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The impact of westernisation and commerce

on the family values in Papua New Guinea

topics:

- *the impact of modernisation on the society of Papua New Guinea*
- *cultural change and the loss of identity*
- *modernisation/monetarisation and the loss of family values*
- *marriage and divorce in Papua New Guinea*

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This paper is written from a pastoral perspective on the impact of the Western culture and commerce upon the traditions and family values in urban Papua New Guinea. It also provides the pastoral problems that are faced by Church workers in counselling situations. But first, some general information about the country is necessary:

Geographical features

Papua New Guinea (PNG as it is called in short) is a very fascinating country, probably the most fascinating country in all of the South Pacific basin. Within the country there are about 800 different languages (as recently assessed). With its diverse cultures and traditions – the way of life that varies from tribe to tribe and from the many ethnic groupings – Papua New Guinea stands to lose immense cultural wealth and riches with the imposition of the Western influence.

Papua New Guinea has the largest land mass of approximately 90% of total land mass (960,000 square kilometres) of the entire Melanesian group of countries, it has a population of four million people. A country that is so rich in natural resources (with large deposits of copper, gold, oil, and forestry, fisheries, coffee and other cash crops) is the envy of many countries of the world. PNG strives so hard to hold together the different ethnic groups for the purpose of national unity.

Colonial administrators

The country's government is democratically elected with 109 members representing the people in the national parliament. The political system is a "synthesis of

traditional democratic structures, for an example clan-based common ownership of land, and modern democratic institutions, such as a federally-structured parliamentary system.”

Papua New Guinea was colonised by two countries in Europe; the Germans had under their administration the northern part and the islands of the territory which is called New Guinea, whilst the British administered the southern region - the Papuan Region. The British handed their part of the colony to Australia in 1902 followed by the German counterparts to the same administration in 1919. Papua New Guinea gained its independence from Australia in 1975 without any blood bath.

It was a ceremonial lowering of one flag and the raising of the other. On the 15th of September 1975 a baby began a political walk on its own. The reins were handed to Papua New Guineans. There were mixed feelings by many people, as to its timing then. The western part of the country was managed by the Dutch from 1828 - 1962. What we know of today as Irian Jaya is now part of Indonesia. It became an integral part of the Republic of Indonesia in 1963.

Papua New Guinea is a tropical country with its highlands displaying a sub tropical climate with alpine mountains and snow-capped peaks. The coastal and the island regions boast of some of the worlds best diving and fishing spots. The country also boasts of its position as the second largest habitat of diverse flora and fauna in the world.

The highly fertile and rich environment made it possible for the people in the past to live by gathering, hunting and fishing. Today most Papua New Guineans concentrated mostly on root crop cultivation which puts them on a different board then the Australian Aborigines, who lived to the South of them, who still are hunters and gatherers and the Indonesians to the West who are primarily rice cultivators. They would rotate taro, kaukau, banana, and other root crops all year around. Rice and processed fish from Japan would form the main staple in any family home. (More on the diet later on).

Brief look into the country

Approximately 80% of people live in the rural areas of the country. Rural areas in Papua New Guinea are unlike the rural in Europe. Rural areas in PNG would scarcely have adequate health, educational and power facilities. Death from preventable diseases like malaria, measles etc. would be a normal occurrence. In the midst of immense wealth Papua New Guineans struggle to understand why essential services are not reaching them. The State owns only 3% of the total land in PNG. The majority of land of 97% is culturally owned. Investor confidence by foreign developers is somewhat dampened by land compensation demands by land owners. Some times such land compensation would run into (*not millions but*) *billions* in US \$. On many occasions compensation came about through ill planning of fair and adequate environmental facilities and monitoring systems by the State, independently from the developers (who are exploiters of natural resources but are not environmentally conscious). Standards of environmental checks would fall below western standards. The failure of the State to realise the importance of the safe guarding of flora and fauna and the eco-marine life has brought the country to its knees. The civil disturbance in Bougainville has seen

thousands of people killed. In the last few weeks eleven soldiers were killed in one encounter with the land owner turned rebels.

Bouganville copper which is owned by CRA-Australia, abandoned its mining activities in Bouganville because it could not possibly pay US\$ 5 billion (current value) as compensation for the environmental damage to the land owners. And principally due to threats on the lives of the employees by the rebels. Obviously no Government or a corporate investor would pay that type of money anywhere. The land owners then resort to violence.

Ok Tedi Mining Limited through its management Company BHP Limited had to fight an expensive court battle in Australia over river pollution of the 1,500 kilometres of the Fly river. The A \$2 billion was abandoned in place of an expensive out of court settlement. The Government then came to the aid of the mining company by legislating against the right of the land owners to take the Company to an overseas Court.

Both cases almost sank the country.

Papua New Guinea was to use its vast natural resources as the means of obtaining necessary revenue for financing developments. In order to do this, the country handed over the exploitation of the natural resources to foreign companies, who would come in with capital and technology. The Country would then earn portions of revenue from exports and employ the 'yields' for national development. Nationals, and particularly land owners would enter into businesses that spun off from these large projects. The Bouganville situation saw the country devalue the nations' currency and its subsequent float in late 1994. This has been the source of the troubles of a young rich and yet poor nation in the South Pacific.

Land rights and position of land owners

While approximately 97% of the total land mass in Papua New Guinea is customary owned, legally all resources that are on or within the land are owned the State. But the actual position is not so. The State has difficulty enforcing that legal requirement for development purposes. This is due to the fact that land to a Melanesian is a birthright and can not be taken away for development purposes without lengthy consultation and dialogue between the State, the developers and the land owners. The roots of the Melanesian people can easily be identified through land ownership. And in addition to this, the cultural background conflicts with westernisation. The constitution of the country was prepared with a strong Australian presence. Papua New Guineans who helped with the drafting of the constitution were mostly educated in the west or were educated by westerners. Because of the influence of westernisation through the constitution most Papua New Guineans would find it impossible to express their culture in a constitution prior to the experience of governing the country. This has brought added violence in the country

The Pastoral Requirements:

A Church worker would normally find himself in a dilemma between the land owners who demanded that land compensation is inadequate and the State and the developer who both say otherwise.

Let me now speak about the impact of Westernisation and commerce on traditional and family values in PNG.

The loss of identity

The advent of the unavoidable western culture through education and commerce, and the fast growing urbanisation in PNG has caught the unsuspecting people off guard. In some parts of the country, the social groups, values and behaviour norms have not just been weakened, they are totally destroyed. Many people have lost a sense of identity. They do not have an aim and are uncertain of what is right and wrong. This comes about when traditional social mechanisms, that have been in place for generations, are destroyed gradually. Traditional roles and relationships that guide members of communities are forgotten in the introduction of newer items and ways of life. Consumerism, a concept that preaches the message that '*the more products one can have the happier he becomes*', is strangling many communities in PNG. This has created tensions and has left the people powerless to counteract them. This would be true for people who live in the urban areas but is now generally true for people in the rural areas as well. This is because of the increasing number of large mining, petroleum and forestry developments that are being undertaken right across the rural areas of the country.

Certainly the majority of people who live in villages in the rural areas, (whose lives would be governed by strict traditional codes of conducts) are increasingly threatened by those that have returned from the towns, or by the large developments that are taking place on their lands. These developments bring direct challenges to the traditional values and norms. Most people would take to drinking, gambling or aggression as a way to fill the void of not having to identify oneself with a sense of roots.

Many cultures in Papua New Guinea have a high traditional value on interpersonal relationships. This enhance personal growth and development. Achievement of status in a community brings about collective joy and honour to all members of the society. Independence and personal success is not the traditional way. In many cases, this calls for outright rejection of one from a traditional setting or village.

The pastoral problems that are faced by Church workers are:

The village Church worker does not have the training and is not familiar with an imposing world view; nor does he understand the processes and the forces that disrupt the existing social roles and relationships that he is so familiar with. He too is caught up by the tension in a group and many times over would resort to violence against the State or a developer instead of seeking an answer. For the answer is not so much a question of personal morality. If this was the case he would have an answer. But the answer lies in the social and economic structures that the village Church worker does not have the remotest clue about. Violence against the State can be described as a form of rebellion against the authority for its failure to create, and facilitate, an educational program that would seek to answer the question of "What is happening".

Marriage and family

The effects of urbanisation are clearly seen and often are felt very strongly in the areas of marriage and family life.

In Papua New Guinea, and this is also true in other Melanesian countries, traditional life is characterised by separation of sexes. Physical and emotional needs are in most cases met by the same sexes. In the rural setting, men and women

would live quite separately from each other. The men would live in “man houses” while the wives, and children would live together in the family houses. Men would generally meet their wives only for procreation purposes.

The pattern is increasingly dying away as husbands and wives have to live together under one roof and even sleep in the same bed, particularly in the urban place. “Both as a result of closer physical proximity and because they are somewhat removed from the rural society and its expectation regarding the behaviour of spouses, husbands and wives have the opportunity to develop a closer relationship as friends and companions. While some urban couples have achieved this most are still engaged in a difficult process of adjustment.”

The roles of the spouses have also changed quite dramatically. In the traditional setting, men would clear dense tropical rain forest for gardening. They would also take care of the heavy work. Planting of crops generally would be done by both parties. The role of the women is to nurture and harvest the crops. The yield would be seen as collective effort, and joy and satisfaction is enjoyed by both parties. Both parties see them selves as contributing equally to the needs of the family. The wife would be seen as the main provider. When the wife works regularly she sustains the family.

In the advent of “development” in an urban setting, reliance is not so much on gardening but on a fortnightly salary. In most cases the roles have changed, where the wife loses her role as a family provider. The husband alone earns a wage. There are a number of problems that rises from this, as Brian Schwarz said:

“a) The wife suffers from loss of self esteem at not being able to contribute to the support of the family;

b) The husband who is the sole provider may feel resentment toward his wife who is now an economic burden, rather than an asset.

c) If, as is becoming common among the well-educated, both husband and the wife earn an income, then the wife is economically independent of her husband. She is not bound to him by her need of him; she can, if she so desires, manage alone. This situation can also be a source of tension. The husband may feel threatened by a wife who can rival or even surpass his earning capacity; he may feel insecure because she is not in some way dependent upon him and thus more firmly tied to him.”

One of the major problems that affects marriages in the urban place (where family units are more independent, unlike the rural where family units are interdependent upon each other and where the welfare of each family lies in the hands of other members of the extended family and the village) is the heavy drinking habits that most men in the urban environment have taken to.

Employed men would drink all the money and come back home with empty pockets, and nothing for the family. In most cases, if not all, wives would take the children away from the husband and leave with them to her relatives. They would be separated from their husbands for long periods of time, in most cases the ultimate penalty of divorce would happen. Such a cost to the children would be unbearable.

The Courts are also alarmed at the increasing number of deaths due to fights between husbands and wives from alcohol related problems. Husbands are known to have died from stab wounds when the wives have defended themselves from their abusing husbands. In most cases much to the sympathy of the Courts the wives

are put in jail for man slaughter. Husbands have been known also to have beaten their wives to death through alcohol related fights.

Last week my neighbour cut his wife's shoulder, almost cutting through the shoulder bones. At the same time he hit another woman who lodges with them with a heavy piece of timber at the side of her rib cage. He was lucky not to have broken any bones. He was "drunk when he did that", was an excuse he gave to some one when he was asked to explain himself

There are a number of pastoral problems that are faced by church workers when it comes to counselling:

- a) Some times it is very hard, because of the language difficulties. Some times the "trade language of pidgin" is used but many people who are caught in such a situation would be those whose comprehension of the language is very limited. More often then not, people will misunderstand each other due to the limited understanding of the language,
- b) Other times, the affected wives or women, would be hesitant to talk to the church workers of their problems due to the differences in age particularly, and largely also because of the differences in the world view (an educated church worker and an illiterate wife or vice versa) it makes it difficult to meet the pastoral needs of those who are in need.
- c) Where the Church worker is old and his membership are fairly well educated, he finds that he would not be able to relate to them.
- d) The cultural context would not permit the Church workers (in the case of male workers) to counsel women.
- e) In the past, people lived together (village living). The problems were easily identified and talked about. Every body knew about the problems, because they lived together, the church workers' task was to bring the Christian response to the known problem. People never needed to learn how to talk about their problems to a stranger (church worker). Now because people have become independent from each other (urban living), and the problems are kept private, the church worker has two difficulties: he has to find what the problems are, and has to get them to speak about them; then he must bring a Christian response.

Sometimes both the husband and wife would not want the church workers to even inquire as to their health – let alone wife bashing through alcohol abuse.

Gambling in family life

The introduction of gambling in the country has yet again added to the suffocating trend upon the live of the marginalised in the urban place. The Government introduced the gambling business under the gamings act (among other commercial reasons) as a revenue raising measure. Much to the regrets of the Government many people who saved money under tremendous and tedious hardships, have thrown it all away in poker machines. A story is told of a Woman in the highlands town of Goroka who used up all her savings in just an hour of play. She saved A\$ 2,000 over years of growing and selling vegetables to the town market. She was saving that money for her children's school fees. Much to her regrets, she could not take the money back. She lost it all.

The impact of the electronic and print media upon the family life

There is now a gradual decrease (but at a very fast rate) of parental authority. In the past parental authority was very important toward the nurturing and the general welfare of the children. Magazines, videos, and TV programs have altered the power of parental authority. Children are turned to believe what is said or read through the print and the electronic media more so than to believe their parents.

I have known of men who wanted to divorce their wives and take on other wives, or have taken on two wives, because their wives would not model after women that are seen in movies and magazines.

The print and electronic media have also caused many marital problems as well. Many marriage break up each year due to the telecasting of the popular Australian rugby games. The break-ups came about when husbands and wives supported opposing teams. When one team wins and the other loses, there will be very heated and emotional fights over that between husbands and wives.

Eating habits in the family life

In the past people lived on vegetables and occasionally would have protein as a complement to their vegetables. Such meat or fish would either be hunted or caught and would make up the diet of the people. The people were free from heart and kidney diseases. As the diet changes more and more people are living off junk foods, sicknesses and diseases that were never known in the past to be killers are attacking both young and old alike, because they are not careful about what they eat.

Lamb flaps dipped in oil and fried on flat metal slabs is a favourite meal to many people in PNG. Lamb flaps, declared not good for human consumption because of the high fat content of 30%, are banned in Australia. The consumer bureau affairs department is in the process of banning it from PNG.

I have had to counsel a patient who was dying because of kidney failure. The doctors told me that the disease was caused by a non control diet.

People who live in the coast would settle for rice and canned fish for their meal instead of fishing for fish. I have had difficulties, convincing people we set up in a large vegetable farm not to sell all the vegetables, but to eat some and sell some. The people have had the tendency to sell the vegetables, so that they earn money to buy rice. Similarly people in the rural areas would go fishing and would sell their catch for money, so that they would buy a can of fish produced by the Japanese. To many Papua New Guineans, death caused by poor eating habits, with poor dieting procedures would not be seen as purely a health problem. Sorcery and the spirits of ancestors would be suspected as probable causes of death.

The pastoral difficulties are:

a) The church worker finds difficulty in explaining to the bereaved families that such death is caused by irresponsible and poor dieting. Many killer sicknesses and

diseases that are associated with poor eating habits are introduced into the country by the advent of the western culture and commerce and trade.

b) A young church worker who would be regarded as having no knowledge at all on how life is lived in traditional Melanesia, will be seen as lacking in both wisdom and insight into questions of death. He would not be trusted in any way at all, and would not be taken into any confidences. This is because traditionally the elders in the village were healers, even though infant and child mortality was very high while life expectancy was very low. The advent of the modern health care was normally viewed with suspicion.

Added causes of divorce

Divorce and family break-ups is becoming a real concern in PNG, as the traditional mechanisms that hold family units together are breaking down. Marriages in the past were held together by devotion and commitment to the welfare of not just the immediate family, but the village as a whole. Success and prosperity and good living in a village would depend, among other requirements, on how spouses conduct their marital responsibilities.

Polygamy which is a practice in the highlands for generations is on an increase, right around PNG, as many young men become educated and are earning a wage. The Courts are also alarmed at the rate of killing by wives of their husbands or wives upon other wives. In traditional Melanesia, the wives would live together humbly, as their sole purpose is to serve the husband in accumulating wealth. In modern PNG today, wives fight over wealth from the husband.

The pastoral difficulty here is that, when people get married to more than one wife they just turn their backs on religion. No amount of counselling would help.

The difficulty is made bigger by the fact that many parliamentarians have taken on more than one wife. The Governor General has more than two wives. Polygamy has now become a cultural norm and an accepted way of life. There is an act of parliament on bigamy, but this law like many other laws in PNG are not enforced. Status and money in the pockets are two factors that attract additional wives to men.