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## Santuala: A Case of Pentecostal Syncretism

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## SANTUALA: A CASE OF PENTECOSTAL SYNCRETISM

Julie C. Ma

There are nine major tribes in the mountains of the northern part of Luzon Island, Philippines. These tribes, collectively known as Igorots, are primarily animists. They have continued the practice of animism from one generation to another. In fact animism plays a significant role in bonding and consolidation among these tribes. In 1565, the Roman Catholic church launched its missions among the Igorots, and several other Christian groups, such as the Anglicans, United Church of Christ of Philippines (UCCP), and the Baptists, followed shortly after the Catholic work had begun.

The Pentecostal faith was introduced by the Assemblies of God in 1947, and concentrated on evangelism and church planting. During the past ten years my research and ministerial experience among the Igorots has revealed that syncretistic phenomena occurred among Christians, particularly among non-Pentecostal believers. Often people attend Sunday morning service and then join in a traditional religious practice in the afternoon. This syncretistic attitude can be traced by two factors: 1) Some church leaders did not teach a distinction between cultural and religious practices. Obvious religious rites and rituals are conveniently wrapped in baggage. Thus, some Christians consider it permissible to participate in a ritual performance. 2) Generally churches did not teach a full-pledged commitment to Christ after conversion, nor did they emphasize that a new belief in Christ replaces old beliefs. As a result, many Christians maintain a dual allegiance, practically worshipping two different (groups of) deities.

According to Paul Hiebert, syncretism takes place when the gospel is uncritically contextualized in cultural forms. In order to avoid syncretism the congregation should critically evaluate their own customs and cultural elements in the light of new biblical principles.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker, 1985), pp. 186-87.

A religious group called *Santuala* in the mountains is a good example of syncretism. This religious group has spread widely in the mountain region. The *Santuala* group has employed the Pentecostal worship style and some of Pentecostal religious practices such as healing and blessing. Like many other *quasi*-Christian groups, the *Santuala* share basic beliefs with traditional Christianity, such as the existence of God, the work of the Holy Spirit, healing, blessing, and doing missions particularly through healing the sick.

This paper first will briefly discuss the history of *Santuala* tracing its establishment, spread, essential goals, specific worship forms, and beliefs. Particular attention will be given to Pentecostal worship forms that they have borrowed and developed into their own model. Although the group does not claim to be Pentecostal, their beliefs and practices include many elements that are generally found in Pentecostal Christian worship. Their forms of religious practices will be analyzed, and their syncretistic phenomena will be investigated to discover its possible origins. Finally, suggestions will be made to assist Pentecostal churches in preventing, or at least minimizing a tendency toward syncretism among tribal people.

Since there is practically no written record either by *Santualas* or researchers, data gathering took place through interviews with *Santuala* believers and several Igorot Christians who once were *Santuala* members. All the interviewees had had many years of involvement with *Santuala*. In fact, a few of them had been in key leadership positions for many years before they turned to Christ and now serve Him sincerely today.

### 1. The Beginning

The *Santuala* group was founded around 1950 by an Ibaloi tribal woman named Maura Balagsa, a native of Kabayan in Benguet Province.<sup>2</sup> She was born around 1880 and became critically ill when she was 70 years old. No doctor was able to discover the cause of her sickness, thus, no medicine could help her. Her illness kept getting worse and she reached the point of death. Because of her long illness, her family members, relatives and neighbors stopped nursing her and decided

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<sup>2</sup> There are six mountain provinces in northern Luzon. Benguet Province has access both to the south all the way to the capital city, Manila, and to the north until Kalinga, Apayao and Abra provinces.

to move her to a riverside spot near the village and leave her alone there so that she could die a natural death. During the rainy season the river swells and flows over and they believed that she would then be swept away by the floodwater. However, as this final plan was under way, a Christian pastor of a church visited her and prayed for her. During his prayer she saw a vision of herself going around to different places and preaching about Jesus and healing many sick people. Soon after this experience she was miraculously healed. The news soon spread among the mountain villages and it became a great event. The impact was particularly felt in Bito, Bagon,<sup>3</sup> where she was miraculously cured. Numerous sick people came to her and received her prayer for healing and many became her followers. From the 1950s to the 1970s, this religious group had great success and hundreds came to join them. The *Santuala* movement did not confine itself to one province but spread to other provinces as well. Especially old folks and the sick were fascinated by unique *Santuala* practices such as seeing visions and praying for healing. The founder, Maura Balagsa, died at the age of 120. With no doubt she had great longevity, although she was still fighting severe illness after her initial healing.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Characteristics of *Santuala*

Many unique characteristics of *Santuala* were cultivated through the years. As briefly mentioned above, the worship styles and forms are similar to those of Pentecostals. For instance, during their services, they sing with much emotion, dance and clap their hands, see visions, and gather around the sick and pray for them. These practices are well interwoven with other less than Christian practices. Their official gatherings are on Fridays and Sundays when the members do not engage in any work, with meals being prepared on the previous days. This strict observance signifies their commitment to holy life in worshipping God.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bakun is one of thirteen municipalities in Benguet Province.

<sup>4</sup> Interviewed with Luciano Calixto, a member of Lamut Assembly of God Church, La Trinidad, Benguet Province. He was converted from *Santuala*. Also interviewed with Teodoro Gaiwen, an elder of the same church, is a former member of *Santuala*. All the interviews, unless stated otherwise, took place in Jan, 1998 in Lamut, La Trinidad, Benguet, Philippines.

<sup>5</sup> Interviewed with Manido Taydoc, who was also converted from *Santuala*, and a member of Lamut Church.

However, when there are special occasions such as a funeral or wedding, they also gather on these particular days.

In their services, there is neither the study of the Bible nor a time of preaching. However, they do spend a great deal of time singing. The group does not have formal leadership leading the service but an elder or elders will be in charge of major activities. Very few members have their own Bible. If they do have one, it is perhaps considered to be a symbolic item whose function is similar to that of a small *Santo Nino*, an image of infant Christ which most Catholic believers carry for divine protection.

### 3. Pentecostal Features in *Santuala* Worship

In a typical *Santuala* worship service, the members offer three songs, each one from a traditional hymnal. In my understanding, it is probably that choruses have not been available to them or it could be that they refrain from using them due to their conservative orientation. When I asked why they sing only three songs in every worship service, they were not able to give me an adequate answer. In my estimation they were influenced either by the notion of the Trinity or the prescription of their traditional native practice to offer sacrificial animals only in odd numbers.<sup>6</sup> According to Teodoro Gaiwen, members sing accompanied by dancing for joy and gratitude for healing and blessing.<sup>7</sup> The dance employs various actions such as hopping, jumping, stepping, and swinging their hands in the motion of a butterfly while turning their bodies. Singing and dancing are always combined with hand clapping by the congregation. This expressive and enthusiastic mode of worship resembles Pentecostal worship. As commonly recognized Pentecostals freely express their emotion in bodily movements. The Pentecostals are particularly known for their “affective action” in the worship.<sup>8</sup> They never conceal their emotion in their time of praising God.

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<sup>6</sup> The Kankana-eyes, one of nine major tribes in northern Luzon, kill animal(s) for sacrifice by odd number, one, three, five, seven and alike.

<sup>7</sup> Teodoro Ganiwen is a sincere and faithful Christian. In fact he is in a position of an elder in Lamut Church. His parents and some relatives are active *Santualas*. He is the only one in the family converted to Christianity.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Poloma, *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), p. 5.

One of their favorite songs in worship is *Balligi* meaning “victory,” which is also favored by Pentecostals in the region. The chorus of the song reads:

Ballige, wen balligi,  
 Alleluya ken Jesus,  
 Intedna ti balligic,  
 Gloria, gloria alleluya,  
 Madaydayaw Naganna,<sup>9</sup>

Victory, and victory,  
 Hallelujah I am free,  
 Jesus gives me victory,  
 Glory, glory Hallelujah,  
 He is all in all to me.

It is also apparent that some of the *Santuala* worship forms are borrowed from their native ritual practices. Dancing is one of the critical elements in the native ritual of inviting and appeasing the spirits. In fact making the motion of a butterfly by swinging the body is quite similar to an Igorot dance in a native ritual.

The next important component of *Santuala* worship is prayer where the congregation actively participates by reciting amens. Each prayer must consist of six sentences, and after each sentence the congregation responds with a loud amen. Thus, a prayer is inflexibly set in six lines to receive six amens. This formula is a unique part of *Santuala* worship. Responding with amens reflects a Pentecostal worship characteristic. The Pentecostals want to affirm their prayers with verbal expressions, such as “amen” or “Yes, Lord!” The *Santuala* have the same desire to assure themselves of God’s answer to their prayer. They call it a “six-amen prayer.” One example of prayer is:

Thank you Lord for this day amen,  
 For gathering us together amen,  
 Bless this service amen,  
 Forgive us amen,  
 Heal us amen,  
 Forgive our first, second, and third ancestors’ sins.  
 Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> The words are in Ilocano dialect which is the trade language among the mountain tribes in northern Luzon.

After offering a prayer, three people go around the congregation and shake each one's hands and pat each one on their chest a few times. Then, three people stand at the center of the gathering and repeat the same thing among themselves, shaking hands and tapping the chest of one another.<sup>10</sup> This signifies the heart-felt love of each member. The love of Christ is expressed more by a gesture and motion than just verbal expressions.<sup>11</sup>

Then, they sing three songs again and also recite six amens in the second prayer time. An intercessory prayer follows, as Pentecostals regularly do. They never fail to include a prayer time for healing, which is also another common feature readily shared by Pentecostal churches particularly in the mountains. Perhaps the most remarkable part of their service is when the intercessor(s) and an elder invite the sick to come to the front. After identifying the illness of a person, the intercessor earnestly asks God to touch and heal the sickness. The intercessor lays both of his hands on the head of the sick person and there is full confidence among the sick that God will speak to the intercessor as to what they should do. The sick also believe that God will answer their prayer through the intercessor.

After the intense intercessory session, every member spends time to seek visions. The *Santuala* are particularly favorable to visions. They believe that God reveals desirable ways to His children through visions. This form mirrors the Pentecostals' practice also. The Pentecostals in the mountains tend to see visions during prayer. A vision is also accompanied by its interpretation. Frequently, elders of the *Santuala* see visions. Yet, this experience is not confined to certain people. Any member can see visions but not all visions are valid. The elders examine and discern the visions.

Agapita Cuyapyap, who is a long-time member of *Santuala*, has actually seen a lot of visions. In an interview, according to her a vision is like seeing a movie or a television program where pictures move consecutively.<sup>12</sup> One of the experiences that she had was of seeing a vision of a member who committed adultery but was never exposed by anyone. She quietly approached that person and shared what she had seen in her vision. The person was strongly convicted by the vision. Hearing

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<sup>10</sup> Interviewed Belina Igueldo, the pastor of Lamut Church.

<sup>11</sup> Interviewed Gaiwen, Teodoro.

<sup>12</sup> Agupita Guyapyap is an elderly woman and has been devoted to *Santuala*. She is one of their prominent seers.

internal or audible voices is another way of receiving a divine revelation. These experiences also edify and strengthen their spiritual life.

As mentioned above, a vision always requires an interpreter. An interpreter is normally an elder who possesses the gift of interpretation. No member is expected to interpret his or her own vision, but only an interpreter does this. Often the interpreter becomes very specific when he hears the vision of a sick member. It is common that the sick person is requested to repent of his or her sin together with their forefather's sin. Often the deliberation goes something like "It is because your forefathers did not conduct a proper ritual performance, that you now have a terrible headache." The prescription will be something like, "You have to confess the sin of the ancestors in four generations. Then you will be healed." Without an exception, the sick do exactly what the interpreter requires.<sup>13</sup>

Another example of a vision is that in a vision, someone cleans a winnow, fills it with rice and gives rice to each member with the exception of one particular individual. The interpreter would explain that the member who did not receive rice will not receive blessing from God.<sup>14</sup>

Toward the end of the service, the elders go to sick people and stroke their back. Then, they spend time singing three songs and six amens. At this time, they sing fast songs and dance lively while circling around. Then they sing more songs, six or even nine, depending on the level of their excitement. If a person is very sick, they again repeat the whole thing.

As part of the service, they dine together. They consider an eating time to be important. The food has been prepared beforehand. The schedule of the meeting is decided ahead of time. After eating, they sing songs and pray with six amens again. Finally at the end of the service, four persons instead of three go around and shake the hands of the members again three times.

The service does not include the sharing of testimonies or preaching. The service primarily consists of brisk activities such as four times of singing, praying with six amens, praying for healing, and seeing visions. At any meeting, these components are always present.

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Jenny Salipnet, a convert from *Santuala*.

<sup>14</sup> Interviewed with Manido Taypoc, a former member of *Santulas* who now attend Lamut Assemblies of God Church.

#### 4. Pentecostal Beliefs Reflected in *Santuala*

##### 4.1 God

*Santualas* believe in the existence of God. They call upon God in their prayers and approach Him in anticipation of His power to heal and bless. Although they may not possess a sound understanding of God as revealed in the Bible and presented in traditional theology, they are assured of His mighty power. This perception has simply been derived out of their own experiences and that of other members. Empirical experience enhances their belief in God and heightens their desire to experience Him. Such experientially oriented expectation shapes the image of God in their perception. Their understanding of God is not that He is transcendental but imminent. His presence is not aloof but nearby them. Comprehending God in such a way is extremely similar to that of Pentecostals. Pentecostals also want to feel the Divine Presence in their daily life.

##### 4.2 Healing

Healing occupies a very important place in the *Santuala* life, since their founder, Maura Balgsa, had a tremendous encounter with God through healing. Her followers naturally adopted the same pattern. As mentioned above, such miraculous events became the key element in drawing people to the movement. Thus, they invariably have a time of prayer for the sick more than once and for lengthy period of time in all *Santuala* services. Even the time for visions often has an unmistakable link to healing because they often pray for the sick after seeing a healing vision of someone. Due to their deep belief in, and expectation of, God's healing touch many members are involved in a so-called "healing ministry" in various mountain regions. Details of their mission work will be discussed below. Their heavy emphasis on healing shows a resemblance to Pentecostal practices.

##### 4.3 Blessing

Believing in God's blessing is another important element of *Santuala* belief which is considered to be almost as significant as healing. Although they do not include a time of thanksgiving in their regular service, they hold it at a separate time during special occasions. The service of thanksgiving is a great moment to recall what God has done,

and to look forward to more blessings in coming days. In this service their joy overflows with expressive body language. It definitely signifies God's abundant and unlimited blessing upon their lives. The heavy emphasis on God's blessing is undoubtedly similar to that of Pentecostals.

#### 4.4 The Holy Spirit

The *Santuala* tend to weave their spiritual practices with a belief in the power of the Holy Spirit. They believe that healing takes place when the Holy Spirit moves through the faith of believers. When they are involved in a healing mission through a visionary experience, they believe in the healing power of the Holy Spirit. They believe that the Spirit brings healing and works miracles in specific circumstances. They exercise their faith when they are in far-flung areas to pray for the sick. *Santualas*, thus, believe in the ministry of the Holy Spirit through human agents.

### 5. Two Specific Services

Throughout the interviews the interviewees highlighted two particular services; thanksgiving and funeral. For significantly thankful occasions members want to exhibit their gratitude to God through worship. The funeral service is another important service. Their practices indicate the combination of both Pentecostal and traditional religious practices.

#### 5.1 Thanksgiving Service

For special occasions like weddings or harvest, a thanksgiving service is held and the people involved are required to bring offerings. They are grateful to God for the granting of His favor. At the same time, people anticipate divine blessing. In their understanding, God's blessing comes only through worship services with offerings. This clearly reflects their old religious practices associated with animism.

As usual, prior to the commencement of the worship service, an elder sees a vision. As indicated earlier, seeing a vision is indeed necessary before beginning any religious activity. Due to such orientation they especially set aside a time for seeing visions, so that they will know God's divine will and earn His favor. Upon seeing a vision, they set a

date, time, and place to prepare for the worship. This implies that the service should not be held in the usual places such as members' homes. A garden, which belongs to either the person or the couple who offers this service, is preferred.<sup>15</sup>

In a wedding service an elder is primarily in charge of conducting the whole affair with the assistance of a few assigned members. First of all, prayer is offered, and then they dance around the sacrificial animal. Their form of dance is a lot like a pagan ritual and non-believers would have difficulty discerning between Christian worship and the age-old native sacrifice ritual called *canao*.<sup>16</sup> Then, they kill a pig. Some aspects of their procedure for butchering the animal are certainly borrowed from pagan ritual practices.

Having killed the pig, the elder of *Santuala*, holding a cup of water offers another prayer of thanksgiving and pours the water on the spot of blood. Then, they singe the butchered pig and boil it in a big pot. They again offer another prayer, which is the last part of the service. After the service, the members feel free to move around and converse with one another. When the meat is cooked, it is served to the people.<sup>17</sup> Thanksgiving service is, thus, important in two aspects: expressing their thanks to and expecting a blessing from God.

## 5.2 Funeral Service

Commonly a *Santuala* holds a three-day funeral service. However, this can be stretched to nine days. The age of the deceased person affects the length of the funeral period. If the dead person is old, they would have more days, and less days if the deceased is young. The funeral service is almost identical with other services. They offer songs related to a funeral theme, and prayer for the salvation of the dead and comfort for the family. Although *Santualas* do not give emphasis to earthly salvation, they firmly believe in life after death. Their belief system includes the notion of hell and heaven.

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Tedoro Gaiwen.

<sup>16</sup> *Canao* is a pagan religious practice held for various thanksgiving occasions and healing purposes. It also serves to consolidate among the Igorot themselves through fellowship in the ritual performance. Usually when the *canao* is held the host invites his or her village friends, neighbors and distant relatives. Therefore through this occasion they even discover their individual identity as mountain peoples.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Tedoro Gaiwen.

There is no prescribed number of animals one should butcher. If the family possesses much, they kill in quantity, but none for the poor. The procedure for killing the animal is similar to that of the thanksgiving service.<sup>18</sup>

Nine days after burial of the dead person, the family is allowed to go to the field and work. But during the first nine-day period the members of the family just rest and stay at home. On the ninth day, they kill an animal again and invite neighbors to dine with them. Perhaps this is to express the family's gratitude to those who extended help during the funeral. Nine months after the funeral, they hold another service for the dead. This also requires the butchering of a pig or pigs. The elder offers a prayer for the dead and also for the family members for forgiveness of their sins. Praying for forgiveness is commonly included whether the family is considered to be guilty or not. In the ninth year after the death, the family of the deceased gathers together for the remembrance of the dead. After this, no more ritual is required.

## 6. Ritual Practices of the Mountain People

Since I have frequently observed traditional religious practices, I would like to discuss *Santuala* ritual practices in the light of native religious practices. The procedure for their rituals is strictly prescribed. When the mountain people perform rituals, they first offer a prayer to the ancestral spirits, with only a priest having authority to pray. They then butcher sacrificial animal(s). While the animal is still alive, assigned butchers prick the heart of the animals with sharp bamboo sticks. Due to pain, the animal screams at the top of its voice. When the shriek comes down, and the animal has little strength left, people cut parts of the animal's body. Animals are butchered in odd numbers, one, three, five, seven and so on. The family that offers a sacrifice always consults with a village priest for the date, place, time, and the number of animals to butcher. The number of sacrificial animals increases by two from the previous ritual.

There are two main occasions for which people perform a ritual: thanksgiving and healing. Thus, rituals are performed during the time of harvest and illness. One tribal group named Ifugao holds the thanksgiving ritual more frequently than do other tribal groups. Of course

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<sup>18</sup> Interviewed with Tino Altaki, who was a *Santuala* for a few decades and now has become the head leader of the regional group.

other tribes are not unexceptional. Ifugaos are rice planters and have cultivated tremendous rice terraces, which even attract tourists. There are two major phases: the time of preparation starting from August to March; and the time of harvest time from April to July. In every phase, from seedling to harvest, they perform rituals for blessing.

The healing ritual is performed when a family member is sick. In an animistic environment, malevolent spirits are believed to cause the sickness. They believe that sometimes a terrible dream makes a person ill, and I hear this quite often. The sick person is taken to the priest for examination of the dream and for the prescription of a ritual for cure. Often the priest blames the illness on their negligence in caring for their ancestors. In their belief offering a sacrifice is the best way to appease an offended spirit. Venerating of deceased ancestors is one of the most important roles that they must fulfill and this can only be done through prescribed rituals.

## 7. Missionary Works

Missionary work often takes place because of a vision, the primary mode being that of receiving a divine revelation among *Santualas*. Since the founder was miraculously healed, healing has become a critical part of their religious life. Indeed all members are required to be involved in the healing mission. However, prior to missionary work, the elder needs to see a vision and be directed accordingly. First of all destiny is decided. For instance, if an elder sees a vision of a pipe that is connected to Baguio City,<sup>19</sup> he immediately interprets that a member should go Baguio to look for the sick and pray for the healing. If the elder sees a particular mountain village in his vision, he commissions a few members to go there. Sometimes, it is not always easy to discover the sick but they often find him or her by inquiring around. If any member refuses to accept a

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<sup>19</sup> Baguio is located a mile high above the sea level. This city was developed as the summer capitol and resort area for American military personnel since the America colonization of the Philippines in 1898. Particularly, certain developed areas like John Hay were continually used and were under the control of the American military to serve the same purpose. It was handed over to the Philippine government when the American soldiers were completely evacuated from the Philippines in the early 90s. Baguio is the only chartered city in the mountain region of Luzon. Particularly, during the Easter and Christmas breaks the city is flooded by hundreds people.

task given by their elder, a divine punishment is expected and it usually happens.

Strangely enough, when members pray for the sick, healing takes place. This phenomenon has apparently attracted many people to the group, and thus it has grown in numbers. Normally, a new *Santuala* group is established in a different community through this missionary pilgrimage. The healing experience is a profound testimony among the animists. In their belief system, spirits have power to cure them. The people follow the deity who demonstrates the strongest power for healing. Thus, the missionary journey becomes the hallmark of the *Santuala* group. It is the only explicit missionary activity considered highly significant.

### 8. Concept of Forms and Meanings in General

The study shows that the *Santuala* group has combined both the Pentecostal and native ritual forms and their meanings. Since different forms are used in their worship, I felt it necessary to analyze them. But before doing that, I would like to first examine the diverse results from various forms and meanings employed in *Santuala* worship. According to Charles Kraft, there are four types of result one can expect.<sup>20</sup>

Forms	Meanings	Result
Indigenous	Indigenous	No Change: Traditional Religion
Foreign	Indigenous	Syncretistic Church
Foreign	Foreign	Dominated Church (a kind of syncretism)
Indigenous	Christian	Biblical Christianity

The only ideal contextualization of the gospel is the combination of indigenous forms with Christian meanings. However, it is critical that indigenous forms are carefully selected and analyzed before putting them into an actual practice. Often churches are encouraged and challenged to use traditional musical instruments, art forms, dance and other forms in worship, but there is a strong hesitancy among Evangelical Christians to use these. This caution prevails among local pastors and missionaries today.

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (unpublished manuscript), p. 158.

Tribal churches are not an exception to this contextualization rule. Members of a local church may not understand how to bring the two forms together unless a church leader gives proper teaching. Syncretism occurs when the pastor probably lacks either knowledge of it, or cannot creatively utilize native forms to communicate the Christian message. Such negligence naturally leads to confusion or even unguarded syncretism.

For example, in their communion service a church used native rice wine, or *tapey*, in place of grape juice. For native mountain people, *tapey* is an important element for certain occasions such as cultural festivals, fellowship among clans, and performance of rituals. Culture varies and in some provinces it is used strictly for ritual performance but in other provinces it is allowed for non-religious occasions. When this church used *tapey*, some members were not able to distinguish between participating in the Lord's table and attending a native ritual performance. This clearly indicates that without proper teaching, the utilization of a cultural form often associated with native religious practices can result in a rather confusing or even destructive effect on Christians.

#### 9. Analysis of Forms and Meanings of the *Santuala*

As noted in the beginning of this study, the *Santuala* group came into being through a unique event. There are no trained or ordained pastors, proper programs, or teaching in comparison with an average Christian church. This group seems to be highly interested in spontaneous and visible external practices in spite of other standard doctrines they subscribe to, such as the existence of God and His almighty power. At the time the *Santuala* came into being, if there had been a spiritual leader who was able to carefully guide the spiritual life of members, the result would not have been what we see today. As a result of this lack of proper guidance, the *Santuala* group created its own model of contextualization by combining both indigenous and Pentecostal worship styles. This resulted in a rather unique syncretistic religion:

Forms	Meanings	Result
Pagan ritual form	Pentecostal worship meaning	Syncretism
Pentecostal worship form	Pagan ritual meaning	Syncretism

Above, I have already discussed the Pentecostal elements found in *Santuala* worship. In this section, it is necessary to make a detailed analysis. Some worship features common to both groups will be examined. First of all, singing songs from hymnals accompanied by dancing may be found in both *Santuala* and Pentecostal worship. However, the movement of the body in *Santuala* worship is exactly like the pagan ritual dance. Prayer is offered in ways commonly shared by Pentecostals, yet the *Santuala* have developed their own style by reiterating amen after each sentence of prayers. Responding to a prayer with a response with “amen” is also a common feature in Pentecostal worship. This expression affirms the prayer and, thus, the congregation participates in the prayer itself.

Praying for the sick by laying on of hands is exactly like the Pentecostals. It is done with earnest anticipation that God will perform an awesome miracle for the sick one. However, praying for forgiveness of ancestors’ sins is not found in Pentecostal worship, although, recently, the Third Wave practices inner healing in a similar manner. I remember a Malaysian pastor sharing that a pastor taught his members to pray for the sins of their ancestors, so that their souls would be saved. This resembles the Roman Catholic teaching that the souls of ancestors are in purgatory and will be transferred to heaven through the prayer of their descendants for the forgiveness of the sins they committed while they were on the earth. In the pagan ritual performance, the priest offers prayers to the spirits often confessing their sins committed in the world.<sup>21</sup>

Seeing visions is *Santuala*’s unique component in worship. For them seeing a vision is the only way to discover the will of divinity. It is true that Pentecostals also expect to see a vision or hear the voice of the Spirit during their prayer time, but not as part of a worship service. This experience has many positive effects causing believers to be drawn closer to God. In Pentecostalism it never overrides the Word, which is the ultimate revelation of God. Interpretation of visions is extremely subjective and they cannot be self-generated.

Tapping one’s chest is a way of showing affection and love among *Santuala* members. Although Pentecostals may not exactly share this particular motion, external bodily expression suits well both the Pentecostal style and a native cultural form. This could be an equivalent to hugging or touching each other’s shoulders among Western Christians. Had this particular motion been brought to a specific culture by missionaries along with the gospel, it may well have been blended with

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<sup>21</sup> Interviewed with Tino Altaki, April 1998.

the existing culture. In fact, tribal cultures provide much space to express their affection and warm feelings. They freely show friendship and kindness to the strangers and guests. Giving is a favorite sign of their love. Although some tribes, such as the Bontoc and Isneg<sup>22</sup> cruelly practiced headhunting until around the turn of the century, they basically possess pleasant characteristics. This might have been reflected in the worship through tapping one's chest.

Another important element in *Santuala* worship is eating food during the service. Many churches in the mountains have a fellowship meal after the service. Any available food is offered for the table. It is observed that after ritual practices, villagers who attend also eat together. Meat, rice and drinks are prepared for the guests. It is possible that such cultural-religious practice has influenced their worship.

Hand-shaking in *Santuala* worship is an expression of showing gladness to one another. Through this bodily contact, the level of intimacy may be increased. Shaking hands is not unusual among the Pentecostals although it is done either early in the service or afterwards. *Santuala* missionary work is done only through healing with the possibility of the establishment of a new *Santuala* congregation. This seems to be their primary commission. The whole process, such as the place and time for this ministry is revealed only through a vision. This practice is unique to the *Santuala*.

This analytical study reveals that the *Santuala* group practices syncretism by mixing the worship styles of both groups. This has resulted in their unique worship style. Three forms practiced in their worship are noted below.

The two main sources for *Santuala* worship are Pentecostal and traditional practices, and they can be seen below:

Pentecostal Worship	
Forms	Meanings
Singing songs	Praising God
Dancing	Praising God
Praying to God for the sick	Healing
Seeing visions	Discovering divine will and direction
Saying amen in prayer	Confirming that He will answer prayers

<sup>22</sup> The Bonctoc tribe inhabits Mountain Province, which is one of six provinces and the Isneg tribe dwells in Apayao Province.

Native Religious Practices	
Forms	Meanings
Dancing in a form of ritual dance	Calling and appeasing spirits
Praying for forgiveness of ancestral sins	Concerning for the ancestors
Butchering animals	Sacrifices

In the case of *Santuala*, the two source traditions were appropriated and developed the following syncretistic system:

<i>Santuala</i> Religious Practices	
Forms	Meanings
Tapping each member's chest	Showing love and affection
Eating together as part of the service	Sharing community life
Shaking hands in the service	Greetings
Traveling different places to pray for the sick	Fulfilling God's work
Seeing vision in a lengthy time (animistic aspect)	Looking for immediate answers

## 10. Why Did Syncretism Take Place?

It is appropriate to deal with several primary problematic issues, which brought such syncretistic results.

### 10.1 Lack of Adequate Teaching

Through the brief description of their history and worship, it becomes apparent that *Santuala* worship never has a time for preaching or time for Bible study. They do keep the Bible but more as a symbolic object. The interviewees commented that *Santuala* members have devotions on a regular basis, but do not read the Bible. Consequently, the members have never had a chance to learn the Word of God. This leads them into a very poor or incorrect understanding of God, the Holy Spirit, healing, vision, and other Christian beliefs. These important concepts are learned through informal and casual settings. They concentrate on proper religious practices that meet their immediate needs, such as healing.

### 10.2 No Stable Leadership

Structural leadership is missing in *Santuala*. The closest person to a leader figure is the elder, but their role is rather restricted to a mediatory function between members and God, very much like a shaman. The elder

simply directs the people through external signs. None of the interviewees have knowledge as to why no official leader existed, even since its establishment. The *Santuala* lacks leadership that will guide members into spiritual growth, and this deficiency is critical.

### 10.3 Misplaced Focus

The motif of the members' belief is limited to only two effects: healing and blessing. The regular members of *Santuala* worship are more or less those who have experienced healing or blessing. As the founder herself had a great experience of miraculous healing, her followers tend to focus on acquiring the same experience. Thus, in a sense, healing is the central focus of their belief system. Their so-called missionary work is only an extension of this expectation. This shapes the nature of the group as a religious group with an expectation of God's instantaneous healing.

Another important emphasis is on blessing. Believing in God is directly linked to receiving divine blessing. However, the blessing is conditioned by the offering of material goods, and this is a deviation from Christian teaching. This indicates that they have inherited the old traditional belief where a sacrificial offering is imperative to expect blessing from their ancestors. They do not understand the concept that God's blessing is given freely because of the loving relationship between Him and His children.

## 11. What Should Pentecostals Learn from *Santuala*?

Based on the above discussions, I would like to make suggestions to Pentecostals as to how to approach animists. My motif is to avoid or minimize such syncretistic outcomes as Pentecostal beliefs interact with culture and native religions.

### 11.1 Focusing Not Just on Miracles

When the Pentecostal message spread at the turn of the century, signs and wonders accompanied the preaching of the gospel. People came to the Lord by scores through the experience of God's miraculous power, and instant healing became particularly prominent. The history of the Pentecostal ministry in North America and Asia reveals that healing took place in almost every place where the Pentecostal message was

proclaimed. Divine healing occurred widely regardless of race, location, or types of illnesses. When Assemblies of God ministers initially brought the gospel to the tribal people of northern Luzon around 1947, healing became a common miracle from God. The expectant atmosphere in healing revival meetings in various mountain regions reminds us of the Book of Acts. As a Pentecostal, I am thankful to the Lord for this unusual and important gift. It is also true that, without a doubt, healing is an attractive element that draws people to the love and power of Christ, so that they can have a personal experience with God.

However, I believe that healing or any miracle should not be an end, but a means to the end. The ultimate purpose of healing should be that of leading people to spiritual growth, a dynamic Christian life and maturity in Christ, thus the miracle of healing functions as a “sign” pointing to a true reality. If one constantly relies on empirical experiences, his or her spiritual life will not be healthy and balanced. Pentecostals need to clearly comprehend the role of the gospel rather than simply underscoring distinctiveness in its parameter.

### 11.2 Biblical Guidance with Proper Experience

In my judgment, due to their heavy inclination in empirical experiences, *Santualas* tend to neglect the Word. It is noticeable that when a church focuses on learning truth, experientialism is downplayed. On the other hand, if too much credit is given to empiricism, learning is overlooked. When I served in an evangelical church in the States as one of the associate youth directors, I was able to observe the nature of the church. The members appeared so eager to study the Bible. The church had Bible studies throughout the entire week, and different groups come to study the Word on different nights. However, when they encountered critical problems or physical illness, their minds did not quickly grasp the meaning of healing in the Bible. Rather, in most cases they looked for human resources to resolve their problem. An elaborate Bible study program does not always seem to provide relevant application. Because the leaders in the church did not have tangible experiences in this area, they had no confidence, or expectation of, divine healing from God. This reminds me of the importance of gaining the empirical experience in our Christian life. Pentecostals need to maintain a balance between the two, the Word and experience.

### 11.3 Emphasis on Pentecostal Beliefs and Practices

In this changing social context, it is crucial to remain in the Pentecostal heritage by adhering to its beliefs and practices. It is often observed that second and third generation Pentecostals begin to lose their roots and heritage. In the end, we may see people who claim to be Pentecostal but do not maintain its distinctive beliefs and practices, thus, they may be called “nominal Pentecostals.” According to one survey, sixty percent of self-claimed Pentecostals have never had any of “Pentecostal” experiences that our forefathers and mothers had.

Why is this happening? Why does the younger generation of Pentecostals seem to care little about the identity of Pentecostalism, its roots and uniqueness? Has the first generation neglected to pass on such heritage? The expectation of the Lord’s soon return may have caused the pioneers to be good evangelists and missionaries, but not writers and reflective thinkers. The lack of reflective literature by them supports this contention. Some Pentecostal churches in Korea favorably follow the worship style of the Reformed Church, while some Presbyterian pastors eagerly adopt the Pentecostal worship style and message. In certain respects it is a good sign to be open to other traditions, but not to the degree that we lose our own distinctives and become “Pentecostal Evangelicals.” Therefore, Pentecostals must maintain Pentecostalism’s unique faith and practices. Teaching with this emphasis should take place not only in local churches, but, more importantly, in theological institutions and ministerial training programs.

## 12. Conclusion

The *Santuala* group is certainly an interesting phenomenon to Pentecostals as it provides an example of Pentecostal syncretism. The founder, Maura Balagsa, and her experience set their theology and ethos with a primary focus on divine healing. Healing became a powerful entry point for many *Santuala* members. The influence of a single leader is noted here, and this is what we have observed in Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity. Even though the *Santuala* acknowledge the work of the Holy Spirit and, thus, call on the Spirit in prayer for healing, it is sometimes doubtful if healing takes place by the Spirit because of their syncretistic practices. One needs to know that Baguio, the largest city in the mountains, is a haven for famous faith healers who definitely display their syncretistic beliefs. And yet, the members’ trust in divine power

seems to be genuine and serious, as no member is expected to take medicine or go to a hospital. If a member gets sick, all members devote themselves to prayer for healing.<sup>23</sup> This strengthens not only their faith in God but also solidarity among themselves. This community orientation is another feature commonly shared by Pentecostals. Noticeably enough, the group highly recognizes the importance of divine blessing although they tend to give it less emphasis than healing.

Divine revelation is expected of individuals through a vision, often to discover God's divine will and direction. If one does not receive visions during prayer time, when he is supposed to, his faith and authority will be severely questioned. On the basis of what the elder sees through the vision and gives during the interpretation, the group is able to move. It is unfortunate that among Pentecostals, theological learning, sometimes replaces the time of prayer and expectation of God's revelation to affirm what is revealed in the scriptures, and to receive guidance for a specific individual or situation.

*Santuala's* lively and participatory worship is epitomized by their dancing. It is acknowledged that the people simply adapt the ritual dancing style without evaluating as to whether it is suitable or not. Offering animal(s) for sacrifice in a thanksgiving service is another interesting practice, as much as praying for, or repenting of ancestral sins. Several important native religious ideologies have entered into the *Santuala* beliefs, and there is no biblical support for these practices. On the other hand, some practices are similar to those of the Pentecostals. Singing briskly, clapping hands, and dancing are elements, which one can easily find in Pentecostal worship.

This study shows that this group developed a belief and worship system, which is similar to that of the Pentecostals but they have never claimed to be Pentecostals, although they do enthusiastically identify with Christianity. Although we do not know how much influence the founder received from the Christian minister who prayed for her healing, his influence could have been great whether right or wrong. It is probable that their heavy emphasis on empirical experience may have come from this minister. This reminds us as to what an important role Christian leadership plays in the development of a new convert's life.

The preceding discussion of the *Santuala* group provides many lessons for the Pentecostal church. As the Pentecostal message has been planted in many Asian hearts, where there is an animistic orientation, it is critical to reflect on several models of syncretism as well as the ideal

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Tino Altaki.

contextualization. Indonesia and some parts of Africa may provide other models.<sup>24</sup> This study also reveals the importance of Pentecostal spirituality.<sup>25</sup> While we can expect spontaneous answers from God, it is indeed important to balance this expectation with a deep understanding of the word.

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<sup>24</sup> For Southern African cases, see Mathew Clark, "The Challenges of Contextualization and Syncretism to Pentecostal Theology and Missions in Africa," a paper presented at the Theological Symposium, the 18<sup>th</sup> Pentecostal World Conference, Seoul, Korea on Sept 21, 1998, pp. 263-83.

<sup>25</sup> See the recent book by an Asian Pentecostal, Simon Chan, *Christian Spirituality* (Downer Grove: InterVarsity, 1998).