**Indigenous culture and religion** dkm September 2023
‘So tribal fighting is back, big time, like a giant fist reaching in from the past- or more worryingly, a foretaste of a chaotic future- to grab PNG by the neck, instructing its leaders of the forces unleashed by their own serial failures’; so ended a report in The Australian (26/8/23) on the resurgence of tribal warfare in PNG. PNG, like other Melanesian, and Polynesian, countries was, and is, a land of various tribes, often involved in tribal conflict. The people of these countries worshipped various gods or spirits, with the tribal chief being a god-like figure. He was believed to have *mana* or supernatural power given by the gods. Life was ruled by fear of the spirits, especially the spirits of the dead, which had to be appeased by sacrifices and offerings. Rituals governed the progress of life- birth, initiation, marriage and death. Spirits could inhabit objects as well as people, meaning objects were regarded as sacred and taboo. The coming of the gospel to the Pacific islands saw people turn away from their gods and idols to the Lord Jesus Christ. Sadly, this has not occurred in some tribes, and this animism and associated cultural practices continue- or have been revived.

The NE highlands of India are home to sixteen Naga tribes. Their pre-literate religion saw them living in fear of evil spirits and worshipping or appeasing these spirits with blood sacrifices and offerings. Nagas believed that ancestor spirits visited them again and again, causing all manner of trouble and calamity. Fighting between neighbouring tribes was common, and deadly, with heads being brought home as trophies- I saw skulls hung outside an old village house. The label ‘head-hunters’ was fitting. Dancing rituals were war-like. Missionaries brought the gospel to Nagaland in the 1870s, and a mass movement followed, with converts taking the gospel to their own people. In a village I visited only two old men remained animists. And thankfully, there has been no attempt to revive their ancient religion!

The first inhabitants of Australia were animists with a pre-literate religion like the people just described. There were over 500 tribes, each with its own language and tract of hunting land; tribal conflict was common. Life was ruled by the cycle of birth and death, with other markers like initiation and marriage along the way. No one died naturally; sorcery of some kind was always suspected. Mortuary and burial rites extended over a long period, and often involved cannibalism, and attempts to find who killed the person. Revenge could occur if this person was found. Religious and cultural life was dominated by fear of evil spirits. Rituals and totems aided in appeasing the spirits. Fertility rituals were most common. What is the basis of the dances performed for the politicians today? Myths or Dreamtime stories, grew up around animals and natural features of the landscape, such as the three sisters at Katoomba.

The gospel was brought to the indigenous tribes of Australia by Christians from the west, just like in Tonga and Nagaland. William Dawes was a believer on the first fleet, as was Richard Johnston, who was sent by John Newton. Dawes tried to learn the local language so as to communicate the gospel to the aboriginal people. The first fleet brought convicts of course, and settlers soon followed, but from the beginning came missionaries desiring to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to these people. They helped the locals in many ways, especially teaching them to read so they could read the Bible. Soon local believers were sharing the gospel with their own people, and many turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God- and they are still doing so! In 2011, 73% of indigenous Australians called themselves Christians, compared to only 61% of the whole Australian population.

In light of the gospel of Jesus Christ transforming the lives of people in Tonga and Nagaland, and indeed in Australia, it is tragic that ‘outsiders’ are trying to revive the religious rituals of our indigenous people for their own political purposes. The culture of the Tongans and the Nagas, and indeed of indigenous Australians, has not been destroyed but wonderfully transformed within the context of their personal transformation by the Spirit of the living and loving God. Sadly, the ‘new pagans’ and politicians in our society are using and abusing indigenous Australians for their own political purposes. The words quoted from The Australian regarding PNG could apply to Australia, but we earnestly pray that neither people will have a ‘chaotic future’.