

An Analysis of Uriay Culture and Gospel Presentation to the Uriay Tribe

Kaitlin Sones

A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Spring 2012

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

Jeff Ritchey, Ph.D.
Thesis Chair

Don Fanning, D. Min.
Committee Member

Chris Foley, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Brenda Ayres, Ph.D.
Honors Director

Date

Table of Contents

Contents

| | |
|--|-------|
| I. Introduction..... | 5-6 |
| II. Culture and Worldview..... | 6-13 |
| A. The Gospel-Contextualization..... | 7-9 |
| B. Christianity and Culture..... | 9-12 |
| C. Ethnographic Research..... | 12-13 |
| III. Animism..... | 13-16 |
| IV. Papua New Guinea..... | 16-19 |
| V. The Uriay People and Culture..... | 19-24 |
| VI. The Uriay People and the Gospel..... | 24-28 |
| VII. Conclusion..... | 28 |

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

Abstract

The Uriay people group in Papua New Guinea is a remote animistic tribe that has just recently heard the Gospel. This people group is just one of the thousands of distinct cultures in this world, many of which have not yet received the good news of Jesus Christ. This thesis opens by analyzing culture and animism and culminates with an ethnographic description of the Uriay tribe based on personal observation and information collected from missionaries who have lived among the Uriay people for over ten years. The purpose of this thesis is to provide research on this remote people group and provide an example of cultural analysis for believers who plan to enter a new culture and seek to understand it with intentions of spreading the Gospel to those who have yet to hear it.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

An Analysis of Uriay Culture and Gospel Presentation to the Uriay Tribe

One of the greatest challenges for missionaries who work cross-culturally is understanding the culture of the people to whom they are ministering. Language and cultural barriers can prevent the Gospel from being effectively communicated, and can potentially harm the presentation of God's Word. Even though visitors may think they are interpreting all that they are experiencing in a new environment, cultures are often deeply complex and indiscernible to recent arrivals. Syncretism, mixing the Gospel with already existing beliefs, is common among people groups who misunderstand the way believers communicate the Gospel to them.¹ Understanding culture is vital for believers to present the Gospel in a way that will bring the truth to people in their cultural context. Paul states in 1 Corinthians 9:22, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." Missionaries are to fulfill the great commission, trust that God is taking them to the nations, and believe He will reveal Himself to the people in the context of their worldview.²

The Uriay people group is a small tribe on the island of Papua New Guinea. The Wabuku village is a part of the Uriay language group and is very remote. Cultural mapping, or ethnographic research, is a method missionaries use to help grow in their understanding of the culture in which they are living and ministering. Cultural mapping in a people group like the Uriay helps to highlight distinctions between this almost uncharted society and the millions of other cultures known to the world. Researchers benefit from this type of exploration by gaining understanding of these fascinating

1. Donald Smith, *Creating Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 26.

2. Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1981), 21.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

people. Cultural mapping also demonstrates a method of detailed culture learning that anyone can use in any cultural setting, especially for the purpose of cross-cultural ministry. In a country of 830 language groups, the Uriay people are seemingly small and insignificant, but in the eyes of their Creator, they are a valuable people group with a distinct culture and worthy of hearing the Gospel in their own language.³

Culture and Worldview

Culture refers to “the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret, experience, and generate social behavior.”⁴ Anthropologists define culture as “the integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance.”⁵ Culture impacts every area of a human’s life. One’s culture provides the rules that govern daily life.⁶

Culture relates strongly to worldview. Worldview is essentially “the central governing set of concepts and presuppositions that its society lives by.”⁷ Marguerite Kraft quotes Robert Redfield’s definition, stating that worldview is, “the way a people characteristically look outward upon the universe...how everything looks to a people.”⁸ Humans learn their worldview early in life, and it does not easily change.⁹

3. Jason Mandryk. *Operation World* (Colorado Springs: Biblica Publishing, 2010), 670.

4. James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (Australia:Wadsworth, 1979), 5.

5. Kraft, *Christianity*, 46.

6. Ibid, 47.

7. Marguerite G. Kraft, *Worldview and the Communication of the Gospel* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1978), 4.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

When analyzing a culture, researchers should not hold an ethnocentric view. Instead, they should analyze each culture from an objective point of view before they compare one culture with another.¹⁰ Differences in cultures are often not matters of right and wrong, but simply different values and goals. Instead of “moralizing about the good or bad in the given culture, one should accept the validity of that culture, whether or not one’s own set of values predisposes one to approve of the behavior of that culture.”¹¹ Understanding characteristics of culture is the key to analyzing any other culture. Culture is learned; it is a shared system; it is an integrated whole, and it constantly changes.¹² Those who study culture often categorize different aspects of culture into four different layers. The first layer is the observable aspects of culture such as material items and behaviors. The second layer includes rituals and practices such as the laws, the education system, and marriage practices. The third layer includes the values of the culture, and the fourth and deepest layer is the core worldview of the people.¹³

The Gospel-Contextualization

Western Christians who wish to spread the Gospel to another culture must recognize that their culture greatly affects their Christian theology, though the Bible provides the basis for their theology.¹⁴ Corduan notes that a believer who wants to share the Gospel with someone of a different culture must recognize the “cultural package in

10. Kraft, *Christianity*, 49.

11. Ibid.

12. David Hesselgrave. *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 100-101.

13. Ibid, 103.

14. Kraft, *Christianity*, 21.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

which the encounter takes place.”¹⁵ Through this understanding, the believer takes part in contextualization. In order to appropriately contextualize the Gospel, believers must not attach their own culture to the message.¹⁶ Unfortunately, this is nearly impossible.

Culture affects every aspect of the way believers understand the Gospel. Culture and the Gospel are inseparable. The Gospel message, as the Bible presents it, is also embodied in culture, namely, the biblical culture of that time. Thus, proper contextualization involves three cultures: the culture of the missionary, the culture of the receptor, and the culture of the Bible.¹⁷ The contextualization process involves the missionaries’ effort to understand the Gospel as the apostles gave it to the people in the culture of that day. Then, they must discern how their own cultural perspectives skew certain areas of the Gospel. Finally, missionaries must understand the culture of the person to whom they are presenting the Gospel so that they can present the message in a way that is clear to the receptor.¹⁸ Missionaries must study the social, cultural, psychological, and ecological aspects of culture in order for them to minister effectively.¹⁹

Those who wish to successfully communicate the Gospel message cross-culturally should use a method called dynamic equivalence.²⁰ Essentially, this means that the Scripture should impact the new hearers in approximately the same way that it

15. Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian introduction to world religions* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 41.

16. Ibid.

17. Gailyn Van Rhee, *Missions: Biblical Foundations & Contemporary Strategies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1996), 114.

18. Corduan, *Neighboring*, 42.

19. Paul Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 12.

20. Charles H. Kraft. *Communicating the Gospel God’s Way* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1983), 4.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

impacted the original audience. Communicators of the Gospel must remember that God is “receptor oriented.”²¹ He is not just concerned that believers properly communicate the words of the Gospel, but that they communicate the Gospel message in a way that the hearers can understand so that they have an opportunity to respond.²² A Christian who wishes to communicate with the receptors in mind should understand the felt needs of the hearers, present in a method that is in line with their cultural preferences, and speak in the language that is most understandable to them.²³ Essentially, Christians should use techniques to communicate the Gospel that are the most culturally relevant to the hearers of the message.²⁴

Christianity and Culture

Since culture permeates the life of every person, American culture deeply affects American Christians. Christians, no matter how well-read, tend to still see the Bible through their own cultural lens. The unfortunate result of this is to preach cultural values instead of solely biblical ones when evangelizing in a different culture. Charles Kraft aptly describes this dilemma and notes that many Christian missionaries transfer their styles of church services and their doctrinal beliefs instead of spreading the Gospel message within the culture they serve.²⁵ When nationals have difficulty carrying on the forms of the Western missionary, the missionary remains convinced that his or her

21. Ibid, 6.

22. Ibid, 7.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid, 8.

25. Kraft, *Christianity*, 4.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

methods are the “correct” way, and the nationals are simply incapable.²⁶ The fact is, many Westerners fit Christianity so well into their cultural box that they find it difficult to handle situations that arise on the mission field, such as new believers living in polygamous relationships or new believers who are still convinced that their necklace protects their newborn child from evil spirits.

When spreading the Gospel, missionaries should make a strong effort to separate “American customs” from “Christian customs.”²⁷ The goal is to transform culture, not transfer culture.²⁸ Issues such as polygamy, infant sacrifice, or mercy killings will change over time when biblical teachings permeate the culture. However, the Holy Spirit’s work of transforming the hearts of people will be what makes these cultural changes. If missionaries try to end these practices without a biblical basis being in place, the missionaries will simply be transferring their own culture instead of helping transformation to occur in the existing one.

Hermeneutical classes at seminaries throughout the United States strongly discourage the use of the phrase, “what this passage in the Bible means to *me*,” simply because biblical passages have one meaning, the meaning that the author intended. However, despite deep study, the readers will always perceive the messages through their own cultural lens. Therefore, the goal is to understand how God intended to communicate His message through the cultural lenses of all the cultures of the world. He made the cultures, and He will reveal His truth to them through His word. Instead of always having

26. Ibid, 5.

27. Ibid, 7.

28. Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Transforming Culture: A Challenge for Christian Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books House, 1992), 13.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

all the answers, missionaries should be diligent to accurately portray what the Bible says, but allow the readers to understand through the way that they understand the world.²⁹

Regarding issues such as polygamy, Charles Kraft states, “Perhaps God wants us to seek to understand and, in love, to accept people within their cultural context rather than simply to impose upon them what we have come to understand from within our cultural context to be the proper rules.”³⁰ In John 16:12-13, the Bible promises that the Holy Spirit guides people into all truth and will therefore guide people of other cultures to truth even if their worldview remains very different than the worldview of the missionary who is conveying the message.

People in different cultures interpret the Gospel in various ways, as demonstrated in endless illustrations. Charles Kraft lists a few examples in his book *Christianity in*

Culture:

What should a cross-cultural witness do when he discovers that presenting Satan as a dragon (Rev. 12) to Chinese results in their regarding him positively? Or presenting Jesus as the Good Shepherd (Ps. 23; Jn. 10) in parts of Africa results in their understanding him to be mentally incompetent? Or telling the story of Jesus’ betrayal results in Judas being regarded as the hero?³¹

The essential question then, is, “What is that core of Christian truth that we must communicate to all peoples and what is peripheral? Just what is conversion?”³² The fact is, a “biblical Christian model” is not necessarily a set, unchanging model.³³ Of course,

29. Kraft, *Christianity*, 9.

30. Ibid, 10.

31. Ibid, 14.

32. Ibid, 18.

33. Ibid, 37.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

believers should strive to understand the Bible in its original context, but cultures will always play a part in perception.

Ethnographic Research

Ethnography is “the work of describing a culture.”³⁴ The goal of ethnographic research is to understand how the nationals view the world. Ethnography goes beyond observing social behavior; it digs into the meaning behind the actions.³⁵ The purpose of ethnographic research is to describe and understand the diversity between different cultures. Ethnographers study marriage, values, eating habits, child rearing, and religious beliefs and practices.³⁶ Therefore, the goal of this type of research is to explain these different cultural aspects.³⁷ However, ethnography for a missionary is especially beneficial, because missionaries must understand the culture of the people in order to present the Gospel to them in a culturally relevant way.

Ethnography involves interviewing people and observing culture in order to discover the “cultural meanings people are using to organize their behavior and interpret their experience.”³⁸ Problems may arise as observers often distort their observational data due to misunderstandings caused by the different perspectives through which they perceive the culture.³⁹ Language is extremely important in the study of a culture, because

34. Spradley, *Ethnographic*, 3.

35. Ibid, 6.

36. Ibid, 10.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid, 93.

39. Williams, Thomas Rhys. *Field Methods in the Study of Culture* (New York: Holy, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 27.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

“language is the primary symbol system that encodes cultural meaning in every society. Language can be used to talk about all other encoded symbols.”⁴⁰ Key categories of analysis when conducting cultural research include life cycle, household habits, material culture, travel and transportation, politics, economics, the supernatural, and forms of ritual.⁴¹

Animism

Part of understanding culture goes back to understanding the origin of all cultures, the creation of the world in the book of Genesis. When Adam and Eve sinned and therefore brought sin into the world, the effects of sin forever changed their lives and the lives of all human beings.⁴² As a result of sin, fear, guilt, and shame came into the world and affect all peoples of the world.⁴³ Guilt drives much of North-American culture, as evidenced by the North-American system of law and justice.⁴⁴ However, “honor and shame” instead of “right and wrong” are the main focus in a Muslim culture. Also, in general, animistic cultures are much more fear-based than either of these other two classifications.⁴⁵ Fear is the main underlying force in animistic cultures. Missionaries need to understand this fear that permeates the daily lives of the people. This fear can be

40. Spradley, *Ethnographic*, 99.

41. Ibid, 103.

42. Roland Muller, *Honor & Shame: Unlocking the door* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Corporation, 2000), 17.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid, 18.

45. Ibid, 21.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

a barrier to peoples' acceptance of the Gospel since they will likely believe that deviating from their spirits will bring harm upon them and their families.⁴⁶

E. B. Tylor developed the term “animism” to describe the type of worldview that he observed in tribal settings. This word derives from the Latin word “anima” which means “soul.”⁴⁷ Animism is essentially belief in the spirits and belief that all things have spirits. Animism is a spirit-oriented religion.⁴⁸ An animist understands his world to be a physical world co-existing with an unseen world of supernatural powers. Various entities, such as spirits, ancestors, people, nature, animals, or inanimate objects, can manifest these powers.⁴⁹ Christians have learned to present the Gospel to fear-based cultures in a way that addresses their fears. God is more powerful than any spirit, Shaman, or power of darkness.⁵⁰

Fear-based practices are easily recognizable in animistic cultural practices. The Yali people of Papua Indonesia would not walk on certain parts of the land for fear of angering the spirits who could cause diseases or death.⁵¹ The Yanomamo people would not leave their footprint in soft ground, because they believed that if someone from an enemy tribe were to take their footprint, he could cast spells on the owner of the footprint that would cause him to die.⁵² While North American culture does incorporate some

46. Corduan, *Neighboring*, 158.

47. Ibid.

48. Corduan, *Neighboring*, 135.

49. Muller, *Honor*, 44.

50. Ibid, 45.

51. Richardson, Don. *Lords of the Earth* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1977), 28.

52. Mark Ritchie. *Spirit of the Rainforest* (Chicago: Island Lake Press, 2000), 123.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

elements of fear-based beliefs and practices, fear and superstitions are much more prevalent in the everyday lives of people in animistic cultures.

Animistic beliefs are complex and involved practices and ideas that have developed over many years.⁵³ Almost all animistic cultures share several common factors. Namely, these common concepts are powers, rituals and magic, rites of passage, and taboos.⁵⁴ Fear controls all of these concepts in an animist's life. Animists' rituals, ceremonies, and celebrations of rites of passage all stem from a fear of the supernatural and a desire to manipulate the spirits in an effort to appease them. Rites of passage typically include ceremonies at birth, the transition into adulthood, marriage, and death.⁵⁵ To an animist, supernatural powers are the explanation of everything: rain, crops, sickness, death, birth, and victory or loss in battle.⁵⁶

The powers in animistic religions are typically ancestor spirits, nature spirits, or both.⁵⁷ Rituals and magic are typically means of manipulating the spirits. Many animistic cultures have medicine men, or shamans, who specialize in healing and serve as mediums between the spirits and the people.⁵⁸ Taboos are also common among animistic cultures. Taboos are often prohibited practices, foods, or words that evoke anger from the spirits, and they frequently relate to specific rituals or ceremonies.⁵⁹

53. Corduan, *Neighboring*, 135.

54. Ibid, 136-138.

55. Ibid, 139.

56. Muller, *Honor*, 43.

57. Corduan, *Neighboring*, 136.

58. Ibid, 137-138.

59. Ibid, 139-40.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

Many Western Christians do not even believe in the existence of spirits. However, since animistic cultures center on a belief in the spirits, the biblical teachings about the spirits become extremely important in the presentation of the Gospel.⁶⁰ The biblical passages about this issue speak the truth that Jesus is more powerful than the evil spirits.⁶¹ The animists learn that they no longer have to fear the evil spirits, because Jesus is greater.

Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea is an island country north of Australia. It comprises the eastern half of a large island, the western half of which is Papua Indonesia. Papua New Guinea is slightly larger than the state of California, yet 830 distinct language groups occupy this area.⁶² Out of these language groups, about half have yet to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Though Papua New Guinea's official language is English, few speak it. Instead, Pidgin English, or "Tok Pisin" is the trade language that the nationals use throughout this country's many tribes. This trade language is comprised of approximately 2,000 words in the urban areas of Papua New Guinea, though those who live in more rural areas use only about 800 words in Tok Pisin.⁶³ These numbers seem rather miniscule when compared to the approximately quarter of a million words in the English language.⁶⁴ As a result,

60. Kraft, *Christianity*, 10.

61. *Ibid.*

62. Mandryk, *Operation*, 670.

63. Cornelia Trefflich. *From Simplified English to Complex Language* (Norderstedt, GRIN Verlag, 2005), 14. <http://books.google.com/books?id=HZ4wq6EATXQC&pg=PA14&lpg=PA14&dq=3000+words+in+Tok+Pisin&source> (accessed February 19, 2012).

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

speakers of Pidgin English cannot be very detailed in their wording, and meaning may be lost in descriptions of complex matters. Though a Pidgin English Bible is accessible to many tribes in Papua New Guinea, the nationals cannot fully understand God's truth through this translation without misunderstandings and syncretism inadvertently arising between the true message and the animistic beliefs that the people already hold.

Papua New Guinea is an extremely complex nation due to its wide variety of ethnicities and languages.⁶⁵ Many different factors have shaped the various cultures. Some aspects that influence the cultures include Papua New Guinea's unique geography, the people emigrating from surrounding countries, the animistic religions throughout the country, and the presence of missionaries from various religions and sects.⁶⁶ Papua New Guinea is the second largest island in the world, the first being Greenland.⁶⁷ Agriculture and fishing are the primary bases of the economy, and tea and coffee are key cash crops. More than 75% of the people in Papua New Guinea live off subsistence farming.⁶⁸ Australia is a key player in Papua New Guinea's trade market.⁶⁹

Papua New Guinea has undergone a tough political past. Until World War I, Germany controlled the northern part of the island, and the south was under British rule

64. Oxford Dictionaries, "How Many Words are there in the English Language?" Oxford University Press, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/words/how-many-words-are-there-in-the-english-language> (accessed February 19, 2012).

65. Mandryk, *Operation*, 670.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid, 671.

69. Ibid, 670.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

until the early 1900s.⁷⁰ After this, the island fell under Australian rule until 1975 when Papua New Guinea became independent within the British Commonwealth. The country has a democratic parliamentary system, and the people have freedom of religion throughout the nation.⁷¹ The country is technically predominantly Christian, but nationals infuse Christianity with their animistic beliefs, making the majority of the supposed Christians only nominally believers.⁷²

Research on the history of missions in Papua New Guinea is frustrating. Many of the earliest accounts in the mid-1800s describe the Papuan people as “the most degraded and cruel savages in all the world.”⁷³ Also, stories and pictures from those early years of pioneer missions in Papua New Guinea reflect that missionaries transferred Western culture and religious rituals to these “savage” people. Many missionaries did not communicate the Gospel message in a culturally relevant way. One account reflects the work of a missionary named James Chalmers, who began his work in Papua New Guinea in 1866. He said,

Two years ago we began to hold morning and evening services in the chapel for all the people of the village. These services were never to exceed ten minutes. A hymn is sung, a short passage of Scripture read, and prayer offered. At first very few came, but I insisted on the services being continued, and every morning at sunrise and every evening at sunset the bell rings. We have many visitors from time to time, and generally these attend.... They began to observe the Sabbath and did what they could to have three services in the day—that is the orthodox number in these parts.⁷⁴

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.

72. Ibid.

73. Delavan L. Pierson, *The Pacific Islanders: From Savages to Saints* (NY & London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1906), 287.

74. Ibid, 294.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

Missionaries like James Chalmers reported thousands of salvations, which were likely nothing more than the number of attendees who came to foreign services as curious observers.⁷⁵

The Uriay People and Culture

The Uriay language group is just one of the 830 language groups of Papua New Guinea. This language group is one of the smallest, as it consists of about 300 people total. The people have divided themselves into three villages of about 100 people each. The Wabuku village is one of these villages, located along the Sepik River in the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea. In the Sepik region, the vegetation is thick, and the muddy rivers are numerous.⁷⁶ The Sepik River itself is 750 miles long and varies in width. Since the jungle is so thick in this region, the Sepik River is the only transportation route to or from the hundreds of tribes along its border.⁷⁷

The culture in this hot climate is very different from the cultures of the islanders or the highlanders. Additionally, the Wabuku village is much more remote and untouched than many of the larger tribes located in more amiable climate. Out of the 6,888,387 people that live in the small country of Papua New Guinea, these 100 people are seemingly insignificant by the world's standards, but they are invaluable in the eyes of their Creator.⁷⁸ These 100 people are virtually unknown to the outside world, but to

75. Ibid, 296.

76. Philippe Diole. *The Forgotten People of the Pacific* (Woodbury: Barron's Publishing, 1976), 42.

77. Ibid.

78. Mandryk, *Operation*, 670.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

missionaries Elias and Jose Struik, these 100 people have become friends, family, and brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Wabuku village is one of three villages in the Uriay people group. The village is small and simple in its layout. The village meets the muddy Sepik River with a small sandy and stony beach. Upon entering the village, one of the most noticeable characteristics is the smell. The muddy river is the only bathing water for all the villagers, and they all carry a distinct body odor. Few of the children are clothed, and most of the men wear shirts, though most of the women do not. Noticeable cultural differences are immediately apparent such as the children carrying considerably large knives and the women breast-feeding their five and six year-old children.

The houses, made of the wood from a sago tree, are approximately eight feet above the ground, standing on thin wooden stilts. A simple upright log with shallow notches serves as a ladder to the entranceway, which is surprisingly not difficult for the villagers, or their dogs, to climb. Most residences consist of both a cooking house and a sleeping house. The nationals use large prickly leaves from the sago tree to make the roofs of their houses.

The distinct language of the Uriay people is particularly interesting. If visitors were to take a trip to the Uriay tribe, they would likely board a small Cessna 206 plane in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, where the language spoken is "Bena," and travel one hour to the Mariama tribe, a completely different language group, to refuel the small plane. They would then travel another hour and a half to the Sinow tribe, which is again a different language group, unload luggage, then board a twenty foot canoe and travel two and a half hours, passing several distinct language groups on the way. Eventually, the

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

visitors would arrive in the Wabuku village, where the language spoken is Uriay. Papua New Guinea is truly unique in the multitude and close proximity of distinct languages. Once among the Wabuku people, the visitors could communicate in a limited way using the Tok Pisin trade language; however, many of the women have never learned this national trade language, and many men use the trade language only minimally.

Gender roles are extremely important in a culture. Upon first entering the Uriay village, cultural differences are immediately and easily recognizable. Even the standards for perceiving gender are different. In American culture, people often recognize gender based on one's length and style of hair as well as body build. In the Uriay culture, a visitor would note that gender cannot be determined based on hair style as all the women and men keep their hair short. Whereas, in the eyes of an Uriay villager, the gender of visitors is difficult to determine because the women visitors wear shirts, which is an uncommon practice for the village women. The women of the village work hard to maintain the gardens, prepare the sago, and care for the children, while the men hunt wild pig and build houses. The Uriay is a male-dominated culture. Females become wives at a young age, and the marriages are typically monogamous, though not always.

The staple food for the Wabuku villagers, as well as for the whole Sepik region, is the starch collected from the sago tree. Women spend entire days chopping the sago tree into small pieces, piling it into a canoe-like hollowed out tree, running river water through the small bits, and collecting the starch that accumulates from the washed bark. They then bake this starch into thin wafers or mix it with boiling water to make sticky and tasteless sago paste. The nationals supplement their diet with sugar cane, pineapples, coconuts, and leafy greens grown in gardens that are deep in the jungle, a mile or two

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

from their riverside village. The villagers also smoke home-grown tobacco as a way to subdue hunger pains.

Social interaction is important in the Uriay tribe. On a typical day, Wabuku villagers will spend hours sitting on tree logs and stumps outside their homes with friends and relatives. Chewing “buai” is a daily social event. Buai is the Tok Pisin word for the areca nut which is a small green nut from the areca palm tree. The villagers break open this nut and combine it with part of an areca tree leaf as well as lime. They then place this combination in one side of their mouth and chew it for hours. After just a few minutes of chewing, this mixture turns blood red, and they spit out the liquid instead of swallowing it. Red droplets of buai residue litter the ground of the village.

As previously discussed, fear drives animistic cultures such as the Uriay tribe. Even when missionaries bring some scientific evidence that proves a less-than supernatural explanation, the people remain convinced of the spirits’ influence in every aspect of life. In the Uriay tribe, visitors can easily observe this way of thinking. For instance, many of the children are plagued with the highly contagious and fast spreading skin fungus known as ring-worm. In the United States, when children develop this skin fungus, their parents apply a topical cream to the affected spot, and the medication cures the ailment. However, the nationals in the Wabuku village did not accept or use the cream offered by the missionaries, because they believed that evil spirits or curses from enemy tribes caused the skin disease, and a lotion could not cure it.

The Uriay religious beliefs are by no means simple. Their beliefs clearly fit within the category of animism, but much about their set of beliefs is unique from other animistic cultures. The Uriay people believe that six different levels of beings exist, all of

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

which affect situations in everyday life.⁷⁹ The highest being, and therefore the one that is furthest away, is God, known as “the Big Man.” He is big, but distant and impersonable.⁸⁰ The next level of beings are the witch doctors. The people believe a witch doctor holds the power of ending lives. When a loved one dies, the village does not look for a cause of death, but rather for *who* caused the death.⁸¹ Villagers consider white men to be reincarnated ancestors, and they believe white men wield the same amount of power as the witch doctors.⁸² Evil spirits are the next level down, and the people believe these spirits live all throughout nature, in the river, the rocks, and the trees. The nationals fear the spirits and believe they have great control over people’s lives.⁸³

Human beings are last on the list, and the people believe they have a spirit themselves.⁸⁴ The nationals consider a person’s spirit to also be his “shadow” or “tasiaba.” However, spirits are also associated with a person’s mind, breath, voice, stomach, and blood. The stomach is especially important since people experience all their emotions in their stomach. The villagers believe that witch doctors eat the stomach of a person in order to kill him or her.⁸⁵

On the level right below human beings are the spirits of dead ancestors. The nationals believe these spirits roam around the village for a couple months before moving

79. Elias Struik, *Culture Docs* (New Tribes Mission, 2012), 1.

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid.

82. Ibid.

83. Ibid, 2.

84. Ibid.

85. Ibid, 3.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

on to the afterlife. Villagers fear these spirits, because they believe the ancestor spirits cause illness or harm while they are still in the area.⁸⁶

The last of the six levels are the dead ancestors that have moved on to the “place of the dead ancestors.” This place exists under the ground. The Uriay people generally believe that white men are dead ancestors that have become rich and have come back to give the villagers the “good message” of how to become wealthy and not have to work.⁸⁷

The Uriay People and the Gospel

The Uriay people are a part of an oral culture as opposed to a literate culture. As oral learners, they much prefer to use oral means of absorbing or giving information. Orality, as defined by J.O. Terry is “the communication and learning characteristic that expresses one’s dependence and/or preference upon the spoken word as the basic mode for sharing thoughts, ideas, observations and experiences.”⁸⁸ Oral culture people not only learn differently than literates, but they retain information differently. People in an oral culture have a highly developed memory and can comprehend and retain stories and narrative much better than literates.⁸⁹

The Uriay people began to hear the Gospel for the first time in 2010. As the missionaries began to teach chronologically through the Bible, they faced intense opposition. There was a lot of dispute among the villagers, mostly over land, and so many

86. Ibid.

87. Ibid.

88. J.O. Terry, *Basic Bible Storying* (Fort Worth: Church Starting Network, 2008), 7.

89. Johannes Verkyul, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1978), 233.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

people had died recently in the village that everyone was grieving deeply. In the midst of all this, there were threats coming from witchdoctors of neighboring tribes that terrified the Wabuku people beyond belief.⁹⁰ Elias Struik was concerned that these conflicts would cause the Gospel to fall on deaf ears.

Knowing that these people had no basis of Christian beliefs in their culture, Struik and his team had to strategically develop words for biblical concepts that would make sense in the Uriay language. The goal of all their teachings would be to point the people to the “marked man by God, that will help people not to receive their punishment for sins,” which became the Uriay word for “redeemer.”⁹¹

As they began to hear the stories, the villagers started to understand God’s judgment on sinners and His plan for redemption.⁹² Imi, one of the older women in the village asked, “Will God destroy us because of our sins like he did with the people that didn’t go into the ark?”⁹³ At another point in time, Markus, one of the men in the village exclaimed, “Yes, our ancestors were part of building that huge house in Babel; they ignored God’s instructions, and that’s why we speak our own language today!”⁹⁴ These beginning Bible stories communicated clearly in the Uriay language and in their cultural context that God is a holy and righteous God, men are not righteous because they have

90. Elias Struik. *Wabuku-Wad*. Google Groups. June 9 2010. <http://groups.google.com/group/wabuku-wad/topics> (accessed January 30, 2012).

91. Ibid.

92. Ibid.

93. Ibid.

94. Ibid.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

sinned, God brings judgment upon sin, and God has provided a way by grace through faith through the shedding of a substitute's blood.⁹⁵

Early on, the people began to grasp the truth about God's word. Elias assessed the peoples' understanding by asking why they believed Abraham was right in God's eyes. He questioned, "did he have the right clothing, did he obey all of God's talk, did he not smoke, did he cut the grass around his house, did he not eat beetle nut?" Andrien responded, "Abraham followed God's only one true thinking with all of his stomach and all of his mind."⁹⁶ How undoubtedly wonderful it was to see these people fully grasping that Abraham was a sinner, "born in Satan's canoe," but transferred to God's "canoe" through his faith in Him.⁹⁷

As the team of missionaries decided how to effectively communicate concepts in the Bible that were not understandable in the Uriay culture, they took into consideration the meaning that needed to be conveyed and how it could best be conveyed. Though the Wabuku villagers had never before seen a lamb, the missionaries could not find an equivalent animal to communicate the same symbolism that the lamb portrayed. There were plenty of wild pigs in the jungles of the Sepik region, but these animals were violent and dangerous and could actually kill the men who were hunting them. There were no real similarities between the meek lamb of the Bible and this feared and vicious wild pig. The missionaries decided to instead describe this animal called the lamb that the Uriay people had never before encountered. The missionaries clearly communicated the

95. Ibid.

96. Ibid.

97. Ibid.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

symbolism of the lamb, and the people understood that the “marked man by God, that will help people not to receive their punishment for sins” would be killed, just like the meek lamb, without struggle.⁹⁸ The villagers recognized that a lamb died as a substitute for those who were sinners but trusted God.⁹⁹

The teachings of Jesus resonated in the hearts, or rather stomachs, of the people. Dakruma knew how Jesus healed the man with the paralyzed hand. She declared, “He did it just like in the beginning, by His mouth, He just spoke!”¹⁰⁰ Tyemes, another villager, also understood the power of this Jesus. He remarked, “There is nothing hidden from Jesus; His thinking doesn’t dry up, that is why He put the inside stomach thoughts of the Pharisees right in the open; He is God!”¹⁰¹

The story of Lazarus and teaching of Jesus about the resurrection in the last day were monumental in the thinking of the Wabuku villagers. The theme of death hit very close to home for the nationals. Many times the villagers gathered to figure out who paid the witchdoctor to kill a person.¹⁰² Now, for the first time, these people were hearing that the spirit of their loved one was not floating around on earth, but that it has gone to an eternal destination in Heaven or Hell.¹⁰³ Understandably, that was a lot of information to swallow. Every one of the Wabuku villagers had a choice to make. After hearing of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, many proclaimed their faith in Him. One

98. Ibid, August 5, 2010.

99. Ibid.

100. Ibid.

101. Ibid, August 26, 2010.

102. Ibid, September 2, 2010.

103. Ibid.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

powerful testimony came from a young married couple. Noel and Wekot told Lisa, one of the missionaries:

Although you have a different skin color and there will be a day when you will leave Wabuku, we are now part of one family – the family of God. We have become the children of God! There will be a time that we are going to be reunited forever when we are with God in Heaven.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

While the Uriay people are continuing to grow in their faith, many other tribes throughout the world have yet to hear the Gospel in their language or understand it in their cultural context. As Christians continue to spread the good news to all the world, they must recognize the importance of cultural mapping to understand the worldview of the people to whom they are ministering. Through contextualization, believers can minimize the amount of syncretism in a people group's belief system, prevent the transfer of Western culture, and promote the transfer of the Gospel as God wishes believers to communicate it to that specific culture. Through study of culture, believers around the world can reap the benefits of watching and participating as unreached people place their trust in Jesus for their salvation, as was beautifully demonstrated in the Uriay tribe.

104. Ibid, September 11, 2010.

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

Bibliography

- Corduan, Winfried. *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998.
- Diolo, Philippe. *The Forgotten People of the Pacific*. Woodbury: Barron's Publishing, 1976.
- Hesselgrave, David J. *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991.
- Hiebert, Paul G. *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009.
- Kraft, Charles H. *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979.
- Kraft, Charles H. *Communicating the Gospel God's Way*. Pasadena: CA: William Carey Publishing, 1983.
- Kraft, Marguerite G. *Worldview and the Communication of the Gospel*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1978.
- Lingenfelter, Sherwood G. *Transforming Culture: A Challenge for Christian Mission*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books House, 1992.
- Mandryk, Jason. *Operation World*. Colorado Springs: Biblica Publishing, 2010.
- Muller, Roland. *Honor & Shame: Unlocking the door*. Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Corporation, 2000.
- Oxford Dictionaries, "How Many Words are there in the English Language?" Oxford University Press, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/words/how-many-words-are-there-in-the-english-language> (accessed February 19, 2012).
- Pierson, Delavan L. *The Pacific Islanders: From Savages to Saints*. NY & London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1906.
- Richardson, Don. *Lords of the Earth*. Ventura: Regal Books, 1977.
- Ritchie, Mark. *Spirit of the Rainforest*. Chicago: Island Lake Press, 2000.
- Smith, Donald. *Creating Understanding*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992.
- Spradley, James P. *The Ethnographic Interview*. Australia: Wadsworth, 1979.
- Struik, Elias. *Culture Docs*. New Tribes Mission. 2012.
- Struik, Elias. *Wabuku-Wad*. Google Groups. 2008.
<http://groups.google.com/group/wabuku-wad/topics> (accessed January 30, 2012).

CULTURE OF URIAY TRIBE

Terry, J.O. *Basic Bible Storying: Preparing and Presenting Bible Stories for Evangelism, Discipleship, Training, and Ministry*. Fort Worth, TX: Church Starting Network Publishers, 2008.

Trefflich, Cornelia. *From Simplified English to Complex Language*. Norderstedt, GRIN Verlag, 2005. <http://books.google.com/books?id=HZ4wq6EATXQC&pg=PA14&lpg=PA14&dq=3000+words+in+Tok+Pisin&source> (accessed February 19, 2012).

Van Rheenen, Gailyn. *Missions: Biblical Foundations & Contemporary Strategies*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1996.

Verkyul, Johannes. *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1978.

Williams, Thomas Rhys. *Field Methods in the Study of Culture*. New York: Holy, Rinehart and Winston, 1967.