

The Owen Outreach

Chronicing the Ministry of Todd and Angela Owen

Serving with Pioneer Bible Translators' Papua New Guinea Branch

Translating the New Testament with the Somau Garia People

P.O. Box 997 • Madang 511 • PAPUA NEW GUINEA • toddowen@pioneerbible.org.pg

We Have Liftoff!

We've all seen it before. NASA is launching a mission into space, now with the Space Shuttle, before with the Apollo's, Gemini's, and Mercury's. The ship clears the tower and the launch director announces, "Houston, we have liftoff!", which gives formal control of the flight to Mission Control at the Manned Space Flight Center in Houston, TX. Perhaps because of all the fiascos of the early days, part of NASA protocol is to not announce that the ship has lifted off of the pad until it has cleared the tower. Before, some of the rockets (especially in the early '60's) would start to rise of the pad, then collapse in on themselves or launch at crazy and dangerous angles. How many of you remember where you were and what you were doing on that fateful day in January, 1986 when Space Shuttle Challenger began to roll (which is normal) and disintegrated in a fireball (which is decidedly **not** normal) with school teacher Christa McAuliffe on board?

In the last edition of *Outreach* we reported to you about the beginnings of translation among the Somau Garia people of southern Madang Province. We went immediately from our first week of translation to write the previous edition of *Outreach*. We've had a few more months since last reporting and I think it's safe to say that we've cleared the tower. The months leading up to September were like all the engineers and directors checking their systems and reporting to the launch director: "All directors, I want a go/no go, for launch. OTC? OTC, go. Safety/Mission Assurance Director? Safety console is go . . . , Weather? We are go for launch with no constraints down range. CDR? CDR, Roger, my crew and I are go for launch." In early September, we ran our first translation workshop at Uria village and drafted and revised most of Mark 5. Really that first week was like final count down. Everything was in order and we were sitting in our ship on the pad waiting to be catapulted into a full-blown translation program.

We've cleared the tower. At writing, Mark chapters 1 – 10 have been drafted. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 have been revised and we are moving steadily toward our goal. We anticipate (pray, pray, pray) completion of the first draft of Mark by February or March of 2003.

As with NASA, who have often needed to halt the countdown to make some checks on systems or correct problems, we have had a few bumps,

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On Death and Dying

We have often commented that one of the more difficult aspects of ministering in Papua New Guinea is the “up close and personal” nature of death and dying, which is compounded by the animistic/demonic practices which accompany severe illness and death, and the knowledge that these beliefs often hold our friends at enmity with God. I Thessalonians 4:13 describes the anxiety of the traditional Garia, “*Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope.*” The animistic practices of the Garia surrounding death are deeply rooted in the lack of hope.

On October 20, we experienced this lack of hope in a tragic way.

A woman who was sort of a grandmother to us in Uria (see picture) had been sick off and on for years. We thought that her frequent aches and pains were due to old age, and perhaps they were, but her most recent ones were of greater import than the previous, as they preceded her death.



A sorcerer, named Peter, whom we have long known, had moved away from Uria to the land of a mentor of his, recently dead. When he returned to Uria one Sunday morning unexpectedly, we assumed it had to do with his practice of sorcery.

He came to Uria because it had been reported that a certain kind of bird had been heard crying out near our “grandmother’s” house—which according to these folks’ belief is an omen of impending death—and part of his “job” is to prepare people for their journey to the place of the dead.

We were talking on the HF radio with PBT Headquarters in Madang when the large *garamut* drum was sounded to announce her death. That night was eerie. We expected some wailing—grieving by moaning, crying at full volume, screaming, repeating the name of the dead, the begging of the good will of her spirit. What we didn’t expect was what came beginning around midnight. We began hearing strange and dissonant melodies played on bamboo flutes interacting with vocal funeral dirges. It was all the stranger because of the strong cultural taboos which were being broken.

Normally, those flutes are only played in the presence of men, as it is a male-cult ritual. It is absolutely forbidden to be played in the presence of women—and yet they were played.

Why? It all boiled down to her late husband and a demon monster named Kenese.

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too. Our initial week of translation was attended by about 30 to 40 guys. We are now down to about 6 to 9 guys any given week. This is actually a relief, because it is much easier to work with a smaller group than to try to manage 30 people with 30 opinions on how certain terms (like baptism, sin, prophet, angel, etc.) should be translated. We are, however, more vulnerable with only a handful of capable co-translators. For example, Ezekiel Panawa, who is a long-time friend and the head of the translation team, got sick and was bedridden for two weeks. We were delayed for two days when he didn’t show up for our last workshop and no one realized he wasn’t coming. When we did continue with our work, the guys worked with less confidence and were more apt to want to wait for Ezekiel’s return.

Pray for the Garia translators, that God will protect them from severe bouts of illness. Pray that God will enable them to serve with strong hearts and good attitudes, especially in the face of the opposition of some in Garia society who cannot understand the purpose of being involved in a work which does not benefit them immediately. Pray that God will enable them to persevere through trial and tribulation, to be made in His likeness and to advance his Kingdom among some very pagan people.

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Her late husband was regarded in life as being a powerful sorcerer. (He was also a leader in the local church—but that is another story.) He, along with other members of his clan, had gone through male initiation rites together. At some point in the past, these men witnessed some sort of demonic and/or false miracle—which must have been fairly convincing to them, because they dedicated themselves completely to the “deity” they believed responsible for the miracle.

According to traditional Garia beliefs (which do **not** correspond to a Biblical perception of reality) when a person dies they inhabit their land for a time—perhaps a generation or two—before going away or dying. But one difficulty that they face in going to the place of the dead is what we can call a demon monster, whom they call Kenese, who, according to their belief, awaits the departed spirits in order to waylay them.

It is my educated guess that these men were blowing the flutes for a couple of reasons: first, to cool the temper of woman’s late husband and induce his good will and second, to encourage him to escort his wife to the place of the dead and protect her from Kenese.

The local women were outraged—because they were afraid that the breaking of the taboo would bring sickness and death. The few who follow Jesus were outraged because of the patent devotion to the demonic.

This brief account, then, is significant because it gives us a glimpse into the nature of the battle. An influential clan is wholly dedicated to a demonic entity because of **one** false miracle performed a generation ago. The majority of people have never seen a miracle performed in the name of Jesus and therefore wonder if God lacks power for their daily life. (They’ve never given Him a try to find out.) The gospel is veiled to the perishing. There is a minority (although they are a growing number) of people who are dedicated to serving Jesus and challenging the demonic practices. They are praying together and are taking stands on cultural issues (such as asking God’s blessing on their gardens and children rather than demons’ “blessing”). There is multi-layered deception which confuses the search for that which will bring peace.

At the center of all this stands the Word of God which is slowly but surely emerging in their own language.

In one corner is God bringing light into a very dark place by His Word. In the other corner is the enemy, struggling to hold onto those whom he has controlled and destroyed for generations. The Christians hold up the light. The sorcerers and their followers try to snuff it out.

Pray that God will unveil his power and glory to these precious ones who have been blinded and wandered through death, disease, deception, and delusion. Ask God to open their eyes to the truth and to open their hearts to Himself.

Cultivating the Garden

Evangelism is not a program in the church or a certain job to do, it is the fruit of a life surrendered to God, the overflow of the Spirit’s work in the life of the Christian.

Inasmuch as the Spirit is at work, we are able to share Him with those around us. Angela and I have some neighbors who live about 50 yards from us through a bushy draw. We have been drawn to them and they to us since we arrived in 1997. This year, Angela and her friend, Korenime (Ko-ray-knee-may), are doing something together that friends and family inside the culture do: plant and tend a garden together.

Along with the food the ladies have planted and tended together, another plant is growing in the garden of Korenime’s life: the Kingdom of God. It has been a joyful experience to see her life change and reflect the life of God. She has been challenging her husband and children to stand for God against the powerful paganism that many Garia are devoted to.

She joins a small group of other believers who are turning their backs to the ways of the evil one and are putting their lives and trust in the One Who Loves Them.

Pray that the fruit of God’s Life will be full and rich in Korenime and other believers’ lives that God’s name will be lifted up.

A Short Holiday

Late August through mid-November were busy months for us and were we ever ready for a break when we took a short holiday to the Eastern Highlands. We left Uria in our 4 x 4 on 19 November and drove along the Ramu Highway into the Eastern Highlands where PBT has a lodge on the base of another mission, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (S.I.L.).

The name of the base is Ukarumpa and it sits at 5,100 feet elevation, so it's nice and cool and reminds us just a bit of mid-spring in North America.

One of the fun things the kids got to do while there was attend a school carnival. In the picture, Samuel (our 7-year-old) is climbing a climbing wall. (Notice those expensive climbing shoes he's wearing! He's really a bush kid.) There was also a teen-ager-powered Ferris wheel, a dunk tank, dart throwing, food booths, games for kids, etc. We also were able to spend time with our friends, Chris and Lori Urton, who are preparing to leave for furlough in the U.S., and to catch up with S.I.L. friends whom we haven't seen in years. It was good to renew friendships and get some rest before returning to Uria for another month of work before going to Madang for our Annual General Meeting.



Stanley Survives Snakebite!

When we returned from our brief holiday in the Highlands, we went directly into two weeks of translation. One evening after we had finished, one of our Garia co-workers, named Stanley, was walking from an open-air kitchen to the open-sided meeting house. En route, he was bitten by a sub-specie of death adder, a highly poisonous snake.

Angela and I were getting the kids to bed and as soon as we (quickly) got them tucked in, we headed down with our "zapper" wondering if we were too late. We zapped him with a high voltage/low amperage shock to try to electro-chemically dissolve the poison. (In other words, a shot in the dark.) They had already tied off his leg to reduce circulation and we applied ice to the foot. Then we prayed with him, read Scripture, and anointed him with oil, in accordance with the instruction in the James, while asking other Christians to pray with us.

The result? No swelling, no reaction whatsoever. He walked away from a snakebite in a manner akin to that recorded in Acts 28:5. God is doing the remarkable here. *Ask God to not allow this miracle to go unnoticed among the people. Ask God to glorify himself and open people's eyes with small miracles like this one. Ask God to allow it to change Stanley's heart as well.*

For Your Prayers:

It has been a long but very productive three months, and wish to thank the Lord for his providence in all that has come about. We also wish to thank those of you who have been praying for doing so—God has honored your prayers for protection and progress in translation.

Toward the end of this village stay we have struggled once again with health problems: the kids have each had asthma and I (Todd) have had a bout of pneumonia. Angela has also been sick with some sort of respiratory infection. Trying to do this work is very challenging even in good health and can be discouraging when our health is frequently a struggle. *Pray for God's continual healing and protection.*

Please pray that God will continue to forcefully advance his Kingdom among these people. We are seeing the early stages of **real and deep change**—so continue to pray!

Be praying that our access road into the village will remain passable this rainy season. The time for heavy rain is just beginning and already the ruts are deep and the road unstable. Our truck is 13 years old but does fine, but the really rough off-road stuff is hard on the frame (we've had to have it welded repeatedly). Thanks for praying!