

Ritual Healing Theory and Mark's Healing Jesus: Implications for Healing Rituals within African Pentecostal Churches

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Abstract

This article uses ritual healing theory to explore the meaning and function of healing rituals performed by Jesus, the Galilean healer, and to raise alarm concerning some healing rituals found in a number of African Pentecostal churches. Using ritual healing theory, a subdivision of the discipline of social anthropology, the study argues that healing rituals are communicative practices that function to reveal the contradictions (unhealthy to healthy; possessed to normal) within a patient's life and to symbolically overturn the existing condition. The study discovers that the lack of supposed contradiction in some rituals by African Pentecostal healers, evident in rituals such as kissing or feeding the congregants grass or snakes, makes it imperative to ask and critique the efficacy of such healing rituals. The article concludes with an exegetical section on the healing rituals found in Mark 1, with the intention to reveal the meaning and efficacy of each healing ritual.

Key Terms

rituals; healing; exorcism; touch; African Pentecostalism

1 Introduction

The rise of African Pentecostal churches and their focus on healing ministry has coincided with the rise of “unhealthy” healing practices, such as eating grass and drinking gasoline. Some preachers even engage in kissing female adherents—a ritual aimed at extracting demons from them. In Soshanguve, a suburb North of Pretoria in South Africa, resides an African Pentecostal preacher, Prophet Penuel Mguni, who is renowned for his controversial healing rituals (Cilliers 2018). Cajoling his adherents to exercise their faith, he feeds them live frogs, rats and snakes, claiming that, if prayed for, all

food becomes non-poisonous and, therefore, edible. The above is just one account; more stories could be emerging or have already happened, but have not been made public yet. A dominant tendency, especially by Kelebogile Resane (2017a; 2017b) and Mookgo Kgatle (2017), has been to castigate these practices as unorthodox and theologically unsound. In critiquing these practices, Resane (2017a, 1; 2017b) describes them using terms like “anti-institutionalism, anti-intellectualism, antinomianism, and anti-sacramentalism,” and calls for government intervention to monitor and control such excesses.

While sympathetic to their writings, this study takes a slightly different approach. It explores the healing rituals by Jesus and so-called “unhealthy” rituals among African Pentecostal churches with a view to decode their intention or meaning. The study does not compare the healing rituals by Jesus to those performed by African Pentecostal healers. Instead, it seeks to raise awareness about the meaning, if any, of each ritual. Such an assumption or hypothesis suggests that rituals have a communicative or coded purpose; they are not mere gestures with empty meaning. In other words, we can evaluate the purpose and function of any ritual based on its intention or implication. Theoretically, I use ritual healing theory informed by ideas within social anthropology to suggest that rituals provide language decodable or understandable by the adherents (Yalman 1964, 115). Within social anthropology, ritual healing theory is the third category or perspective, adding to Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic approach and Durkheim’s focus on social structures.

2 What is a Ritual?

Catherine Bell (1992) suggests that, depending on perspective, a definition for ritual is illusive. However, we can give a generic definition, saying that ritual is action with symbolic or mythical meaning. Rituals are coded actions; they can be short or elaborate actions. Participants decode the meaning of an action and are able to interpret it for the rest of the community (Hull 2014, 165). Jeffrey Alexander (2004) puts it well:

Rituals are episodes of repeated and simplified cultural communication in which the direct partners to a social interaction, and those observing it, share a mutual belief in the descriptive and prescriptive validity of the communication’s symbolic contents and accept the authenticity of one another’s intentions. It is because of this shared understanding of intention and content, and in the

intrinsic validity of the interaction, that rituals have their effect and affect. (p. 527)

In daily life, rituals are our daily way of communication. For example, the ritual of a handshake signifies friendship and hospitality. Concerning this, most African communities express their ritual of friendship, kinship and hospitality through handshaking. A person who refuses handshaking is regarded as a witch—a label that signifies anti-social behaviour. Associated with the ritual of handshaking is greeting. Upon meeting, human beings across the world greet one another with simple phrases such as “hi!” or “how are you?” In case of a familiar person, the ritual may become more elaborate by adding a handshake and a hug. However, if a person is not very familiar, a ritual of head nodding with the raising of one's eyebrows is enough. In one's domestic space, offering a visitor water to drink is a crucial ritual of hospitality and sustenance. For example, among communities living in the hot eastern parts of Zimbabwe, one should give visitors a glass of water first before greeting them with a handshake and/or hug. Because of the hot climatic conditions, a visitor that off-ramps to your homestead is likely to do so because they are about to collapse due to the hot weather. Therefore, culture dictates that the host should give drinking water before engaging in other welcoming rituals. In the same region, visitors may eat food without washing their hands. The reason for this is that they may collapse due to hunger while waiting for handwashing water. In most parts of Africa, a visitor is given food first, then the host goes and brings a basin of water, while in another hand holding a cup full of water to wash the visitor's hands. To avoid the accident of collapsing due to hunger, visitors may proceed to eat the food presented before their hands are rinsed in water.

Following the lead of anthropologists such as Victor Turner, healing rituals are located within the formal forms of ritual practice (Turner et al. 2017). Unlike daily rituals, healing rituals engage in tackling what is perceived to be a contradiction—in this case, a lack of health. Psychological perspectives locate healing rituals within the prism of placebo and shamanism. They associate healing rituals with previous trauma or anomalies that occurred in the past. Taking this perspective, healing rituals function as hypnotic activities (Cooper and Thalbourne 2005, 139). Considering individuals with hypnotisability traits, James McClenon (1997, 345) argues that ancient homo sapiens used shamanic practices as healing practices, and that associated genotypes existing in certain modern

individuals can provide evidence about the evolution of religion. His theory has been useful in explaining human beings' propensity towards religious healing rituals. However, McClenon's use of terms such as "hypnotism" and "altered states of consciousness" has been heavily critiqued (Guthrie 1997). In addition, in my view, viewing healing rituals as placebo and hypnotic practices reduces the entire ritual performance as less valuable and less real.

Social anthropological perspectives that build on the earlier views of Levi Strauss appear more convincing. Taking this perspective, Nur Yalman studied Sinhalese healing rituals, arguing that they function as symbolic codes that are concerned with "basic contradictions such as pollution and purity, fortune and misfortune, health and illness, and appear to be attempts to turn one side of 'an opposed category' into the other" (Yalman 1964, 117). Yalman (1964, 117) went further to provide a hermeneutical map of the interpretation of rituals, with three levels of analysis:

- the contextual analysis of items to allow the construction of a code;
- the formal symbolic structure of an action;
- and the deeper contradictions and problems that the action is concerned with.

I use this perspective as a lens to interpret healing rituals performed both by African Pentecostal preachers and Jesus, focusing on the code or meaning of these rituals. The perspective also offers a basis upon which to critique healing rituals that are seen as abusive due to their lack of efficacy and efficiency.

3 Interpreting the Codes of African Pentecostal Healing Rituals

Using ritual healing theory, what is the symbolic structure and what are the deeper contradictions that African Pentecostal healing rituals seek to deal with? Before answering such questions, we need to understand the context from which the ritual code or meaning is made. Within South Africa, African Pentecostalism operates in poor and low-earning communities (Kgatle 2017). Psychological, economic and socio-economic factors could be among the reasons why people flock to such churches (Kgatle 2017). However, such a statement may be considered too general, because African Pentecostal churches are varied and have different emphases. Some put the emphasis on miracles, others on teaching and empowering their members with social skills, while there are also those who operate by way of small cell groups that act as alternative family support structures (Miller and

Yamamori 2007; Barnes 2010; Unruh and Sider 2005). Healing rituals that consist of eating rats and drinking gasoline are characteristic of African Pentecostal churches that focus on faith healing. In these type of churches, the most common element is healing oil.

Africans have been using oil for healing for many years. Traditional healers use sacred oil from plants and animals to heal various ailments. In part, they draw their teaching and practice from the Hebrew Bible. In ancient Jewish culture, oil was used to anoint practitioners and to treat wounds. Oil is sacred and has healing and affirming properties.

Using Yalman as a guide, what are the deeper contradictions that the healing ritual of anointing with oil addresses and remedies? We can deduce that because of its sacred qualities, oil is used to purify the patient, demarcating his being from demonic forces, which maps the sacred from the profane. Oil has a healing ritual function of protecting the patient from external attack. Oil also cleanses and protects wounds. Sickness is regarded as the opening up of a wound that needs to be covered.

By contrast, it is not clear what worldview or cosmological contradictions are addressed by eating grass and drinking gasoline. Building on Alexander's (2004, 527) earlier remark that rituals are communicative codes, drinking gasoline and eating grass have no communicative code. The fact that the South African government and public raise alarm about these rituals suggests the failure of these rituals to make sense in the lives of ordinary viewers. Equally, kissing someone to extract demons is a healing ritual that has no meaning to the public. If a ritual has no meaning, how do we interpret it? Similar to everyday communication, if somewhere there is a solitary speaker and the people around cannot hear, it is indicative of a communication breakdown, or it signifies that the person speaking is mad or abusive.

However, if we follow Abgu Kalu's (2009) argument that African Pentecostal healing practices are an extension or revised version of African tradition healing practices, then the healing ritual of kissing and providing adherents with white cloths would form a different symbolic structure and convey a different code (Dube 2018b). The question is: as a code for demon extraction or expulsion, what is the ritual of kissing and giving adherents white cloths for healing communicating? Within African traditional religion, sucking is a technique that extracts the evil spirit deposited in a person's body. Evil spirits (*chifura*) can be deposited by an enemy, and can also be extracted from the body part where the pain is located by using a medicated horn or lips. The term *chifura* derives from the verb *kufura*,

meaning to throw. In this regard, the Shona people of Zimbabwe believe that those with magic powers can post or send evil spirits, targeting a specific body part of the victim. Consequently, among African people, a consistent pain in the leg means that someone deposited an evil spirit in the leg. Equally, back pain, neck pain or stomach pain is indicative of an evil spirit (*chifura*) deposited on that particular body part. Ritual kissing may, therefore, be interpreted as a symbolic healing code for extracting demons from the patient's body through the mouth. However, considering the public outcry that the healing ritual of kissing is normally in African Pentecostal churches meted out to female congregants, one may conclude that the code is not communicating its placebo efficacy and efficiency. Again using the Yalman model, such a healing ritual can be critiqued for failing to reverse or amend any discernible contradiction.

What could be the ritual healing code for giving adherents white pieces of cloth and bangles for their wrists? Again, this can be answered by referring to Kalu's (2009) argument about the exchange between African culture and African Pentecostal churches. African culture believes in magic and that objects such as cloths can transmit healing power (Dube 2018b). Similar or comparative practices are found in the OT, where "holy men" such as Elijah and Elisha leave divine regalia, like a staff or cloak, to their followers (2 Kgs 2:9–13). Similarly, among the magic narratives of the NT, Peter is recorded as healing the sick by commanding it or through his own shadow (Acts 5:15ff.). Consequently, the healing code for wearing white cloths or bangles is embedded within the belief that objects transmit divine power. A similar argument can be made about "holy water," which is given to congregants as a means of healing.

When it comes to the African Pentecostal healing rituals, a plausible conclusion is that some codes are ambivalent: they do not communicate the intended placebo that the practitioner seeks to communicate. While oil and water are uncontested healing items, feeding the congregants rats, snakes and grass are uncommunicative healing rituals. Equally, giving congregants gasoline is an "unholy" ritual, because the community cannot decode its meaning. I now proceed to decode the healing rituals of Jesus, the Galilean healer.

4 The Healing Ritual Codes in Jesus's Healing Rituals

The healing stories in Mark have mostly been discussed from a theological perspective, with specific interest in exploring the unique character of Jesus as healer (Remus 1997; Dube 2018a). So far, while acknowledgment is

made regarding the ability of Jesus to heal vis-à-vis other healers such as Asclepius, there is very little literature that explores the meaning or code of Jesus's healing rituals (Kee 1988). Using ritual healing theory, I focus here on the meaning or code of Jesus's healing rituals, with special focus on Mark 1. Also, using Yalman's social-anthropological healing ritual analysis, I ask what the aspects are that Jesus's ritual healing seeks to reverse or contradict.

The first healing/exorcism story in Mark (1:21ff.) took place in the synagogue, which indicates a religious social context. The story shows characteristics of exorcism narratives, namely confrontation, defence, command to depart, exorcism and reaction by bystanders (Guelich 1989, 55). Robert Guelich maintains that in its original form, the story functioned within the setting of early church preaching. Its climax was proclaiming Jesus as the Holy One of God who performs miracles (Guelich 1989, 58). Since Mark already begun the story in Mark 1:1 with the intention of demonstrating the day of the Lord, the exorcism in the synagogue is illustrative of God's power. As such, the healing ritual code in the story is authority through teaching and commanding the demon to leave from the man. The word "power" (ἐξουσία) is used nine times in Mark and is always associated with Jesus (Boring 2006, 63). Eugene Boring makes interesting comments, saying that in Judaism power was understood as residing with God and was transmitted through the Torah, but in the case of Jesus, "God's authority is mediated by the word of Jesus, who simply pronounces" (Boring 2006, 63). For Mark, not to believe in this undeniable healing ritual is blasphemy (Mark 3:28). Using the healing ritual of command, Jesus advances towards the demoniac. Upon realising the invasion of territory, the demoniac quickly employs the tactic of negotiation (an apotropaic manoeuvre) by naming Jesus "the Holy One of God" (v. 27). Using authority, Jesus displaces the demon from this host and from the space of the synagogue. The ritual of rebuke or command is tied to the aspects of power, authority and territory. Boring comments that by using only one rebuke (ἐπετίμησεν), Jesus demonstrates power (Boring 2006, 65). In the OT, ἐπιτιμάω refers to a commanding voice from Yahweh or his envoy that forces evil spirits into submission (Guelich 1989, 55).

Our interest is in using Yalman's model to determine which social contradictions the healing ritual of command seeks to reverse. In the context of NT studies, the closest model is Pieter Craffert's (2008) shamanic model. A shaman healer is possessed with divine power, which he/she uses to tackle other forces through spirit confrontation. Commanding and subduing opposing spiritual powers is the most powerful weapon of a shaman healer.

As a ritual of healing, a command reverses existing levels of authority. Commenting on the narrative function of demon exorcism by Jesus, Halvor Moxnes (2003, 138) remarks that exorcisms took place among villagers and before religious authorities as proof that Jesus has power. Consequently, exorcisms are metaphors that declare authority and territoriality; they seek to unseat existing political and religious powers. In Moxnes's (ibid.) words, "Jesus' exorcisms represented a form of protest against . . . oppression . . . Jesus presented a different form of domination and control of space."

The second healing story in Mark is the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:30–32). The context of the story is the house, and the healing ritual used is lifting the sick woman from her bed, which results in her restoration. The story of the healing of the multitude that took place in the evening at the door of Peter's house may originally have begun with Peter. Further, the story contrasts between the healing that took place in the synagogue (public) and the one that took place in the household (private) (Guelich 1989, 55). Importantly, the house as a place for healing and teaching is a recurrent feature in Mark's Gospel (Boring 2006, 66). Boring (2006, 66) even suggests that by Jesus leaving the synagogue and entering the household, Mark intentionally presents discursive truth that the synagogue and temple are replaced by the household, which is now a "place of healing, table fellowship and instruction of disciples."

The healing ritual of *κρατήσας τῆς χειρός* ("taking [her] by the hand") is my focus (Mark 1:31). According to Jewish literature, rabbis commonly performed such kinds of healing rituals. Such rituals fall within the category of ritual touching, which includes, for example, touching the garment (5:28), laying on of hands (5:23) and touching (3:10). In all such instances, healing takes place when power leaves the healer/physician and enters into the patient's body (Guelich 1989, 62).

Using Yalman's model, what does the healing ritual of raising the sick by holding the hand contradict or seek to correct? In the case of Peter's mother-in-law, the ritual amends the body from helplessness to being physically fit, which is evident from the mother serving the visitors. However, more importantly, it restores her from the position of being sick to fulfilling her gender roles within the household. Mary Ann Beavis (2011, 53) remarks: "the woman's resumption of her household duties demonstrates that she is truly healed . . . and illustrates her gratitude; it is also an expression of gratitude due to an honoured guest."

The healing of the man with leprosy (1:40–45) concludes the collection of stories in Mark 1. The healing ritual in this story, namely stretching of the hand and touching the man with leprosy, is similar to the one performed on Peter's mother-in-law. Robert Guelich (1989, 72) comments that the story follows the structure and form of healing stories, which includes a description of (1) the setting and encounter; (2) the healing and the healer's reaction; and (3) the healing gesture, with word and command to go and see the priests for confirmation. The story has two functions within the larger narrative context of Mark: first, to prepare for the climax of Jesus's fame as healer, which results in him withdrawing to areas where he is less popular, and second, to introduce the theme of opposition to Jesus by the religious leaders (Guelich 1989, 72).

The contradiction that the healing ritual of touching the man with leprosy seeks to reverse relates to the cultural understanding of skin disease. First-century Jews regarded any skin disease as socially and ritually unclean. Such a person was supposed to stay alone, away from the people (Lev 13–14). By requesting to be cleansed, the man was asking to be reintegrated into the community and restored to dignity (Boring 2006, 71). Commenting on the efficacy of the healing ritual of touch, Boring (2006, 72) says: "Jesus transfers his cleanliness and purity into the man." Furthermore, the remark by Jesus that the man must show himself to the religious leaders as a "testimony to them" (Mark 1:44) seems to indicate the replacement of their healing authority by that of Jesus, or it can be interpreted as a testimony that Jesus and his disciples respect the law, which is then a pre-emptive strike against accusations that Jesus does not respect the law (Boring 2006, 72).

5 Conclusion

This study explored the communicative aspect of the healing rituals performed by both Jesus and African Pentecostal preachers across Africa. While African Pentecostal preachers practise some healing rituals that communicate, such as the use of oil, they practise other healing rituals that are undecidable, that do not make sense to the observers. Further, using Yalman, it is observable that some healing rituals, like kissing, eating grass or drinking petroleum, do not have the crucial aspect of ritually displacing or changing the social conditions of the people. Concerning this, we can conclude that healing rituals are either efficacious or inefficacious based on their code or symbolic structure and the way they deal with unwelcome contradictions in the human condition. An exploration of Mark's Jesus

reveals this truth by showing that his healing rituals of commanding and touching are all geared towards combating a particular anomaly within the life of the patient. For example, to exorcise is a healing ritual that symbolically reverses the source of authority from Satan to God. Equally, the healing ritual of touch seeks to restore the patient's health condition from being sick to being physically fit, often for the sake of fulfilling proper societal roles again. Given that the African church suffers under unhealthy healing rituals, this article suggests that ritual healing theory may assist in analysing the items that make up ritual acts in their contexts so as to learn about its structure or ritual code. A healing ritual that does not have a code that communicates has no meaning or efficacy and is abusive to the patients.

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