

HOW THE GUHU-SAMANE CULT OF 'PORO' AFFECTS TRANSLATION

Introduction

This is a study of the Guhu-Samane cult of *poro*¹ and the manner in which it affects Bible translation. The Guhu-Samane people live chiefly inland along the Waria River which empties into the Solomon Sea near the government post of Morobe in New Guinea. Apparently a linguistic remnant, this group's origin is difficult to identify except to say that its people probably came from the sea. This is attested by the presence of numerous coastal vocabulary items. However, there is a slight cultus resemblance to that of the people of Mala'lo, described by Ian Hogbin in his book *Transformation Scene*.² The name given to the cult at Mala'lo is *dabung*, supposedly a cognate of the Polynesian *tapu*. To this the word *poro* bears no obvious resemblance.

Poros a Central Feature of Guhu-Samane

The cult of *poro* affected the lives of the people primarily in such matters as initiation, sex, marriage, feasts, gardening, war, peace, music, magical arts, medicine, sanctions, etc. The rites and ceremonies were performed by the priesthood called the *poro fathers*.

Among these *poro* fathers certain ones were held in great reverence. These chiefs frequently remained in seclusion, and were waited on hand and foot by female attendants called *poro mothers*. The most significant ceremonies of the religious system were performed by the *poro* chiefs, while the lesser priests served as assistants and messengers.

When a son neared the age of puberty and began to rebel against his mother, she would inform her elder brother and her husband that the time for her son's *poro* instruction had arrived. Her brother would then arrange with the priests for his nephew's instruction.

When the time was propitious, the priests gathered their *poro* vines and lighted the ritual fires in the secluded longhouse. The *poro* bull-roarer, a ten- or twelve-inch hardwood paddle which was normally held in mystical custody by the *poro* mothers, was taken by the priest designated for this responsibility. He fastened it to the end of a fifteen-foot cord which was attached at its other end to a slender pole of equal length. Wielding this like a supple whip, he whirled it powerfully around his head in a horizontal arc. This produced a siren-like wail calculated to drive fear and horror into the young women and children of the distant village.

¹ The information concerning *poro* contained in this paper is supplied mainly by Bage, one of the few remaining men who was a practising priest of the cult twenty-five years ago when it was discontinued. It has been verified by other members of the cult.

² H. Ian Hogbin, *Transformation Scene: The Changing Culture of a New Guinea Village*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951.

As the adult males led the initiates toward the poro house they encountered a double file of the younger priests in feathered ceremonial dress, dancing and contorting themselves. Brandishing weapons in mock enmity, the priests awaited the young initiates who marched up boldly, eager for their introduction into the male society. Some, however, began to have misgivings when they saw how the foremost lads were being treated. They were required to run the gauntlet while the priests rained 'discipline' down upon their backs with glancing blows from the stone axes and clubs. This was followed by the piercing of the nose septum and the ear lobe. None but the very weakest emitted even a groan, and any who cried out were dealt a swift, lethal blow as being unfit for male society. The victim would be buried later, and his mother and friends told that the poro had 'eaten' him. This did not indicate to them a physical ingestion, but some mysterious destruction.

At last, battered and dripping blood from their wounds, the lads were allowed to sit down in a row, next to the ceremonial fire. The chief poro fathers then brought out their healing poro compounds of red pandanus fruit, tree bark and selected leaves, and anointed them from head to foot.

At this stage, two priests who were skilled in music took the sacred 'female' flutes down from their place in the rafters. These poro flutes were made of hollow reeds five feet long and two inches wide, with three holes for the production of mellow tones, and were matched so as to produce a pleasing antiphony of the pentatonic scale. Players cradled the instruments in the crook of the left arm so that the far end extended off to the right. The priests faced each other and began a gentle dance, blowing into the orifice of the flutes. They wove back and forth, revolving around an imaginary pivot between them.

The origin of the female flutes is attributed to an occasion following the death of a woman in the mountains, long ago. Some time after her death, men on a hunting trip heard the wind whistling through her hollow bones as they were passing by. Fascinated, they took her thighbone with them, and when they arrived in their village the people tried to reproduce the sounds the men had heard by blowing through the hollow bone. The women failed. But when the men tried, the bone responded, to their delight, with a clear note. Thereafter, the men banned women and children from seeing the bone and held it in highest veneration, tying it up in the poro house. Finally, they regarded it as too sacred to play, so they began to carve flutes of reeds and evolved a set of tunes in honor of the flute bone. Then as time went by, the sacred bone was lost or confiscated. So if the account be true, only the legend remains. But reed flutes retained a reflected sacredness.

Now as the priests swayed and pivoted, the initiates were permitted for the first time to witness the playing of the poro flutes, accompanied by the muttered incantations of the poro fathers. The lads sat wide-eyed, entranced, seeming to lose all sense of the bodily pain so recently endured as tribal discipline.

Initiates were exposed over a long period to rigorous hardship—scant food, taboos and punishment of many kinds. Unquestioning obedience to

their leaders was required, and they were taught to use their weapons and tools skilfully. They were also introduced to the arts of weaving and carving. They learned the names of the flora and fauna and how to hunt and fish, applying always the requisite magic.

When the initiates had completed the instruction period their true names were revealed. They were then considered poro 'bones' or 'of age'. Some were designated as priests, some as warriors, and others were regarded as ordinary. The poro chiefs had a commissioning ceremony for the graduates by tying pads of poro leaves under the soles of their feet.

Those designated for the poro priesthood began their novitiate immediately. They acted as servants and messengers for the poro fathers, and were given further training in medicine, magic, symbolism, designs, and other priestly functions.

Girls were initiated in a less spectacular manner. Each one would be attended by two poro mothers. A hot ritual fire would be lit and the initiate would be required to sit down with her back close to the fire. Although the heat was intense, the girl had the comforting presence of the poro women seated on either side of her. They gave gynaecological, matrimonial and domestic counsel. She was also given instruction in the employment of aphrodisiacs and household magic. After a long hot vigil, the poro mothers would pad her feet with the poro leaves, reveal her name, place on her a virgin grass skirt and bedeck her with necklaces, bracelets, shells, aromatic leaves and flowers. They then revealed to her the name of the man whom the clan had arranged for her to marry.

The promised husband came then with his poro chief and brought the bride-price of pigs, food and valuables, thereby placing his poro seal upon the bride. The marriage was formalized by the poro fathers who brought the pair together in great ceremony. The priest folded a sacred vine, passing it to the groom's mouth from over his shoulder. When he had taken a bite of it, the priest passed it to the bride and she also took a bite. Throughout, the priests chanted incantations and blessings. Following this the poro chief took a new bamboo knife which had been ceremonially dedicated, and approached the sacrificial pig. Another clubbed the animal, and when it ceased to move the chief bent down and slit the mouth of the pig across the cheek and shoulder in an upward hooking motion. This act insured fertility. After others had quartered the animal the priests gathered in a circle, took a portion of the meat and together tossed it into the air repeatedly to guarantee an abundance of meat and game for the future.

When the meat was barbecued, the bride took a poro leaf on her forefinger and wrapped a strip of the cooked meat around it. She offered it to the groom who opened his mouth as if to receive it; but at this point she removed the morsel, returning it to the fire. This was the signal for the groom to leave and go back to his village there to await the summons of his bride. She remained in seclusion wearing her finery until the aromatic leaves and flowers were dried up, at which time she set about cooking a meal for her husband. When it was prepared she sent for him. On his arrival the two sat down on either side of the fire and she offered him a portion of the food. As soon as he 'stretched forth his hand' to receive it, the marriage

was considered finalized and was consummated. Their firstborn son was called the first 'child of the vine'.

It was the prerogative of the poro chiefs to declare war or peace, sometimes arbitrarily. When they decided to do battle, the poro war chief plucked the particular leaves symbolizing war and went out to challenge the young men to battle with the enemy. As they saw the chief wearing the symbols of war, the men worked themselves into a frenzy of anticipation. However, if there were any who lacked courage, the poro chief made a brew of some of the leaves and gave them a drink of it. This potion aroused in the drinker an eagerness to fight.

When the poro chiefs were ready to declare a state of peace, several symbols could be employed to effect it. A round peace stone, *poro mune*, set in a prominent place by the peace chief, was recognized by all as the official declaration of peace. Seeing it, all warring elements would comply by laying down their arms immediately.

Another commonly used symbol of peace was the *soota*, a pinion feather of the cockatoo split in herringbone design. The peace chief inserted this into his hair and ventured out into the battle front, or wherever hostility existed. Upon seeing this it was obligatory to obey its command of peace. This was also the signal which ushered in a new era of feasting, dancing and revelry.

Under the supervision of the poro chiefs the festival *biiri* was constructed. This was an immense longhouse with partitions along its walls where the different families were billeted. The broad central aisle served as the stage for the various activities which followed. There the valorous deeds of the warriors were applauded and the eminent ones were 'crowned' by the insertion into their armbands of a *barei*, the flaming flower of the victory plant. There also the peace drums, shaped like an hourglass, throbbed their intoxicating rhythms through the succeeding weeks of festivities. Only the poro 'knife men' who were responsible for the ceremonial carving of the pigs and other game were abstinent and remained aloof from the merriment.

Before the people commenced a garden, the poro priests uttered certain incantations to insure fertility and abundance. None would think of gardening without this essential ceremony.

At times a poro chief would place a ban on the plucking of fruits and nuts from a certain grove or area, with a view to releasing it on an appropriate date. He would carefully fold a bundle of poro leaves together and tie it to the trunk of a representative tree at the approach to the preserve. The consequences for breaking this taboo were severe for those who were found out; and the magical seances by which such culprits were identified were both the dread of the community and the power of the poro fathers.

When the poro chief considered the time propitious he would go to the poro bundle and ceremoniously untie it. This act released the fruit of the trees for food for the community, and the people rejoiced.

These descriptions do not, of course, exhaust the subject of poro. However, they do suffice to give some of the general implications of the cult in the Guhu-Samane community of a generation ago, and they provide a background in attempting to understand the thinking processes of this generation.

Poro a Useful Ingredient of Translation

There is no doubt it would be folly for the translator to adopt wholesale the terms and concepts of poro in his translation of the Bible into Guhu-Samane. The message of the divine Word is *revolutionary* and cannot be bartered. On the other hand, it would be equal folly for the translator to be ignorant of, or to ignore, the prominence poro still occupies in the thinking of the people. They have gained a measure of enlightenment and sophistication through contact with the white man and through the elements of the Gospel which have filtered through to them via another language. But the core of their perception is still in the old matrix.

This produces a dilemma. Does one employ terms foreign to the experience of the people at the risk of indefinite or even irrelevant meaning? Or does one employ terms familiar to the people at the risk of *wrong* meaning? The answer lies not in an either-or choice, but in a judicious selection and blending of the two. This, in fact, has been the constant aim of the work which has gone into the translation thus far.¹ In the panel discussions on specific issues, all of the elements which are considered relevant are weighed before a collective decision is made. At the present stage none of these decisions is considered final, but honoring the background and the suggestions of the Guhu-Samane members of the panel is paying off.

The following passages show some of the ways in which poro has affected the translation thus far:

Mark 1: 44. For 'priest' the term 'poro father' would at first seem to be a natural choice. However, several priests of the old cult are still living. Although they no longer function primarily as priests of the old system they still have a substantial influence on the community, and there would be more than a chance that the unqualified term would (in some contexts particularly) be equated with the priest of the poro cult. We learned, then, that the poro fathers would sometimes be called 'knife men' in relation to their sacrificial work. The panel was pleased to apply this term to the Jewish priest, and the Christian community has adopted it fully. The verse reads: 'You must definitely not tell any man of this. But you go show your body to the knife man and do what Moses said about a sacrifice concerning your being healed, and the cause (base of this) will be apparent.'

Mark 11: 11. The *biiri*, 'festival longhouse', being the religious and social center of the community, is a possible term for 'temple'. It is not the 'poro house' as such. That would be too closely identified with the cult of poro. The physical features of the building, huge and sub-divided, lend it further favor for this consideration. By qualifying it as 'God's *biiri*' the term has become meaningful and appropriate in the context of the Scriptures.

Psalms 8: 1a. In searching for a suitable equivalent for 'majestic' it was learned that the bull-roarer had the important function not only of

¹ At present five New Testament books and an abridged form of Genesis have been translated, published in trial form, and distributed among the literates who number approximately 2,500.

announcing poro ceremonies, but also the arrival of a great or important person. Of a notable man it is said that his name had the quality of the bull-roarer call. Thus the passage is translated: 'O Lord, our Lord in all the great earth your name has the quality of the bull-roarer call'.

Galatians 4: 1-5. Translation of this passage was most difficult. However, the initiation discipline of the Guhu-Samanes gave a useful point of reference. After much discussion of the similarities and dissimilarities of the Biblical setting compared with their former cultural situation, the passage was translated in this manner: 'This is the way it is. A man's son will later on surely become the owner of his father's possessions. But while the son is not yet adult he is merely the quality of a poro initiate, and the overseers and the poro fathers continue to supervise him. But the [boy's] father sets the time, and when the son becomes fully "poro boned" (initiated) he will receive his own. So then as children who are not yet become adult, long ago we (inclusive) continued to be in the situation of earthly interdictions and sanctions. We continued thus till the time came when God sent his son whom a woman bore, into the jurisdiction of the line talk (law). After she bore him, he freed us who were in the bonds of the law and we are all now become God's grown up gift (adopted) children.'

Ephesians 6: 15. The R.S.V. 'Having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace . . .' is translated in Guhu-Samane 'Tying to your feet the pads of the gospel of peace. . .'. This denotes the readiness for and commissioning to the task at hand.

Ephesians 5: 27. This is translated: 'For (in the manner that) a woman promised to her husband is without stain and untidiness, and, bedecked with "flowers" (and finery), she does not break her husband's poro seal, but waits until he comes and meets her—so Christ intends to take his hands and feet (church).' In this adaptation it was felt wise to avoid the idiom 'stretches forth his hand' as tending to focus too strongly on the sexual consummation of the marriage relationship. Therefore the less explicit term 'meets her' is used as a euphemism.

Genesis 25: 31. Here the birthright is translated 'the right of the first child of the vine'.

Luke 2: 7. This presents a problem in that if one translates '. . . she bore her first son' it could easily be understood that she bore him out of wedlock. If one translates 'she bore her first child of the vine' the legality of the child is established because it implies the poro blessing. But then it could be understood by some that Jesus was the biological offspring of Joseph and Mary. The latter was chosen tentatively in dependence upon other texts, like Luke 1: 34, to clarify.

Ephesians 2: 14. The translation reads: 'He is our peace-feather . . .' This affords a delightful cultural and physical 'exegesis' for the future teachers, who apply it in this manner. They have an idiom, 'he is my pinion', meaning 'he is my mainstay'; for no bird can fly without its pinion feathers. Therefore they first apply this to Christ in his relationship to mankind before the event of Calvary. Then as the feather must be carved in order to be the effective symbol of peace, so Christ was

crucified in order to bring peace on earth. In the context of Eph. 2 this is very meaningful to the Guhu-Samanes.

James 1: 12. 'The man who is unmovable in a test is in a happy condition. For those who love God are the ones into whose armbands he promised to insert the victory flower of life. So then, after the test is over that man will have the victory flower inserted.'

Mark 14: 24. The concept of 'testament' (Gk. *diathēkē*) is not easy, but the ritual freeing of a fruit and nut preserve does afford some reference. Thus, 'As they were drinking he said to them, "On behalf of many this poro provision of my blood is released"'. God is here seen as the great benefactor and man the grateful recipient.

James 5: 14. The 'pouring of the oil' would doubtless be thought of as an act of magic, but the context points to a greater—God—who heals.

Summary Comments

There are obvious elements of magic in poro, and some not so obvious. It is certainly true that the translation should be free of suggesting to the readers and hearers that the Bible is nothing more than another form of magic which can be manipulated to serve people's selfish ends. (Even in magic there is a useful component *if* it can be abstracted—namely, faith.) But in translating into Guhu-Samane care is being taken to avoid any *ipso facto* implications inherent in magic. However, the concept and function of poro is much broader than magic. It contains much that is practical and symbolical. Of these some elements can be useful, if employed wisely.

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IS THE NEW TESTAMENT WRITTEN IN 'HOLY GHOST' GREEK?

The exact place of the Greek of the New Testament in the development of the Greek language has been a matter of debate for many years. In the seventeenth century, with the renewed interest in Greek writings, the question of the 'purity' of the Greek of the New Testament arose. One German scholar explained the peculiarities of New Testament usage through the influence of the Holy Spirit. He said that the Holy Spirit changed the language of the people receiving a divine revelation. This would explain the differences between New Testament Greek and classical Greek.

The problem developed because Greek was known primarily from its literary writings (as opposed to the non-literary or vernacular writings), and hence the New Testament Greek was compared with the Greek literary language. The problem was compounded by the fact that the writings contemporaneous with the New Testament were colored by an artificial revival of the classical Attic dialect.