"Christ was for Papuans": Gogodala Pastors and the Circulation of Evangelical Christianity in South Western Papua

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Introduction

In his introduction to Conversion to Modernities: the Globalization of Christianity Peter van der Veer (1996, 9) argues that Christian conversion to “the entrepreneurial bourgeois self with his urge for self improvement” is an essential characteristic of modernity. In this chapter, I take up a central question raised in van der Veer’s edited collection: to what extent does the constitution of “modern” personhood intersect with the proselytizing project of Christian conversion? I do so in the context of conversion experiences and practices in colonial Papua (latterly, Papua New Guinea, PNG), among a group of Gogodala speakers who became missionaries to other groups throughout their own Division and those of other Divisions, later renamed Provinces. These activities followed a relatively rapid experience of missionization by a non-denominational, evangelical expatriate group based in Australia known as the Unevangelised Fields Mission (UFM).1 I explore processes and practices of circulation and localization in the context of these Gogodala missionary pastors and their wives in the constitution of Papuan Christianity in neighboring groups in Western and Southern Highlands Provinces. These indigenous missionaries were part of a concerted effort to bring “Christ to the Papuans” between the 1950s and 1980s under the guidance and influence of the UFM.2 Several of these couples spent up to eighteen years living in areas foreign in language, climate, food, and cultural practices.

1 The UFM was an expatriate mission, in the sense that its staff was drawn from outside the colonial territories of Papua and New Guinea. The missionaries who came to live among the Gogodala derived primarily from Australia, New Zealand, and, later, the United Kingdom. The headquarters of the UFM was situated in Melbourne, Victoria but the missionaries came from all over Australia and New Zealand (see Prince and Prince 1981).
2 Most of the early missionaries were among the first wave of those converted to Christianity, particularly between 1941 and the mid-1950s.
In the chapter, I compare understandings of Christianity and modernity implicit and explicit in UFM mission accounts with those of Gogodala missionaries in their interactions with other Papuans. Directed by their expatriate colleagues to provide “friendly contact, simple medical work and evangelism,” the Gogodala pastors were instrumental in the development of a certain kind of Papuan Christian, one modeled closely on their own gendered practices, embodied experiences, and ela gi—lifestyle or “way of life.” I argue that the kind of evangelical Christianity they espoused was imbued with Gogodala perceptions of their selection as the “chosen people” by the UFM in the 1930s (as both mission base and spiritual center), as well as certain understandings of the intersection between Christianity, development, and modernity, perceptions that punctuated their interactions with those they sought to proselytize. In looking at the connections between Christian conversion and making “modern” persons in colonial and postcolonial PNG, however, I do not assume that Christianity was an agent of modernizing processes or that the advent of Christianity in colonial Papua presupposed or even facilitated the development of modernity. As Fenella Cannell (2006, 38) notes, “It may be that the history of modernity is inextricably bound up with the history of Christianity, but this does not mean that the meaning of Christianity is sufficiently explained by the history of modernity.” It is not enough, as she suggests, simply understanding Christian conversion in terms of “the teleologies of modernity or global capitalism” (Cannell 2006, 39).

Nonetheless, in this account of pastor missionaries in southwestern Papua, I examine the dynamic between Christianity and modernity in colonial and postcolonial PNG as a site of both ambiguity and anxiety. In order to do this, I explore the idea that, as Cannell (2006, 39) suggests, Christianity is never entirely transcendent although it is ostensibly based on a notion of transcendence in which “God withdraws from man, [to leave him in] in a state of incompleteness that can be resolved only in death, when he will pass into the other world.” She concludes, “the ambiguity of the Christian message” is never resolved (Cannell 2006, 42), a paradox writ large in the tension between “this world” and its concerns and the transcendent “otherworld” of the spirit. Thus, the contradictions implicit in the Christian message mean that, “It can never contain only a single message with single possibilities of interpretation, because Christian doctrine is in itself paradoxical” (Cannell 2006, 43). This is a significant point to note when considering proselytizing practices where the Christian message, however defined and explicated, is of primary significance. I would argue, however, that Christian messages are not confined to the biblical or doctrinal (whether oral or textual), but are also wrought or demonstrated in and through practice, and embodied in the person of the missionary.