

FOCUS ON Papua New Guinea



The independent state of Papua New Guinea is truly a unique country.

It is the most linguistically diverse nation in the world, with approximately seven hundred and fifty languages among just over 4.6 million citizens. These are not dialects but distinct languages! The country occupies the eastern end of the island of New Guinea, just north of Australia and several other important groups of islands including Bougainville, New Britain, and New Ireland. The island of New Guinea is the second largest island in the world. Much of the country is still isolated, with most of the indigenous population living by hunting and gathering in the interior. The country with its equatorial climate is noted for its wildlife. There are many birds of paradise, found nowhere else, and butterflies with wingspans of up to nine inches. More than seventy percent of Papua New Guinea is covered with dense tropical rain forest.

History

Because imposing mountains and extremely rugged territory mark New Guinea's terrain, different population groups developed in virtual isolation.



The man on the left is wearing the jawbone of his recently deceased daughter around his neck. One of the men is now a leading Christian leader in that tribe.

Each group developed its own language and its own tribal culture. This gives Papua New Guinea its diverse and fascinating cultural landscape. It wasn't until the mid 1800s that European missionaries and traders began to settle on the island, and those few settlers

limited their presence mostly to the accessible coastal areas. Over the next several decades Papua New Guinea was claimed by the Germans, the British, and the Dutch, but it came

mountain valleys in cultures that were still in the Stone Age. Papua New Guinea achieved complete independence from Australia in September 1975, becoming at that time a full member of the Commonwealth. The Prime Minister is the leader of the majority party in the single-chamber National Parliament. The British monarch continues to be the nominal head of state and is represented by a governor-general who is a citizen of Papua New Guinea.

A Country Dear to My Heart

Papua New Guinea is dear to my heart for two reasons: first, because my wife and I were there as missionaries, and second, because our daughter was born there. We went to Papua New Guinea in 1975 and worked among one of the few remaining unreached tribes on a tributary of the Sepik River. We were the first missionaries into that remote area. Those over fourteen years of age had

eaten human flesh and many of the people still lived in a Stone Age setting. Human skulls and jawbones of relatives were still kept in the houses and newborn twins were left to die in the jungle. A few of the younger men knew some Pidgin English though most spoke only their own language. We had been trained linguistically and sought to write down their language. It is interesting that there is no such thing as a primitive language among the tribes in Papua New Guinea. The languages all have complicated grammatical and syntactical structures, in some ways even more complicated than English. These “Stone Age” people were not grunting to one other as evolutionists would have us believe. It was amazing to us to witness how such supposedly primitive people could so rapidly acquire knowledge and be brought into modern society. Their ability to memorize and to learn a new language very quickly was humbling to us.

Situation Today

While in the last sixty to seventy years there have been great strides in modernization, most of the people still live in small villages and follow traditional tribal customs. The majority—about four-fifths of the work force—live in small villages and practice subsistence agriculture. Some cash crops are grown on plantations and small holder farms. Mining employs less than one percent of the work force and is dominated by gold and copper

production. Services—including trade and finance—employ about one-sixth of the work force. English is the official language in schools and in government although Pidgin English is spoken by about half of the populace. More than forty percent of the population of Papua New Guinea is under fifteen years of age. The rate of population increase is far above the world average. By 2010 there are expected to be six million people in the country.

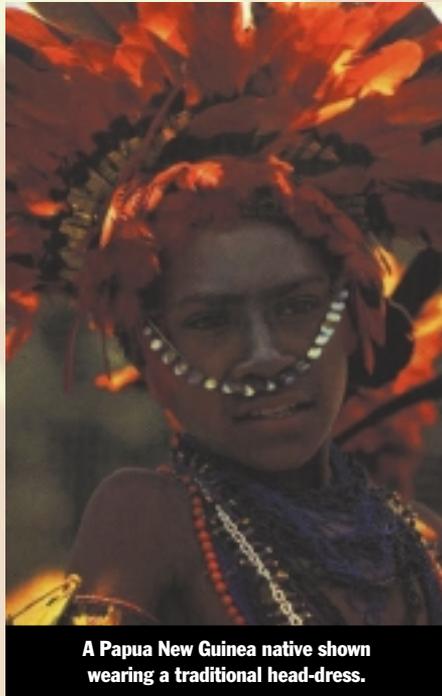
Problems

Great tensions exist between highland tribes; anyone who is not a “wontok” (of one’s tribe) is seen as potentially hostile. Vendettas can often last several generations. Set-piece axe battles occasionally occur between rival tribes. Violence in the few cities is a problem. Many young men have received western style educations, but the vast majority of them are unable to find work. Some of these have not wanted to go back to subsistence farming and instead have formed themselves into organised gangs of thieves known as “Rascals.” The health system has suffered very badly from cutbacks in recent years. Most Papua New Guineans are poor. There is little notion of individual wealth, and those who make money in the mines and on plantations tend to

return home to divide their wealth among their tribes.

The Need

Although almost three-fifths of the populace are estimated to be Protestants (the largest portion of which are Lutherans) and nearly a third are Roman Catholics, traditional religious beliefs and rituals are still widely practised. There is a nominal



A Papua New Guinea native shown wearing a traditional head-dress.

adherence to western religion but a lack of clear understanding of the gospel. Many fine missionaries continue to labour faithfully among remote tribal groups, some of which know only their own language. These servants of Christ are diligently engaged in literacy, translation, and church-planting ministries. There is still a great need, however, for

clear biblical teaching to be broadcast over the radio. With such a high number of young people in the population who want to listen to English programmes, and since even the smallest, most isolated villages have transistor radios it is vital that Let the Bible Speak continue to broadcast into Papua New Guinea. In the last century it was the search for gold that opened up the previously unexplored highland region. Men risked their lives in an attempt to obtain riches. Highland tribes killed some of them. In the Bible we possess pure gold. Psalm 19:10 tells us that “the judgments of the Lord” are “more to be desired than gold, yea than much fine gold.” We need to get the everlasting gold of God’s word over the radio to needy people in Papua New Guinea. There have been encouraging letters received from listeners. One listener wrote as follows, “I am a born again Christian and I have been a regular listener to your radio programme Let the Bible Speak since 1995. It is a source of tremendous blessing and inspiration to my faith life.” The writer then went on to request teaching tapes and literature. Do pray for Papua New Guinea, that many of the growing population of young people will listen to the broadcasts and hear the pure word of God and be built up in the faith. ■



Rev. Ron Johnstone is minister of Armagh Free Presbyterian Church, Northern Ireland.