measurement of "ten feet long, five feet wide and two feet high."⁹⁷ Before warriors set out on head-hunting expeditions, a human sacrifice had to be made. All warriors had to participate in the sacrificial ritual by standing in

⁹⁶Men or women who have the gift of healing using traditional medicines.

⁹⁷Geoffrey M. White, Identity through History (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 79.

a single file facing the altar. The victim would be made to lie on the altar facing upward and the priest offered prayers and petitions for protection, strength and guidance in their planned raid. The victim would then be beheaded and his head was passed along the line of warriors so that they could drink its blood. The body was then cut up and cooked on a sacred fire near the altar and consumed by the warriors.

On Ysabel, human skulls were regarded as a main source of 'mana' so that when a Big Man or a prominent community leader was dead, a head-hunting expedition would be part of the mourning and funeral rituals. More heads would mean more 'mana' for the spirit of the dead person and in return they would receive more 'mana' from him. Apart from honouring the death of a Big Man, head-hunting was also part of a ritual to launch a new war-canoe or to open a new custom house. Head-hunting was also regarded as a process of initiation for young men to manhood. The more heads one got the more he would be vested with 'mana'. In the Big Man system of leadership, the number of heads that one got would be a factor to determine who would be the next Big Man. Skulls of victims were displayed on sacred shrines or in a custom house as a symbol of bravery and success.

Sacrifice of nuts, yams or first-fruits was also regarded as offering. This type of ritual was performed at the beginning of the fishing season or at the beginning

of almond harvest season. These offerings were important but were not better substitution for a person. Generally, sacrifice was made inside a custom house, on ancestral shrines or under a sacred tree. In each sacrificial location there would be a fire place called the 'sacred fire'. In a custom house, skulls and bones were placed above the fire so that when a sacrifice was offered the smoke would rise to them. Sacrifices were made for different purposes, either on behalf of a dead person or to petition for healing and other needs of the community.

Sorcery

Fear of sorcery was a major component of the Melanesians' belief in supernatural power or magic. Sickness was primarily explained in terms of sorcery. When people visited another village they were always conscious of who to speak to or from whom they could accept food and drink. They would also be fearful about not leaving food particles, betel-nut husks, hair or personal clothing around, in case a sorcerer might collect them and invoke magic on them that would make them sick and die.

Burt describes sorcery "as an abuse of spiritual power"⁹⁸ because it is used to cause "sickness and death by unseen secret means."⁹⁹ It was an anti-social

⁹⁸Ben Burt, Tradition and Christianity (Harwood Academic Publishers, Switzerland, 1994), 79.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 79

activity that was discretely performed to kill people. However, the sorcery practitioners had to be very careful not to be found out because if they did they could be killed. The dilemma about practising sorcery was that, there was a claim that, before one could kill other people, she/he must first of all kill a few very close relatives.

Sorcery was practised in several ways. In some parts of Ysabel the common form was called 'korapau'. A human bone was the source of the sorcerer's evil 'mana' and was placed in a basket in a secret place. When the sorcerer wanted to kill somebody, he would collect either food particles, faeces, hair or a piece of cloth from the person and put them on the human bone. The victim would feel sick immediately after his 'remains' had been placed on the bone. From then on the life of the victim would be controlled by the sorcerer. When the 'remains' were removed from the bone the victim would feel better but if heat was applied on the bone and 'remains', the victim could get very sick and eventually die.¹⁰⁰

'Sunī malaba' was another form of sorcery that was commonly feared on some parts of Ysabel. When the intended victim was walking along a road or on the beach, the sorcerer would follow behind and pricked his footprint with a stick. The victim would soon feel a severe pain in his foot and if not treated

¹⁰⁰Whiteman, 352.

by traditional healers the foot would begin to rot and the person could die.¹⁰¹ Fear of these evil forces often restricted people's movement even in their own villages.

Dress

Traditional dress was part and parcel of traditional ceremonies and rituals in the islands. Basically, there were two sets of costumes, one was for everyday use and the other for ceremonial occasions. The everyday costume for women and girls consisted of either a grass-skirt or a waist string from which hung frontal and back aprons made from the bark of a tree. For boys and men the everyday costume only consisted of a loincloth. On ceremonial occasions, men and women wore more decorative ornaments which consisted of shell-money, porpoise teeth and shell ornaments. The different ornaments were tied at the ankles, knees, wrist, elbow, upper arm, at the head and across the chest. There were also ear and nose decorations.

Thus Melanesians identified the colourful vestments of the clergy with their own dress for ceremonial occasions. It was meaningful for them to see a priest wearing something different from the ordinary for a special ritual and celebration. It was a symbol of authority for the one who led the ritual and also it was an indication that the ritual they were participating in was important and

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 352.

that it called for respect and reverence. Patteson said, "Melanesians connect religion with all that is cheerful and happy."¹⁰²

Adoption of Christian Practices

What has been briefly discussed above gives a picture of the situation in the islands before the arrival of Christianity. The initial encounter between the missionaries and the Melanesians was difficult. There was suspicion, hostility and opposition to each other, but as time went Melanesians and whites learned to live with each other and to tolerate each other. As the Melanesians started to accept Christianity, they were taught to surrender their traditional culture completely and to adopt western Christian culture in its place. However, if one observes the practice and attitude of the Melanesian Christians today, one would realize that Christianity did not entirely replace the traditional religion. Except for practices which were contrary to Christian principles such as polygamy, head hunting and cannibalism, Christianity was encouraged to be built upon the traditional belief system. Patteson said, "I tell them plainly that whatever there may be in their customs incompatible with the great law of love to God and man must come to nought."¹⁰³ In fact, Christianity was more or less grafted on the beliefs of the traditional religion so that now there seems to be an overlap

¹⁰²Yonge, Vol.II, 226.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 168.

between the two belief systems. In this regard, people seem to shift from one camp to another according to their convenience, needs and situations, thus showing a high level of syncretistic activities at times. Nevertheless, the continuous movement from one camp to another is probably a reflection of the early missionaries' approach to evangelization.

One of their goals was to approach the so-called pagan practices with sensitivity because they believed that no religion was completely wrong in its activities. Bishop Patteson seemed to think that the pagan belief-system was to be the foundation on which the Christian faith would be established. He said,

There is an element of faith in superstition; we must fasten on that, and not rudely destroy the superstition, lest with it we destroy the principle of faith in things and beings unseen. I often think that to shake man's faith in his old belief, however wrong it may be, before one can substitute something true and right, is to say the least a dangerous experiment.¹⁰⁴

The main ingredient of the Christian culture is 'faith' and Patteson recognised that 'faith' was imbedded in the Melanesian traditional culture.

Missionary Attitude to the Traditional Culture

Patteson's appreciation of the traditional religion as the basis on which the Christian faith could be built upon was not maintained by some of the missionaries who came after him. Later missionaries regarded any Melanesian

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 99.

form of belief-system as satanic and people were advised against preserving them. Even traditional medicines, songs and tunes were condemned. The Bible was heavily used to prohibit the use and maintenance of any aspect of the traditional culture. The concepts of 'judgement', 'damnation' and 'hell' were used to threaten those who were slow to comply.

Shrines and places that were centres for traditional sacrifices, rituals and worship were destroyed by missionaries to show that traditional religion was wrong. Geoffrey White quotes Henry Welchman who worked as a missionary doctor on Ysabel during the period 1890-1908 as saying,

We proceeded to a small island at no great distance, and climbed the hill to a place where there were four well-built tombs, surrounded by skulls, each with the death blow in evidence. There was a momentary hesitation, — it is not a particularly cheerful business to defile your grandfather's grave, and to burn his bones, even for a brown man, — but it was only momentary, and the stones were rolled down the hill into the sea, and the bones in them made into a heap with the skulls of the victims who had been sacrificed to the dead man and a huge bonfire lighted over them. It is only a beginning; it will be a work of time to get rid of them all for the tombs are scattered all over the mainland.¹⁰⁵

What Welchman describes above is an event that occurred at Kia village in west Ysabel, in 1907. As part of their preparation for baptism, candidates were made to participate in the campaign to destroy traditional shrines.¹⁰⁶ The act of

¹⁰⁵White, 103.

¹⁰⁶ibid., 103.

destroying the ancestral shrines was a missionary initiative to show that they have turned away from the 'old ways' and were adhering to Christianity. However, as White said, "the destruction of the shrines did not 'destroy the powers that reside there' but merely to 'signify the ascendancy of one set of institutions and practices over another.'" ¹⁰⁷ According to White,

the act of tearing down the shrines was also an act of domination, giving performative testimony to the shift in power that was taking place from chiefly polities to the mission institutions that had come to encapsulate them. ¹⁰⁸

White's observation and interpretation are probably true because the event he referred to, occurred during the second phase of the establishment of the Melanesian Mission when the paternalistic attitudes of some missionaries have been recorded. Nevertheless, Welchman's plans to destroy all traditional shrines on Ysabel did not take place.

Melanesians' Approach in Integrating Christianity and tradition

When Melanesians began evangelizing among their own people, a slightly different approach was taken in regard to ancestral shrines and tradition on the whole. The Melanesian Brotherhood was established in 1925 by Ini Kopuria, and its priority was primary evangelism. However, when the Brothers visited

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 104.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 104.

Generally speaking, Christian rituals have replaced traditional rituals. Thus Melanesians use Christian rituals to bless gardens, houses, fishing nets, canoes and so on. This replacement process was possible because Melanesians were able to identify their traditional rituals with Christian rituals. While Melanesians prayed to their ancestral spirits for 'mana', Christianity prays to Jesus Christ also for 'mana'. In this comparison, "the point of common identification between the missionary and the Melanesian is power."¹¹⁰ It was that similarity which enabled Melanesian converts to substitute their traditional rituals with Christian rituals.

In healing, Melanesians today still use many of their traditional medicines - leaves, herbs, barks, roots and so on. But instead of performing rituals to the ancestral spirits, they now pray over the substances by calling on the three names of the Trinity to empower the substances for their healing. The same identification is seen in marriage rituals. The sacredness of marriage is honoured in both Christian and Melanesian traditions and for that reason Melanesians often go through both traditional and Church marriage ceremonies.

The substitution of their traditional rituals by Christian rituals is an indication that Christianity has addressed their needs. It is also highly likely that Melanesians have recognized that Christian rituals are fulfilment of their

¹¹⁰Whiteman, 370.

traditional rituals. Those who affiliate with the Anglican Church must have been able to identify their traditional rituals with the Anglican liturgy and rituals.

Like the traditional rituals, the Anglican liturgy is structured and it is performed in an orderly way. The rituals are led by certain people, the priest or catechist, and everybody knows where they should come in. Another similarity is the emphasis on reverence. Melanesians' worship and rituals give reverence to ancestral spirits, so they are able to translate that to the Anglican liturgy where solemnity and reverence are emphasized in worshipping God and in praying to Jesus Christ. Discipline is another characteristic of Anglican worship that Melanesians are able to associate with. There is an orderly way of performing the rituals. The liturgy requires everybody at some point in the worship to — all stand, all sit, all kneel, all sing, all respond and all pray together. All these different aspects of worship call for discipline, order, and proper co-ordination. In the traditional religion the same things were expected. There was a certain way to dance. There were patterns in which they performed rituals: standing in a single line or standing in a circle. Clapping hands together or stamping the right foot or left foot together. Singing songs in parts or in unison. These were all aspects of traditional rituals.

Sickness or death were often explained in terms of someone committing a wrong either against the ancestral spirits, against one's neighbour, or a failure to

comply with social ties. Healing therefore required an admission of the wrong which one had committed. This practice is, in a way, parallel to the sacrament of confession in Anglican rituals so people have no difficulty in going to a priest to make their confession. There seems to be a continuity of that belief among Melanesian Christians today. Sickness and death is often explained as a result of a weakness in observing Christian practices. Failure to attend Church regularly, disobeying orders from a priest or showing irreverence to Church rituals are some of the reasons often given.

When a sixteen-year-old boy was killed by a crocodile in Samasodu village on Ysabel, the accepted explanation was that he was killed because he imitated priests celebrating the Holy Communion. The boy used to tell other boys, younger than him to kneel down while he distributed 'coconut apple' as bread and coconut juice as wine. A boy from another village was killed by a shark and the explanation was that he disobeyed an order from a priest not to dive for trochus shells on that particular reef. When a Chinese beach-trading vessel was sunk by a sudden upsurge of waves in a calm passage, it was believed to be a result of the captain disobeying a request from a priest to transport two school boys to their homes. This kind of explanation is a hang-over of the traditional belief-system.

The sacrament of the Holy Eucharist is another Christian ritual which

Melanesians do not find difficult in relating to their traditional rituals. The talk about the 'body' and 'blood' is familiar. Its Christian significance is even parallel with the Melanesian understanding of cannibalism. For the Melanesians, the consumption of human flesh and blood was not part of an everyday meal. It was not a craving for human flesh and blood; rather, it was a ritual of sacrifice and offering to the ancestral spirits. They believed that in consuming the victim's flesh and blood they would be empowered, strengthened and healed. Another significance of the Eucharist to the Melanesians is that it is compatible with their feastings and celebrations. In view of this Patteson says:

Christianity does meet a human instinct, as, e.g., the Lord's supper, whatever higher and deeper feelings it may have, has this simple, but most significant meaning to the primitive convert, of feasting as a child with his brethren and sisters at the father's Board.¹¹¹

A Melanesian's ritual is always about 'mana', which is a close parallel to the significance of Eucharist to Christians. It is the correlation between the traditional rituals and the Christian rituals that enabled Melanesians to accommodate Christianity. From what we have discussed above, it is obvious that Melanesians accepted and accommodated Christianity because of three main factors. First, 'faith' had always been part of their traditional religion.

¹¹¹Yonge, 169.

They had faith in ancestral spirits to perform supernatural acts for their benefit. Similarly, they believed on the power or 'mana' of the sorcerer to cause sickness and death. Life beyond the grave was also subject to faith and belief. It involved both "rewards and punishments."¹¹² Reward includes having more 'mana' to control and influence the living while punishment is to become without 'mana' and therefore, plays no part in influencing the ordered life of the living. The Melanesians' life activities are therefore associated with faith and belief.

The Missionaries did not introduce or teach Melanesians about faith. The only vacuum which existed in the life of the Melanesians was the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The real change which the Melanesians had to go through therefore, was the replacement of ancestral spirits with Jesus Christ.

Second, Melanesian traditional rituals were addressed to ancestral spirits in order to receive 'mana'. Missionaries introduced the idea that prayers must be directed to Jesus Christ because he has the power that supersedes all other forms of power in this world. Power (mana) is therefore a commonality between the Melanesian traditional religion and Christianity.

Third, there are similarities in the traditional and Christian rituals, including their significance and interpretations. Certain aspects of the traditional culture

¹¹²Trompf, 73.

have deep theological values. For instance, the belief on the supernatural being as the creator and provider of daily needs and the care of the environment to sustain life - their life depend on the land, rivers, and the sea. It is those values that had been the foundation on which Christianity was built upon.

Finally, while the traditional religion had gone through a dynamic process of change it may not be wrong to say that it had not disappeared. It aided the establishment of Christianity and it had continued to play a part in influencing Melanesians to appreciate the purpose and significance of Christianity in the Melanesian context.

However, if the Church of Melanesia is to be relevant to Melanesians, they themselves must take the initiative to work towards inculturation. That calls for understanding of Melanesian spirituality and religious belief, and it is the re-discovery of that knowledge in a Christian context that Melanesians must try to attain. Patteson said, "Christianity is the religion for humanity at large. It takes in all shades and diversities of character, race and etc."¹¹³ Elements of traditional religious rituals are beginning to appear in Melanesian Christian rituals today, but there is still a lot of work to be done to make a truly Melanesian Church.

¹¹³Yonge, 113.