

CHAPTER 2

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BIAK AND NUMFOR WORLD VIEW

Paul Hiebert defines world view as "the ways (people) look at the world."¹⁸ William Haviland enlarges on this definition by referring to world view as ethnosemantics which he describes as "a branch of cognitive anthropology that attempts to understand native concepts of the universe."¹⁹ Haviland suggests that an understanding of the people's view of these concepts, and their inter-relation with the people's lifestyle, a person is better able to understand how the members of that society make their behavioral decisions.

There are several excellent paradigms that describe the world view a primitive society such as the Biak/Numfor people. Reference can be made to J. N. D. Anderson's work World Religions, or Robert Redfield's book The Primitive World and its Transformations to formulate such a view. I have based my description of the Biak/Numfor world view on the studies of writers who have dealt specifically with Melanesian people, and who have interacted with the Melanesian world of

¹⁸Paul Hiebert, Anthropological Insights for Missionaries (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), p. 111.

¹⁹William A. Haviland, Cultural Anthropology, 2d ed., (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1978), p. 43.

cargoism. My own experience of twenty years in Irian Jaya also has a significant part in formulating this description of the Biak/Numfor people, and confirms in my mind that the view of these writers is accurate.

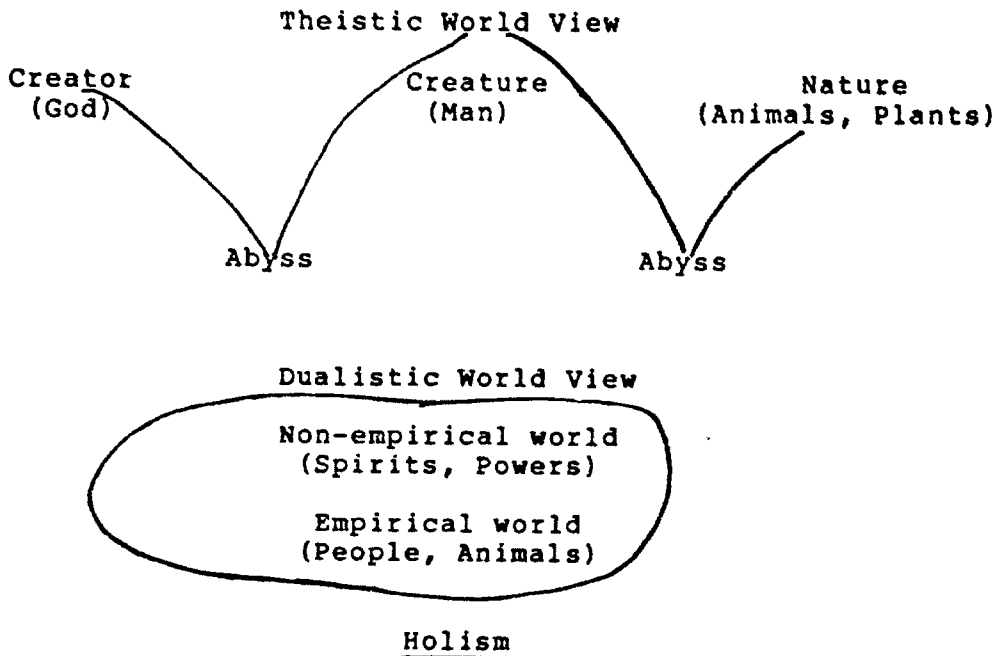
The categories of world view suggested below are not exclusive to the Biak and Numfor people, but are found among other Melanesian societies. This list is presented in order to give a better understanding of the people in dealing with the Koreri myth.

Dualism

The world view of Melanesians is dualistic. The people divide the world into two categories: empirical and non-empirical. The empirical world includes the natural environment, animals, humans, and other objective matter which they can experience with their five senses. The non-empirical world includes spirits; ghosts; totems; and impersonal, occultic, and unseen forces operating in society. Although this classification is considered as non-empirical, there are times when spirits will take on forms recognizable to the people of the society. These beings and forces are also closely associated with the empirical world, dwelling in caves, rivers, mountain tops, or in objects of stone, wood, and metal. Kamma says concerning the Biak people: "The Biak image of the world is strongly dualistic. The east and north are the seat of those powers that are well disposed towards men. The west and

south are inhabited by the adverse powers."²⁰

Darrell Whiteman illustrates this dualism, and contrasts this with the theism in a Judeo-Christian religious setting:²¹



Despite the separation of the world into empirical and non-empirical entities, the Irianese approach life's problems in a unified way known as holism. The people believe there is a single, underlying principle which unites the mental, physical, and spiritual aspects of their lives. That unifying principle is religion and particularly animism. The concept

²⁰Kamma, Koreri, p. 15.

²¹Darrell Whiteman, "Melanesian Religions: An Overview," in An Introduction to Melanesian Religions, ed. Ennio Mantovani (Goroka, New Guinea: The Melanesian Institute, 1984), p. 90-91.

of holism is seen in Whiteman's diagram by the circle that surrounds the empirical and non-empirical entities.

Melanesians do not distinguish religious from non-religious experiences as westerners do. For Melanesians, life is a total encounter with the universe including the religious, legal, economical, and political life of the society. Events may be explained to an Irianese in a scientific, empirical manner. But he will associate the scientific with the unknown. For example, a person may have malaria which can be treated medically. The Irianese may even see the malaria parasites under a microscope and be given an explanation of their existence and activity in a sick person's body. However, two questions still may exist in the national's mind: where did the germs come from, and how did they enter the body? Medical research confirms that malaria is contracted through the bite of a certain type of mosquito that carries the malaria parasite. But the Irianese conclude that someone has put a curse or hex on the malaria victim. He may seek professional medical help or, as is common, may seek help from native cures handed down by tradition from ancestors, or shamans that are experienced in helping sick people.

Irianese do not make a distinction between this world and future worlds. Their view contrasts sharply with the Western world view. Westerners tend to think in terms of either/or. As an illustration, we say that a person, plant, or animal is either dead or alive. This contrast is not as

distinct to an Irianese. To him, a person's soul can leave his body during a dream, and that sleeping person would be classified as dead. Another illustration is that stones, which are considered inanimate objects in western thinking, may receive or lose power and force according to the Irianese way of thinking. These objects are considered as having influence on the lives of people.

A further illustration of holistic thinking is the relationship between the departed ancestors and the present generation of the village. When an Irianese dies, the people believe that the soul departs permanently from the body (to distinguish from souls leaving bodies during dreams). Because they believe that the departed soul can still have contact with living people, the Irianese wish to be buried in their home village.

We should note that the general Melanesian world view, and particularly the Biak and Numfor world view, continues to be influenced by outside cultures. The concept of holism among Melanesians is changing to a more secular, Western perception of life.

Animism

Darrell Whiteman believes that Melanesians rely primarily on religious knowledge as their basis for knowing and understanding the world in which they live.²² Their relig-

²²Ibid., p. 87.

ious attempt to understand life is known as animism. Various the definition given by Ennio Mantovani in the glossary of his book An Introduction to Melanesian Religions: "belief in personalized spiritual beings such as souls, ghosts, and spirits."²³ I would include an additional aspect to that definition, which is the manipulation of those beings by people. Animism is a non-ethical religion which has no written creed that is followed universally. Each tribe in a practicing animistic society defines its own standard as to morals and rituals for fulfilling the requirements of its religious system. Even though animism has no formal creed, the religion is not devoid of religious thinking and formality. The animist knows when to carry out his religious duties. He knows, moreover, what will and will not work in his religious system.

The main function of animism is to make known the correct formula in order to help the individual control the forces that make up his environment. In his rituals, the animist does not seek the will of the spirit or the gods; rather, he wants the spirits or gods to do his will. Thus the religion serves a selfish end.

One of the most important aspects of animism is the method prescribed in order to manipulate power. This power which resides either in people or objects is known as mana. Mana is not a spirit but operates similarly to a spirit force. Mana has no moral quality in itself, but can be used either

²³Ibid., p. xi.

for good or bad purposes by people. It may be compared to electricity stored in a battery. Mana can be dissipated or transferred to other objects. As a battery can be recharged and also lose its power, so also a person can be filled with mana or lose the power.

In an animistic society an individual and the society must have mana operating in order to cope successfully with life. How does one know if mana is operational? Empirical proof determines this. For example, if the Biak person carries a charm or fetish to aid him in his fishing trip, and the trip is successful, he will conclude that mana is functioning on his behalf.

Mana can be manipulated in several ways. Special words and incantations may be used to bring about events beneficial to the one using mana. These words and incantations are frequently tied in with rituals and ceremonies.

Ritual is the means to approach the spirits. Ceremonies are performed to make the animist's world livable and unite the visible world with the invisible. The manner in which the ritual is performed can determine whether harm or good will result from the action.

One of the ritual means of manipulating power is sacrifice. An Irianese may perform his sacrifice, and then eat the food sacrificed to the spirit. To the Western mind this seems contradictory. To the animist, however, the important concern is the ritual, because ritual satisfies the spirit,

not the consuming of the food.

Taboos also are an important aspect of manipulating mana. Certain trees or designated areas of a tribal village are considered off limits by the society where the taboo is located. Should the boundaries of a forbidden area be crossed, adversity will strike the people who transgressed. The entire village may also be affected by the breaking of the taboos.

Fetishes and charms are also used to manipulate power. These objects containing mana are helpful in the people's thinking for warding off evil influences that affect their lives and activities. Biak fisherman are known to carry a small vial of special water designed to protect them from danger on the sea.

The last means to manipulate mana is through the activities of shamans. These people (both men and women) are specially endowed with the ability to call forces into play either to work black magic or white magic. Black magic is the working of harm to another person. White magic is the protection from harm used as a counter measure against an enemy.

Magic operates on the principle of contagion. The animist believes that bewitched objects that have been in contact with other items continue to have an ongoing effect after that contact has been broken. For example, an Irianese will have a stick hexed by a shaman, and will place that stick on the path of a victim whom the owner of the stick wants to harm. The power in the stick from contact with the shaman

"attacks" the enemy passing on the trail.

Another means of contagion is to obtain body material from an individual, such as a piece of hair, nail, or excrement. The person intending to do harm to the owner of the item takes it to a shaman who then performs a ritual resulting in the sickness or death of the one from whom the body material was taken.

In summary, animism is an encompassing feature of the Irianese belief system which covers birth, puberty, marriage, sickness, work, and death. Each of these aspects of life is looked upon as having religious significance in the lives of the people.

Pragmatism

Webster defines the word pragmatic as "concerned with causes and effects, or needs and results, rather than ideas or theories."²⁴ This describes the mind-set and attitude that are evident among the Biak and Numfor people.

Darrell Whiteman uses the term "abundant life"²⁵ to describe the attitude of Melanesians toward life. The people perceive their world in terms of the concrete rather than in terms of the philosophical or theological. Western Christianity presents its claims in propositional truths. Melanesian thought patterns equate these truths with their myths given to

²⁴Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary, 1984 ed., s.v. "pragmatic."

²⁵Whiteman, "Melanesian Religions," p. 96.

the people by their ancestors. Religion for the Melanesian is experiential rather than intellectual. Whiteman notes:

Melanesians are concerned with the religious question 'Does it work? Is it effective? Will it bring abundant life?' The question 'Is it true?', which may be very important to a Western Christian, is a cognitive entity separate from experience and thus not an important element in Melanesian religions.²⁶

It is difficult for a westerner to understand the reason that a Biak person would believe a konoor when the prophet's predictions are not fulfilled. The Biak person, however, like all Melanesians, looks at the issue in a different light. The question for the cargo people is not whether the prophet is telling the truth, but whether he can perform what he claims to do, independently of his knowledge of future events. Truth is not necessarily equated with knowledge to the Biak cultist, as it is to a Westerner. For the cultist, validity is measured by performance. Thus, if the konoor can continue to perform miracles or heal sick people, he is worthy of the people's trust in his role as a prophet and representative of the Koreri movement.

Homogeneity

One of the most significant aspects of the Irianese world view is the understanding of togetherness and family orientation. When speaking of cultures, this concept is expressed by the anthropological term homogeneous, defined by

²⁶Ibid., p. 97.

Webster as "uniform throughout in structure or make-up."²⁷ In Irian, family ties are strong, and the people preserve these ties through their cultural traditions. The westerner's philosophical roots are found in the expression "I exist, therefore I am." The Irianese would phrase this statement to say "I belong, therefore I am." John Mbiti, although an African, sums up very nicely the Irianese view of homogeneity when he states: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am."²⁸

In my thinking, a homogeneous society in Irian is expressed best by the concept of corporate personality or corporate solidarity. The Biblical basis for this thinking will be given in one of the lessons in Part II of this project. I am dealing with the basic idea here to show the significance of the term in Melanesia, and particularly in Biak and Numfor.

J. W. Rogerson defines corporate personality as "corporate responsibility and psychical unity between the members of the same social group in which the limits of an individual personality are not clearly defined."²⁹ With this definition the individual member of a society can be held responsible

²⁷Webster, s.v. "homogeneous."

²⁸Michael Azuh, "Corporate Personality in African Theology," (M. A. dissertation, Wheaton College, 1980), p.37, quoted in John Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy (New York: Anchor Books, 1970), p. 141.

²⁹J. W. Rogerson, "Hebrew Conception of Corporate Personality," Journal of Theological Studies 21 (April 1970): 6

for the fate of the group. H. Wheeler Robinson gives four aspects related to this term:

- (1) unity of its extension into the past and future,
- (2) characteristic realism of the conception as distinguished from personification. This makes the group a real entity which is actualized by its members,
- (3) fluidity of reference moving from the one to the many, and from the many to the one,
- (4) maintenance of the corporate idea even after the development of a new individualistic emphasis within the group.³⁰

Enlarging on Robinson's first point, we note that, because corporate personality of a group extends into their past and future, ancestry and procreation both are significant in the life of the people. Ancestors are considered as being a present and vital part of tribal life, forging a bond of unity within the group. This becomes very apparent in the Koreri movement, where the myth unites the cultists with their past history, and causes all members to work together for the hastening of the day of utopian bliss and abundance.

Irian, and particularly Biak and Numfor, is basically a face-to-face society. In a so called primary group, each member knows the other on an individual basis. This knowledge and intimacy that each one has of the other is sustained over the lifetime of an individual. Because the community is small in population and the area where they live is confined, members of the society do not travel extremely far or for long periods of time outside of their borders. Each member of the tribes knows his or her role and social boundaries in the

³⁰H. Wheeler Robinson, Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 27.

culture. Each person's concept of himself is reinforced by the response of the group. Therefore saving face is extremely important. Public insult is despised, and public correction or discipline must be handled in a very delicate manner.

Homogeneity is seen in the marriage arrangements among the Biak and Numfor people. The bride's family and the groom's family have active roles in determining the final bridal payment. The payment is collected from the groom's extended family. There is an understanding among family members that the father of the groom will repay his kin for their help in marrying his son. Special antique dinner plates are used as part of the bride payment. These family heirlooms are used only for that purpose. Eventually a substitute plate(s) of equal value will come back to the family who give their treasure for the bride payment.

A portion of the goods previously surrendered to the bride's family is, in turn, given back to the groom's parents or next of kin. In certain instances, female children born from the newly formed household will become the property of the father's uncle. This uncle will arrange the girl's wedding when she becomes eligible for marriage.

Another illustration of corporate solidarity in Irian comes from the Sougb people located thirty miles from our station. Expensive pieces of bridal cloth are used in marriage payments. These pieces of cloth are used in the same manner as the plates are used among the Biak and Numfor people. The

cloth is owned by the entire clan, not by individual families. There must be solidarity in decision making before the cloth is given for any bridal arrangement.

In economics, corporate personality is in evidence. If one member of a society has a certain amount of wealth (as measured by the people's definition of wealth), all of the members of the group consider themselves rich through identity with the wealthy individual. The more fortunate bear the responsibility of the less fortunate. A mentally retarded person is the responsibility of the whole group. The Biak society does not consider that person as a social outcast.

A final illustration points out the Melanesian concept of corporate solidarity. A man from Biak killed a man from the Hatam tribe while driving a truck. Upon hearing of the Hatam man's death, the Biak people in the area became fearful that revenge would be taken by the Hatam people. Western thinking demands that only the man who killed the Hatam person be judged for his conduct. Irian thinking interprets the situation to mean that the whole tribe, along with the individual, is accountable for the man's death in the truck accident.

Corporate personality has tremendous spiritual implications for the Biak and Numfor people. These implications will be noted in the biblical refutation of the Koreri movement in this project.

In order to enjoy the "abundant life" to which Whiteman refers, the people must control and manipulate this spirit world. Although the Biak and Numfor tribes are ahead of some other Irianese groups in their proximity to modern influences and western religious thinking, they are still conditioned in their life style by some of their past traditions. The Koreri myth is one such tradition that influences the people to seek abundant life. The myth, however, does not give consideration to the abundant life that the Gospel can bring to the Biak and Numfor people.

In chapter one, six features of Biak and Numfor cargoism were enumerated. These features are intimately related with the Biak/Numfor world view. An understanding of these features will be developed as the project progresses.