

Missions in Papua New Guinea: A History of Missions among the Kafe People

Robin Lumadue, MA

Adjunct Professor

Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education and Human Services
Texas A&M University-Commerce
Commerce, TX

Rick Lumadue, PhD

Assistant Professor

Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education and Human Services
Texas A&M University-Commerce
Commerce, TX

Abstract

The focus of this study was on the history of missions among the Kafe people living in the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea. The study sought to determine what affect missions had on the Kafe people. The study indicated that the Kafe people have mixed the message of missions with their cultural worldview.

The country of Papua New Guinea (PNG) is located in the South Pacific on the eastern half of the island of New Guinea, just north Australia. PNG is also comprised of many islands, including West New Britain, New Ireland, and many other smaller islands. According to the Central Intelligence Agency (2012) World Factbook,

The indigenous population of Papua New Guinea is one of the most heterogeneous in the world, with several thousand separate communities, and most of them with only a few hundred people; divided by language, customs, and tradition, some of these communities have engaged in low-scale tribal conflict with their neighbors for millennia. ("Papua New Guinea: People and Society-People," para. 28)

This small island nation has a population of nearly six million people and over 800 indigenous languages that accounts for one-tenth of the world's total languages. Even though, English, Tok Pisin (Melanesian Pidgin English) and Hiri Motu are the official languages of the country, Tok Pisin continues to be used the most, especially as a bridge language to the other hundreds of languages that are spread throughout the rugged mountainous terrain (CIA, 2012).

Several countries have claimed Papua New Guinea throughout its history. The countries include the Dutch, Great Britain, Germany and Australia to name a few. Neil and Own (1991) found

The innumerable islands of the Pacific had to a large extent fallen prey to ruthless exploitation by traders, and their peoples seemed to be on the way to extermination. Western governments stepped in, France, Britain, and Germany taking the lead, and disorder was followed by orderly government. The greater part of New Guinea was unexplored, but this vast island also was neatly divided up into its Australian, Dutch, and German sections. (pp. 211-212)

As a result of these other countries laying claim to PNG, Papua New Guinea has been referred to by several different names since its discovery. Nelson (2000) documented these names:

The names for the east of the island of New Guinea are confusing. From 1884, the northeast was German New Guinea and the southeast was British New Guinea. In 1906, the southeast became the Australian Territory of Papua. The Australians occupied German New Guinea in 1914 and in 1921, it became Australian New Guinea, a territory held under mandate from the League of Nations. During World War II, both Australian territories of Papua and New Guinea were combined and known as New Guinea. In 1945, the two territories continued under one administration as Papua-New Guinea, from 1949 as Papua and New Guinea, and from 1971 as Papua New Guinea. The name Papua New Guinea was adopted by the new nation at independence. Papua New Guinea is sometimes used here for all of east New Guinea before that became the official name in 1971. (p. 269)

After World War II the Dutch had to begin their rule of the Western half of New Guinea all over again. According to Ploegg (1999), "Hence, when Dutch New Guinea was re-conquered from the Japanese in the later phases of the Second World War, the Dutch government had to start almost from scratch" (p. 191).

The influence of Australia on the history of PNG was probably the most profound. Denoon (2004) reported J.B.D. Miller's 1965 account about the effect of Australia on PNG:

Papua has been an Australian territory since 1906. Australian pressure led the British government to take control in 1885, to keep out the Germans, who established themselves in northeastern New Guinea. The German colony was taken over by Australian forces at the start of World War I, the Australian presence being confirmed by the Paris peace conference through an Australian mandate. The territories were administered separately until World War II. After the war, the Australian mandate became a UN trusteeship; however, the UN agreed to a unified administrative system in 1949. (p. 344)

Australia functioned more as a caretaker of PNG than as a taskmaster. PNG was granted independence in 1974 from Australia (CIA, 2012). The government functions with a Parliamentary style of government. There are eighteen provinces in Papua New Guinea (Statoids, 2011). PNG is very open to mission agencies and missionary work. As a result, there are many religious groups working in PNG. However, most of these groups are working in the major cities using the trade language of Melanesian Pidgin English. Because the country of PNG is so rugged and has been so difficult to reach by outsiders, many unreached people groups have remained isolated to this day.

Purpose of the Study

The focus of this study was on the history of mission work in the South Pacific and its expansion further west into the Eastern Highlands Province (EHP) of Papua New Guinea. The purpose of this study was to determine the impact missions had on the Kafe people. The study explored areas of the culture of the Kafe people that were impacted by missions.

Missions in the South Pacific

The Pacific islands (Oceania) are made up of about 1,500 islands. These islands are divided into three major groups: Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia. Polynesia is the largest of the three groups and goes from Hawaii in the North to New Zealand in the South. Micronesia has the smallest group of islands, which includes the Marianas, the Caroline, Marshall, and the Gilbert Islands but is located between Hawaii and the Philippines. The Melanesian group is the third group of islands and is located south of Micronesia and north of Australia. Fiji, Santa Cruz, New Guinea, the New Hebrides, New Caledonia, and the Solomon Islands make up the area referred to as the Melanesia (Tucker, 1983). Roman Catholic monks were the first missionaries to come into the Pacific islands but were soon followed by Protestants who had been commissioned by missionary societies. In 1521, Magellan and his group of explorers took the first European missionary trip to the South Pacific. Four out of five of the ships landed in Marianas but then sailed to the Philippines. There were about three thousand island people that were received into the Catholic Church. Even though there was no proof as to their true understanding of Christianity, the Roman Catholic South Seas Mission saw this as a high point in their missionary endeavors to the South Pacific (Tucker, 1983).

The discoveries of Captain Cook began to stir the imaginations of the church leaders, thus awakening Protestantism to the potential possibility of serving and evangelizing the Pacific islands. As a result of this awakening, in 1795 the London Missionary Society was formed by an interdenominational group with the purpose of reaching Tahiti. The first Protestant missionaries to the Pacific islands were British, followed by Protestants from Germany, Australia, and America (Tucker, 1983). There were a lot of hardships for these first missionaries. They had to travel for months by ship to get to one of the islands only to be left there for months or years until the next merchant ship would arrive. Tucker (1983) stated, "The geographical uniqueness of the Pacific islands had from the very beginning obvious implications on mission strategy. Transportation became an all-encompassing issue" (p. 196). For the isolated missionaries, having

access to a mission owned ship, would help solve their problems. The ship that was used in Micronesia was called the Morning Star. The John Williams ship was used in Polynesia and the Southern Cross sailed in Melanesia. The ships allowed the missionaries to be more mobile for evangelism, kept them in contact with the outside world, and brought in supplies (Tucker, 1983).

John Williams, also known as, "Apostle of the South Seas," was one of the most innovative missionaries to the Pacific islands (Tucker, 1983). Williams did not have any training in cross-cultural evangelism so he made his priority on changing the culture of the islanders. John Williams had a big influence in getting the first mission owned ship but not without opposition from the mission directors. Williams even wrote a book called "*A Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Seas* to help generate funds to buy a ship" (Tucker, 1983, p. 212). Williams needed a ship to be able to commission and transport native missionaries out to the surrounding islands. Eventually, during one of his expeditions, Williams ends up getting killed by natives on the shores of Erromango. His martyrdom inspired a new generation of young men to take his place (Tucker, 1983).

Following the death of John Williams, the Presbyterian missionary John Geddie decides to go to Aneityum, one of the islands of New Hebrides. Geddie and his wife spent their lives translating, evangelizing, and training native workers. Their hard work, personal sacrifices and dedication pays off because the entire island turns to Christianity (Neil & Own, 1991). Because of Geddie's success in Aneityum, John G. Paton decides to join the missionary work in the South Seas. Paton worked on the islands of Tanna and Aniwa (New Hebrides), and was well known for his autobiography that gave detailed stories of tribesman killing missionaries (Tucker, 1983). John Paton and his wife Margaret made great strides on the island of Aniwa. They started two orphanages, established a church, created a national missionary training school, translated the Bible into the Aniwan language, started a school for girls, and several regular schools. Tucker (1983) commented on the work of John G. Paton, "Great progress was being made in those islands, due in part to his broad influence. By the end of the century all but a few of the thirty inhabited islands had been reached with the gospel" (p. 217). Tremendous progress had been made in taking the Gospel to the islands in the South Pacific. Other missionaries joined the effort to keep pushing westward, looking toward the bigger island of New Guinea.

Missions in the Eastern Highlands Province

Mission work was occurring along the coastline and on the small islands around PNG since the 19th century. According to Tucker (1983), "One of the greatest nineteenth century missionaries to New Guinea was James Chalmers" (p. 218). He was a pioneer missionary who explored the New Guinea coastline along the Fly River region. Cannibals killed Chalmers, like so many other pioneer missionaries to New Guinea who preceded him (Tucker, 1983). Missionaries did not arrive in the Highlands Region until the mid 1900's. The people groups in this province were isolated from the outside world by the mountainous and rugged terrain of the interior landscape of the country. The battle for PNG in World War II between Japan and the Allied Forces led to the discovery of the numerous people groups in this region. Most of the People groups living in the Highlands Region were unaware that there were a vast number of people groups living in such close proximity to them. Radford (1977) noted, "Until Michael and Daniel Leahy and Taylor explored westwards from Bena Bena through Chimbu and Mount

Hagen the existence of the densely populated Highland valleys was not widely known” (p. 43). As a result of this isolation, these people have remained very primitive in their living conditions.

PNG has depended heavily on mission organizations to provide essential services in the most remote areas of the country. The Eastern Highlands Province was pioneered first by Europeans. The Chimbu and Western Highlands Provinces were explored later. The EHP was evangelized first by Lutheran missionaries who were coming across the German portion of PNG located in the Finschhafen region on the Huon Peninsula. According to Radford (1977), “European penetration of the eastern Highlands began in 1919-20 with the Lutheran mission excursions into the Kratke Ranges which lie between the Markham River plains and the Highland valleys of the Upper Ramu” (pp. 41-42). These missionaries were indigenous PNG citizens, who were sent by their local Lutheran congregation to evangelize this region for the Lutheran church. Radford provided some insight on their qualifications and work:

Most evangelists were married and older men were generally preferred to younger. Some had teacher training, others were newly baptized. An evangelist began his work by learning the local language through joining in village activities and only later started preaching the gospel. He might eventually open a small school and give very simple instruction in the Kafe language. In some cases he was 'adopted' by a village elder which facilitated his acceptance by the people. (p. 44)

The Lutheran missionary over the local congregation in the Finschhafen region visited the missionaries annually and provided supervision for their activities and led exploratory patrols (Radford, 1977). The first attempts to evangelize this area were met with resistance. The breakthrough came when a traditional trade route was discovered in the headwaters of the Ramu Valley (Radford, 1977). Once the evangelists made contact, they leased land from the local people in order to build houses and plant gardens. Radford (1977) gave valuable insight here on the impact of these indigenous evangelists,

Not only did they interpret language and custom but they were also agents of change - spiritually with their Christian teaching, socially, as in their efforts to stop fighting, and economically by introducing new vegetables and providing access to foreign trade goods. (p. 44)

Missions among the Kafe People

The Kafe, with an animistic worldview, live in the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea between the major cities of Goroka, the capital of the Eastern Highlands Province and Kainantu. The Kafe are one of the larger groups of people in all of PNG with a population of nearly 80,000 people. The language of the Kafe has four major dialects. These dialects are named after the rivers that run through their area; Kamanotina, Kafetina, Faiyantina, and Dunatina. The four dialects have been classified as one of the Eastern Central Languages. The Kaninte language, referred to by Radford (1977) as the Kate language, is the most similar to Kafe, grammatically and phonetically speaking.

The Lutherans were the first to reach the Kafe and was the most influential. However, the Seventh Day Adventist group has established a presence and is very popular with the young

people. There is some tension between the Lutheran and Seventh Day Adventist groups. This could be due to the rebellious nature of the youth and their desire to be a part of something new and different. The majority of the Kafe people are illiterate. While some of the village kids might have the opportunity to attend a local government run school in order to learn more English, this is usually short lived due to the schools proximity to the villages. The government run schools are located in the bigger cities so the village kids that live in the bush have to walk a long way to be able to attend. The kids get tired of walking every day so eventually stop going, thus probably only getting to about the third grade level. The Lutheran church may be understood as more of a regional identity and original religious community established when the Eastern Highlands Province was first discovered in the mid-20th century. The coastal areas of PNG identify more with the Catholic Church, since the Catholic missionaries got there first. There are several other religious organizations that are working in the Kafe area. Most however, are working in the trade language (Melanesian Pidgin English) not the Kafe language.

The Joshua Project (2011) indicated the Kafe-Kamono people to be 85% Christian with only three unreached peoples among the area in which the Kafe are located. Church services in the Kafe are mostly in the trade language, not in the Kafe language. A more beneficial approach for the Kafe is to have the church services communicated to them in their mother tongue. There are problems with syncretism among the Kafe due to the previous teachings from various religious groups that worked among them in the past. Reyburn (2009) emphasized that it is very important for the missionary to identify with the people through their language, culture and daily living in order to have a road to proclaim the gospel. The religions that have established churches among the Kafe people have resulted in the local people mixing the new religion with their cultural beliefs in order to increase their ability to manipulate the ancestral spirits. This is known as syncretism.

Working among the Kafe people with an informed understanding of their worldview, would provide the missionary with a significant advantage in clearly communicating the message they came to share. Yet, it would be naïve to think this would not occur. Kraft (2009) stated, "Though the risk of syncretism is always present when Christians attempt to inculturate Christianity, it is a risk that needs to be taken in order that people experience New Testament Christianity" (p. 405). As a result of not having a proper understanding of the culture and worldview of the people, a form of syncretism emerged among many of the people groups in PNG, especially among the islands and along the coast. Another form of syncretism that occurred has been referred to as the cargo cult. This phenomenon dates back to when the Europeans arrived in PNG with their abundance of material goods. The natives didn't understand where these goods came from or how they were made. As a result of their pragmatic world view the indigenous New Guineans thought the Europeans held a magical key to getting these resources. In their attempts to get these goods, the natives thought they could perform rituals to persuade the ancestors to provide the goods to them too (Buck, 1988). In spite of the extreme setbacks and hardships (i.e.; living conditions, traveling long distances, culture, hostile natives, isolation and language barriers, etc.) during the early pioneer days into the South Pacific Islands, missionaries continued to spread their message to this remote part of the world.

Conclusion

The focus for this study was on the history of missions among the Kafe people in the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea. An examination of the history of Papua New Guinea revealed that this underdeveloped country has only recently become an autonomous government. As a result, the government has depended on mission organizations to provide essential services in the remote areas of the country. An overview of the history of missions in the South Pacific showed that missionaries have sacrificed greatly and persevered amidst great odds. The history of mission work in the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea found Lutheran missionaries arrived first. The problem of syncretism as a result of a limited knowledge of the worldview and culture of the Kafe people was examined.

References

- Buck, E.P.D. (1988). Cargo-cult discourse: Myth and the rationalization of labor relations in Papua New Guinea. *Dialectical Anthropology*, 13(2), 157-171.
- Denoon, D. (2004). Manuscript XVI: Australia's difficulties in New Guinea as seen by J.D.B. Miller in 1965. *The Journal of Pacific History*, 39(3), 343-351.
- Joshua Project. (2011). Retrieved from: <http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=12458&rog3=PP>
- Neill, S., & Owen C. (1991). *History of Christian missions* (2nd ed.). London, England: Penguin Books.
- Nelson, H. (2000). Liberation: The end of Australian rule in Papua New Guinea. *The Journal of Pacific History*, 35(3), 269-280.
- Ploeg, A. (1999). Colonial land law in Dutch New Guinea. *The Journal of Pacific History*, 34(2), 191-204.
- Radford, R. (1977). Burning the spears. *The Journal of Pacific History*, 12(1), 40-54.
- Statoids. (2011). Retrieved from: <http://www.statoids.com/upg.html>
- Tucker, R. A. (2004). *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). (2012). *The World Factbook*. Retrieved from: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/pp.html>