

THE ASISI CULT

The appearance of this Cult dates from June 1932 when Kitore of Uiahu paid a visit to Manigala. The object of the visit was stated to be the eradication of sorcery, as it was not right that the New Guinea people should be trying to injure one another or to cause death. Kitore had been connected with a Northern cult, and at first had used the Oreda ritual in conjunction with his Asisi work as he thought it might increase his power. He said, however, that on being told by Miss Caswell at Maniu that Oreda was a bad thing he gave up the Oreda ritual. It is doubtful whether he kept his word as the Asisi movement owes its extension to Goodenough Bay to Kitore at a later period, and one of the characteristics of the cult in Goodenough Bay is the use of the exclamation "Oreda!". Kitore also claimed to be gifted with the power to heal the sick - from his statement to the Rev. A. J. Thompson his methods and those of faith-healing differ very little.

Kitore in July 1932 made his way from his home at Uiahu down Collingwood Bay to attend a big feast at Kewansasaf apparently spreading his cult. Some of the newly initiated established a base at the Gwoira a mountain on the boundary of the Boianai District well inland from Goodenough Bay. The country there is practically untouched by the Mission. People from all round went to the Gwoira, and a certain number of young men, including three or four Christian "larrikins" who for some excitement, were initiated and became Asisi. In September bands of Asisi made systematic tours round the head of Goodenough Bay. Visits were made to various places in the Cape Vogel Peninsular, but apparently no stations were established there, and beyond causing a certain amount of trouble, nothing much was done in the way of pros-

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tising. The main stream of the Asisi seems to have passed through the rough mountainous districts on the South Side of Goodenough Bay, avoiding the beach except in places where mountain people had villages. As it passed East it merged with the Vailala cult, which was discussed by Conference last year; the Vailala cult had two surviving strongholds at Foudawana and at Dimadima, both places in the Main Range and difficult of access. The Asisi claim to receive their instructions from God and there seem to have been other associations with Christian teaching but when it became merged with the Vailala cult other bits of Christian teaching were adopted which make it much more plausible for scattered and simple-minded mountain Christians. There were some Vailala-Asisi stations erected in the mountains about the end of 1932 and the beginning of this year, when a heathen from Foudawana, who was prominent in the Vailala cult in 1931, was very busy spreading the cult. The latest recorded appearance of the Asisi was about Easter when a party came to Vanama from Dimadima. Their attempt to convert the Christians of Vanama seems to have been completely unsuccessful.

Now to follow the main lines of activity of the Asisi. They claim to possess three gifts:- (a) to cast out evil spirits; (b) to heal the sick by some power inherent in themselves and (c) to raise the dead. It will be remembered that there are three features of Our Lord's work recorded in the Gospels, viz:- Exorcism, Healing the Sick and the Raising of the Dead. It seems that Kitoro himself did not claim power to do the last, but he did claim to cast out evil spirits and to heal the sick by his methods. It is reported, however, that when he died towards the end of last year his disciples endeavoured for four days

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to resuscitate him, but probably owing to the tropical climate, they were forced to the conclusion that they could do nothing. So Kitoré was buried. From this it seems that Kitoré also included the Raising of the Dead in his repertoire, or his disciples carried his teaching further. It may be a mere co-incidence that these three striking features of the Gospel narrative are reproduced in what is an obvious attempt to provide a practical solution to three of the greatest problems of life. It has been mentioned more than once by natives that Spiritual Healing should be used by the Church, which suggests that it seem to think that the Mission is withholding from the Pagan Christians vital parts of the Faith. It is difficult to say whether this idea is widespread or not. It is some comfort to know that some at least of the people read their Testaments and think about what they read, even though their thinking is confused and raises questions connected with such problems as possession by evil spirits, sickness and death which are difficult to answer.

The Vailala-Asisi cult also provides other points of contact with Bible-teaching. The Vailala-Asisi adopted the "wireless mast" of the Vailala cult. Wherever there was an Asisi station East of Poudawana "wireless-masts" were erected. At first a local leader had a vision of God, who directed him to erect a pillar so that God could converse with the Asisi man. This may suggest Jacob's Pillar at Beth-el, in conjunction with the knowledge that the white-man gets mysterious instructions and messages from the wireless-mast in Samarai. It seems that the Vailala cult travelled across from the South Coast where people had been in contact with the L. M. S. Stations. In our translation too the word

used for "pillar" in Wedsuan, and probably in other dialects, is tua, which is a pole of wood and not a column of stones. This may suggest a connection to the native mind. The man who has received the Divine communication then erects a pole of about 20 feet in height stayed with four lines, as a mast is stayed. On the top for God's convenience is placed an enamel dish of water. At one place a knife and fork and a piece of soap were also supplied. A few yards away a much shorter post, about 4 feet high is erected, with a top of woven cane which is supposed to be a table. Dancing takes place before the post and acts of reverence were made towards them. They claim that God met the Asisi and talks with them here, giving them instruction. The smoking of specially prepared tobacco is a definite feature of the Vailala Asisi cult, the fumes no doubt producing the requisite mental condition for some of their operations.

The Papuan is peculiarly sensitive to the influence of heterosuggestion. The Asisi, preceded by their fans and stories of their exploits (usually magnified), arrive painted and bedecked with feathers at a village. They are led by their head man, who brandishes a highly decorated spear, and dance to the beat of their drums. Their appearance alone affects the villagers. The smelling out of magic stones and stone-like charms of the sorcerer is preceded with. Native eye-witnesses state that the Asisi smell out sorcery stones which have been hidden away in the bush for safety. Certainly they have managed to get a large number of genuine sorcery stones from their owners. Their method is to smell the palm of the man's hand to tell whether he is a sorcerer. When they find the stones they lick them all over to destroy their magic.

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Women supposed to be witches are subjected to different treatment, the evil spirit being sucked out from the palm of the witch's hand, or drawn out from the hair of the head. So much for the first problem.

The healing of the sick is the ordinary New Guinea method of sucking the sick person and by sleight of hand producing a stone or other trifle which is said to have been the cause of the trouble. They may have other methods as well. Kitero stated that he withdrew himself to pray for strength from God, and by holding the hand of the patient was able to impart healing virtue when the patient believed in his power.

The really bad part of the work of the Asisi is in connection with their methods of "raising the dead". By some means or other the Asisi have discovered a way of hypnotising. A mirror is repeatedly flashed at the victim, usually a woman, who falls senseless to the ground - to all appearances dead. Resuscitation is brought about in some cases by a violent jerk of the big toe. Sometimes the mirror is used again. In one case the magic word "Good morning!" was used without effect, but cold water was sufficient. In several cases the after effects have been serious, the victim sitting about in a dazed condition in the village for days, unable to attend to the ordinary duties of life. So it is that the "dead are raised". When it comes to a genuine case of death the Asisi are, of course, powerless. At Baiwapa a man died, the relations delayed the burial, surreptitiously sending to a near-by village for the Asisi man. The Asisi arrived, but their attempts to revive the dead man by means of mirrors was in vain. Their lack of success was attributed by them to the length of time which had elapsed since the man's death.

Extortion is an objectionable part of the Asisi, as it seems common to all these cults. Why the unfortunate villagers should have to pay for a visit from the Asisi is doubtful. Possibly it is for the healing of the sick, possibly it is for the "raising of the dead". Probably fear has much to do with it. Certainly the Asisi managed to acquire many pigs and other New Guinea wealth.

A remarkable point is that a belief in God is apparently well established amongst the heathen, an advance from their primitive belief.

Another encouraging feature is that very few of our Christians have been affected by this cult. Beyond four or five boys who were out for some fun the Christians did not take active part in the Asisi cult but in certain districts the newly converted were at least very interested in the doings of the cult. In the older districts the Asisi seem to have had not the slightest influence.

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