

Ragoso, Kata

WILSON GIA LILIGETO

Wilson Gia Liligeto was born in Papua New Guinea. He is the son of Kuloburu Liligeto, a retired pastor and teacher. Wilson Liligeto attended James Cook University in Townsville, Queensland, Australia, the International Training Institute in Mosman, Sydney, Australia, and the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute, Davao City, Philippines. He is currently the regional youth coordinator for the SDA Church in the Western Sub Office of the Solomon Islands Mission and the deputy director in the Ministry of Traditional Governance, Peace and Ecclesiastical Affairs with the Solomon Islands Government. Liligeto has authored *Babata, My Tribe, My Land, My People*, and delivered several presentations on local church history and local community/church leadership. He is married to Beverly with five children and seven grandchildren.

Kata Ragoso, an Adventist Solomon Islander pastor, held numerous leadership positions in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Solomon Islands. He was the superintendent of the church from 1942 to 1945 during the of World War II. He represented the Australasian Division at the General Conference Session in San Francisco in 1936 and again in 1954.¹



Kata Ragoso

Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

Birth and Early Life

Of all the clans who inhabited the Solomon Islands, the Marovo Lagoon tribesmen were once considered the most warlike and cannibalistic. At the turn of the nineteenth century, a Marovo chief of chiefs named Tatagu, suspecting that there was nothing in the devil-fear to which the islanders were addicted, led a fishing expedition for which he purposefully neglected to affix to the prow of his canoe a vine or “string” which was supposed to placate the devil and bring a good catch. After three fruitless days the tribesmen were about to rebel, when Tatagu spied a large school of makasi fish. Returning home in triumph, the chiefs of chiefs learned that a son had been born to him. In accordance with a local custom of naming progeny after the most important event of the moment, Tatagu called his babe Kata Ragoso, meaning “no devil strings.”² Kata Ragoso was born in Bunibuni on Marovo Island around 1902 and was the second son of Chief Tatagu and Sabenaru.³

Kata Ragoso spent most of his childhood days at his mother’s village. However, he was not well cared for, so he was taken back to live with his cousin Pana, and later was adopted by Pana’s mother, Nose. In his early years, he

saw his people worshipping the spirits of their ancestors whose skulls were kept in the sacred grove called "Vaributo." He also saw constant intertribal warfare and headhunting raids which his father, Chief Tatagu, led. The warriors brought back the heads of their vanquished enemies to put in the skull house as signs of power and victory.

Kata Ragozo grew up during the time of unprincipled white traders coming to Solomon Islands in increasing numbers, their ships filled with cloth, steel axes, and bright trinkets that the people loved. He also witnessed the black-birding trade where many of the people were being enticed into the holds of the ships with pretty beads and trinkets and then taken away as slave laborers. He also witnessed the murder of a white trader named Oliver Burns in the Marovo Lagoon by his own distant relatives from his mother's side.

In June 1914, when Kata Ragozo was about 12 years old, a small white boat, the *Advent Herald*, came into the Marovo Lagoon.⁴ Kata Ragozo's cousin, Pana, and some other boys were playing on the beach at Babata when the boat dropped its anchor. Captain Griffiths F. Jones came ashore and asked for Chief Tatagu. Pana took him to where Chief Tatagu was tending his garden some three miles away.⁵ Jones requested a piece of land on which to build a school. Chief Tatagu eventually agreed. The school was built and commenced at Viru Harbour.

Education

In 1915, Panda, a young man at the time, offered land at Sasaghana for a school. The school was built and Kata Ragozo was one of twenty-three students to first attend school at Sasaghana. The teachers were Donald and Lilian Nicholson. Subsequently, Ragozo accepted Christianity and was one of the first ten Solomon Islanders to be baptized on January 1, 1918.⁶ His elder brothers and cousins tried to stop him from being baptized, but Jones advised that if Ragozo had decided to be baptized, then nothing should stop him.⁷ When Harold B. Wicks landed in the Solomons in June 1920, Ragozo was about eighteen years of age, and appeared to be a very earnest and efficient young man.⁸

Ragozo later attended school at Telina and then at Batuna. He learned to speak and understand English. He also learned to type and operate a printing press. He observed the leadership methods of his European counterparts and adapted them to his cultural setting.

Contribution and Service to the Church

Ragozo's first appointment was as a mission teacher at Bukobuko, Ramata, North New Georgia, in 1919. He convened the school in the church building. In 1920, he was appointed to the Ranogga school, replacing Jugha. He was an associate to his cousin Pana, who was a teacher at the Ranogga school. Ragozo was there until the end of 1923, when he went to Batuna to further his education. He was a student at Batuna in 1924 and 1925.⁹ From 1926 to 1934, he was stationed at Batuna where he engaged in teaching, translation work, and operating

the printing press, which produced school lessons, Bible portions, and song books in the local language.¹⁰ He also assisted his elder brother Peo, who was Marovo district director at Telina. There were nineteen outlying stations under Peo's supervision.¹¹ Peo died on March 9, 1926, and was buried at Telina.¹² After Peo's death, Ragoso became Harold Wicks's principal counsellor and helper in all native affairs. He learned many lessons in district administration while traveling with Wicks as they visited around the islands. Wicks was superintendent of the Solomon Islands Mission from 1920 to 1927.¹³

On October 28, 1932, just as the school year at Batuna closed, Ragoso married Roda Vizoduri, a chief's daughter from Ranogga.¹⁴ In 1935, he was appointed as assistant to the superintendent of the Solomon Islands.¹⁵ Ragoso was ordained to the gospel ministry at Batuna, by Pastors A. H. Piper and E. H. Guilliard on May 28, 1935.

In 1936, Kata Ragoso attended the 43rd General Conference session in San Francisco, California. He was 34 years old and easily identified by his bushy hair, white teeth, sturdy black legs, and large black feet entirely bare beneath the dark-blue serge skirt, or *tivitivi*, which distinguished his otherwise orthodox business attire. During the session, and afterwards, as he travelled around the United States, it had been his intention to speak in Marovo and be translated by Norman Ferris. However, at the beginning of the session Ferris fell ill.

"When Pastor N. A. Ferris, of Australia, who was to accompany him on this journey and translate for him, became suddenly ill at its outset, Ragoso was dismayed, and the General Conference leaders who had made the arrangements were perplexed. But they urged him to speak English the best he could, as he had learned it from the missionaries in his own islands, and after much hesitation and earnest prayer he consented to do so. We who listened marveled! Surely his experience was a modern miracle—the bestowing upon this humble faithful servant of Heaven the gift of tongues."¹⁶

Ragoso spoke over radio on seventeen occasions, covering almost all of the United States. While in the United States, he attended a four-week summer school at Pacific Union College, which helped improve his English.

During World War II, between 1942 and 1945, Pastor Kata Ragoso was chosen to be the Mission Superintendent, and he was left in charge of the Seventh-day Adventist work in the Solomon Islands when all expatriate personnel returned to their homelands.¹⁷

During his tenure, on May 19, 1943, Ragoso was put in prison at Seghe and flogged while lying face-down on a 44-gallon drum by the officer in charge of Seghe garrison. The treatment he received in four interrogations demonstrated the invading officer's disdain for the work of the church. But Ragoso with his friend Lodi, escaped on the night of May 29, 1943.

Ragoso reflected on some of his experiences during the war in a talk delivered in Sydney in 1947:

After the missionaries were evacuated from Solomon Islands, I called one hundred of my people together to build storehouses in the bush to hide the missionaries' goods and the equipment from the Batuna hospital and

school. We carried timber and iron, and build two houses. Then we packed all the goods and marked the boxes with initials of the owners, and on the cases of mission equipment we wrote, "SDA." We carried all this to the bush. The furniture we placed in the house with the leaf roof, and the other things we placed in the store with iron roof. Next we took the two boats *Vinaritokae* and *Portal*, and with a big canoe towed them up the river. We took down the masts and laid them on the decks. Then we built leaf houses over the boats so the airplanes could not see them.

After that we put watchmen every five miles from Gatokae to Vella Lavella, to watch for planes and warships. When any plane was shot down, the watchmen reported it to me, and I sent some men out to find it. When we found any airmen we took them to our villages and mission stations, and looked after them until we could take them to the wireless men [commandos]. We had no white people's food, but we gave them the native food. Sometimes we took them to the wireless men at night through Japanese lines. Sometimes we took them in the day; and when the airplanes came over we made the white people lie down in the canoe and we covered them with leaves. When we reached the wireless men, they would send a message to Guadalcanal or the New Hebrides; then an airplane would come and take the airmen away.

Altogether we rescued 27 American pilots and 187 Australian and New Zealand soldiers. These 187 men were on a warship which was torpedoed by the enemy. When it sank, the soldiers started to swim. Our men went out in their canoes and brought them to shore. It took a lot of food to feed them, but we did not keep them very long. The wireless men sent a message, and a big warship came and took the soldiers aboard."¹⁸

After the war as the expatriate mission personnel began to return, Ragoso resumed his position as assistant to the mission superintendent.¹⁹ Then on January 8, 1948, his wife, Vizoduri, died and was buried at the Kukudu cemetery with services officiated by Wallace Ferguson. Five years after Vizoduri's death, on February 4, 1953 at the age of 51 years, Ragoso married Ellen Sigadao, Deni Mark's widow of Ranogga Island.²⁰

In 1949, three Solomon Islanders, Pana Kapo, Pastor Rini, and Pastor Tasa Hivana, under the coordination of Pastor Robert Barrett, worked to complete the translation of the Bible into the Marovo language.²¹ They worked together for some months.²² Tasa was the typist, even though he had no formal training as such.²³ In 1951, Tasa returned to Australia a second time, together with Kata Ragaso to see the task completed.²⁴ The complete Bible was published in 1952 by the British and Foreign Bible Society.

On his return to the Solomon Islands, Kata Ragoso was appointed president of the Western Solomon Islands Mission. He remained in that position from 1952 to 1957. During his tenure as president, he again attended a General Conference session. In 1958 and 1959, he was the district director for Gizo in the Western Solomons. Failing health saw him admitted to Noga Hospital in Rabaul during much of 1960. The diagnosis was diabetes and his condition led to an early retirement in 1961.²⁵

Upon the fiftieth anniversary in 1964 of the arrival of Captain G. F. Jones in the *Advent Herald* in the Marovo Lagoon, although very ill, Ragoso suggested to the mission president, J. P. Holmes, that a celebration be organized to celebrate the jubilee. Although ailing in health, Ragoso personally went to Batuna to meet with tribal and church leaders to plan the celebration. Unfortunately, when the jubilee celebration opened, Ragoso could not attend because of his deteriorating health.²⁶

Death and Legacy

The day after the fiftieth anniversary celebration, Kata Ragoso passed away in the Honiara Central Hospital on October 26, 1964.²⁷ About 400 people, including the students of Betikama Central School, gathered at the small school cemetery near Honiara, Guadalcanal, to pay their last respects. At the graveside, Elisha Gorapava, the acting president of the Eastern Solomon Islands Mission, comforted loved ones with the promises of the resurrection.

Kata Ragoso and his first wife, Vizoduri, had six children, Evalini (Patovaki), born July 30, 1933; Marina (Ghele), born June 23, 1935; Chief Kata Richard, born June 14, 1937; Chief Burusi, (born December 1, 1939; Pandakana, born June 11, 1942; and Liuvoja (Tigulu), born September 9, 1944.²⁸ With his second wife Ellen Sigadao, he had one daughter Mrs. Stella Luther.

Not only was Kata Ragoso a leader in the Adventist church, but he was the tenth tribal chief of his Babata tribe of Marovo Island after his brother Chief Ghusa Peo died in 1926. He was chief of his people for thirty-eight years.²⁹ As chief, he initiated the resettlement of his tribespeople back to their tribal lands. They had left Babata forty-two years earlier in 1914. In discussions with his brother, Dyson Jimuru, and their cousin, Pana, the site for the new village, called Chea, was cleared in 1956. Kata Ragoso's house was built in 1958.³⁰ The new village included a church and school.³¹ Chea Village on Marovo Island was the first village community to be registered under the Charitable Trust Act in Marovo Lagoon, and it stands as a living testimony of Kata Ragoso as a leader of his own people.³²

Kata Ragoso was 62 years old at the time of his death.³³ His total years of service for the church according to the official record were thirty-seven.³⁴ Ellen Ragoso died on October 6, 2005.³⁵

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NOTES

1. Unless otherwise credited, the content of this article is derived from the personal knowledge of the author, a nephew of Kata Ragoso.
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