

Traditional Sickness Healing Among the Kalam

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The Kalam people live between the Schrader and Bismark mountain ranges in the Simbai region of the Western Highlands.

The Myth and Ritual of Traditional Healing

Local people say that all illnesses have a cause, and all have cures. The cures have been handed down from the ancestors, which enabled the people to survive, before the missionaries, and their medication arrived. The origin of the healing practices was in the descent of a supernatural being (*Wamose*), who descended from the sky, created the earth, and gave all traditional customs. So, prayers (*kunj*) are offered to *Wamose* during the sickness-healing rituals.

Wamose descended from the sky by a bush vine cane, holding in his hand a large flat stone. Below him, there was nothing, so he laid down the stone, as a base, on which to stand. Then he looked up to whence he had come, and called out: "Send me some *ma-an tund* (white strong mud)". When it was given him, he spread it over the flat stone, chanting *kunj* as he did so. Then, in turn, he called for, and laid, with *kunj*, *ma-an fwk* (yellow mud), and *ma-an mosimb* (black mud). After that, he called for, and was given, first every kind of plant, then every kind of animal. Then he built himself a house, and planted all food plants round it. In front of the house, he planted a cucumber and a gourd, and, over these two plants, he kept a close watch, day and night.

Wamose built a place to cook *mumu* food outside his house, and then went hunting. On his return, he saw smoke coming from his house, although he was the only person dwelling there. He came close, and peeped into the house, and saw two ladies preparing a *mumu* meal. He tried to scare them by firing an arrow, without killing them, and breaking a dried piece of firewood, but they would not run away, so he circled round the house, and tried to scare them from the other side. When *Wamose* asked the ladies where they came from, they laughed at him for not knowing, since it had been he who had planted a cucumber and a gourd vine in front of his house. *Wamose* then smiled, and nodded, and told the ladies to prepare

him a separate *mumu* meal, since it would be *shoeung* (defiling) for him, as an initiate male (*muluknumb*), to eat or sleep with females. So, he also built them a separate house to sleep in.

Although, at first, the ladies agreed to keep themselves separate, sometime later they ate the same meal, entered the man's house, and even slept with *Wamose*, so that they both became pregnant, and each bore *Wamose* a son, *Nugulbom* (meaning unknown), and *Be-aiyong* (man from above). *Wamose* told the two ladies that they had defiled them all, but that he and his two sons would undergo purification to become *shoeung* (holy) again, while the two ladies would become sick and die. At that moment, the ladies became sick, and covered with sores, so they pleaded with *Wamose* for mercy. He had pity on them, and said that, to be cured, they had to call upon the names of their sons, *Nugulbom* and *Be-aiyong*, since they had been connected to them by the placenta cord, and had first given them life-giving water, and then the sons would give the ladies ginger to prevent them from becoming sick, and to heal them.

From this myth, we may note three biblical comparisons:

- (a) the idea of creation;
- (b) the idea of a fall and punishment;
- (c) the idea of holiness (*shoeung*), which may be divided into ritual and moral purity.

The two ladies had offended against ritual purity by sexual contact, and against moral purity, by disobeying *Wamose*. As in biblical teaching, there was a link between offences against purity, and sickness, and, in both cases, the remedy was seen to include prayers and sacred food.

About the relation between the creation myth, and the healing ritual, a Kalam informant, Isgwn Diokun, said; "We imitate exactly all that our forefathers did. This includes knowing the traditional creation myth, and its meaning and importance, for all our Kalam customs and traditions were derived from the creation myth. In all our daily life, we follow, and live by, all the customs initiated for us by *Wamose*. One of them is sickness healing, in which we make a prayer of request to *Wamose* through *Nugulbom Be-aiyong* for his aid (healing grace). This is similar to the Christian form of intercession for curing of sickness, and for prevention of diseases entering into our communities."

The first stage in the healing ritual is the preparation of the apparatus by a specialist diviner. The apparatus are: a female pig, which is slaughtered, its blood drained, its inner organs removed, and its reproductive organ cut off, and strung, with a tanager cordyline, a placenta cord to symbolise the presence of *Nugulbom Be-aiyong*, a bush vine, to symbolise the link between heaven and earth, short, sharpened lengths of wood from a fallen tree trunk, and a shrub plant, whose stem and foliage are both used. The diviner summons everyone to lay their hands upon the leaves and stem of the cordyline, and holds the bag of placenta cord aloft, as he recites the following *kunj* (prayer of request) to *Wamose* through *Nugulbom Be-aiyong*:

[translation]“Are we not descendant of *Nugulbom Be-aiyong* through them. May you (*Wamose*) protect us, protect everyone, and protect our bodies.

Sickness from this land, be gone for good,
May the disasters pass over us
May you (*Wamose*) jump over and around
Keep us safe in your midst.

After the *kunj* has been recited, the cordyline stems are dipped in the blood of the pig, and planted in prepared holes at a ritual entrance, through which the people all pass, in order to be protected by *Nugulbom Be-aiyong* from all disasters.

The second part of the ritual is the communal meal, which is prepared near the men’s house, in which women are not permitted. In the first part of the meal, the pig’s giblets are cooked by a *mumu*, in a small shelter called a “*bund*”, and, when the giblets are cooked, the diviner summons all the males, uncovers the leaves wrapped round the *mumu*, chops the giblets into small pieces, as he recites a *kunj*, and distributes the pieces, first to the males, and then to the females, who wait further off. Then the women prepare a second meal from the rest of the pig meat.

These rites are called “*Simbling Kemdev Arr*”, which means “Life-saving act through *Nugulbom Be-aiyong*”. In the rite, *Nugulbom Be-aiyong* acts as mediator between the people and *Wamose*, for their health and well-being, and the people are connected to *Nugulbom Be-aiyong*, through the placenta cord.

When sickness does happen, it is believed to have one or more of several causes, including the power of dead relatives, sorcery, the power of clan totems, ritual impurity, black magic, grievances, “sickness from lower land” (malaria), or clan sickness. In times of sickness, a diviner is sent for, who fasts, and consults his

ancestral spirits, and then interviews the patient, studying the patient's reactions, as he does so. Methods of divining, including pulling the victims hair, while a list of causes is recited, until the hair makes a sound, when the cause is mentioned, or reciting the causes, as the diviner smokes, until the diviner coughs and chokes, when the cause is mentioned. When the cause is identified, it is necessary for the relatives to mend the broken relationship that has caused the sickness. Another form of healing, is the removal of alien objects from a sick person. The original writer of this article saw this procedure done to his uncle, who had been ill in hospital for two months, without getting better. When a diviner was consulted, he identified the cause of the sickness as poisoned food, given by a spurned girlfriend, and he gave, as the remedy, *Andukmangi* – which means reversing the poison back upon the culprit. Then the diviner took out two round objects, covered in blood, from the victim's neck, and said that these had been preventing the victim from getting well. Then the victim was taken back to hospital, and he quickly recovered.

The Kalam have a belief that people get sick because they do bad things, which upsets their spirit, who, then, turns his back on them, and leaves them to get sick. If a death has occurred, a length of bamboo is used, which grows heavy, when a spirit enters it, and moves rapidly, when the cause, and then the culprit, often a sorcerer, is mentioned. When the relatives have chosen either compensation, or the death of the sorcerer, as their payback, the bamboo moves to carry out the sentence, if it is death. The *Nugulbom Be-aiyong* healing procedure, and also the calling-back of the victim's spirit from the abode of the evil one (*Sum alal Korup*), are carried on, as well as the divining, and dealing with causes.

The causes relate, in one way or another, to the breakdown of relationships. The whole community lives in a web of harmonious relationships towards ancestors, living members of the community, towards other communities, and to the whole environment, and it is when one or more of these relationships is broken that the offence has to be paid for, in order for the sickness to be healed.

The Impact of Europeans

The government was only interested in material development, and it was only concerned with the health of the body. The missionaries dismissed traditional beliefs as evil. The people thought the white men were their returning dead ancestors, and they were impressed by examples of quick healing, brought by white men's medicine. They were impressed by preaching about raising the dead to life, and looked forward to a new life, in which they would enjoy the white men's possessions. But, meanwhile, their old problems, with gardens not growing, lack of rain, and sickness, which white men's medicine did not seem to cure, continued, so,

while keeping on the new Christian customs, they began, as well, to return to some of the old customs, to do, with respect for the ancestors.

Before the missionaries came, the Kalams had held an annual pig-kill festival (*Smi*), some time between what is now June to December, during the dry season, whenever the pigs and the food crops were ready. The Kalams numbered the days by the monthly cycle of the moon, and had no idea about weeks, so their pig-kills sometimes fell on a Sunday, and this angered the missionaries. There were also problems between the people and the missionaries over polygamy, since the people did not want to put away wives they had taken, and if they did not do so, they could not be baptised.

The missionaries should have made a close survey of traditional religion, before they condemned it, and then they would have seen some Christian characteristics, and values, in it. The missionaries have not been successful in completely suppressing the traditional culture, which often carries on underneath a show of Christianity, so it would seem best to examine the culture, to see what is good, and then use it in a Christian way.

The old customs provided a worldview that seems to explain a deal with the whole of life, and appeal to people's deepest feelings. Western culture offered new concerns, and new answers, but it failed to look at some of the old ways that were still important to the people. It failed to take seriously the people's need for spiritual help in gardening, in the healing of sickness, and in social relationships; it only provided material answers. Christianity had been too closely linked to Western material culture, and the spiritual help, it could give to local culture, had been ignored.

In fact, both traditional culture and Christianity offered a holistic approach, which dealt with both the spiritual and the material. Both used prayers of request to ask for spiritual help, and looked for spiritual, as well as material, blessings. So, Christianity should be used to correct and fulfil traditional culture, and both should correct the material approach of Western culture.

If we take the example of sickness healing, we see that the Kalams sought, not just to mend their bodies with drugs, as in Western medicine, but to bring wholeness, through the healing of relationships. Such relationships included, not only those with the community, and the environment, but also relationships with supernatural beings, the spirits of the ancestors. The means, whereby wholeness is achieved, include the use of diviners, who act as mediators between the living and

the dead, the use of prayers (*kunj*), exorcisms, strict observance of ritual and moral purity (*shoeng*), the eating of a sacred meal, and the passing through a sacred entrance, to bring deliverance from disaster. All these are meant to nourish life, to enhance life, to give life back, to release life, and to ensure the continuation of blessings, and abundance of life. Is it not possible to see the use of prayers, and a sacred meal, as a God-given preparation for Christian prayer, and the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist? One informant, Emmauel Duk, said: “*Mipela yet bai mi kisim save we, na mekim ol dispela kastam pasin?*” (“Where would we get the knowledge from to perform all the traditional rites?”)

(Chapter 3 deals with ideas of sickness and healing in the Bible. It will be summed up here by saying that the Bible takes a holistic approach to health, which is, at once, material and spiritual, individual and communal, and that sin and sickness are connected, so that healing has to include forgiveness. The Bible lays a greater stress on moral, rather than ritual, purity. The healing work of Jesus was a revelation of God’s love, which opened the way to the final reconciliation of all things with God. In the life of the church, the healing work of Jesus is continued, and in the sacraments of the Eucharist, of anointing, and of penance, people are forgiven, renewed, and made whole. The focus of all Jesus’s healing work was His death and resurrection.)

Traditional Healing Rituals Fulfilled Through Christ

The traditional creation story of *Wamose*, *Nugulbom*, and *Be-aiyong* is similar to the biblical story of creation, and of the salvation brought by Jesus Christ, the Son of God. So the Kalam traditional story can be seen as a preparation for the Christian story, and the symbolic rituals of the Kalam people, as preparations for the Christian sacraments. The Christian gospel gives a deeper meaning to the fall of humanity, and their salvation, through Christ, by emphasising that the cause of the fall was not just ritual defilement, but moral disobedience, and so salvation required the perfect moral obedience of Christ, by which He shared with us the free grace of God’s forgiveness.

In the sickness healing rituals of the Kalam, the passing through the entrance, marked by branches dipped in pig’s blood, may be compared, as an act of protection, with the first passover, at which the Israelites smeared blood on the entrance to their houses. The offering of parts of a pig to the spirits of the ancestors, so that they can become sacred, when they are shared in a meal, by the people, to bring healing, can be seen as a preparation for the Eucharist, in which the healing work of Christ is made present for us. Jesus Christ heals not just bodies, but also puts right the many things that spoil, or divide, individuals, and communities,

strengthens relationships, lifts up the down-trodden, gives hope, and forgives sinners, and reveals the healing love of God, and reconciles creation to its Creator.

(Editor's note: It would seem that the various methods of divination, used to expose the cause of sickness, do help to discover the broken relationships, that may have been linked with the illness, as sin may also be linked with disease, although not directly, as cause and effect. Yet, when it comes to dealing with broken relationships, or moral, or ritual, impurity, as causes of illness, the Christian way would seem to be, not by demanding compensation, or revenge, or reversing the poison, but by acknowledging that Christ has made all payback necessary on the cross, and so, by applying His reconciling work to the illness in question. By making a link between sickness and broken relationships, and providing for the healing of both at the same time, traditional religion could provide the context for the healing of the whole person, and its rituals given Christian meaning, and adapted for Christian use.)

Conclusion

Every aspect of Kalam life is associated with religion. The Kalam is a religious person. In whatever they do, they focus on powers beyond their reach, and channel those powers to help them in their daily life. These powers would help them to exercise healing in times of sickness, protect and bless them with good crops, pigs, and much wealth, and bring success in hunting, marriage, and childbirth.

The Kalam have a sense of reverence towards their ancestral spirits, the recent dead, and the environment, so they offer sacrifices to their ancestors to atone for wrongs, and strengthen their relationships. The sacrifices involve prayers (*kunj*), as well as action. By their rituals, they ensure harmonious relationships with their ancestors, their own, and other communities, and the environment. By these means, they discover their moral order, and live within it. They have a sense that, to tolerate immoral acts, is an offence, a sin, which would cause breakdown of relationships with the ancestors and the community. Such breakdowns of relationships would cause sickness and misfortune for themselves, their family, and their community. We have seen that the Bible also makes a link between sickness and sin.

In both traditional and biblical ideas of healing, there is a coming together of the deity, and the believing community, to establish, or repair, a relationship through sacrifice. The fulfilment of all these ideas of sacrifice, in order to renew relationships, is the reconciling death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.