



Portfolio / Writing Sample

Narrative writing piece (academic writing): Christianity and Tradition in Papua New Guinea

"I am a proud Bouganvillean woman," the words slightly slurred as my colleague Natalie finally leapt out of her shell, helped by a few glasses of wine. The moment was short lived and immediately followed by profound apologies to me, her colleagues and others at the table, as we cheered and patted her back and assured her we agreed. However, after the guests left and there was time to reflect, it was this moment that kept coming back to me. A moment of uncharacteristic boldness from a young woman that gave me an interesting insight into the lives of women in a culture that straddles two competing dynamics – the deeply matrilineal nature of many Papua New Guinean cultural groups, including Bougainville, and the firmly patriarchal culture that holds dominance across Papua New Guinea, endorsed by the prevailing religious beliefs.

Natalie's comments had come during a discussion she and I were having with a group of Australian expatriates and Papua New Guinean *power meris* ('strong women') about women's role in the shifting political and cultural sands of Papua New Guinea. We had been lamenting that despite a long fight for equal rights, women, even including *power meris*, remained too deeply beholden to powerful men's whims and favours to achieve their objectives, and were marginalised from real opportunities to shape their country. One of the women in the room was a failed political candidate, frustration and anger seething in every word as she noted, not for the first time, that Papua New Guinea has no female representation in Parliament. In fact since 1975, Papua New Guinea has only had 11 women in Parliament (Pacific Women in Politics 2018). Even a powerful 'First Lady', championing women's rights, ala Michelle Obama or Rula Ghani of Afghanistan, is denied in Papua New Guinea, with the Prime Minister's wife taking a low public profile on all matters, including gender equality. Another of the women present was a remarkable information technology entrepreneur, taking on Papua New Guinea's antiquated internet sector in the only way a female-led business can – from the community level and subtly, providing low cost, effective internet to the country one suburb at a time.

The comments by these women reflect the statistical picture, such as is available. Papua New Guinea is often regarded as one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman (Human Rights Watch 2017) with around two thirds of women



reportedly experiencing violence (Pacific Women 2017), although informal conversations with people working in the sector suggest the figures are much higher. Having multiple wives is common, at least so common that it gets dropped matter of fact into comments on new acquaintances, even if the more modern Port Moresby middle class roll their eyes at it. Women are excluded economically, only 38 percent of women are in waged employment, compared to 65 percent of men (Pacific Women 2017). There is a slow, almost nascent movement towards shifting a woman's role. A simple google search of "first woman Papua New Guinea" reveals women are recently achieving ambitions that have long been open to women in other countries. The first female surgeon only graduated in 2014, the first female judge was appointed in 2001 (Office of the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea 2016) and the first female airline pilot commenced work in 2018 (Jackson 2018). However, overall women's place in contemporary Papua New Guinean society remains precarious.

Yet, there is an odd dichotomy that stands out – the remaining power of matrilineal culture, and the associated respect accorded to women in these cultures. People from places like Bougainville and East New Britain are even now proud of their matrilineal heritage, proudly naming only their mother's family home as their origin, as if their father's background is of no importance. And in fact, under the matrilineal structures that apply, that background *is* of no importance. Natalie was almost bemused once when I asked her about her father's background after she told me she needed to go back to Bougainville for his funeral. He was from another province, but on his marriage, he was taken totally into his Bougainvillean wife's family and was buried on their traditional lands. This is a common story. Men who come from outside of these societies are expected to integrate fully and put their wife's family and heritage above their own. These traditions have held for hundreds of years, regardless of women's position in the broader community. This is not to say that women from these backgrounds do not experience violence or marginalisation at the same rate as other Papua New Guinean women; they do. But across Papua New Guinea there remains almost complete acceptance on women's secondary place to men.

I had this relative position of women brought to attention in a stark and unexpected way – at a wedding. The ceremony itself was as full of pomp and formality as any traditional wedding anywhere, with touches I recognised from my own Australian experiences. The father of the bride stiffly watching with a vague discomfort at women rushing around with food and decorations before giving in to his emotions as he walks his daughter down the aisle. Glowing mothers, slightly flustered as they



make sure everyone is catered to and where they are meant to be. The inevitable younger relatives chattering in corners or pushed into random jobs to keep things rolling along. And then there was something I hadn't expected.

A southern American pastor giving a stern sermon on marriage and women's position in their household to the church full of avidly listening Papua New Guineans, while his organ-playing wife mangled hymns at semi-regular intervals.

Throughout the sermon, the three-year-old ring bearer sat dejectedly and stared at his shoes, his body language reflecting my emotions as the pastor exhorted the congregation to ensure women's place was in the home and subject to the man of the household. 'The man is not the boss', he explained repeatedly, 'but he is the head'. An oddly clashing statement that was very well received by the mostly female Papua New Guineans in attendance. The determination to put women into their (secondary) place was jarring, given this was a wedding of two middle class educated young people from proudly matrilineal backgrounds – he an Australian-educated Bougainvillean and she a thoroughly modern working woman from East New Britain – who had made the decision to marry freely and without familial interference. I struggled to understand how Charmaine, my colleague and the bride, who had no discomfort in pulling up her expatriate bosses and was seen as a mentor for junior staff in our office, who lived alone in the big city and was exposed to contemporary ways of thinking and living, who had been brought up in a culture where women were valued, inherited property and wealth (Newlin 2000) – how could she reconcile all of this with being effectively told she was and always would be inferior to her husband based purely on her sex?

I asked another colleague, Valerie, about my observations from the wedding a few weeks later, when it was just her and I on a trip away from Port Moresby, bonded together by our shared discomfort in the strange accommodation we'd ended up in, with ferns growing through roofs and coffin-like linens on the beds. 'Charmaine is a strong, proud woman, I was interested in what you thought about some of what we heard at her wedding,' I opened cautiously. Valerie, in her ever-frank fashion, had no objections to discussing the topic. For her, the two things were not at all exclusive – Charmaine could be a strong-minded and independent woman, who could also believe fervently in her own inferiority to her husband and other men, *because that is what God said*. There was, as far as Valerie was concerned, no controversy or difficulty in these two beliefs.



The deep hold of Christianity in PNG is evident even to a cursory tourist, only growing ever more obvious once the sprawling mass of urban Port Moresby is left behind. Huge churches are in every town, sometimes little more than a tin shed which would be unbearable in the soaring heat and humidity of the tropical monsoon season. Christian cemeteries are a frequent sight on the outskirts of towns, although tend to be less sombre places of Western countries and more home to the bright colour that is characteristic of Papua New Guineans. I heard once that missionaries came to PNG and decided, in some form of colonialist agreement, that Seventh Day Adventists would get *this* village, Baptists would get *that* village, and so on until the width and breadth had been covered and converted from their heathen ways. I have no way to know if this is true, but the spread of religion in Papua New Guinea is pretty pervasive. Although there are no accurate contemporary figures even on the population of Papua New Guinea itself, let alone the spread of religious belief, estimates are that around 96 percent of the population is Christian, making it one of the most Christian countries on earth, beaten only by countries like Greece and the Vatican (IES 2018, CBSNews 2018). Papua New Guinean politicians and public figures frequently espouse Christian values and Papua New Guinea's Christian nature in public fora, knowing any associated policies will receive popular support. Churches wield similar power to local 'bigmen' (community chiefs / leaders), and their messages and teachings are held to high regard.

Somehow though, powerful traditional beliefs have been retained even with Christianity, none more powerful than the belief in witchcraft – I once had a conversation with a group of smart, articulate women while we discussed women's rights over Western wines. Those women had said to me, with no sense of irony or doubt, that witches existed, everyone knew that. What was more, everyone knew someone who had either suffered from incurring a witch's wrath, or who had benefited from their largesse, like someone's cousin, who's witch relatives had flown every night to her hotel in France where she missed home desperately, dropping off homemade food from her family. Witchcraft is used to justify horrific incidences of violence against women, from torture to murder, with most perpetrators facing no consequences despite legislation now in place (Pacific Beat 2017). At the same time as these educated and modern women knew firmly that witches existed, they also knew witchery did not exist – and was completely contrary to their religious beliefs in Christianity.

Interestingly, everyone in that conversations also agreed firmly that *a//* women from Milne Bay were witches. Fortunately, or unfortunately, there were no women from



Milne Bay present to prove or disprove the hypothesis. However, Milne Bay is one of the many areas in Papua New Guinea which maintains a matrilineal social structure. I cannot think that the two are unrelated – powerful women, with rights to land and property, and a say over decisions that shape their community, all of whom are witches, and thus can have their traditional position undermined and curtailed on the basis of allegations once something in the community goes wrong.

The juxtaposition of powerful women in matrilineal societies with the overwhelming patriarchal social and religious structures that apply across Papua New Guinea is an interesting challenge for supporting women's rights in a country where this is desperately needed. It also opens an interesting role for churches. In religious societies, the role of churches in supporting social change has been long acknowledged. They provide extensive health and education assistance across the country, running schools and hospitals for communities that would otherwise have no access to such facilities (Coffey 2018). But most importantly, they can be used to share healthy messages in communities on the role of women and ending violence against them.

But how can a church support these messages when they are embedded in a community that had every opportunity to have strong, healthy relationships between men and women, but chose to go so far the other way that people have adopted a belief in witchcraft to justify their actions?

I asked a *power meri* for her views on the matter once. Her reply was intriguing, although perhaps not a surprise. She felt that the matrilineal societies in Papua New Guinea could share lessons with the rest of Papua New Guinea on the role of women and respecting them, but they needed to clean their own houses first. She felt that these communities had lost their way with the role of women and the way Christianity is translated in Papua New Guinea, allowing widespread violence to occur including sorcery related violence, and that this undermined their credibility.

Living in Papua New Guinea as an expatriate it is extremely difficult to really appreciate or become a part of Papua New Guinean culture. Expatriates live in secure compounds, go to bars and restaurants that can cost an average weekly wage for a single meal and have lives that are completely incomprehensible to the average population. Importantly, most do not go to church or share the same beliefs as Papua New Guineans, making many of their cultural challenges and realities equally incomprehensible in the reverse. On the surface, it appears a country where women



are and always will be subjugated and second-class, with limited hope of redemption as long as women are so thoroughly barred from public participation. However, scratching the surface with carefully worded questions and trying to untangle the many strands reveals the presence of so many strong women and the continued presence of matrilineal societies which gives pause and some reason for hope. If these societies can, as the power meri I spoke to put it, 'clear their houses', then there is a good lesson in how the rest of Papua New Guinea could equally shift – maintaining their proud cultural heritage and traditions, but in a way that brings women to a more equal position.

*All quotes from discussions undertaken by the author unless otherwise indicated.
Names changed to protect privacy.*

References:

CBSNews 2018, 'The most heavily Christian countries on earth', *CBSNews*, . Accessed 14 September 2018, available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/the-most-heavily-christian-countries-on-earth>.

Coffey 2018, 'The role of the church shaping public policy in Papua New Guinea', *Latest News*. Accessed 14 September 2018, available at: www.coffey.com/en/about-us/latest-news/the-role-of-the-church-shaping-public-policy-in-papua-new-guinea.

Human Rights Watch 2017, 'Papua New Guinea: Events of 2016', *Human Rights Watch*. Accessed 12 September 2018, available at: www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/papua-new-guinea.

IES 2018, 'Papua New Guinean Culture', *Cultural Atlas*. Accessed 14 September 2018, available at: <https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/papua-new-guinean-culture/religion-7fea8435-f2e4-494e-bc92-402318335682>.

Jackson, K 2018, 'Captain Beverly is PNG's first women captain', *PNG Attitude Blog*, 5 February. Accessed 14 September 2018, available at: http://asopa.typepad.com/asopa_people/2018/02/captain-beverly-becomes-pngs-first-woman-pilot-to-fly-jet-aircraft.html.



Newlin, A 2000, 'The effects of economic growth on gender roles in Papua New Guinea and the Tolai people', *Tok Pisin English Dictionary*. Accessed 14 September 2018, available at: www.calibercreations.com/pisin/PNGstudy.htm.

Office of the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea 2016, 'The passing of the late Justice Catherine Davani', *Media Release*. Accessed 14 September 2018, available at: www.pm.gov.pg/the-passing-of-the-late-justice-catherine-davani-the-prime-minister-of-papua-new-guinea-hon-peter-oneill-cmg-mp-has-extended-the-sympathies-and-condolences-of-the-nation-to-the.

Pacific Beat 2017, 'Sorcery-related violence surges in PNG as women attacked and murdered, accused of witchcraft', *ABC News*, 29 October. Accessed 14 September 2018, available at: www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-29/png-upsurge-in-sorcery-related-violence/9095894.

Pacific Women 2017, 'Papua New Guinea', *Pacific Women*. Accessed 14 September 2018, available at: <https://pacificwomen.org/our-work/locations/papua-new-guinea/>

Pacific Women in Politics 2018, 'Papua New Guinea', *Pacific Women in Politics*. Accessed 14 September 2018, available at: www.pacwip.org/country-profiles/papua-new-guinea.

.....