

THE BELIEFS ABOUT SPIRIT POWERS IN THE AREA OF NORTH MALAITA, SOLOMON ISLANDS

Penuel Idusulia

Penuel Idusulia is Head of New Testament Studies at Atomea Memorial School in Maluu, North Malaita Province, Solomon Islands. He is also an elder in the local South Seas Evangelical church. He received a Bachelor of Theology degree from the Christian Leaders' Training College of Papua New Guinea in 1979.

INTRODUCTION

It was around two in the morning, while I was trying to dig out the beliefs of my people concerning spirits, that I felt gripped by a fear, which I didn't expect. My whole body began to shiver, and the hairs on my body stood on end. I felt as if my whole room was filled with evil. I then began to question myself. "What's wrong with me? Am I a child once again to fear the spirits? Even if my ancestral spirits are real, what can they do to me? I am many miles away from home, up here in the highlands of Papua New Guinea." Shivering, as I was, I claimed the word of Rev 12:11: "And they have conquered him by the blood of the lamb." Holding this word firm in faith, I stood, and walked out of my room, into the night, and outside the house, as if to say to the evil forces, "Do whatever you want to do to me, I have Jesus on my side, with His blood covering me."

And so, I had a cold night's walk. The fear had fled, and nothing was felt in that dark night, except, down in my heart, I felt the admiration of God's mighty act, by which, in the very beginning, He spoke and light came into the darkest of the dark. This was my first experience of fear of spirits, after being a Christian, and it came as a challenge by Satan, as if to say, "See if you have power enough to stand this – think who you are to intrude into my territory."

The society, from which I come, is a society that has long been bound by the fear of spirits. Before a child is old enough to understand anything

else, he is taught to fear the spirits. He is taught how powerful and harmful the spirits are, or can be, to man. He is told to keep well away from any suspected places or objects, which are believed to be the territory of the spirits. He is told to return home before sundown, for, after sundown, is believed to be the most effective time for the spirits to roam around. He is told to avoid throwing bits and pieces of his food in market places, or *tambu* places. This causes the child to grow up in fear of the spirits, and they find it hard, going alone in the dark, even in quiet rooms. Very few could go alone in the bush at daytime. This has greatly affected the lives of my people, and they need the message of liberation from the fear of spirits.

To my knowledge and understanding of my society's beliefs of spirits, the spirits can be categorised under two main headings, according to their characteristics.

SPIRITS THAT ASSOCIATE WITH NATURE – THE WILD SPIRITS (AKALOGWASI)

These wild spirits can also be classified under these two groups:

- (a) Roaming spirits – (*akalo tatha*)
- (b) The spirits, who attach themselves to particular places and objects (trees, swamps, caves, stones, rivers, etc.).

The wild spirits don't associate with man, they are either bush-roaming spirits, or spirits associated with nature. Wild spirits are harmful to man, and those people, who return home late after sundown, often meet with these spirits. When a wild spirit attacks a man, it is believed that the signs are the vomiting of black, sticky substance, sweating, and the tongue dropping out. When treatment from a witch doctor is delayed, death may result. The witch doctor has to identify which particular spirit of these roaming spirits made the attack.

The spirits, who attach themselves to particular places or objects, stay where they belong. If the object is removed, the spirit also moves with the object. Any human, intruding or trespassing into these territories, may receive capital punishment by the spirits. This is very real, in the area

from which I come. A few years back, a policeman treated the people of the area so badly that they decided to lead him into the spirit's territory, by enticing him to go hunting for birds with his shotgun. Nothing would have happened if he had not asked for a place to relieve himself. However, when he did ask, the men, who led him, pointed him to a giant tree. He went to the giant tree, which was believed to be a *tambu* place, a resting-place of the spirits. Going home, he felt a simple headache. As he lay on his bed, he saw an angry, tall man standing over him, with a club in his hands. As he looked, he saw the club drop right on his head. The same night he died.

It is believed that one can always sense, or be certain of, the presence of roaming spirits, by the following signs:

- (a) The crying of the insect we call *keke* (a thick, forest insect). The passing of the spirits disturbs the sleeping insect.
- (b) The deafening of one's ears, as though one receives a punch on his head.
- (c) The hair on the body standing on end.
- (d) Very often, the passing spirit may tap the trunk of the tree, which can then be heard by those close by.

These bush spirits can cry, appear in funny-looking human form, change, at any moment, into an animal (cat, dog, etc.). These unusual happenings may either mean the death, or near death, of a relative back home in the village, or the person, who sees the spirit, is near to his death.

All spirit-fearing people believe that these spirits are most active during heavy rain, early parts of the night (from sunset to about 10 o'clock), and towards daybreak (until about 7.30). People, who travel from one place to another during these times, and are passing a spirit's territory, may find it worthwhile to have some protective barks of tree in their baskets.

Sometimes a wild spirit may appear in a dream, to the man who leads the spirit worship of a clan. The wild spirit may tempt him to offer sacrifices

to both wild spirits and clan spirits. However, this incident is rare, because wild spirits and clan spirits are enemies.

SPIRITS THAT ASSOCIATE WITH MAN

THE CLAN SPIRIT

This spirit is part of a group of spirits, who are believed to be the spirits of the ancestors of the clan. This spirit binds the clan closely together. Any misfortune or prosperity of the clan depends on this spirit. Within the clan, there is only one man, who has access to this spirit, and the clan depends on this man to offer sacrifices of animals to satisfy the spirit. There is no other man, besides the man of prayer, who is able to offer sacrifices. When the man of prayer (*wane ni foa*) gets old, he is to appoint another man, by the leading of the spirit, to take his place when he dies. The newly-appointed man of prayer has to be taught the right way of saying the prayers for the spirits. Wrong prayers can bring harm to the clan. The clan depends on the spirit for prosperity in everything, and victory in battles. Though the clan depends on the spirit entirely, the people live all their lives in fear of the spirit. A prayer is said, with the sacrifice of an animal, to turn the anger of the spirit.

When the leading man of the spirit in a clan is converted to Christ, suddenly there is no one to take his place, which often leaves the clan in confusion and fear. Therefore, many follow their leader to Christianity. This often results in mass conversion. When this happens to a clan, the people of the clan look upon this incident as a bush-growing rope being cut at the root. By this, they mean they are now left suspended, and it will not be long before they, too, will turn to Christianity.

However, if the man dies, the spirit may appear to another man in a dream, and teach him the prayer. Therefore, this man may take up this responsibility in representing his people before the spirit. It is surprising that, in these heathen prayers, the person prays up a ladder of deities, from the least to the highest, and concludes with the God, who creates all things. It is normally easy to teach a heathen priest to pray to God after conversion. This person can quickly become God's man of prayer, with the right knowledge of access to the one true God.

THE SPIRITS OF THE DEAD – RECENT DEATHS

Harmless Spirits

It is believed that the character of the spirits of the dead is determined by the cause of the death. If a person dies as a child at birth, of ordinary illnesses, or of old age, their spirits are less feared, and are believed to be harmless. However, it is believed that most sickness is caused by harmful spirits, or by the practices of magic and sorcery.

Feared Spirits

The spirits of those who are murdered, who die delivering a child, who die by suicide (especially by hanging by rope), and who die accidental deaths are most feared. The spirits of dead sorcerers are also greatly feared. The spirits, based on the type of death, can easily be identified by their actions. For instance, a crying child always accompanies a dead mother's spirit. The mother can be heard making funny sounds to try and quieten her child. When this spirit meets a person, it can follow the person all the way to his house.

But the spirits of hanged person mostly meet with night hunters, those who go out at night, hunting for flying foxes and opossums. At times, the spirit comes in the appearance of opossums or flying foxes. When the hunter shoots it with an arrow, it falls down, laughing like a man. It may vary in its tricks. These spirits are feared, because of their terrible tricks, but they can only harm a person when it is his (as we express) bad luck.

There is a belief, my people once had, that a person's eyes could be changed so that he is capable of seeing evil spirit beings. I was actually told of a man, whose eyes were so treated that he could actually see, and point out, an evil spirit, if it ever came his way. People with him would not be able to see it. There was another man I knew of, but he could not stand the sight of an evil spirit, so he had his eyes treated again to give him normal eyesight.

WHY FEAR SPIRITS?

It is a very sad thing that many of my people seem to fear the spirits more than anything else in all of God's creation, even though they may be

Christians, and have seen the power of God. In spite of that, I praise God for many have been wonderfully liberated from such fear.

From the look of the problem in the lives of Christians, and the experiences of my own life, I can see that it is the lack of clear biblical teaching, in three areas, that cause this fear.

Who the “Christian God” really is

The people are being taught very little about who God is, as the Creator of all things, and who has all power over everything that He has created. We only need to show them the teaching that is clearly laid out in the first two chapters of the first book of the Bible (Gen 1-2), then the problem would not be as big as it is.

This creator God is the God we Christians are worshipping as our God and Father. If this is so, then who or what are we to fear? We need fear nothing, whether spirit beings or human beings (Rom 8:31). Can any spirit beings have any power over almighty God, who cares for each one of His people?

We only need to look at the life of Job, in Job 1-2, to see how God permitted Satan to cause trouble for Job, but only to a certain extent. If only my people would be taught the nature of God, and all that He is. Then they would, I believe, rest secure in God, without fear of the spirits.