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RESISTANCE AND HOPE IN A
THEOLOGY OF LAND FOR
PAPUA NEW GUINEA

PHILIP GIBBS SVD

1. Introduction

People in Papua New Guinea invest their hope in the land as sacred geography and resist moves that could threaten their relationship to it. I will illustrate this and look at hope and resistance seen in recent events in terms of practical theologies that draw upon traditional spirituality and Christian revelation in attempts to link land, people and God.

It is risky to talk about Papua New Guinea as a whole because it is a land of hundreds of different cultures. Most of my examples will be from the PNG Highlands because that is the area I am most familiar with.

2. Land: security, unity and identity

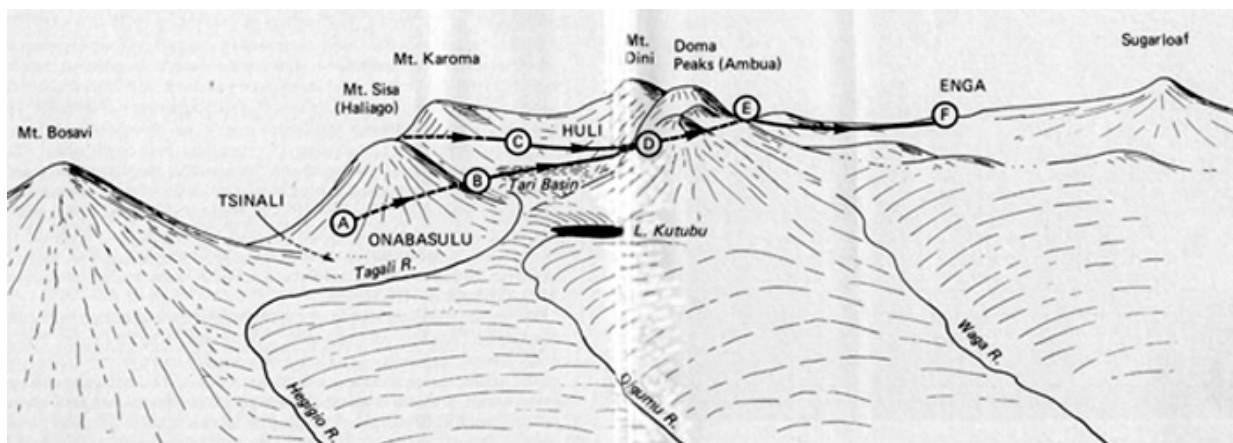
Justin Ain Soongie, a Papua New Guinean priest writes the following: "Two years ago I met a faithful Catholic who publicly confessed that he would not involve [himself] in any tribal fight whatsoever. However, he laid only one condition. '...unless an enemy invades my homeland.' Such sentiment is shared by almost every Melanesian and much more by the Highlanders. We can be as good as saints but when it comes to an enemy attacking on one's land, one cannot but fight to defend his land. Why are we ready to sacrifice our Christian faith and even our own lives for the sake of the land?" (Soongie: 1)

Soongie goes on to explain how for people in Papua New Guinea, personal identification is best based on something concrete and tangible. From this perspective, land serves as an important basis for people to experience security and a sense of belonging. People dispersed after a tribal fight feel alienated and defenceless. To say, "I belong to this land or that place" means that I have value and that I am somebody in the presence of others. In the Enga Province when there is an argument, one person will say to the other: "Imba anja tange?" -- Where are you from? The one questioning is not interested in the opponent's place of origin. Rather, it is a way of humiliating

the other person, saying, "You are not from here -- You are nobody".- [1]

The traditional ideal is a source of hope in that that land provides security, unites people in a certain locale and gives them identity in a particular clan or tribe distinct from others. Fortunately, in PNG there are few people totally alienated from the land which means that the country does not suffer the misery of large settlements of landless people living in squalor around urban complexes as has happened in many other developing countries. Nevertheless the current situation presents many challenges. Erupting volcanoes (Manam Island and Rabaul) compel people to move to "care centres." Tribal fighting forces clans to flee as refugees to live with relatives in rural areas, or "wantoks" in the towns. Settlements in urban areas are expanding and becoming more crowded. Resettlement schemes associated with mining and other industrial developments lead to young people growing up on someone else's land. Hope wanes in such situations, which are becoming all too common.

3. Land as Sacred Geography



Not only is land a source of social value in security, unity and identity in Papua New Guinea; it also has value as sacred geography. For example, the major "earth spell" ritual (dindi gamu) of the Huli people in the Southern Highlands is based on relationships with the land, with neighbouring peoples and with each other (Frankel: 16). The geographical dimension of the "earth spell" cycle concerns the flow of ritual power from the Papuan Plateau to the central highlands. Key sacred sites are said to be joined by the "root of the earth", which is envisaged as a thick vine, entwined by a snake (puya gewa la), providing a channel for smoke at the time of the "earth spell" performances. Active points along this pathway are marked by major sacred sites, referred to literally as 'knots of the earth' (dindi pongo). The root of the earth is thought to be accessible to ritual manipulation at these points (Frankel: 19). The ritual sites usually contain a cave and a pool of water and it is believed that as the fertility of the earth declines, so the water level of the pool falls. This could be replenished through the "earth spell" ritual.

Later in this paper, I will illustrate how present-day mining and other modern developments over a wide area of the Highlands are being linked to this traditional sacred geography, thus providing a basis for political movements and theological speculation.

At a personal level also, many people in Papua New Guinea experience a transcendental dimension in the land. Last year 12,000 Manam Islanders had to flee the island during a volcanic irruption. However now they are making the hazardous voyage from the mainland to their island to

bring bodies of the dead back and bury them on Manam. It is inconceivable for them to bury their dead in someone else's land.

Enga people refer to the *yuu yombone* or spirit of the land. This spirit of the land helps maintain fertility and activates the healthy growth of crops and the overall vegetation and natural resources in a certain area. The yombone watches every act done to the land and will not be happy if it is polluted -- thus children are instructed to cover their faeces when they are in the bush and nature calls.

When the land is deserted after being devastated by tribal warfare or even natural disasters like fire or flood, people will say that that particular land has lost its yombone. The expression used is: "The land has been cooked/burned," *Yuu ongo yangapae silyamo*. In order to regain the yombone the people will have a feast on the land and start cultivating it again. Human activity on the land such as making gardens, building houses, and planting trees, is said to bring back the yombone. The belief in the *yuu yombone* is associated with the ownership of the land and therefore very much related with the spirits of dead ancestors.

The spirit of the land cannot be given away. A portion of land can be lent to someone for temporary use but the spirit of the land cannot be alienated from the owner. This is one reason behind demands for land compensation. Admittedly desire for monetary wealth is often the major factor in such demands, but ultimately the spirit of the land is more valuable than any commercial asset.^[2]

4. Resistance to Land Mobilisation

Unlike countries such as Australia or New Zealand, most of the land in Papua New Guinea (97%) is customary land governed by local clans, (see table below).^[3]

Type of Tenure	Sub-type	% of land in PNG
Customary Land		97%
Statutory Land	State land leased to others	1%
	State land for public use	1%
	Private land – Freehold title	0.5%
	Conditional Freehold land	0.5%

Categories of Land Tenure Systems in Papua New Guinea. Source: Lakau 2001: 26.

With the vast majority of land in PNG under the control of customary landowners, how can they enter into the modern cash economy? Traditionally customary owners see their land as the source of security, unity and identity. From a business point of view in the modern sector, customary land is an asset with no value. It is not a "property," so is outside of mainstream development.

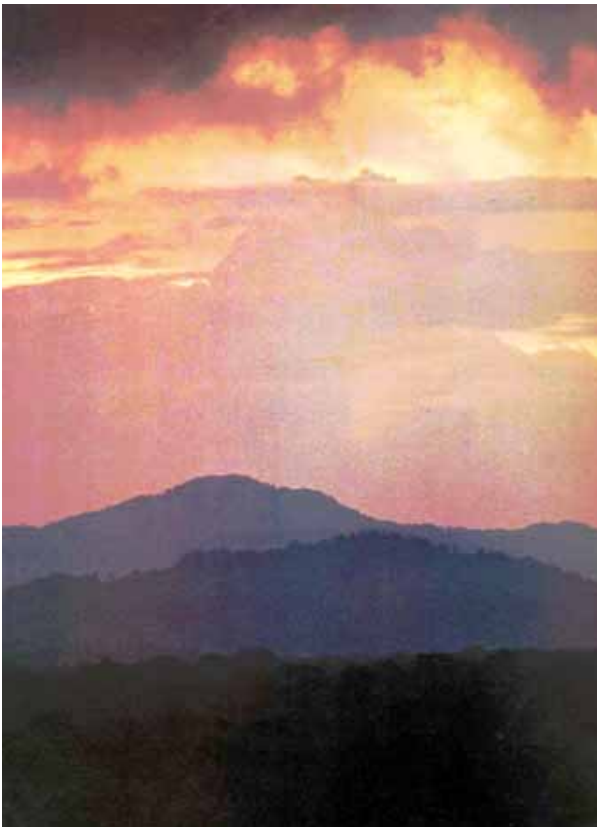
Various solutions have been proposed, from the recognition of the clan as a natural corporation, to individual title. In 1973 the Commission of Inquiry into Land Matters recommended that land held collectively should be registered, but the recommendation was never enacted.

Surely the proposal which has encountered more resistance than any other has been the World

Bank plan for "land mobilisation" whereby land would be registered and "mobilised" for "development." The proposal generated public protests in 1995 and again in 2001. In June 2001, students from the University of PNG held a forum to discuss privatisation, land mobilisation and the structural adjustment programs of the World Bank and IMF. They voted to boycott classes and to move throughout the city in provincial groups seeking public support. After several days of protest matters got out of hand and early in the morning of June 26th, 2001, three students were shot dead and a number of students wounded in confrontations with the police at the university campus. Later, riots and looting broke out in various parts of the city.

The tragic protests of 2001 are an obvious case of active resistance to proposed reforms including land reform. Since then there has been little political will to pursue the land mobilisation program. The general populace continues to offer passive resistance as they see little need for land registration and fear that it would lead to the privatisation of land, land sales, land taxes, and ultimately the loss of land if development projects would collapse. Meanwhile payments of royalty money for mineral, petroleum and timber resources are made through registered incorporated clan-based groups.

5. Stories and Revelation



Many landowner groups have myths or stories that legitimise their claim to the land. For example, the Huli in the Southern Highlands see themselves as being in the midst of a group of people all descended from a common ancestor – Hela. They hold that Hela fathered Obena (the ancestor of the Enga and Ipili people), Duna (the Duna people to the West), Duguba (peoples of the Papuan Plateau), and Hewa (groups around Lake Kutubu). However, this Huli view is not necessarily reciprocated by the other groups concerned (Frankel: 16).

A plurality of myths may weaken support for any one group's land story. Rynkiewicz points out how origin stories are not necessarily charters for land claims. In a place like Milne Bay it is not origin stories or myths or genealogies that determine who owns what. Rather it is the current state of exchanges such as marriage and death rituals that define rights to resources (Rynkiewicz:

141). Rynkiewicz cautions against freezing what was a flexible system lest people who have been temporarily dispossessed would remain permanently so. Efforts to link land claims to origin myths may disenfranchise many people because by origin myth they came from elsewhere.

A recent trend in some parts of the highlands is not to settle solely for traditional myths, but to link traditional stories to the Judeo-Christian revelation leading to practical theologies of resistance in the present and hope for the future. Some of these theologies are explicitly political.

Reference has been made to the dindi gamu--earth spell ritual of the Huli. The ritual itself is no longer practiced, but is not dead or irrelevant by any means. Recent events are seen as confirmation of the story.

There is a well known story among the Huli of the death of a boy named Baye Baye at an early performance of the earth spell ritual. The term baye means good and baye baye means perfect. As the story goes one of the men preparing pork for the ritual was supposed to cut the finger of the boy so that a little of the boy's blood would be added to the offering of pork. However, in an excess of enthusiasm the boy was killed and his body added to the pig offering in a futile effort to make the ritual more efficacious.^[4] His mother left the Bebenete ritual site to return to her home in the Duna area, and as she left she called a curse of plague and death on future Huli generations (Frankel: 23). The curse could not be revoked unless Baye Baye's death would be compensated. Frankel notes how "Similarities between Baye Baye and Christ are apparent to Hulis to the extent that the two names are frequently used interchangeably. Many feel that the Huli are responsible for the crucifixion, and a number of attempts to give compensation payments to missionaries have been made" (Frankel: 23). The Huli have a 15-based counting system. This is projected onto the generations and it is believed that in the 15th generation the earth will become completely barren (and even end) if left unchecked. Many Huli (and others, such as the Ipili in Porgera) believe that they are now in the 14th generation, with the 15th fast approaching. It was predicted that the 14th generation would be a time when young boys would prematurely develop beards and young girls develop breasts and it would be a time of theft and fornication. People believe they see this prediction being fulfilled today. It is now the afternoon.

The Baye Baye story is an example of how people use myths to reinterpret and render intelligible the changes of recent times. People use terminology associated with mining exploration helicopters when they say that such prophetic stories provide "landing pads" for the Christian story. Baye Baye, whom they learned about through general revelation is a "shadow" of Jesus, who they would learn about through the special revelation of the Gospel.

6. Land given by God

Reinterpretation of traditional stories extends also to the land with its mineral, petroleum and gas deposits. Mineral deposits have been discovered in Western Enga (Porgera), and large gas and oil deposits have been discovered in parts of the Southern Highlands. Many Huli link these deposits to a traditional prophecy that one day Gigira Laitebo would illumine the four corners of the earth. Gigira is the name of a mountain near the present-day Hides gas power station. Lai is the name of a tree. Tebo is a modifier signifying that something is glowing or has been burning. When people want to keep a fire alive during their absence they push the burning ends of the tebo into the hot ashes and in this way the embers keep smouldering during the people's absence.^[5]

Huli identify the gas deposits with Gigira Laitebo and say that as it leaves through pipes, pylons and tankers, it goes as no ordinary gas, but as a resource put there by Dadagaliwabe, whom English speakers call God. Dadagaliwabe-God intended the Gigira Laitebo to be a blessing as it is converted into resources so that people could benefit through rural electrification and industry, and also the equitable distribution of the proceeds.

Moreover, some Huli think of the physical Laitebo as being transformed into a spiritual resource

bringing spiritual energy and light to the descendants of Hela and beyond. Some hope to follow the distribution of the gas and deliver the message of its Creator to people of other faiths. The funds for such a missionary exercise would come from the proceeds of the sale of the gas.

However, despite recent developments, to date the prophecy has not been fulfilled to the satisfaction of many of the children of Hela, and this is where what appears to be a hopeful narrative gives way to resistance. There is a question whether Dadagaliwabe-God would have wanted the resources to be exploited the way they are. People in Tari town question the justice of power pylons and electricity transmission lines passing by the town in the direction of the Porgera gold mine,



while mothers deliver babies by candle light in the Tari hospital. The Porgera mine had to curtail operations for several months in 2002 due to the sabotage of transmission towers of the line bringing power from Tari to Porgera. People are watching developments from a monetary and political standpoint, but also from moral and theological perspectives. Huli working at the Mt Kare which is close to a site associated with the dindi gamu-earth spell network believed that they were being stricken with various kinds of illnesses because they had lived at a sacred site with women, and broken sex taboos associated with the site (Jackson and Banks: 49). Where are the blessings when people are dying of AIDS? What does it matter, some say, if the end of mining will coincide with the end of the world in the 15th generation!

7. Land, People and Spirit

Solomon Islander Henry Paroi notes how life in Melanesian means land, people and spirits (Paroi 2001: 178). It might be possible for a person in Australia or New Zealand to live without land and to not believe in God or spiritual realities, but this is hardly conceivable in Papua New Guinea. The ancestral spirits, together with the past, present and future generations are not only represented through the land but are also part of the land here and now. Land is received from one's ancestors and borrowed from one's children.

So, what are the issues for a practical theology of land in Papua New Guinea?

Firstly, in the face of modern socio-economic realities, how can land continue as sacred geography, providing security, unity and identity? The development of a spiritual ecology recognising the triad of land, people and the divine will inevitably be political because finding new ways to conceive of communal land tenure will run counter to globalisation and the alienation of land.

Secondly, what type of relationship can provide a model for a healthy relationship between the land, people and the spiritual realm? Can the clan system survive into the 21st century so that people will continue to feel a moral obligation to respect and conserve the land of which the ancestors are a part?

Thirdly, how can we depth theologially the perceived relationship between cultural traditions and Christian revelation? The concept of a Deus absconditus who left the land in the hands of the ancestors is hardly appropriate; nor is a theocratic theology whereby God owns the land and makes a conditional grant as a "blessing" to those who deserve it. Hope lies in considering land as a source of life – life which has its foundation ultimately in "God" – by whichever name one chooses to use.

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[1] Geoffrey R. Lilburne refers to a similar idea when he writes, "Belonging requires a *sense of place*, a home place where persons can be secure, where meaning and well-being can be enjoyed without pressure or coercion" (Lilburne 1989:25).

[2] Bernard Narokoi says that the statement "my land" carries the same sense of eternity, and an absolute announcement of certainty of rights and obligations as the statement, "my child" (Narokobi 2001: 84)

[3] Churches have freehold or leasehold titles to approximately 33,000 hectares of land in PNG, which amounts to approximately 0.07% of the land (Rynkiewich 2001: 66).

[4] They were trying to use the *dindi gamu* ritual to bring about another experience of the time of *mbingi* (darkness), which was followed by a period of fertility after an ash shower following the irruption of Long Island c. 1700 AD.

[5] I am indebted to Mr Aluago Alfred Kaiabe for the explanation of the *Gigira Laitebo* and its significance.

Philip Gibbs, a New Zealand Divine Word missionary priest, works in Papua New Guinea where he is currently on the faculty of the Melanesian Institute, Goroka. He holds degrees in the social sciences, anthropology and theology. His doctorate is from the Gregorian University, Rome. This presentation was given at the *International Academy of Practical Theology*, Australian Catholic University, Brisbane, 24th-29th June, 2005.

Email: "Philip Gibbs" pjgibbs@online.net.pg



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