

# ENGENDERING THE MILLENNIUM

SPECIAL ISSUE OF THE JOURNAL OF MILLENNIAL STUDIES

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## ENGENDERING THE MILLENNIUM IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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The impact of Fundamentalist and Charismatic Christianity in Papua New Guinea (PNG) has been enormous as it has been in many parts of the world. In both the Hagen area in the Western Highlands Province of PNG and the Duna area in the Southern Highlands Province of PNG people are torn between believing in End Times narratives as depicted in the book of Revelations from the Bible and New World narratives that present an image of a changed and better world (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8). The New World imagery corresponds closely with pre-Christian cosmological schemes of renewal that many New Guinean societies had. While the Hagen and Duna people see an apocalyptic change of some sort on the horizon they are uncertain as to what the events are that will actually transpire. This uncertainty has produced hopeful expectations for some people while simultaneously stimulating anxiety and unpalatable tension for others.

For the Duna people Christianity came into their area in the 1960s, soon after the first European and Australian explorers entered the region. Traditional ritual/religious practices such as those to ensure that the fertility of the ground (rindi) was renewed at fourteen generational intervals, boy's growth rituals which were performed in seclusion from women, and a multitude of healing practices which involved the use of sacrifices to ancestors or the use of magically imbued stones were abandoned in the face of the religion of the colonial power -- Christianity (9, 10, 11).

Nowadays the two main churches in the Aluni Valley, where we conduct our research in the Duna area, are the Baptist and the Seventh Day Adventists. The main social difficulty that these churches are attempting to deal with is the increase in the number of deaths in the community that are being attributed to female witchcraft. Various environmental events have occurred in the last five years that have made the people think that a rise in Satanic forces is being expressed in their community. Many of these events appear to the Duna to resonate with the Biblical predictions from the book of Revelations of what will happen at the End Times.

In 1998 large forest fires resulting from drought destroyed vast areas of forest around where the people have their houses and gardens. Some dwellings were destroyed and some lives were lost (12). In 1997-8 a severe El Nino-induced drought struck the entire Highlands area in PNG, producing food shortages and leading to an increased susceptibility to various tropical

diseases. The drought ended but then the rains came in too great a force, flooding ensued and an epidemic (probably typhoid, and/or pneumonia) swept through the Aluni Valley which took the lives of several small children and elderly people. Some of these deaths were attributed to the actions of witches in the community (13, 14). Witchcraft accusations and trials are a part of Duna life that has not gone away even with the introduction of Christianity.

The Baptist church tries to deal with the problem of witchcraft by asking that people with this power come forward and confess in the church their past witchcraft actions and promise not to use their powers again. This in fact corresponds to a traditional pattern of questioning suspects and obtaining confessions from them that identify other women who were involved, leading to their acting as witch-finders rather than as witches. But not all of those accused of being witches choose to come forward in the church and another method of dealing with the problem has developed that is an elaboration of a “traditional” practice. Nowadays a male prophet who, it is said, has received divine knowledge from God, identifies those whom he has determined are guilty witches and points them out to the community. In the past certain men were said to have been given the power to identify witches by a Female Spirit (Payame Ima) who showed these men how to use a divining rod which would magically point to any person who had used witchcraft powers against another person (13).

Almost all of those accused of witchcraft killings are women who have been married or are currently married and have borne one or more children. Often a wife of a community leader who has one or more other wives (polygamy is legal in PNG) is either openly accused or is covertly suspected of witchcraft as part of a political struggles between leaders. The women who are identified as being witches are sometimes driven out of the community, at other times they are violently treated in the public domain and forced to pay a compensation payment to the family of the deceased person to make amends for their deed.

Both the Baptists and Seventh Day Adventists in the Aluni Valley recognize witchcraft as a form of expression of Satanic powers on Earth but the Seventh Day Adventist church does not promote extended discussions of this phenomenon and does not support its members being involved as recipients in compensation payments for killings attributed to witchcraft, although it does allow them to contribute as donors. In the past few years some of the local women have joined the Seventh Day Adventist church and moved their dwellings near to the church, taking their children with them and leaving their husbands to stay in the old dwelling place if they do not also choose to join the church and move. This may reflect a means by which these women hope to lessen the possibility of being accused of being a witch. These accusations are very serious matters. In 1998 one woman who had already publicly confessed to having killed two small children of leading local family by her witchcraft and was preparing to pay a compensation payment to the family of the deceased children was killed by a blow dealt to her by her own son.

Witchcraft accusations are just one example of the situation for women in Papua New Guinea, which in general is not unproblematic. Domestic violence is a perpetual problem. In conjunction with this some organizations have questioned if the practice of polygamy ought to be eliminated. In 1998 the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches called for Members of Parliament to formulate legislation to eliminate the practice of polygamy in PNG (PNG Post Courier 33/12/98; PNG Independent Sept. 11/98). This move was backed up by the Individual and Communication Rights Advocacy Forum in a statement that said, “[Polygamy] breeds violence, creates instability in the family, leads to social problems between families and communities, and creates competing interests between women. In fact as a result of the conflict

arising out of the polygamy situation, women often engage in fights with other wives which has led to an increasing number of wives killing the 'other women'. . . The practice of polygamy only leads to social problems and disrespect for women in the relationship. Today, most polygamous marriages existing in Papua New Guinea are not practiced according to custom. But custom is being used by men as an excuse to have more than one woman." (PNG Post Courier 3/12/98)(2). Our own observations at the local level indicate that the difficulties here are gravely exacerbated both by urban conditions and by new inter-ethnic marriage patterns.

The sorts of trouble that arise in these situations are often made more difficult for women who are negotiating violent situations while also attempting to adhere to what they believe are their church's teachings about marital life. The story of Y, who is a Hagen woman in her thirties with three children, is an excellent example of the bind that some women find themselves in as the year 2000 approaches. Y. was baptized into the Assembly of God church in Hagen. This was a turning point in her life, providing her with a new Christian name and a new identity. This new name is important since it is said to be listed in God's "Book of Life," while the old name will not be listed. Therefore it is important for people to recognize a baptized person by their Christian name so that there will be no confusion surrounding the Christian identity of the person, especially in these days when the world may be shortly coming to an end.

Y.'s husband is not a member of the church and thus is not restricted by the church's doctrine which states that a man who is a member of the Assembly of God church cannot take another wife in addition to those that he currently has. Several years ago he brought to Y. and his house a new wife, who is from a different ethnolinguistic area, and this has produced a situation of great tension and violence in which Y.'s few personal belongings have been routinely damaged or destroyed. In addition, all three of the involved parties have physically wounded one another on multiple occasions. Traditionally, in Hagen, a man with multiple wives would strive to provide each with a house of her own, where she could raise their children, and he would allocate gardening space for her; thereby providing a modicum of independence for each wife and an arena of spacial separation of the women. Y.'s husband has not done this.

Y. feels trapped because the church teaches that she should not leave her marriage but rather that she should try to resolve the trouble and preserve the marriage. In her mind this means convincing the husband that he should send away the second wife. She says, "I pray and say, 'God when you made Adam and Eve you made them to be together - to have children and to look after them. Now this husband of mine has married another wife'"(6). She means that God intended people to be monogamous.

In the past, one way that some women escaped from difficult marital situations such as the one described here was through threatened or actual suicide. This is how a young Duna woman in 1998 dealt with the circumstances she found herself in. The woman became involved with a man who already had a wife, leading to various confrontations. Ultimately, the woman hanged herself. Another Duna woman, who is afraid that her husband might be planning to take a second wife, explained that this is the sort of trouble that arises when men take multiple wives.

A second form of violence against women that has been noted frequently in the newspapers from PNG is rape. The PNG Post Courier (12/15/98) reported that, "Daily rape incidents, especially pack-raping of women, have become a major concern in the province [Western Highlands]. Women, mothers, and young girls become victims of men who are raping and getting away."

Neither domestic violence nor rape are new practices in PNG. For example, raping women was a part of warfare practice in the Highlands. But some are suggesting that these activities are on the rise and that this is a sign of the End Times approaching. This is much like the case of increased witchcraft activity in Duna which is taken as a sign of heightened Satanic forces and perhaps the onset of the battle of “evil” versus “good” forces as described in the book of Revelations in the Bible.

Another phenomenon that some say is a sign of this apocalyptic battle is the high number of AIDS cases in PNG. A headline in the PNG Post Courier (2/24/99) reads, “Fears rising of HIV/AIDS epidemic. PNG leads the Pacific region in HIV/AIDS cases and they doubled in the past year, prompting fears that the disease could explode in Pacific islands the way it did in Africa, India and Asia.” In reality, it probably has already begun to explode in this way.

Some Hageners believe that the arrival of AIDS in PNG is one of God’s ways of preparing the earth for the year 2000. The narrative of AIDS having arrived in the country is a relatively new one (we were told by several informants that AIDS had just arrived in 1997):

“The time of God is coming up. The rugby player, M.A., went and got AIDS and brought it to PNG. [This is a story that many people told us about a rugby player who went abroad and slept with a woman who knew that she had AIDS. After having intercourse with the rugby player she is said to have left a note for him on his table before leaving the hotel room they were using that said, ‘Welcome to the World of AIDS’.] This man slept with many many women and they became sick. [It is also reported that he has died, as have his two wives, and some of the other women with whom he had sexual relations.]

“White people would have made medicine for this but they haven’t and that’s because it’s the time of God’s return. They would have made it and they should have made it but they didn’t so that is a sign that this sickness marks God’s return. There is no medicine for this and people are dying from this sickness. This is a punishment from God. Because white people would have received from God the knowledge to make a medicine for the sickness. But God wants this sickness to come up and kill people so that more will repent and come into the church and this will then herald in the Last Days. . .

“Some people are trying to take medicine for AIDS like shark grease or snake oil but it doesn’t work. It is not strong enough because this is God’s curse. They can take medicine but if God has cursed them then that is it -- it won’t work. This is a strong talk that will guide us in our actions whether the world ends or not, this is an important thing.” [1998 interview with Hagen woman] (2).

The increase in AIDS infections in PNG is thought by the Duna people to be a problem of increased promiscuity. This fits with the Duna pre-Christian notion of entropy that stated that the earth’s fertility needed to be renewed through ritual practices at regular fourteen year intervals, otherwise various events would occur, including that young people would be seen to become sexually precocious and promiscuous. And this would be a sign that the ground was finishing (i.e. the world was ending). Christian narratives of the last days also include prophecies that “immoral” practices, including promiscuity, will increase as certain people will be under the influence of the Antichrist (7).

Although many events (such as the dramatic increase in the number people diagnosed as being infected with HIV) are being taken as signs that the apocalypse will soon occur, a great uncertainty exists in the minds of most Hagen and Duna people about what will really happen and how their lives will actually change. In Hagen the Assembly of God church is preparing for the

year 2000 by raising the funds for the construction of a new church building -- one built from more durable materials than the current church, which has a straw floor and grass roof. Men and women alike are busily raising the funds needed for this project. Important male leaders in the Hagen community are preparing themselves to be baptized into the Assembly of God church in conjunction with the establishment of the new church building, which can serve as a haven if the End Times do come, and as a symbol of the potential for a New World if the earth does not finish in the year 2000. At their baptism these senior male leaders will be permitted to keep wives they already have but will promise not to marry again while one or more of these wives are living. Women generally are very active in church affairs, witnessing their dream experiences in services and taking part in ecstatic forms of worship with dancing and speaking in tongues.

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In the 1930s the Highlands of Papua New Guinea underwent dramatic change as the first European/Australian explorers came through the area, followed shortly thereafter by colonial government officers and Christian missionaries. Some of the people we work with remember those days in which the world as they knew it was turned upside down and the foreign incomers were classified as spirits from the sky. The spread of change in the lives of the Hagen and Duna peoples has been phenomenal. What the year 2000 will bring for these people is hard to determine, but for people who have undergone so much change in such a short time span the End Times scenarios are in some ways just another expression of the unexpectedly fantastic becoming the reality of the day. The “word of Jesus” came to these people only in the 1930s (for the Hagen area) or the 1960s (for the Duna area), yet Jesus is already expected to “return” and institute a new order of society within the lifetime of those who saw the first light-skinned “sky beings” arrive.

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