
Dealing with Disaster: Critical Contextualization of Misfortune in an Animistic Setting

DEALING WITH DISASTER

Tribal peoples make sense of their world by formulating supernatural explanations for misfortunes that befall them. At times, their explanations are at odds with biblical theology. The author held "sickness workshops" in order to engage the host culture in critical contextualization of misfortune. This article reports on some of the salient findings from those workshops, including (1) the sociological function of tribal discussions about misfortune, (2) an emic¹ conceptualization of misfortune causation, and (3) ideas for engaging the national church on issues surrounding misfortune, such as local cosmology, dreams, retribution, and the breaking of taboos.

Introduction

Pita was digging a well at the base of the volcano on Tanna Island (Vanuatu), when a moderate sized eruption shook the ground. As one of the world's most active volcanoes, Mt. Yasur erupts every few minutes. However, this time, the seismic activity was substantial enough to collapse the well, suffocating Pita. Since it was a Sunday, most of Pita's family members were in church, unaware of the catastrophe, and by the time they found him it was too late to help. For days afterwards islanders discussed what caused his death. As a Westerner, the cause seemed obvious to me: he died because he dug a well in soft soil, and when it collapsed he could not get out. Interestingly, nobody else involved in the discussions shared this explanation. Answers were varied but took two main themes: (1) God caused the death because Pita worked on Sunday; or (2) Pita died because he switched from the Seventh Day Adventist Church to the Presbyterian. Both explanations shocked me. "Do you mean God killed him for working on the Sabbath, or for changing denominations?" I thought the accusing tone in my question would cause my Christian brothers and sisters to think again. Instead, they responded unhesitatingly, "That appears to be the case."

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This sort of soul-searching and finger-pointing in the wake of tragedy is not at all uncommon in traditional societies. Misfortune, even if it befalls one individual as in the case above, is seen as a social problem, rather than accidental. In West New Britain, social anthropologist Ann Chowning discovered similar explanations for tragedies like Pita's (Barker 1990). Traditional people see misfortune as divine retribution, testing, or the result of breaking taboos. Similar responses have also been reported in Nigeria (Dixey 1999), Niger (Rasmussen 1989), South America (Butt 1956), and among Indian immigrants in Great Britain (Spiro 2005).

Western missionaries quickly discover that patterns for dealing with misfortune are culturally specific; and these patterns affect not only *emic* understandings of life's misfortunes but also interpretations of the biblical narratives and what they teach about humanity, spirits, and God. The Western missionary may be tempted to vindicate God by teaching a meta-theology of a generally fallen world — or perhaps more pragmatically — the Great Western Doctrine of Accidents. But either attempt is likely to fail for two reasons. First, it has been long recognized that the notion of accidents does not fit with an animistic worldview (Rasmussen 1989:124). Halverson (1998) suggests that animists (perhaps 40 percent of the world's population) cannot understand or remedy misfortune without supplying a supernatural explanation. Second, there are numerous narratives in Scripture which show that misfortune can indeed arise indirectly or directly from God — i.e., intentionally and purposefully. In the above situation, I realized I would be working against myself to argue the case for accidents. Instead, I decided to work with my host culture to help them work out a contextualized biblical theology (and praxis) for dealing with misfortune by encouraging them to critically engage *kastom* (animistic practices and beliefs) in times of misfortune. To this end I began holding "sickness workshops" to help local churches understand, as broadly as possible, (1) the group-oriented process surrounding the discussion of misfortune, (2) the *emic* conceptualization of misfortune, and (3) how the church can have a Christian impact on that conceptualization.

The Collective Nature of Misfortune Discussions

Westerners see tragedy as highly personal, and seldom something to discuss in a group. Tribal peoples, however, see any personal tragedy as a collective problem that the community must address. These discussions help in determining misfortune causation and have ramifications for how other problems are solved, thus indirectly revealing the *emic* logical process. For instance, in time of sickness, tribal dialogue about the cause may be all that an outsider (missionary) observes. However, at a deeper level, this dialogue also serves as a platform for re-visiting old conflicts, and perhaps settling old scores.

For example, when an elderly woman on Tanna died of acute asthma, members of the taro clan argued that this was a punishment from their ancestors for secretly burying the taro totem decades before. They excavated the totem and implored the man now in charge of it to begin the magical rituals associated with the stone, lest another person incur the same sort of death. However, Christians from denominations that forbid "working" the taro stone argued that the woman's death was a judgment from God, or was due to her "bad insides."

Tragic events like these often serve as proof texts — or cases in point. They call up disagreements about land use and observations of taboos that have lain latent — at times for years. Therefore disagreements are seldom *solved*; they are revisited at every major tragedy.

The normal hostilities that emerge between people living together in close relationships are forced underground, further building up stress in the society. At some point this hidden anger bursts out when someone accuses someone else of being a witch and causing all the problems. (Hiebert, Shaw, Tienu 1999:151)

Tribal discussions of misfortune, then, are both a group catharsis and a platform for resolving conflict, at least for a time. Thus churches in Tanna see this process as too valuable to abandon. One deacon said, “We must have these discussions.” In the new (Christian) paradigm, though, churches are defining their role as comforters and burden-bearers rather than accusers and conflict-starters.

The Indigenous Logical Process

One of the most striking things we discovered from tribal-wide discussions of misfortune was the indigenous logical process. How does the host culture link cause and effect? Westerners, being more dichotomous and crisis-oriented (Lingenfelter and Mayers 1986), see misfortune as more or less following predictable laws. The flu virus is contagious and will cause the flu, resulting in certain predictable symptoms. Bacteria in old meat will cause severe stomach problems. Too much rain will cause a mudslide.

Tribal societies often employ a logic that is less obvious to Westerners. I have heard Tannese link broken bones to anger and miscarriage to infidelity. They do not conceptualize illness as a biological malady affecting an individual. Instead, it’s a sub-category of a much larger category of *nahasien* “badness,” which usually befalls the group. Therefore, tuberculosis, paralysis, and insanity fall into the same category as mudslides, anger, and hurricanes. These are all “badnesses” that affect society at large. This may seem odd to Westerners, who do not typically see any connection between moral failures and sickness or disaster; rather, we link moral failures like pride and anger to personality, and we link sickness with germs and genes. We think of certain people as “hot-tempered” and others as “peacemakers,” whereas, in Tanna, anger and disunity are conceptualized more as external “badnesses” much like the flu, a headache, or a mudslide, and not as permanent features of a person’s personality.

Additionally, Westerners expect the causes of misfortune to be consistent. AIDS can only be caused by contracting the AIDS virus; earthquakes can only be explained by the movement of the tectonic plates. Tribal peoples, on the other hand determine the causation of misfortune on a case-by-case basis. For instance, Tannese say stomach aches can be caused by eating food prepared by a woman who is menstruating. That however does not mean that stomach aches are always caused from menstruation. Instead, tribal peoples look holistically at each situation. What else was going on when the stomach ache occurred? Maybe it was caused by spirits or by black magic. Maybe it is a punishment for some infraction.

Because of the people’s holistic view toward misfortune causation, it quickly became clear that our “sickness workshops” were not really about illness, but about

a more generalized “badness.” If we were going to cover such an exhaustive concept we needed to discover what islanders considered to be the various progenitors of “badness.”

Emic Categories of Misfortune

We performed componential analysis at our “sickness workshops,” to determine plausible causes of misfortune from an *emic* viewpoint. We discovered six major “sources of badness”: (1) “bad insides,” (2) breaking taboos, (3) spirits, (4) natural causes, (5) intentional, and (6) testing from God. These six comprise the substance of tribal discussions about any misfortune. The following section expands on each of these.

Caused by Bad Insides

The most common source of “badness” in Tanna is “bad insides.” One’s insides become bad due to anger, fighting, lust, greed, or other sins of the heart. Such private feelings defy the moral law, and inevitably result in sickness or disaster. As D’Souza put it, pre-modern cultures believe that moral failures must have consequences in the natural world (2007:256–257).

Specifically, on Tanna, “bad insides” must affect the natural world because of a fundamental belief that a person’s will is efficacious. If someone wills his garden to grow a good crop, it must come about. Conversely, if someone performs a magical ritual but his “insides are bad,” the badness in his heart will effect some external malady such as illness, mudslides, or drought.

The concept that Melanesian anthropologists refer to as *mana* may approximate this notion of good or bad “insides.” A century ago, when Codrington first described *mana*, he saw it as magical power which rested in taboo stones or taboo men (1891:119). To this early anthropologist, *mana* was a noun: it was a *thing* that would come to rest on certain objects or people, making them sacred. Recent anthropologists Keesing (1984) and Tomlinson (2006) have suggested that *mana* is best translated as a verb: “to be efficacious, or to make effective.” I have come to the conclusion, especially after this study of disaster causation, that what makes something efficacious or powerful on Tanna is not an impersonal power but one’s “insides.” When someone has good insides, his wishes (whether for evil or good) will be efficacious; when one lacks *will* power (what I suggest corresponds to *mana*), his wishes will not come about.

The connection between the will and the natural world becomes obvious when people talk about illness. When someone is sick islanders say, “He has no power,” or “his body is slack.” That is, his body can’t do anything useful or efficacious. Rather than dealing with symptoms, as we would do in the West, Tannese encourage the patient to “Tell us what your ‘inside’ is . . . Out with it. What is spoiling your thinking?”

When a healthy Tannese man in his fifties collapsed and died suddenly during a ceremonial dance, villagers conjectured that “his heart broke” because he had attended a happy event with “bad insides.” Bad insides and happiness simply cannot coexist. Perhaps he had bad insides because of a family feud, or because of sin he was harboring in his heart. “Bad insides” can be considered the *de facto* explanation for sickness and tragedy on Tanna.

Caused by Breaking Taboos

Many sicknesses are considered to be the result of breaking taboos; however, it is inaccurate to suppose that Tannese conceptualize misfortune as a punishment given by a supernatural being. Instead, misfortune is seen simply as the natural result of breaking these taboos. From our "sickness workshops" we discovered three subcategories of taboo breaking: location taboos, menstrual taboos, and garden taboos.

There are numerous taboo places, including the place of the gecko, the place of the lizard, the locales of various winds and rain, as well as the domains of certain named deities. One may enter these taboo places intentionally to perform sympathetic magic (e.g., to make rain or wind), provided that his "insides are good." If he attempts to perform magic with "bad insides," the result will be severe headaches, asthma, or death. Additionally, people who are unfamiliar with the taboo places may inadvertently pass through them, as long as their insides are good. Otherwise, they will meet a similar ill fate.

Breaking taboos related to menstruation causes different (less serious) illnesses. For example, if a man eats food prepared by a woman who is menstruating, he may experience diarrhea, stomach ache, weight loss, and fatigue. If a menstruating woman touches a man's hair he will lose his hair. Tannese also consider intercourse with a pregnant woman taboo because it may cause a miscarriage.

In contrast to location and menstruation taboos, garden taboos are linked to retributive deities. A garden deity will cause body extremities or eyes to become swollen (Westerners would say that they are infected) for trespassing on someone's garden. Other taboos are related to the clan's totemic crop which is hidden in the garden. If the ritual is performed incorrectly, if the magician has not bathed ritually, fasted, or has engaged in intercourse, or if he has "bad insides," ancestral spirits will cause serious illness, death, or widespread calamity, and the magic will not work.

Caused by Spirits

In the previous category, sicknesses were caused by spirits for breaking garden taboos. Other sicknesses are caused by evil spirits simply out of maliciousness. Unprovoked spirits cause seizures, tumors, and birth defects. When a village girl was born with a severely deformed head and lived for only a number of days, some suspected the mother of trying to cause a miscarriage; others thought an evil spirit caused the birth defect.

Evil spirits sometimes take on the physical form of birds or lizards that bring illness with them, and they cause mischief while people are dreaming. Other evil spirits drink the blood of their victims, who then awake feeling the fatigue resulting from "no blood." We are often at a loss for what medicine to give people who come to our door asking for "medicine belong blood" when they "have no blood." The shamans, thoroughly familiar with this emic understanding of sickness taxonomy, have special cures that will assure the victim that his blood has returned.

Natural or Mechanistic Cause]

Many Tannese recognize that if they eat rotten food they may get a stomach ache or diarrhea. They also recognize the part that nature plays in trauma. If a child throws a rock down from a cliff onto somebody below, the stone can cause severe trauma. One man chopped off a tree limb which landed on his granddaughter, crushing her

skull. The mechanical cause of this trauma was recognized, but was not considered the exclusive cause. (Family discord was also cited). Other mechanistic causes of sickness involve apparently logical associations: being in the rain will cause a runny nose, and playing in the sun will cause fever. At times, the nexus is not at all obvious: eating cold foods at night can cause runny nose and fever; being out in a breeze can cause conjunctivitis.

However, many Tannese do recognize the efficacy of Western medicines, though often as a cure of last resort. One man told me, "I had a fever and vomiting for months, and we killed numerous chickens and pigs to get rid of the sickness, but to no avail. When I went to the hospital, they gave me medicine for malaria, and I got better."

Caused Intentionally

While much misfortune is a result of breaking moral laws or taboos (or from having bad insides), some misfortunes are believed to be caused intentionally. Most Tannese have knowledge of poison or sorcery. The vernacular terms for poison and sorcery are interrelated and "fuzzy," suggesting that poisoning is more magical, and less physiological. Interestingly, we have seen four victims of paralysis (all of whom recovered within a year), and the cause in each case was said to be poison/sorcery.

Self-inflicted misfortune usually involves attempts to induce abortion or sterility. It is widely believed that women can cause abortion by drinking hot water, or by secretly masticating roots of the casuarina tree.

Testing from God

Many Tannese Christians emphatically believe that a person who is free from sin and enemies should suffer no misfortune — except perhaps as testing from God. The church planter in the village where we work told me proudly, "Since we started the church, the village has been free from sickness." This was a remarkable claim, considering that we had operated a regular ambulance service for two years from that village to the hospital. But as long as they are obeying church rules and village taboos, Tannese Christians can see no other explanation except that God is testing their faith, as God tested the faith of Abraham and Job.

Summary of Sickness Categories

At this point, it is clear that the *emic* categorization of illness looks significantly different from a Western taxonomy. Tannese consider sicknesses' causation to be unrelated to the body's response to the physical environment (i.e., they don't connect illness with contagions or congenital defects). *Emic* categories of illness causation are summarized below:

I. Caused by bad insides

- A. Anger, hatred, bitterness cause stroke, heart attack or, when mixed with taboo places or stones, natural disasters, asthma, or death
- B. Worry causes grey hair, heart attack, stroke, death
- C. Sins cause trauma to self and others, birth defects

- II. Caused by breaking taboos
- A. Breaking location taboos can cause erratic behavior, asthma, and death by bloody nose. Some of the taboo "areas" are called:
 1. Rain
 2. Lust
 3. Wind
 4. Violence
 5. Gecko
 6. Lizard
 - B. Breaking menstrual and pregnancy taboos can cause baldness, stomach ache, weight loss and fatigue, diarrhea, and miscarriage.
 - C. Breaking garden taboos can cause pinkeye, blindness, swollen legs
- III. Caused by spirits
- A. For no apparent reason
 1. Birth defects
 2. Seizures
 3. Tumors
 - B. In dreams
 1. Demons cause marital infidelity
 2. Demons drink blood, causing fatigue
- IV. Caused by nature
- A. Malaria from mosquitoes
 - B. Stomach ache or diarrhea from rotten food
 - C. Toothache from eating fish
 - D. Fever from being in the sun
 - E. Runny nose from being in the rain
 - F. Runny nose/fever from eating cold foods at night
 - G. Conjunctivitis from being in the wind
- V. Caused intentionally
- A. Sorcery causes paralysis, trauma, natural disasters, discord in the family
 - B. Poisoning/sorcery causes paralysis or infection
 - C. Miscarriage by hot water or by chewing certain leaves
- VI. Testing from God

Missiological Applications

Working out an *emic* taxonomy of misfortune causation helps cross-cultural workers know where to begin engaging the animistic worldview. If we start by insisting on the sovereignty of God over evil spirits, and on the reality of accidents and the fallen nature of the world, we may not make a significant impact on indigenous understandings of misfortune. We would merely be addressing issues important to us as Western Christians, but irrelevant to the communities we serve.

However, by discovering *emic* conceptualizations of sickness and their underlying values, we get a better idea of what needs our dialogic process must address, namely: taboos, dreams, tribal discussions, and a theology of retribution. These concepts may not seem to be significant to Westerners when discussing misfortune and the Bible, but they are central in tribal conceptualizations of cause and effect.

Mechanistic Explanations Can Be a Starting Point

This paper shows that there is a distinct gap between the Western and traditional views of disaster. Fortunately, though, the chasm is not so great that it cannot be bridged. Since traditional folk do recognize mechanistic causes of misfortune, this can serve as a starting point. Germ theory is accepted by animists to an extent. Those suffering from “short wind” will take albuterol tablets; and, when it is serious, they will use inhalers. Also, patients will seek medical help for malaria and tuberculosis. Women are beginning to go to the hospital to give birth, in anticipation of possible complications.

Of course, if the church is to engage the culture and the Bible, it needs to address more than mechanistic causes for sickness. It must also deal with spiritual causes, since there is very little mention of “accidents” in the Bible or in tribal communities.

Addressing Local Cosmology and Shamanism

Tannese seem uncomfortable when I mention territorial spirits by name in the church setting. If their faith is to be integrated, it should not be awkward or embarrassing to talk about the local cosmology in church — in fact, that is the proper place for Christians to discuss it. How does faith in Jesus transform the way that Christians avert or remedy misfortune?

At our sickness workshops, believers have spoken with confidence that Jesus is more powerful than local spirits (John 3:31; Eph. 1:19–22; Phil. 2:9–10). Therefore they understand that they should not employ shamanistic techniques for exorcism, such as “spitting out devils.” On the other hand some traditional herbal medicines may be efficacious, though this is difficult to determine, since very little research has been done to determine the medicinal effects of herbal medicines in Vanuatu (Bourdy 1992; Grace 2001).

Addressing Taboos

The breaking of taboos is another spiritual cause for sickness that the church must address. The observation of taboos and totems is a central value for the Tannese. The local church needs to discuss whether totemic foods are still off limits, or whether all foods are “clean” (Rom. 14:14–21). When people become Christians, do they still need to observe animistic taboos? What does it mean for a woman to be “unclean?” (Leviticus 12 and 15; Mark 5:21–30). What about taboo places? What makes them taboo/holy (Gen. 32:30; Ex. 3:5; 1 Kings 6)? Was it the presence of God? Can there be holy places today? Has the power of the cross nullified the power of all demonic taboo places?

The issue may not be easily settled, but it is important for the indigenous church to allow her new faith in the Bible to inform and challenge traditional views on all levels, lest she develop a “split level Christianity” (Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou 1999:15ff). This other-worldly Christianity would potentially focus on issues like soteriology to the neglect of daily concerns such as illness, menstruation taboos, cleanliness, and gardening.

Addressing Dreams

In the traditional mind, dreams are a dangerous liminal period because during sleep, the body is neither alive nor dead. This is the time when spirits interact with

people, causing sickness. I was confused when an elderly widower fell ill with an STD, but this did not cause cognitive dissonance for the Tannese. They explained that he contracted an illness by committing sexual sins in his dreams. The notion that people are responsible for sins committed in dreams needs to be addressed, offering hope that God is our protection from the demonic, even in sleep (Psalm 91:5). *Kastom* requires that the victim of bad dreams strangle a chicken and let its blood run over kava; then the dreams will cease. However, Christians at our workshops generally consider this unacceptable, citing that “the blood of Jesus is enough.”

Interestingly, some Christians have suggested that God may even use dreams to reveal the source of sickness, or possible remedies. While this is certainly possible, the church must be mindful that dreaming about causes and cures for illness is more akin to *kastom* clairvoyance than to the apostles’ methods for healing in the New Testament.

Addressing Anger

Since “bad insides,” and especially anger, are deemed to be the root of many types of sickness, the church needs to give people tools for dealing with anger. Tannese believe a life free of anger, jealousy, and bitterness will also lead to a life without sickness or other types of misfortune. However, the Bible does not guarantee that righteous living will bring a life free of misfortune; in fact, it practically guarantees that the righteous will face trouble (Acts 14:22; 1 Thess. 3:3). Tribal peoples have an earnest desire to live with *shalom*, and the church has an excellent opportunity to reach out with tools for Christian living that can help people live out *shalom* in their relationships.

Group Discussions about Misfortune Must Be Contextualized

Tannese Church members inevitably experience cognitive dissonance when somebody is sick — especially when their pastor or missionary becomes ill. Did he commit a sin or break a taboo? Is he upset with the church, and are his “bad insides” making him sick? Did somebody perform sorcery on him? I once visited a village for several days and began vomiting. While I suffered inside the hut, the church sat outside considering all the possible scenarios. Ultimately, they apologized to me profusely, explaining that it was not sorcery, and it certainly was not a sin of mine, therefore it must be testing from God. On another occasion, I witnessed the local pastor strongly rebuking the congregation for making him sick. He threatened them that if they continued their sorcery, he would go pastor a church somewhere else. The point is, churches from animistic backgrounds inevitably feel a need to talk about misfortune, and especially misfortune causation.

Since sickness causation is group-oriented, the idea of workshops dealing with it is a way for the church to work out such misfortune in a group-setting. There is a biblical basis for having sickness be the concern of the group at large. Paul encourages us to “carry each other’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2).² If the church can use group discussions about misfortune as a way to extend compassion rather than condemnation (Eph. 4:32), and to encourage one another in love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24), these tribal discussions will meet this need, and will be evidence of contextualized Christianity.

Theology of Retribution Must Be Contextualized

The theology of retribution which is so fundamental to traditional worldviews often bothers Western missionaries because, while divine retribution is a biblical principle (Deut. 7:9–10), a full-fledged theology of retribution can be myopic, failing to recognize the beneficence and grace of God. True, at times, misfortune can be traced to sinful thoughts and actions. A theology of retribution has biblical support, but the church needs to contextualize this theology.

It became evident at the sickness workshops on Tanna that the church does not want to relinquish themes of retribution when dealing with misfortune; they see retribution as a significant motivator for behavior modification. They find that threats of future misfortune are effective in encouraging repentance and church attendance. Rather than entirely discounting this approach, I have encouraged the churches to consider the following five points.

1. God and Following the Rules

In light of animism's emphasis on keeping the rules to ensure prosperity, the tribal church must consider the nature of God's rules. Is God himself subject to those rules (are they more important than God)? If not, then God is more important than the rules; so what is their purpose? The "law" was meant for us to know God's holiness, our need for grace, and to lead us into a relationship with God (Gal. 3:19–24). Unfortunately, many relationships in animistic cultures are based on reciprocity, which can cause confusion when we speak of a relationship with God. To "seek first the kingdom of God" is more about pursuing a relationship with him than following the rules, lest God "give back" our bad behavior (Halverson 1998).

Additionally, in contrast to *kastom's* promise that following the rules will result in prosperity, churches need to consider whether one can really avoid catastrophe at all (2 Cor. 5:6, 12:1–7; Phil. 1:1–23). At our workshops, one elder who understood this principle suggested that misfortune *cannot* be avoided. "The banyan tree sheds its leaves several times a year. In the same way, we humans must get sick from time to time."

2. Holy Lives and Following Taboos

The tribal church needs to address the relationship between God and *kastom* taboos. Are territorial spirits also engaged in regulation of cosmic rules, and do they punish those who break them? Does that mean that spirits of traditional religion are somehow in league with God — both enforcing cosmic rules? Why would these spirits be in league with God? Or, are these local spirits under God's sovereignty? Is it possible to please both local spirits and God by following *kastom* taboos, or are God's rules for holiness at odds with *kastom* taboos? The "divided house" parable (Matt. 12:25–29) should be enlightening in this case, but we have had little success at communicating the logic of that parable in Vanuatu.

3. The Nature of Chastisement

There is biblical support for the argument that God disciplines believers and blesses those who obey him with health, peace, and food (Heb. 12:10). Paul advised the church in Corinth that they were sick because they were participating in

the Lord's Supper while maintaining impure relationships with others (1 Cor. 11:29–30). However, churches in animistic settings can only grasp the nature and purpose of chastisement after it has been established that God is above the rules, and that he ordained the rules as a pathway for us to have a relationship with him. When the church sees God as above the rules — sees that the rules serve a purpose — then she can begin considering the extent to which the Law remains in effect, and the situations in which God chastises his children today.

4. *When There Is No Misfortune*

It is possible that, when a tribal church is enjoying a time of prosperity, she may use this as an opportunity to insist that her denomination is the best, to prove a certain doctrinal point or push an agenda, or as proof of righteous living. “Theology of retribution . . . argues that prosperity is a blessing from God and a sign that one has lived a good and moral life . . . [and] has tended to be propagated by those who benefit from systemic privilege” (Haddad 2008:81). Some Tannese have argued, “We are enjoying prosperity because we have done everything according to holiness.”

While there is biblical support for such a claim (Psalm 24), it does not mean that whenever things are going well, the community is free of sin. The church needs to ask, “Are prosperity, peace, and health free gifts from a merciful God, or are they our just reward for following God's rules?” Even when the church seems to be free from suffering, she should continue to ask God to show where she has sinned (Psalm 139:23); she should not assume that because she is free from misfortune she is free from sin. The wicked, in fact, prosper too (Ps. 37:7, 73:3). In the NT, there are examples of churches prospering in spite of their sin (Corinth), and there were churches and individuals that were apparently pure but suffering or expecting suffering to come (Philippi, Smyrna).

5. *When Misfortune Cannot Be Explained*

If traditional religion teaches that others can cause our suffering through witchcraft, sorcery, “bad insides,” or poisoning, how do we avoid blaming other people and their actions for the bad things that happen to us? What about people who suffer and yet have not committed a “punishable” sin like Epaphroditus in Philippians? Many godly people in the Bible experience suffering — sometimes senseless suffering. Everyone experiences pain, sometimes as a result of chastisement — it is a means for bringing us back to God. At other times, though, the reasons are elusive; we need the church as a support to bring us through those times. One Tannese woman concluded, “Whatever the cause of illness, the point is, we always need to be looking inward, and asking if we are living a right life before God.”

Conclusion

When I heard of Pita's death, I instinctively wanted to persuade the local believers to see accident causation the way I do. In the end, not only was I unable to persuade them, but they persuaded me to reexamine misfortune in the Bible. This also led me to look deeper at the non-theological issues related to misfortune. I began discovering social functions that are meant to be met through tribal discussions about disasters and sickness. I discovered that Tannese prefer to determine misfortune causation on a case by case basis, and to see the situation holistically. A componential analysis of

sickness terms revealed six *emic* categories concerning misfortune which opened up opportunities for engaging the local church in discussions about misfortune that I had not previously seen.

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. (James 5:13–16)

Notes

1. *Emic* and *etic* are terms coined by Kenneth Pike, taken from the linguistic discipline of phonology. A *phonemic* study describes speech sounds from the “insider” point of view, while a *phonetic* study describes sounds from an “outsider” point of view. Pike applied the *emic* and *etic* distinction to intercultural studies: *emic* refers to the way insiders understand their culture, while *etic* refers to the way expatriates do ethnographic description. Both viewpoints are valuable for the understanding of culture.

2. Citations come from the New International Version of the Bible.

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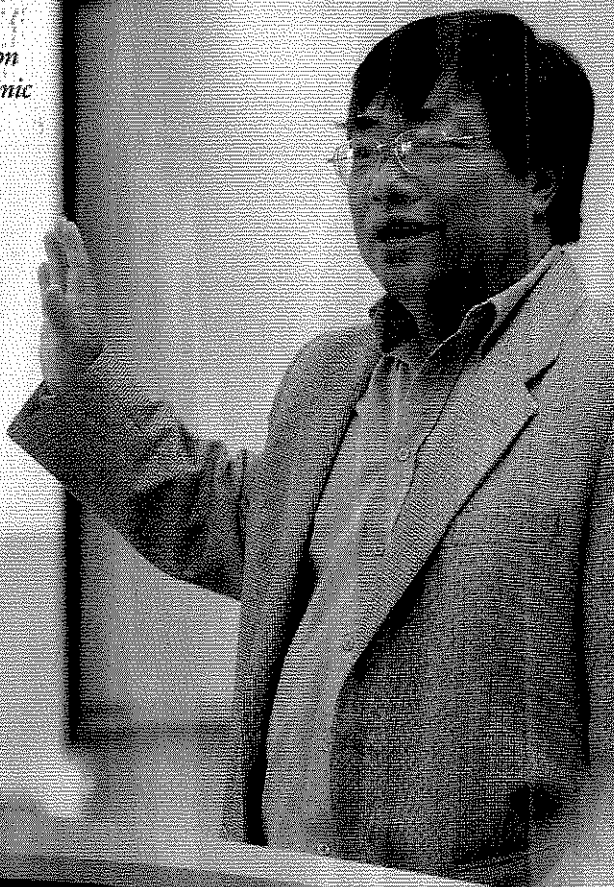
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