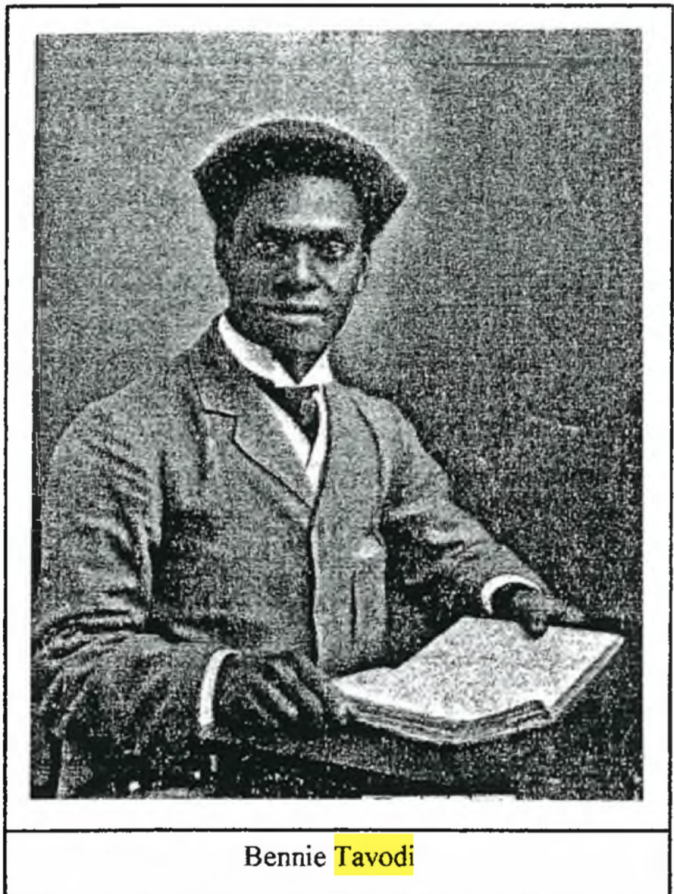


Tavodi, Penisimani (1888–1918) and Aliti Rainima (1895–1978)

SHIRLEY TARBURTON

Shirley Tarburton, M.Litt. (Distinction) (University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, Australia) retired in 2008 after 40 years teaching church-school (mainly high school but including eight years at university). An Australian, she has taught in four mission fields, Australia, and New Zealand. She has authored five books and co-authored one on church history, biography and family history, as well as several magazine articles. She is married to Dr. Michael Tarburton with two adult children and four grandchildren.



Peni Tavodi

Photo courtesy of South Pacific Division Heritage Centre.

Penisimani (Benjamin) Tavodi (Ta-von-dy) was a Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Fijian ministerial worker

who was a pioneer missionary in the territory of Papua.¹ He was the first SDA missionary to die in service on the island of New Guinea.²

Early Life and Education

Penisimani was usually known as Peni, which was often anglicized as Bennie.³ He was born in Navolau on the Rewa River of Fiji in about 1888 to Moapi Dau (d. February 10, 1915)⁴ and his wife.⁵ Peni's parents and siblings became Seventh-day Adventists in 1905 through the work of John Fulton, Alipati Rainima,⁶ and others. Moapi (Moab) took a course of training and became a field worker, spreading the gospel wherever he could.⁷ One of Peni's sisters, Ruci (Ruthie), worked for two missionary families, the Carrs, then the Stewarts,⁸ and later married a mission worker, Jekope (Jacob) Tuilakeba⁹ (of the chiefly line of Lakeba).

Later in 1905, when the first SDA school in the Fiji group opened at Buresala on the island of Ovalau,¹⁰ Peni was sent by Ratu Joni, chief of the Ra district, who lived at Nanukuloa, to be one of the first ten students.¹¹ These young men divided their time between building the school and attending classes.¹² Not only did they construct

the necessary buildings of bush materials, but they established food gardens, made roads, and learned to use a pit saw to prepare timber for permanent buildings.¹³

Here Peni studied under John Fulton and Septimus Carr and was baptized.¹⁴ He also became skilled in reading and writing and became a valuable translator.¹⁵

Missionary Appointment

At the Australian Union Conference council in September 1907, Septimus and Edith Carr were asked to leave Buresala and open the work of the SDA Church in New Guinea, together “with such native help as might be selected.”¹⁶ Buresala graduates Kameli and his wife,¹⁷ and Peni, were selected, but, as Kameli’s health check revealed he was “not physically sound,”¹⁸ Peni was unaccompanied by any of his countrymen. Much excitement was aroused throughout the union conference at the prospect of commencing evangelism in New Guinea, and in three conferences, South Australia,¹⁹ Queensland,²⁰ and New Zealand,²¹ the children and youth pledged to raise funds for Peni’s support.

In November 1907, as soon as the new superintendent for Buresala arrived, Edith Carr and Peni left Fiji for Sydney, Australia, while Sep stayed to complete the orientation and handover.²² Peni went to Avondale to study.²³ Here he also assisted John Fulton with the preparation of a book on hygiene and physiology in the Fijian language²⁴ as he spent time at the Avondale School for Christian Workers.²⁵

Peni sailed for New Guinea with the Carrs on June 5, 1908, and disembarked at Port Moresby on June 25 after calling at Brisbane and many places in the Solomon Islands on their way.²⁶

Working in New Guinea

For the first 12 months the three missionaries were based in Port Moresby, and Peni had the opportunity to acquaint himself with the culture, language, and surrounding districts.²⁷ Peni found the climate very debilitating and contracted a severe case of malaria three months after arrival, but fortunately recovered.²⁸

The climate was much better in the elevated inland region east of Port Moresby, where Septimus Carr hoped to obtain land to establish an SDA mission,²⁹ and Peni spent a lot of time there getting to know the villagers.³⁰ In November 1909 he moved onto the newly acquired property, Bisiatabu, which was about 28 miles (45 kilometers) to the east of the port. Here he supervised the clearing of the land for planting food crops and a rubber plantation.³¹ He readily made friends with some of the villagers, and while he was living there alone, the people of a nearby village expressed concern for his safety, so one man with his two wives and children came to live in a shelter they constructed nearby to afford him protection.³²

Although they were establishing a rubber plantation where they could employ live-in workers who would be required to attend daily classes and worship, the government had not yet allowed the opening of a mission.

However, Peni was allowed to share the gospel with the employees³³ and give simple health education and treatments to improve their health.³⁴

At the end of 1909 a second Fijian worker, Solomona, who had studied at Avondale,³⁵ joined Peni at Bisiatabu for a while.³⁶ However, both of them sometimes returned to Port Moresby to assist in the work there, or just for Christian fellowship.³⁷ The European workforce also increased with the addition of two nurses, Mr. and Mrs. Gordon Smith,³⁸ and builder Frank L. Chaney.³⁹ The latter built a mission house at Bisiatabu so that the Carrs could split their time between there and Port Moresby.⁴⁰ This gave Peni increased opportunity to itinerate throughout the villages along what became the Owen-Stanley Track and is now known as the Kokoda Trail.⁴¹

Marriage

Near the end of 1911 Peni returned to Fiji on furlough,⁴² with the intention of finding a wife that would return with him.⁴³ Peni relished traveling through his home islands, taking the opportunity to itinerate with A. G. Stewart⁴⁴ on his way to visit Buresala again. Here he found Aliti (Alice), the 17-year-old⁴⁵ stepdaughter of Alipate (Albert) Rainima,⁴⁶ (d. 1912),⁴⁷ an active missionary and the first Fijian to be appointed by the SDA mission to pastor a parish (Suvavou).⁴⁸ Her mother, Eseta (Esther, d. 1938)⁴⁹ was the guardian of the girls at Buresala.⁵⁰

On March 11, 1912, Peni and Aliti were married at Buresala by A. G. Stewart.⁵¹ During his short stay at Buresala, Peni gave inspirational talks to the students, thrilling them with his stories of mission service.⁵² The newlyweds left Fiji for the territory of Papua and New Guinea on March 26,⁵³ Aliti becoming the first SDA female Fijian trainee to serve outside Fiji.⁵⁴

After a short sojourn in New South Wales they arrived in Port Moresby,⁵⁵ where Aliti set up home in a room in the mission house⁵⁶ until a place could be built for them to live at Bisiatabu, and Peni moved between the two places, continuing his ministry with the mountain people, the Koiaris.⁵⁷ Arthur Norman Lawson, who replaced the Smiths,⁵⁸ was now the resident missionary at Bisiatabu,⁵⁹ and the Carrs continued to spend time both there and in Port Moresby.⁶⁰

Continued Service

A few months after their return to New Guinea there was an incident that had an impact on events seven years later. Arthur Lawson was called to treat a man who had been bitten by a snake, which he did, at the same time taking the opportunity to teach the people how to treat snakebite. After the treatment and much earnest prayer, the man recovered.⁶¹

As Peni spent more time visiting the people “in the bush” they came to appreciate him and the message he taught. When missionaries Carr and Lawson visited these same areas, they were delighted to see that some had decided to build a church in their village for the worship of God.⁶² Peni was encouraged as he observed the

people learning from his instruction in reading, writing, and numeracy, in classes that he held at noon during the week, and about the gospel and worship of God in the evenings and on Sabbath.⁶³

In September 1913 a special offering was taken up throughout the Australasian Union to enable a house to be built at Bisiatabu for Peni and Aliti.⁶⁴ Their first child, a daughter named Loloma, had been born mid-1913,⁶⁵ and they were very happy when they were able to move into their new house in October and be together.⁶⁶

Peni was still often away on itinerary in the mountains, but he was able to be with his family much more now they were at Bisiatabu. In the last part of 1913 he made an extensive trek deep into the mountainous terrain along what later came to be known as the Kokoda Track. He shared the gospel in Efogi, Kagi, Seragina, Hagari, Bapari, and Kotoi, each place at least a day's trek, sometimes more, deeper into the dense mountain country.⁶⁷ Here he found people who had never heard of God, let alone of Christ and the gospel. Neither could they understand the language spoken at Bisiatabu, and Peni had to communicate by signs and actions. He pushed on farther, visiting Naori and Ilibane, but was not able to make himself understood, so retraced his steps, having reached the slopes of Mount Victoria, one of several of the country's mountains exceeding 13,000 feet (4,000 meters) in height.⁶⁸

He was very interested in learning as much as he could about the people's way of life and their worldview in order to find the most effective way to expand their spiritual understanding. Many of the records that he made of their culture expanded outsiders' knowledge and understanding of these people, promoting more effective communication between them.⁶⁹

About this time, another Fijian couple, Mitieli (Mitchell) and Fika Nakasamai, came to join the staff at Bisiatabu.⁷⁰ The two couples became close friends and worked well together. The government had finally given permission for the operation of a mission station on the Bisiatabu property, so now many more could come to school, not just the rubber plantation workers.⁷¹

After some training by Peni, once Mitieli was able to preach in the local language he began ministering to some of the inland villages by himself. Mitieli planned to spend a particular weekend preaching at a certain village and told Peni he would be back on Monday. When he didn't return as planned, Peni set out to look for him, eventually finding him shaking with the alternating chills and fever of malaria, abandoned to die by those to whom he'd been ministering. Peni was unable to get any carriers to help take Mitieli back to the mission, so, praying for strength and endurance, he carried him back the two-day trek by himself. This further cemented their friendship.⁷²

A big event for Peni in 1914 was his being invested with a ministerial license at the Australasian Union Conference session meetings. This was the last step before ordination and brought with it more responsibility than with the missionary license he had held until then.⁷³ However, Peni never allowed his credentials to restrict what he attempted for the Lord. He taught the gospel at every opportunity, earnestly seeking for someone to accept Christ. So far, no one had.⁷⁴

The Carrs left for furlough in 1915 and did not return to Bisiatabu.⁷⁵ Peni was given more responsibility and was in charge of the mission station when Arthur Lawson was absent.⁷⁶ A second child had joined their family, possibly named Malaki.⁷⁷ Peni never made any complaint about the small wage he was paid, which continued to be sponsored by Sabbath schools in Australia. Both he and Aliti worked hard in their garden to grow most of the food they ate. Despite their paucity of cash, they gave a full month's wages in the Sacrifice Offering of 1917, as did Mitieli and Fika.⁷⁸

Death of Peni

On Wednesday, October 9, 1918, Peni joined Aliti and Fika, who were working in their gardens. The Lawsons had gone down to Port Moresby to meet someone arriving at the Port, so Peni needed to be on the station.⁷⁹ While he was working, he was bitten on the leg by a large black snake,⁸⁰ a Papuan Black, one of the most venomous snakes there. Not wanting to alarm the two women, he dispatched the snake and casually made his way to the mission house, where he had access to the medicine cabinet. He thought he remembered what he had been taught about treating snakebite, applying a ligature, cutting and bleeding the site of the bite, and using potassium permanganate⁸¹ (which he drank, instead of applying it to the wound).⁸² Then, confident that all would be well, he removed the ligature and returned to the garden.⁸³

Sometime later he began to realize that the poison was affecting him, so he told his companions what had happened. Mitieli immediately wanted to take Peni to the Port Moresby hospital, but Peni said he would rather spend his last hours with them than die on the way.⁸⁴ However, he wrote a farewell note to Arthur Lawson, and two of the mission boys sped toward Port Moresby with it. Ever mindful of the reason he was in New Guinea, he called the workers to him and made his last appeal, pleading with them to accept Christ and pledge to meet him in the resurrection.⁸⁵ Two of them responded, Baigani⁸⁶ and Orira.⁸⁷ Both were eventually baptized, although Orira had turned away for some years.⁸⁸

The messengers reached Arthur Lawson about 7:00 a.m. the next morning, and he immediately hired a motor vehicle and headed toward Bisiatabu. He was met at the Laloki River by a further messenger bearing a brief note from Mitieli informing him that Peni had died at 11:00 p.m.⁸⁹ When he reached the mission station, he found the little group leaving the freshly closed grave at the site Peni had chosen. Arthur held a memorial service on Sabbath morning.⁹⁰

As the news of Peni's death spread, it was met with shock and regret, and many tributes were paid to his faithful life of service.⁹¹ Even British officials⁹² and avowed atheists lamented his death.⁹³ Septimus Carr called him "a true missionary, a faithful worker, and a humble, consistent Christian" whose "place will be hard to fill."⁹⁴

Aliti

Aliti, who by now had three little children, Loloma and two sons,⁹⁵ showed real dedication by electing to stay and continue her husband's work in New Guinea.⁹⁶ Early in 1920 they returned to Fiji,⁹⁷ in 1924 Aliti married⁹⁸ Semiti (Shem) Gade,⁹⁹ a teacher¹⁰⁰ who was also an early student at Buresala.¹⁰¹ They ministered in various parts of Fiji,¹⁰² then returned to New Guinea in August 1930.¹⁰³ Here they ran the Efogi¹⁰⁴ mission station, then worked on the south coast.¹⁰⁵ A photo of the family published in May 1932 depicts the couple with their three small children, two boys and a girl, who all appear to be under ten years of age.¹⁰⁶ The eldest boy, born in 1918, is Peni's son, but the other two are children of Semiti and Aliti. Loloma would have been 19 at this time, and Malaki 16, but they do not appear in the photo. Loloma is known to have been attending Miss E. Edwards' school in Navuso, Fiji, in 1927.¹⁰⁷

Upon returning to Fiji on furlough in October 1933,¹⁰⁸ Semiti's health denied a second term in New Guinea (then called Papua);¹⁰⁹ however, he worked diligently in various places in Fiji, being ordained to the gospel ministry in 1934.¹¹⁰ Semiti retired in 1950, and he and Aliti went to live in Tamavua, near Suva, where Aliti was widowed for the second time on January 5, 1965.¹¹¹ Aliti died July 22, 1978,¹¹² aged 83.

Sequel and Peni's Legacy

Building on the foundation laid by the Adventist pioneers, including Peni and Aliti, the SDA Church gained adherents in every province of Papua New Guinea and Pacific Adventist College¹¹³ (later University) was established in 1984 halfway between Port Moresby and Bisiatabu, and a number of Bisiatabu people found employment there.¹¹⁴

As time passed, the Koiari people around Bisiatabu, most of whom were now Adventists, felt a collective guilt over Peni's death and the desire to apologize (a deep cultural response) grew among them. The plan to hold a celebration to mark the centenary of the arrival of Seventh-day Adventist missionaries in the country provided the opportunity,¹¹⁵ and on June 13, 2008, as part of the centenary celebrations held at Bisiatabu, a traditional confession and apology ceremony was held.¹¹⁶

A member of the Taburi clan, Karl Jack, expressed the clan's remorse and sought reconciliation with Mitieli Nakasamai, Jr., who was chosen to represent Peni Tavodi's family. Karl was a great-grandson of Ureki Kosiwa, brother of sorcerer Nadina Kosiwa, who claimed to have initiated Peni's death, using sorcery on Peni while he was praying on a Sabbath morning.¹¹⁷ A traditional peace offering was presented by tribal chief Gideon Jack, and Nakasamai responded with the presentation of a traditional Fijian ornament, signifying acceptance of the apology and to seal the reconciliation.¹¹⁸ Mr. Jack stated that Peni Tavodi's lasting legacy was the transformation of their society from heathenism to Christianity, enabling them to safely "move around freely beyond the horizons,"¹¹⁹ and he expressed the clan's love for Peni, "who brought the light to this place."¹²⁰

On July 25, 2017—a few weeks shy of 110 years since Peni had said goodbye to his home village, Navolau, before sailing for mission service—the Peni Tavodi Memorial Seventh-day Adventist Church was opened in his village in

Ra, Fiji. This lively memorial keeps before the people of Navolau the memory of one of their sons and honors the life of service of one who has provided more than three generations with inspiration.¹²¹

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