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# **The Dialogue in the Evangelization of Tribal Cultures of South East Asia**

**experiences, methodology, difficulties; how to promote this dialogue**

*Victor Bieler, C.M., Assistant Général*

## **Introduction**

It is difficult to know how far dialogue in the evangelization of tribal cultures of South East Asia has progressed. As a member of the Congregation of the Mission I can speak only about the tribes where our Confreres work. The provinces of our Congregation in South East Asia work in the Philippines and Indonesia. As far as I know we do not have confreres working with tribes in the Philippines. The Indonesian province of our congregation has members in West Kalimantan, working with the Dayaks, and I myself - before being called to Rome in 1990, worked with tribespeople in Irian Jaya, East Indonesia. I can speak only about my experience with some of the tribes in Irian Jaya, the Indonesian part of the island, that formerly was called Netherlands New Guinea. I went to Irian Jaya for the first time in 1976 to teach in the interdiocesan major seminary. During my last years I was rector of that interdiocesan seminary, in Abepura.

## **Experiences**

The tribes are undergoing a lot of **change** in many respects. Perhaps one of the greatest changes that has come is the introduction of money. Through this, the whole way of thinking and living has changed, and is still changing. More and more things are being measured in money, and according to the market economy.

In such a situation of extremely rapid and fundamental change it is difficult to know where we stand, and how to dialogue. There are so many things that should be thought over simultaneously, but for which time is lacking. Instant decisions have to be made, with the great risk of taking the wrong decisions.

Sometimes I think that we really **succeeded** in the formation of Christians among tribes, but at other times I doubt it very much. On the other hand, considering the behaviour of Christians in Europe, one may ask if, after almost 2000 years, the people here have really become Christians, and this is a great consolation to me with regard to our people living in regions where Christianity has not existed for more than a hundred years yet. This leads me to the thought that as missionaries we need a lot of patience. But again, there are so many things that cannot wait.

There is great **rivalry** among the tribes. One of the difficult things for a missionary is not to be, or become, partial. As there are many different tribes it is easy to be inclined to prefer the people of one tribe to those of another. There are qualities in certain tribes that are repellent and others that are attractive. It is best not to talk about the pleasant or unpleasant characteristics of the people of one tribe to those of another.

Because of the long years of isolation and separation between the tribes, due to geographic conditions like steep mountains, wild streams and swamps, there is a great distrust with regard to others that do not belong to the same tribe. And even among villages there is sometimes great enmity. When one deals with people of more than one tribe, one should therefore be open to anyone of any tribe, and show that the Lord has come for everybody, from any tribe and nation. Needless to say, this is not easy.

In talking with the people I got the impression that the **Old Testament** is quite easy for them to understand. It is different with the New Testament and its new scale of values like love for one's fellowmen, meekness, humility, etc. It is extremely difficult to talk about forgiveness, about loving others who do not belong to your own tribe, about having only one wife, about eternal life, about celibacy, etc.

One will be **accepted** easily by the tribespeople, if one comes, not as a teacher who knows best, but as a person who is interested in them, and eager to learn from them about their ways of living and thinking. Only when one has been accepted, is it possible to go further and bring the Good Message. But it requires much trying and trying again to make things understandable for them, as they are living in such a different world that, in a certain sense, has been isolated from the rest of the world.

There are many tribes in Irian Jaya, belonging to the Melanesian culture; I do not know all its tribes or cultures. I had contact only with those tribes that had a student in the seminary. But only a few tribes have one, or some. This is, amongst other things, due to the fact that the North of Irian Jaya is mostly Protestant or missioned by Christian non-Catholic denominations, while the South is mostly Catholic.

I could tell about my experience at the **Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Filsafat Teologi**, where we prepare young men and women for evangelization.

The school receives its students from the 4 dioceses in Irian Jaya. We have a *numerus clausus* for the students, 100 to 110. The reason for this is that with the number of teachers we are not able to handle more students, and also because if there were more who finished their studies, their number could become a burden for the dioceses which would have to provide for them. Of

course, it is different with the candidates of the religious congregations that also send their candidates to this school.

The school is meant for those who want to become pastors: priests or lay persons. All have to go through the same studies. The emphasis is placed on Sacred Scripture.

As there are many tribes in Irian Jaya, it is necessary to have a profound knowledge of the anthropology of Irian Jaya, which takes up a major part of the curriculum.

### **Methodology:**

As far as I know, the methodology applied by the first missionaries was that they came to a village, alone or together with a catechist from another tribe or culture, who knew the language of this tribe, settled themselves and starting teaching religion, opening a school for the children. After some time they baptized the people. Of course, perhaps it was not, and is not, religion that attracted the people in the first place, but other things like medicines, material things, and later on education as a means for progress in the wider world. Therefore, the missionary had to start with a study of the customs and culture of a tribe,

Then it was a matter of trying to find meeting points with the Gospel, trying to translate Scripture, that is to find images that speak to the people. The missionary had to find ways of inculturation.

Perhaps the methodology now has changed. Perhaps missionaries now begin with upgrading the environment, building better houses, teaching the people to prepare better food, to till the soil, clothing.

### **Difficulties:**

In general there are difficulties coming from the government, which wants to solve the problem of tribes. Tribes do not have a national consciousness; in the eyes of the government they are backward, not civilized, a way of living to be ashamed of. On the other hand they could attract tourists, which means money. They have land, which could be used by the nation, or by certain privileged persons. Their lands are covered with forests, which could be sold. In the eyes of the government their land is not used by them, and it is not their land but the land of the nation.

The problem of **transmigration**.

People from other islands, especially Java and some parts of Sulawesi, migrate to Kalimantan and Irian Jaya, where the population is still sparse and there are still many forests. The tribes in Kalimantan and Irian Jaya consider the land, even if it is not actually being used, as theirs, and they need it, being

hunters and gatherers. The Central Government does not, or/and does not want to, understand this. The preparation of the migrants leaves much to be desired, and so does the preparation of the tribes who have to allow them to move onto their land. This creates tensions. It is said that the bush and forest fires in Kalimantan last year, which had their impact on air traffic even in Singapore, were due to these. The autochthonous people of Kalimantan preferred to set fire to the forest rather than allow the trees and land be used by intruders from other islands.

There are many newcomers in Irian Jaya and Kalimantan, who are also Catholic: Javanese, Florinese, and others, all of whom want to impose their own form of Catholicism.

### **Islamization** of the islands outside Java

For people who do not confess to be Musulman it is almost impossible to migrate to other islands. The tribes are generally not attracted by Islam, but prefer a Christian religion if they have to make a choice. But gradually the influence of Islam in Irian Jaya and Kalimantan is growing. One of the tactics practised in Flores is importing attractive young women for brothels and as salesgirls. Marriages which result from these contacts are contracted in the mosque.

### **Language**

To really understand the people and to be able to help them, it is necessary to master the language. This is extremely difficult where there are no grammars or dictionaries. On the other hand, as the national language is the Indonesian language, we must use this language. - Perhaps it is interesting to know that of the 180 million inhabitants of Indonesia, 80 million people speak Javanese, which is not, and never will become, the national language. So why should we take pains in promoting some local languages spoken by, at most, 100.000 people ?

But, of course, language is only one of the many things one should know to make an approach possible. There are still so many secrets, initiation rites, ceremonies, not accessible to the missionary. And superstition is still strong.

In Melanesian culture the tendency towards the cargo-cult is very strong. It is a kind of messianism. Should we use this for our eschatological views or rather should we ban it to avoid any misunderstanding about our Messiah ?

A great scandal is the **rivalry among the Christian religions** and sects. If everybody claims to be preaching the Good News, why should there be so many different churches, and why should they even go as far as to attack each other ?

There are many **newcomers** on the island: Javanese, Florinese, others, all of whom want to impose their own form of Catholicism. Instilling respect for other cultures and forms of practising religion is necessary.

Of course, each people has its different scale of values. What are we going to do about that? Do we have to conserve the old values as in a museum, or do we help the people adapt themselves to the new era and let them lose their identity? Of course we all know that the truth lies somewhere in between these two extremes. But in real life it is not easy to find one's way.

**Exploitation** of the country, mining, deforestation, fishery. All this is being done to the advantage of the central government, but the local population does not, or hardly at all, benefit from it. It is not always possible for the leaders of the Church to defend the local people. They will be easily accused of guerrilla activities and of instigating the people against the government.

## **Promoting dialogue**

How to promote dialogue?

Much can be done to promote dialogue.

The most important thing is the willingness in word and deed to **respect** any human being as such, even if he or she is not clothed in the way we are, even if he has a way of behaving different from our ways. We should keep in mind that the way the members of a tribe dress must have some practical reason, about which we cannot always judge rightly. It is so easy to consider oneself as not belonging to their group, and unconsciously consider them as being inferior to us, speaking about them as an object, they do this they do that, their customs are so different from ours, they are not that far yet.. It looks as if it is just impossible not to speak in that way.

There should be more **understanding**, greater awareness that we do not really know the culture yet. There are perhaps many more beautiful things in their customs and culture, but which we do not understand as such. And we do not have the time to study them. Of course, we could prepare young men and women for doing that, as has already been done and is still being done. But through the formation we give them they get transformed or misformed, or, anyhow, they change; will they then still be able to know what is good and what is not in their culture?

It would be more helpful if we could interest **influential people** in the plight of the tribes, make them aware that, even if they want the best for their country, they should keep in mind that the tribespeople of their country are their countrymen and therefore should have the same rights as all others.

Influential people are usually those in power. The question arises whether we should seek their help. Does this not mean siding with them, against the oppressed and exploited tribes ?

In a country like Indonesia it is not that easy. In places far from the Central Government, local authorities are often almighty. Many officials are of the opinion that what is good for the greater part of the nation is good for all. The tribes are only a small minority. The Government claims that only 600,000 people can be reckoned as belonging to the tribes.

And as many officials in the interior or on far away islands often do not receive their salary in time, a salary which is often not sufficient to support their family, they have to find other ways, and the easiest way is by taking the rights of tribal people. Evangelization must then become a liberation from evil structures.

I would like to end my remarks with the prayer:

Lord, give me the courage to change the things I can  
give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot  
and the wisdom to know the difference.

Thank you.

Victor Bieler, C.M.