

## NAMES FOR 'GOD' IN OCEANIC LANGUAGES<sup>1</sup>

While it may be agreed that every people has some idea about a higher world than the physical, it could not be truly said that every people has an adequate idea of the Christian God. So the translation of Christian literature involves the finding of a name suitable for God, in Oceania just as elsewhere. Different translators have followed one of three courses: (a) they have used a European word such as *Deo* or *God*; (b) they have adopted a native term which seems capable of supplying at least a foundation for Christian teaching; (c) they have invented a term such as 'Great Spirit' to make up for the inadequacy of any native name for a local deity. In this article each of these three practices will be studied.

(a) The term *Deo* is used in Catholic Missions throughout Oceania except in Polynesia, where solution (b) has been accepted. The use of this term is limited to these missions.

Many missions of English origin use the English term *God*. This is found above all in Anglican Missions, in the following areas: Melanesian Mission in the Solomon Islands, Santa Cruz, and New Hebrides; and the Anglican Mission in New Guinea and New Britain. An exception is the Anglican usage in Fiji, where Methodist missions had earlier used a term of group (c) which the Anglican Mission took over as part of the accepted Fijian language. The Methodist Mission introduced this Fijian term into its areas in New Britain and New Ireland, but not into Papua.

The general distribution of the English term *God* is as follows: Anglican New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and New Hebrides; the Presbyterian area in parts of the New Hebrides: Santo, Malekula, Ambrym, Epi and Tanna; in the different areas of western Papua: Kiwai in the London Missionary Society area, and Gogodala in that of the Unevangelized Fields Mission, and in sporadic instances elsewhere.

There is no need to enlarge on the use of *Deo* or *God* in the Oceanic region but it may be added in passing that here and there a variation on the theme occurs: in Micronesia the Spanish *Dios* or German *Gott* is found, but the principle is the same. It is more important to know whether such a foreign term can convey to the native the idea that the missionary wants to impart to him. If the Christian idea of God is unknown, is it not a case of *ignotum per ignotius*, the unknown by means of the more unknown? One would naturally say 'Yes', from the point of view of education, but in the areas where the European term has long been employed it is found that it has received a Christian baptism, i.e. that the peoples have gradually learned the meaning

<sup>1</sup> This article is part of a longer one prepared by Dr Capell for the *Journal des Océanistes* under the title of 'Termes Théologiques dans les langues de l'Océanie', and is used by permission of the editor of that journal, Fr Patric O'Reilly.

attached to the word by the Church, at least as successfully as most Christians in Europe have done. Perhaps that does not entirely justify the borrowing, but at least the term is accepted. Incidentally, the origin of the English term remains undecided, but that does not invalidate the concept in modern English! A new term may be introduced among a people while the meaning of the term is patiently explained, and that is just what has happened in Oceania.

An instance will serve to show the acceptance of an innovation which involves not just a word but an important part of the grammatical structure of a language. The story was told to the present writer by a missionary working at Lake Kutubu in the Southern Highlands of Papua and using the Foe language. In this language there is a linguistic differentiation showing whether the statement being made rests on the speaker's own experience or not. If the story rests on his personal knowledge, he uses the normal grammatical forms of the verb; if he has heard it, but has not seen it himself, he adds a suffix; if he judges by evidence still visible, he uses a different suffix; and there are still others expressing different relations between the event and the narrator. The missionary in question set out to translate the story of Creation, and, not yet having a deep enough knowledge of the language, he used the normal grammatical forms of the verb which he knew. The people were astonished and incredulous, because the forms used implied that the missionary had actually witnessed the event. It was then that they taught him the special aspectual forms of the verb. Finally, however, it was agreed that a whole book the size of the Bible could hardly be written in the exact grammatical forms required, and he was allowed to use the simple forms of the verb in his translation. There was a spontaneous adaptation of linguistic forms, and the same sort of thing has happened in the use of a term for God.

(b) The second way of presenting the Christian God to Oceanic peoples consists in the use of a native term which will have been part of the pre-Christian religious system. Such a word would not previously have carried a Christian meaning, but the missionaries believed they could baptise it and give it a Christian content that would take the place of the old pre-Christian meaning. This has been done in many and perhaps even in most parts of the world.

In Oceania the most widespread term is *Atua*. The word is Polynesian, although it has long been used in parts of Melanesia too. In Polynesia it originally had various meanings, many of which were very distant from the Christian meaning. In the first place there are countless *atua*'s, while the Christian God is one only, even though He be a Trinity in Unity—and that difficulty would have to be faced later. But at bottom an *atua* is only a spirit, not necessarily masculine, or good or powerful, and certainly a very poor foundation for conveying the Christian concept of God. The term *atua* is applied to gods possessing personal names, as well as to ancestral spirits and even to dead chiefs. In many ways its coverage corresponds to that of *kami* in Japanese. In Samoa one could even speak of an *atua* of war, thunder, etc. Yet this term *atua* has been employed everywhere in Polynesia by all the missions, from the first efforts of the London Missionary Society up to the present time.

To this Polynesian term *atua* there must be added the Fijian term *kalou*,

for a *kalou* is something very common in Fiji. It does not even require the personal article *ko* in front of it, but is used with the common article *a* and *na*. First of all, *kalou* is the soul of a dead person, but it includes nature spirits as well. So a *kalou* is a ghost. In Fijian mythology the *kalou vū*, the 'founding spirit', is the ancestor of a specific social group; he has his temple (*mbure kalou*) and his priests (*mbete*). The *kalou vatu* (stone spirit) is a stone inhabited by such a spirit and carried into war to assure victory. The *kalou* can even be insects seen on stagnant water. All that certainly suggests a very unsatisfactory name for the Christian God. Yet the first missionaries adopted the term, and it remains in use up to the present. Today Fijians assure us that they do understand what the God of the Bible means, whatever was the original meaning of the word *kalou*. The term has been baptised, and answers, and in spite of a certain modern school of theology, in Fiji God is not dead!

Moreover, the term *kalou* is not limited to Fiji. In New Britain the first Methodist missionaries, who had previously worked in Fiji, introduced the Fijian term *kalou* at Rabaul, where, of course, it was not part of the local vernacular. It originally had no meaning there, intelligible or otherwise; it was a foreign word and nothing more. So it remains a foreign name for a Foreign Being. The dictionary published at Rabaul in 1940 says about *kalou*: 'the Fijian word for God, introduced by the Fijian teachers before the merits of the local word *kaia* were known'. This same dictionary shows that the word *kaia* would actually not have done, for it defines it thus: 'an evil and omnipresent spirit, who afflicts people with deformity and diseases, and is the cause of earthquakes, eruptions, etc., and lives in craters, dark glens, etc.'; also 'any evil spirit, a large snake, or anything much dreaded'. It is even used as the name of a small volcano in Blanche Bay and as an adverb meaning 'very, much'. It is clear that such a term would hardly have been usable for the Christian God and really had no merit at all.

In the neighbouring Duke of York Islands a native term *nara* was used, but information as to its original meaning is lacking, and in any case the Duke of York language is no longer used today as a vehicle of religious instruction.

In the Lutheran area of New Guinea the word *Anutu* is generally used. The term was originally Yabêm, a language spoken about Finschhafen on the Huon Peninsula. In the Kâte language, spoken in the mountains behind Finschhafen, there is a word *numu*, about which Keysser's dictionary states only that it is a loan-word from Yabêm, without giving any reason for its being borrowed. In Kâte there is a term *nemu* for God, defined as 'primordial beings, begotten by Mâlenfuŋ, the creator; they determined the conditions of human life'. According to the dictionary, 'the *nemu* have so ordained it' used to be the invariable answer to every suggestion made with a view to changing a custom, however illogical the suggestion might be. Mâlenfuŋ, the creator of the world, apparently created these primordial beings and then left them to themselves. He lies, himself, below the horizon. When he moves he produces earthquakes. One day he will break the sky, and when that falls the earth will be destroyed. It was believed that he was human only in front; his back was like a rock. If his face is turned towards men, they are in good state; if not, they are in distress—an idea very reminiscent of Psa. 104: 29.

In the centre of the New Hebrides the Nguna language shows an interesting phenomenon. Nguna is one of a group of dialects of the same language, occupying the island of Efate and the archipelago of small islands between Efate and Epi. In Nguna the translator used the word *Sukpwe* (spelled *Suṗe*); in Efate the word used for God is the Polynesian word *Atua* that we have already studied. *Sukpwe* is the name of the graded society to which men of both this and the northern parts of the New Hebrides strive to belong—a type of secret society found from Santo southwards to the centre of the group. So *sukpwe* is not really a person at all. John Layard has described the idea in full.<sup>1</sup> At best *sukpwe* is a ghost, just like the *kalou* of Fiji. Daniel Macdonald, in his strange work *Oceanic Languages* (Henry Froude, London, 1907), describes the idea of *sukpwe* on Efate in a way that makes it harder still to understand how the word could come to stand for the Christian God. He writes: 'what is placed, fixed . . . as upright stones firmly planted in the ground, a row of such stones, . . . a statue, an idol or sacred place; also custom, as a thing fixed . . . *suṗe nin Atua i ben*, 'the nature, custom or disposition or fixed character of God is righteous'. . . . In this last sense it is a general term used to denote either the first or early or ancient inhabitants of a place (the original settlers of a district), or, which is the same thing, the persons who figure in Efatese myths, or the spirits of such, now being *natemate* (= ghosts).' Definitely a very inauspicious foundation for the name of God! But even here it would seem that a baptism has taken place, and the present-day population of Nguna is not under a misapprehension about the nature of God as a Divine and real Being.

(c) The third way of dealing with the name of God calls for less space than the others. If one does not wish to introduce a European term or use a native word, what does one do? Apart from translation or adaptation, there is only one possibility. One uses native words expressing the idea. Thus, in Mailu, a language of the south coast of Papua, the phrase *Boi Ogoda*, 'Great Spirit', is used, and in the same way one says *one ogoda*, 'great sand', for the world, whose vast extent was unknown to the natives. Here is a way of expressing what surpasses the thinking of primitive peoples. Another method is to use a term denoting a Big Chief: in some of the languages of the western Solomon Islands the word *bánara*, 'chief', is used for God, and the recent Pidgin New Testament uses '*bilong Bikpela Jisas Kriast*' on the same principle. In Roviana of New Georgia this term is also used, but along with it *Tamasa*, the origin of which is now forgotten, although the word seems to be quite modern. About South Cape, in Papua, there is the word *Eaubada*, which means 'I am the Chief', to indicate God. This word is used nowadays in Suau, Dobu and Kiriwina, but at an earlier stage it was also used in other languages of the group. Sometimes a word for 'lord' has to be found as well as one for God, and in many of the Oceanic languages the word for a chief is used in this connection, along with whatever word is employed for God. Here and there one finds an adaptation of the word 'Jehovah'.

<sup>1</sup> See J. Layard, *Stone Men of Malekula*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1942, Chap. IX, especially p. 206, where there is a map showing the occurrence of all the mythical heroes of the Northern New Hebrides.