

## EDITORIAL

The goal of the *Melanesian Journal of Theology* is to publish articles that address from a theological perspective issues facing the church in the South Pacific. We strive to publish articles authored by Melanesians or, more broadly, South Pacific islanders in an effort to create indigenous, biblically-based dialogue across the South Pacific for the benefit of readers of this journal.

The two articles in this volume focus on Vanuatu. Each of the authors comes from Vanuatu. Lionel Tom calls the island of Espiritu Santo home, while Tanna is home for Christopher Kouha. These two men have been involved with the master's program at the Christian Leaders' Training College at Banz for the past two years. They graduated in 2014. The following papers are copies of the theses written for their MTh degrees.

Lionel looks at folk religious practices and makes a thorough comparison between Christianity's biblical gift of healing, Christo-pagan healers, and the concept of traditional healing among the Akey people. The Akey of Vanuatu are Lionel's people group, so he is well qualified to research the whole question of biblical healing versus Christo-pagan and traditional healing.

In dealing with the Akey worldview, his research looks at the cultural question of the involvement of spirits in disease and steps that are usually taken to combat these spirits. Lionel also looks at the Akey syncretistic worldview, in which Akey people who attend church continue to perform healing, are performing healing, divination, and exorcism in the name of Jesus. These issues are discussed under the heading of those who are Christo-pagan.

In his comparisons between the Christo-pagan healer and the traditional healer with biblical healing, Lionel calls for a transformation of the worldview of the Akey people. There is also a need for spiritual transformation, so that the Akey people would better understand the relation between God and the spirits and follow a biblical view of sickness, health, and healing.

In his paper, Christopher seeks to conduct careful research on the Tannese primal gods, their nature, some characteristics of their relationship to humankind, and vice versa. These are then compared to the God of the Bible, for the purpose of educating and discipling Tannese Christians, as well as strengthening their faith in God.

He raises the question of traditional gods and their relationship to humans. The characteristics of traditional gods are discussed, with an explanation of how the Tannese people have tried to manipulate their traditional gods.

After discussing the relationship of traditional gods to humans, Christopher then proceeds to discuss God's relationship to humans. Discussion of God's relationship to humans covers the range of God's attributes and characteristics, including love, grace, and mercy, which all have the purpose of leading people to salvation.

In emphasising individual Christian intellectual growth, Christopher suggests that a possible course of action for Tannese Christians would be to understand their culture, understand their Bible, and, finally, to understand themselves.

We hope that the articles in this volume will challenge you to think deeply about theological issues facing Melanesia and the South Pacific.

Finally, the *Melanesian Journal of Theology* wishes to thank Doug Hanson for 16 years of editorship of the Journal. Doug took over as editor with issue 15-2 in 1999, and has worked hard to maintain the vision and aims of the Journal since then.

About six years ago, Doug shared with me his dream of making all back issues of the *Melanesian Journal of Theology* available online. This became a major project, because the text of the early issues of the Journal was typewritten, with proofs, literally, being cut and pasted together to prepare each issue.

In the process of making each issue available online, various errors, which had been noted after initial publication, were addressed, with notations by the revising editor against major corrections. Printed copies of the

*Melanesian Journal of Theology* ceased in 2012, and all issues, together with a progressive index of all issues, are now available online.

Doug has left the Christian Leaders' Training College and has taken up an appointment with a college in the United States which trains Native American Indians to minister to Native American Indians. Meanwhile, we welcome Scott Charlesworth who taught at Pacific Adventist University from 2008-2014. After a vote was taken by the current members of the MATS Executive Committee, Scott has accepted the position of Editor of the *Melanesian Journal of Theology*.

Robyne Hobson  
Assistant Editor

## **DISCERNING THE WORK OF GOD IN HEALING ON VANUATU: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE AKEY PEOPLE ON THE ISLAND OF ESPIRITU SANTO**

**Lionel Tom**

*Lionel Tom comes from the island of Espiritu Santo in Vanuatu. He has been involved with the master's program at the Christian Leaders' Training College at Banz for the past two years, and graduated in 2014. Lionel is now lecturing at CLTC.*

### **ABSTRACT**

Christianity was introduced to the Akey People almost 100 years ago. Despite the presence of the gospel, many people are still living double lives. It is discouraging to see that people, who regularly attend church services on Sunday and participate in other church activities, are still involved in traditional healing. Because of their allegiance to the Christian community, those who practice traditional healing adopt the name of Jesus, with the result that they practice a Christo-pagan form of healing.

The Christo-pagan practice of healing is practised in the churches. Satan imitates the genuine "gift of healing" (1 Cor 12:9), including visions and dreams, and gives to his servants, the Christo-pagan healers, counterfeit gifts of the Holy Spirit. The situation has greatly disturbed God's people. Many have been led astray from their faith, and others are left with the erroneous conclusion that, because healing is being performed, the power must be of God.

The goal of this paper is to guide the Akey people, both ordinary Christians and church leaders on the island of Santo in Vanuatu, to discern the work of God in healing. As Merrill F. Unger urges:

In the age-end upsurge of deluding demonism and diabolic miracle, it is high time for all God's born-again children to claim the genuine spiritual gift of "discerning of spirits" (1 Cor 12:10) and to see through popular occult healing methods and movements of our day. Otherwise they too run

the risk of being taken in by every religiously-camouflaged act where the demonic masquerades as the divine.<sup>1</sup>

This study unpacks and compares three different methods of healing, the traditional, biblical, and Christo-pagan. It makes a critical evaluation of the Christo-pagan methods of healing, and finishes with pastoral recommendations which conclude with a few practical guidelines on how to discern the work of God.

## INTRODUCTION

### BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The issue to be addressed in this study is found all over Vanuatu. This study, however, will only focus on the island of Espiritu Santo, particularly among the Akey people, due to the author's familiarity with that people group. It is instructive to start by informing ourselves about those places.

#### *Zone of the Study*

The Republic of Vanuatu is made up of 90 islands, and is divided into six provinces (see Figure 1). Vanuatu is situated in the South Pacific Ocean, at a distance of "some 1,750 kilometres (1,090 miles) east of northern Australia, 500 kilometres (310 miles) northeast of New Caledonia, and is west of Fiji, and southeast of the Solomon Islands, near New Guinea".<sup>2</sup> The population of Vanuatu is around 243,304, according to the 2009 census.<sup>3</sup>

The predominant religion on Vanuatu is Christianity, which consists of several denominations. It was estimated that Christianity accounts for about 94.08 percent; with ethnoreligionist, 3.4 percent; Baha'i, 1.8 percent; non-religious, 0.5 percent; Buddhist, 0.17 percent; and Muslim, 0.05 percent.<sup>4</sup> Vanuatu has at least 105 languages. In addition, "Vanuatu's constitution establishes Bislama (also spelt Bichlamar) as the national

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<sup>1</sup> Merrill F. Unger, "Divine Healing", in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128:511 (July 1971), pp. 234-244.

<sup>2</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vanuatu>, accessed April 7, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Jason Mandryk, *Operation World*, 7th edn, Colorado Springs CO: Biblica Publishing, 2010, p. 876.

language, and English and French as official languages”.<sup>5</sup> The Republic of Vanuatu is a parliamentary democracy,<sup>6</sup> with a Westminster-style constitution.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Espiritu Santo***

The focus of this study will be on the island, which was first visited by the Portuguese navigator, Fernandes de Queiros, in 1605, which he named Espiritu Santo, which means “the Land of the Holy Spirit”.<sup>8</sup> Espiritu Santo is the largest island of the group. It covers a surface of approximately 4,010 square km,<sup>9</sup> and has a population of 45,855,<sup>10</sup> according to the 2009 census. It forms a province by itself called Sanma (see Figure 1).

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<sup>5</sup> Franco Zocca, “Case studies: Melanesia, Vanuatu”, in *Globalisation and the Re-shaping of Christianity in the Pacific Islands*, Manfred Ernst, ed., Suva Fiji: Pacific Theological College, 2006, p. 212.

<sup>6</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vanuatu>, accessed April 7, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Zocca, “Case studies”, p. 212.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> <http://vanuatu.travel/index.php/en/discover-the-islands/espirtu-santo>, accessed May 2, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> *Census of Population and Housing: 2009 Basic Tables Report*, Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2009, p. 11.

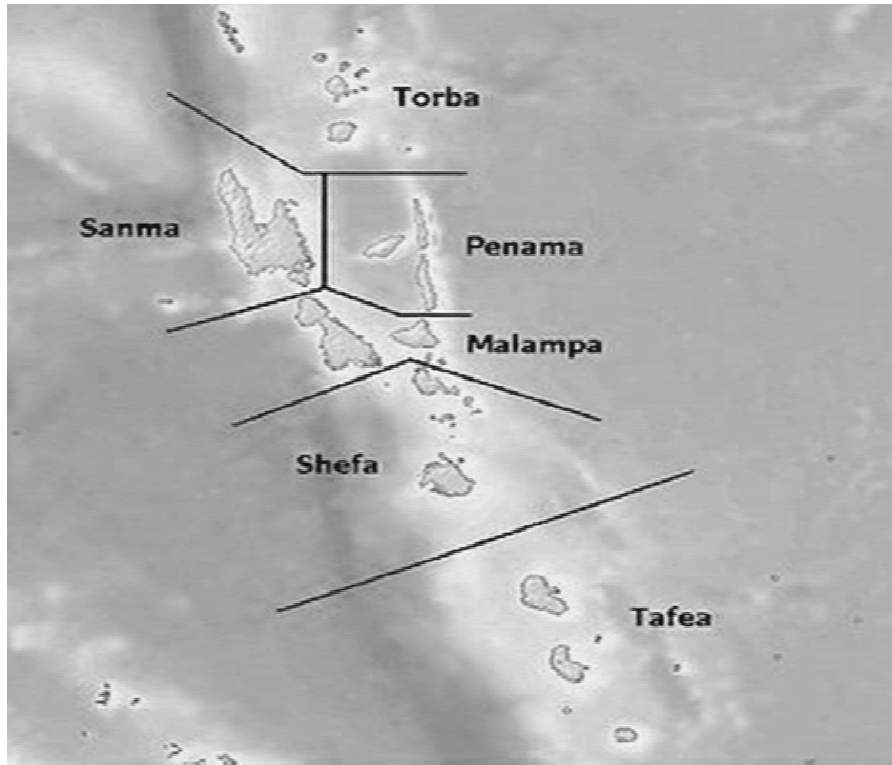


Figure 1: The map of Vanuatu<sup>11</sup>

The Akey people, who occupy the southern and western part of the island, and into the interior of the island, are the people chosen for our study (see Figure 2). This group of people has rich cultural values, which are rarely studied by anthropologists and, therefore, are not widely known. As a product of those beautiful cultural values, it interested the author to study the practices of his own people, in order to distinguish areas which, in the light of God's word, contribute to the maintenance of the spiritual welfare of people, together with those who need to be transformed.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vanuatu>, accessed April 7, 2014.

## PURPOSE OF STUDY

In 1 Cor 12:4-11 Paul teaches that healing is one of the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to Christians for building up the body of Christ, the church. Healing in the name of Jesus is common in the New Testament, but today it raises many questions in the Evangelical church of Vanuatu, particularly among the Akey people on the Island of Santo.



Figure 2: The map of Espiritu Santo<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> [www.hemamaps.com.au](http://www.hemamaps.com.au), accessed April 7, 2014.



Since we (Melanesians) have an integrated worldview, believing in spirits has influenced our spiritual practices and beliefs. This worldview causes much confusion and many problems which need to be cleared up. God's precious gift of healing has been abused, because it is not exercised under the influence and authority of the Holy Spirit, but under the influence and authority of the spirits. There is a mixture of healing practices which combine some biblical and traditional practical aspects. Many Akey people believe them to be equal in power and, therefore, use both. In other cases, there is more focus on traditional healing, in the name of Christ, which makes it look Christian, but really it is Christo-pagan in practice. One of the most challenging issues among the leaders and members of the Evangelical church of Vanuatu is to differentiate between which healings are from God and which are not, because some people are performing traditional healings under the banner of Christianity. This reminds us of Paul's warning, "For even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness" (2 Cor 11:14-15b). Furthermore, Jesus warns

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father, who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons, and perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matt 7:21-23).

In other words, Jesus warns there will be people performing healing in his name who are not Christians. Their works aim to counterfeit the good works of God. That is a problem that we can find all over Vanuatu, particularly among the Akey people.

Amid the deep confusion among Christians concerning healing, whether done purely in the name of Jesus or not, the proper place for seeking healing needs clarification. To settle the issue and the confusion at hand, the scriptures advise, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). In that regard, this paper is titled "Discerning the work of God on healing in Vanuatu". Since we have "the ability to distinguish between spirits" (1 Cor 12:10), the purpose of this

research is to help us to discern the work of God in so-called gifts of healing which people use and claim to be done in the name of Jesus. In other words, the aim of this paper is to “test the spirits” and “distinguish between the spirits” that sometimes counterfeit the gift of God, the gift of healing. The big question to be explored is, “On what basis can it be decided whether healing is done in the name of Jesus or not?” To accomplish this research, we will be exploring the customary concept of traditional healing and the biblical understanding of healing, and using them to evaluate the Christo-pagan methods of healing in order to find out their basis and make a recommendation.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Some key questions need to be raised in order to guide the research to achieve its purpose. What is the customary concept of traditional healing among the Akey people? What is the Christian understanding of biblical healing? What is the understanding and practice of syncretistic Christo-paganism on healing? What are the differences and similarities found among the Christo-pagan, traditional, and biblical understandings of healing? What should be the recommendations on healing practices?

### **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology followed in this research is mainly literature based: archival research on books, articles, and journals, which are available in the library, and relevant information from the internet. The resources used must be helpful in the following areas of my research: cultural, anthropological, and biblical study. Lastly, as one of the Akey people, my own experience and observations will be a valuable resource.

### **LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

A delimiting factor is that this study will be restricted to archival research, due to time and financial constraints for proper field research. Other delimiting factors are that this study will only focus on supernatural healing and the Akey people on the island of Santo. Another limiting factor is that there are limited written resources on Akey culture.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

There are several Akey terms, used in customary healing, that need to be defined:

1. *Vavauli/Tivetivesae* mean the same thing. They refer to a confession made to the healer by the sick person of what laws of nature or law of society they have transgressed.
2. *Avuavuti/Vurevure* mean the same thing. This is the first stage of the process of healing, and means “dust out something”, such as objects taken from the body, in the belief that the angry spirit had used them to inflict pain in the body.
3. *Liliji* is the second stage of the process of healing and means “tying and removing” the spirit who is causing the disease.
4. *Maomao* means “breath”. It is a practice of invoking the healing spirits to give breath and life to a sick person.
5. *Papalani/Lalaoni* mean the same thing. It is the first step of *maomao* and refers to a practice of putting the incanted leaves on the fire and then rubbing them on the body.
6. *Suvisuvi* is the second step of *maomao*. It is a practice of spitting over the whole body of the patient with incanted water.
7. *Kavokavo* is the last step of *maomao*. It means “squeezing something to drink” with an incantation spoken over it.
8. *Christo-pagan healing* is traditional healing practices done in the name of Jesus.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study will be useful for church leaders and ordinary Christians in Vanuatu so that they might discern the genuine work of God amid the diverse approaches to healing, in particular the Christo-pagan practices of healing.

## SUMMARY

This section has presented the background of the study. Although the issue to be addressed is found all over Vanuatu, this study will only focus on the Akey people on the island of Espiritu Santo. The purpose of the study was also highlighted. Due to the rise of counterfeit miracles experienced in the churches, this paper seeks to provide a tool for church leaders and ordinary Christians in Vanuatu to be able to discern between the devil's imitation of supernatural gifts, particularly in healing, and the Holy Spirit's gift of healing. To accomplish this goal, a few research questions were raised to guide the study. Furthermore, other parameters of the study were mentioned for consideration, such as the methodology to undertake the study, the limitations and delimitations of study, and the definition of terms. We now move on to the second section in which we will survey the customary concept of traditional healing.

## CUSTOMARY CONCEPT OF TRADITIONAL HEALING

This section aims to survey the traditional concept of healing among the Akey people. It will help us to understand how and why traditional healing is practised. Paul Hiebert sets out a common formula, which is found in most folk religious practices, when dealing with misfortune (see Table 1).

Adversity	à	Choose a belief system to explain it	à	Diagnose the cause, using this system	à	Select a remedy, and apply it
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Table 1: Formula for folk religious practices<sup>13</sup>

This is the same pattern found in the Akey context. In saying that, in this section we will be covering the following areas: the Akey worldview, the role of a diviner, and the role of a traditional healer.

## AKEY ANIMISTIC WORLDVIEW

In order to have a good grasp of the concept of traditional healing of the Akey people, it is important to look first at their worldview. Kenneth McElhanon explains that a worldview is “a constellation of assumptions

<sup>13</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1999, p. 141.

and beliefs about what is real, how things fit together, and how things happen”.<sup>14</sup> Hiebert adds that a worldview will “clothe these beliefs systems with an aura of certainty that this is, in fact, the way reality is. They are the fundamental givens with which people in a community think, not what they think about.”<sup>15</sup> A worldview is a driving force for all belief systems and practices in life. In this section, we will discuss the holistic life, malevolent and benevolent spirits, and the causes of diseases.

### ***The Holistic Life***

In Akey cosmology, life is viewed holistically. “There is no dichotomy of secular and sacred, animate and inanimate, living and dead.”<sup>16</sup> They have an integrated worldview. This is in line with how Marilyn Rowsome describes the Melanesian worldview: “There is a total view of life, rather than life seen as a number of separate compartments. The real world consists of the supernatural and natural, the physical and non-physical, the living and dead. Man is immersed in this integrated world, and lives in vital relationship with all its parts.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, for all events in life people have to trace different avenues to find the root causes, in order to fix them. For example, in the case of sickness, instead of asking “What caused the sickness?” Melanesian people always ask, “Who caused the sickness?” or “What did we do wrong which brought upon us this disaster?” because they view everything as an integrated whole. Mary Douglas supports this:

The cosmos is turned in, as it were, on man. Its transforming energy is threaded onto the lives of individuals, so that nothing happens in the way of storms, sickness, blights, or droughts, except in virtue of these personal links. So, the universe is man-centred, in the sense that it must be interpreted in reference to humans.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kenneth A. McElhanon, “Worldview”, in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, A. Scott Moreau, ed., Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2000, pp. 1032-1033.

<sup>15</sup> Hiebert, Shaw, Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 40.

<sup>16</sup> Marilyn Rowsome, “Melanesian Traditional Religion”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 17.2 (2001), p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966, p. 85, quoted in Hiebert, Shaw, Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 80.

In the quest to find answers or solutions, different beliefs and practices emerge. This is the beginning of a religious order. People are devoted to that order in what they do, in their ways of thinking, and in their whole beings.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Malevolent and Benevolent Spirits***

As we have seen, in Akey cosmology the spiritual world and the material world belong together, so the vital relationship between them has to be maintained in order to have a good life. Two categories of spirits are experienced in Akey cosmology: the malevolent and the benevolent.

Malevolent spirits are the spirits of those whose lives were taken violently through undignified circumstances. “Malevolent spirits are dangerous to human beings. They are the ones responsible for sickness, death, barrenness among women, and other major misfortune.”<sup>20</sup> The second sort of malevolent spirits are territorial spirits. The Akey people refer to these as red/black spirits or red/black men. A person can be controlled by those spirits, and a person can use them to do sorcery and to poison other people. These spirits can also attack anyone who trespasses or misbehaves in their territory. Their aim is only to destroy human life.

Benevolent spirits can be divided into two categories, the spirits of the ancestors and the healing spirits. In the first category are the spirits of the ancestors “who seek to protect and prosper their progeny”.<sup>21</sup> In the second category are the healing spirits which the Akey people always refer to as white spirits or white men. The traditional healers consult these spirits for advice on remedies for healing the particular diseases that they are dealing with. These spirits are considered more powerful than the malevolent spirits, for they are used to counter the activities of the malevolent spirits.

In light of this worldview, nothing happens by accident in the Akey world. There has to be a cause for every event. This agrees with what Hiebert says

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<sup>19</sup> Ellison Suri, “Religious Experience in Traditional Melanesian Cultures”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 2.1 (1986), p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> Lionel Tom, “A Biblical Response to Divination in the Churches Among the Akey People on the Island of Santo in Vanuatu”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 30.1 (2014), p. 39.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

about folk religions: “Because most events of life are explained in relational terms, people spend much of their time trying to appease and coerce the gods, spirits, ancestors, and other people with offerings and bribes to gain their help and turn aside their anger”.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Causes of Disease***

The Akey people interpret the events which happen in life based on their integrated worldview, in which the spiritual world and the material world belong together, and, where proper relationship is maintained and respected.

In order to find out the causes of any misfortune, for example, or any sickness, Akey people always raise questions beginning with “who” instead of “what.” For example, “Who caused this sickness?” or “Who offended the spirits which caused the sickness?”, or “Who broke the social taboos which resulted in this sickness?”, instead of “What caused the sickness?”

Those questions, which begin with “who”, imply that the sickness is the result of a breach of the relationship between people and their surroundings (other people, nature, and the supernatural). With that concept in mind, assumptions are made about what caused the sickness. First, they assume that the sickness was probably caused by a person, which means a sorcerer may have attacked the sick person, or a poisoner may have poisoned him. Second, they may assume the sickness was probably caused by spirits, as mentioned above, because people offended them, either by trespassing or by misbehaving in their territory.<sup>23</sup> Third, sickness is probably the result of a breach of social norms, such as stealing, quarrelling, sexual sins, and so on. It is believed that a breach of social norms disturbs the guardian spirit, such as the spirit of the ancestors, which then inflicts diseases. Fourth, sickness may be caused by the guardian spirit of the environment, as when

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<sup>22</sup> Hiebert, Shaw, Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 141.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen N. Ezeanya, “God, Spirits, and the Spirit World”, in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, Kwesi A. Dickson, Paul Ellingworth, eds, London UK: Lutterworth Press, 1969, p. 36. Stephen Ezeanya states, “The similar belief is found among the Igbo-speaking people of southern Nigeria. The spirits can topple the order of the world as a punishment for man’s offences, but man has ways and means of preventing this, or restoring the order when upset.”

people are not respecting nature, such as destroying forest and animals for no reason.

Unlike the “what” question, which scientists use to advance their research, to find out what parasites cause a particular sickness, and provide a scientific remedy, the Akey people investigate “who” caused the sickness. They want to determine who is not maintaining and respecting a relationship with his surroundings and to restore relationship. To avoid any misfortunes in life, a “man must be in right relationships with others, nature, and the supernatural”.<sup>24</sup> For the Akey people, sickness is viewed as a result of a broken relationship between others, nature, and the supernatural. In order to restore relationship with his surroundings, which include other people, nature, and the supernatural, a religious activity is required, because spiritual powers and beings have to be dealt with. So, in these cases, diviners or traditional healers are consulted.

### **DIVINERS**

When dealing with an unusual incident, such as sickness, sudden death, and so on, the first person who the Akey people often consult for guidance is a diviner. He is a trusted figure in the society to guide them on what to do, and to whom to go for extra help. In this section we will consider the role of a diviner and the methods used by the diviner to obtain guidance.

#### ***The Diviner’s Role***

In folk religion, a diviner is a religious specialist, spiritually powerful, and well trained to deal with the spirits. Through careful ritual performances, his purpose is to seek hidden knowledge.<sup>25</sup> The role of a diviner is to “seek hidden knowledge from gods, spirits, ancestors, and other beings, with the belief to know the unknown”.<sup>26</sup> To be more specific, the diviner does not consult the malevolent spirits, but he goes seeking the benevolent spirits.<sup>27</sup> A diviner is skilled to determine “the purposes, will, or attitudes of the

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<sup>24</sup> Rowsome, “Melanesian Traditional Religion”, p. 37.

<sup>25</sup> Tom, “A Biblical Response to Divination”, p. 37.

<sup>26</sup> Hiebert, Shaw, Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 176.

<sup>27</sup> Tom, “A Biblical Response to Divination” 39.



gods” revealed through “signs which, if interpreted properly, divulge something of divine intentions”.<sup>28</sup>

The diviner has the power and skill to seek hidden knowledge from the benevolent spirits for the people who consult him for various reasons. The common reasons are as follows: (1) to diagnose the cause of diseases, misfortune, and death; (2) to determine the future, for example, who will be in leadership, especially in a time of election, and to foresee whether a voyage to be taken is safe; (3) to locate the whereabouts of an object, animal, or a person that is lost; and (4) to identify guilt or innocence in a particular issue with which the family or community is wrestling.<sup>29</sup>

When the diviner is consulted, upon his interpretations, information and guidance, people can now make plans and decisions as to how they will deal with their present issue and their future. In the case of sickness, sometimes the diviner will guide them to what to do and to whom to go for extra help. He will always refer his clients to his colleague, a traditional healer.<sup>30</sup>

### ***The Akey Diviner's Methods***

It is informative to mention some of the methods that Akey diviners use to seek guidance and hidden knowledge from the spirits. Hiebert, in his book *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*, provides a list of the different means diviners use to get information in different parts of the world. The ones, which are commonly used by Akey diviners to diagnose diseases, are “necromancy”,<sup>31</sup> “presentiments”,<sup>32</sup> and “dreams, visions, and trances”.<sup>33</sup> All these methods

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<sup>28</sup> O. Burke, “Divination in the Ancient Near East”, in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopaedia*, Supplementary volume, Keith R. Crim, ed., Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1976, p. 241.

<sup>29</sup> Hiebert, Shaw, Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 188.

<sup>30</sup> Victor W. Turner, “Religious Specialists”, in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*, Pamela A. Moro, Arthur C. Lehmann, James E. Myers, compilers, New York NY: McGraw-Hill, 2008, p. 151.

<sup>31</sup> Hiebert, Shaw, Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 176. Necromancy involves rites to gain information from the dead.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177. Presentiments are the power to discern the unseen through feelings or sentiments.

involve rituals to avail the spirits, whether of the ancestors (necromancy) or other spirits, and to channel the information needed through presentiments, dreams, visions, and trances, in particular.

### **TRADITIONAL HEALER**

Earlier, we discussed the diviner in Akey society. He is the first person consulted on any issues, to give guidance about what to do and to whom to go for extra help. In the case of sicknesses, he usually refers people to a particular traditional healer whom he knows well, someone with the remedy for that particular disease. This section discusses common steps which an Akey traditional healer usually follows when dealing with spiritually-caused diseases.

#### ***Rituals and Remedies for Spirits that Cause Disease***

As we have seen, the Akey people view sickness as the result of a broken relationship with others, nature, and the supernatural which has spiritual influence in the Akey cosmos. In saying that, it cannot be denied that they are also conscious of sicknesses which are caused by natural means and are not related to spirits. For example, they have their own ways to treat a cold which is caused by cold weather. However, here we shall look at those sicknesses, which are viewed as caused by spirits. There are three stages when dealing with diseases caused by spirits. These are the binding and removing of the spirits, healing of the effects, and prevention and evaluation of the disease.

#### ***Binding and Removing of Spirits that Cause Diseases***

This first stage aims to bind and remove the spirits believed to cause the disease. This stage includes three practical steps that are so important for healing. These are *avuavuti/vurevure*, *vavauli/tivetivesae*, and *liliji*.

The first practical step in binding and removing of spirits is *avuavuti/vurevure*. *Avuavuti/vurevure* means “dust out something”. This ritual does not aim to remove the spirits; but it relieves the patient from the pain inflicted by the spirit. While invoking the healing spirit, the healer

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 178. Dreams are when the person’s spirit or shadow is thought to leave the body, temporarily, to enter the spirit world, and to bring back a message. Visions and trances, induced by mind-transforming drugs, are widely seen as sources of privileged information.

uses the leaves of the “wild kava” shrub to rub or dust out such things as shell or pieces of glass or metal from the body of the patient, in the belief that the angry spirit had used them to inflict pain in the body.

The second step is *vavauli/tivetivesae*. *Vavauli* is made up of two morphemes: *vava* means “comportment”, and *uli* means “to untie”, or “to untie an evil comportment”. *Tivetivesae* is also made up of two words *tivetive* means “to clear”, and *sae* means “the shoot of a plant”, or “to clear thorns from the shoot of a plant”. The combined meaning is *confession*. This is a confession made to the healer by the sick person and his relatives of evil behaviour done against the law of nature, such as destruction of bushes and animals without any good reason, and done against the law of the society, such as stealing, killing, and sexual sins. Furthermore, they have to confess if they have seen anything unusual, like a rat without a tail, or a shadow without the person, because of the belief that the sick person or one of his relatives must have broken one of these laws. Therefore, those who want to be healed have to confess (*vavauli/tivetivesae*), otherwise there will be no progress in the restoration of their health, which can result in their own death.

The third step is *Liliji*. *Liliji* means “tie and remove”. The healer usually walks around the patient with a piece of stick about 40 cm long and talks to the spirits believed to be threatening the life of the person. He orders them to come out and to enter that piece of stick. As he continues to talk, he repeatedly ties around the stick with some *pandanus* leaves in the belief that he is binding the spirits. At the end of this ritual, the stick has to be submerged in a swamp far away from the community in order to keep the spirits from coming out again to attack the patient. The patient will not be allowed to go there ever again. It becomes a taboo area for him.

#### *Maomao: Healing of Spirits that Cause Disease*

The second stage aims to heal the effects of spiritually-caused disease. It is called *maomao*. Etymologically, *maomao* means “breath that gives life to a person”. When applied in this context, it means an invocation of spirits while asking healing for a sick person. In other words, it is the practice of invoking the healing spirits to give breath and life to a sick person. The invocation is done by whispering a secret rhyme or song and blowing and spitting (which symbolise breath and life) on the elements to be used by the

patient. *Maomao* is included in different rituals as *papalani/lalaoni*, *suvisuvi*, and *kavokavo*.

The first step of *maomao* in healing is *papalani/lalaoni*. These two words, *papalani* and *lalaoni*, mean “rubbing with hot leaves”. The healer takes some leaves of shrubs prescribed by the healing spirits and, after incantation (whispering a secret rhyme or song, and blowing and spitting), he gives them to the patient. The patient takes those leaves, puts them on the fire, and rubs his body with them.

The second step of *maomao* is *suvisuvi*. *Suvisuvi* means “spitting over”. The healer uses incanted water to spit over the whole body of the patient. *Papalani/lalaoni* and *suvisuvi* are believed to be the treatment of the outward effects of spirit-caused diseases.

The last step of *maomao* is *kavokavo*. *Kavokavo* means “squeezing something to drink”. The healer takes the bark of trees or herbs, squeezes them, and dilutes them with water in a cup and, after incantation, he gives it to the patient to drink. *Kavokavo* is believed to be the treatment of the internal effects of spirit-caused diseases.

#### *Preventing Spirit-caused Diseases Through Taboos*

This third stage is preventive. It is a practical step, that is, the sick person has to observe the taboos. The *New Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines “taboo” as “the prohibition of an action, or the use of an object, based on ritualistic distinctions of them as being either sacred and consecrated, or as being dangerous, unclean, and accursed”.<sup>34</sup> This is a broad definition. Since, in this context, we are dealing with sickness, as the result of a broken relationship, and angered spirits, according to the Akey worldview, the taboos, to which we are referring, are symbols that reinforce a fear of spirits.<sup>35</sup> In other words, it refers to things seen as dangerous, and an open door for more trouble from the spirits. According to Mary Douglas, “to break [a taboo] would entail some automatic” consequences, such as lack

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<sup>34</sup> “Taboo”, in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th edn, vol 11, Chicago IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1981, p. 483.

<sup>35</sup> Kenneth Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia: Four Approaches to Gospel and Culture*, Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 2012, p. 68.

of success, sickness, or even death.<sup>36</sup> However, Kenneth Nehrbass adds that keeping taboos is a perpetual reminder of health and welfare.<sup>37</sup> So, if any of these troubles occur in a person's life, people infer that he or she has committed a breach of taboo.

When dealing with sickness, in the traditional Akey context, there are three common types of taboo which a sick person is obliged to observe. These are foods, food colours, and places. Sometimes, the patient would be asked to avoid certain foods and certain protein from a red cow or a white chicken. Furthermore, he might be asked not to go to certain places for some time. There are two benefits when the sick person observes all these taboos well. First, it will contribute to his well-being. Conversely, if the taboos are not observed, it is believed that these taboos are also a doorway of access by the spirits to inflict more sophisticated troubles which can lead to the person's death. Second, the taboos are to be observed so that the healer can be successful in his healing endeavour, because these taboos govern his healing exercise and are a medium for accessing supernatural power to deal with the sick. In the case of a breach of a taboo, it will automatically nullify the strength of the healing spirit and his remedies and one would expect an immediate consequence. The consequence may come in one of two ways. Either the sickness will not be healed, or another sickness will be added to the existing one, but this time it will be the spirit, whom the healer is consulting, who inflicts it for not respecting his taboo. In this context, the function of a taboo is complex. It can be identified as a door which opens/closes or closes/opens to allow certain spirits to be active, and it depends entirely on the subject (sick person).

#### *Evaluating Spirit-caused Diseases*

Having gone through all these required stages of traditional healing, this last step is simply to evaluate the progress of the medicine applied and taboos kept in the life of the person concerned. If there are signs of good health, then the sick person is freed from the taboos and is considered as being healthy. However, if there are no changes, the patient may be

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<sup>36</sup> Mary Douglas, "Taboo", in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*, 7th edn, Pamela A. Moro, Arthur C. Lehmann, James E. Myers, compilers, New York NY: McGraw-Hill, 2008, p. 76.

<sup>37</sup> Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 8.

referred to other traditional healers known to have more power to cure the particular sickness.

It needs to be admitted that the system is complex, and the approaches sometimes vary between different traditional healers. But the pattern discussed above is the common one found among most Akey traditional healers today when they are dealing with spiritually-caused diseases.

### **SUMMARY**

This section has provided an overview of the traditional concept of healing. Although it is a complex system, the common stages, and embedded steps, have been presented.

The first section surveyed the Akey worldview which covers several areas. First, the Akey people view life as holistic. For them, the real world consists of the supernatural and natural, the physical and non-physical, the living and dead. Humans are immersed in this integrated world and live in vital relationship with all its parts. The vital relationship between them has to be maintained in order to enjoy a good life. Second, the malevolent and the benevolent spirits were discussed. The malevolent spirits are the ones responsible for sickness, death, bareness among women, and other major misfortunes. Their aim is only to destroy human life. The benevolent spirits are regulatory spirits. These spirits are considered more powerful than the malevolent spirits. Lastly, the view on the causes of diseases was presented. For the Akey people, sickness is viewed as a result of a broken relationship between others, nature, and the supernatural.

The role of diviners was discussed in the second section. A diviner is a religious specialist, spiritually powerful, and well trained to deal with the spirits, through careful ritual performances using such means as dreams, visions, and trances to seek hidden knowledge. He is the first person to consult for guidance in any emergency because he is a trusted figure in the society, guiding people in what to do and to whom to go for extra help.

Lastly, the complex stages and the role of a traditional healer in dealing with spiritually-caused diseases were briefly covered. There are three stages when dealing with diseases caused by spirits. The first step is binding and removing of the spirits. This stage includes three practical

steps which are so important for healing. These are *avuavuti/vurevure*, *vavauli/tivetivesae*, and *liliji*. The second step is healing of the effects. This stage aims to heal the effects of spiritually-caused diseases. It is called *maomao*. It is included in different rituals, such as *papalani/lalaoni*, *suvisuvi*, and *kavokavo*. The last stage is preventive. It is a practical step, that is, the sick person has to observe the taboos in order for him to be healed. We now move on to the third section in which the Christian understanding of biblical healing will be explored.

### CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF BIBLICAL HEALING

The aim of this section is to assist in understanding biblical healing. In order to achieve that, the following areas will be covered: the purpose of biblical healing miracles, and biblical methods of healing.

#### THE PURPOSE OF BIBLICAL HEALING MIRACLES

We can see that throughout the Bible there are records of many healing miracles that took place. The question to be explored in this section is, What was the purpose of these healings? Since healings are miracles, a definition of miracle may be helpful, in order to provide a background for understanding the purpose of healing in the Bible. Vernon C. Grounds defines a miracle “as . . . an observable phenomenon, effected by the direct operation of God’s power, an arresting deviation from the ordinary sequences of nature, a deviation calculated to elicit faith-begetting awe, a divine in-breaking which authenticates a revelational agent”.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, René Latourelle, in his article, “Originalité et Fonctions des Miracles de Jésus”, in which he highlighted four essentials functions of Jesus’ miracles, adds that a miracle’s function is to also communicate God’s goodness to his people and to testify the truth of God’s message.<sup>39</sup> Any miracles, either of healing or others, “stress the acts of power that reveal God in expressing the gospel, which are then usually explained in speech or vice versa (1 Thess 1:5; Heb 2:4)”.<sup>40</sup> For example, the writers of

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<sup>38</sup> Vernon C. Grounds, “Miracle”, in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, Everett F. Harrison, ed., London UK: Pickering & Inglis, 1973, p. 356.

<sup>39</sup> René Latourelle, “Originalité et Fonctions des Miracles de Jésus”, in *Gregorianum* 66.4 (1985), pp. 648-652.

<sup>40</sup> Jon Ruthven, “Miracle”, in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, William A. Dyrness, Veli-Matti Karkkainen, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2008, p. 549.

the Gospels make it clear that Jesus commissioned his disciples “in his name, to combine healing and exorcism with the teaching and preaching of the gospel (Matt 10:1, 7, 8; Mark 3:14-16; 6:7; Luke 10:9)”.<sup>41</sup> All the miraculous healings found in the Bible performed by Jesus, the apostles, or others were purposefully to show God’s power which is at work in his human agency, to produce faith in those who did not believe, and to validate the message of the kingdom of God, which they (God’s servants) are proclaiming. For instance, Luke reports that in Iconium “Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders” (Acts 14:3 NIV). In other words, the very purpose of healing miracles or other miracles is to demonstrate the divine power of the kingdom of God (1 Cor 2:4-5; 4:20; cf. Matt 12:28). Furthermore, Ebbie C. Smith adds that “[T]he purpose of signs is that people apprehend the message the signs bring, rather than dwell on the signs themselves”.<sup>42</sup> This also indicates that miracles are not the essential mark of a Christian life. Jon Ruthven supports this: “The ideal Christian life is not about miracle mongering, but living in the tension of power and suffering (2 Cor 12:12; Phil 3:10): in the ‘already’ of the promised miracle-working Spirit of the prophets, as well as in the ‘not yet’ of total victory over all suffering and evil”.<sup>43</sup> The purpose of healing miracles or other miracles is to validate the message of the kingdom of God and demonstrate the presence of his divine power, with the aim of producing faith in those who did not believe.

### **BIBLICAL METHODS OF HEALING**

Having discussed the purpose of biblical healing miracles, we will now move on to look at the biblical methods of healing. There are numerous biblical references which show different methods that different people took to perform healing. In this section, the passage of James 5:14-16 has been chosen for our discussion, because it explicitly teaches a biblical pattern of steps for healing, which the church should adopt in dealing with illness, as opposed to stories, which illustrate but do not explicitly instruct. There are

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<sup>41</sup> T. H. Wright, “Miracles”, in *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, vol 2, James Hastings, ed., Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1933, p. 190.

<sup>42</sup> Ebbie C. Smith, “Miracles in Mission”, in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, A. Scott Moreau, ed., Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2000, p. 631.

<sup>43</sup> Ruthven, “Miracle”, p. 549.



certain steps, according to the passage, that both the sick person and the elders (healers) need to do, in order for health to be restored physically or spiritually.

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working (James 5:14-16).<sup>44</sup>

### *Calling the Elders*

James begins by saying that anyone who is sick must call for the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil. The word “sick” is the Greek verb ἀσθενέω (*astheneō*), which means “to be sick, weak, or in need”. The various meanings lead to some differences in interpreting the passage. Daniel R. Hayden argues that this passage “is not referring to physical sickness at all, but is rather giving instruction for dealing with persons, who are discouraged or depressed”<sup>45</sup> – the person who is spiritually weak. However, while it is true that ἀσθενεῖ (*asthenei*) can mean “to be weak for any reason” (2 Cor 12:10; Rom 4:9; 14:2; 1 Cor 8:11-12; 2 Clem 17.2), in this context Ralph P. Martin states that it is probably right to say that it refers to physical illness.<sup>46</sup> Because words such as σώσει (*sōsei*), “to make whole”, and κάμνοντα (*kamnonta*), “the sick person”, in James 5:15 are indications of physical illness.<sup>47</sup> The sick person should προσκαλεσάσθω (*proskalesasthō*), “call to oneself”,<sup>48</sup> the elders of the church. This suggests that the situation or sickness in his body is extreme and has caused him to be in bed and unable to walk.

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<sup>44</sup> All English Bible quotations are from the ESV, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>45</sup> Daniel R. Hayden, “Calling the Elders to Pray”, in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138-551 (July-September 1981), p. 258.

<sup>46</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary, Waco TX: Word Books, 1988, p. 206.

<sup>47</sup> Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982, p. 192.

<sup>48</sup> Martin, *James*, p. 206.

Πρεσβυτέρους τῆς ἐκκλησίας (*presbuterous tēs ekklēsias*), “the elders of the church”, are to be called. These are the leaders in the Christian church.<sup>49</sup> Since they are “spiritual, mature men, who were given responsibility for the spiritual oversight of individual, local congregations”,<sup>50</sup> they are to be called to pray. This is unlike James 3:13 which urges individual persons to pray for themselves in time of distress.

Paul states that “healing” is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who gives to anyone as he determines (1 Cor 12:11). So, why call the elders and not an individually-gifted healer? Why should healing not be regarded as an individual responsibility? David P. Nystrom states that “James knows nothing of a particular person or charisma, known as a ‘faith healer/healing’, such as some claimed to have, and was recognised by Paul in the Corinthian church (1 Cor 12:9, 28, 30)”.<sup>51</sup> However, John Calvin gives other, preferable reasons for this. The first is related to Jesus’ principle: when he commissioned his disciples to heal, he did not send them individually, but he sent them two by two (Luke 10:1; cf. Matt 18:19). Second, James does not encourage each individual elder to act as a private healer, but rather the body of elders were assigned that task, because they were spiritually mature and “the power and grace of the Holy Spirit were most exerted” through them.<sup>52</sup> Lastly, the elders were “representatives of the congregation, and not because of any healing function which was inherent in their office. Intercession for others was part of their pastoral care and duty, certainly, but it was a duty which was shared by every member of the congregation.”<sup>53</sup> So, healing is a group responsibility, not individual, and anyone with a gift of healing has to be used within that group.

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<sup>49</sup> David P. Nystrom, *James*, NIV Application Commentary, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1997, p. 305.

<sup>50</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *James*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Leicester UK: IVP, 1985, p. 176.

<sup>51</sup> Nystrom, *James*, p. 305.

<sup>52</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries Epistle of James*, Edinburgh UK: Saint Andrew Press, 1972, p. 315, quoted in Robert Dickinson, *God Does Heal Today: Pastoral Principles and Practice of Faith Healing*, Carlisle UK: Paternoster Press, 1995, p. 87.

<sup>53</sup> J. Wilkinson, *Health and Healing*, Edinburgh UK: Handsel Press, 1980, p. 150, quoted in Robert Dickinson, *God Does Heal Today: Pastoral Principles and Practice of Faith Healing*, Carlisle UK: Paternoster Press, 1995, p. 87.

### ***The Responsibilities of the Elders***

James states two specific responsibilities that the elders need to do when ministering to a sick person. First, they are to pray over him. Second, they are to anoint him with oil. All these things are to be done in the name of the Lord.

#### *Prayer*

In v. 14, James recommends that the elders are to pray over the sick person, and anoint him with oil. The main emphasis of this verse is on prayer, and not anointing, because “pray (προσευξάσθωσαν, *proseuxasthōsan*) is the main verb, while anointing (ἀλείψαντες, *aleipsantes*) is a participle”.<sup>54</sup> A sick person may be anointed with oil, but the emphasis is that healing is based on prayer.

Furthermore, in v. 15 James highlights the kind of prayer that is needed, that is, the prayer offered in faith. A prayer of faith is a “prayer which expresses trust in God and flows out of commitment to him, for only such prayers are effective”.<sup>55</sup> The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well and the Lord will raise him up. In this context, the faith demanded is the faith of those who pray, particularly of the elders (v. 14). According to Peter H. Davids, the condition of healing is determined by whether there is faith or not from the elders.<sup>56</sup> However, this statement can be problematic. If healing does not occur, can we blame the lack of faith on the part of the elders, since the faith of the sick is not mentioned? To answer that question, while people must have faith regarding what they ask (Mark 11:22-24), the answer is entirely dependent on his will, since prayer is done in the name of the Lord. Alec Motyer states that “prayer is a commitment to the will of God, and all true prayer excises its truest faith in patiently waiting to see what he has determined to do”.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, neither the elders, nor the sick person, should insist on their will to be done, rather

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<sup>54</sup> Donald W. Burdick, “James”, in *Hebrews-Revelation*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, vol. 12, Frank E. Gaebelein, ed., Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1982, p. 203.

<sup>55</sup> Davids, *The Epistle of James*, p. 194.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> J. Alec Motyer, *The Message of James: the Tests of Faith*, Bible Speaks Today, Leicester UK: IVP, 1985, p. 199.

they should let the will of God be done in their request (Luke 22:42; cf. Matt 6:10).

Still on prayer, James adds that the prayer of a δικαίου (*dikaïou*), “righteous man”, in other words, the prayer of a repentant sinner has πολλὴ ἰσχύει (*polu ischuei*), “great power” (James 5:16).<sup>58</sup> The righteous person is not Elijah, nor the elders or prophets whose prayers were powerful, but it is an ordinary community member in good standing, the person who confesses his sins and adheres to community standards (Matt 1:19; 1 John 3:7).<sup>59</sup> James continues to illustrate the truth that a righteous man’s prayer has great power and, in Elijah’s case, was working. He was “a man with a nature like ours” (James 5:17). That means he was not a heavenly being, but he was just a normal person with limitations, like those reading James’ letter. Elijah was known for the power of his prayer. His prayer was powerful for two reasons: he was a “righteous person” (v. 16) and “he prayed fervently” (v. 17).<sup>60</sup> The fervency of prayer needs to be noted. Literally, James says that Elijah “prayed with prayer” or “prayed in prayer”.<sup>61</sup> According to C. F. D Moule, such a construction is used “to express emphasis [intensity] or frequency”.<sup>62</sup> Laws puts it as “he prayed and prayed”.<sup>63</sup> However, it is important to understand James’ intention in mentioning the prayer of Elijah. George M. Stulac comments that “James’ desire in the passage is not to erect a standard of fervency for his readers to attain; he seems more intent on pushing them into the active prayer life that is so readily available”.<sup>64</sup> Alec Motyer states, “The meaning is not his fervency, nor even his frequency of prayer, but that ‘he just prayed’ – that, and nothing more”.<sup>65</sup> James Adamson supports that “here the point is not

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<sup>58</sup> George M. Stulac, *James*, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1993, p. 184.

<sup>59</sup> Davids, *The Epistle of James*, p. 196.

<sup>60</sup> James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1976, p. 201.

<sup>61</sup> Stulac, *James*, p. 184.

<sup>62</sup> C. F. D Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1953, pp. 177f, quoted in James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1976, p. 201.

<sup>63</sup> Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, London UK: A. & C. Black, 1980, p. 235, quoted in George M. Stulac, *James*, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1993, p. 186.

<sup>64</sup> Stulac, *James*, p. 186.

<sup>65</sup> Motyer, *The Message of James*, pp. 206-207.

that Elijah put up a particularly fervent prayer, but that praying was precisely what he did”.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, Moo adds that “not the fervency or the frequency of the prayer that renders it effective – it is *faith*”.<sup>67</sup> It is a prayer of faith that rests on the sure promises of God. Like Elijah, “He knows, he believes, that God’s will is to send rain and, nevertheless, he must pray or the rain will not come (cf. James 4:2). . . . He, therefore, must persevere in prayer that he may show his God that his faith expects an answer and will not grow weary until it is obtained.”<sup>68</sup> Elijah prayed seven times in order for God to respond in sending the rain (2 Kings 13:18-19). Andrew Murray comments, “perseverance in prayer, a perseverance, which strengthens the faith of the believer against all which may seem opposed to the answer, is a real miracle; it is one of the impenetrable mysteries of the life of faith”.<sup>69</sup>

A prayer of faith is a prayer offered by a righteous man (repentant sinner), who has an active prayer life, driven by faith and based on the sure promises of God. The prayer of faith is the kind of prayer needed, which James is recommending, when dealing with the sick.

#### *Anointing with Oil*

James goes on to say that when the elders pray over a sick person, they also need to “anoint him with oil”. Two possibilities have been suggested concerning the purpose of anointing the sick with oil. These are a medicinal purpose and a sacramental purpose. First, Donald W. Burdick argues that James is referring to application of oil as medicinal, rather than sacramental, because of the well-documented fact of such practice in Bible times (Isa 1:6; Luke 10:34). He suggests that James is recommending prayer and medicine.<sup>70</sup> The second is the sacramental purpose of anointing with oil. According to Douglas J. Moo, anointing of oil, administered by the elders, is used as an “outward, physical expression of concern, and as a means to stimulate the faith of the sick person”.<sup>71</sup> As Ralph P. Martin adds,

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<sup>66</sup> Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, 201.

<sup>67</sup> Moo, *James*, p. 181.

<sup>68</sup> Andrew Murray, *Divine Healing*, Fort Washington PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1934, p. 131.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>70</sup> Burdick, “James”, p. 204.

<sup>71</sup> Moo, *James*, pp. 177-178.

it “symbolised God’s concern for, and faithfulness to, his people in time of distress. This tangible evidence of his trustworthiness lets the afflicted one know that God’s plan will be carried out, whatever the outcome.”<sup>72</sup> This idea follows Jesus’ example when dealing with the blind man in Mark 8:23-26, and the deaf man in Mark 7:33. Furthermore, Peter H. Davids adds that anointing with oil is either “the outward sign of the inward power of prayer or, more likely, a sacramental vehicle of divine power, as Mark shows: ‘And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them’ (Mark 6:13)”.<sup>73</sup>

The symbolic understanding of the anointing with oil is the possible answer, according to the context. It cannot refer to a medicinal purpose because it is ministered by the elders, with prayer, rather than by physicians. Douglas J. Moo states the symbolic significance of anointing of oil, “as the elders prayed, they would anoint the sick person in order to symbolise that that person was being ‘set apart’ for God’s special attention and care”.<sup>74</sup> However, anointing with oil is not essential in healing, but the prayer of faith is (James 5:15), and anointing is just part of it. Although, James recommends that the elders anoint the sick, it is not something which must be done, because many healings in the Bible happened without anointing.

#### *In the Name of the Lord*

James adds that the elders of the church should pray over the sick and anoint him with oil “in the name of the Lord” (James 5:14). Since oil was a curative element widely used in the ancient world, James is careful not to cause any misunderstanding of the practice in the church. To guard against pagan criticism of the attribution of mystical properties to the oils, he adds that the anointing with oil should be done in the name of the Lord. The name of the Lord gives a thoroughly Christian character to the practice. Furthermore, James Adamson suggests that “James includes oil in this

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<sup>72</sup> Martin, *James*, p. 208.

<sup>73</sup> Davids, *The Epistle of James*, p. 193.

<sup>74</sup> Moo, *James*, p. 179.

Christian ceremonial in order to reduce the temptation to use charms, incantations, and other such pagan devices”.<sup>75</sup>

Samuel Waje Kunhiyop explains, “in the ancient world, it was believed that to know a person’s name, or a deity’s name, was to know something about him or her, and that to invoke the name of a person was to assert authority based on that name”.<sup>76</sup> The name “Jesus” means “Saviour” (Matt 1:21), and “Christ” means “Messiah”, or “anointed one” (John 1:41).<sup>77</sup> Because of who he is, as reflected by his name, Christians receive all the spiritual blessings, such as forgiveness of sins (Acts 10:43), salvation (Acts 2:21), the Holy Spirit, who was sent in Jesus’ name (John 14:26), and baptism, which is administered in the names of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19-20).<sup>78</sup> Prayer in the name of Jesus was a requirement for the disciples to fulfil the mission given to them (John 14:13; 15:16; 16:23, 26). Since healing and exorcism were parts of the mission, the disciples were to perform them in the name of Jesus, because there is power associated with his name. Jesus affirms this to his disciples saying, “And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name, they will cast out demons; . . . they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover” (Mark 16:17-18). In saying this, some of the disciples probably recalled their experience as having been part of the 72 on their mission. Upon returning, they reported with joy, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name!” (Luke 10:17). Having that in mind, James reminds the elders, as God’s representatives, to pray and anoint with oil in the name of Jesus, which means “appealing to the power released by that name”.<sup>79</sup> It is ὁ κύριος (*ho kurios*), “the Lord” (James 5:15), who will heal the sick person. In Acts 3:6-10, Luke describes how Peter and John healed a man, who had been lame from birth and who sat at the temple gate to ask for money from those who came to worship, expecting them to be generous to their fellow man.

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<sup>75</sup> James H. Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St James*, International Critical Commentary, Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1916, p. 305, quoted in Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, p. 197.

<sup>76</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids MI: HippoBooks, 2012, p. 130.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Martin, *James*, p. 208.

By the name of Jesus, which means by his authority (Matt 28:18),<sup>80</sup> Peter commanded this man to walk. People were all amazed at what had happened to him, but Peter affirms in Acts 3:16 that “faith in his name has made this man strong, whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all”. Prayer, in the name of Jesus, is not a “magical formula that can be used to manipulate supernatural forces . . . is not about forcing God to do something; rather, it is bending our human will to God’s will”.<sup>81</sup> Invoking the name of Jesus expresses strong belief in his power, which flows out of a strong relationship with him.

#### *The Two Outcomes*

James states that, “the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up” (5:15). The elders are to offer prayer in faith, based on God’s promises, and the outcomes depend so much on the will of God for the person’s life. Questions have been raised regarding the two future verbs – the person “will be made well” (σώσει, *sōsei*), and the Lord “will raise him up” (ἐγερῇ, *egerei*) – asking whether James is referring to spiritual healing or to physical healing. The mention of sin and forgiveness in the following verses (vv. 15b-16a) give a sense of an eschatological (spiritual healing and resurrection) implication. But David P. Nystrom argues that “the weight of the grammatical and lexical evidence is on the side of a physical understanding of the passage”.<sup>82</sup> James is speaking of physical healing of a sickness, using the statement “the Lord will raise him up”, as also found in Mark 1:31; 2:9-12; 9:27; Matt 9:5-7; and Acts 3:7.<sup>83</sup>

According to the context, the words are referring to physical healing and not spiritual healing. However, spiritual healing is another important area in life that should not be overlooked when ministering to sick people. It is a state that everyone is expected to experience, without exception, in the end time and, therefore, everyone has to be prepared for it. Whatever, the

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<sup>80</sup> Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, NIV Application Commentary, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1998, p. 139.

<sup>81</sup> Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, p. 132.

<sup>82</sup> Nystrom, *James*, p. 307.

<sup>83</sup> Davids, *The Epistle of James*, p. 194.



will of God is for one's physical healing, that sick person will still have the hope to experience a better healing (spiritual healing) in the last day.

### ***Confession and Forgiveness of Sin***

"And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:15b-16a). James knows that sicknesses are not always the result of sin committed by the sufferer, as the word καὶν (*kan*), "and if", used in v. 15b suggests.<sup>84</sup> However, because of the dominant belief among the Jews that sickness is the consequence of sin, this prompts him to emphasise the importance of confession of sin. James implies that sin causes sickness and hinders healing. Therefore, the conjunction οὖν (*oun*), "therefore" (v.16), connects the discussion of the problem of sin in v. 15 and suggests a way to solve that problem, that is, ἐξομολογεῖσθε οὖν ἀλλήλοις τὰς ἁμαρτίας (*exomologeisthe oun allēlois tas hamartias*), to "confess your sins to each other". Ὅπως (*hopōs*), "so that", indicates what may be the result of confession, which is ἰαθῆτε (*iathēte*), that "you may be healed". Andrew Murray points out, "in man, two natures are combined. He is both, at the same time, spirit and matter, heaven and earth, soul and body. For this reason, on one side, he is a son of God, and, on the other, he is doomed to destruction, because of the Fall; sin in his soul, and sickness in his body bears witness to the right, which death has over him."<sup>85</sup> Because of this combination, people believe that when there is sin, there is sickness, but when there is forgiveness, there is health. The Psalmist's prayer is our great example: "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases" (Ps 103:2-3). Furthermore, confession of sin will not only contribute to physical health, but it also contributes to spiritual health. Whatever may be the will of God concerning the present life of the sufferer, he has complete assurance that, when Christ returns, his "perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality" (1 Cor 15:53). That is the perfect healing, to which Christians are looking forward. Peter H. Davids states, "The person would do well to follow the rabbinic advice (b.Ber. 5a) and examine himself. Should sin be the cause, the healing for which the

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<sup>84</sup> Moo, *James*, p. 181.

<sup>85</sup> Murray, *Divine Healing*, p. 1.

elders pray will not end with the body. It will be a total healing and include the soul, the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>86</sup>

The healing of the paralytic in Mark 2:5 is a good example. Mark reports that when Jesus saw the faith of the men acted out in their determination,<sup>87</sup> “He said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven’”. The expectation of the crowd was to see Jesus bring physical healing. But, to the amazement of all, Jesus first pronounced spiritual healing. As mentioned above, to the Jews sickness and death were viewed as the consequences of the sin of a person (Ps 41:3-4; 103:2-3; James 5:13-18).<sup>88</sup> Therefore, for the Jews forgiveness was a prior condition for a person to be cured.<sup>89</sup>

Confession and forgiveness of sin have two benefits. First, it contributes to both physical and spiritual health. Second, it makes the members of the community right with God and prepares them to pray with great power. As the rest of the James 5:16 states, “The prayer of a righteous person has great power, as it is working”. So, it is a crucial step to be considered, when ministering to the sick.

## **SUMMARY**

In this section, we have discussed the Christian understanding of biblical healing. The first section covers the purpose of biblical healing miracles. Healings, performed by Jesus and the apostles, were done with the purpose of demonstrating the divine power of the kingdom of God, to validate the message of the kingdom that they were proclaiming (Acts 14:3; Matt 12:28), and had the aim of producing faith in those who did not believe.

The second section surveyed the biblical methods of healing as found in the principles set out in James 5:14-16. In order for health to be restored, the sick person has to call the elders to minister to him, because they are spiritually mature men who had been given responsibility for the spiritual oversight of individual, local congregations. The elders’ responsibilities

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<sup>86</sup> Davids, *The Epistle of James*, p. 195.

<sup>87</sup> Bruce B. Barton, Mark Fackler, *Mark*, Life Application Bible Commentary, Philip Comfort, ed., Wheaton IL: Tyndale House, 1994, p. 48.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, Daily Study Bible, 2nd edn, Edinburgh UK: The Saint Andrew Press, 1956, p. 40.

were, first, to pray over the sick person. The prayer of a righteous man offered in faith is the kind of prayer needed when ministering to sick people. It is a prayer, which expresses trust in God and flows out of commitment to him, for only such prayers are effective. Second, it is to anoint him or her with oil. Anointing with oil has symbolic significance. When the elders pray, they anoint the sick person in order to symbolise that that person was being “set apart” for God’s special attention and care. The prayer and anointing with oil are to be done in the name of the Lord, which means appealing to the power released by that name. Prayer in the name of Jesus is not a magic formula, which can be used to manipulate supernatural forces. Neither is it about forcing God to do something. Rather, it is bending our human will to God’s will. The sick person and those who pray have to confess, forgive one another’s sin, and pray for one another. This practice makes the members of the community right with God, and prepares them to pray with great power. The results are the Lord’s, according to his will. We now move on to our fourth section where we will explore the Christo-pagan worldview and methods of healing.

### **CHRISTO-PAGAN WORLDVIEW AND METHODS OF HEALING**

This section aims to survey the Christo-pagan healers’ worldview and their methods of healing.

#### **WORLDVIEW**

Churches have been established among the Akey people for a century for some and half-a-century for others. Despite the presence of the churches, where the word of God is taught once or twice a week, it seems that the word of God has not taken root or made any major transformation in the lives of the people. Their lives and practices are still, as Hiebert describes, split-level Christians, “deeply committed Christians faithfully attend church services and pray to God in times of need, but feel compelled, during the week, to go to a local shaman for healing, a diviner for guidance, and an exorcist for deliverance from spirit oppression”.<sup>90</sup> Hiebert speaks about those claiming to be Christians who seek a shaman, diviner, or exorcist for help but, here, we shall focus on those performing healing, exorcism, and giving guidance who claim to be Christians and whose practices are done

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<sup>90</sup> Hiebert, Shaw, Tiénou. *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 15.

under the name of Jesus. Although their rituals are Christian in form and covered with the name of Jesus, the content and understanding are doubtful. Are these due to a worldview which is not wholly Christian? This is the challenge discussed in the next section.

### ***Akey Syncretistic Worldview***

Akey people, who attend church, but are not born again Christians, and perform healing, divination, and exorcism under the name of Jesus, seem to have a syncretistic worldview. Their lives are like what Sidney Williamson describes as two levels.

Most Christians live on two unreconciled levels. They are members of a church and ascribe to a statement of faith. But, below the system of conscious beliefs are deeply-embedded traditions and customs, implying quite a different interpretation of the universe and the world of spirits from the Christian interpretation. In the crises of life and rites of passage the church is an alien thing.<sup>91</sup>

That is the challenge in the Akey churches which needs to be studied. There are a few factors contributing to this worldview.

The first is the belief system. As discussed in section two, in Akey cosmology life is viewed as holistic. They have an integrated worldview, as with many Melanesians, which means they view life as one compartment consisting of the supernatural and natural, the physical and non-physical, the living and dead, and man is immersed in this integrated world and lives in vital relationship with all its parts.<sup>92</sup> They believe that those physical and non-physical spiritual forces shape happenings in life and, therefore, people are living in continual fear of these powers.<sup>93</sup> That worldview shapes their belief about interactions with spiritual beings. In their belief, spiritual “beings are personal spirits that include God, gods, ancestors, ghosts,

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<sup>91</sup> Sidney G. Williamson, *Akamba Religion and the Christian Faith*, Accra Ghana: Ghana Universities Press, 1965, p. 158, quoted in Hiebert, Shaw, Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 15.

<sup>92</sup> Rowsome, “Melanesian Traditional Religion”, p. 35.

<sup>93</sup> Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*, Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1991, p. 20.

totemic spirits, nature spirits, angels, demons, and Satan”,<sup>94</sup> and their mode of interaction with them is through magic ritual. In times of crises, sometimes church men and women turn to God but, if he is silent and distant, to them it is acceptable to turn and seek to manipulate other spirits for a quick fix to their problems.<sup>95</sup> Others see church as irrelevant, when it comes to addressing immediate issues in everyday life.<sup>96</sup> Others see spirits as “being mediators between us and God, able to intercede on our behalf”.<sup>97</sup> Therefore, in order to assume the responsibility of mediators, homage first has to be given. Furthermore, those, who hold to this view also believe that impersonal spirit energy infuses special objects, words, and ritual, and gives them power to meet people’s needs. These are the reasons why some attend the church and also practise shaman healing.

It is hard for people to change that worldview. They do not see a need to do so, because that worldview is the point of departure in interpreting events in life. This worldview provides answers to their ultimate questions, gives them emotional security, “validates their deepest cultural norms”, and provides them with a sense of peace, of being at home in the world in which they live.<sup>98</sup> Because of that, as Hiebert states, “to question worldviews is to challenge the very foundations of life, and people resist such challenges with deep emotional reactions. There are few human fears greater than a loss of a sense of order and meaning. People are willing to die for their beliefs, if these beliefs make their death meaningful.”<sup>99</sup> We can assume that, for such people, Christianity is viewed as foreign. They just want to incorporate it into their own system, for anticipated benefits. Their involvement in the Christian community is not a result of a genuine commitment but, rather, is communally orientated.<sup>100</sup> Their involvement is only for keeping unity, relationship, and respect within society, which are

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>95</sup> Dean C. Halverson, “Animism: the Religion of the Tribal World”, in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 15.2 (April-June 1998), p. 60.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2008, p. 31.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>100</sup> Alan R. Tippett, *Introduction to Missiology*, Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1987, p. 332.

the social norms in this context. They may be called sympathisers.<sup>101</sup> They shelter themselves under the umbrella of a particular church denomination and keep their traditional beliefs. They gravitate socially towards a form of religion. They do not believe in the description the Bible gives as to how they should live and believe as Christians.<sup>102</sup>

### **CHRISTO-PAGAN METHODS OF HEALING**

In this section, the Christo-pagan methods of healing found in the Akey context will be discussed. However, since the context of the topic is not touched by academic literature, personal experience will be shared. The methods of the Christo-pagan healer are complex and vary between differ-

ent healers, but the common ones will be discussed. Figure 3 above shows a few details on the three common methods used by the so-called Christian healers. Within these three methods there are varieties which some extend by applying other practices, while others do not. The unbroken arrows (→) show the steps that are not really questioned by believers, whereas the steps where critical questions are raised in this study are shown by dashed arrows (⇨).

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 328.

<sup>102</sup> Halverson, "Animism", p. 59.

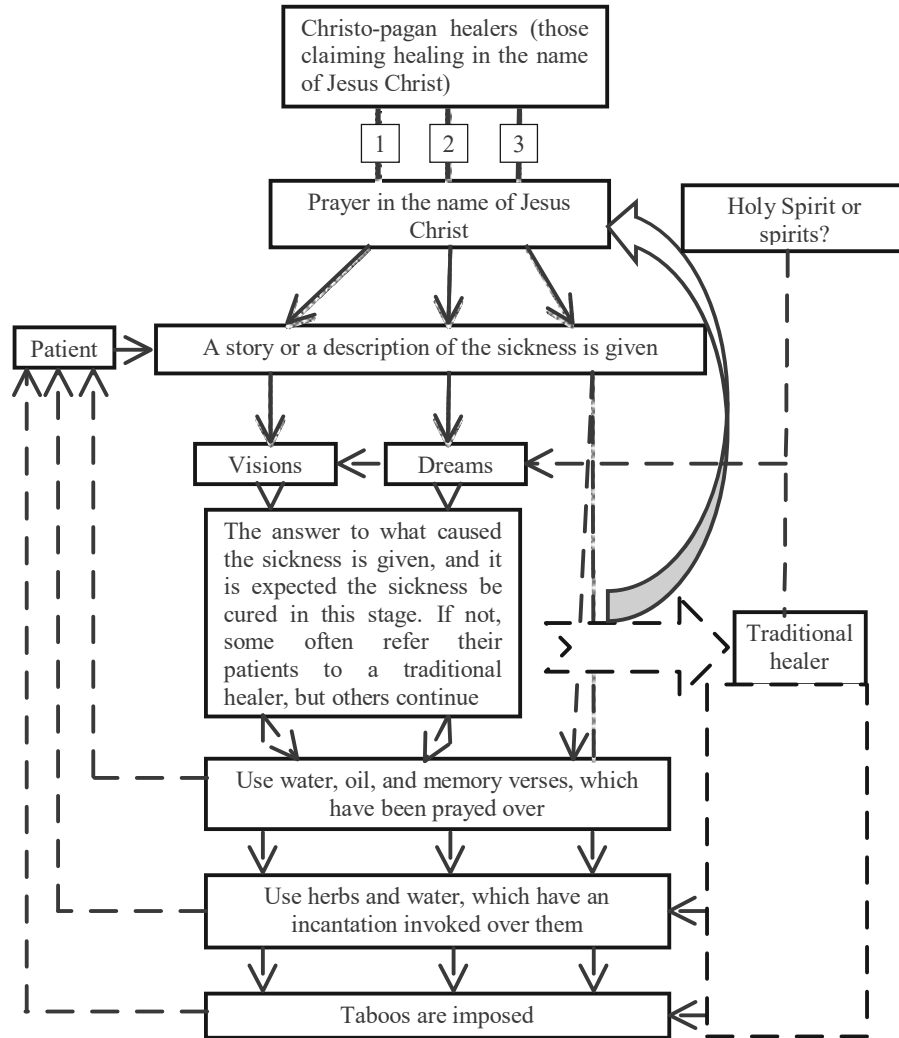


Figure 3: Christo-pagan methods of healing

### *Prayer in the Name of Jesus Christ*

Figure 3 shows that before the healers can interact with the sick person, they always pray first in the name of Jesus to begin their session. They acknowledge the name of Jesus in prayer because they think that there is

some kind of power in his name which can inspire their traditional healing practices. They are using the name of Jesus as a magical means of trying to manipulate God to do what they are asking for. It is an influence from traditional belief in which healers use spells with manipulative power to manipulate spirits to do whatever they want, such as to remove a sickness.<sup>103</sup>

### ***Description of Sicknesses***

After prayer, the healers give time for their clients to give a description of the cause of the sickness and of how and when the person got sick. Sometimes the healers will ask diagnostic questions, not scientifically based, but related to traditional belief. For example, if a person has a fever, instead of asking such questions as “Do you sleep under a mosquito net, or do you have any infection?” (knowing that fever can be a symptom of malaria or an infection in the body), they ask “What did you do yesterday or where did you go yesterday?”, and so on. Those kinds of questions are related to their worldview, because their assumption is that the sick person probably broke a taboo which governs their relationship with their surroundings, including physical and non-physical beings. For example, he may have offended a spirit somewhere by trespassing into that spirit’s territory, which then caused him to be sick.

### ***Visions***

Those who claim to have the gift of visions watch the sufferer and listen carefully while being given the description of the sickness. After describing the sickness, those who see through visions will immediately give him the response to the cause of the sickness that he has seen. It is been observed that most of the responses are linked with their traditional belief on causes of sickness, which is connected to their relationship with everything that surrounds them, including spirits. For example, their response might be expressed as “I saw that this dead person came and took the spirit or life of your son and put it under a rock. I went in and wrestled with the dead person for a while and managed to take the life of your son back. So now your son should feel well.”

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<sup>103</sup> Garry W. Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 85.



### ***Dreams***

After the patient describes his sickness, those claiming to see secret things through dreams will always ask the sick person to come back the next day to get the response. It is believed, when sleeping in the night, he will see through dreams what causes the sickness. Most of their responses are similar to those who see visions, that is, they reflect traditional beliefs concerning the causes of sickness. In addition, sometimes remedies for sicknesses can also be revealed through dreams. Furthermore, some believe that, after revealing the cause of the sickness, the sick patient should get better. This is also true for those with visions.

### ***Water or Oil and Memory Verses, Which Have Been Prayed Over***

When the sickness persists, those who do not know what to do next will often decide to refer their clients to traditional healers instead of continuing to pray. Sometimes, others go even further in their approaches and pray over water or oil and memory verses. Some pray over water, so that the sick person can drink it or wash in it. Others pray over oil so that the sick person can use it to rub on his body. Others write memory verses, pray over them, and place them in small containers which are to be placed somewhere in the corners of the yard and the house. They view those elements that have been prayed over as having some magical power which may be able to provide healing and protection, if the sickness has been seen to have been caused by the evil spirits.

### ***Water and Herbs, Which Have an Incantation Invoked Over Them***

Other healers use incantations and charms for healing. For them, it is acceptable to invoke, at same time, Jesus and the spirits for healing, since they believe they are all spirits. They believe that the name of Jesus mentioned in their prayer will inspire and empower herbs and water which have had an incantation invoked over them, in order to bring healing in the life of the sick person. Others believe that if one spirit (as God) is not responding, then they will go to other spirits, as long as it works, to get a quick response and quick fix for their problems.

### ***Taboos***

After praying for healing in the name of Jesus and invoking the spirits for healing, these healers will always finish by setting taboos to be kept in

order to recover. They will prohibit the sick person from eating certain foods, or from going to certain places, and so on. The strength of the healer and his remedies lies in the taboos and, therefore, they must be observed. In the case of a breach of a taboo, it will automatically nullify the strength of remedies, and an immediate consequence would be expected. The consequence may come in two ways. Either the sickness will not be healed, or another sickness will be added to the existing one; but this time it will be inflicted by the spirit, which the healer consults, because his taboo was not observed. Finally, if they see that the sickness is getting worse, the healer will always refer the client to another healer who has the same gift or to a traditional healer.

### **SUMMARY**

This section surveyed the Christo-pagan worldview and methods of healing. The first section observed that Akey Christo-pagan healers have a syncretistic worldview. The belief that physical and non-physical spiritual forces shape happenings in life always drives people to live in continual fear of these powers. Therefore, when God is silent and distant in times of crises for them, it is acceptable to turn around and seek to manipulate other spirits through magic for a quick fix to their problems. This is because they view God as one among other spirits. They view Christianity as a foreign culture and they just want to incorporate it into their own system of belief and give their own meaning to it. As a result, they come up with different practices that are ambiguous or are considered as Christo-pagan.

The second section covered the methods of healing used by Christo-pagan healers. Their methods are complex and vary between different healers, but the common ones have been discussed. Since their method of healing is a mixture of biblical and traditional healing, their first step is prayer. Prayer is addressed to Jesus, reasoning that he will empower their traditional healing practices. The second step is the patient's description of his sickness. While in the process of describing the sickness, those who see through visions will immediately diagnose and give a response of what is causing the sickness; whereas, for those who see through dreams, their responses are given the following day. For prevention and healing of the sickness, they use water, oil, and memory verses which have been prayed

over. Others use herbs or water, which have an incantation invoked over them, and set taboos to be kept.

### **COMPARISON, CRITICAL ANALYSIS, AND EVALUATION OF HEALING METHODS**

The aim of this section is twofold. First, a comparison of Christo-pagan methods of healing with the traditional and biblical methods of healing, based on the survey done in the previous sections, will be made.. Second, a critical analysis and evaluation will be made on some steps of Christo-pagan methods of healing which look biblical but are doubtful.

#### **COMPARISON OF HEALING METHODS**

This section aims to compare Christo-pagan methods of healing with traditional methods of healing and biblical methods of healing.

##### ***Christo-pagan Healing and Traditional Healing***

The first comparison is between Christo-pagan methods of healing and traditional healing methods. Table 2 below shows brief details of a comparison between the two methods. The comparison in the table indicates that there are similarities and differences that stand out between these two methods. The similarities are indicated by “Yes” and differences by “No”. First, prayer for healing in the name Jesus is not used in traditional healing, because in tradition healing spirits are consulted instead of Jesus. In the second step, visions and dreams are used in both Christo-pagan and traditional healing. But a critical question is raised concerning their sources, “Do they originate from the Holy Spirit or the spirits?”

<b>Christo-pagan healer</b>	<b>Traditional healer</b>
Prayer in the name of Jesus Christ	No
Visions and dreams	Yes
Water, oil, and memory verses which have been prayed over	No
Herbs and water which have an incantation invoked over them	Yes
Taboos	Yes

Table 2: A comparison of the Christo-pagan methods of healing and traditional methods of healing

If visions and dreams used by Christo-pagan healers come from the Holy Spirit, then they are different from the visions and dreams used by diviners in traditional healing. However, if they come from the spirits, then they are similar to those used by diviners in traditional healing, as discussed in section two, “Customary Concept of Traditional Healing”. Third, the water, oil, and memory verses, which have been prayed over, are not used in traditional healing, because in traditional healing there is no concept of praying over things to ask God to bless them. The idea and practice are used in traditional healing, but the spirits are consulted to work through these elements. Moreover, these practices can be considered part of traditional healing, if clients believe those elements to have magical power. Finally, the last two steps (herbs and water which have had an incantation invoked over them) and taboos are clearly associated with traditional healing. This is beyond question because invocation of the spirits is included in the ritual.

### ***Christo-pagan Healing and Biblical Healing***

The second comparison is between Christo-pagan healing methods and biblical healing methods. Table 3 below shows brief details of a comparison between the two methods. The comparison in the table indicates that there are similarities and differences, which stand out, from these two methods. The similarities are indicated by “Yes” and differences by “No”.

Christo-pagan healer	Biblical healing
Prayer in the name of Jesus Christ	Yes
Visions and dreams	No
Water, oil, and memory verses which have been prayed over	Yes
Herbs and water which have an incantation invoked over them	No
Taboos	No

Table 3: A comparison of the Christo-pagan methods of healing and biblical methods of healing

First, praying in the name of Jesus Christ or claiming and performing healing through the name and authority of Jesus is a biblical approach to healing. As seen in the early church, the apostles performed many healing miracles in the name of Jesus which were discussed in section three, “Christian Understanding of Biblical Healing”. Second, it is undeniable that God can reveal secret things through visions and dreams. The Bible does refer to it. However, to use visions and dreams to identify the cause of a sickness and through which remedies are revealed is questionable. There is no passage in the Bible which involves Jesus and even his disciples using visions and dreams when dealing with sickness. Furthermore, James does not mention visions and dreams in his instructions to elders attending to the sick. Third, the use of water and oil and memory verses, which have been prayed over, may be acceptable as a biblical pattern of healing, so long as the sick person is not diverted to trust in these elements as having magical properties. Rather, they should believe that God can use them to bring healing. In the Bible we can find examples where God’s power flows out through elements and heals people. Similarly, Jesus used his spittle, mud, and the hem of his robe, to heal, and handkerchiefs and aprons which had touched Paul were used to heal. Lastly, mention of the use of herbs and water, which have an incantation invoked over them, and taboos is absent in the Bible. There is no Bible passage referring to Jesus or even his disciples using charms or imposing taboos for a sick person to keep, if he wanted to be healed.

#### ***Mixture of Methods***

Having compared Christo-pagan methods of healing with the traditional method of healing and biblical method of healing, it is fair to say that there

is a mixture in Christo-pagan methods of healing. It includes some aspects of both traditional healing and biblical healing. Table 4 below recapitulates the details of the three methods.

<b>Traditional healer</b>	<b>Christo-pagan healer</b>	<b>Biblical healing</b>
No	Prayer in the name of Jesus Christ	Yes
Yes	Visions and dreams	No
No	Water, oil, and memory verses which have been prayed over	Yes
Yes	Herbs and water which have an incantation invoked over them	No
Yes	Taboos	No

Table 4: A comparison between the methods of traditional healing, Christo-pagan healing, and biblical healing

Table 4 shows that most Christo-pagan methods of healing have been adapted from traditional methods of healing. Prayer in the name of Jesus and prayer over oil are the only biblical elements and practices which, when blended with traditional methods of healing, give a Christian form to the method. Prayer is seen as a biblical cover for traditional practices of healing. Therefore, Christo-pagan healing cannot be considered as biblical healing.

#### **CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF CHRISTO-PAGAN METHODS OF HEALING**

Comparison of the methods of Christo-pagan healing with the methods of traditional healing and biblical healing has laid a foundation from which to make a fair and critical analysis and evaluation of Christo-pagan methods of healing. Since Christo-pagan healing in the name of Jesus may not be considered to be biblical, further questions arise about different steps which look biblical but which need critical analysis and evaluation. These are prayer, use of the name of Jesus, visions and dreams, and use of elements in Christo-pagan practices.

### ***Faithless Prayer***

The methods and practices of Christo-pagan healers were not biblical, nevertheless, a question may be asked, “What about prayer?” Prayer is a biblical method of communicating our needs to God. As we discussed above, when dealing with sickness the elders must offer a prayer of faith, which is prayer driven by faith in the sure promises of God. Such prayer also expresses trust in God and flows out of commitment to him. So, prayer offered by Christo-pagan healers can be considered as faithless prayer. The following reasons demonstrate that. First, the rest of their practices, such as the use of herbs and water, which have had an incantation invoked over them, and taboos indicate that faith is missing in their prayer. Their prayer is full of meaningless words because it is not stimulated and inspired by faith. Their faith is attached to the spirits whom they are invoking for healing and not to God. Second, instead of persevering in prayer, they tend to refer the patient to traditional healers. Lastly, there is the question of personal commitment. Their practices and the advice they give, when referring their clients to traditional healers, reveals their true belief system. Those actions definitely prove that they are not trusting God alone and have no personal commitment to him.

### ***Misusing the Name of Jesus***

The expression “in the name of Jesus” is a common expression used among Christians in churches in public prayers, and when praying for healing and deliverance. It is a biblical expression, and reflects important theological truths. The name of Jesus means “Saviour” (Matt 1:21), and “Christ” means “Messiah” or “anointed One” (John 1:41). In the power of his name, all of our physical and spiritual needs are met. Yet, many so-called Akey Christians are today praying in the name of Jesus, but they do not actually believe that this name has power to bring change in their lives and situations. Therefore, they have to resort elsewhere to spirits for guidance and for healing. They are claiming the name of Jesus just to make their traditional practices look Christian. They want to look Christian, to make a name for themselves, and to attract more followers from which they can accumulate wealth. This is a misuse of the name of Jesus. It is a trap that the devil uses to seduce Christians, and even unbelievers, into thinking they are being Christian by doing such good works. Jesus is speaking about those kinds of people when he says “On that day many will say to me,

‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’” (Matt 7:22-23). There are healers who pretend to be Christians, but in fact are using “black power”. They are using the name of Jesus with some hidden agendas attached to it, that is, to make themselves famous and to raise money from their clients. In such cases, Christians need to discern the source of power of those performing miraculous healing. Are they truly performing under the power of the name of Jesus or under the power of the spirits? This process will also involve a test of the spiritual life, and motivation behind their healing endeavours. As we have already mentioned, all of the healer’s practices will prove who he is. He is not relying on God, therefore, he is misusing the name of Jesus to cover his evil practices in order to look Christian.

### ***Visions and Dreams Originating from the Spirits***

On the one hand, we read that when a person is filled with the Holy Spirit, he can see visions and dream dreams (Acts 2:17). Numerous passages in the Bible affirm that people have had an experience where God has spoken to them directly through visions and dreams. On the other hand, supernatural gifts, as such, do not guarantee that the user is spiritual or Christian. Because of that a critical question may be raised against the Christo-pagan healers, Do their visions and dreams derive from the Holy Spirit, or from the spirits? This is a crucial question because the Bible strongly commands Christians not to immediately accept everything done by so-called Christians as the work of the Holy Spirit of God. On the contrary, we need to distinguish between the spirits (1 Cor 12:10). As we continue our quest to determine the source of visions and dreams, the *New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* raises two other important points which must be considered with respect to visions and dreams, quite apart from whether their origin is from spirits. It says that dreams can be the result of intellectual and ethical tension which has been experienced.<sup>104</sup> However, if we are to build our arguments on the practice itself, we can say that the visions and dreams of the Christo-pagan healers have not originated from

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<sup>104</sup> “Dream”, in *New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, 4th edn, Merrill F. Unger, Ronald K. Harrison, eds, Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1988, p. 318, quoting Franz. J. Delitzsch, *A System of Biblical Psychology*, Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1966, pp. 324ff.



the Holy Spirit. The following points support that claim. First, visions and dreams were never used in the Bible, particularly in the ministry of Jesus and his apostles to determine the cause of a sickness and to reveal which remedies should be used. Furthermore, James did not mention visions and dreams in his instruction concerning what the elders should do when attending to the sick. Second, the answers given by those who see visions and dreams are always connected to their traditional beliefs in regard to the causes of sickness. In the case of dreams, Trompf calls them *common dreams*, meaning “the dreams that are common within a society”.<sup>105</sup> They never relate a sickness to a scientific or natural cause. Furthermore, responses are rarely heard to be biblically related.<sup>106</sup> Third, their practices of incantation and taboos reveal them to be traditional healers, with the source of their power coming from the spirits. This is also a driving force for them to always refer their patients to their colleagues, other traditional healers, when their remedies are not efficacious. The above reasons demonstrate that the visions and dreams of the Christo-pagan healers are not from the Holy Spirit. They are using methods of guidance that diviners are using and which were discussed in section two, “Customary Concept of Traditional Healing”. From this we see that the spirits are the origin for their visions and dreams.

### ***Magical Use of Elements***

When talking about using elements for healing, we are touching on a major and complicated area of discussion. The elements which are used, either with or without healing properties, can be misunderstood and, therefore, the place of faith may be questioned. Speaking from experience, many Christo-pagan healers who use elements in their healing endeavours have corrupted the faith of many of their clients. For example, when a client takes elements with healing properties, his trust is in the healing properties contained in those elements, even despite the fact that they have been prayed over. Another case is where elements without healing properties are used and prayed over. Instead of trusting God to use these elements to bring healing, he trusts these elements to have some magical power to bring

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<sup>105</sup> Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, p. 114.

<sup>106</sup> It is rarely heard of Christo-pagan healers connecting sickness with the sovereignty of God; that God is in control of everything, and that he sometimes allows sickness to strengthen our faith, or demonstrate his power and grace in our lives.

healing. Some believe that when elements are prayed over they are transformed and acquire some kind of mystical or magical power. Therefore, this leads to some kind of fear as regards those elements. They are considered to be sacred or taboo and are reserved only for special use. The use of memory verses also generates the same attitude and trust.

Having talked about the emphasis on elements, another big distortion of faith associated with that is that all the faith and trust of the clients is directed to the healer himself. The client believes him to have extraordinary power for healings and prophecies and that he is able to do miracles. Instead of trusting God, people trust the healer. Furthermore, since the Christo-pagan healers always do their ministry individually, pride also reveals itself in their lives. They want to take credit and adoration from their followers for the work they are doing. Therefore, as Hiebert warns, “We must see that leadership, healing, guidance, exorcisms, and other ministries in the church, belong to the congregation. Some members may have particular gifts, but they use these as members of the body.”<sup>107</sup>

To recapitulate, the use of the elements in the Bible has a different understanding and purpose. James encourages the sick to call for the elders of the church, not individual elders. This may be to avoid individual pride on the part of the elders. The elders should pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. James continues that the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up. The emphasis here is not on elements with healing properties, such as oil and spittle, but on prayer. The anointing with oil symbolises God’s concern for and faithfulness to his people in time of distress, so that he can carry out his will.

Furthermore, it is either the outward sign of the inward power of prayer or, more likely, a sacramental vehicle of divine power.<sup>108</sup> The use of elements without healing properties – as, for example, Jesus’ use of mud and the hem of his robe, as with Peter with his shadow, and as with Paul and the

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<sup>107</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, Tite Tiénou, “Responding to Split-level Christianity and Folk Religion”, in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 16.4 (Winter 1999/2000), pp. 178.

<sup>108</sup> Davids, *The Epistle of James*, p. 193.

handkerchief – is a major question for us today. The question is whether a believer can perform the same miracles that Jesus and his apostles did. God is, of course, free to work miracles today. But, at that particular time God gave the apostles extraordinary power to perform such miracles for particular purposes. These were to convey God's grace, to validate the message of the kingdom of God, and to show its power and presence among his people (Acts 5:12; 8:4-8; 14:3; 19:11).

### ***A Fake Gift***

It is not always appropriate to assume that someone who is performing a miraculous healing in the name of Jesus Christ must have a spiritual gift. Remember Jesus' warning that on "that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'" (Matt 7:22-23). Frederick Dale Bruner warns that although prophecy, exorcism, and miracles can be seen as gifts of God, even when they are done in the name of Christ, people need to be on their guard against heretics.<sup>109</sup> R. T. France also adds that, "prophecy, exorcism, and miracle can be counterfeited".<sup>110</sup> Christo-pagan healers may be categorised with these people because they are not performing healing through the power and authority of Christ. Their healing practices are generated and empowered by the devil in order to counterfeit God's good work. Scott J. Hafemann states that, since Satan is designated as an "angel of light", it is to "highlight his counterfeit nature as a messenger of God (2 Cor 11:14)".<sup>111</sup> He also adds that "Satan pawns himself off as the real messenger of light – that is Christ", and his servants as "apostles of Christ".<sup>112</sup> As an imitator of Christ, Satan imitates supernatural gifts, such as healing, visions, and dreams and gives to his servants, the traditional healers, diviners, and even the Christo-pagan healers, the means to

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<sup>109</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: a Commentary*, vol 1: The Christbook: Matthew 1-12, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004, p. 355.

<sup>110</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, Leicester UK: IVP, 1985, p. 148.

<sup>111</sup> Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1998, p. 435.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

counterfeit the gifts of the Holy Spirit and to lead believers astray. This reminds us of Jesus' warning, "For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect – if that were possible" (Matt 24:24). Therefore, Christians need discernment about those exercising spiritual gifts. John encourages believers saying, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). Writing in the African context, Kunhiyop advises,

Spiritual gifts must always be used and interpreted in accordance with the word of God, in conjunction with which the Spirit always works. They are never meant to serve as substitutes for reading and understanding the word of God. On the contrary, when the Spirit is made to overshadow the word, it is an indication of an imbalance in understanding God's revelation.<sup>113</sup>

This is true in the case of the Akey Christo-pagan healers, who are claiming healing in Jesus' name. Their practices of healing overshadow the word of God and need to be cleared up.

### **SUMMARY**

Having compared the method of healing used by the Christo-pagan healers with the traditional method of healing and the biblical method of healing, it has been demonstrated that there is mixture in the Christo-pagan method of healing. Most of their practices are traditional in origin, and only prayer in the name of Jesus is biblical. Prayer is being used as a Christian cover for the traditional practices of healing. It is a Christo-pagan practice of healing.

Critical analysis and evaluation has also been made of the Christo-pagan methods of healing, particularly of different steps which are biblically related but doubtful, such as prayer, use of the name of Jesus, visions and dreams, and the use of elements. First, it has been established that the prayer of the Christo-pagan healers is faithless, because it is not motivated by and inspired with faith. That their faith is not in God but in the spirits is proved by the rest of their practices. Second, Christo-pagan healers are

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<sup>113</sup> Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, p. 179.

misusing the name of Jesus. They are praying in the name of Jesus, but they do not believe that this name has power to transform life and make a difference in the situations they encounter. Therefore, they consult the spirits for a quick fix of their problems. They are claiming the name of Jesus just to make their traditional practices look Christian. Third, their visions and dreams are not from the Holy Spirit, but have originated from the spirits. The responses obtained from their visions and dreams are related to traditional diviners. Furthermore, the rest of their practices, such as incantation, indicate spirits to be their sources. Lastly, the use of elements can be misunderstood and the place of faith in life may be questioned. The elements can divert the faith of the patient to trust those elements to have healing properties or to have magical power to bring healing, rather than to trust God to use those elements as vehicles of his divine grace and power to restore health.

A final critical comment is also made on the gift of healing. The gift of healing of the Christo-pagan healers is not a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a gift of the spirits (devil) given to his servants to counterfeit the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, it is the same gift that the traditional healers use in their healing practices and the diviners use in their methods of seeking guidance, such as in visions and dreams.

### **PASTORAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

Having analysed the Christo-pagan healers' methods of healing, as found in the Akey context, with traditional healing methods and biblical methods of healing, pastoral recommendations need to be provided. In this section on pastoral recommendations, the two following areas will be covered: transformation of worldview and discerning God's working in healing.

#### **TRANSFORMATION OF WORLDVIEW**

To avoid living a double life, a complete transformation of worldview is crucially important in life. Without going through a transformation process, a person will still retain their old worldview and the same old person (cultural belief) will remain inside the new skin (Christian belief). Therefore, the following areas will be discussed: spiritual transformation, God and spirits, and a biblical view of sickness, health, and healing, in order to lay a cognitive foundation towards a new Christian worldview.

### ***Spiritual Transformation***

A person cannot change his worldview unless he goes through a personal spiritual transformation. Spiritual transformation, on the one hand, is the work of God in the life of a sinner to make him his child and a citizen of his kingdom. On the other hand, it is the individual's responsibility to respond in obedience to God's calling. It is a call "to leave their false gods, and their self-idolatry, with its obsession with wealth, power, pride, sex, and race and to return to God as their Creator and Lord".<sup>114</sup> This move is called "conversion" or "repentance", when a person turns from his old gods and turns to God who forgives him and opens the door for reconciliation and a new relationship with him.<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, conversion also involves these three cultural dimensions in a person's life: cognitive (belief), affective (feelings), and evaluative (norms).<sup>116</sup> This is the first and important step through which a person needs to go in order for him to have a new worldview, a biblical worldview. As Hiebert states:

Conversion to Christ must encompass all three levels of culture: behaviour and rituals, beliefs, and worldview. Christians should live differently, because they are Christians. However, if their behaviour is based primarily on their culture, it becomes dead tradition. Conversion must involve a transformation in beliefs, but if it is only a change of beliefs, it is false faith (James 2). Although conversion must include a change in behaviour and beliefs, if the worldview is not transformed, in the long run the gospel is subverted and becomes captive to the local culture. The result is syncretistic Christo-paganism which has the form but not the essence of Christianity. Christianity becomes a new magic and a new more-subtle form of idolatry.<sup>117</sup>

These are the kind of experiences, which can be identified in the life and practices of the Akey Christo-pagan healers. The gospel was introduced, but the people's lives were not grasped by it. Below the surface, their lives were deeply rooted in their cultural behaviour and beliefs. Christo-pagan

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<sup>114</sup> Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, p. 307.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315.

practices of healing are the result of an amalgamated worldview. Therefore, people need to surrender their lives to God and to let his word, with the help of his Holy Spirit, take complete control and bring transformation in their lives. Only through such a process can people have a new biblical worldview. Based on their new worldview, their interpretation of the cosmology and practices will be in accordance to the word of God.

### ***God and Spirits***

Since those claiming healing in the name of Jesus see the world through a set of eyes which results in a syncretistic Christo-pagan worldview and practices, it is important to discuss God and spirits within the framework of a biblical worldview.

#### *God*

The doctrine of general revelation implies that the Akey people may already have knowledge of the God of the Bible whose name *Tautai* means “the sky-god”.<sup>118</sup> He is known in theory, but not in practice. He is not worshipped and honoured by any gifts because he is far removed from his people.<sup>119</sup> He is “distant, abstract, and unknowable” in his attributes.<sup>120</sup> He is not a popular god, therefore, people turn to believe and worship other deities. This is analogous to the situation Paul spoke about in the Epistle to the Romans, where people instead of worshipping God the creator, whom they already knew, worshipped and served the creature (Rom 1:21-25). So, when the God of the Bible was introduced among the Akey people, he was seen as one (spirit) among other spirits and they added him to those spirits they were already worshipping. They saw no difference between God and the spirits. This is a contributing factor to the Akey syncretistic Christo-pagan beliefs and practices. In saying that, their practices prove that they do not have a full knowledge about the God of the Bible who has revealed himself through the person of Jesus Christ. The traditional preconception

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<sup>118</sup> A. Capell, “The Stratification of Afterworld Beliefs in the New Hebrides”, in *Folklore* 49.1 (March 1938), p. 54.

<sup>119</sup> Eugene A. Nida, William A. Smalley, *Introducing Animism*, New York NY: Friendship Press, 1959, p. 15.

<sup>120</sup> Halverson, “Animism”, p. 59.

about him and the spirits will only change when people have a personal encounter with the living God in Jesus Christ.

Our cosmological understanding must begin with God the Creator and the fact that everything else is creation. God is eternal and in him alone all creation, such as angels, spirits, humans, animals, plants, matter, and energy, exists and depends.<sup>121</sup> God is not one like the created spirits who are numerous and live in different places, such as trees, hills, rivers, plants, animals, and so on.<sup>122</sup> God is transcendent and immanent. Since God is the creator, all his creation receives their existence and total being from him. Therefore, he must be other than his creation because he is transcendent. He is immanent, that is, he is “present to all things at their deepest core, existence itself”.<sup>123</sup> As the scriptures say, “In him, we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). He is not like the “sky-god”, as in Akey traditional belief, who is somewhere far above and impossible to relate to. He is not like the territorial spirits whom the Akey revere and whose power and presence are limited geographically. God is always near to us through his Holy Spirit in our lives (John 16:7), and his holy scriptures still speak to us today. God’s presence protects believers and gives them a sense of security. God’s power, through his Holy Spirit, in the life of a believer is stronger than evil forces (1 John 4:4).<sup>124</sup> God is omniscient and omnipotent, which means “there can be no real barriers to God’s knowing or acting”.<sup>125</sup> He created everything and sustains everything. It also means that he knows everything and has power over everything. In fact, there “is no rival or competitor, no spirit or thing that can undermine his sovereign and loving provision for his creation”.<sup>126</sup> He is sovereign over Satan and his demonic spirits which people worship and serve. God is holy, which means he is set apart from his creation, unique, and the standard of all morality.<sup>127</sup> Therefore, he is worthy to be worshipped, so we should not

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<sup>121</sup> Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, p. 269.

<sup>122</sup> Harold W. Turner, *Living Tribal Religions*, London UK: Ward Lock Educational, 1971, p. 11.

<sup>123</sup> Peter Kreeft, Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics: Hundreds of Answers to Crucial Questions*, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1994, p. 94.

<sup>124</sup> Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, p. 61.

<sup>125</sup> Kreeft, Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, p. 96.

<sup>126</sup> Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, p. 50.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.



worship unclean evil spirits. God is just. He deals fairly with his creation and his judgment is fair. At the end of the age, he will judge Satan and his demonic spirits and their worshippers and condemn them to eternal condemnation. God is love. God's justice condemns sinners, but because he is a loving God he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for the sins of humans.<sup>128</sup> Because of who God is, as shown through his attributes, we can simply acknowledge that he is everything we need. We only need to completely surrender ourselves under his lordship and we will experience in our lives all the benefits promised for his sons and daughters.

### *The Spirits*

Belief in spirits among the Akey people has paralysed their spiritual lives. They fear the spirits because of their malevolent deeds in their lives. This has resulted in the formation of unbiblical doctrines and practices, just to bridge that gap of relationship. We cannot ignore the reality and influence of the spirits, for the Bible also acknowledges that there are different categories of spirits. But, as Kunhiyop states, "Christians need to base their thinking about the spirit world on the Bible, rather than on tradition".<sup>129</sup> In saying that, it is important to know that in the beginning the evil spirits were created holy. But they were rejected, because of rebellion against God, and became unclean and violent (Gen 1:31; 2 Pet 2:4; Matt 8:28). However, they still have power to perform miracles (Rev 13:12-15). The evil spirits oppose Christians in their lives and ministries (Eph 6:12), encourage idol worship (1 Cor 10:20), confuse and lead people away from the truth (1 Tim 4:1), and cause physical and mental disease (2 Cor 12:7).<sup>130</sup> Although evil spirits seem cunning and powerful, God is more powerful than them. He has complete authority over them and one day he will send them to eternal condemnation.<sup>131</sup>

### *A Biblical View of Sickness, Health, and Healing*

The concepts of the "good life" and "suffering" (such as, sickness) need to be understood in the light of the word of God. If we are not careful, they can be a means of turning people towards syncretism. This is the case

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

among the Akey people. Some are not able to handle the tension of the problems in their lives and are looking for easy solutions to their problems, to obtain a good life, and they end up seeking guidance and help in wrong places and from wrong people. Therefore, a biblical view of sickness, health, and healing are crucially important.

### *Sickness*

The Old Testament and the New Testament use different words to describe “sickness”, such as *חֲלִי* (*chōli*), and *ἀσθένεια* (*astheneia*).<sup>132</sup> Human sickness began when our first ancestors rebelled against God and sinned. Based on that concept, the common understanding in the ancient world is that any sickness which is experienced is the consequence of sin. Leland Ryken states that in the Old Testament, “[g]ood health and healing are seen as marks of the blessing of God, and illness as an indication of his disfavour (Deut 7:15; 1 Sam 5:9; Ps 38:3; 41:1-4)”.<sup>133</sup> But it is also important to note that not all sickness which individuals experience is the result of their sins, because the experience of Job and the blind man in John 9:2-3 oppose that. The Bible also affirms that there are sicknesses caused by evil spirits (Matt 4:24). This is the common belief among the Akey people, including their traditional healers and the Christo-pagan healers. They always attribute diseases to evil spirits. It is true, in some cases, that spirits caused diseases and affected mental states (Luke 13:32). But it is also important to note that it is not true in every case. However, those kinds of sicknesses should be viewed in the light of the sovereignty of God, which means God is greater than the evil spirits and he only allows them to act under his sovereignty, as in the case of Job (Job 1). Furthermore, there are other sicknesses which have natural causes. For such diseases, we need to seek doctors for help. God has given them wisdom and ability to provide treatments for such diseases and such treatments should be taken with thanksgiving.

Understanding the Bible’s teaching on the causes of diseases should affect our attitude when we experience sickness and suffering. We need to

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<sup>132</sup> J. Wilkinson, “Healing”, in *New Dictionary of Theology*, Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, eds, Leicester UK: IVP, 1988, p. 287.

<sup>133</sup> “Disease and Healing”, in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1998, p. 209.

remember that, as a result of the fallen world (Rom 8:18-25), God allows sickness and suffering in our lives to remind us of the presence of sin and our vulnerability to infection and decay.<sup>134</sup> While still living in this fallen world and striving for a good life, we need discernment as to what causes sickness and to seek remedies in the right places. For example, if the sickness comes from God because of sin, ask for forgiveness and repent, or if it is because God wants to strengthen our faith, thank and seek him more and more. If sickness is caused by evil spirits, seek help in prayer for deliverance by the elders. If sickness has a natural cause, such as malaria, seek anti-malarial treatment by doctors and receive it with thanksgiving. God allows sickness and suffering to display his glory and grace in our lives. The experience of Job and Paul prove that (Job 42:1-6; 2 Cor 12:1-10).<sup>135</sup>

### *Health*

Health, in general, can be defined as “a condition in which the components of the body-mind complex are free from disease and function together to promote the person’s well-being”.<sup>136</sup> The Bible uses different words to describe health. The Old Testament uses the word שָׁלוֹם (shālōm), which is always translated as “peace”. In fact, this word means “soundness” or “well-being”.<sup>137</sup> In the Old Testament, health was connected with an ethical life, and spiritual obedience (Ex 15:26; Deut 28:58-61). As Wilkinson points out, “health in the Old Testament consists of wholeness and holiness”.<sup>138</sup> Likewise, the New Testament accepts the Old Testament concept of health. Jesus uses such words as “blessedness” (Matt 5:3-11), “life” (John 10:10), and “being whole” (John 5:6) to describe health. Furthermore, when the New Testament speaks about healing, it uses the word σώζω (sōzō), “save”, to refer to “healing of the body and the saving of the soul (Luke 7:50; 9:24)”.<sup>139</sup> This implies that “health is the complete well-being of a person, who is in a right relationship to God, to himself, to

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<sup>134</sup> Wilkinson, “Healing”, p. 287.

<sup>135</sup> “Disease and Healing”, p. 209.

<sup>136</sup> Ronald K. Harrison, “Heal”, in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol 2, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982, p. 640.

<sup>137</sup> Wilkinson, “Healing”, p. 287.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

his fellows, and to his environment”.<sup>140</sup> In the Bible, the concept of health is closely related to the animistic view of health in which spiritual and physical relationships with other people and the environment are to be kept. But the difference is that the Bible emphasises the person’s relationship with God, whereas in animism the person’s relationship with the spirit world is emphasised. However, true perfect health consists of the spiritual and physical health which will be received in eternal glory. This is in contrast to animistic belief, which only insists on the necessity for physical health and neglects spiritual health. The health offered is temporary and does not prepare a person for eternal glory, but for an otherwise eternal condemnation.

### *Healing*

From an Old Testament perspective, the biological cause of disease is rarely considered. The predominant conviction is that Yahweh allows and prevents sickness. Therefore, only God can restore the sick to health, and prayer is the chief means for seeking healing. We can find examples of the pattern of answered prayers for healing (Ps 6; 16:10; 30:2).<sup>141</sup> In addition, since illness may be viewed as the consequence of sin, the psalmist (Ps 103:3), the account of healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:2-12), and James (James 5:14) reveal that sin needs forgiveness in order for illness to be healed.<sup>142</sup> But it would be a mistake to assume that all sicknesses are always connected to sin, because of the experiences of Job, Paul, and the blind man in John 9:2-3 refute this.

In the New Testament, healing played just as much of a vital part in Jesus’ ministry as preaching and teaching. Peter testified “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:38). Jesus regarded sickness as an evil influence, which was introduced in a person’s life to disrupt his personality (Luke 8:26-39). Therefore, Jesus’ healing was to reunify body and mind so that the person might have the abundant life that God wanted him to experience (John

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ronald K. Cottle, “Healing, Gifts of”, in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol 2, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982, p. 647.

<sup>142</sup> “Disease and Healing”, p. 209.

10:10). In some cases, both physical and spiritual healing is experienced as a result of submission, in obedience and faith in God's restorative power (Matt 9:27-31; Mark 5:25-35). In other cases, Jesus healed without human response (Matt 8:14-17). Harrison adds, "He intended to heal the sin-damaged personality, knowing that once the imbalance was corrected and the turmoil of the subconscious mind calmed, the person would enjoy a new relationship with God characterised by health".<sup>143</sup> Furthermore, in the early church, disciples performed similar healings to those of Jesus in his ministry, and all their healings were attributed to Christ's power.

However, someone may ask, "Does God heal today?" At a deeper level, this question may also arise from another question, "Does God answer prayer for healing?" To answer these questions, we first need to believe that God always answers our prayers according to his promises (Matt 7:7; John 14:14). Second, whatever his answer may be, it is completely dependent on his will. "God is completely free to heal or not to heal, according to his will (cf. John 5:13-16). His purpose may include physical infirmity and sickness for the testing, strengthening, refining, or chastening of his own (1 Cor 11:30-31; 2 Cor 12:7-10)."<sup>144</sup> In other words, God can use sickness and suffering purposefully to "draw people to himself, and to teach them patience and maturity (Job 42:5-6; James 1:2-4)".<sup>145</sup>

It needs to be remembered that sickness and suffering are part of this fallen world of which we too are part. Therefore, from the time of conception, a human being is in the processes of aging and death, and the side effects of these processes are sickness and suffering.<sup>146</sup> For Christians, sickness and suffering are reminders that their lives are temporary and destined to decay, due to original sin. Therefore, for Christians, whatever may be God's will concerning their health, they will always have joy and peace that after their death they will experience a full deliverance, when they receive their new bodies (1 Cor 15:50-56). This is perfect healing.

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<sup>143</sup> Harrison, "Heal", p. 646.

<sup>144</sup> Merrill F. Unger, "Divine Healing", in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128:511 (July-September 1971), p. 239.

<sup>145</sup> Hiebert, Shaw, Tiénou, "Responding to Split-level Christianity and Folk Religion", p. 176.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

### **DISCERNING GOD'S WORKING IN HEALING**

Christ predicted that false Christs and false prophets would arise and would deceive many through demonic signs and wonders (Mark 13:22; Matt 24:24). In addition, Paul also reminds us that Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light, so Satan's servants can also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness (2 Cor 11:13-15). Satanic imitation of spiritual gifts is a big challenge. Because of that, John warns that Christians need to "test the spirits, to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). Merrill Unger emphasises the urgency of discernment, saying:

In the age-end upsurge of deluding demonism and diabolic miracle, it is high time for all God's born-again children to claim the genuine spiritual gift of "discerning of spirits" (1 Cor 12:10), and to see through popular occult healing methods and movements of our day. Otherwise, they too run the risk of being taken in by every religiously-camouflaged act, where the demonic masquerades as the divine.<sup>147</sup>

Discernment begins when we raise different questions as a practice concerned to "prove all things" (1 Thess 5:21). K. Neill Foster, in his book *The Discerning Christian*, emphasises the importance of questioning. "We Christians hesitate to question anything, lest we grieve the Spirit of God, lest we contribute to dissension and division. . . . The failure to question will short-circuit the process of discernment."<sup>148</sup> Everything that happens in the church and everything done in the name of Jesus needs to be questioned. These questions will help determine whether they have originated from the Holy Spirit, through whom Christ is the author, or from Satan the deceiver. Therefore, questions are crucially important in the process of discernment.

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<sup>147</sup> Unger, "Divine Healing", p. 235.

<sup>148</sup> K. Neill Foster, *The Discerning Christian: How the Believer Detects Truth from Error in the Midst of Today's Religious Confusion*, Harrisburg PA: Christian Publications, 1975, p. 53.

Several biblical tests will be discussed to enable Christians to discern the work of God and differentiate it from the work of Satan. In the tests, there are four areas that need to be questioned and carefully observed.

The first test is to analyse the practice from the scriptures. Does this practice conform to scriptural teaching?<sup>149</sup> The scriptures should be the measuring rod for all that we do (2 Tim 3:16-17). A practice, guided by the Holy Spirit, will never contradict the scriptures. For the scriptures themselves assure us that “God is not the author of confusion” (1 Cor 14:33). So, any practice which raises doubt or is in conflict with the scriptures will need further investigation.

The second test is to investigate the spirituality of the healer. Is he (the healer) a born-again person? Does he recognise Christ as Lord and Saviour? (1 John 2: 3-5). This test is not to find out whether he is a member of the church, but to find out his personal relationship with the Lord. If he is a committed Christian or a spirit-filled Christian, fruits of the Holy Spirit should be manifested in his life (Gal 5:22-25). In what he does, is there love or self-centredness, gentleness or arrogance, and so on?

The third test is to identify who gets the glory from the work done. If the power manifested is from God’s Holy Spirit, the glory will always be attributed to God (John 7:18; 8:50; 17:4). On the contrary, if it is manifested through the power of flesh or spirits, glory will always be given to the person concerned.

The last test is to assess the maturity and unity in the body of Christ (the church). Jesus said, “I will build My church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18). It needs to be established whether the practice draws the attention of the people to Christ, and the members of his body. In particular, does this practice contribute to the spiritual growth of the people, or it is something that leads to spiritual immaturity (1 Cor 12-14)? Moreover, it needs to be seen whether the healer is accountable to the church or not. Furthermore, “does it [the practice] lead Christians to seek the unity of the body of Christ, or is it divisive (John 17:11; 1 John 2:9-11;

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<sup>149</sup> Hiebert, Shaw, Tiénou, “Responding to Split-level Christianity and Folk Religion”, p. 179.

5:1-2)?”<sup>150</sup> If the healer is an influential figure drawing people to himself rather than to Christ, acting independently from the body of Christ (the church), and his works are not contributing to the spiritual growth of the people, this kind of healer must be avoided.

### **SUMMARY**

In this section of pastoral recommendations, transformation of worldview is crucial. Unless a person goes through spiritual conversion and repentance, he cannot have a new worldview (a biblical worldview). Therefore, he has to turn from his old gods and turn to God, who will forgive him and open the door for reconciliation and a new relationship with him. This can only be achieved through the preaching and teaching of the gospel. Furthermore, our cosmological understanding must begin with God the Creator, and recognise that everything else is creation, including the spirits. Therefore, “there is no rival or competitor, no spirit or thing that can undermine his sovereign and loving provision for his creation”.<sup>151</sup> This is our complete assurance.

Next, Christians must hold to a biblical view of sickness, health, and healing. First, people need to be taught that God allows sickness and suffering in order to display his glory and grace in our lives. Second, they need to be reminded that health is not only confined to physical health, but it is the complete well-being of a person who is in a right relationship to God, to himself, to his fellows, and to his environment. Lastly, it is worth knowing that God is completely free to heal or not to heal, according to his will (cf. John 5:13-16).

Finally, because of the satanic imitation of the spiritual gift of healing, several biblical tests are offered to enable Christians to discern the work of God on healing and differentiate it from the work of Satan. The first test is to analyse the practice from the scriptures. The second test is to investigate the spirituality of the healer. The third test is to identify who gets the glory from the work done. The last test is to assess whether the practice promotes maturity and unity in the body of Christ (the church).

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, p. 50.



## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study is to discern the work of God in healing in Vanuatu, with special reference to the Akey people on the island of Espiritu Santo. This section brings together the summaries and draws conclusions.

### **SUMMARY**

The introduction in section one presented the background and the purpose of the study. Section two surveyed the customary concept of traditional healing among the Akey people. Section three gave the Christian understanding of biblical healing. Section four looked at the syncretistic Christo-pagan worldview and methods of healing. Section five made a comparison, critical analysis, and evaluation of the healing methods. Section six offered pastoral recommendations.

#### ***Introduction Summary***

In the introduction the background and the purpose of the study were presented, which was to provide a tool for church leaders and ordinary Christians in Vanuatu to be able to discern the work of God in healing. A few research questions were raised to guide the study and other parameters of study were stated, such as the methodology, the limitations and delimitations, and the definition of terms.

#### ***Customary Concept of Traditional Healing Summary***

This section provided an overview of the traditional concept of healing. First, the Akey worldview was explored – including their view of life as holistic, malevolent and the benevolent spirits, and their view on the causes of diseases – which drives them to form their own belief system and practices in life.

Second, the role of diviners, as the first person to consult for guidance in any emergency, was discussed. He is a trusted figure in the society, guiding them as to what to do and who to go to for extra help.

Lastly, we briefly covered the complex steps and role of a traditional healer when dealing with spiritually-caused diseases. There are three stages when dealing with diseases caused by spirits. These are binding and removing of the spirits, healing of the effects, prevention and evaluation of the disease.

### ***Christian Understanding of Biblical Healing Summary***

In this section we discussed the Christian understanding of biblical healing. The first section covered the purpose of biblical healing miracles. Healings, performed by Jesus and the apostles, were with the purpose of demonstrating the divine power of the kingdom of God, to validate the message of the kingdom which they were proclaiming, and had the aim of producing faith in those who did not believe.

The second section discussed biblical methods of healing by following the principles set in James 5:14-16. In order for health to be restored, the sick person has to call the elders to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. They have to confess, forgive one another's sin, and pray for one another. This practice makes the members of the community right with God and prepares them to pray with great power. The results are the Lord's, according to his will.

### ***Christo-pagan Worldview and Methods of Healing Summary***

This section surveyed the Christo-pagan worldview and methods of healing. The first section discussed the fact that Akey Christo-pagan healers have a syncretistic worldview. When God is silent and distant, in times of crises for them, it is acceptable to turn around and seek to manipulate other spirits through magic for a quick fix to their problems. This is because they view God as one among other spirits.

The second section covered the methods of healing used by Christo-pagan healers. Their methods of healing are complex and vary between different healers. Furthermore, their method of healing is a mixture of biblical and traditional healing. The first step is prayer for the empowering their traditional healing practices. The second is the patient's description of his sickness. The third is using means, such as dreams and visions, to diagnose the causes of sickness. Lastly, for prevention and healing of the sickness, they use water, oil, and memory verses which have all been prayed over. Others use herbs or water, which have an incantation invoked over them, and set taboos to be kept.

***Comparison, Critical Analysis, and Evaluation of Healing Methods Summary***

In this section, a comparison, critical analysis, and evaluation of healing methods was established.

In the first section, the Christo-pagan method of healing was compared with traditional and biblical methods of healing. As a result, it was demonstrated that there is mixture in this Christo-pagan method of healing.

The second section covered critical analysis and evaluation of different steps of the Christo-pagan methods of healing that are biblically related but doubtful, such as prayer, use of the name of Jesus, visions and dreams, and the use of elements. Due to blurry practices, it was concluded that healing performed by Akey Christo-pagan healers is not a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a gift of the spirits (the devil) given to his servants to counterfeit the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 John 4:1). Similarly, it is the same gift that the traditional healers use in their healing practices and the diviners use in their methods of seeking guidance, such as visions and dreams.

***Pastoral Recommendation Summary***

The section on pastoral recommendations covered these two following areas: transformation of worldview, and discerning God's working in healing.

A few important points in the first section on transformation of worldview have been highlighted. First, the importance of spiritual transformation was emphasised. Unless a person goes through a spiritual conversion or repentance, he cannot have a new worldview (a biblical worldview). Second, information was provided on who God is in comparison with the spirits, and instruction was given that our cosmological understanding must begin with God the Creator and everything else as creation, including the spirits. Third, a biblical view of sickness, health, and healing was discussed. God allows sickness and suffering to display his glory and grace in our lives. He is completely free to heal or not to heal, according to his will.

The last section was on discerning God's working in healing. Due to the satanic imitation of the spiritual gift of healing, several biblical tests were

offered to enable Christians to discern the work God in healing and differentiate it from the work of Satan.

### **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

There are several concluding thoughts that need to be shared as an urgent call to church leaders for consideration. These are the practical steps to enforce ideas from the pastoral recommendations to address the challenges identified in the analysis and critical evaluation.

The first is to preach the gospel. Let the word of God challenge and transform the lives of the people. People need to repent from their old ways of life and from their gods, and to turn to God the Father of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who will give them new lives. Only through genuine repentance can people begin to assimilate a new worldview, a biblical worldview.

The second is to spend more time in teaching the word of God to the people. It will help them to have a solid biblical understanding, to view life and evaluate situations biblically. Furthermore, it will help people to build strong relationships with God. That is, to be able to trust him as their creator and the sustainer of the universe, in whom we have our being in whatever situation in life. For everything which happens in life works for the good of those who love God.

The third, the power encounter, is a problem in Vanuatu, where we see people running around searching for power to solve their immediate problems. When God is silent, he is assumed to have no power and, as a result, people seek help from other deities (spirits), believing them to have more power and to be able to meet their needs. Therefore, to address that challenge, people need to be taught the doctrine of God in relation to Satan and his spirits.

Finally, due to the devil's imitation of supernatural gifts in counterfeiting the work of God and leading his people away from the truth, there is an urgent need to instruct people in practical steps on how to discern or test the activities of the Holy Spirit from the spirits' activities. This is to guide ordinary Christians to seek help in the right place and from the right people.

### ***Suggestion for Further Study***

This study unpacks Christo-pagan methods of healing, and identifies the root of their beliefs and practices. It is a tool for church leaders and ordinary Christians to be able to discern the work of God in healing. It is hoped that this study will contribute to further study in the ecclesiological and missiological field that will lead to the making of strategic plans on how to let the word of God address the issues which this paper was not able to cover due to time and word restrictions.

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# **A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE GOD OF THE BIBLE AND THE TANNESE PRIMAL GODS: AN APOLOGETIC TO EDUCATE TANNESE CHRISTIANS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Melanesians are very religious people. They have in their primal religion certain objects or spirits which they fear as gods. The people of Tanna Island (in Vanuatu) have several of these primal gods. They have supernatural beings in the spiritual realm and stone gods in the vicinity. In the supernatural realm, there is *kughen*, impersonal (unnamed) spirits, and *nanmin*. In the category of the stone gods, there is the fertility god, *nahak*, and mythical stone gods.

This poses a challenge for Tannese Christians. Often they are tempted to revert to the primal gods in times of sickness and the new yam harvest. Furthermore, one can see the outworking of traditional religion creeping into the church and resulting in either apostasy or syncretism.

The purpose of this paper is to do careful research on some of the Tannese primal gods, their nature and some characteristics of their relationship to humankind and vice versa. This will then be compared to the God of the Bible, for the purpose of educating Tannese Christians, as well as strengthening their faith in God.

## **INTRODUCTION**

“There is no God”, the fool says in his heart” (Ps 14:1). “Yahweh is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the Israelites”, says a Jew. “Whatever you find to be true about God is your truth, but not mine”, says a relativist. “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who in these last days

has revealed himself in Jesus Christ (Heb 1:1-2), and lives in an individual's life by his spirit (1 Cor 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16) is our God", says a Christian. "We also have our own primal gods", says a Tannese.

Missionaries brought Christianity to the island of Tanna<sup>1</sup> in the mid-1800s. The Presbyterian missionary, John Geddie, settled on Aneityum<sup>2</sup> in 1848. However, prior to Geddie, the LMS missionary, John Williams, on a visit to the New Hebrides (as it was formally known), now Vanuatu, was martyred on Erromango<sup>3</sup> in 1839. Missionaries have encountered many challenges over time in bringing Christianity to the New Hebrides, especially Tanna. For instance, Henry Nisbet and George Turner (1842-1862),<sup>4</sup> later John Gibson Paton and the Mathiesons (1858), had to withdraw from Tanna, when their lives were threatened by the people. Despite these challenges, the church gradually flourished. In 1948 the Presbyterian church of Vanuatu<sup>5</sup> became a self-governing church and has remained so to the present day. Unlike the challenges of the missionary era, now challenge encountered by the church is coming from within the church itself, namely, the continuing influence of paganism. As a result, two things are inevitable within the church: (1) apostasy, and (2) syncretism. The premise of this paper is that a genuine understanding of the God of the Bible, by way of comparison and contrast with the traditional gods, will strengthen the believers' faith in God. This introductory section will include: (i) introducing the geography, history, and people of Tanna; (ii) the purpose of the study; (iii) delimitations and

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<sup>1</sup> Tanna is an island in the southern part of Vanuatu. It lays south of Efate, where the capital city of Vanuatu, Port Vila, is situated. The author is from the island of Tanna

<sup>2</sup> Aneityum is the southernmost island in the Vanuatu archipelago. It lays about 40 miles (64 km) south of Tanna. According to the history of missions, this is the first island to be settled by the Presbyterian missionary, John Geddie, in the year 1848.

<sup>3</sup> Erromango is another island in the southern part of Vanuatu. It lies some 20 miles (32 km) north of Tanna. With regard to missionary history, the island is referred to as the "Martyr Island" by the missionaries. Several missionaries were killed there: John Williams and Harris in 1839. Later, George Gordon and his brother James Gordon were also killed there. With regards to trade, the island is known for sandalwood, even to this day.

<sup>4</sup> John G. Paton, *John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides: An Autobiography*, James Paton, ed., London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1890, p. 229.

<sup>5</sup> Any reference to the church in this paper will mostly be the Presbyterian church of Vanuatu (PCV), because (1) the author is a pastor of the PCV, (2) it has historical roots, back to the first missionaries, and (3) it still has the largest membership.

limitations; (iv) research questions; (v) methodology; and (vi) definition of terms.

### **INTRODUCING THE GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY, AND PEOPLE**

The shape of Tanna has been described in many ways, such as “a fat crescent moon, or a Stone Age hand scraper, roughly chipped to shape, with the bulge along the west coast”<sup>6</sup>, or a “20-mile-long kidney-shaped island.”<sup>7</sup> But, for the Tannese, it is simply their land, as expressed by the name, *Tana*, meaning “land”, “earth”, or “soil” in the South Tanna language.<sup>8</sup> It is the land in which their forefathers lived, where they are now living, and the land in which their children, yet to come, will live. Hence, shape and location is unimportant to them; but a sense of belonging, ownership, and *kastom* is vital to their everyday living. The entire life of the people is governed by *kastom*.

The first recorded visitors were sailors and explorers. In 1606 Quiros sailed to the northern part (Banks) and Santo thinking it was the Australian continent. He named it “Terra Australis de Espiritu Santo” (Great Southland of the Holy Spirit). In 1768 Louis-Antoine Comte de Bougainville discovered the central part from Aurora (Ambae) to Malekula. It was Captain James Cook, who came six years later, who gave the name New Hebrides and mapped the rest of the islands to the south. In Tanna he named a harbour, Port Resolution, after his vessel. Cook was followed by La Perouse in 1798. Other visitors were the traders in the 19th century. For instance, Peter Dillon found sandalwood trees on Erromango in 1828 which attracted foreigners to the island. Another development was the recruitment of labour for Queensland and Fiji sugar plantations in 1840.<sup>9</sup> In 1848 the first Presbyterian missionary (John Geddie) landed on Aneityum and, in conjunction with Bishop Selwyn (1849), constituted what later became the sequence of missionary work to the northern parts of

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Rice, *John Frum He Come: Cargo Cults and Cargo Messiahs in the South Pacific: a Polemical Work about a Black Tragedy*, Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1974, p. 129.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia: Four approaches to Gospel and Culture*, Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 2012, p. xvii.

<sup>8</sup> George Turner, *Nineteen Years in Polynesia: Missionary Life, Travels, and Researches in the Islands of the Pacific*, London UK: John Snow, 1861, p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Gardissat, “Taem Bifo (The Past)”, in *Vanuatu: Twenti wan tingting long taem blong independens*, Suva Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1980, pp. 25-27.

Vanuatu (the Northern Mission).<sup>10</sup> They contributed much in the areas of health, education, and economics. On 16 November 1887 France and Great Britain set up their joint colonial administration in the New Hebrides, which continued up until 1980 when the nation gained its political independence and became the Republic of Vanuatu.

Recently, Tanna has become the administrative centre of Tafea Province.<sup>11</sup> The provincial hospital is located in the small provincial town of Lenakel on the west of the island. It is one of the islands which has been trying to maintain its traditional ways in spite of the changes brought by Christianity, tourism, education, and globalisation. See below a map of the Republic of Vanuatu, and a map of Tanna.<sup>12</sup>

The land is fertile. The people are gardeners who depend on their crops for a living. They have a wealth of traditional relationships which are maintained through traditional ceremonies, traditional roads, and traditional mythology. People are required to work in their gardens, keep domesticated animals, and maintain relationships for traditional functions. Recently, gardening and the keeping of domesticated animals have taken on a commercial aspect due to changes in the standard of living.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> The word “Tafea” is made up of the initials of the five islands that make up the province. They are Tanna, Aniwa, Futuna, Erromango, and Aneityum.

<sup>12</sup> The maps of Vanuatu and Tanna were taken from <http://www.bing.com/images/search?q=map+of+vanuatu>, accessed August 1, 2014. The names of some islands may be different to the ones used in the essay. This is because the names on the map were written in French. For instance, Aneityum in English is Anatom in French. The reason is that the British and French colonised Vanuatu before 1980. Hence, at independence in 1980 both languages were languages of education, as stated in the constitution.

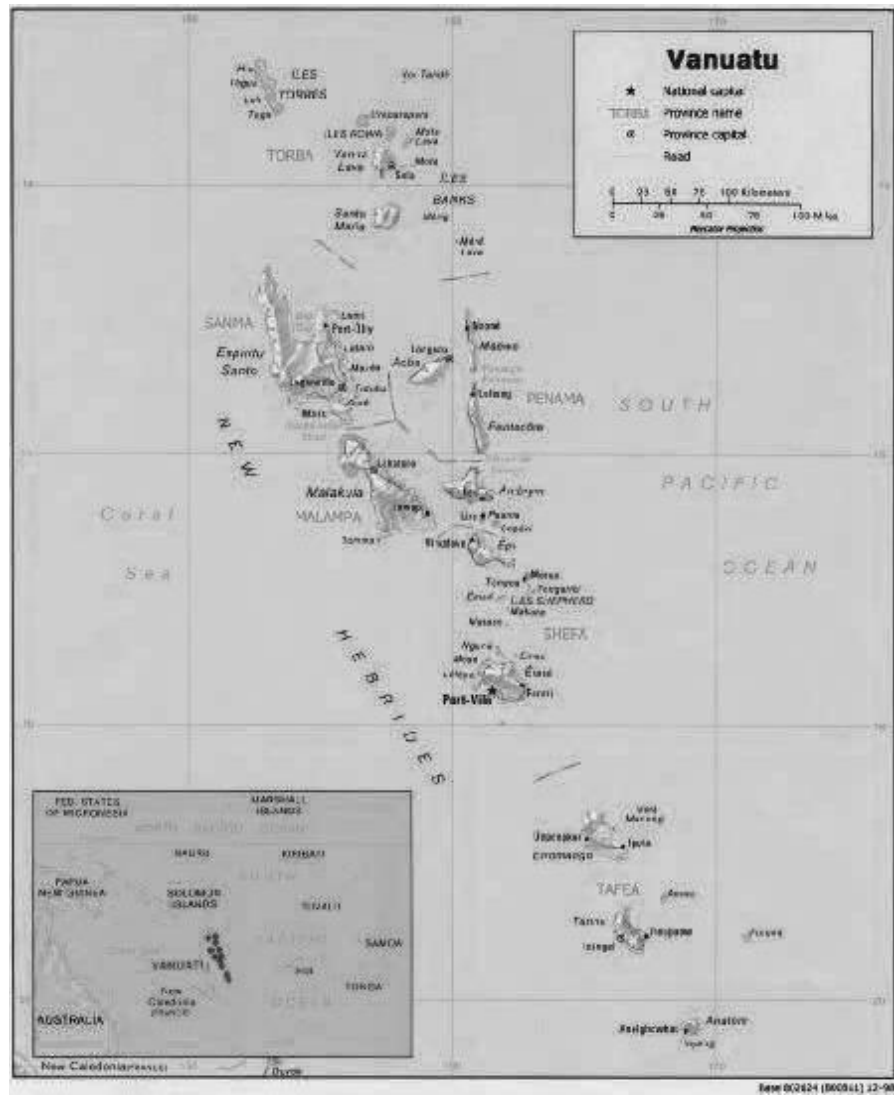


Figure 1: Map of Vanuatu



Figure 2: Map of Tanna

Recently as well, there have been significant developments in the life of the people. For example, Tanna has become a tourist destination. In particular, the famous accessible volcano, Mt Yasur, and traditional performances have attracted many tourists to Tanna. There is also the recruitment of seasonal workers in New Zealand, with the result that many have been travelling abroad. Furthermore, there has been a slow increase in the number of students going away for education. In fact, the greatest challenge for locals nowadays is school fees for their children's education.

### THE PURPOSE OF STUDY

This thesis is an apologetic for Tannese Christians, which aims to strengthen their faith and to increase their ability to convince unbelievers.



As Wayne Grudem puts it, “apologetics is providing a defence of the truthfulness of the Christian faith for the purpose of convincing unbelievers”.<sup>13</sup> Although apologetics is mainly for Christians, there is an evangelistic purpose to it which, according to Grudem, is to convince unbelievers. Norman L. Geisler states that “prior to establishing these two pillars [Christ is the Son of God, and the Bible is the word of God] on which the uniqueness of Christianity is built, one must establish the existence of God”.<sup>14</sup> This thesis seeks to show that the God of the Bible is not one among many that a person may choose from, but that he is the only God. He is not only the white-man’s<sup>15</sup> God, but he is also the God of the Melanesians. So, on the one hand, the pastoral purpose of this thesis is to inform mature Christians and to strengthen weak Christians so that they will not see God as a foreign God.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, it is also to put forward reasonable arguments for non-Christians to believe in God.

In the past, several attempts were made by government representatives and church workers to put an end to traditional gods, but to no avail. For instance, the colonial government tried to remove magic stones, which are an important part of the traditional life of the people. A regulation of 18 November 1918 enforced by the District Agent, Mr Nicol,<sup>17</sup> that all magic

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<sup>13</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: an Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1994, p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1976, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> The word “white-man” is not used here with any negative implication. In some Melanesian languages, and especially the Tannese language, there are not many words for all the different colours. So, in order to describe something, the closest colour has to be used. Although foreigners are not really white, the people have to resort to the closest skin colour. The same is also true for black people.

<sup>16</sup> For Tannese, there is a fine distinction between what is of the people and what is from abroad. Things from abroad include: practices, lifestyle, materials, belief, and the teaching/education system. This is referred to by the one word, *yasifa*, meaning “things that were brought from outside into the land”. This is the view that has been held by unbelievers towards the church and God, as though the latter was brought to the land via the missionary’s vessel. As a result, there are still villagers who would not allow churches to be built or their children to attend church. The missionaries, of course, brought the knowledge of God, but he was already there. The creator God is Spirit and cannot be confined to a vessel or a certain time, as though his presence is confined to the missionary’s presence.

<sup>17</sup> New Hebrides, as it was formally known, now Vanuatu since 1980, was jointly ruled for 70 years by the condominium government of both the British and the French. Their powers

stones be destroyed forced the matter underground.<sup>18</sup> In the same way, in the past the church has removed stones, via national and local evangelistic campaigns, but was never able to remove them all. Coercive and collective approaches seem to work only for a short time. Thus, this paper seeks to influence the minds of Tannese Christians in a gentle and loving spirit by emphasising individual choice based on a sound comparative study.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The research methodology is qualitative. The two main sources for this research were written sources in the library and my personal understanding. The writer also conducted interviews via email.

This thesis has two parts. The first part will consist of a reflection on some characteristics of the primal gods and the God of the Bible, and their relationship to humans. Several questions will be asked. How has the God of the Bible and traditional gods revealed themselves to humans? What do the people say or think they are? The second part will include an evaluation and a recommendation to Tannese Christians, for the purpose of defending the faith and informing the whole population about the true God. The writer believes that educating people in a way that they can understand may lead to growth in faith (for believers) and a change of allegiance (for unbelievers). This will be done by opening the word of God to the people because it “is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb 4:12 NIV). Only the living Word of God itself will transform them by the renewal of their minds (Rom 12:2). The writer believes that by educating their minds with the word their faith will grow. Believers live by faith and not by sight, says Paul (2 Cor 5:7).

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were delegated from High Commissioners (the French head office in New Caledonia, and the British in Solomon Islands). In New Hebrides, both the British and the French appointed Resident Commissioners on October 20, 1906. Hence, District Agents were appointed to different islands of the archipelago. Mr Nicol was an expatriate, appointed as District Agent of Tanna at that time.

<sup>18</sup> Rice, *John Frum He Come*, p. 125.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

These are the two main questions to be dealt with in this paper. What are some of the characteristics of the God of the Bible and the traditional gods? How is the relationship between them and humans different or similar?

## **DELIMITATIONS AND LIMITATIONS**

While it would be appropriate to cover a much wider area of Vanuatu, or even Melanesia, this thesis will be limited to my people group, Tannese. For Melanesians, people are who they are because of the people group to which they belong. The traditional community is where their identity, knowledge, and a sense of belonging are, and so it is proper to focus on my people group. However, Melanesians, in general, may have some things in common. So, it is the hope of the writer that other Melanesians might find this paper relevant in one way or another, when comparing their traditional gods with God as revealed in the Bible.

It is not possible for this thesis to cover all aspects about the God of the Bible and primal gods. However, while a few specific things have been selected for discussed, this thesis is more of a general overview, meaning that, among other important things, the vital Christian doctrine of the trinity will not be dealt with. The general overview is for the purpose of comparative study.

It would be helpful to do some research or interviews among my own people, but because of distance, time, and finance the writer will rely on his knowledge, the library, and the internet.

## **DEFINITION OF TERMS**

### ***Apologetics***

This paper is using the definition given by Wayne Grudem: apologetics provides “a defence of the truthfulness of the Christian faith, for the purpose of convincing unbelievers”.<sup>19</sup> Although the purpose is for convincing unbelievers, it is vital for all Christians to be informed and to be ready to give reasons for their faith. Therefore, this apologetic will

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<sup>19</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 21.

demonstrate the attributes of the God of the Bible in comparison with the Tannese primal gods.

### ***God/god***

The writer is aware of the fact that the term “god” is a generic term, meaning that it can be used in a plural sense, and the writer is aware of the danger that may be posed when it is used in this way.<sup>20</sup> So the writer will be using “traditional god”, “primal god”, or “god” with a lower case “g” in order to make the distinction from the God of the Bible, and use an upper case “G”, as in mainstream Christian usage, to refer to the Christian God. According to *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of the English Language*, “god” is “[a] being, regarded as possessing superhuman or supernatural qualities or powers, and is made an object of worship or propitiation; a higher intelligence supposed to control the forces of good and of evil; a personification of any of the forces of nature, or of some human attribute, interest, or relation; a divinity; deity”.<sup>21</sup> Worship is an important aspect for defining god. Although anthropologists would separate gods from spirits and probably objects, this thesis uses the term “god” to refer to something that is the object of worship or is said<sup>22</sup> to be the object of worship, both personal and non-personal.

### ***Kastom***

This paper will be using the word *kastom* as defined by Kenneth Nehrbass. He has well represented the people’s use of the term, although it may be confused with the English word “custom” because the word *kastom*<sup>23</sup> cannot be found in the Tannese lexicon. Often, a language borrows words from other languages, but the way that same word is used in a particular language may be different from another. The writer prefers “culture”, which means “patterns of learned beliefs and behaviour that order human

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<sup>20</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, Leicester UK: IVP, 2004, p. 24.

<sup>21</sup> *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of the English Language*, Chicago IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1959, p. 541.

<sup>22</sup> This is especially so of the first ethnographers, missionaries, and some anthropologists. Some of whom the writer will refer to in this paper.

<sup>23</sup> The word *kastom* is taken from Vanuatu pidgin, Bislama. Although it derives from the English word “custom”, it has a broader use.

activities”.<sup>24</sup> The closest we can get to that in the West Tanna vernacular is *nolan*,<sup>25</sup> “this is the way, fashion, or the manner of doing things”. It includes the way of building, gardening, fishing, relating to one another, relating to the gods, performing ceremonies, and everything that makes up a Tannese traditional society. The word also includes human attitudes. Nehrbass points out that the word should not be confused with the English word “custom” for foods, dress, language, music style, holidays, etc.<sup>26</sup> *Kastom*, for the Tannese, is totality of life. That is how the people use the word. Its use connotes a perfect harmony between the gods and the people, between the living-living and the living-dead,<sup>27</sup> and between the material and the spiritual world. Figure 3 below seeks to show Tannese cosmology.

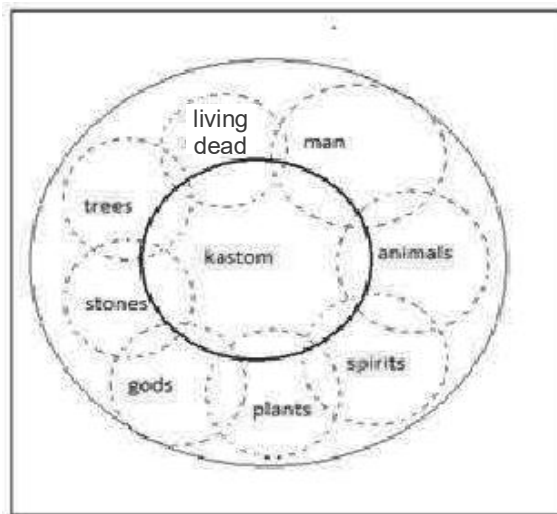


Figure 3: Tannese cosmology

<sup>24</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2008, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> The word is from the West Tanna language (Netuar) of which the author is a speaker. The reason for mentioning the word, *nolan*, is because the word *kastom* is not a Tannese word, even in other languages of Tanna. It is an English term.

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> The phrase is used to refer to dead people who are believed to be active and still around the place.

## REFLECTING ON TRADITIONAL GODS

When the missionaries first arrived in the South Pacific, they discovered that the people were already deeply religious.<sup>28</sup> There was a sense of religiousness expressed through the awareness of supernatural beings. To give some examples, on Raiatea (Tahitian group) there was the worship of Oro, the war god, in which men were slain and sacrificed to this god.<sup>29</sup> On Samoa there was the worship of the spirit of the dead chiefs, birds, fish, trees, and even such inanimate objects as the war clubs of famous warriors. They also had totem gods, like sharks, birds, or stone.<sup>30</sup> On Lakemba (Fiji) the people believed that their god had actually left the island because the God of the missionaries had beaten him until his bones were sore.<sup>31</sup> On Tanna (Vanuatu) the missionaries discovered that there were several traditional gods. We will now proceed to a more-detailed discussion of these Tannese gods.

## INTRODUCING TANNESE TRADITIONAL GODS

The discussion of Tannese primal gods is not new. It has always been part of the epistemological process, via oral tradition. Upon arrival on Tanna, missionaries observed and recorded ethnographic descriptions of the local people and their traditional gods. Later, professional anthropologists also came and wrote a great deal about the people. This is not to say that one group of observers is more authentic than the other. In fact, the later, at one stage, relied heavily on the ethnography of the former, especially for the south Pacific. Furthermore, both groups are liable to misrepresent the culture. For instance, an observation might be based on a surface level observation and overlook deeper realities. In addition, there may be questions concerning the integrity of an informant, even for a professional anthropologist.

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<sup>28</sup> Ennio Mantovani, "Traditional Religions and Christianity", in Ennio Mantovani, ed., *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions: a Handbook for Church Workers*, Point 6 (1984), p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Basil Mathews, *John Williams the Ship Builder*, London UK: Oxford University Press, 1915, p. 45.

<sup>30</sup> V. A. Barradale, *Pearls of the Pacific: Being Sketches of Missionary Life and Work in Samoa and Other Islands in the South Pacific*, London UK: London Missionary Society, 1907, p. 49.

<sup>31</sup> George Stringer Rowe, *The Life of John Hunt: Missionary to the Cannibals in Fiji*, London UK: T. Woolmer, 1860, pp. 71-72.

### *An Etic View*

Tannese have several gods. Despite a rather short stay in Tanna, Turner noted that the Tannese had no idols, although they venerated stones. He distinguished between two categories of gods. The first are *arema*, meaning a “dead man” or “the spirits of departed ancestors”. The second are the disease makers. These people have life and death in their hands through *nahak* (*natik* in West Tanna language). They collect remnants of food, footprints, and human excrement to be burned, according to formalities, so as to ensure sickness and eventually death.<sup>32</sup> John Gibson Paton, a missionary who landed on Tanna on 5 November 1858<sup>33</sup> at the same spot where Turner had settled earlier, also recorded a description of the religious practices of the people. It is worth quoting at length because his description will be referred to in the later parts of this paper.

The Tannese had hosts of stone idols, charms, and sacred objects, which they abjectly feared and in which they devoutly believed. They were given up to countless superstitions and firmly glued to their dark heathen practices. Their worship was entirely a service of fear, its aim being to propitiate this or that Evil Spirit, to prevent calamity or to secure revenge. They deified their chiefs, like the Romans of old, so that almost every village or tribe had its own Sacred Man, and some of them had many. They exercised an extraordinary influence for evil these village or tribal priests, and were believed to have the disposal of life and death through their sacred ceremonies, not only in their own tribe, but over all the Islands. Sacred men and women, wizards and witches, received presents regularly to influence the gods and to remove sickness or to cause it by the *Nahak*, i.e., incantation over remains of food, or the skin of fruit, such as banana, which the person has eaten on whom they wish to operate. They also worshipped the spirits of departed ancestors and heroes through their material idols of wood and stone, but chiefly of stone. They feared these spirits and sought their aid; especially seeking to propitiate those who presided over war and peace, famine and plenty, health and sickness, destruction and prosperity, life and death. Their whole worship was one of slavish

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<sup>32</sup> Turner, *Nineteen Years in Polynesia*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>33</sup> Paton, *Missionary to the New Hebrides*, p. 70.

fear; and, so far as ever I could learn, they have no idea of a God of mercy or grace.<sup>34</sup>

Two things to particularly note from the above excerpt are: (1) stone idols, charms, and sacred objects, and (2) spirits of departed ancestors and heroes. In other words, the traditional belief system involves objects as well as spirit gods.

When comparing Turner and Paton, the former stated that there were no idols, although there were venerated stones; but the latter stated there were stone idols. From an etic point of view, this portrays the “fuzziness”, not only of the social structure, but also of the cosmology.<sup>35</sup> Alongside these material and spiritual gods, there are the mythical gods as well.<sup>36</sup> The question which arises here is, “Do the Tannese regard the things mentioned above as gods?” How have these gods been worshipped? These are some of the questions that this paper will attempt to answer as we seek to understand the relationship between these traditional gods and man.

Anthropologist Joel Bonnemaïson writes, “Tanna, itself, is a sort of ‘pantheon’, a polytheistic space people, with an infinite number of spirits, divinities, and cultural heroes”.<sup>37</sup> However, it is a pity that, when referring to what he called “magical rocks or stones”, he uses the generic name *kapiäl*.<sup>38</sup> For that term denotes any rock or stone, even the ones lying alongside the road, even though they are not magical stones. In fact, relation to gardening, not all stones and rocks are magical..

According to Nehrbass, Tannese cosmology includes “the hierarchy of gods, spirits, humans, animals, and plants”.<sup>39</sup> However, in this paper, we will only be dealing with the first two, gods and spirits. Nehrbass outlines

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>35</sup> Ron Adams, “*Homo Anthropologicus* and Man-Tanna: Jean Guiart and the Anthropological Attempt to Understand the Tannese”, in *The Journal of Pacific History* 22.1 (January-April 1987), p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 47.

<sup>37</sup> Joel Bonnemaïson, “Magic Gardens in Tanna”, in *Pacific Studies* 14.4 (December 1991), p. 72.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 47.



some anthropological questions that may help to ascertain some things concerning cosmological beliefs. These are:

[w]hat are the named deities? Is there a distinction between “devils” and “dead men”? Is that distinction fuzzy? Is there a hierarchy of spirit beings? How do people enter the spirit world? Through *kava*? Singing? In dreams? Can musical instruments summon or shoo away spirits? Which ones? What else shoos away or summons spirits? Wild cane? Bathing? Bathing in coconut milk?<sup>40</sup>

When explaining the Tannese cosmology, Nehrbass notes three different supernatural beings in the spirits’ realm. These are *kughen*, impersonal (unnamed) spirits, and *nanmin*. *Kughen* are spirits with personal names. They are mythical spirits, such as Matiktik, Taransamus, Karwas, and Karpapeng. Nehrbass quoted Capell, in making an interesting observation that,

“[h]e [*kughen*] provides them food and gave them their stones, but he is not the centre of mythology or worship. The Tannese are deists, rather than theists.” Tannese believe in the existence of eternal beings, but do not worship them. They relate more easily to a mechanistic power (*mana*), than to a personal god.<sup>41</sup>

This mechanistic power is the manipulation of the stones which were given by *kughen*. *Kughens* are only referred to when the myth is told to children or to make a point in the *Nakamal*,<sup>42</sup> but *kughens* are not worshipped. It is, rather, stones (magic stones) that involve religious rituals.

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<sup>40</sup> Kenneth Nehrbass, “Anthropological Field Guide for Vanuatu”, 3rd edn, Port Vila Vanuatu: SIL Vanuatu, 2009, p. 6, <http://www.nehrbass.info/bislama/Guidebook.pdf>, accessed April 24, 2014.

<sup>41</sup> A. Capell, “The Stratification of Afterworld Beliefs in the New Hebrides”, in *Folklore* 49.1 (March 1938), p. 77, quoted in Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 47.

<sup>42</sup> *Nakamal* (*Imayum* in West Tanna dialect, *Imarum* in South Tanna dialect), for Tannese, is the traditional meeting place for a community, and is usually under big banyan trees. It is also used for ceremonial functions, such as circumcision, payment of bride prices, traditional dedication, exchange of garden food and fruit trees, and the ordination of a chief. The *Nakamal* is also the place where men usually meet every afternoon for *kava* drinking.

According to Nehrbass, the second sort of supernatural beings are the impersonal spirits. They are non-personal spirits, totemic spirits and devils, but not ghosts. They are also feared by the people. The third group of supernatural beings, according to Nehrbass, is *nanmin*, which can mean “spirit”, “dew”, “shade”, at times, “powerful”, and even, at times, “fake”.<sup>43</sup>

### ***An Emic View***

Before proceeding to an emic view, it is important to acknowledge something that might be a limitation to the writer, even though he is an insider. This can be referred to as natural limitation. An analogy to natural limitation can be observed as follows. When you are in a building, you might not realise that the roof has holes until the rain falls on the roof. You will notice through the leakage that there are problems with the roof. Insiders of a culture may think they know everything about their culture because they are in it, and so can be less concerned about the details. That is, genuine knowledge may be suppressed because of mentality, the system, or mere ignorance.. It is not until an outsider probes to ascertain knowledge that an insider finds that his/her knowledge is limited. Different people ask different questions, according to what is of interest to them.

Another limitation, so to speak, is that the writer is a Christian Tannese, meaning the environment in which he was raised may be different to a typical traditional environment. Furthermore, the influence of Christianity, modernisation, and other cultures, via several national and international movements, enables exposure to a wider culture, on the one hand, but may limit knowledge in one’s own culture, on the other. This is to restate the writers’ limitation, but the writer will seek to give the best of his knowledge on the subject matter. We will now proceed to discuss these traditional gods, especially the stone gods and the spirit gods.

Material gods are mentioned above, but we will be focusing mostly on stone gods. For clarity, these stone gods may be categorised into fertility stone gods, *nahak* stone gods, and mythical stone gods. The fertility stone

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*Kava* is a traditional narcotic drink consumed by men. But, nowadays, it has become commercialised, and so women are also consuming *kava*, not in the *Nakamal*, but at *kava* bars. Hence, its traditional value is often questioned.

<sup>43</sup> Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 47.

gods are the ones used for agricultural, fisheries, and weather purposes. The traditional name for these stones is *kivir*.<sup>44</sup> They are placed in the *niko*,<sup>45</sup> a specially shaped piece of wood in a canoe shape. These stones are not just for garden plants (taro, yam, and banana), but also for fruit trees (breadfruit and others). Several fish in the sea would also have their stones, as well as weather stones. Each garden plant has its own stone. For instance, the taro tuber has its own stone, as do the yam and the banana. Likewise, this is true for fruit trees. Thus, one village may have several stones scattered in the vicinity. For the weather, the sunstone, is used to burn the rain away to allow a special traditional ceremony to occur. However, the rain stone is used to invite or call on rain to come. When Edward Rice was told, “we can control the weather with stones”, these are the stones referred to above.<sup>46</sup>

The second category of stone gods is *nahak* stones. Unlike the fertility stones, these are malevolent stone gods. As Paton explained earlier, these are used to induce sickness upon someone, which eventually leads to their death. This is a way of punishing enemies, because death is slow and agonising, destroying the physical appearance, and involving complications in bodily functions.

The last category of stone gods is the mythical stone gods. Some of these are huge rocks, either on the land or in the sea. They each have myths attached to them which make that particular stone sacred.

Personally, the writer thinks fertility stones have some element of being gods (not that I believe in them). These elements are communal relationship, communal benefit, and communal awareness. The entire community is related to their fertility stone god via their *Tupunes*.<sup>47</sup> The whole community knows who this person is and respects him during his time of seclusion, when he enters into the sacred place. The success of his performance, his keeping of ritual rules, and the community’s abiding will result in the community’s good harvest. The stone is kept in a sacred place,

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>45</sup> Bonnemaïson, “Magic Gardens in Tanna”, p. 73.

<sup>46</sup> Rice, *John Frum He Come*, p. 135.

<sup>47</sup> The sacred man who is responsible for fertility stone gods (*kavir*).

of which the whole community is aware, and people are not allowed to enter. This is unlike the *nahak* stone which is kept in secret and no one knows who uses it. Furthermore, *nahak* stones only bring disaster to humans, including death. Tannese relate to the fertility stone more than other stones because of the need for communal well-being.

### **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRADITIONAL GODS AND HUMANS**

Traditional relationships are probably the most important thing in Tannese society. This includes a person's relationship to animals, plants, human beings, and spirits or gods. However, for the purpose of this study, we will concentrate on the relationship of traditional gods to humans and vice versa, followed by a consideration of some characteristics of traditional gods.

#### ***Traditional Gods' Relationship to Humans – Myth***

The chief way in which Tannese gods reveal themselves to humans is via myth. The use of myth here refers to a story or report of what has been said, without saying whether it is true or false.<sup>48</sup> Tannese have a rich tradition of mythology. As mentioned earlier, locals maintain that *kughen* gave those stones for garden plants, fruit trees, and weather. Nehrbass explains "[t]he Tannese term for 'oral narrative' (*kwanage*) is complex, having at least five nuances: (1) stories about imminent deities, (2) geographic etiologies, (3) etiologies of living things, (4) didactic stories, and (5) funny stories".<sup>49</sup> However, only the first category, stories about imminent deities, is the concern of this section. Although anthropologists differ on the function of myth, Nehrbass argues that it is to transmit *kastom* cosmology.<sup>50</sup> In public discussion in a *nakamal*, speakers often refer to these myths to support what they are saying.

#### ***Human's Relationship to Traditional Gods***

The relationship between the local people and traditional gods is not simple or clear, not only for an outsider, but also for some insiders. As a Tannese myself, I have many questions. For instance, how would I know that

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<sup>48</sup> Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, 2nd edn, New York NY: Scribner, 1976, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 27.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

something, whether good or bad, is from the gods? If a special person were to tell me, how would I know that the message is authentic? In general, Tannese people are not encouraged to raise many questions, because too many questions may provoke someone to anger. Whatever practice was passed down by the ancestors is regarded as traditional logic and normative for traditional living. In view of this, we now go on to explore some aspects of the people's relationship with the gods, such as manipulation, fear, legalism, and punishment.

The first aspect of humans' relationship to the gods is manipulation. But before discussing this aspect, I will summarise what has been said so far about the traditional gods. In the supernatural category, we have *kughen*, impersonal spirits, and *nanmin*. In the category of stone gods, we have fertility, *nahak*, and mythical stone gods. The diagram below seeks to show these two categories.

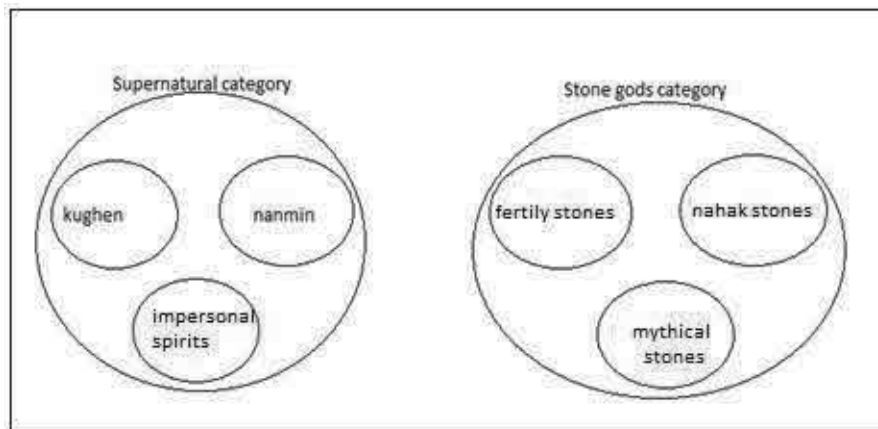


Figure 4: The supernatural category and stone gods category

This phenomenon of manipulation can be seen in nearly all the rituals of these gods.<sup>51</sup> The following are some examples of the manipulative processes of those who are responsible. Whenever someone is sick and the sickness is believed to have been caused by a spirit, the person who is somehow related to that particular spirit will chew some leaves and spit over the sick patient to get rid of the spirit. One could question the

<sup>51</sup> This may not include *kughen* because they are too remote from the reach of people.

relationship between the chewed leaves, the person who spits, and the spirit. Is the spirit obedient to the leaves or the person? If the power is in the leaves, then why should a particular person have to do the chewing and the spitting? However, the idea is that the spirit is somehow manipulated to leave the person, so that healing might eventuate.

In this process of manipulation, one has to do things correctly. When power is handled wrongly, it may have a negative impact on the life of the person or his relatives. For instance, a man called Nako<sup>52</sup> is a sun maker near my home village.<sup>53</sup> Some of his relatives are having problems with their eyes and ears, and some have disabled children. This has been interpreted by the locals to have been caused by the inappropriate use of his power.

Another example of manipulation is that of the fertility stone gods. It is believed and said that if the *tupunes* performs well and abides by the rules, then there will be plenty of fruit at the harvest and pests will not infect the fruit. The *tupunes* will have to clean up the sacred place, the wooden canoe and the stone. It is uncertain as to what exactly he does in there. Some of the rules include that he only must eat roasted food, and that he must abstain from sex during the period of seclusion. In this process the genuineness of his performance will be publicly approved or disapproved during the time of harvest. The point is that, in all of these processes, it is the *tupunes*, a human, who is the focal point, and not the stone. It is as though the gods' actions depend entirely on the person's performance. He is the one who manipulates the gods to act according to the wishes of the community. Again, one could question who is really in control here.

The second aspect of man's relationship to traditional gods is the intense fear in society. People fear spirits, graveyards, taboo places, and *nahak* men. As stated above, Paton rightly observed that their worship was

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<sup>52</sup> This is a real example of someone the writer knows, but Nako is a pseudonym to protect his privacy.

<sup>53</sup> The phrase is somewhat misleading. This is not saying that the person is the one who creates the sun, but that when there is a traditional function to occur, and, those who own the function, would not like rain to disturb their function, the right person to consult is the person I refer to as "sun maker". His stone is referred to as the "stone of fire", which burns away the dark clouds for a sunny day.

entirely a service of fear. He continued by giving a list of things people are afraid of, such as evil spirits, chiefs, sacred men and women, wizards, witches, and the spirits of departed ancestors.<sup>54</sup> This fear is manifested in several ways. There are certain places where all noise must to be reduced when passing. It is said that noise might invite the spirit to follow the person to his house and to cause sickness. There are also places which people should not approach at certain times of the day, especially in the late afternoon, when spirits are moving around and people might encounter them. There are also places where people have to utter words informing the spirits of their presence or passing, so that nothing disastrous or bad luck will be encountered on a journey or fishing or hunting trip. Again, there are times when people may give gifts of food to spirits of a particular place. The reason for all this is fear.

The third aspect of man's relationship to traditional gods which can be referred to as legalism is related to fear. Because of the intense amount of fear, people feel they ought to adhere to all the details of traditional laws and taboos in order to ensure prosperity and good health. Whenever someone is sick, people gather in the *nakamal*, doing what we call in our language *kamarisen nimisan*. The second word *nimisan* is the general term for sickness. The word *kamarisen* literally means "untying". Let me illustrate this in the context of fishing. Relationship, when harmonious, can be likened to a straight fishing line. When the fisherman is careless or panics because a big fish is on the line, the fishing line can become tangled and messy. In the process of undoing the messy part, it can become so entangled that one has to cut the line and later rejoin it. The word used to refer to sickness is the same word used for untying a fishing line when it has been tangled. The motivation for keeping these laws is worth discussing.

For humanity, in general, there may be many motivations for keeping laws, but only two will be mentioned. First, there are people who keep laws because they are slaves and so. The law was imposed on them in a heavy-handed way. Although they work very hard for their master, the question remains for these slaves, "Is our master satisfied?" All their lives they move around and do things in fear. Second, there are citizens of a free

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<sup>54</sup> Paton, *Missionary to the New Hebrides*, p. 72.

nation. Although they have to maintain their nation's laws and regulations, they are free to go about doing their own work. In this kind of living there is no fear. Fear only comes when a person has actually committed a crime. While these people are punished, they are still citizens of a free nation. It seems to me that the way in which Tannese have been keeping traditional laws corresponds to those in the first situation.

To return to the example of the untying of sickness, whenever the discussion in the *nakamal* reaches the stage where something has to be done, the leaders will indicate what to do. Often the relatives of the sick person are required to kill a pig or chicken, depending on the weight of the offence, to put things right. The next day another rope will be followed and result again in the death of another pig or chicken. This costly practice can go on for days. Despite all of this, fear is always there. The relatives will never know whether they have appeased the spirits. They think that to be right with the spirits they have to keep all the traditional laws without breaking one.

The final aspect of man's relationship to traditional gods is punishment. The Tannese have an interpretation for almost every sickness and natural disaster that affects them. Often they may be interpreted as punishment from the gods for a broken relationship or overstepping the bounds of traditional rules or regulations. For instance, on one occasion, several aircraft of Air Melanesia had crashed. The third one was on Tanna and, during that same year, Bob Paul's<sup>55</sup> son died in a plane crash in Australia. According to Rice, the Tannese had two interpretations: "one (from Green Point) that the most recent crash was the result of whites' tampering with the *SemSem* stone at Laminuh . . . and the other that John Frum was punishing Bob Paul for his treatment of the Tannese".<sup>56</sup> Another example is that of Nako mentioned above. The disability within his relatives is seen as a punishment for the misuse of power.

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<sup>55</sup> Bob Paul was a businessman from Australia who had settled on West Tanna. He runs a trading shop and owns coconut plantations and cattle projects on Tanna. He claimed to own Tanna and caused a lot of inconvenience.

<sup>56</sup> Rice, *John Frum He Come*, p. 137.



### ***Characteristics of Traditional Gods***

As in all animistic societies, the Tannese have several gods. To refer again to those covered so far, there are *kughen* (impersonal spirits), *nanmin* (supernatural), fertility, *nahak*, and mythical stone gods (material gods). The spirits of the ancestors are another, which this paper has not dealt with in detail. Furthermore, there was the mention of traditional sacred men who have a huge religious influence in the life of the society. Although this paper has not done much to study all there is to know about traditional gods, it is a fact that there are many gods in an animistic society.

The plurality of traditional gods raises many questions concerning the relationship between these gods. Although the realm of these gods cannot be visited to see their interrelationship, it can be “seen” through the experiences of humans of these gods and their allegiance to them. For instance, if *kughen* gave stones for the well-being of the society, why is the effect of the *nahak* stones on human lives only disastrous? Do fertility stones and the *nahak* stones say something about *kughen*? Could he be both a good and a bad god? Concerning allegiance, how well can it be given to those many gods? If one of these gods is not given proper reverence, what will be their reaction to humans? These are some unanswered questions which this paper does not have answers for. There is also another question which was posed earlier, “Do Tannese regard all these as gods?” As quoted by Nehrbass, Capell partly answered this question, when he states,

[h]e [*kughen*] provides them food and gave them their stones, but he is not the centre of mythology or worship. The Tannese are deists, rather than theists. Tannese believe in the existence of eternal beings, but do not worship them. They relate more easily to a mechanistic power (*mana*), than to a personal god.<sup>57</sup>

The other characteristic of the traditional gods is their limitations. They are limited with respect to both geography and power. While almost every hamlet has their traditional fertility stone gods, these stone gods are for a particular area only and cannot be taken to another. Other areas have their

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<sup>57</sup> Capell, “Stratification of Afterworld Beliefs”, p. 77, quoted in Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 47.

own distinct gods as well. A *tupunes* for one area cannot act for another area. They are restricted to their traditional territories. This is not only true for their physical confinement; their power is also restricted to their territory. For instance, several Tannese have migrated to different islands of Vanuatu and in the places where they settled they became successful gardeners without the influence of their traditional fertility stone gods.

As a Tannese, I have been living on Santo<sup>58</sup> for more than eight years. As a student at Talua Ministry Training Centre,<sup>59</sup> gardening was a vital aspect of living, and this was done without any influence from Tannese traditional gods. Of course, the writer is a Christian, but this is also true for anyone who is a strong advocate of traditional gods. Whenever a person boards a plane or ship for another island, the gods are left in the village. The fertility gods cannot be taken to another island, even by the *tupunes*.

### **REFLECTING ON THE GOD OF THE BIBLE**

The previous section was an attempt to understand Tannese traditional gods. Having discussed the traditional belief system of some Tannese, the writer will now discuss some of the aspects of the God of the Bible for the purpose of seeing the similarities and differences to the traditional gods as outlined above. The discussion of God will be undertaken from a Christian point of view. The following section will include an introduction to God, and then move on to his relationship to humans.

### **INTRODUCING THE GOD OF THE BIBLE**

A discussion of the God of the Bible is not new. There has been a constant theological battle in the history of Christianity to continue to maintain the true teaching handed down by the apostles and the apostolic fathers up to the time of contemporary Christian apologists and theologians. All through this battle, creeds have been formulated to express the confessions of these Christians. To mention a few, we have the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Westminster

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<sup>58</sup> Santo is the largest island of the archipelago (see map). It is where Talua Ministry Training Centre is situated.

<sup>59</sup> Talua Ministry Training Centre is the Bible College owned by the Presbyterian church of Vanuatu (PCV). It is situated on the island of Santo towards the north of Vanuatu.

Confession of Faith, chapter 2, paragraph 1, has the following description about God,

[t]here is but one only living and true God, who is finite being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal most just and terrible in his judgments; hating all sin, and who will, by no means, clear the guilty.<sup>60</sup>

This excerpt is a summary of the attributes of God. Nevertheless, for this paper, only a few topics have been selected, for the purpose of comparative study. The main section here is the relationship between God and humans.

### **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND HUMANS**

God, in his infinite wisdom, reveals himself to humankind (revelation), but human beings, within their limitations, seek to understand God in their own ways (religion). Although humankind cannot fully understand God, they have general revelation and so that they are left without excuse (Rom 1:20). God is a relational God. He has revealed himself to all humankind. However, his revelation is not just a past reality: it has been, it is today, and it will be in times yet to come (Heb 1:1-3). He continues to reveal himself to believers through the scripture. The Spirit illuminates the scripture for believers to see God. We will now proceed to the ways in which God reveals himself.

#### ***Revelation***

According to Daniel L. Migliore, “[t]he word ‘revelation’ means an ‘unveiling’ or ‘disclosure’ of something previously hidden”.<sup>61</sup> God reveals himself through the Bible. Although the Bible was written by men, it was

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<sup>60</sup> *Confession of Faith, The Larger Catechism, The Shorter Catechism, The Directory for Publick Worship, The Form Of Presbyterian Church Government with References to The Proofs from the Scripture*, Edinburgh UK: William Blackwood, 1959, pp. 6-7.

written through divine inspiration (2 Tim 3:16). Robert L. Reymond explains that the Bible,

though written entirely by men, it is also entirely the word of the living God, because the Spirit of God inspired men to write it in the whole, and in the part. The relationship between the human authors and the Spirit of God, however, was not one of simple cooperation or co-authorship. Men could not (and would not) have written the Bible, apart from the Spirit's superintending activity. The Holy Spirit, then, is the author of the scripture in a more profound and original sense than the human writers ever could (or would) have been. God is the primary author of the Holy Scripture, with the human writers being the authors of scripture only insofar as the Spirit mandated, initiated, and provided their impulse to write.<sup>62</sup>

The challenge for humans today is their view of or presuppositions about the Bible. If humans view the Bible as merely words of men, then they have already limited themselves to the limitations of humans, resulting in scepticism concerning the authenticity of the word. It is easy for Melanesians to want to identify the Bible with the people who brought it to their shores or the people into whose language the Bible was translated when it was first brought to them. But it is more than that. The Bible contains the word of God to humans. If Melanesians desire to know the truths of God, they have to read the Bible themselves so as to see who is this God.

For the Tannese, their understanding about traditional gods is through myth. However, the problem in an oral tradition, as in most Melanesian situations, is that there is a possibility for stories to change or be misinterpreted when they are handed down through different generations. One of the reasons for these changes is the purpose of its use. Often, when someone is making a point, he is tempted to bend the story, or interpret it to suit his point, and often the story turns out to be very different. Thus, it is

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<sup>61</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian theology*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, p. 19.

<sup>62</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998, p. 3.

not so much the evolution of the story that matters, but that the point has been made for that particular speaker or a people group. For instance, *Karpapeng* (*Kalpapen* in West Tanna language) is the god who is believed to reside in Tokomera.<sup>63</sup> He is the god who gave the fertility stones for the well-being of the people. Someone in a village called Yaohnanen, in the interior of Tanna, somehow got hold of some pictures of Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, which led to a story that Prince Philip is the son of *Karpapeng* and that he will one day come back to reside on Tanna. This has become a movement referred to as the Prince Philip movement on Tanna. *Karpapeng* is a Tannese god known to all Tannese, but not all are in this movement. The movement is someone's presupposition read into *Karpapeng* mythology.<sup>64</sup> Although Prince Philip's family background and date of birth are known to almost everyone around the globe, these people groups are adamant in maintaining this belief and it is difficult to convince them otherwise. This is a problem with oral traditions. There are also geographically- and linguistically-related reasons for these changes. The same story as told in one area may be very different in another. It is a human in-built inclination that causes people to want to be different from others. Languages diverge in different places; some are dialects of the same language, but others may be a very different language. Due to the lack of language standardisation, each language passes on the story in its own way.

Christians should not attempt to bend the Bible. They need to read it as it is and work out, through the process of hermeneutics, what it has to say about their situation. Although there are many human characters and stories in the Bible, it is the story of God's dealing with humankind. It is through the Bible that contemporary believers come to understand what Bible scholars refer to as general revelation, that is, that creation is pointing to a Creator who is God (Ps 8; Rom 1:20). In contrast, specific revelation through the nation of Israel culminates in Christ (Heb 1:1-3) as recorded in

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<sup>63</sup> Tokosmera is one of the two mountains in the interior of Tanna. The other is Melen.

<sup>64</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince\\_Philip\\_Movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince_Philip_Movement), accessed July 23, 2014. I am also referring to this group because I know that the group exists and have seen them.

the Bible.<sup>65</sup> In his concluding section on “inspiration and authority of the Bible”, Norman Geisler states that

the Bible and the Bible alone contains all doctrinal and ethical truth God has revealed to mankind. And the Bible alone is the canon or norm for all truth. All other alleged truth must be brought to the bar of Holy Scripture to be tested. The Bible and the Bible alone, all sixty-six books, has been confirmed by God through Christ to be his infallible word.<sup>66</sup>

The other very important element of this God-human relationship is faith. The author of Hebrews defines faith as “being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see” (11:1).<sup>67</sup> He continues in the third verse of the same chapter, “[b]y faith, we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what is visible”. Paul exhorts believers saying that we are now living by faith and not sight (2 Cor 5:7), and ought to “fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor 4:18).

Throughout the history of Christianity, the Bible has been accepted as the inspired word of God, and it is still accepted as such by many Christians in different geographical locations. Although there may be several translations, they are just different translations of the same Word. For instance, Tanna has the English Bible, the Bislama Bible, and the Bible in several local languages. Despite changes in translation, the fact remains that the truths about God can still be obtained.

If religion can be defined as an attempt by humans to reach God/god, then, in a way, Christianity is not a religion because it proves the opposite. It is rather a relationship in which God himself reaches out to humans through self-revelation. Without revelation, humans would never have known

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<sup>65</sup> John E. Schwarz, *Word Alive!: An Introduction to the Christian Faith*, Minneapolis MN: Tabgha Foundation, 1995, p. 16.

<sup>66</sup> Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, pp. 376-377.

<sup>67</sup> All scripture quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise noted.

anything about God.<sup>68</sup> It is through revelation that we come to know some of the characteristics of God.

### ***Characteristics of God's Relationship to Humans***

This section will deal with some of the characteristics of this self-revealed God. The selected characteristics are love, justice, and grace, all of which enable salvation. Love is an important aspect of God's relationship with humans. It raises a sense of security, belonging, and being special before God. However, overemphasising it at our (human's) end may lead to an egocentric view on God. As regards love, we also have to be ready to "see" God at his end. Several things can be mentioned about the love of God.

First, love is the very nature of God.<sup>69</sup> The New Testament states clearly, "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). Yet the statement could be misunderstood. As R. C. Sproul explains that the

statement is not what we would call an analytical statement, whereby we can reverse the subject and predicate and say that, therefore, love is God. That's not what the Bible means. Rather, what the Jewish form of expression says here is that God is so loving and his love is so consistent, so profound, so deep, so transcendent, and such an integral part of his character that to express it in the maximum way possible we say that he is love. This is simply saying that God is the ultimate standard of love.<sup>70</sup>

The second aspect of God's love is that his love is unconditional. He loves because he is love, and there is nothing anyone can do for God to love any more or any less. The nation of Israel was chosen, not because of any good thing they had done, but out of God's love (Deut 7:6-8). Humans in their sin and constant rebellion do not deserve the love of God; nevertheless, he chose to love them. Although he had a special love for Israel in the Old Testament and for Christians through his Son, his love also goes out for all of the lost (John 3:16).

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<sup>68</sup> Schwarz, *Introduction to the Christian Faith*, p. 16.

<sup>69</sup> David Jackman, *The Message of John's Letters: Living in the Love of God*, Bible Speaks Today, Leicester UK: IVP, 1988, p. 117.

<sup>70</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Now That's a Good Question*, Wheaton IL: Tyndale House, 1996, p. 6.

The third thing is that God's love is a self-giving love. This self-giving love can be seen in the way God provides for his people. For instance, in the garden of Eden, he provided clothing for Adam and Eve (Gen 3:21). In Exodus 34, when God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses, he himself made an astounding proclamation saying "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin (Ex 34:6-7). As a result, he delivered his people from slavery in Egypt and provided for the journey, while the Egyptians were punished. Furthermore, the idea of self-giving love was foreshadowed in the covenant with Abram, when God himself walked between the pieces of the sacrificed animals (Gen 15:17). The NIV study notes make the following comment, "[t]he practice signified a self-maledictory<sup>71</sup> oath: "May it be so done to me if I do not keep my oath and pledge".<sup>72</sup> This self-maledictory oath is firmly rooted in love (John 3:16) and was fully demonstrated on the cross. When humans were still sinners, Christ died for them (Rom 5:8). On the cross, we see the self-giving love in its fullest measure (1 John 4:9-10). The Greek word "ἀγάπη (*agapē*) is the regular New Testament word for love that gives even to the unlovely and undeserving".<sup>73</sup> Having seen these aspects of God's love, let us turn to the primal gods.

As discussed above, the writer is uncertain as to whether or not the Tannese traditional gods are or may have been referred to, at any point in time, as gods of love. The recurrent word in Tannese relationship to gods is "punishment" (as discussed above) in sickness, natural disasters, and bad harvests. A person rarely hears people referring to a good harvest, health, or the absence of a natural disaster as love from the gods. When there is well-being in the community, the gods are often left out of the scene and the right standing of the *tupunes* or the community is emphasised. Love is

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<sup>71</sup> "Malediction" is another word for "curse" or "calling destruction or punishment, if an oath is not being kept". In the above use, it is a self-cursing that the one engaging in the ritual, in this case God, is saying: "may it be done to me as has been done to the animals and birds cut in half". This is not saying that God was the one who did not keep the oath or pledge. It was humans, but God in Christ filled in the gap on the cross on their behalf.

<sup>72</sup> *NIV Study Bible*, Kenneth Barker, ed., Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1985, p. 35.

<sup>73</sup> James I. Packer, "God", in *New Dictionary of Theology*, Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, eds, Leicester UK: IVP, 1988, p. 277.



a distinctive feature of the God of the Bible. Furthermore, if love is the very nature of God, what would be the nature of traditional gods? For a fertility god, could a virtue like love be associated with an object like a stone? If it is the spirit behind the stone, how can one be certain of the love of that particular spirit? In contrast to God who is very much concerned and is actively involved in his peoples' daily lives by his Spirit, *kughen* isolated himself from his people. He is hardly referred to by Tannese individuals in their daily life.

Another characteristic of God is that he is a just God. Justice is related to the fact that God is righteous. The *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* explains that "righteousness" is associated with the idea of individual moral rectitude. " 'Justice' . . . generally signifies a right social order, that is, the proper distribution of goods and honour, including retribution for evil."<sup>74</sup> God's justice also involves the idea of his impartiality.<sup>75</sup> To refer to love without referring to the fact that God is also a just God is like doing injustice to what the Bible says about God. In using the conjunction "yet", the self-painted picture to us in Ex 34:7 continues to give another side to this God – "yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of their fathers, to the third and fourth generation". God's justice is related to the fact that he is a righteous God. He hates and will not tolerate sin. In light of his righteousness, he has to deal with sin, accordingly, with a just punishment. He will not let the guilty go unpunished, but sees to it that they receive their just punishment. The Old Testament has much to say on this particular characteristic of God (Deut 32:4; Ps 37:28). In the garden of Eden God's justice was demonstrated via Adam and Eve being sent out of the garden (Gen 3). God's justice was poured out via the flood in the time of Noah (Gen 6). The sin of the Israelites provoked God and his justice was served via the exile. This can be seen throughout the whole Bible, but the above references are enough to demonstrate God's justice. However, the positive aspect of God's justice must not be overlooked. "[T]o give someone

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<sup>74</sup> M. A. Seifrid, "Righteousness, Justice, and Justification", in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, eds, Leicester UK: IVP, 2000, p. 740.

<sup>75</sup> Donald Guthrie, Ralph P. Martin, "God", in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1993, p. 363.

justice' is to vindicate them, to grant them salvation from injustice (cf. Ex 23:7; Deut 25:1)".<sup>76</sup>

Often when people read about the God who punishes in the Old Testament, they are tempted to think or say that the God of the Old Testament is a different God to the one of the New Testament. But the Bible is plain that he is the same God.<sup>77</sup> The only difference is that the just punishment for humanity's sin was fully taken by Christ on the cross; so that, through faith, believers may go unpunished. On the cross, God's wrath against sin was fully poured out on Jesus, when his one and only beloved son cried, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt 27:46). Therefore, "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1). People are now living in the period of God's grace and patience (2 Pet 3:8-9).

Nevertheless, there is also the doctrine of eternal punishment (Matt 25:46). There will come a time when the wrath of God will be fully poured out on humankind, especially those who reject Christ (2 Pet 10). Just as heaven is real, hell is also real for those who, having heard the name of Jesus, decided to turn their backs on him. Hell is where the eternal punishment of God will be on Satan and his angels (Matt 25:41), as well as those who refuse to accept Jesus as their personal Saviour. It is certain, from Jesus' teaching, that it is a place of fire, a fire that will never die out (Matt 18:8-9; Mark 9:43-49). For Tannese, the idea of unquenchable fire is not difficult to understand. You just have to walk up Mt Yasur, take a peep into the

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<sup>76</sup> Seifrid, "Righteousness, Justice, and Justification", p. 740.

<sup>77</sup> The apostles maintain this truth that he is the same God in both the Old Testament and New Testament. Peter, in his address in Acts 2, portrays this. He refers to God's word through the prophet Joel and through David. It was this same God, who worked through the prophets and kings, who raised Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:14-39). The New Testament writers have shown that the God of the Old Testament is the same God whom they are serving. Matthew opens his gospel with the genealogy and birth of Jesus. Jesus' birth was understood by Matthew to be a fulfilment of the Old Testament scripture. The name "Immanuel", meaning "God with us", is important. The God, who was with his people Israel, is now with them in the person of Jesus (Matt 1:1-25). The writer to the Hebrews, in his opening two verses, maintains the truth that, although God spoke through different people, at different times, and in various ways, he is the same God who in these last days, has spoken to us through his Son (Heb 1:1-2).

volcano, and there you have a glimpse of unquenchable fire. However, it is nothing compared to the actual unquenchable fire of hell.

Again, if we refer to the traditional gods regarding justice, it is very difficult to measure justice. One of the reasons for this is because most of the gods are objects. Although there are spirit beings as well, it is difficult to be certain whether they are just, as regards impartiality, or not. Furthermore, although punishment is an aspect of Tannese religion, it is uncertain as to whether the punishment is just or not. Again, when a sacrifice is offered to the gods, it is uncertain whether the punishment has been removed or not. It is often humans who determine whether or not a sickness is a punishment. The pivotal point to highlight here is the fact that God in Christ took upon himself the punishment for sin, once and for all time (1 Pet 3:18), so that, by faith, people would not have to experience his judgment. As far as the traditional gods are concerned, people are responsible for their sin. They continue to offer traditional gifts to appease the spirits. They themselves are the ones who have to do something. But, for the Christian, God has done it all in Christ. This is the gracious act of God alone.

The next characteristic of God's relationship to man is grace. According to Philip E. Hughes,

[t]he doctrine of grace lies at the very heart, not merely of all Christian theology, but also of all Christian experience. If we have an incorrect or inadequate understanding of the biblical teaching on grace, our whole grasp of the meaning and purpose of Christianity will be deficient in consequence.<sup>78</sup>

He defines grace as "undeserved blessing, freely bestowed on man by God and, more particularly, the blessing of salvation in all the rich significance of that term, freely given to sinful men in and through Jesus Christ".<sup>79</sup> In the scriptures, God's grace is manifested every time judgment is pronounced on humankind. In the garden of Eden, God's grace can be seen

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<sup>78</sup> Philip E. Hughes, *But for the Grace of God: Divine Initiative and Human Need*, London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1964, p. 9.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

in the fact that he himself made the couple clothes to cover their nakedness (Gen 3:21). Having pronounced Cain's punishment (Gen 4:11-12), God's grace can be seen in his mark on Cain so that no one would kill him (4:15). During the flood, God's grace can be seen in the way Noah's family was saved. The whole of the Old Testament has contains occasions when the grace of God was manifested, but these examples are enough to demonstrate the matter. In the New Testament, grace is again fully demonstrated in Christ. In Eph 2:8-9 Paul states that salvation is through grace alone. In the passage Paul also uses the word "gift", which is related to grace. This relationship is well demonstrated in the Greek language. For instance, in the NIV the Greek word χάρις (*charis*) is translated as "gift" in Rom 4:4 and as "grace" in Rom 4:16.<sup>80</sup> Salvation is entirely God's work. Robert L. Reymond says that "God's grace not only makes salvation available; it also actually saves men".<sup>81</sup>

The final characteristic of God's relationship to mankind is salvation. Salvation cannot be separated or fully understood without three words: love, justice, and grace. They are arguably the motivating factor for God to save humanity. Notice that the three words all refer to God's character. There is definitely nothing on humanity's side. When we return to God's way of salvation, we cannot really comprehend the ways and thoughts of God (Isa 55:8-9), but can only get down on our knees in worship of God, because there is no other way in which salvation could be found (Acts 4:12; Rev 7:10). The fascinating thing about God's salvation is that he filled the gap, in Christ, between himself and humankind for their salvation. When we think about this great God, who created everything, including humankind, and placed them in a stewardship position over all his creation, who sent his son to die a criminal's death in humankind's place; and when we then think of humankind, who choose to disobey, rebel, and turn their backs on God, it sounds absurd, or foolish. But, for believers, it is the power of God (1 Cor 1:18-2:5). Because salvation is God's, he has chosen to accomplished it in his way, just as Jesus prayed, "[y]et not as I will, but as you will" (Matt 26:39).

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<sup>80</sup> Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, eds, *The UBS Greek New Testament: Readers Edition with Textual Notes*, 4th edn, Stuttgart Germany: DeutschBibelgesellschaft, 1998, p. 716.

<sup>81</sup> Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, p. 380.

In the Tannese mythological corpus, especially the hero stories, heroes always win or defeat the enemy in the end. For instance, two myths state that *Matiktik* defeats *Taramsumus*, and *Kasasao* and *Kaniapnin* defeat *Semusemu*.<sup>82</sup> For Tannese, death is defeat or loss, and being alive is victory. In the *Taramsumus* story, children were kept in a pen to be eaten by *Taramsumus*. *Matiktik* took the form of a child, freed the children, and ended up killing *Taramsumus*. Although the notion of incarnation may be seen in *Matiktik*, he does not die in the process of saving the children. In addition, the two sons, *Kasasao* and *Kaniapnin*, though they risk their lives to kill *Semusemu*, in the end their lives were spared and *Semusemu* was killed. The diagram, below will illustrate some similarities and some differences between the mythical heroes and Jesus, regarding some aspects of salvation and complete salvation, respectively.

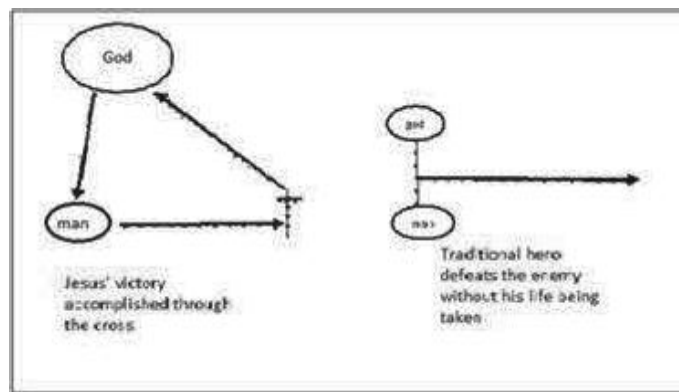


Figure 5: Heroic work of Jesus and a traditional hero

The point is that for someone to die for another person, a thing, or a principle, something of greater value, a virtue, such as love, a commitment, or a conviction to do what is right must be involved. For the creator, to die for his creatures in Christ is, humanly speaking, bizarre. But, for God, that is the way he has chosen to accomplish salvation. Even if humans tried their own ways, they could not possibly do anything to be saved. That is one of the unique things about Christianity. Unlike any other religion, including Tannese religion, in which humanity tries to save themselves through their good works, Christianity, through the scriptures, says there is

<sup>82</sup> Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 29.

nothing you could have done or could possibly do to earn your salvation. Salvation is safe and secure in Christ (Eph 2:8, 9). God's anger against sin, and his just punishment, the depth of his self-giving love and grace, was fully served and demonstrated on the cross. The other thing to note about Jesus' death is that his life was not taken by anyone, although that seems to be the case. he, himself, decided, on his own accord, to lay down his life (John 10:17-18; cf. John 19:30). He could have done it otherwise, but that was God's plan for him.

### ***Characteristics of Humanity's Relationship to God***

The previous section sought to discuss some of God's personal characteristics. While there are others, such as his holiness, eternal nature, immutability, and so on, they are beyond the scope of this paper. This next section seeks to explore some of the features of humanity's relationship to God, or more especially, the status and action of persons before God. These are sinners saved by grace, sons of God, walking in the fear of God and praying according to his will.

The first characteristic of a person's relationship to God to be discussed is their status or standing before, and even after, salvation. The Bible plainly says that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). Paul says that sin entered the world through one man, resulting in death and affecting the whole of the human race (Rom 3:10-18; 5:12). Furthermore, sin affects the whole of the human person and the environment around us. Theologians use the term "total depravity", not to mean that humans are totally bad like demons, but that sin has affected their whole being.<sup>83</sup> Louis Berkhof explains this by giving the negative and positive implication of total depravity in order to avoid misunderstanding.

[N]egatively, it does not imply: (1) that every man is as thoroughly depraved as he can possibly become; (2) that the sinner has no innate knowledge of the will of God, nor a conscience that discriminates between good and evil; (3) that sinful man does not often admire virtuous character and actions in others, or is incapable of disinterested affections and actions in his relations with his fellow-

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<sup>83</sup> Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief*, Nottingham UK: IVP, 1982, p. 140.

men; nor (4) that every unregenerate man will, in virtue of his inherent sinfulness, indulge in every form of sin; it often happens that one form excludes the other. Positively, it does indicate: (1) that the inherent corruption extends to every part of man's nature, to all the faculties and powers of both soul and body; and (2) that there is no spiritual good, that is, good in relation to God in the sinner at all, but only perversion.<sup>84</sup>

This is a universal reality. Having mentioned sin, it will be useful, at this point, to consider the Melanesian understanding of sin. Sin, according to Melanesians, is "broken relationship",<sup>85</sup> as opposed to one of the many biblical definitions,<sup>86</sup> such as, "missing the mark".<sup>87</sup> For a Melanesian, a broken relationship is a serious business, especially when the one sinned against is a greater spirit. Thus, it makes the process of reconciliation urgent and necessary. The other terms related to broken relationship in the New Testament are aliens, separated from God, enemies, and sinners. No one is born a Christian, all are born sinners, and all need God's salvation in Christ. However, to be put right with God is what the Bible refers to as a "gift" (Rom 6:23; Eph 2:8-9). It is a gift, given to us by God, to be accepted through faith alone. Faith in the Lord Jesus is all that one needs to be saved. Again, it is just an act of God's grace shown to humankind. There is nothing we can do to be accepted by God. Jesus has done it all. All we have to do is reach out and receive the gift of God's Son in faith. It is through faith in Christ that we are justified or put right with God (Gal 3:1-16). It is through faith, which also a gift from God (Eph 2:8-9), that we are granted the right to become sons and daughters of God.

The second characteristic of man's relationship to God is the right to be sons of God. This blessing follows salvation and is also a gift given by grace alone. However, it is more intimate in that believers are given the privilege to become sons of God (John 1:12). This characteristic could be

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<sup>84</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, London UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1939, pp. 246-247.

<sup>85</sup> This insightful observation is taken from Syd Gould's devotional talk on Hebrews 8, delivered on 3 June 2014 at Christian Leaders' Training College.

<sup>86</sup> Apart from the definition of sin as missing the mark, others definitions include the breach of relationship, perversion, rebellion, and separation from the holy God.

<sup>87</sup> Milne, *Know the Truth*, p. 139.

controversial, because some may question whether women are included. However, if you perceive it through Christ, you will see that it is a relational privilege made certain through Jesus, his Son. It is not something of our own achievement. So we should not get distracted from the main issue with gender differences. In the scriptures the overwhelming evidence is that masculine forms are often used to cover both male and female. For example, Israel is called God's son, and there is no suggestion that the women were not part of Israel! Do not covet your neighbour's wife does not mean it is permissible to covet your neighbour's husband! Paul is clear on this issue: when it comes to salvation, gender should not be a hindrance. The most important thing is that people are baptised into Christ and clothe themselves with him (Gal 3:23-4:7). As sons, we can now come to God at any time and place, through Christ, and present our needs and worries to him (1 Pet 5:7). We can now call out to God "*Abba* Father" in prayer.

Prayer is another characteristic of man's relationship to God. Theologically there may be several questions regarding prayer. For instance, "Does God depend on our prayers to make him act"? We were not there when God created the universe, and we did not even ask for him to send Jesus. If he knows all our needs, why should we tell him? Despite all these theological questions, the Bible simply encourages believers to pray continually (1 Thess 5:17). Prayer is an important aspect of the people of God in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Although there were priests in the Old Testament, people could pray to God concerning their needs. For instance, Hannah prayed and God answered by giving Samuel (1 Sam 1). There are several other recorded prayers, especially in the Psalms. All God's faithful people are asked to pray (Ps 32:6). In the New Testament, Jesus modelled a life of ceaseless praying to his Father. He encouraged his disciples to pray for others (Matt 5:44), taught what prayer is not (Matt 6:5-8) and what prayer is (Matt 6:9). He prayed alone (Matt 14:23), and he prayed for others (John 17). In Matthew 6 Jesus taught his disciples the prayer commonly referred to by Christians as "The Lord's Prayer" (Matt 6:9-13). Prayer was also a vital aspect of believers' lives after they received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:42). As a result, God did tremendous miracles through the, and the gospel message spread rapidly to other nations.



Another important thing about prayer for Christians is that it has to be done according to God's will. This is where many have been impatient and unclear. This is simply saying that, although we are asked to pray at all times, it does not mean that answers will turn out the way we expect. God often answers prayers by either "yes", "no", or "wait for some time". Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane highlights some of these points. The cup was the suffering that he was going to go through as he bore the wrath of God (Jer 25:15-18). Although he prayed that the cup might be removed, if it were possible (Matt 26:36-46), it is clear that the answer was "no". But Jesus was also certain of the fact that it was God's will that he had come to do, and, whatever the answer was, he was willing to accept it. We know from a later chapter (Matt 27) that he had to die on the cross.

Having discussed the above characteristics of man's relationship to God, let us now turn to man's relationship to traditional gods. In Tannese primal religion mankind is left on their own to make amends for their sins. If it means sacrificing a number of pigs or chickens, the people have to do it, if they want to restore the relationship. The question of whether or not the gods are satisfied with one's offering still remains unclear. This, of course, is a costly practice. One has to accumulate these things or else buy them from other people. Human effort is definitely the focus of traditional religion. This is the opposite of human's relationship to God. Forgiveness and salvation are gifts from God. We cannot add anything of our own to gain God's salvation. Furthermore, Christ died on the cross, once and for all time. On the cross God's wrath on mankind's sin was fully poured out. The sacrifice cannot be repeated. Consider the great God, who has offered his sinless Son to die for us, once and for all time, so that through faith in Jesus believers are accepted as sons, and so that now, as sons, they can come to him at any time through prayer. By contrast, in traditional religion, only the *tupunes* enters the fertility stone god's area to offer religious rituals. This speaks loudly of the kind of gods people are worshipping.

The final characteristic of man's relationship to God, with which we shall deal, is the fear of the Lord. Among many other themes of Proverbs, the fear of the Lord is very prominent. According to Proverbs, the fear of the Lord is from where wise living emanates (Prov 1:7; 9:10; 31:30). Often when the word "fear" is used these days, the first meaning that comes to

mind, at least for Melanesians, is its negative meaning. It may be the fear of spirits, *nahak* men, or something bad, as discussed earlier. What does the Bible mean when it uses the word fear? According to Tremper Longman III, in the *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, the root word יָרָא (yir = fear), such as in Prov 1:7 (יִרְאַת = yir'at), “has a semantic range that runs from respect to horror”.<sup>88</sup> That is, it has both the positive implication of “respect” as a response for God’s people. But, for his enemies, it has the negative implication of “fear”, especially in holy war (1 Sam 11:7; 2 Chr 17:10; 20:29).<sup>89</sup> In his commentary on Proverbs, Charles Bridges explains, in a down-to-earth illustration of father-son relationship, that

[fear] is that affectionate reverence by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father’s law. His wrath is so bitter and his love so sweet that hence springs an earnest desire to please him, and – because of the danger of coming short from his own weakness and temptations – a holy *fear* – anxious care and watchfulness, “that he might not sin against him”. (Heb 12:28, 29.)<sup>90</sup>

While explaining fear as “a healthy respect for the Almighty”, Derek Kidner links it to the knowledge of God (Prov 2:5) and trust (3:5-7).<sup>91</sup> This makes sense, because how can you revere someone you barely know, or someone you do not trust. The son will trust his father because he knows him in an intimate way.

In Tannese primal religion, taking the fertility stone god as an example, it is not easy to know who to trust: the stone, the spirit behind it, or the *tupunes*? Do people really know these spirits that they are trusting? Can you really trust a human being to truly represent you and your needs? This is why

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<sup>88</sup> Tremper Longman III, “Fear of the Lord”, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, Tremper Longman III, Peter Enns, eds, Nottingham UK: IVP, 2008, p. 201.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Charles Bridges, *A Commentary on Proverbs*, Geneva Commentary, London UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1846, pp. 3-4.

<sup>91</sup> Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Leicester UK: IVP, 1964, p. 33.

there is great deal of fear and mistrust in a traditional society, because of the lack of knowledge of the nature of the spirits.

## EVALUATION

Evaluation has been a task of this paper, especially in comparing the God of the Bible and traditional gods. The reason for immediate evaluation, now rather than later, is to help the reader see the similarities and differences. This section of evaluation will seek to take the discussion of two topics, which the writer believes are worth discussing, a step further..<sup>92</sup> These are ownership and worship.

### OWNERSHIP

Ownership in Tanna, and probably across Melanesia, is an important concept. Often you will hear people using collocations, such as “*kastom* owner”, “rightful owner”, or “land owner”. Ownership of something is a general principle, but, the way in which people own things, differs in different contexts. Ownership, for the Tannese, can be attributed to a people group, or individuals. Ownership also has aspects that are related to language, traditional story, value of a particular thing, and geography. Although the things mentioned may seem different, they are, in fact, inseparable. You cannot discuss one without the other. All these are packed into this one word *kastom*. *Kastom* maintains and determines who is the rightful owner. Let us now discuss this aspect of traditional ownership, where we can see the other aspects played out.

In Tannese society, there are several traditional groupings, beginning with the smallest to the largest. These are kinship groupings, tribal groupings, and geographical groupings. Each of these groupings has its own traditional name, known to the whole area. The kinship grouping is, by definition, related to blood. The language term used to describe this grouping is *namhip*, plus the name of the great grandfather. *Namhipun* is

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<sup>92</sup> There are several reasons for discussing ownership and worship. People generally will always stand to defend what is theirs. Ownership mentality can also differ, according to the context. For the Tannese, they own everything, even their gods. In contrast, the God of Christians owns all things and people. A deity deserves the worship due to him. These two terms, as discussed, say much about the similarities and differences of the God of the Bible and the Tannese primal gods.

the word for grandchildren. In this case, it is shortened to link to the name of the grandfather. For instance, the writer is *Namhip-Iaken*, literally the grandchildren of *Iaken*. The other grouping is tribal grouping, which includes several kinship groupings. It is marked by geography, and people know these geographical boundaries. For instance, the writer is from the *Lalan* tribe. The next tribe to the south is *Pukia*. Since these two tribes are rather small, they are normally referred to as one, *Pukiam-lalan*. The next, and a much greater, grouping is a geographical grouping, because it has natural landmarks, especially rivers. This geographical grouping includes several tribes, and many kinship groupings. The writer is from the geographical area called *Iru*. The diagram below seeks to demonstrate these groupings in circles, but a topographical map would be preferable, because it shows the geographical features of boundaries.

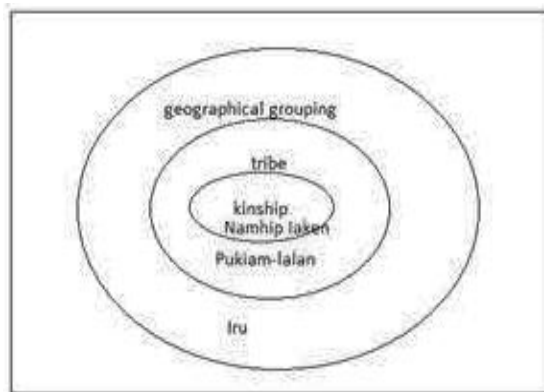


Figure 6: Traditional groupings

It is important to explain these traditional groupings, because this is where the sense of ownership lies. It is often handed down via verbal stories, *namsu*, in West Tanna language. These stories are confirmed by the naming of people, physical objects (stones and trees), or places; visible landmarks, and traditional songs, as well. For instance, since the chiefly title of the Tannese is hereditary, it is maintained within the kinship, via naming, or the kinship's decision to give it to a member within the kinship. That particular kinship owns the chiefly title. This idea of ownership also holds true for land, stories, environment, and almost everything in the society, including the gods.

The initial reason for the rise of the John Frum movement in Tanna was a reaction to foreigners, especially the colonial government and church representatives, who sought to put an end to some of the traditional practices. During the time of the missionaries, there was what was called “Tanna Law”, which prohibited *kava* drinking, traditional dancing, and several other things. Although it is unclear as to whether the law was introduced by the missionaries, or the local church leaders themselves, it is clear that this law robbed the people of some of the very things belonging to them, the things they valued in their society. But when John Frum appeared, he encouraged the people to revert to *kava* drinking, gardening, feeding pigs, and traditional dancing.<sup>93</sup> Consequently, it is said,<sup>94</sup> that, around 1940-1941, there were only two members left in the huge Presbyterian church building at the Lenakel mission, not, as Rice claims, that church attendance was nil,<sup>95</sup> for the church at Lenakel. Having given the bad side of a monocultural viewpoint, Paul G. Hiebert states “[f]ar too often the missionaries ended up as policemen, enforcing what they believed to be Christian practice on the people.”<sup>96</sup>

The trouble with a traditional ownership mentality is that, often, there is a tendency to want to apply it to Christianity, or to the churches in Tanna, and probably to Melanesia, as a whole. For instance, if a chief, a leader, or an ordinary person was the first to accept Christianity in an area, or a village, the relatives of that person are expected to carry on that legacy, often as ordained elders, or pastors in the church. The relatives of that particular person view the church as something belonging to them. Furthermore, at times, the relatives of that person are often coerced into ordination, overlooking the fact that the call to ministry is a gift from Christ

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<sup>93</sup> Rice, *John Frum He Come*, p. 3.

<sup>94</sup> This is orally maintained by the people that the two were Nalaus and Kamut. These were the two elders of the church at Lenakel, West Tanna. The writer is from this area. Every Sunday, they both take turns in sharing from God’s word, while the others listen. This is what the two elders, metaphorically, say to the people when they abandoned the church, “you people go, and, if you reach the peak of the rock, we will come, but if we reach the peak of the rock, you will have to come back to us”. Things turn out on their side, and the people began returning to the church.

<sup>95</sup> Rice, *John Frum He Come*, p. 6.

<sup>96</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization”, in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11.3 (July 1987), p. 106.

(Eph 4:7-13; 1 Cor 12). This, to me, is an outworking of the traditional ownership mentality. After all, the church is Christ's body, which he owns, and takes care of, as the head, in his way, as revealed through the scriptures. The notion of ownership has expectations for church workers. As a pastor, I would not expect my son to be a pastor after me, but I would not forbid him, either, if it is a genuine call from God for him to enter full-time ministry. It is not mine to give to my son; it is for the Lord Jesus, himself, through the Holy Spirit.

Although people would not say so directly, their actions seem to indicate that they think they own God by making his word say what they want it to say and not submitting themselves to the word and allowing it speak to them. For example, when talking about *kava*, some people would refer to Jesus' words that "[w]hat goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean', but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean' " (Matt 15:11). They use the Bible to support their desire for *kava*, but overlook what the Bible says about drunkenness (Gal 5:21). Excessive use of *kava* also leads to biological and social problems, such as, stealing, greed, and excessive smoking. Having stated that contextualisation widens our understanding of God, Darrell Whiteman states that "God can no longer simply be the god of myself, my family, my community, my nation; such a god is ultimately an idol, or false god; one made according to my narrow and limited image and perspective".<sup>97</sup> Affirming the view of Peter Schineller,, Whiteman continues, "human beings have a tendency to create God in their own image, but we must always counter this observation with the biblical view that God has created all human beings in God's image".<sup>98</sup>

In short, the Bible clearly states that God created and owns everything (Gen 1-2; cf. Col 1:16). When it comes to Christianity or the church, God's word has to be the ultimate standard for faith and practice. The traditional mentality of ownership should be subjected to its teaching. Furthermore,

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<sup>97</sup> Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation*, New York NY: Paulist Press, 1990, p. 116, quoted in Darrell L. Whiteman, "Contextualisation: the Theory, the Gap, the Challenge", in Gerald H. Anderson, ed., *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21.1 (1997), p. 4.

<sup>98</sup> Whiteman, "Contextualisation", p. 4.

God's word can change a traditional mindset so that it can now view things with a transformed mindset. However, this has to be done with great pastoral care and love, taking into account Paul's weaker-brother principle (1 Cor 10:23-33) and with a genuine understanding of that particular context. In the scriptures we are told that we are stewards of God. For instance, we are to take care of creation (Gen 1:28, 2:15).<sup>99</sup> We do not own creation.

### **WORSHIP**

We now turn to the subject of worship. An important question is, "Do the Tannese worship these gods?" To answer this question, the writer will explore the term "worship" and what it involves through the lens of Christianity. The term "worship" is often misunderstood, even by Christians. As a result, they regard certain acts, such as corporate church meetings or prayer and singing as worship, and neglect the private aspect of it. Some even refer to some songs as "worship songs", perhaps the ones with a slow rhythm and no clapping of hands or dancing, and others as "praise songs", especially the ones with a strong rhythm which arouse one's emotions to clap, move a bit, or dance.<sup>100</sup>

In an attempt to define the term "worship", David Peterson gives several areas which ought to be included. These are words, life orientation, divine and human action, and engaging with God.<sup>101</sup> According to Peterson, the word "worship" is derived from "to attribute worth". So, worship means to attribute glory and praise to God, because he is worthy of it (Ps 96:7-8; Rev 5:12). That does not make every form of worship acceptable to God, and the scriptures, especially the Old Testament, are full of details of unacceptable worship. Worship has to be done in accordance with the scriptures. Therefore, it is vital to examine traditional forms of worship in the light of the scriptures.

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<sup>99</sup> This includes the environment and all that is in it, both the land and waters. Stewardship covers other areas, as well as time, money, people, and even the gospel, which is the usage of stewardship in the epistles.

<sup>100</sup> This information was taken from Henoma Ttopoqogo, a masters student of CLTC, on June 5, 2014. He is a Lutheran Renewal pastor who resides in Lae, Papua New Guinea.

<sup>101</sup> David Peterson, *Engaging with God: a Biblical Theology of Worship*, Leicester UK: Apollos, 1992, pp. 17-20.

Although one may want to define the word as “worship” or “being worthy”, the Old Testament never uses such terminology.<sup>102</sup> There are other related terms in the Bible which Peterson could have included. The first indicates the gestures involved in worship. In the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Peterson says the Hebrew word “to worship” “הִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה” (*his<sup>e</sup>ttach<sup>a</sup>vah*) literally means ‘bend oneself over at the waist’ . . . as a total bodily gesture of respect before a great one (e.g., Gen 18:2; Ex 18:7; 2 Sam 14:4).<sup>103</sup> The other word is “עָבַד” (*abad*), which literally means ‘to serve’, specifically the service offered to God” (Ex 12:25-27; 13:5).<sup>104</sup> Finally, this group of words, according to the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, conveys the reverence or respect due to God. This fear includes keeping his commands, obeying his voice, walking in his ways, turning away from evil, and serving him.<sup>105</sup>

According to Peterson, one aspect of worship is that it is at the core of a right relationship to God. It is an integral part of God’s redemptive work. In the New Testament, it is the whole existence of Christians (Rom 12:1). Wanting to limit worship to certain places, people, activities, and times is a traditional religious mentality, not Christian. This is seen at work in the Tannese religion, regarding the fertility gods, where only the *tupunes* enters the sacred place performing certain rituals at an appointed time, while the rest of the community are inactive in the process. For Christians, there has to be a shift from a traditional mindset to a Christian mindset, and it begins with the fear of the Lord.

Peterson’s next point is that worship involves both human and divine action. For this aspect of worship, it is necessary to understand God’s part and our part in worship. It is God who draws us to himself as we respond to him in worship. In the Old Testament, he was the one who initiated the religious life of Israel, through the Tabernacle, priesthood, and sacrificial systems. It was his work in Christ that brought people to him for salvation,

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<sup>102</sup> W. M. McConnell, “Worship”, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, Tremper Longman III, Peter Enns, eds, Nottingham UK: IVP, 2008, pp. 929-930.

<sup>103</sup> D. G. Peterson, “Worship”, in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, eds, Leicester UK: IVP, 2000, p. 856.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.



and Christians to him in worship. Our part is to surrender ourselves as vessels to be used of God as our daily worship.

Peterson's final point is that worship is engaging with God. When Christians gather for worship, the Bible says God is with them (Matt 18:20). God the Holy Spirit comes to be with his people to help them pray. However, this is also true for an individual Christian. He is not alone. God is with him/her (1 Cor 6:19). Thus, a Christian must be careful what he or she does.<sup>106</sup>

Let us now turn to Tannese traditional worship. The people of Tanna have an awareness of a deity, whether object or a spirit. It may be helpful to see how they worship this deity. This is the primary task of the *tupunes*, as mentioned earlier. However, it is vital to reiterate its limitation to places, people, activities, and time. Another thing, which Tannese men do in the *nakamal*, is that, after one consumes his *kava*, he utters some words. This is referred to in the language as *damafa*. People would often say this is a form of prayer. For example, when discussing the function of the *nakamal*, Christopher Iawak states that "[i]t is a place where men commune with their god through *Damafa* (prayer), while *kava* drinking".<sup>107</sup> *Damafa* is done for almost everything. It can be done for a new garden, a newborn baby, for circumcision, growth, health, knowledge, marriage, weather, hunting or fishing trips, and so on. However, when considering the uttered words, most of the time in translation it is as follows. For a new yam garden: "May those yams we planted today grow big and may nothing bad happen to them". For circumcised boys: "May their wounds be healed speedily, and may they grow to become strong, healthy boys".

There may be other expressions, but the thing to note about these uttered words is that they do not seem to be like prayer. It is more like expressing a wish. Anyone can wish for anything. The other important thing to note is that the wish is not expressed to a god or anyone. Perhaps there is an assumption that the gods are listening. For Christians, prayer is certainly

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<sup>106</sup> Peterson, *Engaging with God*, pp. 17-20.

<sup>107</sup> Christopher Iawak, "Kava Consumption as an Issue of Gospel and Culture", in *Women in Culture and Church and Other Issues, Gospel and Culture in Vanuatu 5*, Randall Prior, ed., Wattle Park Vic: Gospel Vanuatu Books, 2006, pp. 220-221.

directed to God, through Jesus. Furthermore, this form of prayer (*damafa*) is limited only to men because, traditionally, only men consume *kava* at a certain place (*nakamal*) and time (late afternoon). The negative side of *damafa* is that often people use it to call down disaster, harm, and death upon others. So, when discussing a sickness in the *nakama*, often you hear people referring to *damafa tat*, literally bad wishes. This is often done in secret.

In short, for Tannese traditional religion, worship is limited by geography, certain times, and certain people; but, for Christians, it is limitless. It is universal, that is, it is done by all Christians. It is a core part of the daily lives of the people. Furthermore, it is not only done in this life, but the next as well. If Tannese Christians can make this shift in their traditional understanding of worship or religion to a Christian understanding, I believe there will be tremendous changes in the lives of the people, the churches, and the society at large.

Another thing to be discussed under worship is, “Do Tannese, themselves, regard the things mentioned above as gods to be worshipped?” The above discussion is based on the general idea that Tannese do have their gods, most of which have been discussed. But no one has ever probed deeper in order to see whether or not this is a genuine claim. Earlier, the writer quoted some missionaries who gave a list of what they perceived to be the gods of the Tannese. For instance, Paton mentioned “stone idols, charms, and sacred objects; chiefs and sacred men; departed ancestors, heroes, and stones”.<sup>108</sup> Before Paton, Turner had said that there were no idols, despite the venerated stones.<sup>109</sup> This shows that although these two reflect foreign views, both differ to some extent concerning their view of the gods. We will seek to answer this question in two ways: (1) by describing how Tannese people relate to these gods; and (2) by doing a word study on the Tannese terms for these gods. Tannese relationship to these gods has already been considered above. For instance, the *kughen* is an isolated mythological god hardly referred to in the daily life of the people. Some of the beings categorised as *kughen* are, in fact, primarily viewed as heroes rather than gods. For example, when referred to by the people, *Matiktik* is

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<sup>108</sup> Paton, *Missionary to the New Hebrides*, p. 72.

<sup>109</sup> Turner, *Nineteen Years in Polynesia*, pp. 88-89.

seen more as a hero who defeats *Taramsumus* and frees the little children. He is not referred to as a god which requires people's worship. Capell, quoted by Nehrbass, was right when he says that,

“[h]e [*kughen*] provides them food and gave them their stones, but he is not the centre of mythology or worship. The Tannese are deists, rather than theists.” Tannese believe in the existence of eternal beings, but do not worship them. They relate more easily to a mechanistic power (*mana*) than to a personal god.<sup>110</sup>

Furthermore, the fertility stone gods are not referred to as gods which all people are to worship. Rather, they are afraid of going near the place where they are kept. The people are aware that the stones are in the vicinity, but the ritual activity is performed by the *tupunes* rather than the general population. If the traditional god is for the entire community, why then is one person (the *tupunes*) representing them all?

As just mentioned, Capell says that the Tannese relate more to the mechanistic power (*mana*) than to a personal god. Paul Hiebert elaborates further on the idea, saying that there are mechanical and organic systems. According to Hiebert, the mechanical system works on the notion of equilibrium or stasis. The example he gives is of cars and computers. There is a time when these two cease to operate. They depend very much on an outside force to keep them working. He continues by referring to organic or living systems, such as body parts, including cells, heart, and liver. This system includes birds and animals.<sup>111</sup> If we consider the fertility stone gods, then we can see that Capell may be right. The stone has been lying there for many generations. In itself, it is powerless and inactive. There has not been any change in its size or shape. Like a car or a computer, it needs an outside force to get it active. Whether or not people worship cars or computers, there is a time when they will no longer function and another will need to be purchased. Similarly, there are times when some of these stones might go missing, especially in natural disasters, or be destroyed by men (government or church representatives), and soon

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<sup>110</sup> Capell, “Stratification of Afterworld Beliefs”, p. 77, quoted in Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*, p. 47.

<sup>111</sup> Hiebert. *Transforming Worldviews*, pp. 77-80.

you will hear people referring to another. Cars, computers, planes, medical equipment, and stones are instruments for people to achieve something, but they are not the end or ultimate goal, in themselves, for humankind. The writer is not advocating the use of a stone, as in traditional religion, but putting a general truth about mechanistic systems. It is different with the God of the Bible. Hiebert explains that the God of the Bible is

a living being, not energy, matter, karma, or any other impersonal foundation of being. In the beginning was God, not matter and laws, natural or moral. It is God, a living being, who created a material world that operates according to the order he placed in it, and he created humans as beings who can shape and use the world because they understand the intrinsic order in it.<sup>112</sup>

The fact that Melanesians respond well to mechanistic systems or something physical and manipulative could be one of the reasons for Melanesians resorting to traditional ways for healing, success, and prosperity, when there seems to be no answer to their prayers. This may also be true for others, who resort to their material possessions, rather than waiting on God. Humanity prefers shortcuts, material and visible things. But, for God, it is his kingdom first and other things will follow (Matt 6:33; cf. Is 55:8-9).

Another thing to mention is that an outsider must seek to fully understand the context, before deciding whether something is a god or not. For instance, in a traditional context such as Tanna, leaders are given special respect. This does not mean that the leader is deified. In the end, the leadership role will be handed to another, and the people will still give him the same respect. It is part of the culture. The other example is the worship of the ancestor spirits. Just because people put food in the graveyard or talk to their deceased does not make them gods. In this worldview the deceased are believed to be around with the people in the society, just as when they were alive physically. There are central meeting places, such as *nakamal* for the community and the kitchen for a family. But, for a deceased member of a family, the meeting place is the graveyard. Just because people are doing the things they are doing, it does not mean that we have to

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 285.

jump to a quick conclusion which might not be accurate. It might be, as in John Pobee's idea of "*tabula rasa*, i.e., the missionary doctrine that there is nothing in the non-Christian culture on which the Christian missionary can build and, therefore, every aspect of the traditional non-Christian culture had to be destroyed before Christianity could be built up".<sup>113</sup> The important question here is "has the people's worldview been well grasped and represented?"

A word study on the Tannese terms used for these gods will also help to answer the above question. Let us begin with the supernatural, or the gods referred to by Nehrbass as *kughen* (*whughin* in West Tanna language). According to Nehrbass, *kughen* are spirits with personal names. They are mythical gods, such as *Matiktik*, *Taransamus*, *Karwas*, and *Karpapeng*. However, in the western part of Tanna people do not refer to these spirits as *whughin*. They normally refer to them via their names, *Saramsumus*, *Kalwas* (*Kalpapen* in West Tanna language). Furthermore, to refer to the *Taramsumus* as *kughin* gives a negative connotation because, according to the myth, he was devouring all the people when *Matiktik* intervened to save them. Traditionally, the name *whughin* is used as the name of a person. For instance, in my village (Loukatai) a person is called Iaihit Whughin. The traditional leadership structure will help to see the importance of the name. In almost every Tannese village, there are two important people. The first is "*yeni*", the spokesperson of the community. He is the equivalent of a contemporary chief. The second is the "*yeremera*". The term "*yeremera*" carries the notion of headship, ownership and, maybe, some aspects of a king, although kingship is absent in Melanesia. For my village, this person, Iaihit Whughin, is the *yeremera*.

When the missionaries came, they chose the term "*Yeremara Whughin*" in translation to refer to the God of the Bible, and that is how it has been used until the present day. However, the point is that people (at least for West Tanna) are not referring to the mythical gods as *kughin*. The word "*kughin*" is mostly used nowadays by Christians to refer to the God of the

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<sup>113</sup> John S. Pobee, "Political Theology in the African Context", in *African Theological Journal* 11 (1982), p. 168, quoted in Hiebert, Shaw, Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1999, p. 19.

Bible, so to use the name to refer to a personal spirit would not be welcomed in such context.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Since this paper emphasises individual Christian intellectual growth, a possible course of action is as follows: for Christians, understand your culture or the host culture; for cross-cultural workers, understand your Bible and, finally, understand yourself. This process of seeking a better understanding involves critical analysis.

### **UNDERSTAND YOUR CULTURE**

As stated above, while staying in the village, the author thought studying the culture was not a priority. But, after writing this paper, I would like to appeal to all Tannese, especially Christian leaders, to make every effort to better understand why people are doing the things they do. This is not only true for Tannese leaders, but for anyone in cross-cultural work. There are several reasons for the author not studying the culture while in the village. First, as mentioned earlier, the thought was that it is my culture, I know it because I am part of it. Just because many people are in a ship, does not mean that all of them know how it works. The captain, crew, and passengers are in the ship. For the passengers, the boat is moving, but they lack the knowledge to probe deeper as to how it is moving. We have to analyse every practice in order to seek to understand the deeper reasons for it. To use Hiebert's term, we need to "surface them – to consciously examine the deep, unexamined assumptions we have and, thereby, make explicit what is implicit".<sup>114</sup> He continues that these "[c]ultural assumptions affect what we see and what we believe is true, right, and proper . . . unless they come in conflict with a set of assumptions from another culture".<sup>115</sup>

Second, to enable successful learning, the traditional learning system itself has to be understood. Unlike the contemporary education system, which involves confinement to the classroom, writing, and paid teachers, the traditional learning system is on the field (in the garden, on the sea, on the

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<sup>114</sup> Hiebert. *Transforming Worldviews*, p. 319.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 320.

building site, in the kitchen, etc.). It is oral, and an individual has to find the time and place to learn from traditional elders. One of the great contemporary deceptions is the notion that unschooled village elders have nothing to teach us. However, if one understands the traditional learning system, one will learn a great deal. The final thing is to learn to be humble and respectful to the traditional leaders. If they can see that you are a trustworthy custodian of the traditional things, they can entrust many things to your care.

There are reasons for a better understanding of one's own culture. First, as Christians and leaders we are not called out of the world, although we are not of it. Our ministry is in a world of many cultures. Consequently, one has to better understand the culture (not just the practices, but also the underlying principles of a particular practice), so that we can offer concrete ways to enable people to come to a better solution. There also needs to be awareness that culture is not static. Some of the past cultural practices to which we are referring, may no longer exist. We also need to be aware of the new practices taken on board by the culture. In doing so, we may offer relevant explanations for the questions of the day. Second, many people, such as missionaries and anthropologists, have written and will continue to write books and essays on individual cultures. Some have well represented the people, while others have not. It is only when people know their culture, that they can rectify errors. Otherwise, they may accept anything said about their own culture, even if it is a misrepresentation, because they, themselves, do not know it. Finally, as a custodian, one has the responsibility to pass the knowledge on to the next generation. Therefore, one needs to know what to pass on and, of course, what not to.

Christians need to understand their culture, not that they may return to or discard it. Practices and principles need to be evaluated. There are some valuable practices that should be maintained, but there are others that are clearly against the gospel which, therefore, should be discarded. This has to be done in a pastoral and loving spirit. For that to happen, one has to understand his/her culture.

#### **UNDERSTAND GOD THROUGH THE BIBLE**

It is vital for all Christians to seek to understand God. As John Calvin says, "true and sound wisdom consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and

of ourselves”.<sup>116</sup> He explains that “[i]n the first place, no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he ‘lives and moves’ (Acts 17:28)”.<sup>117</sup> However, one cannot fully understand God apart from the means that he has provided, the Bible. The Bible has to be read or heard taught by all Christians, if they wish to grow in their relationship and knowledge of God. Christians read the Bible because they believe it contains the word of God for their walk in this life, and to prepare them for their life in the next. However, there are a few who may have read it for other reasons. For instance, some read it to know what it teaches, so that they can find ways around it or teach against it. Christians believe that the Bible is the sole standard and has answers for our questions. So contemporary Christians ought to know what the Bible teaches about God. Furthermore, the Bible is not just a book like any other book. It is God’s book or, rather, it contains God’s story of creation, sin, salvation in Christ, and the new world to be brought by Christ at his second coming. The Bible helps us to know who God is and his relationship to humanity. Although there are 66 books, categorised into 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament, it is actually one book, giving the one story of the one God of humankind. In Melanesia there are still illiterate people in communities. This places a much bigger burden on church leaders who ought to read the Bible with the illiterate in mind. That is, they ought to live out what the Bible teaches, for the sake of those who cannot read it (literally) but can read it through other’s daily lives.

### **UNDERSTAND YOURSELF**

Understanding yourself does not mean one has to understand how his/her body functions, biologically. It means understanding yourself, with respect to your culture and your new life in Christ, through the scriptures. This involves understanding the requirements of this new life. It means giving oneself and one’s ways fully to God. It means, after examining one’s culture, if there are some things which are against or pose a threat to faith, these should be brought under the scrutiny of the scriptures. If this means abstention from certain cultural practices, there is a cost to count before following Christ. Following all traditional practices or just some, does not

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<sup>116</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, tran., London UK: SCM Press, 1961, p. 35.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.



make you more or less Tannese because there is more to being a Tannese than following certain traditions.

However, the most important thing is to understand your spiritual state. This includes understanding your sin, how guilty you are before God, and the fact that you cannot save yourself. This makes the need for a God, who loves, saves, and forgives, according to his grace, a reality in your life. Again, John Calvin's second aspect of true and sound wisdom is the knowledge of oneself. In Tannese society, the need to understand your spiritual need is fuzzy, because of an integrated worldview, where spiritual, physical, social, and cultural needs are inseparable. Often, spiritual needs may be less emphasised, at the expense of other needs, like physical needs. Furthermore, the system itself can become a hindrance to seeing the real need. For instance, the traditional sacrificial system is thought by Tannese to be sufficient. Thus, it is vital to understand oneself.

### **COMPARATIVE SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Since this thesis is a comparative study, I would like to summarise the paper in a table, which compares and contrasts the God of the Bible with the Tannese primal gods, because this may help readers to see the differences more clearly. This will help review, as well as state, the main points, in a simple way. However, it is difficult to make a one-on-one comparison, because of the plurality of Tannese traditional gods. Further, they are both spiritual beings and objects, but this summary will seek to show a more general comparison (see Figure 7 below).

It is still a challenge for Christians to defend their faith, ever since the time of Paul, who committed his time to defending the gospel for which he was imprisoned (Phil 1:16), and Peter, who encouraged Christians to be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks about the hope they have (1 Pet 3:15). Two words, "defence" (Phil 1:16) and "answer" (1 Pet 3:15), are from the Greek word ἀπολογία (apologia),<sup>118</sup> from which we get the word "apologetic". It is the hope of the writer to provide Tannese with some answers about primal gods to aid the defence of the truth. Apologetic has

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<sup>118</sup> Aland, Aland, eds, *The UBS Greek New Testament*, Phil 1:16-5:25; 1 Pet 3:15-6:22.

been mostly left to the ecclesiastical elite, but it should not be this way. It has to be done by lay people and even ordinary Christians as well.

<b>The nature of the God of the Bible</b>	<b>The nature of the Tannese primal gods</b>
Spirit	Spirit, as well as objects
One	Many
Organic	Organic and mechanistic
Eternal	Limited
Characteristics of the relationship of the God of the Bible to humans	Characteristics of the relationship of the Tannese primal gods to humans
Speaks through revelation, Jesus, and the Bible	Myth/objects cannot communicate (stone)
Love	Uncertain/Punishment
Just in his dealings	Uncertain
Gracious	Uncertain
Saviour	Uncertain
Near/Within	Distant/Confined to territory
Characteristics of the relationship of humans (Christians) to the God of the Bible	Characteristic of the relationship of humans (non-Christians) to the Tannese primal gods
All have sinned	All are corrupt, but a person can be good
God provided a way, a gift	Legalism (humans seek their own ways)
All Christians can pray	One person prays on behalf of the people ( <i>tupunes</i> )
Pray according to the will of God	Manipulating/controlling gods for the wish of man
Fear – reverence, respect, honour, freedom	Fear – enslavement
Worship the creator	Worship creatures
God owns everything and humans are stewards	We own things

Figure 7: Comparative summary table

After all, Peter is writing to all “God’s elect” (1 Pet 1:1), not just some people in the church. It is vitally important that Christians ought to

understand their God, through the Bible, their culture, and themselves, in the light of the Bible and culture. The approach of apologetic that this writer is advocating, is appealing to the mind, via comparative study, done with love. Let me conclude by referring back to the main questions of this paper. The main task of this paper has been to discuss some aspects of the nature of the God of the Bible and the Tannese primal gods, and some characteristics of their relationship to humans, and vice versa. The above table helps us to see this discussion in outline. It portrays certain truths about God and gods. God is creator, living, eternal, and the God of the universe. A Tannese primal god, on the other hand, is a creature, limited, and dead/object (stone). Their relationship to humans shows God, on the one hand, to be more loving, caring, and intervening, when he sees that humanity is helpless. On the other hand, he is righteous and will not tolerate sin. However, his way for dealing with sin was on the cross, so that sinners are saved by grace alone. The primal gods seem to leave humankind on their own, by confining themselves to a territory. Punishment seems to be the mark of the relationship, leaving man in total fear. As for the God of the Bible, although humans are sinful, he provides a way for forgiveness of sin, so that believers are accepted as his children. In traditional religion, humankind has to find its way to god. Whether or not the people get to the traditional gods, the God of the Bible came to people's aid in and through the person of Jesus. Imagine you are walking on an unknown road and, at a place where two roads meet, you are uncertain which road to take. There you see Jesus standing and a stone lying on the ground. From which of the two will you seek guidance?

The recurring issue with which the writer has been grappling is, although most people say that the Tannese do have gods, both personal gods, such as *kughen*, and impersonal gods, such as stones, the gods relationship to humans, and vice versa, seems to show otherwise. This paper makes a claim that Tannese have no gods with regards to "communal worship", a vital aspect of Melanesian society. Although fear is present, it is not healthy; rather, it is an enslaving fear. However, in the case of venerated spirits and objects, they are multiple.<sup>119</sup> The important question is, "how

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<sup>119</sup> This paper's concern is not so much with the distinction between the spirits and material gods or where to draw the line when defining the term "god". It is more concerned with the

are the people relating to them?” Do Tannese worship these so-called gods? People may wish to define a deity as beings or objects, but this paper is seeking to understand God/gods, via the relationship between God/gods either to humans, or vice versa. A person or thing regarded as a god, is nothing without some form of relationship. It is worship, relationship, revelation, allegiance, and conviction which makes a being God or a god. This is not a conclusion, but is the opening up a claim for further discussion and research into cultural practices, and the relationship regarding what people believe to be their gods and their undergirding principles. It calls for a better understanding of oneself as a Christian, one’s culture, and one’s Bible.

This paper is a call to Tannese Christians. Jesus’ words still stand and, for the purpose of this paper, “You cannot serve both God and traditional gods” (Matt 6:24). A Christian is someone who has totally switched allegiance from traditional gods to God, through Christ. As Christians, we have a God who is far superior in every way to Tannese gods. His superiority is evident through his relationship with us. He has chosen to reveal himself to us by his Son and the written word, so that we can know who he is and his relationship to us. In fact, he knew us first because he made us to be his. His love is eternal, and by his grace he has provided a way, through Jesus his Son, that we might be saved and become his children. He is so great that no one can confine him to a particular place. His greatness and love embraces humans of all nations. He communicates to us through his word, and we can talk to him through prayer. For a non-Christian Tannese, consider the things which are gods to you, their relationship to you, and the freedom you have in them. Do not settle for something, because the majority is for it. That majority may be a minority when compared to a much greater world and a greater reality. Furthermore, we are rational beings, meaning that we have to critically evaluate our relationship to our gods, so that we can fully understand the gods we are serving. If we are to stand for the traditional gods, let us make sure that they are worth defending. But, I doubt they are worth it, as discussed above.

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relationship of who/what is thought to be God/gods, and those who are pledging their allegiance to this/these God/gods.

## GLOSSARY

This glossary is to help with some of the words used in this paper, most of which are language terms.

*Damafa* – A word given to the uttered words of wishes spoken after men have consumed their *kava*.

*Iru* – The name of an area in West Tanna marked by two rivers.

John Frum – The name of a person who was said to appear to certain people in South Tanna. Later the movement grew in other parts of Tanna. The movement is referred to as the John Frum Movement.

*Kalpapen* – The god who gives fertility stones for food. He is said to be residing at *Tokosmera*.

*Kasasao* and *Kaniapnin* – In one of the oral narratives, *SemuSemu* was eating all the inhabitants of Tanna. These are the names of the two boys who killed *SemuSemu*.

*Kava* – A traditional narcotic drink, traditionally consumed by men of certain stages, excluding women and children. Having become a commercial commodity, it is now consumed by anyone. Some of these words have to be understood in their context.

*Kavir* – The language name for a fertility stone.

*Kughen* – The language term for god.

*Kwanage* – The language name for oral narrative.

*Lalan* – The name of a tribe in West Tanna.

*Laminuh* – The traditional *nakamal* in West Tanna (Lenakel), where *SemuSemu*, according to oral narrative, vomited its liver, when *Kasasao* and *Kaniapnin* were trying to kill him. There is a stone, which is there to this day, referred to as *SemuSemu*'s liver.

*Lenakel* – The name of a place in West Tanna, which has now become the little town of Tafea Province, where are the main wharf and the provincial hospital. In the history of mission activity, it was a main missionary centre for the whole of West and even the northwest of Tanna.

*Matiktik* – In the oral narrative of *Taramsumus* eating people and keeping young boys in a pen without knowing that they were his food, *Matiktik* took the appearance of a boy and was taken by *Taramsumus* to the pen. When *Taramsumus* informed the boys of their destruction, *Matiktik* freed them and led them out of the pen.

- Nahak* – The language term for the process of using sorcery against someone by collecting remains of food, footprints, or cloths and performing magic to bring about sickness or death to a person.
- Nakamal* – Traditional meeting place for the community. It is also used by men's *kava* drinking, especially in the afternoons, and for other traditional ceremonies, such as the instalment of a chief, circumcision ceremonies, bride price payment, new harvest dedication, traditional exchanges, and customary dancing.
- Namipun* – The language term for grandchildren. Often the two last letters are dropped, to join it with the name of the grandfather. For instance, the writer is *Namip-Iaken*.
- Namsu* – Part of oral narrative/stories which is different to *Kwanage*/myth and includes stories of identity. For instance, it includes the family tree, movements, and blood lines of a particular kinship.
- Nimisan* – The generic language term for sickness.
- SemSem (SemuSemu)* – The name of the beast that was said to be going around eating humans. It was *Kasasao* and *Kaniapnin* who killed the monster.
- Tafea* – The name given to the province consisting of Tanna, Aniwa, Futuna, Erromango, and Aneityum (see the map on p. 82 above). The word derives from the initial letters of the five islands.
- Tannese* – The word is used generally to refer to the people of Tanna.
- Taramsumus* – The name of another beast in the oral narrative in which *Matiktik* intervened to save the young boys.
- Tokomera* – The name of the highest mountain in Tanna.
- Tupunes* – The name of the sacred man who enters the sacred place to offer ceremonial rituals to ask the fertility god for a good harvest.
- Yaohnanen* – The name of a village in the interior of Tanna. It is the centre for the Prince Phillip Movement.
- Yeni* – The word means spokesperson. This is equivalent to a contemporary chief.
- Yeremera* – The person who is in charge. He is the headman or an owner. *Yeni* is subservient to *Yeremera*.

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#### **EMAIL INTERVIEW**

Some of my traditional research was done via email interviews. In this approach, I would ask questions through Mary Becky (my niece). She is currently on Tanna. The reason I chose her is because she has an email address and is working in an office where she has access to the internet, a

rare and expensive thing on a remote island like Tanna. During her spare time, she would interview people and sent me her findings. However, names have been changed to preserve confidentiality.