

Indigenous Christians Embrace Traditions

Increasingly, indigenous believers are reclaiming their cultural traditions as tools for worship and evangelism

Evangelist Arild Maso won't soon forget 1994.

That year he hosted a conference in Norway and attempted for the first time to perform what he calls a "Jesus joik," a variation of the traditional form of chanting practiced by the Sami people of northern Scandinavia and northwest Russia. As a result he was banned from preaching in Norwegian churches for 10 years and accused of "spitting at God."

Though many indigenous Christians have been told that traditional forms of worship such as joiking are sinful, a growing number are slowly reclaiming their cultural traditions as tools for worshiping Jesus.

At the fifth World Christian Gathering on Indigenous People held Aug. 7-14 in Kiruna, Sweden, several hundred indigenous people such as the Maoris from New Zealand, First Nations people from North America and Australian Aborigines gathered to pray, fellowship and worship.

First Nations Americans drummed and chanted "Jesus is good medicine." Moluccans performed a war dance to "prepare the way for Jesus." Aborigines joked that "if Eve had been one of us she would have refused the apple and eaten the snake."

Testimonies from people such as 74-year-old Aborigine Mona Olsson revealed why indigenous Christians would travel the

globe to participate in the event.

"I was 5 and playing with my cousins by a desert stream when a truck pulled up, police officers got out and started to round up us children," said Olsson, whose sister is the custodian of the Uluru Monolith, the sacred mountain of the Aborigines located at the heart of the Australian desert.

Olsson, her baby sister and her cousins were thrown into a truck and taken to a mission house. Though her mother managed to board the vehicle, she was not allowed inside the house. Olsson said she didn't see her mother again for 32 years.

From 1910 until 1970 roughly 100,000 "half-caste" and Aborigine children were orphaned by the Australian government, often with missionaries' involvement. The officials entertained ideas of "breeding out" an undesirable race, Olsson said, and many missionaries believed that unless the "heathen" were "civilized" they were not "fit receptacles" for the gospel.

Still, Olsson became a Christian during her first year with the missionaries. One evening, she said, God comforted her and explained the Scriptures she had been reciting without understanding. For years since then she has been involved in intercession and reconciliation.

"These gatherings mean a lot to our self-esteem," said Håkan Enoksson, a reindeer-breeding Sami from Kiruna who with his wife, Marie, organized the 2005 event.

During his childhood, Enoksson got used to being called "lappjävel" by many Swedes. "Lapp" is a derogatory term for

the Sami; jävel literally means devil and is a common swearword in Swedish.

In both society and the church, Enoksson's way of life and language have been derided more often than not. "But we are no longer ashamed of our cultural identity," he said. "We know that we have a contribution to make."

But there are dark streaks in most native traditions, among them shamanism and idolatry. Enoksson said for years he felt haunted by a curse. "I could not put my finger on the cause," he said, "until one day my wife and I came across an old book in an antique bookstore."

It was a 100-year-old travelogue about the land of the Sami. The author had visited Enoksson's native village and told of a Sami father who sacrificed his son on a nearby mountaintop in 1860—a site that many Sami still held sacred. Enoksson later went secretly to the mountain to repent for the sins of his forefathers.

During the indigenous peoples' gathering, a group of leaders joined Enoksson on the mountaintop to intercede for the Sami people and to break curses evoked by centuries of occult practices, especially the sacrifice of children. Enoksson told attendees he believed that act represented a "turning point for the Sami people."

The World Christian Gathering also addressed the social and political issues facing indigenous people, in particular the approximately 70,000 Sami. In Russia the average life expectancy for Sami men is no more than 40 years because of high rates of alcoholism. In Sweden, tension over hunting and

fishing rights, reindeer breeding, and land ownership are dangerously inflamed, said Judge Marie Hagsgård, a government expert on Sami relations.

Although the Jesus joik caused the Norwegian church to “excommunicate” Maso, he said doors opened for him to reach a new mission field: North America. Maso has shared the gospel on several reservations in Canada, and he said many First Nation Americans have accepted Jesus and some have received healing.

“One day 13 shamans from different tribes came to my meeting to ‘put a lid on their people,’” Maso recalled. “As I was joiking one shaman sneaked up from behind intending to ‘sap’ my power, as I was told later. Next thing I knew the shaman was slain under the power of the Holy Spirit, and I went over and prayed for him. I thought he had come for ministry.”

This year’s World Christian Gathering on Indigenous People will be held in the Philippines. The symbolic seventh gathering will take place in Jerusalem in 2007.

Herti Dixon in Kiruna, Sweden