

CRISIS AND MASS CONVERSION ON RENNELL ISLAND IN 1938¹

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INTRODUCTION

THIS PAPER CONTAINS an account of the events which led to a sudden mass conversion to Christianity on Rennell Island in 1938, and a brief analysis of the occurrences, the purpose of which is to show that what at first may seem to be completely unpatterned behaviour becomes somewhat more intelligible when judged in the light of the social and religious structure of Rennell Island.

Rennell and Bellona, two Polynesian outliers about 120 miles south of Guadalcanal, enjoyed almost complete isolation until the middle of the 1930s. The people had no contact with surrounding islands populated by Melanesians, and only very few British government vessels found their way to Rennell and Bellona at that time.

Missionary attempts to establish Christianity had hitherto been futile. In 1910 the South Seas Evangelical Mission had landed three teachers on Rennell. They were promptly killed by the Rennellese, and further attempts to introduce the new faith were suspended until 1934. At this time the same mission took a group of Rennellese men to the mission station on Malaita for education.

Fearing that a new attempt to land missionaries on Rennell might lead to the same disaster as in 1910, the government of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate had declared Rennell and the neighbouring Bellona closed districts. Nobody from the outside world would be allowed to settle on these two islands in the future. The only way in which the missions could hope to introduce Christianity on Rennell was therefore to take people from the island to the mission stations. This was done not only by the South Seas Evangelical Mission but also by two other missions that started work on Rennell about 1934, the Seventh Day Adventists and The Melanesian Mission. This traffic went on until 1938. The number of Rennellese who had been to the mission stations before 1938 is not known to us, but it is not likely that it exceeded 50 out of some 1,200 Rennellese. (We do not even know whether the number 1,200 is correct. No census was made before the 1950s.)

1938 became the critical year on the island. Discussions of the truth of the new faith versus the old gods were apparently in the focus of attention. A paramount chief, Taupongi, who had great prestige and was known as a skilled warrior and priest-chief, proposed that

¹ This paper was read at the Tenth Pacific Science Congress in Honolulu, Hawaii, August 1961. I have made a few minor additions and changes.

people should include worship of the Christian God in their old rituals. This apparently met with some approval. In October, 1938, chief Taupongi summoned people to a feast in his settlement, Niupani, on the shores of the lake on Rennell. It was to be a ritual harvest festival with offerings to the gods in the traditional way, but at the same time it was to be a meeting with prayers to the Christian God.

It started as cult feasts used to start, but very quickly developed into an occasion of mass hysteria.

There are two sources of information about events on Rennell at that time. The first is a long account in Rennellese given to Samuel H. Elbert on Rennell in February 1958, by an old man, Moa, who is a Seventh Day Adventist and who took a leading part in the events. It is a dramatic account, giving minute details of the events, and it tells a very vivid and fascinating story.

The second account was given to me on Rennell in November 1958, by the somewhat younger man Jasper Tekobi, the president of the South Seas Evangelical Mission at the lake district. He had also taken part in the events and his account was dictated to me in Rennellese over two nightly sessions. His account is a little shorter than the one given by Moa, but also full of interesting details.²

The two versions do not contradict each other. In fact, their accounts of the events are very similar. Dissimilarities are readily accepted as a result of two different personalities viewing the same occurrences: the one an older man with a Seventh Day Adventist background, the other a somewhat younger man with a background built up by another mission.

These two accounts give us an idea of what happened during the fateful harvest feast at Niupani in October 1938.

THE FEAST AT NIUPANI

When people arrived at Niupani, summoned to the feast by Taupongi, Tegheta, Taupongi's adopted son, who was to act as priest-chief during the rituals, put on his ceremonial attire and went out on the cult grounds where the food offering had been laid out. Just before this, the same Tegheta had gone to the bush and prayed to the Christian God. Now, standing on the cult grounds, he thought that something seemed to be wrong. People began arguing among each other and somebody started fighting. Instead of intoning the ritual prayers, Tegheta began scolding the people who were fighting and shouted to his own father, who was performing a ritual at a grave beside the cult grounds: Stupid Taupongi! Stupid Taupongi!

People now knew that Tegheta was mad. A god had possessed him. A man went around among the guests talking about the gospel, and then suddenly Tegheta ordered people to pray. When evening came, people left the village in fear that something terrible might happen in the darkness. But Tegheta ordered them back and told them:

² It is proposed shortly to publish the two accounts of the Rennellese conversion to Christianity in a volume of texts from Rennell and Bellona prepared by Samuel H. Elbert and the present author.

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"Tomorrow you will go to Heaven, all of you; but Taupongi will stay alone in Niupani." Next morning people went to get food which they brought to Niupani as provisions to take with them when they went to heaven. Tegheta ordered people to gather inside the largest house in the settlement. So they did. It was very crowded, so crowded that some had to cling to the rafters of the house to make room for everybody. Tegheta rose and shouted: "Today we will go to heaven! Cling, cling firmly to this house because it will go to heaven!" People prayed and somebody cried because there was not room for their children in the house. As the house did not move, Tegheta told people to go out and get more food to take to heaven. Once again he tried to make this house full of people leave for the sky, but he did not succeed.

In the settlement all was now chaos. People started building big earth ovens, apparently to cook more food to take to heaven. Many gathered their precious belongings, mats and tapas, and burned them in the ovens.

Tegheta now ordered three young men to go to heaven and get some calico from God to bring to the cult grounds so as to have a proof of God's existence. They went off and came back with something in their hands. When people saw them approaching the settlement they were filled with joy. But what they had in their hands turned out to be some pieces of old tapa taken from a neighbouring settlement.

The madness grew and grew. People sang and prayed "till their mouths were weary" as Moa expressed it. Then some people started felling an entire coconut grove, smashed the largest house of the settlement into bits, killed dogs, cats, and chickens, and piled the broken parts of the house and the dead animals into a big heap.

Tegheta now told people to gather in groups. Out of these groups he picked every man, woman, and child having yaws¹sores on their bodies. They were told to lie down on the cult grounds, and Taupongi and Tegheta beat them, one after another, with clubs. Five of them died; many lay unconscious. Tegheta ordered the bodies to be removed from the cult grounds, and the victims were put in a stack behind the settlement so that Tegheta could eat them on a later occasion.

Tegheta now went straight to the house where Taupongi's wife and daughter were. Taupongi's wife and daughter were Tegheta's classificatory mother and sister. Tegheta now violated one of the most strict social taboos²of Rennell by having intercourse with his mother and sister. He left the house shouting and singing.

Some people now planned to kill him, but others objected. He was caught on the path leading to the sea, taken back to the settlement, and made to lie down on the ground. His father, Taupongi, came and humiliated³him by covering his eyes and genitalia with earth. One informant said that Tegheta was actually killed by people but restored to life by a man, Maamata, who was possessed by an angel. According to this story Maamata blew into Tegheta's nose, mouth, eyes, and ears, and Tegheta became alive.

At this time more people apparently went mad. Some fought and beat each other. Others climbed into the trees and preached from there. Others sang hymns and prayed. During this fighting the settlement

became more and more empty. People fled. Some ran away to the neighbouring settlement, Temaige, and others fled down to the south coast of Rennell. Only a few stayed in the settlement to bury all the people who had died during the madness. This burial took place during the night. When morning came, people rose and gathered together and sang and prayed to the Christian God.

Apparently there was only one group of people who had not been affected by the mass hysteria. It was a group of men from another district, Lughu, on the south coast of Rennell. Taupongi had invited them to the feast because these people and his own people had gone to the mission station on Malaita together. The Lughu people returned to Niupani in the morning and exorcised the deities who possessed people—by singing Christian hymns. People gathered again and prayed and prayed. The madness was over; even Tegheta was now 'normal'.

Some men decided to go to the other districts and report that the old deities had now left Rennell, and that the Christian God was the one that had all the power. So they did, and after only a few weeks, perhaps even less, people all over Rennell began worshipping the Christian God; readily accepting their new master, they started building church houses all over the island.

POSSESSION BY THE GODS

This account naturally evokes the interest of the field worker. He will want to understand why all this happened, why the events took that special turn. Questioning the informants for further details naturally gave valuable information. But when asking them why Tegheta killed the people lying on the ground, why he committed incest, why people beat each other, one got two stereotype answers: because people were possessed (*uguhia*) or mad (*sasa*), or "because we were punished (*kagohia*) by the gods".

The Rennellese themselves saw the events in Niupani as an earthly projection of a fight between two powers, their old god Tehainga'atua and his large family of gods on one side, and the Christian God on the other. It was a fight for power over the island. When the old gods saw that the Rennellese began praying "to two sides", as the Rennellese expressed it themselves, they possessed people, thus punishing them. Tegheta was possessed by a god, presumably Tehainga'atua himself, though informants were not certain.

Being possessed by gods was a common feature of pre-Christian Rennellese culture. In fact, one can distinguish three different types of possession:

- (1) The embodiment (*hakatino*) of gods in persons officiating at the cults.
- (2) The possessions of mediums (*taauga*) through whom the gods talked to people.
- (3) The possession by wild, non-worshipped gods (*'apai*) or angry gods which caused madness and uncontrolled behaviour in the person possessed.

Tegheta was possessed in this last way, and his behaviour thus fell outside the normal pattern of behaviour of individuals in the Rennellese culture.

A further knowledge of the religious concepts of the Rennellese will, however, reveal that the mad priest-chief did act in accordance with a very specific pattern of behaviour. Not, however, that of humans but that of the gods.

The Rennellese gods had very peculiar ways of behaving. They were man-killers. People dying from diseases were considered killed by the gods, who were man-eaters. They would often kill people who broke the taboos or neglected the rituals, take them to their heavenly abodes and bake them for supper (a horrible thing to the Rennellese, who were not cannibals themselves). The gods also behaved incestuously, preferably marrying their own sisters. The Rennellese themselves practised complete brother-sister avoidance.

All these things Tegheta did during his possession. He killed people suffering from yaws. He had them stacked up behind the settlement to eat them later (though in fact he never did), and he committed incest with his own mother and sister.

During the madness in Niupani Tegheta behaved as an angry god because he was possessed by one. Judging from the sources it is obvious that Tegheta did not act according to a deliberately laid plan. He did not assume the role of madman in order to force his will upon people, for it is clear that Tegheta at that time did not know himself what he wanted. He did not know whether to accept the new God or not. He was a man in grave emotional distress³ and being a recognized medium (*taauga*) he had frequently been ritually possessed by the old gods in the years prior to 1938.

CULTURE CHANGE AND EMOTIONAL CONFLICT

Tegheta's emotional conflict apparently reflects that of many people on Rennell. Written sources⁴ and information obtained from Rennellese in 1958-59 show that the impact of the new culture and its religion upon a people who had hitherto lived almost completely isolated from the outside world resulted in an emotional strain which increased rapidly in the years after 1934. It was clear to all that the acceptance of the new God also meant acceptance of new moral values, abandonment of many social institutions and a reorganization of the society. Was this "good" or "bad"? For Tegheta as well as for most other Rennellese it was not a question whether the Christian God was true or not. Once they had heard about this God from the missionaries they apparently never questioned his reality. The question was whether he was more powerful than the old gods. It was clear to the Rennellese that the old deities disapproved of this new, rival power. Rennell society was considered an earthly replica of the society of gods in the eastern sky.⁵ How could one begin worshipping the new God and reorganize the society according to his commandments without angering the old deities and disturbing the world order?

³ Deck 1954:104f.

⁴ Deck 1954: Lambert 1941:337.

Out of this religious and social conflict grew a serious emotional stress, the climax of which was the mass hysteria in Niupani where the two faiths fought their last and decisive battle.

The religious conflict on Rennell had, however, other effects which deserve to be mentioned in concluding this paper. When it was realized that the Christian God had won the battle in Niupani, the old gods fled hastily to their heavenly abodes in the east. There they still live. The Rennellese still believe in their existence today but pay no specific attention to them, knowing that they have lost all power over humans.

The Rennellese, however, maintain that before the old gods left, they had managed to bestow a last punishment upon their faithless worshippers. They stopped giving children to the women of Rennell for several years. This infertility was said to have started earlier, about 1934, when the first Rennellese began listening to the preachings of the missionaries. Under the old culture the Rennellese believed that children were gifts from the gods rather than gifts of the husbands. One almost feels tempted to see some truth in this statement. In fact, an earlier observer in 1951,⁵ and Elbert and I in 1958, noticed a remarkable lack of youths in the age group from about 15 to 25. This is, however, only an impressionistic observation. No exact census has, as yet, been made. It will have to be left to experts, psychiatrists, psychologists, and others to tell us whether mental stress may cause infertility in a larger group of people or whether a reason for a possible lack of births will have to be sought elsewhere.

Lastly it must be mentioned that the conversion to Christianity was complete in a very short time. All the old rituals were quickly abandoned, and revolutionary changes in the social structure began.

I asked people on Rennell whether anybody doubted the truth of the new God and continued with the old rituals. One informant answered: How could they? They had all heard about the punishment in Niupani and knew that the old 'atua had left. What then was the use of keeping the old customs?

This answer ended our discussion of the Rennellese conversion to Christianity. The former madmen left my house and went over to the church to sing and pray in praise of their new and apparently very powerful God.⁶

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⁵ Birket-Smith 1956:30.

⁶ The data on which this paper is based were collected during field studies on Rennell and Bellona Islands in 1958-59. A short report on these studies has appeared in *Folk*, volume 2 (1960, Copenhagen), under the title "Research on Rennell and Bellona, a Preliminary Report". I am greatly indebted to Professor Samuel H. Elbert for his permission to make use of material collected by him on Rennell in 1957-58 and for his initial stimulation and inspiration which made me prepare this paper.

It is my hope to be able to publish a more detailed and less tentative study of the religious transformation on Rennell and Bellona at a later date. Further research will be carried out on Rennell Island in 1962.