

# TATAPA: CHRIST THE PROTECTOR

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## INTRODUCTION

Tribal fights have been common in Papua New Guinea, although the strategy and weapons vary across the nation. There are common enemies, however, that all tribes in Papua New Guinea have fought. Those common enemies are evil spirits. The people of Teop, in North Bougainville Province of Papua New Guinea, fought the battle with *tatapa*.

## TATAPA

*Tatapa* is a practice that has been historically used by the Teop people to protect themselves against attack from evil spirits.<sup>1</sup> *Tatapa* was used to ward off evil spirits, so that they could not enter villages to attack. People knew that they could not kill or eliminate these spirits; all they could do was use *tatapa* to repel the evil spirits. The practice of *tatapa* was believed to serve as an invisible protective shield, or hedge, around the whole village.

The practice of *tatapa* involved two materials. The first was a stick, two centimetres in diameter, and 20 centimetres in length, made from a special tree – *toras*, which was strong in nature, and sacred in use.<sup>2</sup> The second was a reddish fruit, with a hairy body, containing red seeds inside – these were the ones commonly used in many parts of Papua New Guinea during sing-sing ceremonies to paint participants' faces. In order to protect the village, the practitioner would prepare several sticks by making them sharp on one end and rounded on the other.

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<sup>1</sup> *Tatapa*, does not destroy evil spirits; rather, it keeps them at bay.

<sup>2</sup> Only the *tatapa* practitioners knew the location of the *toras* trees. One must assume that the tree had some spiritual power associated with it.

The number of stakes depended on the size of the village. The stakes were planted, evenly spaced, on the circumference of the village, which created a powerful invisible wall, or hedge, that stopped the evil spirits from entering the village. The practitioner would use both hands to drive the stakes into the ground in specific locations – the rounded end of the stakes remaining above ground. He then took dry powder that had been stored in a coconut shell – *guvi* – which had been specially prepared to keep the powder dry.<sup>3</sup> While rubbing the rounded end of the stake with the reddish powder, the practitioner would recite a chant or a prayer – *ananava* – calling the spirits of the ancestors, who had been strong warriors, to come and drive away the evil spirits.<sup>4</sup>

It was believed that, when these stakes were planted, the special powder applied, and a special chant said over them, then an invisible wall of power was created that repelled the evil spirits from entering the village. The belief was that invisible rays of power spread out along the edge of the village for about ten metres from each stake. The stakes had to be driven into the ground just as night began. Traditionally, the time was indicated by the *atoto* – fireflies – because people believed that evil spirits travelled through these fireflies.<sup>5</sup> All the people of the village had to make sure to return to the village before dusk, at which time, the stakes were driven into the ground. If the people failed to return by dark, the belief was they would be caught and killed by the evil spirits, which hovered around the village trying to get in.

### **CHRIST AS *TATAPA* THE PROTECTOR**

For Christians today, the *tatapa* represents Jesus as protector. Jesus is the one who protects against evil. He is the refuge that Christians can run into

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<sup>3</sup> *Guvi* is a whole and dry coconut shell, specially carved with an opening in the shape of a mouth that is located below two eyes. The *guvi* is used to store traditional items, such as beads (used for bride price), or water, but mostly dried-out, red, fruit seeds.

<sup>4</sup> *Ananava* is the chant or prayer to the spirits of the ancestors, recited by the practitioner of the *tatapa*, in which he calls on the dead spirits of the ancestors, who were known to have been well respected and feared by the community for their warring achievements.

<sup>5</sup> *Atoto* are flying insects that come out in number during the evening, and fly randomly around. According to the Teop people, these fireflies were the means of transport for both evil and good spirits.

for safety – “but you are my strong refuge” (Ps 71:7; 91:2, 4). Christ is the fortress, a Christian’s stronghold – “O Lord, my strength and my fortress” (Jer 16:19; Ps 91:2). He is the shield against Satan’s fiery arrows – “take up the shield of faith” (Eph 6:16; Ps 91:4). Christ is the hedge that surrounds believers – “Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has?” (Job 1:10).

Believers know that Satan comes to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10), but God places a hedge of protection around His people, to shield them from Satan’s attacks. The hedge is like a spiritual wall-of-fire surrounding God’s faithful, so that Satan cannot harm them – “And I myself will be a wall of fire around it [Jerusalem] declares the Lord” (Zech 2:5). Therefore, believers have this wall of protection around them.

The protective power of the rays of the stakes, which cover the village like a “no-go zone”, represent Christ’s protective righteousness – “deliver me in your righteousness” (Ps 31:1a).<sup>6</sup> With Christ’s righteousness, believers are covered with rays of power that brings fear to evil spirits – “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God you won’t torture me” (Mark 5:7). God has given Christians divine power through His mighty armour to stand against the attack of evil spirits (Eph 6:13-17). Christians cannot eliminate evil spirits; nevertheless, God will punish evil spirits in the fiery furnace, with their master, Satan – “their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulphur” (Rev 21:8).

For Teop Christians in the North Bougainville Province, Christ is their tatapa – their protector.

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<sup>6</sup> A “no-go zone” is a military term that refers to a strip of land, into which opposing parties do not venture, lest the enemy kill them.