

THE DANI CHURCH OF IRIAN JAYA
AND
THE CHALLENGES IT IS FACING TODAY

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I, Jennifer Bensley, hereby declare that this thesis contains no material that has previously been accepted for any other degree or diploma awarded by any other University. To the best of my knowledge and belief neither does this paper contain any material previously published or written by any other person except where duly referenced within the thesis.

Signed

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SUMMARY

In dealing with the topic of the Dani church in Irian Jaya and the challenges it is facing today, this thesis will address various aspects. Initially a brief history of Irian Jaya, and in particular of the Dani people, is given together with the advent of the Christian missionaries into their homeland. Leading on from there the thesis discusses development that has occurred and is occurring in Irian Jaya. This chapter is used to set the scene for later chapters in which the Dani reactions to rapid and various changes are discussed. Chapter three focuses in on the Dani church in the North Baliem Valley, its establishment and organisation. The background information provided on the church will be useful in discussing the nature of the present problems it is facing. The following two chapters attempt to deal with a number of issues that the Dani church and its community are facing at present. These have been collected under one of the two headings of "modernisation" and "Islamisation". This division was largely dependent on the responses I received from my Dani informants, who were obliging enough to be either interviewed by myself or complete a questionnaire for me. Their perception of whether certain issues were related to Islam or to "modernity" was the main criterion for issues being in one group or the other. The issues discussed are those which were portrayed by my respondents as challenging the Dani church over the July to August 1994 period. I conclude the thesis with an overview of its contents, and focus on the problems the Dani church is facing, together with its reaction to them.

INTRODUCTION

"The Dani church in Irian Jaya and the challenges it is facing today." For the uninitiated this title may conjure up ideas of a religious sect that has deviated from mainstream Christian beliefs, but for those who have heard of, or who know, the Danis it evokes images of a different kind.

The term Dani refers to a group of people who inhabit the highlands of Irian Jaya, the region now referred to as Jayawijaya, and who speak the Dani language. This language group is divided into two subgroups, Grand Valley and Western Dani. According to the linguist and missionary Myron Bromley, Western Dani is a "fairly homogenous group of mutually intelligible dialects" while "Grand Valley Dani is a chain of dialects each intelligible with the next ... the opposite ends of the chain are mutually unintelligible dialects".¹ The Western and Grand Valley Danis form the largest single ethnic and linguistic group within Irian Jaya although the Western Danis are the more homogenous. They are also noticeably the larger of the two language groups, numbering almost three times as many as the Grand Valley Dani.² The term Dani was first recorded in 1926 during a Netherlands-American expedition into the highlands of Irian Jaya led by M.W.Stirling.³ The party apparently were in contact with the Moni tribe who referred to the people of the Baliem Valley as Ndani or Dani. Those we now call Western Danis, previously did not have a term to distinguish themselves as a cultural group. In their contact with other highland inhabitants they would use the term "Lani" to distinguish themselves linguistically from the other groups around them.⁴ The Grand Valley inhabitants continue to be referred to as Danis while the Western Danis go by either Dani or Lani. In this paper the *Dani Barat* or Western Danis will be referred to as Danis unless a distinction is being made between them and the Grand Valley Dani.

¹ M.Bromley "Ethnic Groups in Irian Jaya" in *Irian Bulletin of Irian Jaya Development*, UNCEN, 1973, Vol.II No.3, p.6

² D.Hayward *The Dani of Irian Jaya Before and After Conversion*, (Regions Press, 1980), p.11

³ *Ibid.*, p.114 & J.A.Godschalk & A.E.Dumatubun *Bangunan Baru dan Fondasi Tua: Suatu Studi Kasus Tentang Kargoisme di Dani Barat*, (UNCEN/Bapeda Tingkat I Irian Jaya, 1989), p.3

⁴ G.Larson *The Structure and Demography of the Cycle of warfare Among the Ilaga Dani of Irian Jaya*, (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, 1987), p.28

We have already noted the magnitude of the Western Dani population and from the figure below we can see that they also inhabit a number of valleys constituting a wide area. Since the distribution of the Western Dani is so extensive, a geographical restriction will be made to focus on those who reside in the North Baliem Valley and coming down as far east as the district of Asologaima, to Pyramid where the Western Dani district borders on the Grand Valley Dani.⁵ (See Maps 2 & 3)

Figure 1

<u>The Western Dani Population</u>	
<u>Overall Population</u>	150,000
55,000	North Baliem around Tiom, Makki and in the Grand Baliem around Pyramid (Kecamatan Asologaima)
15,000	Hablifura Valley (Kelila and Bokondini)
45,000	Swart Valley (Karubaga)
30,000	Yamo River Valley (Ilu, Mulia and Sinak)
5,000	Kecamatan Ilaga (where the Dani has integrated with the Damal)
from J.Godschalk & A.Dumatubun <i>Bangunan Baru dan Fondasi Tua: Suatu Studi Kasus Tentang Kargoisme di Dani Barat</i> , (UNCEN/Bapeda Tingkat I Irian Jaya, 1989), p.1	

The Dani people while distinctly Melanesian, have become citizens of the Austronesian Republic of Indonesia. Unlike the majority of Indonesian citizens, most of the members of the Western Dani community adhere to the religion of Protestant Christianity. Yet less than forty years ago the beliefs of the entire Dani community were animistic. Their former beliefs centred around the belief in the power of the spirits and the damage they could wreak in every aspect of an individual's life. This belief system led to the establishment of rituals, ceremonies and offerings. The connections a man had with the spirit world also played a part in his position of power in the community. Those who possessed spiritual power were considered to be of great social importance.⁶ The people were governed by the spirits which they feared. This fear was evident in their daily living, one example being their aversion to venturing outside their living quarters after dusk. This was

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.12

⁶ Hayward *The Dani of Irian Jaya*, pp.86-89

all to change when in the late 1950s they were confronted by, and had their first significant contact with, foreigners. These foreigners were Christian missionaries from Australia and America. In the years following the appearance of these missionaries and their families there was a move from an animistic to a Christian belief system by a large majority of the Western Dani community. The Grand Valley Danis were not so accepting of the new message.

While the Danis generally have accepted Protestant Christianity, those in the North Baliem Valley are predominantly of the Baptist denomination as it was the Australian Baptist Missionary Society or ABMS that took Christianity to these Danis. One exception is the area around Pyramid station which was established by Americans from the Christian and Missionary Alliance or CAMA. While there is a major input into the thesis from, and regarding the Baptist denomination, other Protestant denominations have also been represented both through written material and fieldwork. The widespread acceptance of Christianity has resulted in the establishment of a substantial Dani church that will be the focus of this paper. The term 'church' will refer to both the organisation and the individuals who constitute it unless otherwise specified.

My initial interest in the Dani people and the church is not academic but rather stems from my childhood when I lived amongst the Danis in a village called Makki, with my family. Both my parents were involved in mission work amongst the Dani people. My father was a minister, a Bible teacher and a translator. My mother also taught at the Bible school in Makki and applied her pharmacy training by fulfilling the tasks of a pharmacist, nurse and doctor according to the circumstances. Meanwhile my brother and I were given Dani names and spent our childhood years growing up in the village, speaking Dani. It was an idyllic childhood. We had no notion that we were in the midst of an active rebellion against Indonesian rule, which some members of the Dani community around Makki were involved in. We came back to Australia for furlough at the beginning of 1980 with the firm belief that we would be returning to Makki, but instead we lost our visa and despite efforts made to secure work permits, have been unable to return. It was not until July this year that I returned to Irian Jaya and to Makki, but I have always considered it to be my home and

have wanted to learn more about it as an adult. I have been able to keep up with developments within Irian Jaya through continued contact.

The focus on the church and its members is also a result of my Christian upbringing and beliefs. I have a real interest in the church, particularly the Dani church and its survival. Also my family's contact with members and leaders of the Dani church, as well as missionaries working in Irian Jaya, made this topic fairly accessible to me and facilitated the undertaking of fieldwork in Irian Jaya.

This paper will explore the situation in Irian Jaya, amongst the Dani Christians following societal and structural changes which have increasingly impacted upon the Danis over the last few years. A specific impetus to undertake this topic came from various reports from Irian Jaya. Initially, accounts from members of a youth tour to Irian Jaya⁷ raised my interest and concern over the changes taking place in the highlands in particular. On their return to Australia in February 1990, members of the youth tour described a number of issues the Danis, especially the young people, were facing. The most prominent issue presented by them was the introduction and spread of STDs, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, including AIDS, in the urban area of Wamena. Through personal contacts with people working and living in the highlands of Irian Jaya I was able to remain informed, although somewhat spasmodically, of various new developments.

The Dani community is undergoing numerous changes and as the majority of the people are Christians, these are impacting the church. The Dani Christians faced many challenges when the church was first established in the early 1960s and yet the church managed to remain firm. Today the problems seem to be of a different nature and it is the second generation Christians, the young people, who are being directly challenged by the emerging issues. As second generation Christians they have been brought up with a different outlook and some apparently tend to take Christianity for granted.⁸ While there are some positive aspects emerging from these new developments, according to the Dani Christians, both young and old, the negative aspects are overwhelmingly predominant.

⁷ Goba Youth Mission Irian Jaya, January 1990. Those involved in this tour were young people from a few churches in Geelong. They went to Irian Jaya with the aim of learning about it and the mission field over there. This tour was led by a former missionary Rod Bensley.

⁸ N.&S.Draper *Daring to Believe*, (ABMS, 1990), p.230 quoting Miyaawarak

Earlier this year, with the assistance of certain members of the staff at Monash University, I made the decision to research and report my findings on the situation in Irian Jaya and the issues faced by the Dani church.

I chose to address the contemporary situation of the Danis, about which there is very little written, in an attempt to determine how they are handling the changing circumstances and lifestyle and how the church is dealing with the numerous issues that have surfaced. Much is written on the traditional culture of the Dani people and their initial conversion to Christianity. There are numerous mission accounts of the conversion of the Danis and other tribal groups in Irian Jaya which are valuable in the piecing together of the history of mission work in the highlands, but do not provide any information on the contemporary situation. I was also well aware of the mission perspective of these accounts, making them inspirational for Christian or sympathetic readers, but requiring them to be treated with discretion in an academic study.

Other sources, while written by missionaries, provided a more scholarly view of the Dani people. A couple of examples are *The Dani of Irian Jaya Before and After Conversion* by Douglas Hayward⁹ and the doctoral dissertation by Gordon Larson on *The Structure and Demography of the Cycle of Warfare Among the Ilaga Dani of Irian Jaya*.¹⁰ An earlier source *Baliem Beginnings*¹¹ is a collection of accounts supplied by a number of ABMS missionaries and is a mixture of personal and historic accounts of the history of Irian Jaya and the missionaries amongst the Danis. Norm and Sheila Draper compiled *Daring to Believe* and had it published in 1990.¹² While the first section deals with Papua New Guinea, the second section deals with the Danis of the North Baliem Valley, and provides translated personal accounts of Danis who lived through the transition period from the animistic tradition to Christianity. These sources were useful in providing background information required in approaching this topic. Apart from the mission publications, written information on the Dani people is largely restricted to Dani linguistics and anthropological studies of the traditional Dani lifestyle which centred on spirits. Other

⁹ (Regions Press, 1980)

¹⁰ (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, 1987)

¹¹ (Camden Baptist Church, 1976)

¹² (ABMS, 1990)

English sources deal with the political position of Irian Jaya and have nothing specific to say on the Danis. *Religious Tolerance and the Christian Faith*¹³ is written by an Indonesian about the general situation in Indonesia. Another more recent Indonesian source by Godschalk and Dumatubun is *Bangunan Baru dan Fondasi Tua* which referred specifically to the Western Danis and the issue of Cargo Cults.¹⁴

As has already been mentioned, I travelled to Irian Jaya in July and undertook fieldwork from the 15th of July until the 22nd of August. This fieldwork was central to this thesis, as I could not have dealt with this topic without it. It provided me with individual Dani perceptions of the present situation, as Dani Christians completed questionnaires and were interviewed. I was also able to access historical and anthropological material, as well as contemporary material written largely by Danis. This latter resource was a major advantage and consisted of various unpublished theses. Their value lay not only in the factual information they provided but also, being written by Danis they offered a Dani perspective of the issues the church has been and is facing. These theses tended to concentrate on one particular district or village in the North Baliem Valley and as such provided a useful picture of specific churches. They provided a great deal of information, that could be used to present a wider view of the Dani church. I also gained access to pamphlets and books written and published by church organisations and local publications that are only available in Irian Jaya.

My fieldwork involved the distribution of about 70 questionnaires, of which 47 were completed and returned. I also interviewed 11 members of the Dani community in order to obtain a more detailed idea of the general views reflected in the completed questionnaires. Those who were involved in my fieldwork were from the North Baliem Valley. This, and the requirement that they be church members and speak Indonesian, were the only criteria for selection. Church leaders, students completing their theological training and lay members of the church were included in the fieldwork. Danis studying and working in Jayapura were included, as were Danis who had never left the village, both male and female, young and old. Then there were those who had studied in Jayapura and had

¹³ Dr.W.Bonar Sidjabat (BPK Gunung Mulia, Jakarta, 1982)

¹⁴ (UNCEN/Bapeda Tingkat I Irian Jaya, 1989)

returned to their village to live and work. With some minor variations, the views reflected were unified, despite differences of education level, gender or social status. Gaining the trust of my respondents did not prove to be a problem particularly in the North Baliem. Even on the coast people were relatively uninhibited, particularly as most of my respondents knew my parents. One young man I interviewed on the coast remembered my parents well because they were the first white people he saw. I also interviewed a few Dani young people whom I had grown up with in the village and a Dani couple who had known me since I was born. The position I was in allowed the respondents and myself to be quite open about the issues under discussion. I was more than just an observer of the people and their reactions to the issues they were discussing, I was empathetic and shared their concern for the community and the survival of the church.

I faced few problems in being able to use the sources that were made available to me, particularly as there was no language barrier. The written sources on the Dani people are in either English or Indonesian, while my contacts all spoke Indonesian.

My relationship with a number of the Danis and my empathy will have coloured my research to some extent as a researcher's "'interest' ... will determine his discoveries, his selection, his pattern-making and his exposition. This is unavoidable...".¹⁵ The researcher's "personal experiences, especially those of participation and empathy, are recognised as central to the research process, but they are firmly restrained by the impersonal standards of observation and 'objective' distance".¹⁶

This thesis is written from a Christian perspective by someone who grew up amongst the Dani people. Not only is the subject the Christian church but my respondents are Christians as is the author. I hope that this will not deter the reader but that my interest in this topic will make it interesting for the readers, approaching it from their own perspective and bias.

While I will be attempting to represent the Dani perspective of the issues that are challenging them and the Dani church as a whole, I also realise that in the final analysis their

¹⁵ J.Barzun & H.Graff *The Modern Researcher*, (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985) Fourth Edition, p.198

¹⁶ J.Clifford "Introduction: Partial Truths" in J.Clifford & G.Marcus(eds.) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, (University of California Press, 1986), p.13

views will be seen through the eyes of someone outside their own culture and as such will provide an etic view. It is unavoidable for me to process and relate their statements from my point of view, despite my attempts to do otherwise. I am also aware that the situation as it represented itself to me while I was with the Danis is not static as any culture or situation is continually moving and changing.¹⁷

While the main focus of this paper will be the contemporary situation of the Dani church, this discussion will be preceded by a brief profile of Irian Jaya with regard to politics, culture, geography, pre-Christian beliefs and the history of Christianity, particularly amongst the Danis. This background knowledge will supply a framework within which to view the issues that are to be discussed, and will be of particular importance given that many people know very little about Irian Jaya. Knowledge is generally restricted to particular issues such as the Indonesian *transmigrasi* (transmigration) programme, the "Act of Free Choice" that was carried out in 1969 and which resulted in Irian Jaya becoming an official Indonesian province,¹⁸ and the rebel group OPM (*Operasi Papua Merdeka*) or the Free Papua Movement that is fighting to free West Papua of Indonesian rule.¹⁹ The awareness of people regarding these aspects has resulted from the considerable press coverage they received until interest waned. Yet there is a great deal more to Irian Jaya and it is in fact necessary to understand a little of the region's background if we are to attempt to understand its present.

Chapter one will outline the process of contact and the opening up of Irian Jaya to the outside world. The exploration of the highlands and discovery of the Danis will be discussed as will the advent of Protestant Christian missionaries amongst the Danis, particularly those in the North Baliem Valley, and their move towards Christianity. The second chapter will deal with the general development that has taken place both informally and as a result of various developmental projects that have been undertaken. The role that missionaries, the Indonesian Government and non-government organisations have played in the overall development of the Dani people will be discussed. The Dani church organisation

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.10

¹⁸ The Provincial Government of Irian Jaya *Irian Jaya: A New Frontier for Trade, Investment and Tourism*, (1993) p.5

¹⁹ e.g. J.McBeth "At Loggerheads" in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 10, 1994, p.52

as it is today, including aspects such as its structure and administration, will be the focus of the third chapter while the final two chapters will be based on the information and views expressed in the interviews and questionnaires from my fieldwork and will deal with the challenges that the Dani Christians perceive the church to be facing. These will be discussed under the two headings of modernisation and Islamisation. Those who were willing to assist me in my research will be quoted but they will not be named as they prefer to remain anonymous. On many issues there was a consensus among the majority of my informants, as will be made clear in the discussion.