THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL REFLECTIONS
ON THE PRACTICE OF SHAMANISM STILL FOUND
IN THE CATHOLIC INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES OF TAIWAN

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Introduction

The term “shamanism” originally referred to the religious practices of Siberian indigenous peoples who were hunters and fishers. Today the term is used to talk about religious practices which seek to obtain gifts from invisible powers, gifts such as prosperity, health, good luck, freedom from personal disasters or natural calamities. Shamanic practices, called Wushu巫術 in Chinese, vary according to culture and place. They are an essential part of the traditional religion of the indigenous people of Taiwan, who converted to Christianity about fifty years ago, becoming largely Presbyterian or Catholic.

This article analyses one particular phenomenon, the persistence of shamanic practices within Taiwanese indigenous Catholic communities. It is based on a field survey carried out by the Research Center for Aboriginal Theology of the Faculty of Theology of Fujen Catholic University in Taipei. With only limited resources available, yet enjoying a large network of acquaintances throughout the island, the Centre conducted the survey by interviewing a carefully selected number of ten Catholic shamans, both men and women, of different tribes:

- Three Tayal shamans from Taian District (Miaoli County): Mrs Iban-Soyan (aged 73) [Ta1] and Mrs Iban-Losing (aged 54) [Ta2] from Yong’an village and Mrs Puhor-Kagi (aged 77) from Tiangou village [Ta3];

- Two Bunun shamans living in Ren’ai District (Nantou County): Mrs Newn (aged 55) from Wuqie village [Bu1] and Mr Abis (aged 73) from Quping village [Bu2];

- Two Tsou shamans living in Alishan District (Jiayi County): Mr Pasuya (aged 65) from Tefuye village [Ts1] and Mrs Kuatu (aged 69) from Jingmei village [Ts2];

1 The members of the team who carried out the survey are Chang Chanhui, Solomon He and Olivier Lardinois. We would also like to thank those who worked as translators during the interviews: Wu Guoxiong (for Tayal), Solomon He (for Bunun), Wang Baorui (for Tsou), Ke Huiyi (for Paiwan) and Sun Meihua (for Amis).
Two Paiwan shamans living in the Districts of Dawu and Jinfeng (Taidong County): Mrs Karue (aged 82), the former catechist of Daniao village [Pai1] and Mrs Kedrekedr (aged 84) of Dabang village [Pai2];

A former Amis shaman from Hualian, who is now a Sister in the Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Martha [Am1].

To complete the survey, the team also interviewed:

- The Amis prayer group of the Catholic community in the village of Tingpu in Fengping District (Hualian County), most of whose members are the daughters of shamans [Am2], as well as their parish priest, the late Fr. André Bareigts, an anthropologist of the Paris Foreign Missionary Society [Mis1];
- An Amis shaman, Mr Aki (aged 55), who lives in Tavalon village in Guangfu District (Hualian County) [Am3], as well as the catechist of the same village, Mrs Sawmah Katig (aged 62) [Am4].
- Two ladies of Nanwang village near Taidong: Mrs Hanabi and Mrs Paraytay [Pu1-2], who both knew the first catechist of Zhiben village, Mr. Aliyalem. Before his conversion, Mr. Aliyalem was a renowned shaman among the Puyuma;
- A Swiss missionary, Fr. Karl Stähli [Mis2], who has been studying the continued existence of shamanism in his pastoral area in Taoyuan District (Gaoxiong County) for a quite long time;
- The catechist of the Bunun village of Quping, Mrs Kaut (aged 66) [Bu3].

During the interviews, the team concentrated its questions on three aspects, which form the basis for this article:

1. Why do the shamans who have become Catholics still feel it valuable to continue to practise their art?

2. Why are the indigenous shamans still consulted and what do they do for those who seek their help?

3. How do the Catholic shamans can conciliate their recourse to shamanism with their Christian faith?

1. Why do the shamans who have become Catholics still feel it valuable to continue to practise their art?

Of the ten shamans interviewed, nine were shamans before they became Christians. We only found one case of a woman who had been initiated as a shaman after she was already a Christian: a Tayal woman [Ta2] who began her initiation at the age of 50 after her parish priest, a Columban missionary passionate about inculturation, encouraged her to become a shaman so as to continue the tradition. When her initiation was complete, it was this missionary who paid for the pig which is traditionally sacrificed on such an occasion.

Of the nine other shamans, two, who were initiated by aunts who were shamans, said that they had stopped all shamanic practices after their baptism. One of these was a Paiwan lady who became Christian and a catechist in 1956 [Pai1] and the other was an Amis Sister who entered
religious life at the age of 18 in 1966 [Am1]. However, these two women continue to be consulted to help solve difficult problems. The first of them is a lady who is very much respected in her village by Catholics, Protestants and non-Christians. Fifteen years ago she managed to get her fellow villagers to grant a normal funeral to people who had died a violent death, by accident or as a result of suicide, even though this was contrary to tradition. The Amis Sister is regularly consulted by Christians who are faced with psychological or physical ailments that neither Western nor Chinese medicine are able to cure: headaches, very painful arthritis, sudden attacks of fever among children, incurable cancers, deep depression and unrelenting crises of anxiety. Among her regular patients are several priests and Sisters and even a few highly-placed ecclesiastical persons.

Two others of the shamans were obliged to put aside their practice in order to be baptised. However, they have subsequently returned to it in response to pressing needs. The first is a Paiwan lady [Pai2], who had to burn her shaman box at the demand of the catechist in order to qualify for baptism. Some years later a chief from her village asked her to return to her practice in the following words:

> You were a shaman before you became a Christian and everyone in the village knows that you have the power within you. Christianity is a foreign religion. If you no longer practise, the tradition of the ancestors will die out. You must continue to practise at least for those who have not converted to Christianity. Otherwise, they will have no-one to bless their marriages, bless their houses with holy water or pray at funerals.

The lady in question consulted her parish priest, who was of open mind and gave her this instruction: “You may begin to work as a shaman again but only for the non-Christians.” From that moment, the lady shaman took up her practice again, first only for non-Christians, but little by little also for Christians who asked her, in particular for those who felt that the Christian burial rites showed insufficient honour to the deceased. Today this Paiwan lady is 84 and is still consulted, especially by older people. Recently, she even blessed the marriages of young people who want to marry in the traditional way. The second case is that of a Bunun shaman [Bu2], who was trained by his father from the age of seven and then baptised when he was ten. He returned to his practice at the age of 45 after the death of his father, who was a renowned shaman. “After my father died, it was necessary to help all those in need since they could no longer consult my father.” Now 65, he is a devout Catholic held in high esteem by his parish priest, who is not aware that he is an active shaman.

The other five shamans interviewed [Ta1, Ta3, Bu1, Ts1, Ts2] have never stopped practising. They all explain the continuance of their practice by the good of those who consult them:

> When I see people suffering, I cannot but be moved and want to help them. [Ta3]
> I am convinced that the gift I have received comes from God and that what I do is right and proper. [Bu1]
> The practice of my art is a good thing because it helps people who suffer. [Ts1]

One important point to underline is that all the shamans interviewed unanimously condemn the use of shamanic powers to hurt others:

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1 Paiwan and Rukai shamans have very pretty carved painted boxes in which they keep the instruments they need for their practice.

2 Among the Paiwan, Rukai, Puyuma, Amis and Tsou, the shamans play a much more important social role than among the Tayal or Bunun. They intervene not only to resolve problems but also to bless and pray at the important stages and moments of people’s life.
Those who dare to practise black magic are always punished, either by a violent death, or by sterility, or by their male descendents turning into good-for-nothings. [Bu2].

Black magic seems to have been used largely out of jealousy, vengeance or unrequited love:

*The principal cause of the use of black magic is jealousy or vengeance.* [Bu3]

*This girl loved him but he did not love her, so she went to see a shaman to put a spell on him.* [Ta2]

According to several of the shamans interviewed, it would seem that this dark side of shamanism survives only among the Bunun and the Tayal-Sediq:

*There is no longer any black magic among the Tsou bands, though the Bunun continue to practise it.* [Ts1]

*What the Tsou and Rukai fear the most here is to have a spell cast on them by a Bunun shaman.* [Mis2]

*Among the Tayal here, there is no longer any black magic, but the Sediq continue to cast spells against us.* [Ta3]

2. *Why are the indigenous shamans still consulted and what do they do for those who seek their help?*

Detailed analysis of the interviews, which we cannot reproduce in full within the confines of this short article, enables one to discern five main reasons, often inter-linked, as to why indigenous shamans are still consulted:

- The existence of a physical and/or psychological ailment that is apparently incurable;
- The presence of a recurring sense of guilt, particularly with respect to persons who are dear to one, and/or deceased;
- A difficult family situation with tension between spouses, among siblings and/or between generations;
- The disappearance of a person or personal ability or precious object that one wants to recover;
- To know by all means possible the cause of an overwhelming and unexpected misfortune.

Five accounts of consultations drawn from the interviews will enable us to grasp the interaction of these various elements rather better.

A Catholic lady shaman from the Tayal tribe shared the following story [Ta2]: A young man who had studied for three years at the diocesan catechetical school came back to work in his village as a paid catechist. Some weeks after taking up his appointment, his mouth became strangely deformed and he was unable to express himself correctly. He consulted several doctors in various hospitals, who were all unable to cure him. At a loss, the young catechist visited the shaman. After a few sessions, the shaman discovered through dreams that the reason for his illness was that a young lady in a neighbouring village had cast a spell on the young man because she was in love with him but he paid no attention to her. The shaman advised the young man to stop his work so as not to be subject to any such spells again. He decided to give up his work as a catechist and his mouth returned to normal. The

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4 This point is confirmed by Fr K. Stähli based on observations made during his long career among the Bunun [Mis2].
parish priest of the time, who was not aware of the consultation with the shaman, explained his resignation to the parishioners by saying that he was too stressed by his new job. But the family of the young man and his friends all knew that the real reason for his departure was that a young lady, who was in love with him, had cast a spell on him.

This account is particularly interesting. It shows a lady shaman who cures a physical ailment that had deep psychological and relational implications: the mouth of the young man, whose function as a catechist was the pride of his family, is deformed and he is unable to express himself in public. The shaman’s art is to suppress the psychological cause of the patient’s illness, which is most likely caused by stress linked to his new job, by giving an explanation for the affliction which helps to maintain his face and self-confidence: he must give up his job as a catechist, because the young girls love him too much and could play tricks on him.

Another consultation carried out by a non-Christian Amis shaman is also very significant [Am2]. A man who was a recent convert to Protestantism suffered from atrocious headaches, for which the doctors could find no physical cause. He went to visit the shaman, who, after several sessions, showed him that the reason for his headaches was that his ancestors were angry because he no longer showed them the veneration that was rightly theirs. The shaman, although not a Christian, knew enough about the difference between the Catholics and Protestants regarding veneration of ancestors that he was able to suggest that the man join the Catholic Church: “I made him understand that, as a Catholic, he would be free to venerate his ancestors whilst remaining a Christian.” The man joined the Catholic Church and his headaches ceased.

As in the preceding case, a physical cure is effectuated by means of a psychological solution (being freed from a recurrent sense of guilt generated by the failure to practise the traditional cult of the ancestors) which preserves the patient’s relational face (He maintains his Christian faith whilst returning to the veneration of his ancestors.)

Two other accounts of consultations that speak loudly come from a religious Sister, a former shaman of the Amis tribe, who is still frequently consulted [Am1]. One day she was called to a family where the many children were quarrelling over inheritance at their mother’s deathbed. Although already unconscious for two weeks, the mother was unable to die and her long agony concerned the family. The sister, who knew the family well, first prayed and meditated and then told them that the dying mother had communicated with her by telepathy to say that she wanted her eldest daughter-in-law to be responsible for the inheritance. The children accepted the mother’s wish as revealed by the Sister and the mother was able to die in peace. Another time the Sister was called to a family where one child suffered from sudden attacks of fever that could not be explained by medicine. The little girl in question was the child of her mother’s first marriage. Again the Sister prayed and meditated, though in this case also in order to communicate with the ancestors of the family. The Sister then revealed to the mother that, if she wanted her daughter to recover, she should restore the portrait of her first, deceased husband to its place in the house and regularly show respect to him. Shortly after the reintroduction of the portrait in the main room of the family house, the little girl’s fevers disappeared.

A final account that is also significant is the story of a deliverance effectuated by a lady shaman of the Tsou tribe [Ts1]. Distraught parents came to ask the shaman to help them recover their 17 year-old daughter, who had gone missing some ten days previously. During the consultation, the shaman exhorted the parents to be patient: “Sooner or later, you will find her again!” She then probed further, asking indirect questions to try and understand why the daughter should have fled the family home. Finally she gave them specific advice as to how to improve their relationship with their daughter.
Before long, not only did the daughter return, she was also reconciled with her parents, who welcomed her warmly.

These five accounts show that beyond the basic “primary” tools used (vocal prayers, sprinkling with holy water, traditional ritual instruments, imaginary stories and strange rites) the shamans are in fact excellent psychologists full of human wisdom. The shamanic art that they practise aims at delivering those who consult them from an affliction which is tied to the psychological and relational interstices of their life, where anguish and guilt play an essential role.

The wisdom of the shamans is clear too from the humility with which most of them shared their accounts with us. All admit that sometimes they are faced with a case that they are unable to resolve, such as incurable cancer or psychological illnesses of unknown origin. It is thus essential for them to acknowledge their impotence and to direct the patient towards other means of healing whether in Western medicine or in religion.

Another feature of the shaman’s wisdom that emerged during the survey is a firm insistence on the danger of using shamanism as a means of earning money from those who suffer. Some of the people questioned said that they had observed such practices among the Bunun, Amis and Puyuma. They say that there are more and more false shamans drawn by a desire for profit, who readily mix indigenous and Chinese traditions in order to attract clients. All the Catholic shamans interviewed insisted on the fact that in their tribal tradition it is forbidden to make money from their service. They only accept a symbolic gift (a chicken, some fruit, a bottle of millet alcohol) and/or a small sum of money in an envelope as a reward for their services.

3 How do the Catholic shamans can conciliate their recourse to shamanism with their Christian faith?

While performing their rituals the three Tayal shamans and the two Bunun shamans interviewed all call on God according to the Christian understanding of the term. Moreover, they consider that their power is a gift from God:

*I use the ancient formulae, but I also invoke Yava Kayal (the Heavenly Father) and Jesus.* [Ta2]

When I pray, I invoke Yava Kayal. Before I was baptised I was not clear who God was nor how to pray, but now everything is clear and easy. [Ta3]

I always make the sign of the cross at the beginning of the consultation because I know that my power is a grace from God. [Bu1]

One of the Bunun shamans even gives half of the money he receives in the course of his service to the village church. “It is God who gives me the power to do what I do, so I must thank Him” [Bu2]. This relatively easy integration of Christian faith and shamanic practice by these Tayal and Bunun shamans seems to be the result of two notable factors. These shamans are all regular, practising church-goers with a good knowledge of Christianity. Moreover, in the case of the Tayal, the parish priest or, in the case of the Bunun, the catechist, know that they work as shamans, openly approve and regularly talk with them about it.

The two Tsou shamans interviewed integrate their Christian faith in a more problematic way. They acknowledge the superior position and strength of the Christian God, but they prefer to keep Him at a distance whilst continuing to work with the traditional spirits.
When I pray, I communicate with the spirits who are good and help me, never with God, who is supreme over all. God and Jesus know that I do this because I let them know but it is not they who help me in my work. [Ts1]

I know that God is the most powerful and that He is above all, but I continue to work with Aaku, the spirit to whom my father married me spiritually during my initiation. This is normal because I have a more intimate relationship with Aaku. [Ts2]

Unlike the above, these Tsou shamans hardly ever go to church and have only a vague awareness of the contents of their Christian faith. Moreover, they have never had the opportunity of discussing the practice of their art in depth with any pastoral worker in the parish (priest, Sister or catechist).

The integration of the invocation of the Christian God in the ritual of one of the two Paiwan shamans interviewed seems to be carried out in a syncretistic way, that is without any clear understanding of the reality to which the new words refer.

Sometimes I go to mass, but I do not understand much about what is going on. I know there is only one God. When I pray I first invoke Nagau, the sun. Then I invoke Nagamadi, the creative force, which is also the name used in the church for God. Sometimes I also call on Jesus, who has the same qualities as Nagamadi: He is the origin of the goods that nourish us and the origin of life. He is just and does not make distinctions between persons. I do not know if all these names refer to the same reality exactly, but it does not much matter for my practice. [Pai2]

This lady shaman, who has a rather superficial knowledge of the Christian religion and rarely goes to her village church, did have an open-minded parish priest who broached the subject of her practice but the dialogue did not go very far.

Another point that poses both theological and pastoral problems even for the Tayal and Bunun shamans who have integrated God into their ritual prayer, is that of explaining the cause of a sudden illness and the imposition of an expiatory rite to end it. The lady catechist from the Amis village of Tavalon insists on this point:

The less fervent Catholic and Protestant Christians who continue to consult the shamans say that they do so because the parish priest, catechist or minister are unable to satisfy what they see as two essential requirements: knowing the reason for the illness which has struck them and knowing what they must do concretely to be free from it. [Am4]

One of the Tayal shamans also makes the same point:

Most often, it is not enough to pray to God to cure our patients. They want us to show them why they suffer and what they should concretely do to be free from it. [Ta1].

In most of the cases reported by the shamans, the evil is revealed to be the result of a family or social relationship that has been damaged by an offensive act: theft, lying, a spell inspired by jealousy, vengeance, lack of respect to the deceased, adultery or offences against filial piety. The liberation of the patient requires a public act of reparation, which most often takes the form of an offering to deceased ancestors.

The challenge here is not to want to denounce such practices too quickly by saying that they are contrary to Christian faith, without first discerning what is good and praiseworthy in them. These practices imply an offering of reparation to the deceased, which seems to be contrary to one of the fundamental commandments of the Judeo-Christian tradition: “Who can forgive sins, but God alone”
These practices also seem to contradict the teaching of Jesus, who openly criticised the direct link which the Jews of his time made between a physical ill and a previous sin:

‘Rabbi, who sinned? He or his parents, such that he should be blind?’ ‘Neither he, nor his parents sinned,’ Jesus replied (Jn 9:2-3).

In fact what the Judeo-Christian tradition condemns is to believe that the dead have the power both to punish a sinner by making him suffer and then free him from that punishment in exchange for a reparatory offering. The Judeo-Christian tradition certainly does not condemn a symbolic offering to the ancestors as an acknowledgement that one has committed a fault and that one desires to mend it. On the contrary, Judeo-Christian morality considers that reparation is an indispensable step to gain pardon from God:

When you present your offering to God at the altar, if you then remember that your brother has a grievance against you, leave your offering there and go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering (Mt 5:23-24)

In the same way, Jesus clearly condemns those beliefs which pretend that physical or psychological ailments are the result of a punishment sent by God or other invisible powers as a retribution for sins committed previously. But he does not deny that a physical or psychological ill could come from profound anguish due to a recurrent sense of guilt, linked to some previous sinful action. This explains, moreover, why Jesus says one day to a man whom he cures and frees:

‘See you are well now. Do not sin again, lest worse things happen to you’ (Jn 5:14).

One essential element, which shows the quality of the fruit produced by the shamanic tradition of the Taiwan indigenous people, is that several very active members of the indigenous Catholic community are themselves former shamans or children of shamans. These are persons who have either been initiated as shamans themselves, or who have lived for a long time with a family member who was an active shaman. Above we mentioned a Paiwan catechist and an Amis Sister, who were initiated as adolescents by their shaman aunts and whose pastoral charisms still have a good influence today [Pai1, Am1]. During the survey, we learnt that two of the indigenous catechists who were working as translators were in fact the daughters of shaman mothers, from whom they said they learnt a great deal in the way of wisdom useful in pastoral work [Bu3, Am4]. Two catechists who were very successful in the first Catholic evangelisation of the Puyuma village of Zhiben [Pu3] and of the Bunun of Luona village were former shamans with well-known powers. From my own experience during eight years of pastoral work in Jianshi District (Xinzhu County) where traditional Tayal shamanism has completely disappeared, I can confirm that the elderly Christian ladies who are the best at leading community prayers for the dead and the sick are almost all the daughters of shaman mothers.

During the survey, Fr André Bareigs, who worked for over thirty years in the service of the Amis Catholic communities of the villages next to Fengping District (Hualian County), told us that the very active prayer groups in his pastoral area were led by women who were daughters of shaman mothers who had become Christian [Mis1]. In an interesting article, a Japanese anthropologist noted that since conversion to Christianity, Catholic prayer groups in Fengping District, largely composed of women in their mid-fifties, play a social role comparable to the groups of female shamans in traditional Amis villages. They pray for and calm the sick, console the families of the deceased and bless new

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5 For the latter, see Lardinois, O., Chan Chang-hui & Sun Ta-chuan, Church Alive: The Catholic Church among the Aboriginal People of Taiwan, Taipei: Kuangchi, 2004, 216-219.

6 K. Yamaji, Female Activity in the Amis of Taiwan in K. Yamaji, Kinship, Gender and the Cosmic World, Taipei: SMC, 1990, 49-74.
houses and boats with holy water. When they go to a family to pray, the women use a prayer book, *Sapliso’Satolon Ọlic-Radiw*, in Amis written by the foreign missionaries with help from local catechists [Am2]. The words of the songs used in the rituals are purely Christian, but most of the tunes are those of traditional shamanic prayers [Mis1].

**Conclusion**

In Taiwan, as elsewhere, Christianity still carries negative prejudices against shamanic practices. The analysis of a survey based on what remains of shamanic practices still found among indigenous Catholic communities invites us to a more open and welcoming attitude towards the good fruits that are bound to this shamanic inheritance more or less Christianised.

Throughout the enquiry we found that the indigenous shamans sought essentially the physical and psychological well-being of persons. We have also noted that, beyond the simplistic or strange external practices, in fact the healing capacity of the shamanic consultations rested on two laudable pillars: sincere listening to the patient with the aim of trying to truly take into account all aspects of his/her personal and social life; and a wisdom full of common sense on the part of the person consulted. Finally, we also found that all were clear in their denunciation of the two main possible deviations of a healthy shamanic practice: its use to cast evil spells and/or its development purely for financial gain.

The survey, nonetheless, has also revealed certain practices which are questionable because it seems they could still serve as vehicles for beliefs in sharp contradiction with Christian faith, such as fear of the souls of the dead, a too easy and direct link made between illness and punishment and recourse to the help of spirits whose power is not explicitly founded in God. Such practices should not necessarily be condemned outright but at least they call for real dialogue and a serious discernment to help all concerned to have a better grasp of what is at issue.

Our article is, then, an encouragement to appreciate (and help others appreciate) the good side of shamanic practices. But it is also an invitation to engage in greater effort at pastoral dialogue so as to help those who have recourse to shamanism to discover the liberating aspect of Christianity, notably and above all, with respect to certain beliefs which can lead to people being closed in by fear, condemnation from others, guilt and/or confusion.