



## Christian Faith and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture

**Bishop Saibo Mabo  
2005**



There are three ways we can look at the link between Christian Faith and Culture in our world.

### **1. Christian Faith *Against* Culture**

In this situation, the Christian Faith is attacking the culture. It is criticising the culture.

In PNG the early missionaries burned down the spirit houses as pagan places. In Australia the missionaries forbade the using of a person's own language in the schools and institutions for both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Traditional dances in the Torres Strait were banned as 'Satan dances'. The Church did not encourage the use of Indigenous languages in services until very recently.

In this understanding, all traditional beliefs are pagan and all traditional practices are sinful and must be stamped out. The missionaries brought the Christian Faith to Indigenous Australia as a complete package. This point of view sees no positive links between Christian Faith and Culture. To become a Christian, a person must renounce their Culture entirely.

### **2. Christian Faith *Harmonised with* Culture**

In this view of the world, the Christian Faith is absorbed by the Culture. Every aspect of the Christian Faith is interpreted by the Culture. This has the effect of harmonising the Christian Faith with the Culture in which it is located. The Culture tames the harder teachings of the Faith.



Churches that live under a harsh political system sometimes seem to fit this model on the surface at least. Religious leaders do not speak out against injustice. If they keep quiet, they can continue to live peacefully. The Church in El Salvador followed this line of fitting the teaching of the faith in with the powerful forces in their society until Oscar Romero became Archbishop. When he went against these forces, they killed him. They killed him for his stand for the poor against the rich and powerful. This teaching is part of the heart of the Christian faith. Often the leaders of these 'cultural' churches denounce their members who stand up for their beliefs against the system in power. This kind of church has lost its power to speak out against wrongdoing in the society because it has become part of the group that runs society. In situations like this, the Culture, represented by a Military Dictatorship, had power over the Faith with the Faith being represented by the Church Leaders. This is unbalanced and unhealthy.

### **3. Christian Faith *Walking Alongside Culture***

A healthy situation is when the representatives of the Culture and the Faith are in mutual respect and can speak to one another.

I will illustrate this through an example from my culture: *Kup Mari Theology*.

#### ***Kup Mari Theology of the Torres Strait Islands***

The Kup Mari is a kind of feast where a large pit is dug and filled with very hot stones. Then the meat and vegetables, sometimes wrapped in banana leaves, or more recently aluminum foil, are placed on the hot stones and the whole thing covered in soil and left to cook for a number of hours. When the Kup mari is opened, there is a wonderful smell of cooked meat and vegetables. People then gather round, and after prayer, they join together to eat the Kup Mari.

When I think about the Kup Mari, I think about the damper that is cooked in the Kup Mari. It is different to the damper that is just cooked in the oven. The Kup Mari damper is sweet and beautiful to eat. I see an image of the living bread in that Kup



Mari damper. Christ our living bread was buried under the ground just like the damper. When he rose from the dead he brought the sweetness of many blessings to all of Creation. The living bread of the Holy Communion is sweetened for us by the risen Jesus in the same way as that damper is full of life and flavour when it comes out of its time under the ground. I see a close connection between the way we do Kup Mari and the way we celebrate Holy Communion. They are both feasts. In some cultures in PNG they use the drum to call people to worship. The drum sound is the one calling people to a feast. In a similar manner, in the Torres Strait we have used the conch shell to call people to worship. Here Christian Faith and Culture walk alongside each other, drawing goodness and richness from one another, each respecting the other. This is just a brief glimpse of some of the theological insights that can come from Kup Mari theology.

Another example of Christian Faith walking alongside Culture happens at Yarrabah. Here a group of young men use traditional dance to communicate the truths of the Christian Faith. They express their faith THROUGH their culture. They have taken their dancing to the wider church. People understand what they are doing and they like it.

### **Humanising Theology**

Where will Reconciliation come from? We need a genuine Humanising Theology. This means theology that will lead us in touching one another, walking together, feeling for one another, smelling the atmosphere and seeing what needs to be seen. Humanising theology will create an effective and strong reconciliation.