

# The Use of Traditional Healing Practices in Christian Pastoral Care

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## **Introduction**

The subject of this article is a challenge to ministers and pastors, in the development and growth of the church today. Although we are in the scientific age, traditional healing practices are still holding to their roots, in most Melanesian societies.

In this paper, I shall discuss the general topic, by considering the subjects of spirits, the causes of sickness, and of healing, gifts of healing, lives of sacredness, healing in the Old and New Testaments, contrasts between traditional healing practice and Christian ministry, and, finally, the transformation of traditional healing into Christian ministry. Alternatives, suggestions, and recommendations are also mentioned in concluding the discussion.

Healing is the restoration of the body to health from sickness. It refers to the “wholeness” of humanity, in both the physical and spiritual aspects of life. To be whole, means to be complete, or in good condition; to be free from defect or disease; to be well in body, and to have a sane mind.

Melanesians have experienced healing in their localities, ever since time unknown, mostly through herbalists, believed to be using power from the spirits. They used two kinds of traditional healing beliefs and practices, which were very much at the centre of the lives of these people. The early missionaries, however, gave very strong teaching to abandon this traditional

healing, but the people did not listen to them, because it was part of their lives, and power was seen in it.

In my society, there are two categories of spirits: firstly, there are the spirits of human beings, and, secondly, the wild, or bush, spirits. Ghosts of human beings retained the physical and social characteristics of the former living self. My people do not know how a man becomes a ghost, but they know simply that, when a man dies, he becomes a ghost. The wild spirits are divided into two types, namely, good spirits and evil ones.

Good spirits are believed to be the motivating force in various medicinal plants that are looked after in small quantities around the houses. The good spirits give power and healing to these natural means, so that, when they are consumed, or used externally (washing with, or rubbed on, the skin), they are effective in making the person recover from sickness.

The most important high spirit to our people is known as *Tilik*. This spirit lives everywhere: in the air, the sea, the mountains, and even in the place of the dead. He is powerful, and benevolent, a loving protector, the spirit of the dance, of feasting, and also of the *Tubuan* and *Dukduk* societies. A legend, in the Duke of York Islands, says that *Tilik* took part in the creation of the world, and is feared by other spirits, all incantations for good purposes are carried out with the use of his name.

It is clear, therefore, and important for us to note, that definite similarities can be seen between *Tilik* and the Christian God, for they each are known to be powerful, good, loving, and saving. We shall refer to this again, when we discuss the relation between traditional and Christian healing practices.

Evil spirits, on the other hand, empower the plants kept by sorcerers in secret places. Other evil spirits are also believed to appear to people in the bush, frightening them, and are able to hurt, or to make them sick, in some ways. We generally believe that the good spirits are more powerful, and can overcome the power of the evil-spirited plants.

## **Traditional Causes of Sickness and Healing**

In my society, people believe that there are a number of causes of sicknesses and diseases. Here, I will give examples of two causes, on the spiritual side, and of two others, on the natural side.

- (a) Ghosts and spirits that are mistreated can make people sick. A ghost or spirit may get angry, and cause discomfort or sickness, if he is sworn at, scolded, or if his habitat has been violated by being burnt, or damaged, in some way. Generally speaking, Melanesians believe that ghosts or spirits bring about any serious sickness.
- (b) Evil spirits may fight, or curse, human beings, without any good reason at all. These spirits live in the bush, forest, valleys, mountain-sides, or in swampy areas. They do a lot of harm to people, by frightening them, or causing sickness, by entering their bodies, and taking control of them (being possessed). These spirits do not care at all for human beings, but may cause madness, paralysis, miscarriage, and the like.
- (c) My people also believe that sicknesses are derived from natural elements, such as, air, water, soil, leaves, fruits, and other environmental sources. Sickneses, like coughs, colds, and influenza are thought to affect a person if he/she spends too much time in cold weather. These sicknesses have been with the people since time immemorial, and were recognised as “natural” complaints.
- (d) It is a popular belief today that our ancestors, who lived during the pre-European period, were stronger than the present generation, and lived longer. They were well nourished, hardworking, and looked very fit. They ate taro, yam, nuts, pig meat, possum, fish, shellfish, fruits, and greens. As new goods, such as, rice, tinned fish, and meat, sugar, and other imported foods were introduced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries,

people began to leave their local foods, and showed interest in the foreign ones. They were not aware that the new foods brought in new sicknesses also. As time passed, they realised that the new sicknesses in their society (such as high blood pressure, heart attacks, and diabetes) were caused by the foreign foods.

I will now refer to the same four examples, above, and describe the traditional remedies for these sicknesses.

- (a) If the sickness is deemed to be caused by the anger of a ghost, or spirit, the family of the victim will have to perform a recovery ritual. A member of the family may go to the graveyard, consult the ghosts in confession, and ask for forgiveness. Later on, the healer will come to the patient, and wash him with herbs, or rub them on his body, and, at the same time, put on spells for protection and recovery. The same recovery ritual is performed for either a good or a bad spirit.
- (b) Sickneses caused by evil spirits are regarded as very dangerous, often deadly. People, who are attacked, can either be killed on the spot, or become permanently sick or paralysed. The victim's relatives have to give an appropriate amount of money (shell money) to the healer, who will then go to the spot, where the incident happened, and use spells to call back the spirit of the victim. The sick person will be taken to the sea to be washed, and later, at the house, his body would be protected by spells. The victim will be in the care of both the healer, and the relatives, until he recovers.
- (c) People, who are believed to be sick, by common "natural" complaints, such as, fever, colds, and coughs, are normally given liquid medicines. In giving these, the healer may pronounce spells, and wash the body with herbs. Normally, the

patient is encouraged to eat more food, in particular, the ones selected to give strength, and quick recovery.

- (d) It is surprising to see that our traditional healers, today, are quickly adapting themselves, to cater for the needs of victims of modern diseases. I have personally witnessed the work of a traditional healer in my village, who worked on cancer, venereal diseases of different kinds, tuberculosis, asthma, diabetes, paralysed body, pains, poisoning (understood as being internally demon-possessed), and many other sicknesses. He has been so successful that he is being asked, by people of different races, to help sick people, not only in New Britain, but also in other provinces.

According to some people, who have lived longer, and have experience of life, in different situations, the younger generation should be advised to eat local foods, rather than taking Western food. The best way of healing, and keeping fit, is to eat local foods, because they are fresh, healthy, and of the best quality.

### **Gifts of Traditional Healing**

Melanésians are gifted people. Some are gifted in leadership, some in service, some in speech, and others, in healing ministry. We believe that healing comes from the spirits, but has originated from God alone, and is, therefore, a gift from Him. Through a number of interviews, in my recent visit to the village, I found that there are four main ways, in which these gifts of traditional healing are achieved.

Most of the healing practices come through dreams and visions, before they are handed down from generation to generation. Even today, there are still many Melanesians, who get their gifts of healing in this way. In many communities, there are expert “Wisdom guides” (*Tena Buai* in the Kuanua language), who initiate others into dreaming and visions. People, who are being initiated into this special area, have to be taken away from society, and kept in a secret place, called “*Marovot*”, where they are given special betel

nuts, with certain leaves, herbs, ginger, lime, and tree-roots. They are also taught how to pronounce the correct incantations,<sup>1</sup> and to abstain from particular foods, such as, fish with smooth skin, pig, chicken, and certain vegetables. When the initiated person has been absent from society for several weeks, he comes out to the community, and is recognised as “*Tena Buai*”, and is able to dream, and see visions.

Dreams and visions are often connected to healing. What actually happens is that a man/woman may appear in the dream, and show healing herbs, plants, roots, and other natural substances, and also pronounce the necessary spells. This type of passing on of secrets of healing to others is said to be open to anyone, who wants to be a dreamer, although, of course, a person has to pay (shell money) for the secrets. Most of the powerful healers and herbalists obtain their abilities from dreams and visions.

Secondly, healing gifts are often received from a person's own relatives. When people are close to dying, even today, they pass on the secrets of healing to their children, or to some other person. The recipients of these secrets are also blessed, so that they are empowered by the spirits to be healers. Because the secrets of healing belong to the individual family or clan, they must be guarded well from other clans or persons. The father, wishing to pass on the secrets, would take his son (a female healer would take her daughter, or other female relative) to a special part of the bush, where he is shown the appropriate leaves, herbs, roots, etc., and how to prepare them for use. Incantation, or calling of the spirits, is also learnt, along with the necessary laws, rules, and sacredness.

A third source of healing powers is by receiving them through friends, in a manner similar to receiving them from relatives. Fourthly, some people

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<sup>1</sup> Incantations are normally said in short sentences, or phrases, in a repetitive way, for example: “Get this man well. Get this man well. Work in his body. Work in his body.” After repeating the words several times, the healer ends the incantation with the words, “*Tilik*, you hear me you say ‘yes’, you make this man well!” (*Tilik* is the name of the most powerful spirit, as mentioned above.)

study nature, in relation to sicknesses, and, by using natural means, are able to heal sicknesses and disease.

The use of healing gifts, and the whole process of healing, requires the observance of various taboos, in order to maintain sacredness. If the healer fails to observe these restrictions, *Tilik* may absent himself, and the healer loses his power and wisdom, even becoming sick himself. The person, who wishes to be healed, also has certain rules to follow. He may be stopped from eating particular foods, told not to enter graveyards, or sacred places, nor to sleep with his wife. To become healed quickly, one must follow the laws that govern the healing exercise, and observe sacredness. By doing this, the people involved will be pure, receive power from the supernatural beings, and so be healed.

In summary, traditional beliefs about becoming healthy combine supernatural beings, man and nature together, with respect for the laws and sacredness, set down by the gods, ghosts, or spirits. These beliefs were handed down from the ancestors, or are received directly from them, through dreams and visions.

### **Healing in the Bible**

We will discuss this heading only briefly, giving some examples from both the Old and New Testaments. Healing by faith, and also with the use of medicine, will be considered, so as to bring out the similarities that exist between traditional healing practices in our societies, and the healing practices of the Bible.

In the Old Testament, we cannot establish the existence of a proper order of medical practitioners, in the early stage of Hebrew history. This seems remarkable, considering the long residence of Israel in Egypt, where medicine was well established. But, this is not to say that they never attended to their sicknesses: sores, boils, fevers, dysentery, leprosy, paralysis, and so forth.

There are some indications that the people of Israel used traditional medicines, together with faith healing, by applying leaves, herbs, fruits, resins, and other natural substances. “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?”, asked Jeremiah (Jer 8:22), evidently referring to a healing ointment that had been known from patriarchal days (Gen 37:25). Dill (Lev 27:30) was widely cultivated, not only for use in cooking, but also as a domestic medicine, while galbanum (Ex 30:34) was applied as an antiseptic ointment.<sup>2</sup> Isaiah used a preparation of figs in successfully treating a boil (2 Kings 20:7), and in the healing of Naaman, cleansing water was used (2 Kings 5:1-14). Elijah used symbolic action in reviving the widow’s son, thereby indicating that his own health and vitality were transferred to the boy, for whom he prayed.

In Ex 15:26, the Lord said that, if the Israelites did not follow the laws and commandments, He would bring upon them diseases, “for I am the LORD who healed you”. This shows that sickness was regarded as a spiritual matter between God and His people.

Turning to the New Testament, the purpose of Christ’s incarnation was not to condemn the world, but to save it; to save the whole creation. He had compassion and concern for the peoples’ health, healing, and wholeness, and was able to treat them, both physically and spiritually.

During His ministry, Jesus healed many people from a variety of sicknesses, including paralysis, and demon-possession. He even raised the dead. He healed by touch and word, often explicitly accompanied by faith (Luke 18:42). In these cases, healing took place, either through the faith of the healer himself, or through the faith of the sick person, or that of his friends. Jesus healed all age groups: children, the middle aged, and the elderly, alike.

Although Jesus emphasised faith for healing, He also used medicine, derived from nature, to heal people. He was both a faith healer, and also a

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<sup>2</sup> So, Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1988, pp. 1331-1332.

physician. Two such examples, are the man born blind (John 9:1-12), and the use of oil and wine (Mark 6: 13 and Luke 10:34). We are also reminded, in 1 Tim 5:23, that wine was effective in healing digestive problems. The New Testament visibly shows that faith and medicine both played an important role in healing people.

### **Traditional Healing and Christian Ministry**

The main contrast between traditional healing practices and Christian ministry is that the latter sees Jesus as the leading person. At His ordination by the Holy Spirit, Jesus was commissioned to put into operation God's plan for bringing total healing to the people living in a sin-sick world (Luke 4:18-19). The power of God was upon Jesus (John 1:33), enabling Him to heal every kind of disease, and He summarised His ministry as coming into the world to preach, to teach, and to heal (Matt 10:1, Luke 9:1, 26). Through His ministry, He taught His disciples that the kingdom of God had already come into this world, healing being one of the signs of its presence (Mark 1:15, Luke 9:2).

After Christ's resurrection and ascension, the leading agent became the Holy Spirit, who actively continued to participate in Christ's work, so that many people were healed by the apostles, in the name of Christ. The Holy Spirit was the main force, empowering and directing the believers in the apostolic age, and is, similarly, seen at work in the life of believers today.

The spells, divinations, and rituals of our traditional healing practices were not wrong. These practices were used by my society to heal people, and were right, during that time. Traditional healing was carried out, in the name of *Tilik*, and we have already noted the many similarities between this spirit and the Christian God. We may say, therefore, that God's saving exercise, through the ages, is seen in the activities and practices of the people, in saving themselves from sicknesses and demonic captivities.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In recent interviews on the Duke of York Islands, many people testified that such practices were powerful, and of divine origin.

Yet, in the Christian context, the scriptures condemned such practices, because they were from other spirit beings (Deut 13:1-3, Matt 7:12-23). Such practices could heal through spells, divinations, and rituals, although some of these gave only temporary relief. Permanent healing by the Spirit of God can only be seen through the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt 11:28-30). In Christian ministry, spells, divination, and rituals are exercised by being directed to Jesus Christ, who is the mediator between God and His people in this age.

Culture is not static, but changes continually. I would like to clarify, here, that, whatever the ancient ancestors had believed and practised, should not be regarded as evil. In fact, they experienced healing of the spirit, healing of the body, healing of the mind, and, at the same time, peace within their tribal groups. As Christianity came into our societies, healing was not restricted or confined to certain individuals, or areas, but became universal, for all cultures and nations.

What Christians have to do is to accept traditional healing practices, and let Christian values penetrate into them. The penetration of Christian values would allow traditional healings to be recognised as coming from God, enabling the people to experience and see the Lord Jesus Christ, in their own village and life. By acknowledging this, traditional healing practices that use local elements would bring people closer to God. This will enable the people's Christian faith to be concrete, and firm, as they experience the divine presence in their cultural practices and locality.

From my interviews with a number of people recently, Christians, today, see a great need to accommodate traditional healers in the church. There are many sicknesses in our societies that cannot be healed by medical doctors, or even faith healers. Because such sicknesses are caused, both culturally and socially, only traditional healers are able to relieve them. Since Western medicines cannot heal many Melanesian sicknesses, I see that traditional healers have a very important role to play in the church. I would like to emphasise here that traditional healing is available, and should be transformed into Christian ministry, or pastoral care.

There are two important factors that can help the people to recognise, and accept, traditional healing, as coming from God. Firstly, there is a need to recognise Christ as the centre of all daily life and activities, and, secondly, traditional practices should now be related specifically to belief in the Spirit of God. Both of these factors witness that, only through Christ's transformation of people and their cultures, can there be a better solution for their sicknesses.

The Christianity, brought by missionaries, created within people a negative attitude towards their culture and traditional life, that, whatever is cultural, is considered evil. Missionaries brought the gospel, but, at the same time, destroyed cultural values. Melanesians, therefore, thought of Christ as a foreign God, a God, who is not of their own society, but of Western society.

Jesus does not belong specifically to any culture, but belongs to all cultures, because God gives all cultures to mankind. Rom 3:10 says, "there is no one, who is righteous, not even one". This means that human beings are not perfect, and, therefore, need transformation. However, the transformation of a person is not enough to make him an effective, firm, and faithful Christian. There is a need to transform, together, both the person, and, also, his culture. We must not forget that the bad parts of a culture have to be eliminated to obtain purity in the life of a person.

Jesus came to transform people's lives and cultures, in order for them to enter the kingdom of God. Transformation is not a sudden leap from one state to another. It is a gradual process. It takes time and space before people can accept changes. It starts from the heart and mind, and then influences people's outward lifestyles. We should, therefore, recognise that the good values of traditional healing are to be Christianised, and used, while the negative values should be discarded, and forgotten.

## **Alternatives, Suggestions, and Recommendations**

How then, we must ask, may traditional healing practices be encouraged as a part of Christian pastoral care? The following possibilities may be helpful:

- (i) The consulting of gods, spirits, and ghosts, for healing purposes, should cease, and traditional healers be taught to consult the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the new source of wealth, success, guidance, and protection. People's minds and hearts must be transformed and renewed, so that their thinking, in regard to healing ministry, becomes focused upon Christ. The Lord is the replacement, confirmation, and continuation, in the church today, of Melanesian gods, spirits, and ghosts (Matt 5:17).
- (ii) In His ministry, Jesus showed the world the reality of God, as He showed Himself to be a faith healer, and physician. The church has to transform the old healing beliefs into Christianity, so as to be accepted, in the light of Jesus Christ's teaching. Beliefs and practices must be Christianised. The receiving of Jesus Christ, through the Spirit of God, in traditional healing ministry, will enrich the church, making it healthier, and more fruitful.
- (iii) Divination, spells, rituals, incantations, and charms will not be accepted, unless they can be transformed, and can be linked with the Spirit of God. The church should transform such elements of traditional healing practices, if they are to be accepted in general.
- (iv) The laws, sacredness, and taboos of traditional healing practices should also be transformed, before acceptance in Christian ministry. The bad effects, which deprive and ruin people's lives, should be abolished, while the positive effects are to be accepted, and maintained, throughout the ministry.

- (v) People, gifted in the traditional healing practices, should be guided and encouraged, in order to be used in the church. They should be welcomed, to help the lives of Christians, through counselling, etc. Many people, today, are leaving the church, because they find it ineffective, and not able to satisfy their needs. Culturally-gifted people should be accepted, to participate fully in the ministry of God, in order to make the church more locally oriented and valuable. This would be a new, alternative means to bring many people to Christ.
- (vi) People must be convinced that the powers from traditional healing practices do not come from the healers themselves, nor from the spirits, but directly from God, through His Spirit. Likewise, natural items, such as, herbs, water, lime, ginger, stones, and liquids, which are used in traditional healing, must be understood as properties of nature, given by God since creation. They are derived from God, through His Spirit, and the power in them is from Him, and does not come from the ancestral, or other, spirits. The church must transform the thinking and attitudes of the people, enabling them to understand that all healing practices draw their power from God.
- (vii) The medicinal plants, around people's houses, used for protection and guidance against evil spirits and sorcerers, are not wrong. They are planted for the betterment of the people, and the church should develop the understanding of the people, so as to accept them as being from God. Likewise, the plants that are placed inside the house, and those, which are given orally, or rubbed around the body, as protection and guidance, should all be Christianised, and accepted.
- (viii) Prayers are to be encouraged in traditional healing practices, ending the activities, in the name of Jesus Christ. All traditional healing appliances are to be prayed over before being used. Since all things are created by God, praying for traditional

healing elements would be more appropriate, and be truly accepted by God (1 Tim 4:4-5).

For example, my wife's father (who is 85 years old, once a traditional healer, and now a deacon in the church), was glad to tell me that, for all the healing appliances he uses, he now prays over them, in Jesus' name. He strongly advised me that, for these healing practices to be effective, a healer and the patient both must have a strong faith in Jesus Christ, in order for the plants, or herbs, etc., to be empowered. You cannot use Jesus' name superficially, just for the sake of prayer. There must be a deep feeling for, and commitment from, the healer, if the practice is to be successful.

To conclude, we may say that the transformation of traditional healing practices into Christian ministry would enrich, attract, and localise people's thinking about Jesus Christ. The use of local materials, and the experiencing of His power, through local traditional healers, will give a sign to the church that Jesus Christ is a real Melanesian, as well as being universal. It should be encouraged, and developed, in order to protect and heal the pains, sufferings, and wounds of all Christians.

Discouraging traditional healing practices denies the grace of God, and contributes to the ineffectiveness of the church. Neglecting traditional healing will be a disaster for Melanesians, both physically and spiritually, since it denies the incarnation of Jesus Christ into Melanesian cultures, to transform both our lifestyles, and us. If we forbid traditional healing, Jesus Christ is falsified, as both human and divine. The belonging of Jesus Christ to all cultures shows that Melanesian Christians should accept traditional healing beliefs and practices, provided that they are Christianised. This will enable God, through his Holy Spirit, to be actively alive in the cultural perspectives, and will richly bless the church.

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