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Conflict and reconciliation in the context of two different cultures

A case study from the Fiji: The ritual of reconciliation between a married couple

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John Snehadass:

In the socio-political, cultural and religious context of Fiji, the two major ethnic groups, (Fijians, the indigenous People, and Indians, brought in by the British 150 years ago), have various mutual concerns and conflicts. Racial tension had been a major issue which has erupted in political upheavals. Cross-cultural marriage is not the best way for racial harmony, many think. However, my case study shows it is possible. Mutual respect and sincere efforts to understand and appreciate one another's cultural traditions and religious values have resulted in happy marriage and family life. How Christian Churches and Pastoral Care organisations can learn from this and provide support system.

When two cultures meet, from whatever world they came, a third culture is formed at the point of intersection. The encounters and experiences make one a child of a new world. He/she has a unique perspective. He/she can discover his/her real roots, wonder at it and be enriched by it, although not without pain.

Ulrich Fritsche:

John Snehadass is hospital chaplain in Suva and CPE-supervisor on the Fiji Islands. He presents a case study in which there meet, or clash, not only the Indian and the Fiji cultures but also different religious and social backgrounds. A ritual of reconciliation helps out of an otherwise unresolvable conflict.

One day, John Snehadass has an unexpected guest. John is a Roman Catholic priest, raised in India. For some years he has worked as a parish minister on the Fiji islands, at the present he has the position of a hospital chaplain and is coordinator of the program for pastoral care and counselling of the Society for Pastoral Care and Counselling in the Pacific. His visitor is Vinod, a young man of 26 years, whom he knows from his former parish. Vinod had gone on a two hour bus ride to ask Father John for help. He starts: "I have got problems..."

Vinod is the fifth of a number of eight children (two boys and six girls) of a family of Indian origin. Both his parents were born on the Fiji islands, the father is a Brahmin (he belongs to the Hindu priest caste), his mother is Roman Catholic. Vinod's father had been working for the British government as a police officer and at the time is in a distinguished communal position. In spite of being a member of the Hindu priest caste, he values the faith of his wife. In the family he enforces discipline, obedience and submission to rules. The mother feels obliged to follow Indian traditions. She has a strong personality, was very strict with her children, and she expects that her children marry partners of Indian decent. The Indian family traditions are meant to be followed in the next generation also. She shows little of her emotions, but she is patient, sometimes a little bit stubborn.

For Vinod, childhood was not easy. Though being the elder one of the two sons, his younger brother had always been the darling in the family. Vinod's twin sister has a dominant personality and is much more outgoing than he is. Vinod seems rather restraint, even shy. He has a strong mother relationship. Sometimes he drinks. He regards himself as not especially religious.

Vinod describes his problem as follows: He works as an electrician in a large company. His assignments he receives by telephone through a secretary, Tokasa, a young lady of 32 years who had fallen in love with him and now is pregnant by him.

Tokasa is a Fiji woman; she is a member of the original Fiji population. Her family lives on one of the more distant islands. Tokasa is the second child out of seven (three boys, four girls). Her father stems from a chiefly family, and he has the position of a community leader. The mother also stems from a noble family. Tokasa's parents have made arrangements to marry off Tokasa in the traditional way to a Fiji man. Both parents are Jehova's witness.

Tokasa was born on the island but has gone to the main island for further education. In the city, living by herself, she has experienced much more freedom than Vinod. She is very outgoing, is well educated, talented in languages and is able to manage her life well. One of her sisters is married to a British man. As many others, she thinks of herself as belonging to the "better" people.

The situation is complex. Both the families of origin have done first steps to marry off their children in a traditional pattern. Premarital sex is forbidden, and the "normal" social solution in a case as such would be: Tokasa and Vinod are not allowed to marry. Tokasa's means are too short to raise her child; however, she will not be allowed to return to her family either. Vinod will be expelled from his family. And with the dissolution of their family bonds, both, Vinod and Tokasa lose all of their relations and the nurturing source of the society, and they would find themselves at the edge of the society. For in both cultures, the Indian as well as the Fiji, the families are constituents for a gratifying life.

Vinod had hidden his situation from his family for some time, but then had asked an aunt of his to inform his parents. Consequently, his sisters and brothers and his parents had turned their backs on him, and he had no other chance than to move in with Tokasa into her small apartment. In this situation he had remembered John Snehadass, and he had made up his mind to see him. At this first visit, John promised to help as best he could.

On his next visit, Vinod brings Tokasa along. They consent - as a first step - that John will pay a visit to Vinod's family. A few days later John goes to see Vinod's family at the house which he had visited often during his time as their parish minister. The welcome is friendly but somewhat reserved. When he talks about the reason of his visit, Vinod's sisters leave the room, and the mother points out clearly that - because of his siding with Vinod - John is no more welcome in this house. Vinod's father, with whom John had had many good conversations before, says: "I feel sorry. You know my family. We cannot accept this."

Back home, John reports only to Vinod how he has been treated by his family: "This is how your family received me." Tokasa may have a guess as to what had happened. However, she learns more when she visits the parish in which Vinod's family are members. She gets enough hints that his people don't want to see her. Even with John, because he further tries to help the two, contact is avoided by the family and others. For Tokasa and Vinod there is no chance of experiencing and receiving the help and shelter of a caring community any more. If one of them or both would be struck by misfortune, there would be nobody who would take care of the children. Meanwhile it becomes clear that Tokasa is pregnant with twins. In this period of time, Vinod feels more and more drawn to John, and they both seek strength and guidance through prayer. Then, John takes a second chance. He feels: If anyone in Vinod's family is capable of openness, it would be Vinod's father, the Brahmin. Thus, John contacts him and meets with him secretly. On this occasion Vinod's father shows his willingness to see Tokasa at least once and talk to her.

The crucial encounter and the ritual

When Vinod's father appears to the visit, Tokasa welcomes him in his language and calls him "aypa" (which is an honorary word for a father), she kneels in front of him and touches his feet with her hands. Because she knows how deeply he is rooted in his tradition, she adapts those elements from his tradition, that call on him as head of the family and let him stick to this role. Vinod's father is deeply touched, he lets all this happen and then answers: "You are my daughter." Then there is a long period of silence.

After this, John prepares everything for a ceremony that is known and performed in both the native Fijis as the people of Indian decent: the "Yaquona drink", a rite of drinking together out of the Yaquona bowl.

The Yaquona bowl is a hemispherical bowl out of dark hard-wood. The outside of the bowl and the edge are decorated, and the whole bowl is covered with a beautiful wickerwork which ends in a three feet long plaited cord. For the ritual, the host places the bowl in front of himself and arranges the cord in a way that it points to the guest who is seated opposite to him. The host prepares the drink, and an assistant on his left hand side passes the drink in a smaller bowl to the participants of the ceremony.

The ritual starts when the host calls on the powers of the heavens and the earth and says a prayer in which he prays for the benefit of the community. Then he takes some powder out of a box made from the roots of the Kawa bush, pours it into a silk cloth and squeezes the silk cloth with the contents and puts it into the Yaquona bowl which is filled with water. The cloth and the powder absorb some of the water, and are moved and squeezed in the water until enough of the powder substance is dissolved in the water. The host tastes the drink and fills some of it

into a smaller wooden drinking bowl, and the assistant at his side then offers the small bowl to the guest - with all signs of reverence. The guest claps his hands once, takes the bowl with both his hands, drinks until it is empty and returns it with both his hands to the assistant. Then he claps his hands three times and bows down towards the host. All this is done in silence. The drinking bowl is filled once again and then handed to the person next in rank to the honoured guest etc.

The time of the ritual is holy time. Nobody speaks or gets up or moves from his or her place. If there are children present, they are strictly advised to follow the rules. Nobody passes the bowl on the side of the host. If someone has to leave the room, he does so moving backwards and bowing down. If at informal meetings one passes the Yaqona bowl, one bows down and touches its edge respectfully with the fingers of the right hand.

With this ritual, John offers the father, the son and the young woman the chance of reconciliation. The four persons celebrate together. John prepares the bowl and the ingredients. The plaited cord of the Yaqona bowl points to the opposite side, towards Vinod's father. Tokasa is seated at John's left hand side, Vinod at his right hand side, and he is the one to assist John. With his consent to participate in the ritual, John's father has already indicated his readiness to reconcile. When John starts to call on the powers of the heavens and the earth, the realisation of reconciliation begins. Because Vinod's father as the head of the family readmits Vinod and accepts Tokasa, he binds the whole family into the process of reconciliation.

A few weeks after the ritual of reconciliation, Tokasa gives birth to two girls. Vinod's older sister who had played a major part in his expulsion from the family is the first one to come into the hospital for a visit. She brings the baby outfit as a present. The young family of four is assigned a living space in the house of Vinod's parents.

In the workshop, John shows a video that has been recorded shortly and which shows the family ten years after these events. John interviews the members of the family about the situations then and now – not only Tokasa and Vinod but also their respective parents, brothers and sisters and their children. Once again it becomes clear how big a burden the situation then had been and how happy the persons involved were, when the conflict could be resolved in a way, that was apt to clarify the relationships of the individuals with each other as well as those between the families. At first, the interview questions sound somewhat stereotype: "How did you feel then?" and "How do you feel now about these events?" Afterwards the questions become more specific and concentrate on individual persons. The answers are simple: "Good." "I feel good." "I am content, happy." What becomes quite clear is that on the Fiji islands, the family and the family relations have absolute priority over against the values of individual life. The family is the source of personal and social security. The family is the place, in which the identity of the individual is formed, nurtured and healed.

The perspective of pastoral care

Regarding this case study we ask: What is the pattern of pastoral care? For sure, pastoral care is brought about through the ritual, which forms the point of crystallisation in this helping relationship. Because in both cultures involved, the Fiji and

the Indian culture, Yaqona drinking stands for revering and honouring people, and for the experience of community life, this ritual is a means of reconciliation. In both groups people say: “During our traditional ceremonies we feel deeply connected with each other.” However, it is not only the ritual itself. In this case study we see that pastoral care takes place in John’s personal participation in the fate of Tokasa and Vinod. He not only listens carefully, shows his understanding and his acceptance, but takes side with these persons who are in danger of falling out of the sheltering community. In consenting with Tokasa and Vinod, John initiates problem solving procedures in which he himself becomes active and runs the risk of experiencing humiliating experiences and the loss of relationships.

The pastoral relation between John and the young couple is one of a common quest for the chances for reconciliation - in respect of the orders and structures of the Indian and Fijian society. The strive is not for the fortunes of individuals or the realisation of individual chances but for a life under the conditions of traditional social structures.