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This undated photo provided by Fr. Tomas Ravaioli shows local villagers posing for a photo with him in Goroka, Papua New Guinea. (Fr. Tomas Ravaioli via AP)

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Pope Francis' visit to Papua New Guinea will take him to a remote part of the South Pacific island nation where Christianity is a recent addition to traditional spiritual beliefs developed over millennia.

Francis will visit the diocese of Vanimo on the main island of New Guinea, one of the most remote and disadvantaged in a poor and diverse nation, according to local Bishop Francis Meli.

Trappings of modernity are scarce. There is no running water for the more than 120,000 people who live in the diocese, according to a church website. Electricity is a luxury for the few who can afford solar panels or portable generators.

The visit is an extraordinary religious highlight in an area where Christian missionaries did not arrive until 1961, and where the religion coexists with traditional ancestor worship, animism and sorcery.

The pope will meet around a dozen missionary nuns and priests from his native Argentina during his visit scheduled for Sept. 8. He will also inspect a church-built high school and crisis center for abused women and girls.

Argentinian missionary Tomas Ravaioli, a priest of the Institute of the Incarnate Word, said he came to the Vanimo Diocese 14 years ago after his superiors told him there was "a big need for priests."

While Christian churches are full, Indigenous "customs and traditions are very much rooted," Ravaioli said.

"Sometimes for people, it's not easy to live Christianity 100% because they have traditions that are pagan," Ravaioli said.

"But honestly, I think Christianity here in Papua New Guinea is very, very strong," he added.

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Papua New Guinea is an overwhelmingly Christian country — a 2000 census showed 96% of the population identified with the religion — but the spiritual beliefs that

developed during 50,000 years of human habitation remain part of the fabric of the nation's culture.

Michael Mel is a 65-year-old academic who was baptized as a baby by one of the first missionaries to reach his village in the remote highlands. An Indigenous man, he said he also "aligns" with traditional spirituality and cautions against abandoning Indigenous culture.

"Western civilization is great. The West has brought us reading and writing and technology and all of the rest of it, but there are some things where I think our sensibilities were much, much better," Mel said, giving Indigenous forest care as an example.

Mining has widened the country's economic divide and pitted the haves against the have-nots.

"We need to balance ourselves. We cannot just gung ho throw our knowledge away and accept Western civilization completely," Mel said.

But traditional beliefs can also contribute to the deadly tribal violence that is creating an unprecedented internal security threat across the country, especially allegations of witchcraft, known in local languages as sanguma.

Sorcery allegations typically arise in reaction to unexpected deaths or illness. But some suspect they also reflect jealousies and rivalries arising from major societal changes in recent decades that have more to do with rapid modernization and uneven development than religion.

As traditional bows and arrows are being replaced by more lethal assault rifles, the toll of fighting is getting deadlier, and police fear that they are outgunned. Mercenaries are also now a feature of what were once conflicts limited to tribal rivals.

"Even though they believe in God and they believe in Jesus Christ, ... they fear witchcraft," said Meli, who was born east of Vanimo on an island off New Britain.

Authorities don't condone the persecution of supposed witches. Parliament in 2013 repealed the Sorcery Act which had made an accusation of sorcery a partial defense against a murder charge. But a study has found that prosecutions for violence against accused sorcerers remain rare compared to how commonplace witch hunts

are.

Another enduring source of conflict is land ownership. Almost all the land in Papua New Guinea is customarily owned, which means it belongs to a distinct tribe or group instead of individuals. With no clear borders between customary lands, territorial disputes regularly lead to violence.

Both were among the complex combination of causes blamed for a massacre in East Sepik province, east of Vanimo, on July 17 when 30 men armed with guns, axes, spears, knives and sling shots launching sharpened steel rods killed at least 26 villagers.

Four weeks later, police reported a single suspect had been arrested. They remained hopeful that the rest of the culprits would be found. The U.N. children agency UNICEF said 395 survivors of the attack, including 220 children, remained homeless more than a month later because their houses were torched.

Meli said tribal violence was not a problem in his diocese, where he described the population as "friendly and peaceful."



Pope John Paul II is greeted by Papua New Guinea Highland natives on his visit to Mt. Hagen, Papua New Guinea, on May 8, 1984. (AP file)

Papua New Guinea Prime Minister James Marape relished the attention the papal visit would bring his country, noting that 80 members of the international media had registered to travel there for the event.

Marape said South Pacific leaders he met at the Pacific Islands Forum on Tonga in late August had proposed sending delegations to meet the pontiff.

He also noted that Catholics were the largest Christian denomination in Papua New Guinea. Catholics accounted for 26% of the population, according to a 2011 census.

"We look forward to the visit," Marape told The Associated Press at the Tongan capital, Nuku'alofa.

The Vatican is highlighting Papua New Guinea on the international stage at a time the United States and China struggle over the former World War II battleground for strategic influence.

The United States and close ally Australia, concerned by China's growing influence in the South Pacific, have struck new security agreements with Papua New Guinea. Australia's latest pact addresses Port Moresby's concerns about deteriorating internal security problems. China is also reportedly pursuing a bilateral policing pact with Papua New Guinea.

The Vatican, meanwhile, has been working for years to try to improve relations with China that were officially severed over seven decades ago when the Communists came to power. A renewed agreement between China and the Vatican on the appointment of Chinese bishops is expected to be signed in October.

Meli said the faithful in his diocese were amazed that they would be included in the itinerary of the first visit by a pontiff to Papua New Guinea since Pope John Paul II in 1995.

"They are so excited and people are full of jubilation and joy because this is historic," Meli said.

"They don't think any pope in history will be able to come again to Vanimu," he said.

This story appears in the **Francis in Asia and Oceania** feature series. [View the full series.](#)