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The Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*

*George Mombi**

Many cultural groups in Melanesia aspire to an ideal of *gutpela sindaun*, the perfect life.[1] *Gutpela sindaun* is a state that was lost when the first ancestors committed a great wrong, in a period known as the *taim nambawan tumbuna i mekim asua*. The first ancestors, or *namba wan tumbuna*, are solely responsible for this loss.[2]

How do Melanesians know this? There is no simple answer. Knowledge of the lost *gutpela sindaun* is drawn from diverse myths that vary from tribe to tribe. Despite their many variations, Melanesian myths tend to agree that the good life was terminated on account of the ancestors' wrongdoing, or *asua*, against a folk hero. In response to this idea, Melanesians past and present have fashioned social, economic, and religious practices that actively seek to restore the lost state of *gutpela sindaun*, which is still deeply desired.

In Neo-Melanesian or Tok Pisin, the term *gutpela* means 'good, attractive, fine.'[3] *Gutpela* also connotes the adjectives 'well, decent, perfect, pleasant'. The term *sindaun* literally means 'to sit, sit down, live, stay,'[4] but it also implies the concept 'way of life.' Hence, *gutpela sindaun* means a perfect and a pleasant way of life. Related concepts include *gutpela laip* (good life), *laip is pulap tru* (fullness of life), and *nogat hevi na bagarap* (no problem or calamity). The terms *istap gut*

* George Mombi is Dean of Graduate Studies at the Christian Leaders' Training College, where he teaches theology. He holds a PhD from the University of Otago and is a former Langham Scholar. He is based in Banz, Papua New Guinea.

(keeping a good life), *istap stret* (having an orderly life), and *istap klin* (being clean physically and ritually) are also used to describe the primal concept of *gutpela sindaun*.[5]

While some scholars define this idea in terms of material wholeness,[6] others speak of a relational wellbeing.[7] Others combine both attributes, which is correct in my view.[8] *Gutpela sindaun* implies both bodily and spiritual wholeness.[9] What Ennio Mantovani calls 'the completeness of life' is the key to understanding the Melanesian search for a holistic existence. For this reason, *gutpela sindaun* can also be understood as synonymous with the Melanesian concept of 'life'. It contains the Melanesian values of achieving happy relationships, prestige, security, health, wealth, meaning, success, both on this earthly plane and in relation to the cosmos.[10]

In Melanesian thought, *gutpela sindaun* is not an abstract notion of salvation. Rather, it refers to a pragmatic, concrete, this-worldly salvation that will involve the restoration of the known cosmos to its original state. Traditional Melanesian culture looks to the material world for abundance and fullness of life.[11]

Gutpela sindaun is an understanding of life as corporeal earthly immortality.[12] It is an ideal of immortality lived on earth, in contrast to our current mortal state. It refers to a life that is spiritually and physically complete, balanced, and theistic as well as bio-cosmic, meaning a life that is centred on both God and earthly life.[13] This life is one integral whole with no demarcation between the spiritual and physical realms.

Immortality, in the Melanesian mind, means life without ageing. This notion is depicted in the Grujime myth of the Mundogumur people, among many others. In this story, a woman named Grujime and her two daughters went to pound sago, the starch found in tropical palms. While they were doing so, the occultists or *sanguma* crept up and killed Grujime. She had thankfully hidden her two daughters before the attack. One had climbed a tree and the other hid under sago palm leaves. After the *sanguma* had killed her and disappeared, Grujime came back to life through her blood. She patched up her body using some sago starch. Then she called out to her daughters to come out of hiding. But the one in the tree mistook

her mother for a spirit. She took fright, came down and ran home to tell their father what had happened. Her father frantically rounded up the men of the village and, as soon as his wife and their other daughter arrived with a bag of sago, the men chased her out of the village. She fled to another one and tried to settle there. But she couldn't rest, for she could hear the banging of slit-gongs, which meant the villagers were still chasing her. And she kept going until she reached a place far, far away. The location where Grujime was killed and revived is still known today. It lies just on the outskirts of Fudukuang village, in the hinterlands of Biwat village on the Yuat River, my home village. The Mundogumur people believe that if Grujime had been allowed to stay, human beings would not now grow old and die. Instead, at the point of death they would enter fresh new bodies and live on.

Other myths use the analogy of a snake shedding its skin to explain rebirth.[14] In other words, corporeal earthly immortality is understood as the removal of old skin and putting on of new skin like a snake. It is believed that human beings originally possessed the gift of immortality and could shed their bodies and be reborn as youths.[15] The ancestors lost immortality due to their evil ways (*pasin nogut*) and, as a result, were subjected to today's unhappy, spoiled, mortal life (*sindaun nogut*). The desired return to *gutpela sindaun* lies at the heart of Melanesian cultures, religions and the so-called cargo cult movements.

Ancestral myths and Melanesian worldviews are the interrelated background elements to *gutpela sindaun*.

First, ancestral myths or *tumbuna stori* explain what life was like in the beginning, its termination, the present state of life, and its future restoration. The term *tumbuna* means 'grandfather, predecessors [and] ancestors.'[16] It can also be applied to the continuing line of descendants from grandparents down to their grandchildren and posterity. *Stori* means 'story, [narrative], parable, to tell a story.' The term *tumbuna stori* thus implies an ancestral story or history passed down from generation to generation. In oral societies like those of Melanesia, *tumbuna stori* is an oral account of how the world and life came to be, how it is now, and how it will be.[17]

Myths are the basis of socio-religious, -economic and -political practices in Melanesia. People there believe that myths tell the stories of real events that occurred in the past, which in some cases are supported with visible evidence. As Mircea Eliade notes, in primal and archaic societies myth 'happens to be the very foundation of social life and culture… [It] express[es] the *absolute truth*, because it narrates a *sacred history*… Being *real* and *sacred*, the myth becomes exemplary, and consequently *repeatable*, for it serves as a model, and by the same token as a justification, for all human actions.'[18]

This holds true across Melanesian societies, where myths are believed to sacralise the cosmos and explain the world's origins.[19] As Kees Bolle writes, myths are 'an expression of the sacred in words' that reveal the foundations and purpose of the known world.[20] This makes them living realities. According to Malinowski, the myth

> expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficacy of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man [sic]. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.[21]

Through such myths, people attempt to explain how life was in the beginning as a physical and spiritual whole.

Melanesian myths often suggest that, in the beginning, life was perfect. The ancestors had fashioned a spiritually and materially integrated, perfect life. But they lost immortality due to a great wrong they committed, called *asua*. The myths variously identify the *asua* as impatience, murder, sexual intercourse, and so on.[22] For the Yangoru people in East Sepik, it was the murder of the god-man Saii-Urin.[23] These were the immediate causes of *gutpela sindaun* being lost. But many myths anticipate that our currently unbalanced state will come to an end when the departed ancestors return. Ancestors like Saii-Urin and Manamakari, the ones who terminated the good life,[24] are the key to restoring it.[25]

Melanesian ancestral myths emphasise themes central to *gutpela sindaun*. Researchers have categorised these myths according to their five over-arching themes.[26]

The first is that of the division of humankind. The second is the separation of the two brothers. Third is the lost paradise. Fourth is the end time or eschaton. And the fifth theme is the advent of the ancestor hero or redeemer. Another scholar has categorised Melanesian myths into the five themes of creation, death, the first human, culture and cargo myths.[27] From a Christian perspective, there is substantive overlap between both lists, which I amalgamate into one. Some of these mythical themes clearly parallel biblical ones, which for many Melanesians provides a bridge between the Christian gospel and their traditions. This is why, historically, Melanesian thought about *gutpela sindaun* was re-read in light of ideas more recently introduced by the Christian faith.

At least four interrelated themes capture the essence of belief in the *gutpela sindaun*. The first is that of the creation of the cosmos and everything therein. Creation myths are found among many Melanesian tribes. As Wendy Flannery observes, although not many of these are detailed cosmogonies, Melanesian myths generally tend to account for the origin of *their* world, people, culture, environment, rituals, etc.[28]

The creation myths of the Ngaing people of Madang, Papua New Guinea, are an example of this. They are one of the cultures whose beliefs illustrate creation as a staged process.

In the first stage, the high god or supreme being Parambik initiated the creation of the cosmos with land, rivers, wild animals, birds, plants, totems and war gods.[29] From the coast to the highlands of the country, people have generally believed in the existence of a high god or supreme being who authors or creates life. Many peoples in Melanesia believe in the existence of a high god, but they rarely invoke them to meet their material needs.[30]

In the second stage, the Ngaing believe that semi-gods, superhumans, and totemic beings[31] created parts of the natural world and human cultures.[32] Customs, rituals, artefacts, social order, and magic generally belong to this second stage. For example, the To Kabin-

ana and To Purgo myths of the Tolai people suggest that these two brothers created certain features of the world including culture, but not the whole cosmos.[33]

We also see this in the Madang people's Manup-Kilibob myth.[34] After a falling out, Manup and Kilibob began creating separate parts of the world. Manup is credited with creating love magic, sorcery and warfare. Meanwhile, his younger brother Kilibob made human beings, pigs, dogs, food plants, artefacts, new islands, reefs, and the peoples of the Rai coast of Madang.[35] He gave them 'the power of speech [languages], plants, bows and arrows, stone axes, rain and ritual formulas.'[36] Many cultures associate such superhuman beings, or culture heroes, with their group.[37] While some treat myths on the origins of culture and humanity separately, they arguably come under the broader theme of creation.[38]

The second theme is that of a lost paradise or *gutpela sindaun*. This myth suggests that an idyllic life was 'spoilt by foolishness, disobedience, or ingratitude'.[39] The Mansren or Manamakari myth of Indonesia's West Papua is one of many such myths.[40] Death myths also depict the same idea. These often portray superhuman beings or sky gods ending the good life to punish humans for their wicked ways.[41]

A third theme is that of the end time or eschaton. Many myths predict a cosmic upheaval when a redeemer will restore the lost golden age. Some speak of natural disasters such as a solar eclipse or a violent earthquake before the final coming of the culture hero.[42] In one case, a native of the Markham Valley, in Papua New Guinea's Morobe province, reportedly had visions of the end of the world during which the ancestors would cause earthquakes and floods.[43]

A fourth theme is the return of the culture hero and dead ancestors who will restore the good life. Departed culture heroes like Manamakari or Saii-Urin who confiscated corporeal earthly immortality will return with this same gift. Immortality and prosperity will be regained on their return.[44] Friedrich Steinbauer's account of a cargo cult myth vividly demonstrates this idea's direct lineage to the *gutpela sindaun*. The story goes that Kilibob, the younger of the two

brothers in the Madang myth, initially created the cargo that Europeans brought with them. They only gained technological mastery over Melanesians by a costly mistake that the latter made:

> Whites and Blacks were allowed to choose what they wished. Kilibob made firearms and iron ships and placed them beside the traditional weapons and canoes. The Blacks chose the latter because they were familiar with them. Their choice forced them to stagnate. The Whites, however, chose the advanced, technical implements and so became superior to the Blacks. Only when Kilibob returns and shows the Blacks the way to technological mastery over the world will equality between the two be established.[45]

The myth predicts that former relationships will be restored. Melanesians' ancestors will be reunited with their living relatives, and peace and harmony will once more reign in the universe. This will mark a new beginning of the golden age, that is a return to *gutpela sindaun*.[46]

Some scholars see the cargo cult phenomenon as a core theme of Melanesian myths.[47] But the idea of "cargo" is clearly a later development.[48] It is the modern expression of Melanesian beliefs in a corporeal earthly immortality, which culture heroes will bring back for the living. The arrival of Europeans and their material goods was often understood as confirmation of older, established myths. As Glynn Cochrane writes, 'new concepts were not created in a vacuum' but 'had to be linked to old ideas and theories,' making them 'limited by myths which were in existence at the time'.[49] Cargo myths tapped into the pre-existing notion of a lost paradise. They were fuelled by a hankering for its restoration, reuniting the living and the dead. These ideas trace their ancestry to the *gutpela sindaun* myth, pervasive even in Melanesian worldviews.[50]

A worldview is the way in which cultures 'conceive of the world, how they categorize the things in the world and structure their knowledge, and how they interpret life experience so as to live fulfilling lives.'[51] Often taken for granted, a group's worldview is the very heart of its culture and shapes every part of it.[52] It provides a framework for interpreting the world, while religion reflects a people's view of transcendent reality.[53] Melanesian worldviews are

often religious worldviews dominated by ancestors and spirits.[54] Tribal people in general tend to fashion an encapsulated cosmology which 'embraces the divine, the human and the natural in one interlocked, working system, usually with a hierarchical arrangement.'[55] This interweaving of worldview and religion links nature, human beings and supernatural beings. The heart of Melanesian worldviews beats with the same concern for *gutpela sindaun*.[56]

Melanesian understandings of the cosmos are not as divided as in the West.[57] They tend to see the spiritual and material worlds as two sides of the same coin. Theirs are 'unitive worldviews',[58] meaning that they view the world as an inclusive system embracing the whole of reality, including transcendent powers such as gods and culture heroes, which the latter created and bequeathed to humans.[59] This frames the cosmos as a 'finite and almost exclusively physical realm', as Peter Lawrence writes.[60] Human beings are the locus of both systems. These are so interwoven in Melanesia that religious consciousness tends to influence social values and relationships. The latter gives spiritual and religious meaning to everything in one's earthly life.[61] In turn, such worldviews inevitably also shape Melanesian belief systems, religions, and cultures.

The interconnectedness of the material and immaterial realms depicts a cosmic-centric *gutpela sindaun*. This lost paradise is envisioned as both this-worldly and cosmic. It involves human beings, the material and the unseen worlds. And its return hinges on culture heroes and ancestors.[62] *Gutpela sindaun* embraces the 'living dead' who have died but are spiritually alive, the 'living living' who have not yet tasted death, and the whole cosmos.[63]

While they await their culture heroes and earthly immortality, Melanesians influenced by this myth strive to recreate their lost paradise in the here and now.

Notes

1 Melanesia is one of the south-western sub-regions of the South Pacific, along with its Pacific regional neighbours, Micronesia in the north and Polynesia in the east. Melanesia is comprised of Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and the Papua Province (formerly Irian Jaya) of Indonesia.

2 Garry W. Trompf, *Melanesian Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 71.

3 Friedrich Steinbauer, *Neo-Melanesian Dictionary* (Madang, PNG: Kristen Press, 1969), 56.

4 Steinbauer, *Neo-Melanesian Dictionary*, 172.

5 Joshua Kurung Daimoi, 'An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage from an Indigenous Evangelical Perspective' (Ph.D. diss., University of Sydney, 2004), 179.

6 Gernot Fugmann, 'Salvation in Melanesian Religions', *Point*, Vol. 6 (1984): 282.

7 Daimoi, 'An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage', 181.

8 John G. Strelan, *Search for Salvation: Studies in the History and Theology of Cargo Cults* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977), 81; Maxon Mani, 'Quest for Salvation in Papua New Guinea: the Yangoruan Context', *Melanesian Journal of Theology,* Vol. 26, No. 2 (2010): 70; Doug Hanson, 'Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans', (D.Miss diss., Western Seminary, 2012), 55; Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1999), 82.

9 Daimoi, 'An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage', 181.

10 Ennio Mantovani, 'Ancestors in Melanesia: Toward a Melanesian and Christian Understanding', *Catalyst*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1990): 26.

11 Daimoi, 'An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage', 30.

12 The notion of corporeal earthly immortality is depicted in some of the myths found among certain Melanesian cultural groups, such as the Daribi. Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 35. For the Manamakari or Mansren myth of the Irian Jaya people, see Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of "Cargo" Cults in Melanesia* (New York: Schocken Books, 1987), 136-141.

13 Ennio Mantovani, 'Introduction to Melanesian Religions', *Point*, Vol. 6 (1984): 31.

14 Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 35-6; also Daimoi, 'An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage', 38-39.

15 Norman C. Habel, 'Introduction', in *Powers, Plumes and Piglets: Phenomena of Melanesian Religion*, ed. Norman C. Habel (Bedford Park: Australian Association for

the Study of Religions, reprinted 1983), 7; see also Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (London: Kegan Paul 1926), 43.

16 Steinbauer, *Neo-Melanesian Dictionary,* 208.

17 Wendy Flannery, 'Appreciating Melanesian Myths', in *Powers, Plumes and Piglets: Phenomena of Melanesian Religion*, ed. Habel, 161; also Glynn Cochrane, *Big Men and Cargo Cults* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 17.

18 Italics in original. Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, transl. Philip Mairet (London: Harvill, 1960), 23.

19 Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 18; see also Flannery, 'Appreciating Melanesian Myths', 161.

20 Kees W. Bolle, 'Myth: An Overview', in *Encyclopaedia of Religion,* Vol. 10, ed. Lindsay Jones (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 6359.

21 Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, 23.

22 Trompf, *Melanesian Religion,* 71.

23 Mani, 'Towards a Theological Perspective on the Mystery of Suffering in the midst of Prosperity Theology within the Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches in Papua New Guinea, particularly Yangoru', *Melanesian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2013): 12.

24 For the return of Saii-Urin, see Mani, 'Towards a Theological Perspective on the Mystery of Suffering', 71; and for Manamakari, see Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 140.

25 Daimoi, 'An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage', 182.

26 Strelan, *Search for Salvation,* 60-61.

27 Habel, 'Introduction', 7-8.

28 Flannery, 'Appreciating Melanesian Myths', 163.

29 Peter Lawrence, *Road Belong Cargo: A Study of the Cargo Movement in the Southern Madang District of New Guinea* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1964), 16.

30 Daimoi, 'An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage', 62-66.

31 Daimoi, 'An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage', 31-37.

32 Lawrence, *Road Belong Cargo,* 16; Flannery, 'Appreciating Melanesian Myths', 163-164.

33 Flannery, 'Appreciating Melanesian Myths', 163-164.

34 Flannery, 'Appreciating Melanesian Myths', 164.

35 For details on the separate creations of the two brothers Manup and Kilibob after their dispute, see Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 60-1; see Kenelm O. L. Burridge on the separation of the two brothers' families, in *Tangu Traditions: A Study of Way of the Life, Mythology and Developing Experience of a New Guinea People* (Oxford: Clarendon,

1968), 400-402. For an ethnographic study of the Tangu people, see Kenelm O. L. Burridge, 'Tangu, Northern Madang District', in *Gods, Ghosts and Men in Melanesia: Some Religions of Australian New Guinea and the New Hebrides*, ed. Peter Lawrence and M. J. Meggitt (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1965), 224-249.

36 Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 17.

37 From this point on, I will use 'culture hero' as a designation for the being often referred to as the primordial being, superhuman being, *dema*, or folk hero. I will reserve the term 'ancestor' for dead human ancestors, past and present.

38 Habel, 'Introduction', 7-8.

39 Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 60-61.

40 For a detailed account of the Mansren myth, see Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 133-157.

41 The Sau myth of the Daribi people of Chimbu (Simbu) in PNG also highlights the theme of death. Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 35, 71.

42 Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 17; also Friedrich Steinbauer, *Melanesian Cargo Cults: New Salvation Movements in the South Pacific*, transl. Max Wholwill (Brisbane: University of Queensland, 1979), 34-35.

43 Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 111; *cf.* Patrick Gesch, 'The Cultivation of Surprise and Excess: The Encounter of Cultures in the Sepik of Papua New Guinea', in *Cargo Cults and Millenarian Movements: Transoceanic Comparisons of New Religious Movements*, ed. G. W. Trompf (New York: Moulton de Gruyter, 1990), 218-219.

44 Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 194.

45 Steinbauer, *Melanesian Cargo Cults,* 41.

46 Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 60-61.

47 Habel, 'Introduction,' 8; see also Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 59.

48 Moses Bakura, 'Towards a Melanesian Perspective on Conversion: The Interrelationship Between Communal and Individual Decision-making and its Implications for a Melanesian Communal Way of Life', *MJT*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2009): 21.

49 Cochrane, *Big Men and Cargo Cults*, 17.

50 Daimoi, 'An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage', 39-40.

51 Ken A. McElhanon, 'Worldview', in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 1032-1033, cited in Hanson, 'Contextualized Christology for Papua New Guineans', 36.

52 Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 53.

53 Terry C. Muck, 'Religion', in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 818-891, cited in Hanson, 'Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,' 36.

54 Daimoi, 'An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage', 132.

55 Harold W. Turner, *The Roots of Science: An Investigative Journey Through the World's Religions* (Auckland: DeepSight Trust, 1998), 22.

56 Hanson, 'Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans', 37.

57 P. Lawrence and M. J. Meggitt, 'Introduction', in *Gods, Ghosts and Men in Melanesia,* ed. Lawrence and Meggitt, 7, 9.

58 Turner, *The Roots of Science*, 19-20.

59 Turner, *The Roots of Science*, 164.

60 Lawrence, *Road Belong Cargo*, 9, 11.

61 Hanson, 'Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans', 57.

62 Trompf, *Melanesian Religions*, 17.

63 Mani, 'Quest for Salvation in Papua New Guinea', 69-73.