

THE CASE OF THE EXCLUDED MIDDLE

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Far up the Suriname River in the Amazon rain forest, a small group of Saramaccan Christians gathered for their usual Sunday service. But no sooner were they in the church than a young woman among them ordered them all outside while she took a broom and swept the church. She announced that the church needed "cleaning up" and began to point out the people who were responsible for the problems in the congregation. She even named their sins. Most of the people accepted her as a spokesman for God and an answer to their prayers. Later she began to take control of the church service in a rather disorderly way and to renew an old feud between the two families living in the village. In the confusion and disagreements that followed, the church lost its pastor and endured many misfortunes, including a village fight that brought police from the capital city. The problems continue and the church leaders still have not come to an agreement as to whether the woman was under the influence of the Spirit, a spirit, or "the flesh."

Why are they not able to "discern the spirits"? Why were they so vulnerable at this point? According to the excluded middle theory, most if not all non-Western cultures include a middle zone in their perception of the universe that Western cultures have eliminated. Consequently, when Western Christianity is accepted by non-western ethnic groups there are frequently problems and confusion as the missionaries and

converts attempt to understand and adapt to the views of each other. The Saramaccan Bushnegros of Suriname are from a non-Western culture. Do they have this middle zone in their perception of the universe? In the last 20 yrs., at least two congregations of a Pentecostal denomination have been established among the Saramaccans. If the traditional Saramaccan worldview includes a middle zone, to what extent have these churches provided replacements for the beliefs and activities that filled the "middle zone" in the lives of the Saramaccans before they were converted to Christianity? Is there a vacuum that leaves the congregations vulnerable to biblically unacceptable influences? This paper is a consideration of the questions of 1) the existence or non-existence of the middle zone in the traditional views of the Saramaccans, and 2) the replacement or lack of replacement of the middle zone beliefs and activities by the Pentecostal church. The paper concludes with comments and suggestions concerning the situation in the churches in their present status.

THE THEORY

Dr. Paul Hiebert proposes a two dimensional, three level grid for analyzing religious systems.² The vertical dimension of this grid makes the distinction between those systems which tend to view the universe as organic versus those systems which tend to view the universe as mechanical. Organic systems view the universe as filled with living beings such as cosmic gods, ancestors, demons etc. Mechanical systems view the universe as filled with impersonal forces such as fate, mana, or interaction

of objects based on natural forces. The boundary between these two extremes is not sharp. The views of most cultures will fit somewhere on the sliding scale between the organic-mechanical poles.

The horizontal dimension of the grid consists of three levels or zones. The highest is the zone of High Religion. It is the zone for those beings which are unseen and of another world. That is, they are not visible to humans and they exist in some other world than the one we live in and see around us. These are such things as cosmic gods, angels, and demons for those who view the universe as filled with living beings. It is the realm of such forces as Kismet, fate, Brahman and Karma for those who view the universe as filled with impersonal forces. The lowest zone of this horizontal dimension is the visible world around us. It is the realm of Folk Social and Natural Sciences. It is the interaction of living beings such as humans and possibly animals, and plants and interaction of natural objects based on natural forces. These two zones, that of High Religion and that of Folk Science, seem to be universal, existing even in the explanation systems of Western cultures. It is the middle zone that seems to be missing in Western worldviews. This is the zone of Folk and Low Religion, Magic, and Astrology. It is the realm of unseen beings and forces in the world around us. For those who view the universe as filled with living beings, this is the realm of local gods and goddesses, ancestors and ghosts, spirits, fairies, and gnomes. For those who view the universe as filled with impersonal forces, it is the realm of such things as

mana, astrological forces, and magical rites.

The Middle Zone

According to Dr. Hiebert, those beliefs which are associated with a mechanistic view of the world are: mana, omens, taboo, ordeal, magic, evil eye, evil mouth, evil touch etc. Those beliefs which are associated with an organic view of the world are: animated objects, metamorphosis or metempsychosis, lycanthropy, totemism, ancestor veneration, fetishes, possession, animism, incarnations, gods and goddesses, High God. The practices of divination and healing are also associated with these views. The questions and problems of daily life such as:

- well being: disease, famine etc.
- uncertain future
- guidance in decisions
- dealing with the spirit world

are dealt with in the beliefs and practices of this middle zone (Hiebert 82). Here people find the answers to the problems they face in day to day living. Churches established among peoples who traditionally hold these middle zone beliefs and practices must provide corresponding beliefs and practices in the church to fill the needs of their members or they will turn back to the old practices for solutions to their daily problems.

TRADITIONAL SARAMACCAN BELIEFS

Observations of outsiders

The first question we are considering is the existence or non-existence of the middle zone beliefs in the traditional beliefs of the Saramaccans. Richard and Sally Price are anthropologists who have studied and written about the

Saramaccans for many years. In their discussion of Saramaccan social practices they make many statements about the supernaturals with which the Saramaccans are involved on a day to day basis.

For example, in a discussion of spirit possession, Sally Price mentions some of the many supernaturals in the Saramaccan world:³

"In Saramaka there are many different kinds of possession spirits- dead people; forest spirits; water gods; several types of gods that live in the bodies of snakes, caymans, jaguars, and other animals and a number of others as well." (Price 84:25, 26)

These supernaturals are not beings that live far away in another world, but are very much involved in the everyday lives of the Saramaccans. Concerning the ancestors, Richard Price says:⁴

"And even after death, residents continue to serve the living villagers in their capacity as ancestors, ready to intercede in their behalf with angered supernaturals." (Price 75:79)

Sometimes the involvement is negative. Those that have been wronged while alive may remain the eternal persecutors of the living:

"Kúnus are the avenging spirits of people or gods who were wronged during their lifetime, and who pledge themselves to tormenting eternally the matrilineal descendants and the close matrilineal kinsmen of the offender." (Price 75:46)

The extensive involvement of the Saramaccans with supernaturals is nowhere better seen than in their involvement with the kúnus. Their role in the social structure alone is so

important that R. Price considers the unity of the family to depend on the belief in kunus.

"The belief in kunu provides the charter for the unity of each bée [extended family];"
(Price 75:46)

All members of an extended family are potential victims of the family kunus. Therefore they remain united in their efforts to appease them.

In addition to the necessity of keeping the family kunus appeased, the Saramaccans must also deal with each other. The combination of their beliefs about each other and their beliefs about the supernatural causes them to spend a good deal of their time and money in efforts to control and manipulate the "seen" and "unseen" world around them.

"An aura of danger and fear is added to this somewhat cynical view of social relations by the belief in a variety of easily accessible supernatural weapons. Saramakas distinguish many types of witchcraft-sorcery, some of which are so simple technically that a child can use them, and many of which are actually practiced. Divination reveals that such forms of aggression lie behind many cases of illness or misfortune, and people spend considerable time and money trying to protect themselves against them as well as to purify themselves when they have become victims. The accessibility of malevolent supernatural techniques combines to make the social world seem dangerous and hostile as well as competitive to Saramakas." (Price 75:33)

In all of this, the channel of communication between them and the supernatural is divination, one of the practices of the middle zone belief systems. It has an extremely important role in the lives of the Saramaccans.

"Divination plays a dominant role in every aspect of Saramaka social life. Seances provide the stage upon which social conflicts

are aired and resolved and it is by divination that moral law is created and administered. The Saramaka concern with causality leads them to define with remarkable breadth the domain of events which require special investigation. They consult divination for everything from toothaches, nightmares, bee bites or the loss of a common spindle to bad weather, the sinking of a canoe, and of course all serious illness and deaths." (Price 75:38)

So in answer to the question, "Do the Saramaccans have this middle zone in their perception of the universe?," according to these general comments by R. & S. Price, the world of the Saramaccans is filled with supernatural beings with which they have intense involvement, and divination is a crucial part of that involvement.

Case Studies

Next let's consider how these beliefs actually work out in some specific cases. Here are seven cases based on everyday occurrences in the lives of the Saramaccans on the Upper Suriname River.⁵

CASE 1

Long before daylight a mother is trying to comfort a sick child. As soon as it is light she goes to the woods and gathers certain leaves with known medicinal properties for treating fevers. She brings them home, cooks them in water, and washes the child with the solution.

But the child does not recover, so she goes to her uncle, her mother's brother (tio) and tells him that her child has a fever and since the natural medicines are not helping, she would like for them to divine to determinate the reason for the

sickness. So several family members get together with a diviner and investigate first the possibility of problems with the child's supernatural genitor (neseki). Perhaps he is angry because they have not kept the taboos which the child inherited from him. But that does not prove to be the case, so they go on to investigate the various avenging spirits (kunus) of the family. As the diviner holds the divining apparatus suspended from his hand, they address the family kunus and ask if they have been offended. The apparatus hangs still as they call one after the other until finally it swings slightly. They double check by calling others and finally go back to the apparently offended kunu. The apparatus swings again and they are satisfied that they have found the spirit responsible for the child's illness. Next they try to determine the exact cause of the offense by naming possibilities until the apparatus swings again. After that they go to the medium of the spirit and pay the required fine. They will also pray to the spirit at a designated place, pleading with the him to spare the child and pour out water as an offering. Finally the assistant to the medium makes a charm with medicinal powers to protect the child.

CASE 2

A woman is accused of having an affair with another man. Rumors have spread until the husband's uncle (tio) has been informed that the woman is indeed being unfaithful. The relatives sit down with the husband and gently inform him of the situation. They advise him not to do anything drastic to himself or the adulterous couple. He takes their advise and simply goes

to the woman and tells her to leave, to return to her family. The woman goes, but she denies the accusation. There is talk of her undergoing an ordeal to prove her innocence. Meanwhile special friends and people she is likely to trust with the truth are sent to talk to her. But in the end, this strategy proves ineffective also and she undergoes the ordeal. It is held in the village of a neutral specialist who conducts the ritual. He has certain paraphernalia which he knows how to manipulate in order to make the ordeal effective. When he has made the necessary preparations, the ritual is performed in the open with the villagers crowded around to see the outcome. The woman kneels while the specialist in one quick motion attempts to puncture her tongue with the spine of a feather. If she is innocent, the feather will not penetrate, but.. it does. The woman is guilty. And the crowd roars with derisive laughter.

CASE 3

A young man returns from a three year trip to the coast where he has worked and saved his money until he was able to buy supplies that may last as long as two years. As he settles into Saramaccan life again, he distributes the goods among his wives, relatives and friends. But not everyone receives them with gratitude. An older man, his father's brother, is jealous of the young man's success and chooses to believe that the gifts are given with scorn to the less successful. He determines in his heart to end the success of his nephew. He takes the rum that was given as a gift and performs certain rituals of black magic with it and the spell is cast. Weeks and months pass and things

do not seem to be going well for the young man. The supplies he brought back from the coast are disappearing and he has been unable to obtain any of the few jobs available to men in the interior. Finally he has to return to the coast to seek employment. But even there he does not seem to be able to acquire and hold a good job. His suspicions of the influence of black magic (wisi) increase. He decides to consult a diviner (lukuma) in the city. The diviner consults his divining apparatus and asks the young man if he knows a certain person, even giving the name. The man does know the person in question. The diviner informs him that that person has cast a spell on him. He next asks what he would like done to his enemy, would he like him killed, harmed otherwise, or would he just have measures taken to break the spell of the black magic. He decides he only wants the spell broken. So the diviner gives him instructions for making a solution of leaves and creek water to be mixed in a certain type container. He is to wash with the solution and the spell will be broken.

CASE 4

A group of men are cutting trees for a new field. One of the trees falls pinning a man to the ground. The others quickly remove the tree, but the man's leg is broken. Injuries of this type are not trusted to the white man's medicine. The man is taken to a specialist among the Saramaccans. He agrees to treat him and confines him to a house near his own where he can take care of him for several weeks. The specialist has been trained by his uncle who was a specialist before him. He is skilled in

(kunu) of the family is responsible. Then the family goes to the medium of the responsible kunu and pays the required payment of cloths and rum. They pray to him and pour out offerings of rum at a designated place asking him to spare the patient. Finally the assistant to the medium makes a solution for the patient and family to use in ritual washings.

But this time, the patient still does not recover. The family goes back to the medium of the kunu to determine the cause. This time the kunu tells them that he is not the cause, a different kunu is responsible. This second kunu is the most important of the kunus involved with this family (di mama kunu). So they go to the medium of this second kunu and again make the required payment. They pray and pour out rum at the ancestor shrine. And again a solution is made for them to use for ritual ablutions. If the patient does not recover this time, there is nothing further that they can do and they will try to take care of the patient at home or they will have him committed to a mental hospital in the capital city.

CASE 6

It is time for the rainy season. People have planted or are about to plant their rice. But there is no rain. The days pass and the situation becomes serious. If the crops aren't started soon, the harvest will be delayed, if indeed there is a harvest. In a few weeks the food shortage will bring them considerable hardship. The problem is universal, so the captains from the various villages come together in the village of the paramount chief, the Granman. Then the Granman, some of the captains and

certain specialists make a trip to the shrine of the spirit that controls the rain. There they perform certain rituals, make offerings and pray to the spirit. Back in his village the Granman orders everyone to return to their villages from their planting grounds. Together they must perform certain rituals, observe certain taboos, and pray to the ancestors for rain.

CASE 7

A man's wife is sick and he has exhausted his resources of natural and supernatural channels and the woman is not recovering. He goes to consult an oracle. The oracle belongs to a family in the next village. Their ancestor bought it years ago from the another tribe. The man goes to the person in charge of the oracle, the priest (gadu basi) and tells him the situation. The priest goes into the god house and consults with the oracle. When it consents to help the man, two assistants put the board on which the oracle is bound on their heads between them. In that position it directs them to the leaves they must use to make medicine and tells them certain rituals they must perform for the woman.

Analysis of case studies

In these seven cases we see a general pattern as follows:

- + PROBLEM
- + SOLUTION
 - +/- Natural remedy
 - +/- Divination
 - Cause
 - +/- Supernatural remedy
 - +/- Payment
 - +/- Prayer
 - +/- Protective measures
 - +/- Other measures

In all seven cases there is a problem. In six of the seven cases the victims and/or their families attempt to solve their problem by natural means, such as commonly known leaves and herbs (cases 1 & 7), or by social channels as in the case of the woman suspected of adultery (case 2).

If these natural measures are not effective, they turn to the supernatural. The first step is to determine the cause of the problem. Diviners with divining apparatuses (cases 1, 2 & 3) and mediums of possessing spirits (case 5) provide channels of communication with the supernatural powers. These inform the inquirers which spirits (cases 1 & 5) and people (cases 2 & 3) are responsible for their misfortunes and in what way. Occasionally divination is not necessary when the cause-effect patterns are standard (cases 4 & 6). But in 5 of the 7 cases here they were used.

In solving the problem, all the cases involve payment of some sort. Offended spirits have to be paid (case 1 & 5) or bribed (case 6). Offended people have to be paid (case 2). Specialists have to be paid for their services (cases 4 & 5). Services of people such as the diviner (cases 2 & 3) and the priest (case 7) require payment. In many cases there are payments required for several entities, as an offended husband and a diviner (case 2), or a specialist and offended spirits (case 5).

Any interaction with spirits requires prayer and offerings, usually offerings of rum or water poured out at shrines during the prayers (cases 1, 2, & 6).

In addition to prayer, offerings, and payment, apparently spirits can sometimes be manipulated by the performance of dances,

drum beating, and certain rituals (case 6).

In all cases which involve a harmful or attacking agent (cases 1, 2, 3, 5, 7) some protective or remedial measures are taken after the payments and prayers. Sometimes it is a charm to be worn or kept; sometimes it is a medicinal solution to be used for ablutions or to be taken internally.

When the normal procedures are not successful, other measures are taken. Sometimes it is necessary to start again at the divination step (case 5) and deal with a second kunu. Sometimes the sufferers have to "change doctors" (case 4).

These basic patterns are adjusted, varied, and repeated to fit the needs of the situation. The questions and problems of the daily lives of the Saramaccans:

- well being: disease, famine etc.
- uncertain future
- guidance in decisions
- dealing with spirit world

involve constant involvement with the "unseen" around them in this world, elements of the "excluded middle."

CHRISTIANITY

In the last 15 yrs. two small Christian congregations have been established that have rejected or greatly altered most of the beliefs and practices that have traditionally been so much a part of the lives of the Saramaccans. Have they replaced them? Or have they merely eliminated them, leaving a dangerous vacuum?

To answer these questions, let's consider the information on chart 2.

Problems: Christians are not exempt from the daily

problems of others. They may even be accused of adultery or become targets of black magic.

Natural solutions: The church has not forbidden its members to use the natural medicines of the Saramaccans nor to use the medical services of the medical mission clinics. So these avenues of seeking help are still open to them.

Divination: This is closed to them, as all divination involves dealing with supernatural spirits that are considered alien to God and Christ. They must determine the causes of their problems some other way.

Payment: This is no longer applicable since the spirits are no longer appeased and Christ's help and blessings cannot be bought.

Prayer: This is very much a part of the church life. People who are ill or seeking help for other things have opportunity for individual and group intercession on their behalf. In serious cases fasting is also done.

Protective Measures: This is also no longer necessary. They are taught that the Holy Spirit and the "blood of Christ" is all the protection necessary against malevolent spirits.

Other Measures: I do not know of any other measures taken by the church.

Problem

As we look over the traditional practices of the Saramaccans and compare them to the present practices of the church, the three missing factors in the church practices are divination, payment, and protective measures. The church teaches quite

clearly that Christ's death on the Cross paid the only such payment required of His followers and provides ongoing protection against Satan and his followers. They no longer have anything to fear from avenging spirits or the black magic of their fellow man. So I do not think that the absence of "payments" and "protective measures" has created a vacuum in the lives of the Saramaccans when they sincerely believe the teaching of the church.

However divination is another matter. As we have already seen, divination is a very important part of Saramaccan life. Its function seems to be to determine the underlying causes of all problems and misfortunes. The Saramaccan Christians have not ceased to have problems and misfortunes. Saramaccans assume that all problems have an underlying cause and that that cause is human sin or error (Price 75:).** This assumption does not change when they become Christians. When problems arise, they begin to speculate about the causes. Statements such as, "He is having a secret affair with so and so." or "He has not kept the taboos our ancestor A. gave us." are quite common suggestions for the causes of such things as a young man's illness. Such suggestions are rejected by the church leaders, but the mind set of the believers is not changed. However, they now have no legitimate channel for determining what they feel are the underlying human sins. Traditional social control relied heavily on divination (Price 75:42) and now it is missing. This leaves a frustrating and dangerous vacuum which may have already led to the serious upheaval in the church mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

By claiming to speak for "the spirit that (their ancestor)

Anake had,"⁶ the young woman filled a crucial role in the Saramaccan traditional belief system as well as fitting into the Pentecostal emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit. On the one hand she pointed out the offenders and sinners who were causing the problems in the church. On the other hand she became the spokesman for the "Spirit" to His congregation.

Such incidents would be much less likely to happen if the vacuum left by the rejection of divination was filled. But how?

Suggestions

Divination was a vital part of the traditional Saramaccan "middle zone" worldview. It's elimination by Christianity seems to have created a vacuum for at least this Saramaccan congregation. What could the church do to replace its function in the social control of its members? What do the Scriptures teach about the causes of illness and misfortune? How are those causes to be determined and controlled?

As we look at the Scriptures we find that, contrary to Saramaccan beliefs, not all illnesses, misfortunes etc. are caused by human sin or error. Jesus tells the disciples in John 9:3 that the blindness of a certain man was not caused by his or his parents' sins.

"Jesus answered, "His blindness has nothing to do with his sins or his parents' sins. He is blind so that God's power might be seen at work in him." TEV⁷

There are many other Scriptures to support this idea including the book of Job. So the Saramaccan Christians should be taught not to assume problems are always caused by human sin or error.

However, sometimes they are. What does the Scripture say

about that?

In the case of illness James 5:14 tells us:

"Is there anyone who is sick? He should send for the church elders, who will pray for him and rub olive oil on him in the name of the Lord. This prayer made in faith will heal the sick person; the Lord will restore him to health, and the sins he has committed will be forgiven. So then, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you will be healed." TEV

From this passage I understand that illness is sometimes caused by sin. And the command is that the sick person confess his sin so that he may be healed. In this case then, it seems that no second person or supernatural except the Holy Spirit need be involved in determining the cause. The sinner himself reveals the underlying cause of the illness. If he does not, it seems to be an issue between him and the Lord in which the Lord Himself is handling the case through illness.

In situations involving a wrong committed between two people, Matt. 18:15-17 tells us:

"If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back. But if he will not listen to you, take one or two other persons with you, so that 'every accusation may be upheld by the testimony of two or more witnesses,' as the scripture says. And if he will not listen to them, then tell the whole thing to the church. Finally, if he will not listen to the church, treat him as though he were a pagan or tax collector." TEV

I understand then, from these Scriptures that Christians, in the first place should confess their sins without the necessity of a diviner to expose them. Sins that do not involve others probably require confession only to God. If they do not confess,

the Lord will handle some situations alone. In other cases, an offended person is to go to the offender in private. If he does not respond, they should return with other people in an effort to turn the offender from his sin. Finally he is taken before the congregation and if he does not repent, he is put out of the church. These methods of confession and confrontation should accomplish, at least in part, the functions of social control of the now missing divination practices.

In addition there are certain gifts of the Spirit listed in I Cor. 12:8-10 & 28, namely the gifts of prophecy, the gifts of knowledge, and the gift of healing, which should be explored and perhaps emphasized. At present only the gift of tongues seems to be emphasized and present in the church. These additional gifts might be a means to the more direct communication with the supernatural that the Saramaccans are accustomed to.

In Summary

In-depth Bible teaching on:

- the causes of the problems and misfortunes in our day to day lives
- the place of all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the church
- the practices of confession of sin and correction of our brothers could be steps toward filling the gap left by the now forbidden divination practices in the middle zone of the lives of the Saramaccans. As the Saramaccans say:

"E i puu faka a wan mii maun,
nöö i musu dëën pau."

"If you remove a knife from a child's hand,
you must give him a stick."

Notes

1. This paper is based research and observations of Saramaccan customs made during the frequent 2-6 month periods when I lived among the Saramaccans between the years 1968 - 86 and in-depth discussions with Dawson Petrus, Metzen Sanne, Frans Panza, Asoinda Hagbo and Dofia Amoida, all Saramaccans from various villages on the Suriname River.

I am grateful to the many other Saramaccans for their help and to Dr. Sherwood Lingenfelter of Biola University for his comments and suggestions.

2. Paul Hiebert, "Phenomenology and Institutions of Folk Religions" (Fuller Theological Seminary, Class Notes, 1982).

3. Sally Price, Co-wives and Calabashes (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984).

4. Richard Price, Saramaka Social Structure: Analysis of a Maroon Society in Surinam, Caribbean Monograph Series 12 (Rio Piedras: Institute of Caribbean Studies of the University of Puerto Rico, 1975).

5. These case studies are hypothetical, based on my observations of everyday activities of the Saramaccans and on conversations with Dawson Petrus, Metson Sanne, and Dofia Amoida, all Saramaccans from the Suriname River. They are typical of Saramaccan life.

6. Apparently most, if not all, the believers in this particular congregation believe the "spirit that Anake had" to be the Holy Spirit.

7. All Biblical quotes in this paper are from the Good News English Version.