

Christianity and the Pacific

Micronesian Religion

* Sky gods: stories known and recounted, but not absorbed into personal devotion. They remain mythical figures—like Greek and Roman gods. Anulap, Lukeilang, Olofat (trickster god). Lived in Kuchua (sky world)

Creation myths in Marianas and different islands

Always room in the pantheon for additional deities—they had been added long before Christianity

* Guardian or protector spirits—local figures, generally the spirits of deceased islanders who had proven their worth to kinsmen during their lifetime. Sometimes known as “ancestral spirits.”

+ Guardian spirits consulted through spirit-possession. Offered gifts and honored with shrines (type varies throughout the islands—skulls in Marianas at time of first mission)

+ Importance of *mana*, or power—the single most important religious concept. Whatever works should be practiced, no matter where it originated.

+ Guardian spirits could be promoted from family to village, or even island deity.

* Nature spirits: associated with certain landmarks: a tree or a stretch of shoreline, but especially in wooded areas. But some confusion between nature and ancestral spirits

* Emphasis not on doctrine (beliefs), but on practice—with special emphasis on rituals to be followed and taboos to be observed.

Christianity's Introduction to Pacific

* San Vitores and companions in Marianas in 1668 was first mission established. Mission party consisted of 6 Jesuits and 31 lay catechists from PI and Mexico. No Spanish troops at first.

* Conflict from the outset

+ Began with Choco's assertion that baptismal water was killing the young, and the Jesuits' disrespect of the ancestral skulls. Rationale for both.

+ Then a series of cultural clashes resulting in intermittent violence for 30 years. Body count on both sides. “Warfare” only in the island meaning, not European definition. Real loss of life came from European epidemics as Spanish ships visited regularly. Population drop of 90 percent during this period.

* Result was acceptance of Christianity in Marianas—and rebuilding of island society.

+ Village life re-established throughout Guam, even with shrunken population

+ Accommodation of Spanish culture and Marianas practice—even as Spanish flag flew over the islands.

* Relative ease of introducing Christianity later in other parts of the Pacific.

+ Process began in the late 1700s and through the following century. Mostly it was without

the direct support of a foreign government—so no acceptance of “faith and flag”

- + Examples of Kosrae and Marshalls

Cultural Impact of Christianity

* Old argument on cultural consequences of Christianity on island societies

- + Mission of the Marianas has often been represented as an especially deadly clash between and island culture and an advanced European society—a clash that supposedly ended in genocide. This represented what could happen when the cross and the sword worked in collaboration to achieve their twin aims.

- + Even if other societies did not suffer the same loss of life, other depredations would be worked upon the people and their cultures. Land would be alienated, customs would be disparaged, island peoples would be sold into bondage when their territory was seized.

- + The people may have received a strong belief system, the argument went, but they paid the price in cultural loss and surrender of freedom.

* Actual social changes were indeed significant in the Marianas, as elsewhere in the Pacific. Christian missionaries were a force for change.

- + Closing of clubhouses (with prostitution) in Marianas, as later in Yap and Palau. Reasons for and against this change in these islands.

- + Menstrual huts closed in Yap so that women could attend church on Sundays.

- + Other significant cultural changes—eg, pastor inviting congregation to stand in the presence of the high chief for the final blessing.

- + Dress standards changed, reading and schooling was introduced, work patterns were altered (with impact on names given to Saturday and Sunday—“preparation” and “holy”).

* But much of the culture was absorbed and continued through assimilation

- + Picture of the young people in the Marianas chanting the litanies (as they once had chanted local histories) wearing Western clothes.

- + Gatherings of the village in a church, with the old male-female seating divisions honored.

- + Traditional forms of competition, such as recitation of legends, were incorporated into church activities.

- + In the end, Christianity has taken such firm root in island cultures that it can be considered a key component in all island societies today.

- + American who complained to a traditional Fijian chief of the damage Christianity had done to the island society. Reply that had it not been for those changes, the foreigner might have served as “long pig.” (Fijian chief’s fork for long pig turned over to pastor and now exhibited at the Peabody Museum).

* Main contribution of Christianity was end to inter-village warfare, which once had been endemic nearly everywhere.

- + End to inter-village warfare in Marianas. But curiously, village chiefs who had converted to the new religion had taken on the role of military leaders marching for the Spanish during the early years.

- + Cessation of island warfare in Chuuk. William Logan walking on to the battlefield with

his black umbrella—ban on warfare.

+ The new religion offered a large banner under which smaller political and social factions could unit. This was especially important on islands that had no paramount chief—ie, everywhere in Micronesia but Kosrae. Belief in Christ provided a bond between people of different locales, just as membership in the same clan had traditionally. But a shared faith embraced a far larger portion of the population than clan ties, while providing a spiritual basis for regarding even the stranger with sympathy. Denominational differences within Christianity may have led to wariness and even recriminations at times, but with one exception (in Kiribati) there were no violent eruptions among Christians of different denominations.

+ Is it too much to claim that the religion introduced by Western voyagers helped make the Pacific truly pacific?

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