

SYNCRETISM I PRAYER FOR HEALING AMONG THE KANKANA-EY - PART 2

By Robin Steen

Introduction

God anointed the early missionaries to the Kankana-ey to establish the Assemblies of God Churches in the Cordillera region. He confirmed their preaching with signs and wonders. Many were healed through prayers of faith. The church grew rapidly because of these demonstrations of God's power. With time, the denomination was able to train more of their pastors to provide sound Bible teaching to the congregations. This confirmed the churches, giving them greater stability through an understanding of God's will. Today the church is maturing under the leadership of its own Kankana-ey ministers. The Kankana-ey Assemblies of God has done a good job of excluding the traditional beliefs and practices of their animistic past in their prayers for the sick.

Early Missionary Work

The early missionary work of Elva Vanderbout laid a strong foundation for the development of the Assemblies of God Pentecostal churches in the Cordillera.¹ She had two factors working against her according to traditional values of mission work among indigenous people, but she was able to lay the groundwork for a strong church regardless. The first factor was that she was a single woman. The work that single missionary ladies in the Pentecostal movement have been able to do since its inception is truly remarkable; their success defies the norms and expectations of the time in which they lived. Sociologically, a foreign woman, especially a Caucasian, wrote her

¹Ma, "A Comparison of Two Worldviews," 278.

own rules by her conduct and presence. For the indigenous woman there was often a bleak script, but was not true of foreign women. The second factor was that Vanderbout never learned the language. Why she did not do so is not clear. It may have had much to do with the nature of the Kankana-ey people. Not all cultures would have embraced someone so completely that could never communicate with them in their own dialect. However, the Kankana-ey are more open than are other indigenous groups of Northern Luzon.²

Elva Vanderbout's two strengths were great faith and great love. Ely Sebian mentioned that the people were able to understand Vanderbout's genuine love for them, which she showed by practicing holistic ministry.³ One of the things that the people appreciated was that she took in the orphans. Great miracles of healing were also accomplished through her prayers and those of the ministers that she raised up.

Power Encounter

Power encounters are important for first stage outreach in a new area where the people are culturally animistic.⁴ The people's lives are hard and they have few natural explanations for many of the difficult issues they experience. As is typical under these circumstances, the Kankana-ey had developed an extensive pantheon of gods and goddesses to which they attributed certain powers and areas of authority to explain the otherwise unexplainable. Some of these gods were benevolent and some were malevolent. The main players in the spirit world, however, were the spirits of the ancestors. While the pagan priest would call upon all of the appropriate gods and goddesses as a part of their traditional rituals, the spirits that were closest to the people were those of their ancestors.⁵

These ritual observances are variously called *cañao*, *sida*, or *man-sida*—these terms all refer to the same thing.⁶ The central feature of a *cañao* was the sacrifice of animals. The preferred sacrificial animal, if the person could afford it, was a pig. These traditional rituals could be held for any reason, but for the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the *cañao* for healing. The poor, which included most of the Kankana-ey, could scarcely afford to have a *cañao* for healing because

²Manolo Taipoc, interview with the author, February 28, 2012.

³Eleanor (Ely) Sebian, interview with the author, March 8, 2012.

⁴Ma, *When the Spirit Meets the Spirits*, 118:237.

⁵*Ibid.*, 118:105.

⁶Balthazar Tictica, interview with the author, March 5, 2012.

it was so expensive. The ritual would require a pig, *tapey*, which is a traditional wine, and other things. For this reason, a healing *cañao* was normally the last resort.

The practice of calling on the spirits during the traditional healing ritual is the aspect of greatest concern for syncretism in the practice of praying for the sick in the Christian church. Concrete thinkers who are enculturated as children with a spirit-dominated cosmology in which the spirit world is sometimes even more real to them than the physical world struggle to turn their allegiance from their ancestors—to whom they feel close, as apposed to God—who may seem far off.

Adika-ila is the greatest of the spirits in the Kankana-ey pantheon; he is the creator god. He is also unknowable.⁷ This is very common in the spiritual hierarchies of animistic peoples. This combination of the spirits of the ancestors that the people feel close to and the great god that the people feel alienated from is a mixture that can easily be brought into Christianity. This can lead to a Catholic-like idolatry or folk-Christianity that turns the hearts of the people from Jesus to the saints (the ancestors).

Vanderbout did not provide much Biblical training for these early ministers. Yet God responded to their faith. The early meetings and crusades were known for the miraculous healings that took place.⁸ There was frequently no ordination process for the new pastors. If an individual felt the call, he would step in where there was a need. A Bible teacher blanches when he considers these circumstances. Where is the control? What sort of heresies might be hatched in this hothouse?

The Assemblies of God did provide some Bible training during these days and oversight for the pastors as they were able, but the growth was great and not always containable. This first stage is a time of power encounter between the Spirit of God and the reigning spirits in the region. The doctrinal point that the people first learn is that God is greater than the gods they had previously worshiped. They learn experientially that there is great power in the name of Jesus. This is not to say that there was no syncretism, because there was. Balthazar Tictica, another interviewee, reported that until recently, there have been some of the old guard—he mentioned an elder in a church in Balcone, and a pastor in Abra that would still do *cañaos* or go to *an*

⁷Balisong, "The Gods of the Igorots."

⁸Julie C. Ma, "Ministry of the Assemblies of God Among the Kankana-ey Tribe in the Northern Philippines: A History of a Theological Encounter" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1996), 274.

albularyo (faith healer) for healing.⁹ In this context of barely controlled chaos from 1945 to 1970, the power encounter paved the way for what was to come next: the truth encounter.¹⁰

Truth Encounter

The following stage in development of the Assemblies of God was from 1970 to 1990.¹¹ During this era, the youth that came to the Lord during the first stage or the children of the families that came to the Lord because of miraculous healings during those days, went to Bible school to prepare themselves for ministry. Those who experienced the great miracles of God during the first phase bemoan that there were markedly fewer in the second phase. The characteristic that is central to this second phase is immersion in the Word.

I have a personal opinion (to be confirmed through further research) to describe this process. This opinion comes from having lived long enough to experience personally two remarkable times of renewal, the Charismatic renewal of the early seventies and the “Toronto Blessing” of the early nineties. Each of these times of refreshing was followed by a time of consolidation in the Word. The Bible schools fill up during the years following a time of renewal. I know, because I was one of those that went to Bible school after the Charismatic renewal. Our class was the largest class that little Pentecostal Bible School has ever had. Why does this process occur? Why does there seem to be a lull in signs and wonders during the second stage of a revival? It seems that the first stage is thrilling, while the second is fulfilling in the mundane sense. The initial power encounter stage of outreach into the Kankana-ey lasted around twenty-five years. This is a more substantial amount of time than the two or three years taken by the Charismatic renewal of the early seventies or the “Toronto Blessing” of the early nineties; yet, the principle carries over. After a certain amount of time, the responsible thing is for the Holy Spirit to refrain from doing the miraculous in order to confirm and establish what was accomplished during the exciting first stage. Confirmation and establishment comes through the Word of God. One must immediately balance this opinion of what God does by emphasizing the practical theology of what the

⁹Tictica.

¹⁰Ma, *When the Spirit Meets the Spirits*, 118:237.

¹¹*Ibid.*

Church should do. The Church should always believe God for miracles, pray for the sick, and study the Word of God.

The Principal Foci of the Assemblies of God Churches Today

The second stage of consolidation continues until today. The number of Bible school trained pastors is increasing. A few have earned their Master of Divinity degree and now staff the Bible school. There are Spirit-anointed evangelists doing the work of spreading the gospel not only among their own people, but also among other tribal groups in the Cordillera. Pastor Manny Taipoc, one of my sources, is pastoring a Karao (tribe) Assemblies of God Church.¹² Evangelist Balthazar Tictica ministered in over thirty different denominations in three hundred churches throughout the northern Luzon region in the years before coming to APTS to study.¹³ Therefore, the answer to the question, “What is the principal foci of the Assemblies of God today?” will be as varied as the calling of the person to whom the question is asked. There is a balance of ministries among the Kankana-ey Assembly of God Ministers. (Ephesians 4: 11-13) This is a sign of maturity of the movement. God has been faithful to the Kankana-ey people to bring many out of darkness and into his light. Those he has called, he has also equipped to do the work that remains to be done.

The Modern Kankana-ey Assemblies of God Practice of Praying for The Sick

Tapioc commented that Assemblies of God pastors do not pray for the sick as often as they did in the past.¹⁴ When I asked him why he thought this was so, he gave me two reasons. The first reason is that there are modern medicines available to the people that make it less necessary to pray for the sick. The second reason is that the youth are being increasingly exposed to secular ideas through their education.

Tictica, however, had a different perspective. God has anointed with faith for healing, so the center of his ministry is praying for the sick and, to a lesser degree, deliverance from demons. He has also observed that in many churches the pastors give altar calls less frequently than they once did. When he has talked to pastors about this, they have responded that each servant should minister according to his

¹²Taipoc.

¹³Tictica.

¹⁴Taipoc.

or her own spiritual gifts. In his opinion, the pastor ought to “want them to walk with God through the altar call.”¹⁵

My counsel to these men comes directly from the history of the church in the West. During the heady days of the Enlightenment in the late eighteenth hundreds, the Westerners believed that they could find the answer to all things through scientific discovery; they put their faith in man. Biblical theology was adversely affected during those days because of the resulting secularization. It was discovered the hard way through two world wars and ever increasing social problems and unrest that science, at least when it is godless, tends to produce more problems than it resolves. Right now, the Kankana-ey youth are enthralled by what they are discovering in their university educations, but the secular answers they are learning are no more correct than the animistic answers of their grandparents. The Biblical way still leads to stability and security more surely than either of these other two worldviews. Pastors ought to be encouraged to be steadfast in praying for the sick. Doctors and medicines can be incredibly helpful, but the sick person’s faith must be in God above all.

In What Ways Do Tribal Beliefs and Practices Influence the Practice of Praying for the Sick in the Kankana-ey Assemblies of God Churches?

In the positive sense of the word, there is “syncretism” in the practice of praying for the sick. From a religious studies perspective, the word “syncretism” describes any process by which two or more cultures mix and share ideas to produce a third entity that is not completely like either of the first two.¹⁶ By this definition, the Kankana-ey bring their awareness of the spirit world, their hatred of evil, and their desire to see the sick healed with them when they pray for the sick.¹⁷

In the negative sense, syncretism could mean incorporating traditional pagan rituals in the practice of praying for the sick. The Kankana-ey have been careful to avoid this. Taipoc described in detail a stand that the elders made in the Lamut Assemblies of God church in the prior generation. In his parents’ generation, there was the first significant influx of people into the church. This produced a serious strain in relationships with the pagans in the same community because the Christians no longer participated in the community *cañaos*. This

¹⁵Tictica.

¹⁶Yong, “Going Where The Spirit Goes,” 118.

¹⁷Ma, “A Comparison of Two Worldviews,” 289.

community discord continued for more than ten years as the elders stood firm in their resolve before the community finally brokered a lasting peace. The result was that this church successfully made a break from traditional practices, including prayer for the sick.¹⁸

That has not always been the case. In the earlier section on power encounters, two cases were discussed in which an elder in one church and a pastor in a second church intentionally participated in traditional rituals for healing. Ely Sebiano provided examples she had personally observed where members of some of mission churches still participate in *cañaos*. In another case, she overheard the prayers of a lady who had been a church member for years. Ely described the prayers in this way: “She is talking as one does in the pagan style. . . . It is coupled with fear. . . . How would I describe it? It is like calling on the spirits. This happened within the church.”¹⁹ All of my sources said that this is not that common, however. Yes, there are sporadic examples of syncretism with traditional beliefs and practices, but they are not that numerous.

The Remaining Task

The task of discipleship never ends, yet it is the task for the Kankana-ey Assemblies of God churches to pursue with unflinching resolve. Sebiano signaled three tasks within the area of discipleship that are worth repeating. The first is growth in knowledge. Not all of the local churches have sound Biblical teaching. In Sebiano’s opinion, this is “because not everyone is being taught properly.”²⁰ As a denomination, the number of trained teaching pastors has risen dramatically, but the task is not finished. The second is divine encounter. God has no grandchildren. The third of Kraft’s encounters is the Allegiance Encounter.²¹ It is not enough to know about God; it is necessary to decide to follow him as an obedient servant. There is also a Pentecostal slant to having a divine encounter. It is good for all Pentecostals to refresh their “Pentecost” every so often. This is especially true of the pastors. If the pastors’ spiritual tank is dry, they are going to have little incentive or power to pray with faith for healing or for any spiritual blessing for the people. The third remaining task is pastoral encouragement to stand strong in the temptations of everyday

¹⁸Taipoc.

¹⁹Sebiano.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ma, “A Comparison of Two Worldviews,” 289–90.

life. As Sebiano described it, “When you are in a place of worship it is easy, but the test of faith is when you are out there in the community. That is where you can see if you are really standing up for the Lord and what you believe.”

Conclusion

With a culture so rich in ritual spiritual traditions, the chances of veering into syncretism are high. It would be simple and tempting to incorporate ancestral religious heritage into the Kankana-ey’s Pentecostal churches. However, this research has demonstrated that the Kankana-ey Assemblies of God has successfully excluded the traditional beliefs and practices of their animistic forefathers in prayer for the sick. While there have been a few examples where ministers and the lay members of the church made a syncretistic mix of Christian with pagan beliefs and practices in the area of healing, the number of these cases is comparatively small. The work of the Assemblies of God among the Kankana-ey was founded in the power of the Holy Spirit and with notable signs, wonders, and miraculous healings. There are still anointed evangelists that minister in the power of the Holy Spirit but their number is balanced with other Kankana-ey ministers who are working to establish the church in sound Biblical teaching. Syncretism may continue to be a concern for this people group, but with the leading of the Holy Spirit and the direction of the Word of God as guideposts and barriers, it is certain that the Kankana-ey will continue to minister in Spirit and in truth with great power.

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About the Author

Dave Johnson, D-Miss, has been an Assemblies of God (USA) missionary to the Philippines since 1994 and has conducted extensive research on lowland Filipino culture. He is also the author of *Led by the Spirit: The History of the American Assemblies of God Missionaries in the Philippines* and is the managing editor of the *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, the theological journal of the Asia Pacific Theological Seminary in Baguio City, Philippines. He can be contacted at www.aps.edu or through his own website, www.daveanddebbiejohnson.com.

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