

POWER AND SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE AMONG PHILIPPINE FOLK HEALERS

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In recent years, the Philippines has attracted the worldwide attention of scientists, and an increasing number of non-Filipino patients, who come to be treated for various diseases. The object of their visits is Filipino faith-healers, who do psychic surgery with their bare hands, and close the wounds without scars. The international bibliography on the topic has been growing, not to mention films and other documentations.¹ Although the number of such healers, frequented by foreigners, seems to be limited, there are others, who also do the same. In fact, these healers seem to follow the ancient tradition of the Filipino shamans.²

This paper will study two related topics, namely, the concept of power and spiritual discipline among Filipino folk-healers. How do the Filipino healers think of power? Is it acquired, inherited, or God-given? Is the power of healing lost through commercialisation and vice? What are the spiritual disciplines connected with acquiring the power of healing and conserving it? What is the Filipino healer's concept of asceticism? Since the therapeutic aspect of Philippine faith healing has sufficient literature, we shall not deal with it in detail.

Filipino folk-healers are usually folk-Christians. Folk-Christianity is a kind of folk religion, which may be defined as a habit religion with the elements of customs, festive characters, symbols, and a moral dimension.³ Folk-Christianity, in the Philippines, pertains more to folk-Catholicism, than to folk-Protestantism, for two reasons. Firstly, Catholicism, especially the form introduced by the Spanish missionaries, appealed to the psyche of the early Filipinos more than Protestantism.⁴ Secondly, since Catholicism came earlier than Protestantism, the former has taken root, and adapted more to Philippine culture.

Filipino folk-healers, today, are of many kinds: herbalists (*arbularyo*), masseurs, midwives, diviners, sorcerers, and general practitioners.⁵ A common denominator among them is that they combine prayer and ritual in their respective specialisations. We shall deal more with the *arbularyo*, or the general practitioner of folk medicine, who cures ailments caused by the natural and the supernatural. In some instances, he also deals in sorcery, in order to be a supra-legal instrument of justice.⁶ Sorcerers also have their antidotes for their evil means. This paper will deal with the *arbularyo*, and his modern counterpart among the Filipino psychic healers.

The paper will be divided into the following parts: (1) a comparison of the traditional *arbularyo*, and the modern psychic healers; (2) the concept of power, and its related practices; (3) the spiritual discipline, or ascetical practices, of the folk healers; and (4) some philosophical and theological reflections on power and spiritual discipline.

COMPARING THE OLD AND NEW HEALERS

We shall, chiefly, base our comparison on the study of Eliade.⁷ Eliade's authoritative work points out that shamanism has features common in Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. Demeterio has pointed out the features common between Philippine shamanism and some Southeast Asian countries.⁸

Folk healing in the present situation of the Philippines was quite similar to what the early Filipinos did. The descriptions of the early Spanish chroniclers (such as Aduarter, Chirino, Colin, Loarca, Placencia) on the early healers are similar to present-day situations.⁹ The Spanish chroniclers called them *baylan*, *babaylan*, *catalonan*, etc., and associated their practices with the devil. Their pre-colonial animistic forms are similar to, or identical with, those of the Philippine ethnic minorities today (that is, those not touched by Christian influence).

One study claims that the modern Filipino faith healers are the continuation, and development, of a Filipino "pre-Hispanic medico-religious system of beliefs and practices".¹⁰ Furthermore, these folk healers were also leaders of the anti-Spanish revolt, and of messianic movements.¹¹ While it is true that the majority of the millennialist movements, and local sects, were healers,¹² we shall not pursue this point here, but, rather, focus on folk healing.

The first area of similarity is the process of the call to shamanism. One becomes a shaman, either by hereditary transmission, or by spontaneous vocation. One can be called to shamanism by relatives, who practise it, or by other shamans. The call by the spirits is characterised by mysterious illnesses, insanity, trances, and visions. After the initiation to the world of healing, the candidate becomes an apprentice to senior shamans until he graduates, and becomes accepted by the community.¹³ But, for the modern Filipino healers, the spirits, calling the shamans, have Christian names. Thus, Eleuterio Terte, the first notable Filipino psychic surgeon, got his call in 1925, when two angelic children appeared to him, when he was seriously ill. He was promised a cure if he would accept the mission to heal others.¹⁴ Jun Labo, another famous healer, based in Baguio, claims he received his calling when Jesus Christ appeared to him.¹⁵ Mari Daylo, a healer from Leyte, was promised a cure from her ailment by the apparition, in a dream, of St Michael, the Archangel, and she, in turn, promised to heal other people.¹⁶

The apprenticeship stage of modern faith healers is under the Union Espiritista Cristian de Filipinas.¹⁷ Jun Labo was an apprentice healer to Tony Agpaoa. He later hand picked Labo as his successor.

The second area of similarity is the trance. According to Eliade, the shaman, who is called, learns his trade through the ecstatic and the didactic. In the ecstatic element, he goes into a trance, or is taught by dreams. In the didactic, he learns the techniques through other shamans, such as the functions of the spirit, the secret language of shamans (*foulae*), etc. In the ecstatic element, he is affected by sickness, and is sometimes thought of as insane. And, because he has undergone suffering and death (which can be a ceremonial initiation), he is resurrected, and becomes a new person, who can heal others.

We find the same analogy among Filipino faith healers. In the more-primitive Filipino animist culture, this dream occurs at the initial stage. It can also occur during his ministry proper, when the shaman goes into a trance, in order to diagnose diseases, or gets revelation from the saints/spirits. Bulatao describes the new shamanism, in Christian dress.¹⁸ The person in the trance becomes a different being. His voice changes, and is said to belong to the spirit possessing him. The medium has the power of reading minds, and has an extraordinary strength. He can even walk on fire. But, after the trance, he has no memory of what happened.

The third area of similarity is the spirit guide. In celestial form, the shaman has a spirit guide, whose function is to teach, and to give power, and to advise the shaman in his ministry. Eliade calls this the tutelary spirit, who may either be a celestial wife, for male shamans, or a celestial husband for female shamans. The language they use in their conversation/dreams is like that between spouses and lovers.

In the Philippine setting, this is also realised in the folk-Christianity context. In the traditional context, such as the shamans of Pangasinan, what Eliade describes is true. Because they have to prove their power of healing, they have to kill somebody dearest to them in order to foster their gift of healing. Deza interviewed three such shamans, who have become widows.¹⁹ Their spirit guides have become their celestial husbands. In the folk-Christianity context, however, the spouse concept is not so clear. Some of the well-known healers have male or female guides in the name of the saints, and of Jesus Christ. This change to Christian forms is part of religious acculturation.²⁰

Genuine mystics, like St Teresa and St John of the Cross, describe the growth of the soul as a wedding with Christ. Likewise, their vocabulary is also that of lovers.

Related to the spirit guide are the souls of the dead.

The souls of dead . . . serve the candidate as a means of entering into contact with divine, or semi-divine, beings (through ecstatic journeys to the sky and the underworld, etc.), or enable the future shaman to share in the mode of being of the dead.²¹

Furthermore, the “shaman is a man who has immediate, concrete experiences with gods and spirits; he sees them face to face, he talks to them, prays to them, implores them – but he does not control more than a limited number of them”.²²

In Philippine traditional religion, the generation of the departed ancestors was the core.²³ With the coming of Christianity in the Philippines, this was transformed into the devotion of the saints and the poor souls of purgatory. The poor souls are considered greatly to help the petition of their devotees.

The fourth area is esoteric language. In the shaman's training, is the learning of "secret language" and "animal language".²⁴ The Filipino folk-healers have to memorise plenty of pig Latin prayers and formulae, which they think will affect the cure. Jocano has documented the pig Latin prayers used by the healers around the Laguna de Bay area.²⁵ The popular healer, Alex Orbito, has a mantra, which he prays in healing.²⁶

The fifth area of similarity between the old and new healers is their classification of diseases into two kinds: those that are naturally-caused, and those that are supernaturally-caused.²⁷ Naturally-caused diseases need medicine, like herbs, and the like. In the modern context, they need the help of the doctor. But, supernaturally-caused diseases, such as those caused by witchcraft, cannot be cured by doctors, but by *arbularyos*, or shamans. Whereas the Filipino shamans, long ago, were mostly female, the present healers are mostly male, and do their healing in a clinical setting.

Sixth, both the old and the new healers have similar healing procedures. This procedure presupposes the belief that man has two dimensions in his soul.²⁸ The first is the "soul" (*kaluluwa* in Tagalog, or *kalag* in Cebuano Visayan). The soul is identified with man, and is the essence of intellectual and moral power. After death, the soul becomes a separate entity, called the *anito*. But, during life, the *kaluluwa* may temporarily depart from the body. The separation causes bodily disturbance. The Spanish missionaries identified the *kaluluwa* as the guardian angel of each person. The second dimension is the *ginhawa*, which can mean stomach, breath, vital spirit, and character. Whereas the *kaluluwa*, is localised in the head, *ginhawa* is seated in the intestinal region. The *ginhawa* is the special preference of witchcraft. Whereas ancient Filipino shamans extricated disease, caused through sorcery, by means of ritual massage, dance, or exorcisms, the present-day healers reintegrate the body and the soul through "magnetic healing" and psychic surgery. In psychic surgery, the healers extract clots of blood, and other tissues, through operations done by bare hands and leaving no scars or infection.²⁹ The modern healers, according to Salazar, "invented" the modern process, in order to appear scientific and acceptable.

POWER

Power may be translated as *bisa*, *gahum*, or *pigsa*, respectively, in Cebuano Visayan, Tagalog, and Ilocano – the three most-widely-used Philippine languages.

The healers describe the healing power differently. It may be a hard, ball-like substance inside the body of the healer, or a kind of force coming from the blood, or like an electric current, with paralysing strength, or a cold feeling, then becoming warm, coming from God.³⁰

Is the power of healing acquired, or a gift? From the foregoing comparison of healing, it is both acquired, and a gift. To a certain degree, the powers of healing may be acquired through human effort. One example is magnetic healing. Orbito is of the same opinion. The efforts made in the initiation stage of the shaman are directed towards the acquisition of power. Arens reports that the shamans are directed towards the acquisition of power. Arens reports that the shamans in Biliran, an island near Leyte, have to spend nine Fridays in the sea, nine Fridays in the church, and nine days in the cemetery.³¹ But, concerning the higher forms of healing, this seems to be a God-given power. Thus, not all the members, who join the Union Espiritista Cristiana de Filipinas, get the power of healing, as performed by the psychic surgeons. The healers also claim that their gift of healing comes from the spirits/saints, or from God.

Connected with the acquisition of the power of healing is the cultivation of amulets (*anting-anting*). It is claimed that amulets play a role in the power of healing.³² They are also connected with the phenomena of locally-founded sects, in their penchant for power.³³

Is the power of healing dependent on the faith of the patient? The testimonies of the healers are unanimous in saying that the positive disposition of the patient plays an important role in the healing process. Those who lack faith will make the cure harder and slower on the part of the healer. This means that no faith on the side of the patient will result in no cure. The healer's power can work, but often to a limited degree.

Is the power of healing weakened if the healer receives money or indulges in vice? In the first place, the majority of healers feel that their ministry is a gift, which must also be given freely. Thus, Terte, the first well-

known psychic surgeon, died a poor man. They also receive money, or reward, for their sustenance, and the support of their families. But they also give away plenty of what they receive to charity. If the healer can detach himself from material success, he will not lose his power. Since the Philippine healers are also human, they may be subject to human frailty, like gambling, liquor, and extra-marital sex. But, as long as they do not allow these vices to dominate their personality, and as long as they keep healing as their main ministry, they will not lose their power. Otherwise, they cannot effect lasting cures.³⁴ This point will be discussed more in the following section, under spiritual discipline.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

Spiritual discipline is not to be understood here as the nuances of asceticism, which has stereotyped meanings in traditional Christian piety. Analogies can be drawn. The rigorous training, which an athlete undergoes in order to develop his skill and power, may be considered a kind of discipline. The same is true of the hours of practice and discipline, which a concert pianist undergoes, in order to have the skill of playing the piano.

Is the spiritual discipline of healers and shamans related to the acquisition and retention of power? The explanation can be varied. One explanation is that the asceticism of the Filipino healer seems to be connected with the accumulation of power. All sacrifices – such as flagellation, or the use of amulets – are not for the forgiveness of sins, but to make the body acquire more power.³⁵ The old shamans used to go to the caves for this purpose; the modern healers go to cemeteries. Their most-important season is Holy Week. Lent is said to be the season when the spirits give their power. Orbito goes to a privately-owned cave during Holy Week to meditate. The most-important day for this is Good Friday. Why Good Friday? Arens thinks that, like the grace of redemption, which was won for mankind on Good Friday, redemption from evil should also be connected to this great day. The *tambalan*, who drives away evil spirits, and heals men, might, therefore, in folk belief be related to this day of “redemption”.³⁶

This reason for sacrifice (i.e., to acquire power) may also be the explanation for prayers used. As mentioned, above, the shamans prefer esoteric, formulas such as pig Latin. The shamans have to memorise plenty of

such prayers for particular purposes, which, again, may be connected with acquiring power.

Prayers are the most carefully-guarded part of the healing technique, because they control the power of the healers. They serve as the link between the practitioner and the supernatural power, which, in the local concept, is actually responsible for the cure of an illness; the healer is merely a tool, through which the supernatural gift is given to man. Prayers are, thus, regarded as sacred symbols, that hold the key to an unseen source of power of *bisa* to overcome diseases. As such, extreme caution is taken that they are not exposed to the uninitiated, or read by anyone who is not a practitioner. If written down, the booklet, or paper, must not be touched by any person, other than the healer. Any pollution destroys their healing potential.³⁷

On the other hand, the healers may be motivated by the Christian way for doing good. One healer from Leyte feels that, unless he heals other people, he gets sick.³⁸ He, therefore, does not carry out his mission for his own sake. Most healers seem to be moved by this call, that since they have freely received the gift of healing, they must also freely give it away to others. Even Orbito, with his international fame, and people coming from various countries to him for healing, has free consultation for his patients three days a week.

Likewise, they are noted for their charity work. Daylo, the healer from Leyte, supports 38 needy persons in her house. Also the well-known Filipino healers generously give to charity.

Another healer, Alfredo Dotado, has become a sort of lay minister.³⁹ Besides his healing, he has given up marriage, in order to be of full service to his ministry. His exhortations to those, with whom he comes into contact, lead the patients to a better Christian life. The report of Bulatao about healers in Manila seems to point in the same direction.⁴⁰

Obedience to superiors is the test for spiritual discipline. Daylo, who was known for her spectacular hearings, used to drink ditch water, and make similar sacrifices, in the presence of others, before performing her healing. This was in line with her victim-hood, that is, to take the sins of others herself, before she did the healing. But, when she was forbidden by the parish priest,

because of her “showing off”, and her healing, she stopped her cures, except for her prayers that God will do the rest.

COMMENTS

Before making our comments on the foregoing phenomena, let us first state our assumptions.

Assumptions

The interpretation of the foregoing phenomena must be grounded on the right mode. The dualistic model puts a dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural, between nature and grace, between body and soul. If this model is adopted, it has the built-in bias of classifying whether or not some healings are miraculous. A miracle is not just any extraordinary event, but must be a sign of divine revelation in a religious context. Since many of the reported healings are in a religious context, are they miracles? Some of the reported cures done by Filipino faith-healers may pass the criteria used for the screening of miracles attributed to the intervention of a holy person before canonisation, or the criteria for miracles in Lourdes. The incarnational model is better than the dualistic model, because it can explain better the phenomena, as well as avoid the problem of miracles.

Secondly, we assume that man can meet God outside official Christianity. Vatican II concedes this point in its declaration on non-Christian religions. What counts is not the label but good works, especially love of one’s fellowmen (Luke 10:29-37, Matt 25:25-31). Although Peter thought that salvation was only for the Jewish Christians, he was surprised that the Holy Spirit was also given to the gentiles (Acts 10:44-47). The criterion of good fruits (Matt 7:16, Gal 5:22) shows that the animistic shamans, and their modern counterparts, do encounter God.

The third assumption is that whatever is received is received according to the nature of the receiver. This is because grace is built on nature. When God spoke to the prophets and writers of the Old Testament, they understood, and expressed the revelation in their Jewish (Near East) categories. Likewise, the inspired writers of the New Testament also expressed revelation according to their style and limitations.

The fourth assumption is on the nature of healing. Like health, healing is psychosomatic. The mind can influence the body, and vice-versa. Furthermore, all healing is under the umbrella of self-healing. The body has the mechanism of coping, and adjusting itself to changes. The intervention of medicine, and of physicians, is a prop to let nature eventually take care of itself.

Comments

How the Filipino healers perceive health and sickness, hinges, perhaps, on their worldview. What may be assigned to the realm of the spirits, may have its non-spiritual counterpart. Father Jaime Bulatao, an experienced clinical psychologist, has tried to duplicate some psychic phenomena of the Filipino faith-healers in his laboratory. Whereas the shamans become mediums, through a trance, and become possessed by the spirits of saints, and of the departed, Bulatao has replicated such phenomena. He lets his subjects go into an altered state of consciousness by murmuring Latin declensions of some words. Then the subjects get possessed by “saints” called at will, or by national heroes, or even by living national figures. The latter shows that the dead have no “monopoly”, and, perhaps, disproves “possession”, as claimed by the shamans. In such an altered state of consciousness, Bulatao has succeeded in suggesting to people that they get rid of their sickness.⁴¹

The same approach may be said of “possession”, which shamans may claim. Whereas Eastern psychotherapy may work, Bulatao’s kind of “exorcism” is better than Western psychotherapy, in the Philippines.⁴² He has “exorcised” possessed people, by letting them go into an altered state of consciousness, and telling the “spirit” to go away. He says that the Filipino therapist must accept the client’s belief that he is possessed by a spirit, and treat him accordingly. In this way, better healing is achieved.

But his explanation ends there. He cannot explain the feats of Filipino healers, like detaching eyeballs, removing the diseased part, and replacing the eyeball back in its proper place without infection. He cannot explain how the healers can “operate” with bare hands, and have no scars after the operation. Perhaps the answer goes back to faith, and God’s grace.

The foregoing phenomena of folk healing in the Philippines have parallels in the Bible. Just as the shamans could be put in a trance to the sound of some instruments, the prophet Elisha was put in the state of ecstasy, or

trance by his expressed wish that a lyre be played (2 Kings 3:5). So were the group of prophets, entranced by the sound of the harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre (1 Sam 14:6). In such a state, one can do foolish things. For example, Saul, who was also a psychic, stripped himself naked (1 Sam 19:23-24). Likewise, the trance was not necessarily revelatory, because God used a lying spirit to deceive the evil king Jehoshaphat (1 Kings 22:19-23).

Whenever Christ cured the sick, He felt the healing power going out of Him (Luke 6:19; 8:46). He demanded faith from the sick (Matt 9:28-29; 8:10), and, where there was little faith, He performed fewer cures (Mark 6:5-6). He gave His powers, including that of healing, to His apostles, and promised that they would “perform even greater works” (John 14:21) than Christ did. He did not prohibit others from using His name in casting out demons, because – as He told His disciples – “anyone who is not against you is for you” (Luke 9:49-50). The power of healing, which the disciples, and early Christians, received was a gift from the Holy Spirit (Rom 12:9; 1 Cor 12:9; 28.30), and could not be bought (Acts 7:18-21).

Could the foregoing biblical data apply to Filipino folk healers? If the tree is to be known by its fruits, do the good works of Filipino faith-healers show their essence? Why give the gift of healing to such a group of Filipinos? Are there no worthier ones? Such is the mystery of God’s generosity. One cannot question the Creator, just as the pot cannot question the potter’s design (Rom 9:19-21). The Filipino healers claim the healing power is not theirs, but coming from God.

If the *sensus fidelium*, or the sense of the faithful, is a basic sound doctrine,⁴³ perhaps the way Filipinos look on power may be interpreted as the theology of grace in the Philippine context.⁴⁴

NOTES

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