The Holy Synod Expands the Scope of its Pastoral Responsibility to Papua New Guinea

Over the past few years, both Russian and foreign media have increasingly been reporting on the development of Russia's relations with Papua New Guinea, the largest island nation in Oceania, with a population of almost 9 million people. Another area of media interest has been the activities of the Miklouho-Maclay Ethnic and Cultural Heritage Foundation.

In 2017 and 2019, this Russian non-profit organization sent two research expeditions to the north-eastern part of Papua New Guinea to follow in the footsteps of the 19th-century ethnographer, anthropologist and traveler, Nicholas Miklouho-Maclay (1846-1888). Experts from St. Petersburg and Moscow took part in the expeditions under the leadership of the head of the Foundation - Nikolai Nikolaevich Miklouho-Maclay, or Miklouho-Maclay Junior, as he was christened by the media, a descendant and namesake of the great Russian scientist and humanist. Over the past few years, the Miklouho-Maclay Foundation has done a great deal of work to establish cultural, educational and other ties with Papa New Guinea at the highest level, and recently a group of Papuans contacted the head of the Russian Orthodox Church with a request that an Orthodox mission be sent to their country.

To understand more about the origins of the relationship between Russia and Papua New Guinea, and why several hundred local residents have converted to Orthodoxy, we need to look back to the work of the Russian scientist Nicholas Miklouho-Maclay Senior almost 150 years ago.

In 1871-1872, 1876-1877, and 1883, Nicholas Miklouho-Maclay conducted scientific work in a place that was undiscovered territory for Europeans - the island of New Guinea, located in the Pacific Ocean near Australia and Indonesia. Unlike representatives of the colonial powers, he went there with good intentions: to study the local people's life and culture, without imposing his own will upon them by force. At that time, most people thought of the inhabitants of New Guinea as a kind of transitional form between apes and humans - a view shared by many Western scholars. As a humanist, Miklouho-Maclay was aware of the danger of such racist theories, and therefore, taking as an example the inhabitants of the north-eastern coast of New Guinea, he proved to the world that there is no such thing as "higher" or "lower" races in the world, and that we are, by nature, all equal. He became a true friend to the New Guineans and made their life easier by bringing them iron tools and introducing new crops such as maize, watermelon, and cucumbers. The north-eastern coast of New Guinea was later named the Maclay Coast in memory of the first European to land in that part of the world.

New Guinea was divided between the Netherlands, Britain, and Germany in the late nineteenth century, and was an Australian protectorate for most of the twentieth century, and then, in 1975, the eastern half of the island gained independence as Papua New Guinea. It is the most developed economy among the island states of Oceania, rich in natural resources such as gold, copper, oil and gas, and with a significant agricultural sector, in which coffee production plays an important role.

Today, almost 150 years after N. N. Miklouho-Maclay’s first expedition to New Guinea, the team of Russian researchers led by his descendant made a discovery. For a century and a half, the Russian scientist's memory on the Maclay Coast has remained alive, and stories about him have been passed down from generation to generation. The names “Nicholas” and “Maclay” remain popular to this day. Thanks to his humanistic ideals and good intentions, Papua New Guineans view Russia and Russians with affection and respect to this day.

The Miklouho-Maclay Foundation’s expeditions in 2017 and 2019 can be seen as promoting the development of good relations between Russia and Papua New Guinea. In December 2019, the Miklouho-Maclay Foundation, with support
from the Russian World Foundation, opened a Russian World Centre in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea. Here local people can learn about Russia’s history and culture and take a Russian language course.

The opening of the Russian World Centre and the popularity of the Miklouho-Maclay Foundation’s educational projects were among the reasons behind an official visit to New Guinea by Kirill Shkarbul, priest of the Church of the Exaltation of the Cross in Taipei (capital of Taiwan), in 2020. Today, more than 90% of the country’s residents consider themselves Christians (Catholics, Protestants, Lutherans, Adventists, etc.).

During his trip to Papua New Guinea, the Russian cleric visited three parts of the country - Port Moresby, the autonomous region of Bougainville, and the province of East Sepik, where after conversations with Father Kirill, a whole clan, consisting of several settlements (a total of about one thousand people), decided to convert to Orthodox Christianity.

According to the press service of the Miklouho-Maclay Foundation, when they learned that an Orthodox priest had appeared before them, many Papua New Guineans said they wanted to accept Orthodox Christian religion with great enthusiasm. Later, Father Kirill was joined by several other people who helped the priest. It was they who became the first local missionaries, and themselves told their compatriots about Orthodoxy. With help from these Papua New Guinean enthusiasts, booklets on Orthodoxy and several prayers were translated into one of the country’s official languages, Tok Pisin.

Several Papua New Guineans were also baptized and became the first Orthodox Christians in the island nation. More than a hundred residents of Papua New Guinea made a joint appeal to His Holiness the Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, requesting him to establish an Orthodox mission there.

On August 25, 2020, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, led by his Holiness, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, expanded the scope of its pastoral responsibility to Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste (or East Timor, a state with a population of 1.3 million inhabitants, located between Indonesia, Australia, and Papa New Guinea, which gained independence from Indonesia in 2002).

History is being made before our eyes: relations between Russia and Papua New Guinea are rapidly gaining momentum. The foundations of friendly relations and relatively close historical ties between the two countries which were laid almost 150 years ago by the humanist scientist Nicholas Miklouho-Maclay have now been revived at the highest level by our contemporary Nikolai Nikolaevich Miklouho-Maclay Jr. The interest shown by Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Russian Orthodox Church in developing these ties gives reason for confidence that relations between the two countries in a range of different areas will continue to grow stronger.

Sofia Pale, PhD in History, Researcher at the Center for Southeast Asia, Australia and Oceania at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.