

MYTHS THAT PREPARE THE HEART OF THE TRIBAL PEOPLE FOR THE GOSPEL

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INTRODUCTION

It is intriguing to hear the stories and legends of many tribal places in both Philippines and Thailand which prepared the hearts of the tribal people to be receptive and responsive to the gospel of our Lord Jesus. When the missionaries arrived in these places and preached the Word of God to the people, the truth penetrated their hearts and they turned from animism to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as their hope of their salvation and Lord and Savior.

I believe that when the Lord Jesus declared His Great Commandment and Great Commission to His disciples to go and make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19-20), right at that moment, He had already prepared the tribal people all over the world, through their myths and cultures. So that when the disciples arrived, the locals would respond positively to their teachings.

In this paper I would like to present just three (out of many) particular tribal people groups who, through their myths, accepted the missionaries and listened to their teachings and then received the Word of God as not from the missionaries but from God Himself.

MYTH OF THE LOST BOOK OF LIGHT

Red Karen Tribe, Thailand

A long time ago, the spirit gave the book of light ("Lithisopha") to the first Red Karen man with the instruction to read it because it contains all the truth. The book of light was made from a dried skin of an animal and was rolled up. The Red Karen man was illiterate and when he unrolled it he couldn't read it because the writing was like the scratches of the chicken. He rolled it back and put the book of light in a secure place under the grass roofing of his hut. After many weeks and a lot of rain, some of the drops from the leaks in the grass roofing fell on the book of light and it became damp and the mold grew all around it. The next day the Red Karen man dried it outside under the heat of the sun on top of a tree stump, and after that he went to his farm. Early in the evening he went home and went directly to where he left the book of light to take it but it wasn't there anymore, and it was lost.

The Red Karen man was bothered and started to search and search because he couldn't afford to lose that precious book of light but he could not find it. He then asked the pig "Where is the book of light?". The pig answered "I ate it this morning and I pooped it already and the dog ate it." The Red Karen man then asked the dog "Where is the book of light?" The dog

answered, "I ate it and I pooped it, and the chicken ate it." The Red Karen man asked the chicken but the chicken couldn't answer the man's inquiry. (The chicken is a dumb bird in the Red Karen culture) so the Red Karen man caught the chicken and killed it and searched for the book of light in every part of the chicken's body even to the bone marrow but he couldn't find the lost Book of light. Since then, in the Red Karen culture, every time they make a big decision the old man in the clan will do divination and offer a chicken to the spirits. He then calls the spirits to reveal to him the truth. The diviner then removes the leg bone of both feet of the chicken and compares their length. If one leg bone is longer than the other leg bone, it means "no". If both leg bones are equal it means "yes". Example, if a man asks for another man's daughter for marriage, the older man in the clan will do divination and offer a chicken to the spirit and ask the spirit whether or not the inquirer is the right man for their daughter or not. The diviner then removes both bones of the leg of the chicken and compares their length. If they are exactly the same length it means 'yes' and if they are not equal it means that man is not chosen by the spirits to be the husband. The Red Karen people do this divination because they lost their book of light which tells them all the truth they want to know.

The Introduction of the Bible

One day, when a missionary arrived in the Red Karen village, he joined a community meeting and asked permission to speak to all of them. The chieftain and other leaders allowed him to speak. Using the interpreter, he said: "I would like to ask permission from all of you to allow me to live with you in the village to study your language and your culture, because I want to teach this book to you. (The missionary held in his hand the Bible and raised it to let everyone see it.) This book is not an ordinary book. In it is written the Word of God who created heaven and earth, who created you also. You don't know Him but He is with us and He wants you to know Him through His book. In it He let all the truth be written. Before there was paper or ink a portion of this book had been written. It was engraved on a piece of stone, then later when ink was discovered it was transferred and written on a piece of the dried skin of an animal and then when papers and printing press were invented it was printed in the papers and formed into a book like this, but the truth that is written in it did not come from men but from God."

The people accepted the missionary to their village. After the missionary was able to speak the Red Karen

language, he started to teach the Bible to the Red Karen people, the first group who listened being the elderly people. The missionary was surprised that these old people were willing to listen to the teaching of the Word of God because in their culture, the older they become, no one can talk to them about God because they believe that they are gods already and when they die their living children will worship them. The elderly people then told the missionary the myth of the lost book of light. When the elderly people heard the strange missionary speak about the Bible at that community meeting, the elderly people remembered the myth of the lost book of light, and they concluded that the missionary had carried the exact copy of their lost book of light. The missionary taught them the Bible chronologically; from Genesis to the ascension of Christ when the church was established. Indeed the Lord prepared the hearts of the Red Karen people through their myth of the lost book of light so that in due time His church was established among the Red Karen tribe.

MYTH OF THE BIBLE IN ILONGOT TRIBE

Nueva Ecija, Philippines

The Ilongot people live in the Sierra Madre Mountain 1,915 meters above sea level located in the Northeastern part of the Philippines. Their population (during 1990 survey) was 50,017 people but this number did not increase because of their headhunting practices where they killed each other. Every summer when certain grass pollen is dried and is borne in the air and invisibly enters into their nostrils and makes them sneeze, it is the sign, for the Ilongot tribe, that the spirits want them to go headhunting. When the flowers of the fire tree are blooming that is the right time for them to do their head hunting activities. When they are sneezing and they do not go on a headhunting trip, the spirits will be angry with them and then give them sicknesses and plagues in their village and the people will die, especially the children. Their favorite victims are the lowlanders, and if there are no lowlanders they will go to the village of their fellow Ilongot who have been in dispute with them before. Prior to their headhunting trip, they will do a ritual. They offer a pig and call the spirits to possess them and help them be successful in their headhunting trip. They perform the warrior's dance and after the ritual they go to headhunting trip. These headhunters will sit at the trailside or at the roadside waiting for their victims. They are armed with Second World War guns (taken from the Japanese soldiers who were their victims) and big machetes used to chop the heads off their victims. They will shoot their victim and chop the head off and cut some parts of the body of the victim and bring them home and give the parts of their victim to their sons to practice cutting the human flesh so that when they grow into men they will not be afraid to cut their human victim. The more heads they chop the more prestige and respect they get

from their fellow Ilongots. Head hunting is a noble practice in that culture. A man who never experiences killing somebody and slicing the head off the victim is considered as weak and the Ilongot people don't give their daughters to him in marriage because he is weak and can't support his family.

One day, a lowlander was killed and beheaded, and his legs and arms were cut and taken leaving only the victim's body. The relatives of the victim reported the incident to the police. The policemen were not willing to do the arresting of the suspects who were the Ilongot men so they turned it over to the military. It did not take long for the military, who had a mapping operation in one of the Ilongot villages near the location where the incident of the decapitated lowlander happened, to arrest all the suspects. Two New Tribes Mission missionaries, (Florentino Santos and Marvin Graves) asked permission of the commanding officer of that operation if they could go with them also. They had a real burden from the Lord in their heart to start a pioneering church among the Ilongot tribes and to go with the military was a good opportunity for them to meet the people of that tribe. The Ilongot people are wily and have a good espionage system. They were able to know the presence of the military before they arrived in their village. The Ilongot men camouflaged themselves and hid, encircled around the village, with their machetes and guns ready to engage the military. They left in their village only the old people, the women, and their children. When the military arrived at the (Kapitaen) village the men were not in the village, and the commander in charge of the operation was furious because they could not arrest their suspects. They stayed overnight in that village waiting for the men to come home but they did not.

Early the next morning the commander of that operation informed the two missionaries that when he fired a signal shot they should drop to the ground because the military would massacre all the children, the older people and the women who were in the village. The commander believed that this would be an example to the Ilongot and would stop them going headhunting again. The two missionaries pleaded with the commander not to do their plan because it wouldn't change the headhunting culture, as only the Gospel could change the hearts of the Ilongot people. The commander was persuaded and left the two missionaries in the village. As soon as the military left, the Ilongot men came out from the bush where they were hiding with camouflage and guns. They had been watching and observing the movement of the soldiers and were ready to shoot the military. The fierce looking head hunters surrounded the two missionaries ready to kill them.

One of the missionaries had his black covered Bible tucked under his armpit, Tanitan, one of those headhunter chiefs, who was a professional champion in head hunting and had chopped off the heads of more than 10 people, and was highly respected by

the Ilongot, remembered his dream many months before. He saw in his dream that a man who wore pants and clothes (not a G-string like them) and had a black book tucked under his armpit came to their village and taught the people the truth and according to his dream the Ilongot people had to listen to the man. Tanitan concluded that this missionary was the man in the dream. He announced to all that these two outsiders were to be respected. No one could touch them. Tanitan explained to the people about his dream. With this announcement the younger men who were eager to add to their victim count were disappointed. but they did not touch the missionaries. Tanitan allowed the missionaries to stay in his house and provided them food and helped the missionaries to learn their language and culture. And finally Tanitan became the first believer of the Lord Jesus. He became an active helper of the missionaries preaching the gospel in every village. Sometimes he walked many days from one village to another. Many Ilongot people became Bible believing Christians and now (2015) there are 40 Ilongot churches located in many places in the Sierra Madre Mountain. The headhunting activities are no longer practiced. Those former headhunters became elders of their churches, and evangelists to their fellow Ilongots and to the lowlanders. They witnessed and told of the goodness of God in their lives. The people in the low land were all surprised that these former head hunters whom they feared are now preachers of the Bible.

In the year 2013, Florentino Santos, one of the two missionaries who pioneered the gospel in Ilongot died. He translated the old and new testament of the Ilongot language Bible. He also translated many gospel songs and much Christian literature for the church. Marvin Graves is still alive and still active in New Tribes Mission ministry. In 2011, I was invited to speak during their Ilongot believers' annual conference, and I met the elders of the churches who were formerly professional headhunters. I listened to their testimonies and they said: "Before I was not afraid to kill but I was afraid to die. But now I am with Christ, I am not afraid to die but I am afraid to kill." Indeed God is gracious. God, through myth, prepared the facilitation of the gospel to the Ilongot people. Praised be His name.

SUBANEN TRIBE MYTH ABOUT THE BIBLE

Zamboanga, Philippines

According to the Subanen belief, Bathala, the high God is the one who created all things in heaven and on earth, but after he finished his creation, he became indifferent and had no more concern and became unreachable to the people. But, before He left the world alone, he called a conference of all people groups. Visayan, Tagalog, Ilocano and other ethnic groups sent their representatives to this conference with Bathala. The Subanen tribe sent representatives to that conference and their representatives mingled

merrily with all other representatives without shyness or low self-image.

The conference with Bathala took a few days and at the end of the conference, Bathala handed to each representative a black covered book and instructed them to read it always because in this black book was written all the truth that would help them not to be ignorant about many things. Then Bathala told them to wait for the person who would come to their village and interpret for them the meanings of the contents of the black book.

At the end of the conference all representatives went back to their respective tribes. The Subanen representative went back to his tribe excitedly eager to report everything that happened at the conference with the Highest God (Bathala) but what most excited him was what Bathala had given them, the black book of wisdom that would help his people become intellectual. He brought the black book (the Word of Bathala) and tucked it under his armpit. On his way back to their tribe, he had a call of nature and needed to go to the toilet but no toilet was available so he needed to relieve himself in the bush. He put the black book in the middle of the two branches to keep it from falling to the ground while he relieved himself in the bushes. When he finished his toilet business, he went back to where he placed the black book, and to his discouragement the black book was not there anymore. It was gone! Then he heard a deer laughing. When he looked at it, he saw the black book was in the horns of the deer that looked like branches of the bush. The deer laughed to taunt the Subanen representative because the branches where he placed the black book of Bathala were the horns of the mature deer.

The deer run away with the black book in its horns, and the man could no longer find it. He went back to his village very discouraged. The leaders and the fellow Subanen blamed him for the loss of the black book. Since then, the Subanen people have had a very low image of themselves because they are ignorant and they do not have the source of wisdom, that black book from Bathala. Their only hope was the person who Bathala told them would come to interpret the black book.

In 1997 a missionary couple arrived and lived in their village to study their language and culture and promised to teach them the Bible when the couple were able to communicate with them in their heart language. The people were elated and encouraged to hear it and waited until the missionary taught them the Bible in the chronological way and they understood it. They found out that they were also part of the story of the black book from Bathala. The Subanen people believed the message and interpretation of the black book by the missionary. Churches have been planted and now the Subanen churches is bringing the good news to other villages through their local missionaries.

PALAWANO TRIBE “MYTH OF A WHITE MAN WITH THE BLACK BOOK”

Palawan Island, Philippines

Before the arrival of Missionaries to the Palawano Tribe, there was a myth that had been passed down throughout the tribe’s generations. This myth states that there will be a white man with a black book, who will come to their tribe. The tribe is advised, by the myth, to listen to that man because he will teach the truth from the black book. In 1954 the first missionary, Fred Sanstrom along with his wife, arrived and lived with the Palawano people in Tabon, Quezon, Palawan. The Palawano people were impressed by the way these missionaries showed them real love. The missionaries would share with others, their last supply of food. They would even give up their blankets even though they suffered in the cold weather. One day, as Sanstrom was reading from his Bible, that happened to have a black cover, the Palawano people saw him and remembered the myth about this black book. The elders of the tribe believed that this missionary, Sanstrom, would be the one from their traditional myth: of a white man with the black book.

It is crucial for pioneering missionaries to be careful of what they teach initially. Despite the fact that God has prepared the target people’s hearts to listen to His word, the urgency to quickly tell the Gospel can cause misunderstandings between them and the missionaries.

The missionary, despite his limited capability in speaking the Palawano language and his limited knowledge of the culture, started preaching the Gospel. Like any other evangelist, he told them directly about the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross. He then invited the Palawano people who wanted to receive the Lord Jesus to raise their hands and be baptized. All the people from that village and some other villages raised their hands and obeyed God through water baptism.

There were hundreds of men and women baptized by Sanstrom. The people obeyed and followed his instructions. They stopped chewing beetle nut, they stopped smoking, they started going to church religiously, etcetera. Sixty-five churches were established in that area during the era when Fred Sanstrom was the missionary.

After Sanstrom left, a new batch of missionaries arrived. They discovered that the so-called “believers” of the tribe had not understood the Gospel correctly, but instead, were just following what the “white man with the black book” instructed them to do. In

their misunderstanding, the Palawano elders told the children to avoid the river, downstream from where they were baptized, because it was where their sins washed away. When asked about their assurance of salvation, they answered with the facts that they had stopped smoking and chewing beetle nuts. They also responded that they faithfully went to church and gave few centavos to the offering box every week; thus they were assured of their salvation. Now, these sixty-five churches are weak spiritually. The new batches of missionaries are in the process of re-teaching the believers a right doctrine. It is hard to do so, because the first believers, from Sanstrom’s era, always refer to what they understood from the teaching of the “white man with the black book”.

The inaccuracy of the Palawano Tribe’s doctrine stems not from incorrect teaching by Fred Sanstrom, but from miscommunication and a lack of foundational teaching. The miscommunication resulted from Sanstrom’s minimal knowledge of the language and culture. There was also no foundational teaching presented, that was about Christ, from the Old Testament. The Palawano misunderstood Sanstrom’s teachings, and instead of receiving the Lord Jesus as their Lord and Savior, they received the “white man with the black book” and obeyed faithfully what he told them to do. It is crucial for pioneering missionaries to be careful of what they teach initially. Despite the fact that God has prepared the target people’s hearts to listen to His word, the urgency to quickly tell the Gospel can cause misunderstandings between them and the missionaries. Although the people are ready to listen, if they perceive an inaccurate doctrine about the Gospel and believe that version, their belief will still be in vain.

CONCLUSION

One of the many authenticated miracles is the changed life of people after they encountered the Gospel of the Lord Jesus. Wild Head hunters became tamed and their lives have been marked with love; low image Subanen people have now become bold in preaching the Gospel to many people. Their perspective of themselves has been changed and they see themselves the way the Lord Jesus sees them. Red Karen people who were restless in searching for the lost book of light are now finding peace in Christ and have stopped worshipping the spirits.

No powers in this world can change the heart of these people; not education, military operation, or any system of government. Only the power of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus that was brought by the faithful servants of God who endured hardship risking their lives in going to the heart of the extreme dangers, can do this. As they obeyed the guidance of the Holy Spirit they experienced the power of God working in the midst of darkness and they realized that God had been working in the tribal people way back even before they arrived; preparing the hearts of the people

through their myths to make it easier for them to hear the gospel.

PEOPLE INTERVIEWED/ SOURCES

Khun Na - Villager
Khun So - Red Karen Village official
Khun Miya - spirit doctor, Red Karen Tribe
Khun Phee - Villager
Khun Phrea -owner of elephants in Huaysuthaw, Maehongson, Thailand
Rev. Jessie Magallanes - Former missionary in Palawano Tribe
Selin Magallanes - Born Palawano tribe wife of Rev. Jessie Magallanes
Miss Clara Esteban - former missionary in Palawan
Sources: SIL translator
Renee Padrelanan - Pioneered Subanen Church planter missionary
Al Dungo - Subanen Tribe missionary
Florentino Santos - 1st Ilongot Missionary
Lucinda Santos, Lydia Santos, and Kulit Santos, (Daughters of Florentino Santos)
Ex - Mayor Jerry Pasigian, Ilongot Tribe
Roman Pasigian - village's Chieftain, Ilongot Tribe



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