

ELIA KOKE Story

- *Archbishop Adrian Smith sm, Archbishop of Honiara*

Monday 3rd of November 2008 I'm in Manivovo and I have the opportunity to meet with one man from Manivovo who is 82 years of age and has a great story to tell about the history of his own life.

Elia was born on the 25th of September 1926. His father was a man from Malaita, from the Baegu area. His family were members of the then South Seas Evangelical Mission (SSEM). In 1936 Elia as a young boy of ten years of age started his education at Faumera in the Star Harbour area. It was the first place in that area that the Catholic Church attempted to set up a mission station. There was a small Catholic School there under the care of Father Emile Babonneau sm. In 1938 Elia with his whole family, were Baptised and received in the Catholic Church. In 1940 Elia and parents were Confirmed at Wainoni Bay by Fr. Bononneau, because of pre-war conditions, Bishop Jean Marie Aubin sm was unable to visit Wainoni Bay. From the small school in Faumera, Elia in 1942 went to school in Wainoni Bay. Fr. John Patrinage sm brought Elia to school in Wainoni Bay.



World War II Days

In the lead up to the World War II days Fr. Babonneau went to New Caledonia and was replaced by a priest from America, Father McMahon. And Fr. McMahon was later replaced by a priest from New Zealand Father Tom Parsonage sm. Elia remained at Wainoni Bay and he continued his schooling there right through the war up until the middle of 1945.

Elia went to Fiji

1946 Elia was one of a group of twenty young men who were sent to Fiji to further their education at St. John's College, Cawaci to continue their education. This group was selected by Bishop Aubin sm with the hope of beginning a seminary in Solomon Islands. While Elia was a student at Cawaci he has as his classmate Pedro Macada who is now the Archbishop of Suva. The Solomon Islands group who went to Cawaci at that time on their return to Solomon Islands they made an important contribution to the life of the Church in their various home parishes. Elia shared how difficult it was for the group when they first went to Fiji. They knew very little English and no Fijian, it took them a while to find their way around. Learning Fijian was an easier task than learning English. Communication was a real problem for the group.

St. Vincent's Seminary

Elia came back from Fiji late 1950. In 1951 he joined a group of young men who were beginning their formation as seminarians. The venue for this first attempt to have a seminary was in what we now call St. Martin's Tenaru. The name given to new project was St. Vincent's, some of the priests involved in the formation at St. Vincent's Fathers Pete van Mechlen sm and Emry de Clerk sm. Priests like Father Michael Aike, Father Tim Bobongi, Fr. Donasiano Hite'e and the late Fr. Francis Maul sm were students at St. Vincent's. Elia stayed one year at St. Vincent's.

Elia choose other paths to follow. In 1951 he went to work for the Government, in the Meteorology Department for about six months and then Fr. John Espagne sm took him to Mami to be a teacher at a small school that they had started at Mami. Elia stayed one year with Fr. Espagne teaching at primary level.

He found his place in a Medical career for many years.

He decided to join the Medical Service and went off to train as a medical assistant which was his work for many years in many different parts of Solomon Islands. After training in Honiara as a Medical Assistant, Elia went to Malaita. He was in Auki for a number of years with the Pharmacy Section in Auki. In 1958 having finished from the Pharmacy Section, we went to work in Kwaibala Hospital, Auki it was at that time that he found his beautiful wife, Esther Mary. Esther Mary is a Kwara'ae lady, she comes from Anoasa village that is in the highlands behind the Auki, Ambu area. Perhaps Elia can attribute his good health and wellbeing at 82 years of age to the loving care of his wife who is quite a bit younger than Elia. A new hospital was built at Kilufi, a little north of Auki, Kwaibala was reduced to clinic status, Elia moved to Kilu'ufi Hospital. After long service in Malaita, Elia came to work in Kirakira Hospital and in 1976 retired from the Medical Service.

From medicine to politics

On retirement from the Medical Service Elia returned to his home area in the Star Harbour region, he set up home in Makorukoru. That same year he stood as a candidate in the Council/Provincial elections and became the Premier/President of the Makira Council Makira/Ulawa Province from 1976 to 1987 when he retired from active political life. During the period 1976 to 1987 there was the change over from Council Local Government to Provincial Local Government; in telling his story Elia did not distinguish clearly the exact form of Government he was referring to.

Enough of politics

Having finished his political career he returned to his home place in Star Harbour area, starting a small village at Maniara where he now resides. As a man of 82 years of age his mind is still very clear and full of good memories of the past.

Fiji memories

As stated above language was a major problem for the Solomon Islands group when they went to Fiji. In recalling the different students who were part of the group Elia remembers the late Alphonse Ganea from Kwaio. From Langalanga he remembers the late Kalisto Kobiloko and the late Joseph Buluteteo. He also had good memories of the late Peter Taloni and late Sosimo Sifotelia.

Political reflections

Thirty years ago Solomon Islands gained independence and at that time Elia was Deputy Premier and he also took the portfolio of Minister of Lands for the Makira/Ulawa Province. During his early years with the Makira Province/Council, Ulawa and Ugi had not yet become part of what we now called the Makira Ulawa Province, Elia sees himself as having played a significant role in helping to achieve the unity we have today as Makira/Ulawa Province combines all these different area.

Another important development in Elia's time in politics was the acquiring of the land at Waimapuru and the building of Waimapuru National Secondary School. He was also in the Government at the time when the Church of Melanesia released responsibility for Pawa and it became a Provincial Secondary School.

Elia had a family of six children. Rose is the first born, she is married and living in Honiara. Patrick his son is married in Santa Ana. His next daughter is Matilda and after Luisa. Matilda is a teacher at Naruka and the sixth member of the family Michael the last born is also married. Elia is blessed with the fact that his wife Esther is still alive and healthy able to take care of her aging husband. Mary Esther was born in 1942 so that makes her quite a bit younger than Elia.

Elia is like the mustered seed, something that started off very small but now is a big bush. Rose has seven children. Patrick has six children. Matilda has five children, Luisa has four children and Thomas has four children. Michael has one child. So Elia rejoices in having a long line of grandchildren to carry on the family tradition.

Elia is proud of his grandchildren; six of them have gone as far as university education. One of Rose's children is already a qualified lawyer and another medical doctor, others are at university. In Elia's long association with the Church he has memories of Bishop Jean Marie Aubin and when he was in Fiji he knew the Archbishop of that time Bishop Foley and of course his friend Pedro Macada became Archbishop of Suva. He also remembers Archbishop Dan Stuyvenberg and also Bishop Peter Kurongu who was auxiliary bishop of Honiara.

Elia has memories of Bishop Thomas Wade who served as Bishop of Bougainville later the Solomon Islands part of what was then Bougainville Diocese became part of the new diocese of Gizo. That happened in 1958.

Reminisce on the history of Manivovo Elia remembered Fr. John Espagne sm as the one who came and acquired the land at Manivovo he had of course been missionary at Mami for quite some time. Then as a young priest Fr. Jan Sniders sm came and spent some time at Manivovo. After Fr. Sniders, Fr. Carl Lemans, after Fr. Carl Fr. Theo Koning. After Fr. Koning then Fr. Gerry Bruns came, then Fr. Bruns moved to Wainoni Fr. Tim Bobongi came and served for a short time here then his place was taken by Fr. Michael Aike. And after Fr. Michael came Fr. Anton Everwin and then for the period Manivovo was looked after by Wainoni Bay. Fr. Joseph Kluwen sm, Fr. Julio Aihunu sm and Fr. Patrick Stanley also visited Manivovo from Wainoni Bay. Then Fr. Julio Geaney came with Fr. Onesimo. After Fr. Onesimo came Fr. Martin Tuqamatani and today is Fr. Julio and Fr. Howard Deli. Fr. Max Hautona is also remembered the one who came to visit, also Fr. Maurice Raqe came from Holy Cross and Fr. Japhet Manebusa. They are the ones who are part of the memory and the story of Manivovo.

On the 27th of January 2009 we received the sad news from Manivovo that Mr. Elia Koke died at his home. I ask God to Grant Elia Eternal Rest and I offer all the members of his family my deepest sympathy. Manivovo has lost a person who knew the story.