

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE UNHOLY SPIRITS

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I like the title you chose for this presentation, “The Holy Spirit and the Unholy Spirits.” I don’t want to sound like some semantics parsing politicians from years gone by, but it seems to me that the first task is to determine what is meant by “unholy spirits,” and then see if the spirits that were part of the cosmology of the Enga people of Papua New Guinea could be fairly called, “unholy.” And then secondly, to determine if those spirits that were so central to what we would regard as the “religious” life of the Enga people could be equated with the demons and unclean spirits that Jesus encountered and exorcised from people in the gospels.

I do not necessarily regard everything “unholy” as also being “evil.” For instance, I understand that I and everyone I know could legitimately be labeled as “unholy” based on the fact that we are imperfect and sinful. And yet, I would hesitate to label myself and most people I know as “evil.” The inhabitants of the highlands of Papua New Guinea believed their world to be populated with a virtual pantheon of spirits that, generally speaking, were more dangerous than helpful. However, I concluded early on in my ministry among the Enga people that while those spirits could fairly be classified as unholy, I did not think it fair or accurate to call them “evil.” And so, my thesis is that the invisible beings with which the Enga people related through a variety of rituals that we would characterize as religious were unholy spirits, but not necessarily demons, and that is the starting point for considering the work of the Holy Spirit in that context.

Anthropologist Polly Weissner who has done extensive research among the Enga provided me with a chapter on Enga Religion from a yet to be published book on Enga culture. The final paragraph of the chapter seemed like a good place for us to begin our thinking on this topic. She wrote,

“In Enga religion, beings in the spirit world were considered to be largely detached from human life on earth. The god Aitawe, the sky people and the ancestors were rarely believed to interfere with the lives of individuals or to punish individuals for wrong doings... . Illness and death were blamed largely on ghost attacks by recently deceased close relatives...It was believed that the sky people and ancestors would help with the fertility of the environment and growth of crops, children and pigs if the appropriate rituals were held to communicate with them. People united to hold rituals to restore balance and harmony.”(1)

As mentioned in the above paragraph, there were different types of spiritual or invisible beings in the Enga Cosmology and I will begin by providing a brief sketch of them and how they interacted with the Enga people of Papua New Guinea. (2)

AITAWE AND THE YALYAKALI.

The Enga believed that there was a supreme spiritual being that most Enga’s knew as “Aitawe” although in the area where I served, he was also known as “Niki” and “Nita” and even

by the name “Gole” a word remarkably similar to our name “God.” *(It is possible that this name is a variant on the word “God” and was picked up by way of trade routes from areas near the coast that had very early contact with missionaries. However, I think that is unlikely. I learned of this name from some of the elders while talking about their understanding of this spiritual being).* Aitawe was often identified with the sun and was regarded as the creator or source of pretty much all that existed. Aitawe was male and the moon was regarded as female. Aitawe was believed to have spawned a class of angelic beings called “Yalyakali” who are eternal and who inhabited an ideal version of the material, visible world inhabited by the Enga. In the realm of the Yalyakali, gardens produced bountifully and life was truly good (epe). The Yalyakali had access to the “water of life” which was a key reason why they were both eternal and lived without suffering and hardship.

The Yalyakali (3) were the agents by which the material world and its inhabitants came into being. There were myths about the Yalyakali explaining how they were involved in the formation of rivers, lakes and other land forms. Therefore, the social structures and life on earth reflects the world of the Yalyakali and visa versa. In at least one story, the reason human life is hard and painful while that of the Yalyakali is not is that when human women began having children they fed their children with breastmilk before the Yalyakali could intervene and provide the infants with the water of life. And so, (almost a version of original sin??) the children of Papua New Guinea inherited a flawed life that, after the fact, could not be completely remedied, not even by the Yalyakali.

Interestingly enough, very little of the religious activity of the Enga people was directed toward Aitawe and the Yalyakali. They pretty much regarded them as just a part of the Enga reality, much like the sun, moon and stars. Aitawe and the Yalyakali, much like the sun, moon and clouds were essential to their existence, but human activity, even religious activity had minimal influence on these beings. The Yalyakali were regarded as being responsible for meteorological events such as rain, storms, landslides and the like, but rituals focused on the Yalyakali for the purpose of deterring bad weather or bringing good weather were very minimal. Anthropologist Polly Weissner notes that after a big Landslide or storm, the men of a clan would occasionally have a feast at which the Yalyakali were thought to be present and enjoying the aromas of the food they ate. However, there were no special prayers (nemangos) or prescribed rituals associated with this event. It was understood to be just a time of fellowship with these benefactors in which they cultivated a good relationship with them.

Children were taught not to urinate or defecate in the sunlight or in the open where they would be seen by Aitawe or the Yalyakali. Such behavior was considered offensive to the sky beings. But unlike the ancestral spirits who I will talk about in a moment, they did not have required rituals to remedy the situation. The Yalyakali were generally regarded as being benevolent and kindly disposed toward human beings and so their anger over the violation of a taboo would not last and good weather was likely to return.

It is interesting to note that the early missionaries and bible translators chose not to use the name “Aitawe” for God nor the term “Yalyakali” for angels despite the apparent similarities

between the Aitawe and the Yalyakali and God and the Angels. Rather, they initially used a term borrowed from one of the coastal languages of the native evangelists who catechized them, “Anasuu” for God, and later adopted the term “God” from the English language. They also simply adopted the English term Angel with a Melanesian pronunciation (Enjele) for Angels. I asked one of the early Lutheran missionaries to work among the Enga why they did not use the term Aitawe for God. I heard back that at the time they began working among the Enga, they had not yet learned about Aitawe and the Yalyakali. Their knowledge of this aspect of Enga cosmology came later. However, in my opinion, the decision to not use the terms Aitawe and Yalyakali may have been wise. It seems to me that Aitawe and even the Yalyakali were too distant, remote and unengaged to adequately convey the sense of nearness of the God who we address as “Father” and even “Abba.” It is also true that nearly all of the indigenous religious terminology and ritual were so loaded with the freight of their traditional beliefs that many of the Enga people, especially the older ones who remembered the “old ways” could not in good conscience, employ them in the proclamation of the Gospel.

THE “TIMANGOS”

The other invisible beings that were part of the Enga Cosmology were the spirits of the ancestors who in Enga were called “Timangos.” The Timangos were divided into two categories. There were the spirits of the recent dead who were believed to be near at hand, often causing individual cases of sickness and misfortune. And then there was what I would characterize as the “corporate” body or community of ancestral spirits (Polly refers to them as the “pool” of spirits) who were more distant, but who, when offended, could be the cause of widespread problems and disasters such as crop failures, illness, and defeat in battle. The “Timangos” were the spirits that were near at hand and were generally the primary and immediate concern of the Enga people. The Enga felt that if any of these ancestral spirits made their presence known, it spelled trouble for the people. They were almost always thought to cause trouble and almost never regarded as being helpful.

I recall one old Enga man describing the timangos to me in this way. He said that the timangos were like a dog that suddenly appears before you on the trail and begins barking and growling and threatening to attack you. So, in order to proceed down the trail, you take a cooked sweetpotato out of your string bag (bilum) and throw it into the bushes beside the trail. And then, when the dog runs to retrieve the sweetpotato, you slip by him while he is distracted. In other words, most of their religious activity was not aimed at enlisting the help of the ancestral spirits, but in appeasing and distracting them so that the Enga people could proceed with the essential life tasks without being hindered by the angry spirits of the dead.

Missionary Anthropologist and Bible translator Paul Brennan wrote a book entitled, “Let Sleeping Snakes Lie.”(4) This book provides us with an extensive description of the religious life of the Enga people. The title of this book points to the predominate attitude of the Enga toward the timangos, which was to keep the spirits sleeping and uninvolved in their lives. For, if the spirits were awakened (offended) and turned their attention to the humans, their families,

gardens, pigs and possessions were likely to suffer in one way or another. The title of this book also points out that the corporate bodies of ancestral spirits were represented to the people by totems, quite often a snake. The reason for the snake being the tribal totem was generally rooted in a myth which involved the totem and the putative founding father, or family of the clan.

So, if someone spotted the totem, for instance a snake, it was regarded as a sign that the ancestral spirits (timangos) were upset about something and the clan needed to take action to ward off an imminent attack by the timangos. They would consult a medium or “spiritual specialist” (called a “topoli” among other terms in Enga). The job of the specialist was to determine what needed to be done to pacify the ancestors and cause the snake to crawl back into its hole, go back to sleep and leave them in peace. These rituals were major events and involved the entire clan or even neighboring clans in building a special house. They also had special stones called “stones of power” (yaina kuli or kepele kuli) through which they could make contact with the timangos. The rituals almost always involved sacrificing pigs and offering the smell of the pigs to the ancestral spirits and greasing the sacred stones with grease from the cooked pigs while offering prayers (nemangos).

Of course, there are exceptions to every generalization. It is not totally accurate to say that the spirits were always making trouble and never being helpful. For instance, the Kandep Enga would sometimes make an arrowhead out of the human bone of an ancestor who was a great warrior believing that if that arrow struck an enemy, the spirit of the dead ancestor would make the arrow extra deadly. The assistance of the ancestral spirits could also be enlisted in identifying the culprits behind criminal acts. It was also the case that when the people gathered for the premiere religious event called the “Kepele” ritual, they would create a basket figure called a Yuu Pini which was a male figure, complete with a penis. The Yuu Pini embodied the ancestral spirits and in the course of the ritual, they simulated intercourse of the basket figure in what was obviously a fertility rite. From this it would appear that the ancestral spirits were being stimulated to aid in the fertility of crops, pigs and people and not just being coaxed into leaving pigs, people and gardens alone and free of damaging interference by the spirits.

However, for most Engas, it was more common to have to deal with the negative effects of individual spirits of the recent dead on an individual level. In this case, the person or family was not dealing with the corporate body of ancestral spirits, but with a single angry spirit of a relatively recently deceased relative. And this was not occasioned by the appearance of a snake or widespread crop failure or illness, but by a sick child, or by the miscarriage by a pig, or some harmful incident attributed to the angry spirit of someone who had recently died but whose spirit had not yet moved on down and joined the corporate body of the ancestors.

I once had an evangelist come to a gathering of church leaders in a panic about what had occurred the night before. An Evangelist in a congregation across the valley had died, and this young man was sent to take his place. In addition to taking the dead evangelists place in the pulpit, he also chose to live and sleep in the house of the deceased evangelist. Overnight, he was awakened to the door rattling as if someone were trying to get into the house. Suddenly he was knocked out of his bed by an invisible presence and went screaming out of the house. The

consensus among the other church leaders was that the spirit of the dead evangelist had returned to his house as was customary for the spirits of the recently deceased, was upset at being locked out of his house and having an interloper sleeping in his bed, and attacked the young man. They counseled the terrified young evangelist to put the treasured possessions of the dead man out in front of the door. Then, when the spirit came by, it would find its things there, revisit them and then, satisfied, leave without causing any trouble and would eventually leave the area.

According to pre-Christian practice, if someone got sick or there was some other existential problem, the individual and family would need to enlist the services of a topoli (a seer/medium/specialist) to help determine what spirit was causing the problem; whether the spirit could be appeased by a ritual sacrifice of a pig, and if so, what pig? And finally, the specialist would need to prescribe the manner and location of the sacrifice. Once this information was discerned by the specialist, the family would carry out the prescribed ritual with the hope that the spirit would be appeased, leave off attacking the individual or pig, and go away to become a part of the corporate body of ancestral spirits.

I got the impression that some missionaries believed that the “timangos” were to be identified with the demons and unclean spirits that we read about in the Bible, and that they were either the servants of or manifestations of the Devil. I always had problems with that. Most of the spirits they were dealing with were the spirits of Grandpa Nenge and Grandma Jopadama, Uncle Imbu and Cousin Muliwana. It just didn’t seem to me that equating the devil with Grandpa Nenge was doing justice to the devil or Grandpa Nenge. I was happy to find that in the 1988 Enga translation of the New Testament, they did not translate “demons” and “unclean spirits” with the term “timango.” So, in the Enga New Testament, the spirits who Jesus regularly cast out of people were not the ancestral spirits. Instead of translating the Greek words for “demons” and “unclean spirits” as “timango” they used the term, “enjele koo” which borrows the English word “angel” and simply adds the word “koo” which means “bad.” So, the demons (Mark 3:22) and unclean spirits (Mark 5:2) in the initial translation of the Enga Bible are called quite literally, “bad angels.” A truly traditional Enga man or woman would not know what an angel was unless someone explained it to them, but, I suspect it was at least better than giving them the impression that their dead relatives were demons and evil spirits.

The 1988 translation of the New Testament into the Enga language is currently being revised under the guidance of a Mr. Adam Boyd. I contacted him to see how he and his team were translating the terms “unclean spirit” and “demon.” He said that they didn’t feel that the Enga language had the capacity to differentiate between demons and unclean spirits. They did jettison the term “bad angels” however, and instead used the term “imambu koo” which literally interpreted means, “bad breath.” However, as in the biblical languages, the term “imambu” can mean both breath and spirit so it probably isn’t too bad an attempt at translation. The usual invocation to worship in Enga uses the term “Imambu Epe Doko” (literally translated, “the Good Breath”) for the Holy Spirit, so using the term “imambu koo” makes the demons and unclean spirits the opposite of the holy spirit, and that might not be as good a way as any to think of them.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE UNHOLY SPIRITS.

There is no question but that the timangos as experienced by the Enga people were “unholy spirits.” They were petulant, vindictive, bore grudges and inflicted harm and misfortune upon people. However, I do not think it accurate to regard them as evil or demonic in the sense of being the minions of Satan or the devil. And, what’s more, as the Gospel was preached and lived and as the Holy Spirit (the “Imambu Epe Doko”) went to work among the people of Papua New Guinea, I am inclined to think that the timangos along with the people experienced at least a measure of what we regard as the work of the Holy Spirit, namely “sanctification.” I am not naïve enough to think that all vestiges of the old religious practices were abandoned. I am sure that among many of the people even today, when a pig is killed, they dedicate the spirit of the pig and the aroma of that cooked pork to ancestral spirits. But overall, as the Grace of God has leavened the lives of the people, I saw evidence that it was leavening the people’s perceptions of and relationships with those “unholy” (but not necessarily evil) ancestral spirits. Let me share this story that I think might illustrate this.

Pastor Andale was a good friend and colleague, and pastor of the local congregation. He related to me that once a woman in the congregation had gotten very sick and died. And so, they had a Christian funeral service and buried her. That night, some of the people thought they heard leaves rustling on her grave and worried that she was not really dead. They decided that they needed to dig her up and make sure that they had not made a terrible mistake (after all, they didn’t have heart and brainwave monitors to determine if a person had truly “flatlined”). Andale tried to dissuade them, but without success. So, they dug up her body to see if she was really dead, and not surprisingly, they discovered that she was indeed deceased.

At this point, they became very fearful that her spirit was angry that they had dug her up, disturbed her grave and might make known her anger by causing trouble. Shortly after that, Andale’s daughter became quite sick, and he was concerned that the illness was caused by the irate spirit of the woman. He was supposed to attend a meeting at a church across the valley that would last overnight and he was debating whether he should go, or stay with his daughter who was ill. That night, the spirit of the woman spoke to him through the whistling of his daughter while she slept. It was not unusual for spirits of the dead to communicate through whistling (called “Yopo Lenge) that was intelligible to certain people. Andale related that through the whistling the spirit of the woman told him that she was not angry. She told him that when the people ate pig, she would be there eating with them. When they worshipped, she would worship with them. When they communed, she would commune with them. She told Andale to go to his meeting and when he returned, his daughter would be well. Andale attended the meeting which took him away from his home and daughter for a period of days, and when he returned, his daughter was fully recovered.

In other words, the spirit of the dead woman was still regarded as real by the Christian people of Enga. It still hung around her old haunts among her family and clan members very much like the people understood spirits to behave in the pre-Christian era. There was still fear

that by offending the spirit, the people might suffer because of her anger. However, because she had been a member of the communion of saints, namely, the church (something that is accomplished through the work of the Holy Spirit), the attitude of the woman's spirit toward those who had disturbed her grave was markedly different from what would have been expected in the pre-Christian era. She was still a member of that community and more importantly, that "communion of saints," and as such, she was not offended by what they did to her grave, but regarded the people in a kind and gracious manner. Was this not a sign of the "Holy spirit" working not only among the living, but also among the spirits of the dead??

I assume that the key question is, "what if any impact did/does the Holy Spirit have upon the unholy spirits that were very real and important characters in the Enga world? Did the Holy Spirit lead the people to conclude that the "Timangos" did not exist? Did the Holy Spirit become the protector of God's people and enfold the people in a spiritual force field that deflected the attacks of the ancestral spirits? Or, did the Holy Spirit have a sanctifying effect upon the ancestral spirits *as well* as the baptized people of God and actually have a transformative effect upon those spirits along with the people? I suspect that all three scenarios were true for some of the people. However, I believe that the last scenario was common among the people of PNG as well as being more consistent with our theology of the Holy Spirit.

In Luther's explanation to the third article, we read that the Holy Spirit "has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts and kept me in the true faith just as he *calls, gathers, enlightens and makes holy the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith*" (italics added). It is my contention that as the Holy Spirit called, gathered, enlightened and made holy the people of Papua New Guinea it created a ripple effect that radiated out and had an impact on the entire Enga Cosmos. We understand that the creation of the church, the communion of saints means that people have been reconciled to God and come to "fear, love and trust" in God above all things. But it also means that people are reconciled to their neighbors. There is a sanctifying of the horizontal relationships between people and their neighbors. I contend that as the Holy Spirit worked to sanctify and reconcile the Enga individuals with one another (including traditional tribal enemies in at least some cases), that reconciling work also leavened the relationships the Enga people had with their timangos or ancestral spirits. I suggest that the story I just told is one illustration of how an unholy ancestral spirit (a timango) was changed through the work of the Holy Spirit and became, if not holy, at least less unholy. I would contend that the Holy Spirit changed the Enga people and their world to the point that although the timangos were still real, they had been brought in from the cold, and in a sense, integrated into a new world view that included them as having been transformed by the Holy Spirit in a way that might almost be called "sanctification."

And, I found evidence this even applied to ancestral spirits who pre-dated the arrival of Christianity. In the Finschhafen region of Papua New Guinea there is a very unique church in a village named Malaseega. There is a famous wood carver who came from that village and whose work is prominent in that church building as well as many others. The ridge of the roof is supported by a line of tall posts which are beautifully carved in human images. The rafters slant

down from the ridge pole to the side walls and then for a distance outside and beyond the side walls where they rest upon much shorter but also artistically carved posts. These posts stand on the outside of the walls of the church, but are still part of the structure by virtue of them being the outermost supports of the rafters of the church. Those posts are also ornately carved with human figures.

If you ask what the carvings represent, they will tell you that the carved poles that stand inside the church walls represent the ancestors who were Christian and died in the faith. The carved posts holding up the roof but standing outside the walls of the church represent the pre-Christian ancestors, the ones who died before the coming of the Gospel to their lands. This architecture of the church suggests that those ancestral spirits are no longer regarded as lurking about in the forest, waiting to attack, but have actually been brought near to the present day Christian Community. Although they were not regarded as being fully Christian and part of the communion of saints in the same way as the baptized ancestors, there is a relationship to the communion of saints and it certainly suggests that it is not an antagonistic one. It appears to me that the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel of Jesus Christ changed more than just individual human hearts. The Holy Spirit sanctified more than just the human beings sitting in the pews during worship services. In with and under the sanctification of those people, the Holy Spirit was also sanctifying the very cosmos of the people of Papua New Guinea and thereby changing the nature of the timangos and their relationships to the rest of the community.

I believe that for many if not most Enga Christians, the Holy Spirit led them to see their ancestral spirits in a different light. I am not convinced that those spirits really did and do exist. However, neither am I convinced that they do not. In the same way, I am not sure if the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit just changed the thinking of the Papua New Guinean Christians about the timangos, or made a holy change in the very timangos themselves. But I do believe that things did change for the Christians in Papua New Guinea and the change was in their understanding of the nature of those ancestral spirits and their relationships to one another. The timangos too, in one way or another, were encompassed in the sanctifying, reconciling work of the Holy Spirit.

I believe that the truly evil, satanic spirits that afflicted the Christians of Papua New Guinea were the same evil spirits that negatively impact our lives. The spirits that are truly satanic and evil are the spirits of greed, prejudice, vengefulness, pride, covetousness and a few more legions of spirits that corrupt and debase people and their relationships to God and one another. They were just as present, just as real and just as destructive as we can find them anywhere in the world. They fought, mutilated and killed one another over land, lost pigs, old grudges, perceived insults, and countless other considerations that they considered more important than the life and wellbeing of their neighbor. The hunger for power drove “big men” (Akali Andake/Kamongo) to be as ruthless and cruel as anyone on the face of the earth. I spent almost 9 years in Papua New Guinea serving with the Gutnius Lutheran Sios in the Enga Province of Papua New Guinea. For the first couple of years, I was constantly struggling with what I perceived to be the extreme differences between the Enga People and me and my culture. After

a time, I was amazed by how much the same we were and how we battled the same character flaws, the same temptations and the same demons. Me, my Papua New Guinea friends and my American friends were all under attack by the same unholy appetites, the same legions of spirits that like wolves, tried to scatter us and leave us lost to God, and dangerously afraid of one another.

In conclusion, I am suggesting that the Holy Spirit did indeed encounter a plethora of unclean, “unholy” ancestral spirits (timangos) among the people of Papua New Guinea. But I would also suggest that the encounter did not result in the Holy Spirit turning into a Divine Ninja and driving out the unholy timangos and problematic ancestral spirits in the manner in which Jesus did as recorded in the Gospels. Rather, I suggest that the Holy Spirit did exactly what the Holy Spirit is famous for doing. The Holy Spirit has been calling, gathering, enlightening and making holy the people of God, and reconciling them into a new cosmic communion that transcends cultures, languages, races, regions and generations, and includes both the living and the dead. And so, speaking both theologically and from the experience of the people of Papua New Guinea, can we not conclude that the Holy Spirit has done this sanctifying work, not just for the unholy people who heard the gospel, but also for the unholy spirits with whom they lived?

1. *Chapter 17, p. 14 of a soon to be published book on traditional Enga Culture and Life written and edited by Anthropologist Dr. Polly Weissner. The chapter is entitled, “Enga Beliefs and Rituals.”*
2. *The information about the spiritual inhabitants of the Enga people is drawn largely from my own recollections of conversations and experiences while serving in Papua New Guinea with the Gutnius Lutheran Sios from 1975-1983. I also drew information from the book, Let Sleeping Snakes Lie, Paul W. Brennan; Australian Association for the Study of Religions (1977), and from the above cited work by Dr. Polly Weissner.*
3. *In the Kandep region of Enga Province where I served, the Yalyakali were known as Tai Akali. There were a number of significant differences in terminology and customs between the Enga in the central part of the province and the Kandep which was on the edge of the province and thus borrowed customs and words from their neighbors to the south in Mendi and Tari.*
4. *Brennan, Paul W. Let Sleeping Snakes Like; Australian Association for the Study of Religions (1977).*