

Science, Spirits, and Common Sense: The Espiritistas of Upi

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Upi circa 1960s

The time is the summer of 1961. In the dim light of three kerosene lamps, augmented by the glow of numerous candles, an elderly woman lays her hand on a young man's head, anoints him with a bit of menthol paste and prays for his bad back. She speaks of the magnetic fluid which is being transmitted through her hands from St. Francis and of the need of the young man to correct his ways. The twenty-some persons gathered in this rural house, neighbors all except for the parish priest who watches but does not actively participate, standing around the healer and her patient and praying silently. Earlier another woman, having made contact with the world of the spirit, has been the channel for a short moral homily, urging the young women of the community to dress modestly and to avoid cosmetics. There will be a few more moments of prayer following the anointing, and the little group will disperse. This has been a regular Thursday evening meeting of a spiritist cult which had been quietly, even clandestinely, formed in the midst of a thriving Episcopal mission in the remote Upi valley of what was then Cotabato province.

During the latter part of 1960 and until 1963, when I was a priest at the Episcopal Mission of St. Francis of Assisi in Upi, I had the opportunity of watching a number of Ilocano homesteaders of Mindanao, all of whom I knew well, form themselves into a local cult, loosely based upon the Union Espiritista Cristiana Filipinas (UECF), a national spiritist movement. Like their counterparts in many other rural Filipino barrios, these neophyte *espiritistas* had virtually no formal contact with what little national organization the movement possessed.

Yet within a year and a half more than thirty persons were meeting twice each week for spiritist sessions. A local espiritista ministry had emerged within the group, a body of (from the Episcopal viewpoint) heterodox belief had been accepted among them, and several individuals had won esteem as successful healers and mediums. I was fascinated by this group and watched them for several years. I made no effort to use my own position to contradict or expose them, wishing only to observe and learn what I could from their emergence. However, pressure from other members of the local church leadership and, indeed, from other parishioners uninclined to the spiritist way of looking at and doing things eventually led to the decline and dissolution of the espiritista group, most of whom were then reabsorbed into mainstream Mission ways.

The women and men who elaborated this local cult with such considerable initial speed and energy were by no means malcontents in the local parish church. On the contrary, they had been and continued to be enthusiastic and active parishioners, were devout in their personal religious observations, regular in weekly attendance at mass, and even avid in their participation in parish groups and activities. They understood and verbalized their spirit-communication and faith-healing activities as being science, not religion. As they saw it, espiritista rituals and beliefs harmonized with, supported, and actually assisted the Christian faith, just as their medium's healing power supported and made common cause with the pharmacy, the clinic, and the doctor.

The following account is based upon what I was able to see during the period, upon what I could learn from many enjoyable conversations with the Upi espiritistas, and upon the few publications of the movement which have found their way into the Upi valley. In this essay, I will briefly describe the cult and attempt to account for its rapid development by placing it into a larger context of Filipino folk spirit belief on the one hand, and the Upi religious and medical institutions of its day on the other.¹

Elements of preconquest belief

Of all aspects of preconquest Filipino culture, those that most aroused the curiosity of the Spaniards were their spiritual and religious beliefs. Some of the early friars and civil servants left richly detailed surveys of pre-Spanish culture in the lowland areas. From these early ethnographies, one is able to draw a clear impression of native beliefs.²

The principal ritual practices of the Filipinos, prior to the coming of the Spanish, were based on belief in environmental spirits, soul spirits, and a hierarchy of deities. The high ranking deity, *Bathala* in Tagalog, was the "maker of all things," and in honorific address, "the ruler of humans." He was remote, however, and was generally relegated to the background by a pantheon of goddesses and gods, each having specific and independent functions. These deities controlled the weather, the success of the harvest, and other phenomena important to society. They were associated with various skyworlds or underworlds and were known less through daily encounters than through elaborate myths and ritual epics which placed into a vivid cosmography the origins and destiny of humanity.

The spirits, however, were far from remote and were encountered everywhere. The spirit world of the Filipino was the everyday world, and it was densely populated. Environmental spirits lived in the water of fishponds, seas, and rivers; in the ground of the hills and fields, in caves, in stones, in trees. Some were mischievous or malevolent by nature, but most were considered benign or evil, depending on one's daily social relations with them. If a person, for example, should accidentally chop down a tree which was the abode of a spirit, it would become angry and cause the person to be sick.

Similarly, everyday existence involved interaction with the spirits of the dead, most often recently deceased relatives. These spirits demanded respect and attention, not unlike the deference due them when still alive. If such were not shown in conversation, or if food and intoxicants were not shared during rituals, the soul spirits would become offended and would inflict illness. Rituals and healing seances were frequent family activities. Spanish sources are full of extended accounts of these ceremonies.

There were several specialized classes of priestly office, with ritual, spirit-medium, and healing roles. The religious functionaries were usually elder women or transvestites. They were called upon to interpret dreams and omens, auspicious occasions for marriage, planting, battle, or hunting. They knew and recited the myths and ritual epics, linking them with social values and applying them to customary laws. More than any other person, they were wise in the ways of the "other people," the omnipresent spirits.

It has long been a virtual truism that the encounter of Spanish and Filipino culture was not a one-sided process, in which the conqueror remade the conquered society into an Hispanic image; many beliefs and practices survived the conquest and continued to thrive until the present time. The Spanish friars Christianized much of the Philippines, but their converts Filipinized the Christianity they adopted. Some of the old beliefs and practices, such as ritual drinking, were swept away by vigorous and occasionally draconian opposition by the Spanish missionaries and most traditional rituals were finally overwhelmed by the elaborate ceremonies of the Spanish Church. Certain other aspects of preconquest religion simply blended into folk Catholicism and eventually lost their original identity. Faith in the efficacy of charms remained as strong as ever, but rosaries, medallions, and images replaced these traditional items. Patron saints took over the guardian duties of the ancient lesser deities.³

The densely populated spirit world was, in many ways, the least affected. To be sure, some superficial renaming took place but Filipino Catholics still knew the environmental and soul spirits to be everywhere around them. Writing in the mid-eighteenth century, Friar Tomas Ortiz noted:

When they are obliged to cut any tree, or not to observe the things or ceremonies which they imagine not to be pleasing to the genii or the *nonos*, they ask pardon of them and excuse themselves to those beings by saying among many other things that the Father (the parish priest) commanded them to do it, and that they are not willingly lacking in respect to the genii or that they do not willingly oppose their "will" (Ortiz 1731).⁴

His observation could have been made in the twentieth century. Nurge observed identical behavior in a small fishing village of Leyte,⁵ and I have seen countless similar instances in the Upi valley.

Father Ortiz not only recognized his parishioners' continuing belief in environmental spirits; his observations on syncretism included a vivid description of their efforts to behave correctly, as they saw it, toward the soul spirits:

... the Indians very generally believe that the souls of the dead return to their houses the third day after their death in order to visit the people...they conceal and hide that by saying that they are assembling in the house of the deceased to recite the Rosary for him...They light candles in order to wait for the soul of the deceased. They spread a

mat on which they scatter ashes, so that the tracks or footsteps of the souls may be impressed thereupon; and by that means they are able to ascertain whether the soul came or not.

Anyone who has participated in the familial gatherings of rural peasant Filipinos following the death of a relative would recognize in this description ideas which continue, virtually unaltered, to the present day.

The tenacity and influence of the old beliefs and practices, especially among rural Filipinos, is nowhere more marked than with regard to illness. The spirits not only still inhabit the proximate environment—the trees, the streams, the mountains—but their aroused anger is, as it always has been, the principal source of sickness. Some illnesses, of course, are attributed to natural causes, such as indigestible food or sudden changes in the weather, but most sicknesses must be dealt with by a folk practitioner versed in the ways of the spirits and expert in the rituals and potions which are believed to appease their hostility. Since the turn of the twentieth century, when the American emphasis on rural education and medical service began, most of the Philippine lowland areas have been the scene of concerted efforts to introduce modern sanitation, modern concepts of disease, and modern medical treatment. Nonetheless, although injections and drugs have won widespread acceptance, the germ theory of disease remains largely foreign. Most rural Filipinos do not claim to have actually seen a tree spirit or a soul spirit, but like the millions of Westerners who have never seen germs, their belief in them is profound and unquestioned.

Nuro in the Upi valley

At the time of these observations, Upi was a municipality in the province of Cotabato. Except for its western boundary on the Moro Gulf, the municipality was almost entirely steep mountains and deep gorges, with a central fertile valley. The municipal poblacion, its only town of any size, was called Nuro and was located at the northern end of the valley, close to the center of the district. Today, a mostly dirt road runs through Nuro from Cotabato City, some forty winding kilometers to the northwest, and this road is Upi's only connecting surface link to the outside world. The valley itself is well adapted to both wet and dry cultivation to rice and corn.

Like many areas of Mindanao, Upi is marked by considerable ethnic diversity. Its mountains, valleys, and forests comprise the ancient homeland of the animist Teduray⁶ and, in the twentieth century, of a branch of the Muslim Maguindanaon. In the last years of the nineteenth century, Spanish Jesuits had a small mission effort among the Teduray, centered at Tamantaka near Cotabato City but they never penetrated as far as Nuro. The greatest change in the Upi valley came with the arrival of the Americans, and proceeded rapidly after 1916 when an American Constabulary captain married a Teduray woman and began efforts to "modernize" the Teduray. In the same year, the first elementary school was built at the foot of the mountains; three years later, the road was built to Nuro and an agricultural school established there. Very soon Ilocano homesteaders from Luzon began to homestead the Upi valley, followed by Ilongo homesteaders from the Visayas. By the 1930s, Nuro had become a predominantly lowlander Christian community and remained so to the present.⁷

Although political power has generally remained in the hands of the Maguindanaon, they and the Teduray farmers have tended to stay in the surrounding forests and hills, leaving the valley to the Ilocanos and Ilongos. These two groups, despite coming from different parts of the archipelago and speaking similar but distinct languages, both knew almost 400 years of Spanish influence and were similar in many ways. They have, nevertheless, tenaciously preserved their own identities and mingled very little. The Ilocanos settled to the southeast of town, where they have homesteaded out on both sides of the provincial road; while the Ilongos have established themselves to the west and southwest. Representatives of both communities participate in the municipal council and persons of both communities shop together at the Saturday market. In Nuro, on the whole, the Ilocanos and the Ilongos get along well enough with one another, but do not mix much.

Following the completion of the provincial road to Nuro, a wide variety of governmental and commercial enterprises were extended into the valley, bringing to an end its relative cultural isolation from the mainstream of lowland life. Except for the government offices and Chinese stores located at the heart of the poblacion, each of these enterprises tended to serve one or the other ethnic community; certain rice mills, for example, were operated by and for Ilongos, others by and for Ilocanos. Exactly the same pattern

characterized the development of both religious and medical institutions in the valley. There were two parish churches in Nuro, one Roman Catholic and the other Episcopal.⁸ Both were large and had great influence in community affairs. Like most other valley institutions, they reflected the ethnic dichotomy of Ilocano and Ilongo.

The Episcopal Mission, the first Christian body to establish itself in the valley, was founded by American missionaries in the early 1920s, primarily to evangelize the Teduray. Over the years, more than forty Teduray village congregations had developed in the surrounding area, but the central Upi parish church became overwhelmingly Ilocano in its membership. The pioneer Ilocano homesteaders in the valley were not Roman Catholics but members of the Iglesia Filipinista Independiente—followers of Msgr. Gregorio Aglipay who had severed his allegiance to the Roman Catholic hierarchy at the turn of the century and had led several millions of people into a Philippine Independent Catholic Church.⁹ Lacking a priest of their own, they attached themselves to the Episcopal parish, where they found the Anglo-Catholic ceremonial and discipline familiar and congenial. The Mission, as it is called, has continued to be the parish church for almost all of the valley's Ilocano settlers.¹⁰

Ilongo homesteaders began to settle in the valley some years after the Ilocanos. In contrast to the latter, the Ilongos were Roman Catholics, who soon established their own chapel in the poblacion along the road which led to their settlement area. Newcomers aligned themselves accordingly: Ilocanos who were born and raised in the Roman Catholic Church tended to become Episcopalians when they settled in Upi; Ilongos, including those of Aglipayan background (as followers of Aglipay came to be known) were quickly absorbed into the Roman Catholic parish. After all, the images and ceremonials were almost identical in the two churches. People worshipped with their kinsmen and provincemates and left the subtleties of hierarchical dispute to the priests who understood them.

Two modern medical facilities served Upi. The government maintained a rural health unit (RHU) in the poblacion, staffed by a doctor, a nurse, and two midwives. The doctor who served in the early 1960s was sophisticated, a Tagalog, and graduate of one of the country's better medical schools, and his clinic was modern and clean. His wife, an Ilonga from the local community, was a registered pharmacist and

operated a well-stocked *botica* next door. The other clinic was established by the Mission before the war and greatly expanded by 1962 when it came under the oversight of Brent Hospital, an Episcopal institution in Zamboanga City across the Moro Gulf. No doctor was a permanent resident, but a Brent staff physician spent a week there each month, supplementing a highly competent and popular resident nurse.

As with the two parish churches, so with the two clinics. Ilocanos and Teduray saw the Mission clinic as their own, and tended to distrust the government health unit. The Ilongo community, on the other hand, looked upon the public health doctor, through his wife, as one of their own; Ilongos almost never visited the Mission clinic. For both groups, of course, these modern facilities—with their crisp linen, their shiny porcelain, their mysterious but impressive microscopes and flasks, and their row upon row of little bottles filled with wonder-working contents—constituted only one aspect of Upi valley medicine. The Ilongos and the Ilocanos each had their own folk healers, their various traditional specialists who knew and understood the ways of the spirits. These people were the first line of defense against most illnesses, for they were the ones who dealt not only with the sickness but with its underlying cause: The myriad spirits and demons, who, together with the homesteaders, inhabited the valley.

In sum, we have a background of two significant dimensions, against which we can now begin to place the spiritist cult of Upi. Their environment, on the one hand, was an ancient world of powerful saints and proximate spirits, of charms as well as of chalices; on the other hand, it was a changing world of increasing complexity and rapid modernization, where the traditional was being confronted daily by the radically new.

A local cult under the Episcopal mission

The group of people who call themselves *espiritistas* were Ilocano, mostly tenant farmers, and all active members of the Episcopal Mission. They did not see themselves as a separate sect, although they did have a meeting place, a home where they gathered twice a week for religious services, and they numbered among themselves several charismatic functionaries. Although the *espiritistas* had adopted a somewhat blurry

belief in reincarnation, had redefined the Trinity, and communicated with departed souls, they did not consider themselves as unfaithful in any significant sense to the teachings of the Philippine Episcopal Church. Because of their unanimous conviction that they were loyal members of the Mission, and therefore participated in all the regular parish affairs, and believed in the notion that spiritism is science, not religion, I think they are best regarded as a cult and—as they would resolutely affirm—not a sect.

Although they had no institutional ties with the organization known as the UECF, the spiritists in Upi took the name and most of their distinctive ideas from this group. The UECF was founded at the turn of the century by Juan Ortega, an attorney and avid disciple of the then internationally known spiritualist author, Alan Kardec.¹¹ The Union's original center was in Tondo, Manila and later on spread to several provinces, establishing such major centers as Malabon, Rizal. Most rural *espiritista* groups seem to have begun in this manner. It had no salaried, professional clergy and no national machinery, although the beginnings of both could be observed around the older centers. Some literature was published, mostly in mimeographed form, but there were no funds for national distribution. The UECF had no program of missionary expansion. Individuals who had come to know and accept the teachings of the Union were encouraged, should they move to another place, to gather and instruct all who would listen.

The cult began in the Upi valley in 1960. A young Ilocano tenant farmer's wife had a dream experience in which the soul of her grandfather advised her to follow the teachings of some *espiritista* pamphlets, which she had picked up when visiting relatives in Manila, and instructed her in the use of a healing oil. She was soon recognized among many families in the Ilocano district as an "anointer"—one of the traditional types of folk healers—and was credited with several cures. Regular meetings began a few months later when a near neighbor found, again through a dream, that she had the power to go into a trance and communicate with spirits. The pattern for the meetings was taken from that of a Union temple, the literature of which was soon regarded as a sort of manifesto to be studied avidly by all followers who are able to read.

By mid-1961, the spiritist meetings had been attended at one time or another by a great many of the Ilocano settlers, of which some thirty or so were regular and actually thought of themselves as *espiritistas*. All of the members were Ilocano and lived in the same general area. The majority were interrelated by blood or marriage, but not all. In fact, the cult—like the Mission as a whole—cut across many of the most conspicuous alliance and factional lines within the Ilocano community. Some of the group had attended the local agricultural school, but most had little or no education beyond the primary grades. Approximately two-thirds of the *espiritista* regulars were women and all were among the Mission's most active and devout members.

The cult's functionaries were of two basic types. Like other spiritist groups of the Union pattern, there were presiding officers who were not thought by the group to need supernatural validation. The other type of religious functionary, the medium, did require a specific charisma. *Espiritistas*, in general, recognize four possible medium activities, each of which is known by the particular gift which the medium has been granted with. The *medio curandero* is the healing medium, and has a key role in the sessions. Like the other mediums, the healer is usually a woman. The other three types of medium are not healers but have some power of verbal communication with the spirits. A *medio vidente* has the highest standing of them all, being able to see, hear, and speak with the spirits. The *medio escribiente* is used by the spirits as an amanuensis to write down its words. The *medio parlante*, the most common of these last three, is able to act as a vehicle through which the spirit can speak. The Upi group had no *medio vidente* or *medio escribiente*. Several women expressed speaker abilities, and the original anointer was the group's only *medio curandero*. Spiritist mediums and officers were strictly nonprofessional and received no offerings of any kind for their activities. Furthermore, they were forbidden by their beliefs to attempt to use their powers outside the specific context of spiritist sessions.

In Upi, sessions were held twice a week and generally lasted about two hours. One meeting was held on Thursday evenings, after the day's activities are finished, and the other took place each Sunday morning following the seven o'clock main sung mass at the Mission. The cult met at the house of a member which they referred to as "like a temple."

The ritual of a session was somewhat informal and followed a regular form. After a hymn, the presiding officer recited an invocation, asking God's blessing on the session, then led the assembled group in the Lord's Prayer and a general confession.¹² These opening exercises completed, he then called for a speaking medium to come to the table where he was seated. Other mediums present remained to the side. The people attending the ritual did not arrange themselves in rows, as in a church, but sat on benches along the walls, as they would at a social event.

After some minutes of intense concentration and silence, the medium would begin to mutter sentences. These were rarely audible to the group as a whole, but were recorded to be read aloud later. When the medium began to tremble, the gathering knew that the spirit had arrived and were able to tell, from her actions and message, whether a desirable or a "low" spirit had been contacted. Should it be the latter, the speaking medium was immediately recalled from her trance, so that the spirit was driven away. On occasion, no contact could be made with a "high" spirit, in which case the practice was to read a lengthy portion from the Ilocano translation of the Bible. When the medium, or the Bible reading, was concluded, the presiding officer would ask anyone who felt moved by the Holy Spirit to speak. Anyone present was free to stand up and speak at this time, although in practice only acknowledged mediums tended to do so.

Most of the spirit messages received, and most of the comments and additions by others present, consisted of exhortations to be good and to seek health and happiness by living a moral life, loving God and neighbor. It was very seldom that the spirits communicated anything other than the simple and straightforward folk moralism of proverbs and pulp magazines.

The seance part of the ritual, which was concerned mostly with moral teaching, was followed by the healing part. The sick were called to the center of the group, and the others present were bidden to pray for them silently. Meanwhile, the healing medium discussed the patient's ailment with her or him, touched the person's head or arm, and offered advice concerning a cure. An *espiritista* would then say that her touch was a channel for the curative "magnetic fluid"¹³ which flowed from the Holy

Spirit or the Spirit Protector into the sick person. The healing medium usually suggested rest and invariably inquired whether the patient has been to the Mission clinic for medication. Not infrequently, she would apply some balm of her own, such as a menthol paste. The sick person was then dismissed with an injunction to be regular at her or his attendance at Sunday mass and at the bi-weekly spiritist sessions and to try to lead an exemplary life. No one seemed to expect a miraculous cure to occur at once, but it was expected that the cure would follow in due course if the patient was strong in belief and followed the medium's advice. Another hymn and a closing thanksgiving prayer concluded the meetings.

To summarize, the spiritists in the Upi group tended to be neighbors and relatives, but they did not reflect any political or factional divisions within the Ilocano community. They had a quasi-organization, but it had no distinctive or special expression outside the group's ritual meetings. Except at those sessions, their functionaries, both officers and mediums, had no role as such whatsoever. Their pastor was the Mission parish priest, their center of formal worship was the Mission church, and their scripture was the Bible. The particular ideas which drew them together as spiritists were, they stoutly maintained, all sound Christian doctrines. Far from renouncing or departing from the Christian faith, they believed they were giving it actual empirical proof. While the spiritist group in Upi did, in fact, have some quite distinctive beliefs—to which we now turn—their primary corporate religious identification was, with the rest of the valley's Ilocano homesteaders, to the Episcopal Mission. They operated very much like a prayer group within that church and not like a splinter group from it.

The espiritistas' belief system

The particular beliefs of the Upi group of espiritistas were not highly defined and rationalized, but they were distinctive and diverged from the more traditional Christianity officially taught at the Mission along three important and closely related theological lines: Notions about spirits, ideas about the relationship of morality and physical health, and the somewhat inchoate belief in reincarnation.

The spiritist group conceived of the spirits as divided into two categories, the high and the low spirits. The high spirits were God and

the saints of Christianity. The low spirits were held to be mostly the soul spirits of the recently deceased. Having been imperfect humans, the low spirits were not able to enlighten the believer regarding higher righteousness, nor were they helpful in combating illness, which, as we shall see, was related directly to sin. The presence of low spirits was thus unwelcome at the sessions and discouraged by the mediums. The high spirits, on the other hand, were extremely interested in the moral and physical well-being of the living, so they worked through the mediums to help them. They spoke wisdom through the speaking medium and sent their healing magnetic fluid through the curing medium. The Spirit Protector, who was the Mission's patron saint (Francis of Assisi) aided in repelling the undesirable spirits. This was important to the mediums, as the low spirits were said to leave a medium weak and tired after the session, while the high spirits gave her strength and a feeling of elation. Mediums were strictly warned not to attempt spirit possession outside of the regular group sessions where the low spirits would be encouraged to manifest themselves. To do so was considered tantamount to paganism and would displease the Spirit Protector, who could not then be expected to render any assistance.

The espiritistas considered that there was no distinction between God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, while Jesus was considered to have been an ordinary mortal who achieved perfection, over several reincarnations, and became Christ through his moral goodness and his strict obedience to God's commands. Having overcome all sin, he had been fused into *Dios*. This formulation seems to have been found in the UECF pamphlets to which the group had access, and it apparently seemed reasonable and unexceptional to them.

God and the other high spirits were thought to be greatly concerned about the moral goodness of persons during their life, so that all the messages which they communicated through the medium had the flavor of the everyday morality of the rural pulpit, the political platform, and the editorial page. A typical spirit-communication would exhort the group to social and personal responsibility, to conduct becoming of a Christian such as avoiding graft and corruption and eschewing loose living. It would likely conclude with an assessment of all these problems being caused by lack of moral earnestness and a recommendation that the community prays for the enlightenment of those who perpetuate the evils.

On the healing side, the *espiritistas* believed illness to be the direct cause of evil deeds and bad thoughts. God was thought to help sinners, but God also demanded that they must suffer the effects of their evil ways to the exact degree that they have committed it. Sickness was considered due to God's justice.

Since the cause of illness was understood to be sin, the cure was quite logically linked to reform—sick people needed to amend their ways. They could then bring their sicknesses to the group sessions, where the spirits not only warned against immorality through the speaking medium but assisted in its cure by sending their magnetic fluid through the curing medium.

God's punishment for sin was regarded as inevitable, but not necessarily immediate. This present life is only one of many incarnations, and the Upi spiritists believed that their present life not only reflected unremembered previous lives, but set the stage for future ones. A good Christian who was afflicted with misery was not necessarily suspected of harboring secret wickedness, but rather was thought to be paying for sins committed in past life. So, too, it was held that while evil may go unpunished in this life, she or he would have to pay the debt of sin in one's subsequent existence.

The *espiritistas* recognized that these ideas were not explicitly elaborated in the sermons or masses at the Mission church. They did not, however, see any conflict between them and the Christian doctrine taught; these beliefs, in fact, were held to positively support the validity of the Christian truths. Members of the spiritist group were really not very concerned about these beliefs in themselves. When they referred to them at all, they saw them as science, not religion, and they dealt with their ideas not as esoteric variations of the Christian religion but as common sense insights into how it operated.

Espiritistas' "scientific" worldview

I have repeatedly made the point that neither in their image of themselves nor in their general behavior did the Upi spiritists act as outside the membership and thought-world of the Mission church. Furthermore, as priest-in-charge of the Mission in those days, I remained a bit wary and watchful but did not choose to declare them heretical

or excommunicated, and so did not force them into any separatist attitudes. I took very seriously their contention that they were engaged not in religious activities but in scientific ones and wanted to learn what they meant. It is with this assertion that I believe we need to begin an analysis of the Upi *espiritista* phenomenon.

In the modern Western world, from which the prestige-laden word "science" has made its way into Upi valley parlance, the term has a distinct meaning and represents a very special sort of perspective on the world. But the characteristic marks of modern science—formalized doubt, systematic experimentation, conceptual abstraction—remained as foreign to these Upi peasants and their thought as did the equally characteristic mark of the scientific worldview: A closed natural universe in which natural event follows a continuum of cause and effect, uninterrupted by supernatural agents of any sort. It soon became clear to me, in talking with my peasant Ilocano parishioners, that "science" generally meant something quite different to them. It referred to consideration of the surrounding world not abstractly but in a highly concrete way. It evoked an attitude toward reality which was not experimental or tentative but pragmatic and prudent.

"Be scientific," I once heard the bus driver urge. "Take the late trip to the coast when the bus is not so crowded." "Science" was to plant only when the ground was well prepared and the weather at its proper stage, so that the crop would get a good start. It was to follow tried and tested advice of those who knew when deciding how far apart to plant coconuts. In short, this rural, peasant use of "science" was far more akin to that point of view which philosophers and social scientists refer to as "common sense." It evoked a simple acceptance of the world as being just the way it seems to be and a desire to deal with its given realities practically and sensibly.

The given realities which comprise one's common sense world are, of course, not universal; they are modeled by the person's cultural heritage. Concepts of practical wisdom and prudent realism are handed down from generation to generation, just as are concepts of right and wrong and all the many other components of a social entity's worldview. When the Upi spiritists spoke of high and low spirits, and when they looked to these spirits for help or blame in time of sickness, they were concerning themselves with beings which have since time immemorial

been a "given reality" of their world and which no sensible person would, or could, attempt to ignore. It was precisely this element of the prudent and the pragmatic—this common sense acceptance of the nature of things as they were "known to be"—which was what the *espiritistas* meant when they described their activities and thought as "science."

When they spoke of "religion" they meant Christianity, specifically the complexity of the doctrines and practices taught and nurtured at the Mission by its clergy and nuns. Despite the local Anglican-Roman Catholic divisions, which most parishioners considered esoteric and technical at best, they all believed themselves to be, along with most other non-Muslim Filipinos they knew, participants in the worldwide Catholic Church which they never doubted to be God's true and personally established religion. In a very real way, to belong to the Church was itself a part of fitting into the common sense reality of things.

But the viability and the vitality of their religious commitment to Christianity did not merely lie in its being a part of their common sense world of practical reality. It also rested in its ability to profoundly ground that world in ultimate meaning. Religious systems classically inform their followers about what the world is like and how they should live in such a world. It is only when a religion supports its moral imperatives by grounding them in the fundamental nature of reality, as that reality is understood, can it invest its ethical precepts not only with a sacred aura but one of practical good sense.¹⁴ Mission teaching, in the hands of foreign and foreign-trained teachers, was virtually silent and uncomprehending regarding the popularly understood world of spirits. By itself, in those days and under those conditions, it simply failed to connect with the lived environment of the Ilocano homesteaders. This was the significance, I would argue, of the *espiritista* conviction that their "science" supported and proved Christianity.

They knew that the world was filled with spirits and that their religion must take them into account. In spelling out a difference between the high and low spirits, the spiritists classified the Trinity and the saints into a different category from the soul spirits, and they specified the former as ultimately significant and rejected all traffic with the latter. This and other similar *espiritista* scientific notions made the clearest good sense; they vindicated the fundamental tenet of their faith and their worldview.

In showing how it was that, in terms of that worldview, God was related at the deepest level to the moral code which they were on all sides challenged to make their own, they brought both God and that moral code into a cognitive and behavioral harmony which was both existentially convincing and ethically coercive. By explicating a relationship on the level of ultimate reality between moralism and illness, they placed the problem of suffering and pain into a religious setting and, at the same time, equipped their religion with a capacity to give them meaning. And, in their somewhat vague acknowledgment of a notion of reincarnation, the *espiritistas* were able to set into a religious framework the perennial problem of evil; they enabled their religion to demonstrate "scientifically" how it is that the good so often suffer while the wicked flourish.

The Upi spiritist group had not attempted a wholesale incorporation of the spirit population into the Christian scheme. They were silent about the *encantos*, the flying witches, and the like—all of which they simply dismissed as varieties of low spirits to be shunned. But they had brought into their understanding of the Christian system the ancient worldview in which such spirits are myriad and ever near. Whether or not they were justified in believing themselves to be orthodox Christians, they had indeed adapted the faith as they knew it to actuality as they perceived it, and in so doing had given their faith the possibility of making that everyday world a context for life that was religiously and ethically meaningful.

To the *espiritistas*, therefore, their "science" made explicit—and thereby ritually demonstrable—what must somehow be made at least implicit to all Christians if the Church is to have force and vitality. It established the coherence of their religious lives in terms of their world—and of their world in terms of their faith.

Sickness and restoration of health

If a theory of disease and its treatment is to be equally comprehensible, whether it be a "modern" or a "folk" theory, it must at the very least conform with ideas of what illness is and does, and ideas about how it is caused. There was probably no arena where the science of the modern West and the "science" of the Upi peasant's commonsensical world came into more dramatic confrontation than they did in matters of sickness and

health. More than fifty years of rural education and health activities on the part of both government and Mission agencies had secured a place for injections and antibiotic tablets: They had, however, produced very little comprehension of germs, diet deficiencies, or glandular imbalances.

As centers of modern medical theory and practice, the rural clinics in Upi had come to be regarded with respect, even awe, for their proven ability to deal with symptoms. But, despite all their devices and drugs, they seemed in the popular mind to be thoroughly unrelated to cause. To the vast majority of these rural folks, the cause of illness was still to be sought in the world of the spirits. Sickness for them was essentially a religious phenomenon.

According to traditional spirit lore, one became sick because of some particular spirit's mischief, malevolence, or anger. As the *espiritista* group saw it, the proximate cause of illness was sin; its ultimate cause was God's justice. Whereas in the ancient scheme, restoration of health required some appeasement of the spirit's hostility, in the spiritists' system restoration of health followed repentance and moral amendment. To be sure, the cause of sickness here had been considerably intellectualized and had been placed in an ethical frame, but illness and recovery were still grounded on the causal level in the spirit world, and the connecting mechanism had been unambiguously clarified. Sickness and health were functions of personal morality. Earlier, I have argued that *espiritista* beliefs and rituals served to make explicit the coherence of Mission religion by adapting it meaningfully to the rural Ilocano worldview. So, too, their ideas and sessions rendered explicit the coherence of Mission medicine by integrating it meaningfully with religion, where their worldview required that it be understood as such.

As powerful adjuncts to the curing medium and her magnetic fluid, the drugs and injections which characterized scientific medicine could find a place in the Upi common sense world. Modern medicine, for *espiritistas*, was stripped of its mystery and magic simply because it was placed into a context of pragmatic realism and prudent wisdom and into a context of ethical verities which sprang from the very structure of reality.

Conclusion

From what has been described of the Upi *espiritistas'* organization, such as it is, and of their distinctive notions, one striking conclusion seems clear. If the coming to being of the group is to be analyzed in terms of its functionality, the social system in which it was embedded offers little promise as a fruitful context for the analysis.

The Upi valley was definitely divided into ethnic camps, but insofar as this was reflected in religion—as indeed it was, and markedly so—it was a division between Anglican and Roman, delineating Ilocano from Ilongo. The *espiritista* cult was completely within the Ilocano group, and completely within the Episcopal Mission. Among the Ilocanos of the valley, all the factional alliances and divisions which typify barrio life were to be found, and yet these lines were as cross-cut by the cult as they were by the Mission as a whole. Even within the specifically ecclesiastical setting of parish affairs, one can hardly propose that the spiritist group underlined some social reality. Church politics abounded in the Mission as they do in all rural parishes of size and influence—between clergy, between clergy and people, between laypeople—but in three years I saw no instance of *espiritistas* grouping themselves over against others on the basis, explicit or implicit, of being *espiritistas*. That they did not is, I believe, not just a curious fact but one of analytical importance. Whatever the attraction of the movement was, it did not lie in its reinforcement of some traditional social tie.

On the other hand, the movement was indeed attractive, as the rapidity with which it took hold and was locally elaborated testified. I would argue that the key to this attraction was to be found not in the social dimension of the group, but in its cultural dimension; not in the part it played in the organization of community roles and collectivities through which the spiritists interacted socially, but in the integration of beliefs and values in terms of which they interpreted their experience and oriented their social behavior.

The Mission church taught about and dealt with sin and salvation; the clinic taught about and dealt with sickness and health. What *espiritista* "science" showed was the connection between the two. It interpreted

each in terms of the other and it demonstrated that both reflected the very nature of existence. These are accomplishments which the Mission was not achieving on its own. Espiritistas were clearly able to be loyal members of the Mission and regular patients at its clinic, because the role of their cult was neither to displace Christianity nor to rival modern medicine. Its role was to make both of them relevant and workable.

Notes

¹ This is a revision, reflecting further thought, of an earlier essay published in the United States (Schlegel 1965).

² See, for example, de Plasencia (1589) on pre-conquest Tagalog culture.

³ See Phelan (1959).

⁴ Ortiz (1731).

⁵ Nurge (1956).

⁶ The Teduray are also known in the literature and in common usage as "the Tiruray." This latter name is an Americanization of the name of the people.

⁷ See Schlegel (1999) for a more extended discussion of the history of the Upi valley.

⁸ In general parlance, the poblacion or town church with a resident clergy is termed a parish. The Episcopal Church makes a technical distinction between a congregation which is financially self-sufficient and one which is subsidized by the diocese, calling the latter a mission and the former a parish. The Episcopal congregation of Upi was officially titled the Mission of St. Francis of Assisi from its foundation in 1923 until 1962, when it attained financial independence and parish status. By that time, local reference to the Mission was too ingrained to change. In this essay, I refer to it either as the parish or as the Mission.

⁹ Studies of Aglipay and the IFI (See Achutegai and Bernad 1960; Wittemore 1961) have tended to be partisan and polemic and need to be read with this in mind.

¹⁰ There is, in addition, a small Protestant church of Ilocano membership, founded by homesteaders of Methodist background; it has no significance for this present study.

¹¹ I am indebted to Mary Racelis who has studied the UECF and who first pointed out to me the relationship between the UECF organization and thought and those of the Upi spiritist group. See Hollnsteiner (1958).

¹² These opening prayers and the closing thanksgiving prayer were taken from the Episcopal *Book of common prayer*.

¹³ The curious term "magnetic fluid" apparently derives from its quasi-scientific sound and its sense of mysterious power. It comes from UECF terminology, and I could elicit no idea among the group of any relationship to actual magnetism.

¹⁴ This point has been made most powerfully in the writings of Clifford Geertz. See especially Geertz (1957; 1966).

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