

# **The Indigenisation of the Baha'i Faith in New Ireland, Papua New Guinea**

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the process by which the Baha'i Faith has become an integral part of the culture of the Nalik People of Madina in north-central New Ireland, Papua New Guinea. Examining the experience of another culture along the Spiritual Axis can help us contemplate how, when, and if we will be able to experience a similar merging of the Baha'i Faith and Japanese culture in this country.

## ***Indigenisation of Religion***

What is meant by *indigenisation* of a religion? This term refers to the process by which a religion that has been introduced from the outside becomes an integral part of an indigenous culture. In this process, the local culture is changed to reflect the values and traditions of the new religion, while the practices and rituals of the introduced religion are shaped by the culture into which it has been planted. After this process, the once foreign religion is no longer seen as foreign and its history becomes part of the indigenous folk-history. All of the world religions have depended on this process to spread and become rooted in their new environments. Some of the more notable examples of this would include Catholicism and the Celtic culture of Ireland and the Hebrides, Buddhism and Japanese culture, and Islam and Iranian culture.

This process does not happen in all instances when a religion is introduced into a new culture. Sometimes, as with Christianity into the present-day Australia, a new religion is introduced and becomes dominant through massive immigration so that there is no chance for the indigenous culture to impact on the introduced religion. At other times, the members of an introduced religion remain such a small minority that they continued to be viewed as an outside force. This would be the case with Islam in the

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United States or Christianity in Japan. Although both are recognized in their new location—there is an Islamic prayer room in the Pentagon, for example, for Moslem personnel, and Christian universities are highly prestigious in Japan—in each case the religion remains foreign and exotic. Thus, “Christ” and “Jesus” are written in katakana script in Japanese to indicate their foreign nature, while “Buddha” and “nirvana” are written in *kanji*, indicating their having been nativised.

Some of the essential prerequisites for a religion to become indigenised would seem to be the existence of: (a) an elite leadership class which adheres to the new religion, (b) active religious leaders and teachers who are indigenous, (c) at least one younger generation which has no experience of life in their own culture without the religion, and, (d) at the time of the introduction of the new religion, a strong culture that is not under immediate threat of annihilation by an outside culture. All of these conditions existed among the Nalik people in Madina Village in New Ireland, Papua New Guinea when the Faith was being established there.

### ***Characteristics of New Ireland***

New Ireland is a long narrow island, about 322 kilometers long and an average of 11 kilometers wide. It is part of the Admiralty Islands northeast of the New Guinea mainland. The climate is tropical, and even today most New Irelanders are subsistence farmers and fishing people. Papua New Guinea is an intensely multi-ethnic and multilingual society; the population of 70,000 New Irelanders speak 20 distinct languages. The Nalik language is spoken by about 4,000 people. There are 15 villages in the Nalik region of north-central New Ireland. Madina today has about 300 inhabitants, many of whom are not ethnic Naliks.

Colonialism reached New Ireland in the mid-1800s in the form of traders, Christian missionaries, and slave-trading “blackbirders.” New Ireland was a German colony until the Australian invasion during World War I and, except for the devastating Japanese occupation during World War II, New Ireland remained Australian until 1975, when Papua New Guinea was established as an independent state. Colonialism brought great population and social changes. Political authority was taken from traditional leaders and put in the hands of outsiders with little knowledge of New Ireland ways. The moral authority of traditional spiritual philosophy was replaced by forms of Christianity which were antagonistic towards many traditional practices. A plantation and money economy was established, and large numbers of

workers were brought in from mainland New Guinea ethnic groups. The Germans also brought in Malay and Chinese laborers, some of whom intermarried with local women. Diseases from the outside caused great depopulation to the extent that one early colonial administrator spoke of “the dying New Ireland race.” The use of New Ireland as a battleground by Japanese and Western forces brought great suffering and social dislocation.

### ***Introduction and Development of the Baha'i Faith***

This was the setting for the introduction of the Baha'i Faith to Papua New Guinea. The Faith was brought to the Admiralty Islands by Knight of Baha'u'llah Violet Hoehnke, who moved to Manus Island during the Ten Year Crusade. At that time the Australian colonial administration enforced a system of strict racial separation similar to that of apartheid South Africa. In spite of this, Violet Hoehnke invited an New Ireland teacher, A. Pelis Mazakmat, to her home. Before Ms. Hoehnke was sent away from Manus for this breach (and other breaches) of the color bar, Mazakmat became the first Papua New Guinean believer. He wrote to another New Ireland teacher, Michael A Xomerang, to return to Madina with him to teach their people of the new faith.

Both of these men came from traditionally powerful Nalik families who had moved to Madina to escape the ban on traditional Nalik carving and dancing by the Catholic mission, which had its headquarters in their families' original home village. Both were by nature inquisitive and rebellious and were becoming restive under colonial rule, in part as a result of the Japanese invasion, which showed that Australian masters were not as omnipotent as they pretended to be. They and the other early believers were attracted to the Faith as a way of breaking colonial racial barriers and of being free to follow customary practices without the interference of White missionaries.

Within a short time about half the village had accepted the Baha'i Faith. Missionaries at a nearby high school frightened many to return to the church, however, by telling them they were destined for hell-fire for believing a false prophet. These actions provoked violence against the new Baha'is. Mazakmat himself was imprisoned for hosting a White travel teacher in his home, a criminal breach of segregation laws at that time, and an attempt was made to imprison the first inter-island travel teacher from the village until a colonial administrator intervened.

In spite (or because) of all this, the new Baha'is elected an LSA in 1957, the first LSA in Papua New Guinea and the first completely indigenous LSA in the South Pacific region. Although pioneers regularly visited the village for

annual summer schools, the new Baha'is were left to their own devices for most of the year. Over the years, most village leadership roles were taken up by Baha'is, especially those dealing with customary practices. The regional high school was built on land owned by Baha'is, and the LSA was always represented on the governing councils of the local primary and high schools. Baha'i children were encouraged to attain academic success, and pioneer families gave advice about establishing modern plantations and small businesses. As a result, the Baha'i community became well known for its prosperity and cohesiveness.

The preservation of traditional culture and customary law is perceived both inside and outside the Faith as a key Baha'i principle. This is undoubtedly a reflection of the early believers who accepted the Faith as a sign of opposition to the Christian missions established under colonialism. Today this feeling is undoubtedly reinforced by the community. At present, although only about one-third of Madina is Baha'i, seven of the eight clan chiefs are Baha'i. As part of my work in the area, the Baha'is established a writing system for the Nalik language, and produced the first book in Nalik, a collection of Baha'i prayers. Using this orthography, the Baha'is have established a vernacular pre-school and early primary school, so that, in contrast to earlier times when only English medium education was available, children begin their formal education with a firm grounding in their own culture and language. They also sponsor regular seminars on traditional law and practices for youth and adults, and the regional Assembly of Chiefs meets in the Baha'i Center. Baha'is therefore play a disproportionately large role in traditional ceremonies and the transmission of traditional culture.

Today, many of the aspects of everyday Madina life have Baha'i origins, even if this is not always obvious to local people. Many Baha'i children have names from Baha'i history, so much so that names such as Tahirih are known outside as "New Ireland names."

Traditional practices are some times maintained with Baha'i explanations and bride price is a good example of this. Bride price is a custom throughout Melanesia, and in New Ireland it has always been customary for the parents of the bride to reciprocate with a small present of customary shell money to the parents of the groom. Today this custom is explained as being a symbol of marriage as a bird that must be supported by two wings, an explanation obviously taken from 'Abdu'l-Baha. Similarly, the end of the monsoons is in mid-March, and is marked by freshwater springs bubbling in the reefs near the shoreline. This has been incorporated into the Baha'i Holy Day of Naw Ruz which is usually referred to as "New Rus," *ruz* meaning "freshwater spring in the reef near the shore. "

This merging of tradition and the Baha'i faith extends to abstract matters as well. The concept of "Allah/ God" taught by Baha'u'llah is identified with (and is translated into Nalik as) Nakmai, the virtuous half of a set of divine twins who fought with his evil brother in ancient Nalik cosmology. Similarly, the explanation of 'Abdu'l-Baha in *Some Answered Questions* about the difference between the soul and the spirit has merged with the traditional Nalik belief in the separation after death of one's essence into the ghost that remains on earth and the eternal spirit that is released into Paradise (*Liaa*) after the period of customary mourning.

In recent years, the Baha'i translations have become the standard for elegant "classical" Nalik, in the same way that the King James Bible is still a standard for English. A conscious effort is made to incorporate terminology expressing traditional Nalik philosophy into the Baha'i translations. Thus, much of what is perceived as "Baha'i deepening" is actually closely linked to customary beliefs and activities. In children's classes and deepenings, key philosophical terms are explained using Nalik expression and traditional context. I remember a youth deepening on the second Arabic Hidden Word, "The best beloved of all things in My sight is justice..." The speaker, a Paramount Chief, explained that "justice" was *ziparaas* in Nalik, a word traditionally meaning a fence used in olden times to keep an area or community safe from harm. He then went on to explain that in the same way justice was a fence enclosing the community. What is striking here was that the explanation of the fence was as new for most of the young audience as the Hidden Word. Thus, instead of learning Baha'u'llah's teachings in terms of their original Middle Eastern context or in the framework of the English words chosen by the Guardian in his translations, they were taught as if they were traditional Nalik concepts.

This fusing of Baha'i and traditional concepts can also be seen in attitudes to religious history. Older people especially take great delight in explaining the movement of Xomerang and Mazakmat's fathers from their original home to Madina as being a "local Hegira" in reverse. Similarly, stories of the Dawn Breakers are taught to children in the same spirit as traditional stories of ancestors and spirit begins. Undoubtedly, for many children, these stories are in the same genre as customary folk-tales.

It is interesting how strongly certain opinions about oral history or customary law can be identified as "Baha'i positions" just because certain Baha'is hold them. When I was trying to establish the sequence of events in oral history accounts of the first migration of Nalik people into the area, I was told by a Christian chief that the view expressed by one Baha'i chief was wrong, but "what can you expect, he's a Baha'i and the way he explained it to

you is just the way his religion teaches our history”.

Madina Baha'is have revived a number of practices that had been banned by Christian missionaries. Often these are changed to reflect current new conditions imposed by the Faith. For example, although Baha'is have not revived the pre-Christian practice of cremation, they have revived the practice of using a coffin that is made in the shape of a bird and flown around the village, reminiscent of the “broken-winged bird” in ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s prayer. To keep with Baha’i law, the body is removed for burial before burning the bird-coffin and releasing the spirit of the dead person. Another example is honorary initiation of non-Nalik persons as chiefs.

In a rather controversial move, Baha’i chiefs have introduced an honorary initiation into chieftdom in which non-Nalik leaders, such as National Spiritual Assembly members and at least one Baha’i Counsellor have been consecrated as Nalik chiefs. This thus endows Baha’i institutional spiritual authority.

Of course, simply having a large number of Baha'is is no guarantee of a perfect society. As in other parts of Papua New Guinea, there has been an increase in crime in the Nalik area, and Baha’i youth are not always immune from being involved. At times this can be disconcerting as when I heard on the radio news that Quddus had been arrested on his way back from Madina.

In addition, having the Faith so entrenched in a society does not always ensure that all persons are active members of the community. The heavy emphasis on education in the Faith, together with the confidence that comes with mixing with outsiders from an early age, has meant that Baha’i children tend to do quite well in school. This means that most go to urban areas for education, where most then stay for much of their working careers. For many who have grown up with the Faith being so closely identified with village culture, going to the city and leaving behind country ways can also mean leaving the Faith behind, as well, in a quest for urban sophistication. Moreover, having identified with their Faith as an almost ethnic religion, some find it difficult to mix with Baha’is in urban areas who come from other ethnic groups with very different cultural expectations than New Irelanders. With almost half of all Nalik Baha'is now living in urban areas, this problem of retaining Nalik youth in the diaspora is an important issue that has still not been adequately addressed.

Luckily, most Baha’i youth in urban areas eventually do grow into adults who find an internal balance between the demands of their Nalik and Baha’i identities. Many of those who have been able to do this have become quite active and devoted believers who are able to use their education and

experience in the Faith to lead the community. This is shown by the fact that three of the current nine National Spiritual Assembly members are Nalik, and by the large number of Naliks who travel teach, including two youth who have worked at the World Centre.

### ***Prospects for The Future***

Given the relatively small size of the Nalik people and the increasing ease with which Nalik Baha'is have broken barriers by marrying outside their group, it is difficult to predict the future of the relationship of the Nalik culture and the Baha'i Faith. What can be said is that after almost a half century of its introduction, the Baha'i Faith has become an integral part of the culture of Madina village. This is a result of its Baha'i-dominated elite, its corps of indigenous Baha'i teachers and administrators at the local, national and even international levels, the existence of a still-resilient local culture at the time of the introduction of the Faith, and most importantly, the existence today of three, four and even some five generation Baha'i families.

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### ***Terms***

Indigenisation: becoming nativised

*Maaimaai*: Paramount Chief

Custom: traditional Melanesian law / practice

Subsistence farmers: persons who live from what they grow, not from money they earn.

Bride price: money paid by a groom to the family of the bride to compensate for their having raised her

Provincial premier: governor of a province

Nalik diaspora: Nalik people living outside the traditional Nalik region