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MELANESIAN MORALITY AND BIBLICAL VIRTUES

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Abstract

Early accounts of European contact with Melanesians portrayed animistic societies as bereft of morality. More recent anthropological work has theorized that Melanesian morality is pragmatic in that moral problems are worked out on a case-by-case basis. In this essay I argue that moral reasoning in a Melanesian society is much more complex and multi-faceted. I suggest that Western ethical theories (such as deontological, pragmatist, and virtue ethics) are also evident. In fact, classical, biblical, and classical European theories of ethics can help uncover, rather than obscure, morality in so-called primitive or animistic societies. In cases where societies do have robust moral reasoning, these ethical systems should be preserved, yet refined through further interaction with the fields of ethics and biblical theology. I examine six constructs of moral reasoning on the island of Tanna, Vanuatu: 1) the perceived “normal” state of moral equilibrium; 2) the conceptualizations of “the good”; 3) the categorical imperative; 4) virtue ethics and moral exemplars within the mythical corpus; 5) moral obligations within the society; and 6) the authority behind such obligations.

Keywords

Vanuatu, moral reasoning, virtue ethics, animism, Melanesian morality

INTRODUCTION

When Europeans began colonizing the so-called “primitive peoples” of sub-Saharan Africa, Australia, South America, and the Pacific, they believed they had encountered tribes that had little capacity for moral reasoning. William DeWitt Hyde, President of Bowdoin College, pontificated in his survey of ethical systems, “The conscience of an educated Christian has a worth and authority which the conscience of the benighted savage has not.”¹ If the moral “good” was innate in advanced

¹ W. Hyde, *Practical Ethics* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1900), 181.

humans, somehow it had not evolved amongst “savages.” On the other hand, if morality was socially constructed, these primitive societies had not yet progressed to the point of codifying morality in the way that European civilizations did.

The image of the “savage,” along with his savage ethics, was reified in colonial days by sensational reports of cannibalism, incessant warfare, and sexual violence. Such reports caught the imagination of missionaries in the 19th and early 20th centuries, who surmised that the noetic effects of sin were so devastating to humankind’s moral compass that the “natives” were essentially blank slates, devoid of moral reasoning, waiting for Christianity to write a moral code on their hearts. For example, James Dennis’ essay on the “social evils of the non-Christian world” maintained there was no training of children in India, Burma, or Africa. “There is no family training. Children run wild and grow up with untamed and grossly tainted natures.”² Europeans likened primitive peoples to children lacking emotional control. Jahoda’s thorough study of “images of savages” during colonialism contains numerous reports, including a missionary who decried “theft, lying, murder, atrocities, the most revolting forms of corruption do not seem to astonish anyone.”³ Another missionary report said, “Our Blacks have not yet arrived at a degree of personality to be able to follow a coherent line of conduct ... [O]ne has to supervise them a great deal.”⁴ Another reported that the natives “engage in orgies every day,”⁵ and one missionary described the natives’ “purely negative morality.”⁶ The natives were “from the standpoint of morality, veritable children incapable of self-control, of mastering their passions and their greed.”⁷

Today most readers would see such appraisals for what they are: ethnocentric and racist. Colonizers and missionaries did not recognize ethical systems because they did not bother to learn the local languages which are used to encode and transmit moral reasoning. If primitive societies lacked a Western-looking judicial or legislative system,

² J. Dennis, *Social Evils of the Non-Christian World* (New York: Revell, 1889), 64.

³ G. Jahoda, *Images of Savages: Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 146.

⁴ Jahoda, 147.

⁵ Jahoda, 146.

⁶ Jahoda, 146.

⁷ Jahoda, 147.

Westerners assumed there must be no way to regulate social behavior. And since most of these societies were pre-literate, Westerners assumed there must be no body of accumulated rational thought on philosophy or ethics.

However, the notion that pre-contact societies lacked moral reasoning contradicts the observations of cross-cultural workers who have actually lived for a prolonged period of time in sub-Saharan Africa, the Pacific, the Americas, and Australia. The past hundred years of ethnography has uncovered ethical systems in every corner of the world, and has often discovered surprising overlap with Western codes of conduct. Anthropologists have recorded intricate taboos related to respect for elders, sexuality, land use, and hospitality. Now we know that even if a society's ethical system is neither written nor articulated systematically, a robust corpus of moral reasoning is transmitted through other societal structures such as myth, ritual, gossip, and speeches from the "big men."

Early Europeans failed to see the ethical reasoning of "primitive peoples" because their own categories for moral reasoning had become so in-grown and specialized that they were non-coterminous with animistic societies. But the ethical worlds of Europeans and pre-contact peoples are not so incongruous that a dialogue is impossible. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that Western ethical theories (such as deontological, pragmatist, and virtue ethics) are also evident in a particular animistic society in Melanesia. In fact, classical, biblical, and modern European theories of ethics can help discover, rather than cloud, how moral reasoning is done in so-called primitive or animistic societies. In cases where societies do have robust moral reasoning, these ethical systems should be maintained, yet strengthened and honed through further interaction with the fields of ethics and biblical theology.

In the past sixty years, anthropologists and missiologists have focused especially on how dyads like honour/shame and sacred/profane delineate moral judgments in animistic societies. Much less attention has been paid to other ethical constructs like: 1) the "normal" state of moral equilibrium in animistic reasoning; 2) animistic conceptualizations of "the good"; 3) retribution as a categorical imperative in animistic moral reasoning; 4) virtue ethics in animistic societies; 5) moral obligations in animistic societies; and 6) the authority behind such obligations, or an epistemology of moral obligations in animistic societies. I will work through each of

these constructs to understand the ethical system in one particular animistic society in the South Pacific.

SCOPE

This paper will focus on moral reasoning in Melanesia, and especially on Tanna Island, where I lived and did fieldwork from 2002 to 2012.⁸ Some moral concepts that I will explore seem to be generalizable to other animistic societies, such as the dyads of honour and shame, right and wrong, or the link between taboos and misfortune. Other ideals like “payback” are specifically emblematic of Melanesia, but are also found in some other cultures.

Tanna’s version of animistic reasoning (called “custom”) has been largely unaffected by Western thought or global trends. While it would be tempting to argue that if classical ethical theories are indeed found in a “primitive” society, they are therefore universal to human experience, such a project is impossible to validate and goes beyond the methodology of ethnography. So I am not inclined to take it on, even though others have attempted such a universalizing project, including Wilhelm Schmidt in his massive culture-history.⁹ Nor is my goal to legitimize a particular ethical theory or to demonstrate approximation (let alone connection) between Tannese and classical or European ethics – let alone between Tanna’s morality and that of Scripture. Instead, I aim to use ethical theories to give a “thick description”¹⁰ of a particular society in Melanesia, and to consider how Christian theology intersects with the moral logic of this animistic system.

THEORY OF MELANESIAN MORALITY

Anthropologists have typically argued that Melanesians are pragmatists who solve moral dilemmas by looking at a particular social context. “The

⁸ As members of Wycliffe Bible Translators, my wife Mendy and I translated the New Testament with a team of ni-Vanuatu church leaders on the island of Tanna (Vanuatu) from 2002 to 2012.

⁹ W. Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion: Facts and Theories* (London: Methuen & Co., 1931).

¹⁰ C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

moral judgment does not operate from the fixed perspective of universal obligation for the moral assessment of behaviour varies in different social contexts.”¹⁷ In this view, breaking an agricultural taboo, sleeping with one’s sister, or murdering someone is wrong, not intrinsically or universally, but insofar as any of these infractions entails *social* consequences. Breaking garden taboos, for instance, can result in sickness, mudslides, drought, and so on. While Melanesians do consider social consequences to evaluate the morality of an action, it is highly reductive to argue that pragmatism is the basis of their moral system. As I will show below, moral reasoning – in Tanna anyway – is much more complex and multi-faceted.

THE NORMAL AND ABNORMAL HUMAN CONDITION IN ANIMISM

A systematic study of moral reasoning in any society may as well begin with its theological anthropology. A central preoccupation for Christian theologians who focus on anthropology (the nature of humankind) is to describe the “normal” state of human beings. If we bear God’s image, do we innately know “the good”? Is possessing a moral compass in fact what it means to bear God’s image? If so, do we sin because we are sinful, or are we sinful because we sin? Since Augustine, orthodox Christianity has maintained that “humanity is universally affected by sin as a consequence of the Fall ... Sin makes it impossible for the sinner to think clearly.”¹⁹ We are in a *state* of depravity.

Further, since Christian theology usually extends the consequence of the Fall to all of creation, theological anthropology must also describe the “normal state” of the rest of creation, from animals to weather patterns to microbes. Is creation functioning properly when floods and droughts come? Is sickness normal or abnormal? Interestingly, Christians typically arrive at a sort of middle ground on these questions. It is not “ideal” for humans to sin; that is, they are not functioning in a truly human way (in God’s image) when they sin; but it is nonetheless “normal” since the Fall for all humans to sin. Except for some proponents of Wesleyan perfectionism, theologians

¹⁷ K.E. Read, “Morality and the Concept of the Person among the Gahuku-Gama,” *Oceania* 25 (1955): 262 (233-282).

¹⁹ A. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An introduction* (5th ed.; Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 352.

would not expect a human to be sinless, let alone for humans to live in a sinless society. Likewise, creation is not functioning as *intended* when nature brings droughts and floods; but it is functioning as *expected* ever since the Fall. Just as we do not expect humans to live in sinless societies, we do not expect them to be free from sickness, aging, or suffering.

This view, which I would call “suffering as equilibrium” – at least the equilibrium that has existed from creation until the *parousia* – has impacted Judeo-Christian moral reasoning for three millennia; but it is absent in many animistic societies. Anthropologists and missiologists have discovered that people in animistic societies often conceive of the normal human condition as free from suffering, disharmony, sickness, or even natural disasters.²⁰ Misfortune is never part of “nature’s course” or simply an “accident.” Under normal circumstances, gardens flourish, rain falls when it should, the dry season only comes when necessary, and families live in harmony. These situations fall under the simple rubric of “goodness” in the Tannese lexicon. “Goodness” entails all flourishing, from health, to respect, to abundance of crops, to peace in the village.

Misfortune, then, is a disruption to the equilibrium. It is the result of either a moral failing or deliberate sorcery. When disaster does befall a group, the leaders undergo moral examination (through séances, tribal councils, drug induced visions, etc.) to determine who is at fault. If no moral failing can be discovered, the group turns to their only other explanation: someone – either within the society, an outsider, or a demon – has bewitched them to bring about the suffering. This is drastically different from the Western Christian’s view, who is not at all surprised to see suffering on a regular basis without any apparent cause. In animism, every misfortune or misdeed arrives like a surprise, and the cause must be determined on a case-by-case basis in order to find a remedy.

1. The Steady State is “the Good”

Because of restrictions in Tanna’s lexicon, the word which is glossed in English as “good” must incorporate dozens of moral and aesthetic judgments, such as beautiful, obedient, polite, tasty, functioning properly,

²⁰ See L. Levy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality* (New York: MacMillan, 1910), 39-42; and S. Tackacs and E. Cline, eds., “Animism” in *The Ancient World* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 7-8.

restored to original condition, healthy, useful, clean, helpful, and kind-hearted, plus all of the synonyms for each of these lexemes (attractive, loyal, generous, delicious, productive, renewed, etc.). Consider the following examples of the lexeme “*huva*” in the Southwest Tanna language:

- His actions are *huva* (kind, respectful).
- Her face is *huva* (attractive, desirable).
- They live *huva* (happily, peacefully).
- The axe is *huva* again (restored, useful).

This ethical system, inadvertently, nearly approximates Aristotelian ideas of “the good” as “functioning properly.” For meat to be “good,” it must not be rotten and it must be tasty. For a man’s wife to be “good,” she must be hospitable and a good cook. For the weather to be “good,” it must rain but not rain too much. I ultimately decided that the best gloss for *huva* is “desirable,” since the term is an aesthetic judgment by which the speaker is simply showing approval.

Likewise, in the Tannese language, the antonym for “good,” *hah* (bad), is the way the speaker shows disapproval, because something is useless, old, disobedient, impolite, etc. The closest term for “sin” is *tavhaga hah*, or undesirable behavior. *Nahasien* (badness) also means disaster, punishment, sickness, or death. When a speaker says, “There was a ‘badness’ in Kitow village,” s/he may mean someone has died, a hurricane has struck, or two teenage males came to blows over a young lady. So badness refers both to undesirable behaviours or their consequences since, in the Tannese point of view, sin and the consequences of sin are inextricably linked. If bad behaviour necessarily brings about suffering, why not refer to both by the same term?

Along with defining “the good,” ethicists must answer how we can attain “the good.” I have explained that in the Tannese mindset, “the good” is the normal state of affairs, and the breaking of taboos disrupts the equilibrium causing “the good” to disappear for a while. It is not that “the good” must be achieved as much as “the bad” must be warded off by obeying the taboos and remaining in harmony with others. For example, harbouring greed or resentment can disrupt the steady-state and bring about

disaster.²⁴ Strathern and Stewart discovered this to be the case in the highland societies of Papua New Guinea where, they argue, “morality and cosmology, in the broad sense, were inextricably linked.”²⁵ Verena Keck’s study of sickness and healing among the Yupno gives similar data from the lowlands of Papua New Guinea.²⁶ Likewise, Valero Valeri compiled an extensive list of sicknesses and disaster which are tied to the breaking of taboos or moral failures for the Huaulu people of the Moluccas. There skin diseases result from breaking meat taboos, tuberculosis symptoms are related to sexual taboos, vomiting blood and blindness result from breaking taboos related to women’s menstrual cycles, women may lose their hair or fertility for breaking taboos related to male customary rituals, and so on.²⁷ Further investigation would probably reveal that the Moluccan logic is more flexible and does not employ a one-to-one predictable link between moral cause and physical effect. But the data certainly show a strong connection between moral failures and physical consequences.

On Tanna, the good life is not something to *attain*, but to *maintain*. If one obeys the traditions of “custom,” life will be good. Therefore, Tannese specifically refer to their animistic practices or “customs” as the “road for goodness.” Roads are a dominant metaphor in Melanesia, as they connect social groups to “cargo,” brides, knowledge, or anything essential for life. Garden magic rituals such as the annual yam and taro “thanksgiving” are examples of “custom roads” that ensure goodness. Arranging marriage with cross-cousins is another “road” for goodness, as is the chiefly leadership system. In this system, goodness and badness are external entities that arrive and disappear, rather than internal qualities waiting to be discovered or perfected.

As I will argue below, this view of goodness as homeostasis diverges slightly from classic eudaimonism, and differs significantly from scriptural moral reasoning. Eudaimonistic ethics place intrinsic value on “goodness”

²⁴ K. Nehrass, “Dealing with Disaster,” *Missiology* 39 (2011): 459-71.

²⁵ A. Strathern and P.J. Stewart, “Morality and Cosmology: What Do Exemplars Exemplify?” in *The Anthropology of Morality in Melanesia and Beyond* (ed. J. Barker; Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), xiii-xxi, esp. xiii.

²⁶ V. Keck, *Discord and Bodily Disorders: Healing among the Yupno of Papua New Guinea* (Medical Anthropology Series; Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2005).

²⁷ V. Valeri, *The Forest of Taboos: Morality, Hunting and Identity among the Huaulu of the Moluccas* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 139-40.

as a road for wellbeing, but classical philosophy does not teach that humans exist in a natural state of moral goodness, or that intermittent external forces cause them to have moral failings. Scripture paints a picture of humans as morally lost (Eccl 7:20, Rom 3:10-23), and states that “only God is good” (Mark 10:18). In some senses, from a biblical standpoint, we should be more surprised when people are altruistic and sacrificial, rather than when people have moral failures.

2. Retribution: The Categorical Imperative

If creation enjoys a steady state of harmony, purity, and “goodness,” anything which disrupts the homeostasis must be mitigated. When my daughter was about four years old, she inadvertently wandered onto the men’s sacred kava drinking ground. A father about my age hurried over and lightly whipped her back with a kava root. He was stern enough to make an impression, but not so heavy-handed that he would cause my family to lose face. I asked why the punishment was necessary? “Because if we didn’t whip her, the retribution would come back. Maybe she would be sick as an adult, or a disaster would happen, or her child would get sick.” Un-atoned infractions can lay dormant, but will eventually be requited. A well-known garden magician held a large festival to explain the logic of retribution to the younger generation: “The taboos are for goodness. They are for promoting life. If you don’t observe the taboos, it will come back to get you. You’ll get sick. If you go to church, they don’t know how to bring goodness, and they don’t know about the taboos. I dare them to break the taboos!” Note that the church leadership has had to work out its own response to the observance of taboos. Some take Romans 14:14 (ESV) “nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean” to mean that taboos are inefficacious, and Christians are under no obligation to follow them. Yet others believe that taboos are indeed efficacious to those who “think they are unclean” as Paul put it. Therefore, some Christians observe the taboos because they believe the *kastom* logic of these taboos; others obey them out of respect or a desire to not cause conflict, and others flout the restrictions wholesale. (The Tannese church is still working out its own version of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15:1-35).

The logic of retribution is most visible in the Melanesian practice of exchange.²⁸ A certain village gave around 10,000 taros, 60 mats, and 25 pigs to the neighbouring village. About twenty years later, the receiving village repaid the gift, adding some extra things. But the “extra” must now be repaid by the reciprocating village in the future.

Humans – like animals, mats, and bad deeds – must be reciprocated. When a man takes a wife from a clan, the man’s clan must reciprocate with a sister who will return in marriage to the bride’s clan—or else the newlywed couple will send a daughter by marriage or adoption to the bride’s clan.²⁹

Reciprocity, then, is a sort of Kantian categorical imperative,³⁰ albeit one that looks more like the *lex talionis* (Ex 21:24): yam for yam, taro for taro, bride for bride, infraction for infraction. Knauft described this ideal, yet unattainable homeostasis as “reciprocal equivalence” for the Tangu in Papua New Guinea. The Tangu term *mgnwotngwotiki* refers to a “state of neutral equality ... achieved between erstwhile competitive exchange partners.”³¹ However, multiple influences and factors such as moral failures, Europeans, Christianity, and sorcerers disrupt this steady state.

Is kindness a virtue within an ethical system that makes reciprocity paramount? If Nako gives ten chickens to his father-in-law, it may seem like a kind-hearted gift. And when the father-in-law gives Nako’s family ten chickens down the line, it appears like another act of kindness to an outsider. But Mauss showed that there are no free gifts in Melanesia.³² Free gifts, in fact, disrupt the equilibrium; they break the categorical imperative, since they go against the logic of retribution. The Golden Rule (Matt 7:12),

²⁸ See G. Trompf, *Payback: The Logic of Retribution in Melanesian Religions* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

²⁹ K. Nehrbass, “Expatriate Adoption in Vanuatu in Light of ‘Relative’ Adoption in Tanna and Rah,” unpublished paper, Symposium on Adoption in the Pacific at the Association for Social Anthropology, Oceania, held in Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2015.

³⁰ I. Kant, *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785; repr. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³¹ B. Knauft, “Moral Exchange and Exchanging Morals: Alternative Paths of Cultural Change in Papua New Guinea,” in *The Anthropology of Morality in Melanesia and Beyond* (ed. J. Barker; Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 67.

³² M. Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1950; repr. New York: Routledge, 1990), 8-11.

or even the “silver rule” of Confucius, is not in accord with Melanesian custom in which all deeds, good or bad, will be paid back equitably. This is a significant divergence from the morality of the New Testament, which focuses on active blessing rather than the maintenance of a steady state or retribution. “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing” (1 Pet 3:9, NIV; cf. Rom 12:17-21, citing Deut 32:35).

3. Virtues

We might also conclude that in Melanesia people are seen as inherently in a steady state of virtuosity, whereas vices act as external influences to temporarily remove the virtue. So sin is an external force, not an innate characteristic. On Tanna, a man is not angry intrinsically; rather, anger bites him. Likewise, men are not lustful; rather women and money “pull the eye.” All sorts of other sins come upon a person against their will, just like the common cold does. Sorcerers and demons also cause people to sin. For example, when a middle-aged widower contracted a sexually transmitted disease, I intimated to several islanders that the man must have been sleeping around. I was met by several protests, “No, he dreamed of a woman, but only had sex with her in his dreams.” Actually, the demon Nokwa, rather than the individual’s thought life, is responsible for immoral dreams on Tanna. This moral reasoning diverges significantly from the pragmatism that anthropologists have reductively suggested is the basis for Melanesian morality. An ethical system that places blame for moral failings and natural disasters on the spirit world is not pragmatic, but religious. The introduction of the spirit world in moral reasoning leads to sacrifices of chickens, libations of kava, and incantations, all to ward off spirits that would cause moral failings. Since morality is so tied to religious thought in Tanna, biblical views of human nature, moral obligations, and demonic temptations must serve as a corrective. I will return to this at the end of the article.

4. Moral Exemplars

Societies typically exegete virtues from moral exemplars who show up in legend or holy scriptures. Interestingly, the rich mythological corpus on

Tanna does not contain many demigods who show bravery, humility, honesty, wisdom, etc. There are ogres and, in one case, brave twin boys defeat the ogre Semsem. And the Polynesian imported cultural hero Maui (or Matiktiki) is cunning, but not particularly virtuous. Instead of finding virtuous heroes, we find the virtues implied through certain myths. Consider a short myth I heard several times:

A mother and father went gardening. The mother left a basket with her daughter and said, "Don't touch the basket. Your father and I are leaving for a while." Alas, the child opened the basket and was bitten by a bat! She sang a song "O, dear mother, I've been bit! One bit me. One bit me!" And the mother knew she'd opened the basket.

Here, the virtue of obedience is implied, and the harmful consequence of disobedience is explicit. Another myth teaches the virtue of obedience subtly.

A grandmother brought her child to the ocean to swim. The grandmother said, "I will leave shortly and come back." The grandmother then went a short distance and shed her skin. She came back to the granddaughter and said, "Let's go back to the village." But the granddaughter said, "You're not my grandmother. My grandmother is old and wrinkly." "Have it your way," the grandmother told her. So the grandmother left her on the shore and went back to the village.

The girl was not as wise as her grandmother and did not obey her, which resulted in the severe consequence of being left indefinitely on the shore without adult assistance.

The corpus contains myths that subtly teach other virtues like hospitality and respect, but room does not permit me to include more. I will simply propose that based on the mythical corpus, virtues are transmitted through the *consequences* of moral failings, rather than through characters who serve as moral exemplars. Most significantly, Tannese tell a myth of two brothers who disobeyed their mother's taboo regarding a certain river. The one brother, "Stormy," swam in the river, which caused a global catastrophic flood.

Just as Western ethicists have not reached a consensus on a list of virtues, we cannot definitively lay out a defined set of virtues in Melanesia. Instead, we can look at the lexicon, data from social settings, and the

mythological corpus to analyze the virtues which emerge. To demonstrate the flexibility of discourse on virtues in Tanna, we can see whether Aristotle's twelve virtues³⁴ are evident in Tanna. Below, I have given the Aristotelian value and, when applicable, an equivalent way to speak about this virtue in the Tannese language.

- Courage = *notghoyen*, “courage”
- Temperance = “ruling the self”
- Liberality = “helping others”
- Magnificence = “a big man who is generous to others”
- Magnanimity = “he finds the roads to help others”
- Proper ambition = *not applicable*
- Patience = “he has long thinking”
- Truthfulness = “telling the truth”
- Wittiness = “he is a person of speaking”
- Friendliness = “good toward others”
- Modesty = “his thinking is low”
- Righteous indignation = *not applicable*

Tanna's languages are flexible enough to describe almost all of these virtues, but the idioms are often vague. For instance, a person may be described as *yermama kape nerkunian* (“person of ability/knowledge”) or *kafan nerkunian rehua pek* (“his knowledge/ability is very large”). But the knowledge/ability is unspecified. Or a “man of speaking” can mean wittiness, but can also mean “inspiring” or “persuasive.” More significantly, the Tannese language has ways to articulate ideas like intelligence, curiosity, and honesty; but these are not the common markers of a virtuous or flourishing person. Leaders are good because they are generous and humble; wives are good when they are respectful and hospitable. These are the “focal virtues” in Tanna, which I will discuss below.

5. Honour and Shame

The growing body of missiological literature on honour and shame has reified these theoretical dyads, implying that they are basic moral

³⁴ Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nichomachaen Ethics* (rev. ed.; trans. J.K. Thomson; New York: Viking, 1955), 104.

evaluations which apply not only to Japan, where anthropologist Ruth Benedict developed the ideas of “shame and guilt cultures,”³⁵ but also to the Mediterranean,³⁶ to East Asia at large,³⁷ and to the Philippines.³⁸ However, early on in the development of honour and shame literature, Herzfeld demonstrated that it is foolish to apply these theoretical categories uniformly across cultures.³⁹ “Honor” has its connotations for the British, whereas the Italian cognate *honore* takes on quite different nuances throughout Italy, and conceptualizations of the Greek *timi* vary throughout Greece. In the Mediterranean, honour and shame is particularly tied to wealth, sexual purity, and must be regularly either won or lost. In contrast, the Tannese sense of honour and shame is not as agonistic. Honour is maintained in a sort of steady state until it is lost through disrespect.

And while “honour” can connote sexual purity or wealth, it is primarily linked to respecting leaders and gender roles. When I began componential analysis for the lexicon on Tanna Island,⁴⁰ I quickly became confused as I tried to fit the indigenous terms *nesiaiyen* and *naouresian* neatly into the English categories of “honour” and “shame” respectively. *Nesaiiyen* can be used in the following ways.

- Leaving someone alone; e.g., not bothering males who are intoxicated on kava, or children refraining from talking loudly, or refraining from uttering a request that might offend someone.

³⁵ R. Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1946).

³⁶ J. Peristiany, *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Oxford University Press, 1966).

³⁷ See T. Tennent, “Anthropology: Human Identity in Shame-based Cultures of the Far East,” in *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 77-104; J. Wu, *Saving God's Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame* (EMS Dissertation Series; Pasadena: William Carey Library Press, 2013); Young Gweon You, “Shame and Guilt Mechanism in East Asian Culture,” *Journal of Pastoral Care* 51 (1997): 57-64.

³⁸ B. Bowe, “Reading the Bible Through Filipino Eyes,” *Missiology* 26 (1998): 345-60.

³⁹ M. Herzfeld, “Honour and Shame: Problems in the Comparative Analysis of Moral Systems,” *Man* 15 (1980): 339-351.

⁴⁰ K. Nehrbass, *A Comprehensive Comparison of Lexemes in the Major Languages of Tanna, Vanuatu* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 2012).

- Understanding the danger – respecting fire or respecting the taboo on crops, lest a disaster befall the taboo-breaker. Old English “fear” usefully connoted both respect and a healthy dose of fear.
- Giving honour, status, or respect.

From the above, it seems the idea of *nesiaiye*n is closely associated with Brown and Levinson’s concept of “negative face,” or the desire to refrain from inconveniencing others.⁴¹ In fact, a common way that *nesiaiye*n is used is the exclamation, *Nesaiiye rekak!* which means “Respect/honour has disappeared!” Note that a person is not intrinsically disrespectful; rather, respect is a thing in and of itself which comes and goes.

The Tannese language does not have the Chinese equivalent of *ren* (“face”), but “face” in the sense of “reputation” is something that can certainly be downgraded or even lost. The loss of face, status, or respect ultimately results in mechanistic forces that retributively restore the *status quo*. For instance, when a woman “disrespected” her husband by having an affair, she later miscarried. Her husband was clearly angry at her affair, but the ultimate consequence was not simply his anger over how she dishonoured him, but the loss of flourishing or “the good.”

The Tannese language also has an antonym for *nesiaiye*n: *nauresian*, which covers the following:

- causing embarrassment for oneself;
- feeling embarrassment for others; and
- causing others to be ashamed or embarrassed.

Here again, a person is not intrinsically shameful, but shame comes on a person or group temporarily. What caught the imagination of many Americans when Benedict formed the categories of shame cultures and guilt cultures was the erroneous interpretation that Japanese do not feel guilt when they sin, but feel ashamed if they are caught, because they would fear social consequences.⁴² Had readers seriously read Benedict’s work, they would have understood that she was not studying the conscience at all, but was describing the obligations that organize Japanese social life. Japanese

⁴¹ P. Brown and S.C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 95-100.

⁴² Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum*, 223-27.

do in fact feel guilt as people from any shame culture do; but shame cultures tend to understand their moral obligations in terms of what will bring honour to the social network.

An experience on Tanna can demonstrate the forces of guilt and shame in Melanesian moral reasoning. A village discovered that a middle-aged man, Doug, had locked his second wife out of the hut in order to sleep with her daughter. The classificatory brothers of the scorned wife pleaded her case, and Doug's classificatory brothers pleaded his. Doug and his wife Naga were both silenced from the proceedings because "custom" did not have a mechanism for him to confess publicly or apologize with words. Doug's classificatory brothers paid Naga's family with a large pig and kava roots. Naga's family also brought a gift of kava to the peace offering. The payment of a pig was considered *narpenien*, which English speakers may be tempted to gloss as "punishment" because of the context. But the word actually means "reciprocation." From an etic perspective, we may say that an amount of honour, equalling \$200, had been robbed of Naga's family, and the pig of equal value restored it. But why should Naga's family also bring kava if she had done nothing wrong? The incident and public discussion caused Doug's family to lose face as well, and the goal was to restore the homeostasis for all parties involved – to bring harmony to the relationship rather than to atone for a particular sin.

With such an emphasis on honour, did Doug's moral reasoning cause him to feel personally guilty about his sin? He told me that his "pillow spoke to him" about his "bad behavior." That is, his guilty conscience kept him awake at night. However, we must recognize that what kept Doug awake at night, and what he might frame as "bad behaviour," encompasses in a wider sense the disharmony he brought to his tight knit society. His obligation is not to refrain from sin before God, but at all times to act in such a way that he does not bring badness (whether disaster or disharmony) on the community. This idea is extended into the Tannese Christian experience, where even sins that entail a spiritual component, such as breaking the Sabbath, are not problematic in that they offend God, but because they result in misfortune that can harm the community.⁴³ If Tannese Christians are to adopt a more biblical view of sin, they must

⁴³ K. Nehrbass, "Dealing with Disaster: Critical Contextualization of Misfortune," *Missiology* 39 (2011): 459-71.

begin with the understanding that sin is harmful because it breaks our relationship with God. The resulting communal disharmony (or other punishments and disasters) are also potential consequences of sin, but the primary issue is that God has commanded us to be holy, as he is (Lev 20:26), and because he cannot dwell in the presence of sin (Isa 59:2; Hab 1:13). That is why compensation cannot atone for rape, as in the case of Doug above. Genuine repentance and forgiveness must sought from God. 2 Corinthians 7:8-10 discusses the ultimate futility of “worldly grief” over sin (because it does not lead to repentance) versus godly grief of sin which does change our behavior. Such “worldly grief” involves making sacrifices to mitigate the consequences of sin; but true repentance is the fruit of being born again. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Cor 5:17 NIV).

5. Moral Obligations

There are numerous other moral obligations that arise out of social relationships in the animistic village life, and I will start by focussing below on two: generosity and humility.

(a) Greed and Generosity

Nawhaiyen (“sharing”) is a moral obligation, and gluttony or failure to share (called *naptergien ken nar*) are major moral failings. The obligation to share also includes sharing in hard work. While the moral failure of laziness (*narpahyen*) is not typically linked to disaster, it will invoke social sanctions such as gossip. What legitimizes a leader in Melanesia is his ability to find wealth and then distribute it. In fact, when the community was saying farewell to us after ten years of mission work in Tanna, the virtue people mentioned most in their speeches was our generosity in school fees, transportation, etc. While our mission work may have been appreciated, it was generosity that legitimated us.

(b) Pride and Humility

Most animistic societies are highly collectivist. Pride, the desire to stand out or to accumulate more status or wealth than others, also upsets the homeostasis. Melanesian languages use phrases like “big head” and “high thinking” to refer to pride. On the flip side, “low thinking” refers to

humility. When a member of parliament used his annual allocation to distribute axes and shovels to his constituents at Christmas time, he was seen as virtuous; and this moral reasoning extended even to the national level, as members of parliament are expected to use their allocations in this way (rather than for themselves, which would be considered corruption). He also gave a speech about the hard work of the community and never referred to his own generosity, skill, or position. The high will be made low, so it is better to present oneself as low to begin with. (Note the similarity to Jesus' instruction on humility in Luke 14:9-11).

(c) *Moral Reasoning*

While morality in animistic societies is based on social obligations, on maintaining “the good” and warding off misfortune, moral reasoning is not exclusively consequentialist. That is, it does not look at the ends, such as “the greater good,” in order to delineate morality. In fact, when it comes to ontology, Tannese are realists. Virtues like generosity and humility are “right” (*atuatuk*) in themselves. Murder and gossip (literally “speaking on the side of a person”) is *ikoiko* (“crooked”), not because it would impede the greater good, but because it is simply wrong.⁴⁹ Tannese, like many animists, are vague about how we can know these objective rights and wrongs. While truths in other areas of life (religious, healing rituals, or cargo cults) can be revealed from spirits or dreams, a shaman would be swimming upstream if he claimed to have new ethical knowledge, since morality seems to have been held by group consensus since time immemorial. In fact, the most common source cited for moral authority is the ancestors. For example, breaking the breadfruit taboo is wrong because the ancestors passed these taboos along to us. Many Tannese Christians consider these taboos to be plainly in effect, and they point out that the Bible does not have anything to say against the observance of these specific taboos. In fact, the Bible seems to reinforce a number of taboos related to female menstruation, and the Torah has its own litany of cleanliness taboos related to foods and seasons. Each denomination on Tanna, though, works out its own response to both Old Testament and *kastom* taboos. One

⁴⁹ This is not to imply that Tanna is free from gossip, or that there is no social value to gossip. In fact, I observed gossip employed as a tool for transmitting value judgments to children and for creating a consensus about proper behavior.

Seventh-day Adventist leader told me that, “If the taboo is not in the Bible, I don’t follow it.” An urban, educated Presbyterian told me that he doesn’t follow the *kastom* taboos because Jesus declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19).

Other prohibitions such as not to murder or steal are taken as brute facts. While it may be self-evident that murder and theft are wrong, Tannese moral reasoning would have a firmer foundation if it began with the obligation to obey divine commands.

Moral obligations are known through the sense of “ought.” In Tanna, *amakeikei* can mean both “certainly will happen” or “ought to happen.” *Tukma nakvah nauta rehua, takamakeikei mahwai* can mean either “if you have a great deal of property, you will certainly share it,” or “if you have a great deal of property, you are obliged to share it.” The sense of moral duty is so strong that it is a certainty. In the steady state of “goodness” all moral obligations will certainly be fulfilled. Only when the homeostasis is uncertainly disrupted will these obligations be unfulfilled.

While these obligations are objectively right or wrong, there is still a good deal of ambiguity in the lexicon. For example, Tannese may say it is wrong to steal, but the lexicon is ambiguous about this. Consider the following two examples:

1. Tom stole Roni’s wife.
2. The rat stole my sweet potato from the garden.

Example (1) contains a moral judgment, but we would be hard-pressed to say that “steal” in (2) was a moral judgment. The Tannese language has the same ambiguity with truth-telling, as *remneikua* can be glossed the following ways.

1. He lied.
2. He was kidding.
3. He was mistaken.

In all the cases above, the word *remneikua* connotes that the speaker has not told the truth. but only in case (1) is it morally wrong.

(d) *Moral Obligations and Land*

A discussion of morality in the Pacific must include ideals about land use, since land disputes are at the nexus of public moral discourse. Stealing is

primarily about the misuse of land resources, and disasters are often traced to land disputes. For instance, Matt was adopted into a family of three brothers. When he came of age, his biological family could not reach consensus about whether he could use their land for agriculture, nor could his adoptive family. In this liminal space, Matt occasionally cultivated crops on both plots. At each disaster, the two feuding clans brought up the moral dilemma. The biological clan would argue that grandmother died or a mudslide happened because Matt was cultivating the wrong land.

(e) Summary of Animistic Moral Reasoning

Early European depictions of Melanesian morality were sorely mistaken. Far from lacking moral reasoning, I have demonstrated how a particular Melanesian society has a robust system of moral obligations. Virtues are a rich part of discourse and the consequences figure into moral choices. But it is unfairly reductionist to refer to Tannese morality as ultimately pragmatic. True, much moral discourse is related to discerning, on a case-by-case basis, which moral failing is tied to the most recent catastrophe. But my thesis here is that it is not that actions like murder and stealing are bad because they bring about misfortune; instead, they bring about misfortune because they are bad *a priori*.

CONCLUSION: COMPATIBILITY WITH BIBLICAL MORALITY

By this point it should be clear that Tannese moral reasoning is at times similar to biblical moral reasoning, and at times it diverges significantly. The deontology of Tannese morality aligns to some degree with biblical ethics. For instance, Tannese lean toward positivism, seeing certain actions like murder and theft as absolutely wrong. They may not root these notions in divine command theory, or in the intrinsic value of humans as image bearers; but Tannese are not situational ethicists either. They would argue that something intrinsic to humans teaches young to respect elders, men to not force themselves on women, and so on.

Further, Scripture does seem to vouch for Tanna's consequentialism in moral reasoning. The Bible does indicate that moral failings may result in disasters such as famine, exile, and disease (Lev 26:14-17). But churches need to find a Christian response to the village's temptation to trace every sickness and disaster to the breaking of a taboo or a moral failing. At times

when people need compassion the most (sickness and disaster), Satan uses these misfortunes to further people's grief through dissention and finger pointing.

Christian Melanesians would also find their ethics enriched with further interaction with the Bible on consequences, virtues, and the source of moral obligations. The Tannese virtues of hospitality, harmony, humility, generosity, and honour are important virtues in Scripture as well. But the Bible has additional virtues which may be implied in this particular Melanesian society but are not prominent parts of its moral discourse, including compassion, self-sacrifice, faithfulness, and patience. Therefore, Tannese Christians would do well to spend time parsing the panoply of virtues in Scripture. The indigenous moral exemplars do model particular virtues: Matiktiki is cunning; the twin boys who defeated Semsem are brave. But there are many moral exemplars in scripture who can fill in the virtues that are missing in Tannese mythology. While both *kastom* and biblical moral exemplars are discussed in worship services, church leaders should emphasize the ontological difference between mythical characters in the Tannese cosmology, and the historical characters described in scripture. Such a distinction would elevate the value of scripture over mythology in teaching virtue.

The area that could be most expanded is the source of our moral obligations and how we can know these obligations. This is significant because Melanesian moral codes have numerous taboos which are outside of what we may consider "universal." Who commanded the taboo on eating Tahitian chestnuts in December or yams in March? And more significantly, who commanded us to marry our cross-cousins? Tannese would do well to distinguish between obligations that are socially-constructed, on the one hand, and moral obligations which are divinely commanded, on the other. But distinguishing between these two requires serious biblical study. The scripture is much more than a collection of passages to read publicly on Sunday morning. Indeed, it can be of tremendous value in deepening the understanding of moral obligations.

Probably the most significant disconnect between Melanesian and biblical moral reasoning is the high emphasis in Melanesia on reciprocity, since an over-emphasis on reciprocity takes forgiveness and mercy out of view. Out of one hundred sermons I observed on Tanna from 2007 to

2009⁵⁰, obedience and hospitality both surfaced as major themes, but grace and forgiveness were rarely mentioned. Tanna's theologians must discern ways in which Christ is the fulfilment of the system of reciprocity, and the ways in which Melanesian reciprocity is unbiblical. Additionally, with a tremendous emphasis on social obligations, especially reciprocation, Melanesians should be careful not to manipulate these obligations for selfish gain at the expense of others.

Melanesian theologians would benefit from further discussion on customary moral reasoning in light of scriptural virtues and commands. The rich ethical system in Melanesia pre-contact is an indication that God is not far from any one of us.⁵¹ But God, as a source of moral authority was often absent in pre-Christian Melanesian moral discourse. Therefore, church leaders throughout Melanesia must be well-trained, and must engage in serious study of scripture. Additional Bible study materials and theological works aimed at Melanesian audiences must be developed in Melanesian languages of wider communication.

⁵⁰ K. Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia: Four approaches to Gospel and Culture* (Pasadena: William Carey Library Press, 2012), 171.

⁵¹ See Acts 17:27.