

THE PEASANT WORLD VIEW OF HEALING AND RELIGION

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Most of us are fascinated by popular religious movements perhaps because they break into our world in such bizarre, sensational and often tragic ways. Reports reach us of groups who have padded their homes and donned football helmets to await the end of the world; of groups who have killed and possibly eaten flesh of fellow cult members in rituals to exorcise bad spirits, of groups armed with bolos and amulets who have marched against government troops only to meet their deaths in the streets of Manila. That we tend to look upon such events as aberrations of peasants' behavior is unfortunate, for much evidence to the contrary suggests that they are simply the more dramatic manifestations of a conceptual world view that underlies much of Philippine peasant tradition.

One approach to popular religious movements, in fact, begins by studying how people view their world and organize their experience. This approach demands an appreciation of what Murray and Rosalie Wax call the "magical world view" of non-Western people.

When a people views the world magically, they see it as composed of beings where Western man sees lifeless *objects*. . . Some of these beings are human; others could be termed "nonhuman". Generally, the beings of the magical world relate to and affect each other just as do the humans of that particular society. Human and nonhuman beings might be kin, friends, or enemies; they might visit each other; exchange gifts, gamble, dance or compete; they may amuse, sadden or irritate each other; and they may even mate or beget offspring.¹

The relationships among human and nonhuman beings may be as varied as the relationships among humans alone, and the patterns a society will stress will most likely be those that are dominant among the human members.²

The dynamic of this world is power; this may exist in many varieties and some beings will have more of some kind than of others. One being may obtain power from another by a gift or a loan, by fraud or theft or even inadvertence, or by exchange, depending again upon the particular society. Rite is performed as a relationship between the participant and other beings (human or nonhuman) in order that a more favorable balance of power should exist.³

Viewed by a person in the magical world, power is awesome and wonderful but, at the same time, it is an intrinsic feature of the natural order. . . Thus, any activity of note or worth can only occur because of it. A bountiful harvest, a successful hunt, a healthy birth – these and countless other activities and accomplishments of living are predicted on the possession of power. Conversely, those individuals or people who fail in their activities and suffer misfortune lack power.⁴

In the context of Philippine peasant tradition, the notion of power appears to be closely connected with that of the *loob*, *kabuotan* or inner self. To acquire power, one's inner self must be purified through tests, ascetic rituals, prayers, and other forms of sacrifice. In like manner, one's inner self must be pure in order to manifest power. Only then can one heal the sick, speak in different tongues, interpret signs and look into the future.⁵

In the Philippines, it is primarily within small groups or *samahan* that traditional healers – religious leaders embody, interpret, and make meaningful the more generalized world view of Philippine peasant tradition. *Samahan* can mean group, association or movement. Basic to the idea of *samahan* is the idea of the united action of those who are equals. Within the *samahan*, practical experiences of illness, chaos in social relations and personal problems are reinterpreted and given new meaning by the healer-leaders and the spirits who speak and work through them.⁶ The healer-leaders may acquire and manifest power in a variety of unique and individual ways. Nonetheless, their interpretation of tradition is guided by a basic view of the world that they share in common.

This paper seeks to explore the peasant world view of healing and religious through a presentation and analysis of one firsthand account gathered from a healer-leader in Davao del Norte. The healer's name is Segundo Salvacion. In the context of Philippine peasant tradition, he is a person of power.

The Account of Segundo Salvacion

Segundo Salvacion migrated to Davao del Norte from the province of Leyte. In Davao he lives with his wife on a small farm set back from the main road of the barrio. Segundo's ability as a healer is well-known. I learned about his power in a neighboring town and I was able to talk with him myself. Born in 1914, he is now hard of hearing although he easily captivates a listener. One afternoon I was there waiting for him when he came in from the field. He took off his hat, hung up his bolo, and began to tell me his story.

We are not the only ones living in this world. There was a time in the heavenly palace that Saint Peter was cutting up paper dolls from the book of life. When the Lord God appeared he asked Peter why was he making a mess out of his palace. Peter was silent. The Lord ordered the cuttings to be swept away. Peter picked up a broom and started to sweep when the Lord stopped him. "Wait Peter," he said. "Whatever you sweep that falls to the earth will become people of the earth. Whatever falls to the trees will become people of the trees. What falls to the caves, people of the caves; and what falls to the sea, people of the sea. They will live. Those who are baptized will provide for them."

These people are second to God. We have never been second to God. They have the power to hurt and punish us. It is easy for them to take our lives if we commit a sin against them. For if they take a life and there is an investigation in heaven, they will remind the Lord that man was supposed to look after them. Instead he destroyed their homes; he cut down their trees; he plowed their fields.

Not long ago a man died here. He was clearing an area to build a fish-pond. When he became sick, he was told that his sickness was due to his work on the pond. He refused to believe that. He did not want anything to do with *diwata* and would not agree to make an offering. The days went by, he became worse and then he died.

What I do is not *diwata*. It is *premecias* for the people not like us. It all started when I was sick. I was treated by eight healers and was not cured. The ninth healer told me that I will be freed from my illness if I accepted the power being passed down to me. I told him that if I will become a witch I will not accept it, for that will destroy my name and my children's. He assured me that it was the power of the healer and I consented. That was in April. By May, I was able to go out and walk around the barrio. He was right. I was freed.

Now the next thing to be done was to have someone offer a *premecias* in my behalf. Someone has to represent you before you can establish your right to the power. A healer offered a *premecias* for me. When this was done, I was able to heal. I prayed to God to help me and since then, through His mercy, many people have become well.

Even so, there are many people who say that the practice of Segundo is *diwata*. My own *kumpare* was talking like this. Then he was stricken. His tongue reached down to the middle of his chest. He could no longer speak clearly. Since we are *mag-kumpare*, his wife came to me and asked for help. They had been to a doctor but his tongue had still not shrunk back to its normal size. "Mare," I told her, "I don't like what he was saying. He has talked against my practice when it's one way of helping those who have been punished by the unseen people. He has suffered for what he said." I offered a *premecias* so that he would recover. I also let him drink some Chinese wine. That afternoon he was better. By night, he was able to put his pants on. It is the same as a debt that has to be paid back. We could get angry too.

The only thing I do is to offer a *premecias* so that other people may live through us. It is like we are neighbors. You see that I always have something good to eat, but I do not share even a small amount with you. How will you feel? What kind of neighbor is that who does not know how to share? That's why when I kill a chicken I always take a piece of meat,

gizzard or liver, and put it near the stairs of the house. That's the way it should be.

The souls of our parents may also punish us if we do not pray or have a mass said for them. And if you are punished in this way, nothing can help you. Only when a mass is said will the illness disappear. Like Pastor Gamboa who came to me after spending P400 with a doctor in Tagum. I talked to him about having a mass said for his parents and tears came into his eyes. He recalled that he had never prayed for his father or mother. He had a mass said and was freed from his illness.

When I am healing, my spirits are assisting me. They are my *abyan* or allies. I have befriended them and they have helped me. I have put my trust in them. The spirits are like the souls of those who are already dead in the grave. They are like the people who are not baptized. These spirits are my allies. I call upon them when someone is sick. They are the ones who look into the sickness and determine what has happened and what must be done.

I have eighteen allies though some are not always around. The ones who care, I call upon first. I will not mention their names. They might not like it. When they enter my body, I shake and tremble. Two or three are there at each offering. If they all entered me at once, I could be overpowered and die.

When a *premechas* is offered, I prepare the wine, *tuba*, eggs, cigarette, tobacco, and incense. A chicken or pig is killed depending upon the offense. Often I am assisted by the *aghoy*. Things I need appear from nowhere with whistles from the north, east, and west. Then I put on my red turban and sash and call upon my allies. When they possess me, I don't remember what I say. They are the ones talking and acting through me. The unseen people are asked to come to the table and join the banquet. No one can see them. Even my wife only sees the one offering the *premechas*. They are asked for their forgiveness, and little by little, the request is put before them.

Once while visiting a friend in Tamparan, three men come looking for me. I was upstairs in the house and could hear them talking below. I was not deaf yet. It was the mayor of Tamparan and two policemen. I was frightened that they had come to arrest me. But why, I thought, would they be after me when I had never taken money from the sick.

I came down and introduced myself. The mayor did the same. Then he explained his problem. A road was being built through Malibay. A bulldozer had turned upside down killing the driver. Other men with picks and shovels were brought to the hospital and some of them died there. Then when white monkeys were seen in a bamboo grove near the construction site, everyone refused to work.

I asked the mayor if there would be trouble with the government; for they might come after me. He assured me that that would not happen for he

was the one who wanted it. He then pulled out a pencil and paper and started to write down what was needed: pig, wine, *tuba*, cigarettes, rice, eggs, and betel nut. I told them to choose a black pig and set the day for Friday.

Friday morning came, and we left from the mayor's house in his jeep. A truck followed loaded with three tables and three large pigs. When we reached the construction site, I placed one of the tables in the bamboo grove and the other two to each side of it. An American arrived. I did not know whether to start with him there or not. The mayor explained that he was the engineer in charge of the project and had agreed to the ceremony.

I called upon the evil ones in the bamboo trees to attend the *premecias*. Everything had been placed on the tables. Then my ally played the guitar and ordered the mayor to dance. Everybody danced; even the bearded, long-nosed American. They danced and fired shots in the air. I was not aware of this until later, but some in the group were afraid that they were going to shoot each other. After the dancing stopped, they rested.

I struck an axe into a bamboo shoot. "If this axe falls to the ground," I said, "the construction may not continue; but if it stays in place, the work may go on." That was on Friday. By Sunday we would know. Then I invited everyone to eat leaving enough space around the tables.

On Sunday, we went back to the bamboo grove and found the axe still in place. The people living there had agreed. The work would continue. The workers who were still alive in the hospital also recovered. I don't know, maybe that road has reached Surigao by now. I tried to make them understand. "This is a project of the government. Don't hinder it. All of us can benefit. Even your cars can pass on this road." I had to approach them in the right way.

I will tell you more about my allies. Their names are Badoro, Pa, Makasa, Dioskalo, and Osi. They are the fierce ones. Pa can heal a wound in the blink of an eye. In the beginning, I could hardly understand their language. They have different names for wine, cigar, cigarettes, incense, betel nut, pig, chickens, and eggs. Even their name for moon is different. I tried to learn their language and my head was banging inside for a long time. But when I speak they can easily hear me from Leyte, Cebu of Bohol. I call and they are here. But I will not call them now. I only call if someone is sick and needs to be treated.

There is a healer in Kabadian named Conrado. He is very powerful and feared by the people. At one offering, he killed ten chickens. We were together. When we finished the ceremony, I laid my bolo on the table and he laid his next to mine. Then as I turned to go, he seized his bolo and stabbed me in the back. His wife ran to me surprised to find that I was not wounded. My shirt was not even ripped. Dioskalo, my ally, had taken hold of Conrado's

bolo and had thrown it away. When I learned that this happened, I was really scared.

That night at Conrado's house, I stayed awake and kept my bolo by my side. I told my companion to do the same. I had reason to be on guard. The people staying at Conrado's were all criminals. But, nothing happened to us. The next morning they came up to me and asked me for defense.

In some places there are many sorcerers. It's hard to be without a defense. In Cantikan, a sorcerer tried to destroy me but he could not penetrate my power. When he touched me, his bottle crushed into small pieces. I could hear the glass breaking in his pocket. Good, my ally pinched me. The men were carrying a hidden power.

A sorcerer will pat you on the back and you will die right away. If someone pats you on the back, do the same to him. If you are sitting on a bus and a man taps his finger on the seat, do the same to counter the attack.

There are many kinds of sorcery. *Barang* is a kind that is bred by its owner. A beetle is fed with violet ginger to make its offspring black. That's the one used for *barang*. The sorcerer ties a piece of hair to its body and tells it whom to bite. Then it flies and comes to rest. If, the hair is covered with blood when it comes back, the victim has been sorcerized.

I used to go into the caves on Good Fridays, but here in Davao, there are none. To go into the caves is a test for someone who wants to acquire power. When you go to the caves, knock outside first and do not go further until you hear a knock from within. As you enter, there is a snake coiled high, ready to strike. Stay away from it. As you move inside, there are many turns from side to side. You may be startled and frightened at what you see but do not make a sound. If I meet another healer, we undergo a compact. If not, one of us will be killed. With my bolo I cut his flesh. With his bolo he cuts mine. Then I drink his blood and he drinks mine. Next, we find out whose power is the stronger. I take my oil and run it into his wound and he takes his oil and rubs it into mine. If his oil is not able to heal my wound in two days his oil has no power. It means he lacks authority. He lacks prayer. From that time on, he will not be able to heal. If, however, my oil is able to heal his wound in two days, it is the proof that I have the power.

Here in Davao, I gather the herbs and roots needed for my medicine on the six Fridays that the stations of the cross are said. On Good Friday, I chop them into pieces and lay them on the table. The oil is also placed there. Then I call upon the allies to come and add their power.

When I treat a sickness with my medicine, I know if I can help. My allies will tell me. Some sickness is serious and there is nothing I can do. But sometimes, I can help even when it seems that I cannot.

In Dipalo, where we lived before, the child of Lourdes had died. Lourdes was so taken up with grief that she was ready to go out and drown herself. I was there but there was nothing I could do. The child was dead. They had already covered her with a sheet. I turned my back to go away but my allies stopped me. "Put your fingers on her throat," they said. "She is not yet dead. Treat her with your herbs." I went back and felt her pulse. She was still alive. Then I rubbed my medicine on her temple, her pulse, and over her heart. The child sat up and asked to eat some rice porridge.

When they plan to visit, my allies will tell me to prepare something for them. They usually come when the moon is full. Because I am poor, I am not always able to buy something. What I do then is to leave some wine in an empty bottle of pomade and burn some incense near it. If I forget to do this, they will bang on the walls and floor of the house. This really scares my wife. Most of the time I remember to leave the wine. After three days, I'll look and find that it is empty.

So this is the reason why you came, to ask questions. You are the one my ally said was coming. He said that there was a visitor who was supposed to come.

Discussion

The account of Segundo Salvacion embodies much of how experience is interpreted within the peasant world view of healing and religion.

1) Segundo's narrative reflects the influence of the Christian tradition upon the indigenous tradition. His account of the origin of the unseen people is actually a reinterpretation of an indigenous myth within the context of a Christian one.

2) For Segundo, it is not a question whether one is to believe or not to believe in the unseen people. One must believe, otherwise there will be consequences. A man died because he cleared a fishpond and would not agree to make an offering.

3) Segundo acquired his power through sickness. This was a sign that he had been chosen, and that it was a means, perhaps, to purify his inner self. Segundo was free to accept the power although he would only become well if he did so. He recognized that there were powers of the evil as well as of the good and he would only consent to the power if it was of the good. He accepted the power and became well, a sign that the power and his sickness were related.

4) Segundo attests to the fact that his power to heal comes from God. Through His mercy, many people have become well.

5) For those who speak against the power, there are consequences. Segundo's own *kumpare* talked against it and his tongue reach down to the middle of his chest. In healing his *kumpare*, Segundo turned the disparage-

ment of his power into a proof of its efficacy.

6) Segundo realizes that his indigenous practices are looked down upon in the larger culture. To legitimize these practices within the larger culture, he makes an analogy between the offering of a *premecias* and the acceptable Christian practice of offering food and drink to the souls of the dead.

7) In the world of Segundo, illnesses are related to transgressions. Such illnesses cannot be cured by doctors. One will only spend a lot of money and get no results. Humans must maintain proper relationships with the spirits. If a transgression has been committed, restoration has to be made. It is like the payment of a debt. To avoid transgressions, treat the spirits like your neighbors. Remember to share with them.

8) There are also illnesses that are punishments to make humans remember. The souls of our parents may punish us if we do not pray or have a mass said for them.

9) Segundo is intimate with his allies. They are his friends. They enter his body and speak through him. They are also very powerful. Segundo does not take the relationship lightly. He only calls them if someone is sick and needs to be treated.

10) Segundo's power is not to be used for business. He states that he has never taken money from the sick.

11) The fact that a mayor and an American engineer seek out the help of Segundo is both a recognition of his power in these matters and an acknowledgment of the ineffectiveness of their own. (Robert Love makes a distinction between power as *magaling* or *gahum* and power as *malakas* or *kusog*.)⁶

12) The unseen spirits are offered pig, wine, *tuba*, cigarettes, rice, eggs and beetle nut. The souls of the dead are offered prayers and masses.

13) Segundo has the power of divination or the power to interpret signs. "If the axe falls to the ground," he said, "the construction may not continue, but if it stays in place, the work may go on."

14) To get the spirits to agree to the construction of the road, Segundo had to approach them in the right way, as most Filipinos, no doubt, would have had to approach one another.

15) There are people, such as sorcerers, who cultivate power to harm others. To counteract this power, one must not be without a defense.

16) People with power compete with one another to see whose power is stronger. The strength of one's power is related to one's inner self which must be tested and purified in rituals like going into the caves on Good Friday. If one's power is not effective it means that he lacks prayer, he lacks authority.

17) The articulation of the indigenous tradition with the Christian tradition is seen in the importance given to Holy Week. This is the time to test one's power, to gather herbs and roots and to make one's medicine.

18) Segundo recognizes limits to his power but sometimes he can help even when it seems that he cannot, like the cure of the child of Lourdes.

19) The allies of Segundo are his friends. They are also a bit temperamental. If he forgets to leave something for them, they will bang on the walls and the floor of his house.

20) Segundo has the power to look into the future. His allies had told him that I was coming to visit him.

NOTES

1 Murray Wax and Rosalie Wax, "The Notion of Magic," Current Anthropology 4 (1963): 501.

2 Murray Wax, "Religion and Magic," in Introduction to Cultural Anthropology, James Clifton, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968), p. 236.

3 Wax and Wax, "The Notion of Magic," p. 502.

4 Murray Wax and Rosalie Wax, "The Magical World View," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 1 (1962): 102-183.

5 Reynaldo Ileto, Pasyon and Revolution, Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910. (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 1979), pp. 32-33.

6 Robert Love, "The Samahan of Papa God, Tradition and Conversation in a Tagalog Peasant Religious Movement," unpublished dissertation, Cornell University, 1977.