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## Bulugo Vine Story: Redemptive Analogy Case Study

The withered grandma sat on the edge of the rough bench, straining to hear every word of the story that my father was telling. "This is not possible!" she thought to herself. "No outsider has ever known this legend, nor the details about the spirits which this white man talked about tonight. No one has ever cared enough, nor stayed long enough to learn these deep things. What can this mean?"

My father, a missionary with Adventist Frontier Missions (AFM), continued the story. "Remember how the ancestors told us that in the beginning, earth was connected by the *balugo* vine to the next world above us, the world called *Alitao*? Your ancestors used to go up and down the vine every day, visiting the Alitao people, and even communicating with God who lived in the topmost world.

"Then one day, as a father and daughter climbed up the vine, the father was filled with lust, and committed the first sin. As he did this terrible, terrible thing, the *balugo* vine broke off and fell into the ground. Ever since, you have been disconnected from God. The world has suffered as the spirits torture people and fill every waking moment with terror. Worst of all, God is now silent. You have no way to contact him, and he appears to have no interest in you anymore."

The grandma bowed her head in grief. It was true. This white man knew. Her people, the Alangan, had brought all this suffering and fear on themselves. Worse, God had fallen silent, nevermore to communicate with his wayward children.

But the missionary was still speaking. "There is something which you don't know, though. The spirits that came into the world after the first sin, after the *balugo* vine broke, they have deceived you. They told you that Satan was the weakest of all spirits. They taught you sorcery, and how to kill people through spirit birds and cats. Some of them claimed to be your dead ancestors. All of them brought fear and suffering. But the greatest

deception of all, was when they convinced you that God no longer cared about you, that he no longer wanted to communicate with you or help you.

“The reason that I came here and spent the years it has taken to learn your language and beliefs, was so that I could give you this message from God. He has not forgotten about you. He still wants to take care of you, just like your ancient name for God means, ‘The One Who Takes Care of Us.’ In fact, God sent his Son to earth to replace the broken *balugo* vine, in other words to replace the connection to God which our ancestors broke. God’s Son, Jesus, is like a new *balugo* vine. God sent him to the Earth so that you can go back up to God’s world and live forever without any fear or suffering, without any evil spirits to torture you. You can reconnect to God by believing in Jesus, and trusting in him.”

The Alangan were silent. The little grandma continued to sit with her head bowed. “Could it be true?” she wondered, hope beginning to burn in her heart for the first time in decades. “This white man knows so much. He knows the old story. He knows about the spirits. He knows our language. He has demonstrated his love to us by staying so long, and by treating our sick. He must know the truth about God too. This Jesus must really be God’s way to bring us back to His world.”

“I want to go back to God’s world!” the grandma said, standing up. “I believe this Jesus is God’s son and that he can protect me from the spirits. Tell me what I must do.”

Growing up working among the Alangan with my parents, as well as now on my own AFM project, I have had many first-hand experiences of contextualization. Some of the instances which I have witnessed worked quite well, while others actually caused harm. Generally, in my experience, the missionary needs to initially contextualize his or her own understanding of the plan of redemption in order to break through the established barriers of resistance. However, the people we work among should immediately be allowed, and even led, to discover God and the truths of the Bible from within their own context. Thus, after the initial acceptance of salvation, further contextualization becomes an inherent part of the process of discovering God as they learn from the Bible.

In the examples related in this article, it is important to understand that the use of the word, *contextualization*, does not imply that the missionary comes to the target people with his or her own culturally interpreted understanding of the Bible, and simply translates that into a message which the people in the local culture can understand. Rather, in this article, contextualization is intended to refer to the process which both the missionary and the new believers go through to discover how the unchanging principles of God’s word apply in this new context.

The most dramatic use of contextualization that I have personally witnessed

was my father's use of the *balugo* vine story as a redemptive analogy. Catholic missionaries had attempted to convert the Alangan since the 1500s. Protestant missionaries had joined the effort in the 1950s. There had even been an Adventist church less than a kilometer away from the nearest Alangan village for thirty years before we arrived. Yet there was almost nothing to show for all of that effort.

My family was the third AFM missionary to the Alangan. After nearly three years of working among them, there was little more to show for our work than our predecessors. My father, however, was convicted that he must find a way to learn the deep spiritual beliefs and practices of the people. Up to that point, they had never opened up to anyone. No one had ever gained their trust sufficiently.

By faith the AFM team scheduled a series of meetings to address the spirits and the ancient beliefs. For weeks, my family and the rest of the team prayed for a breakthrough. Finally, just before the meetings were to start, a young man by the name of Ramon came to my father and volunteered to teach him. Night after night Ramon taught him the heart of the Alangan beliefs and practice in the spiritual world. It was Ramon who taught him of the *balugo* vine, and it was this story which God used to bridge the gulf between the Alangan worldview and the plan of redemption. That night, as my father retold the story of redemption, using the analogy of their legend, God started a revolution among the Alangan.

As the church began to rapidly grow, we found that God had uniquely prepared Ramon to lead the young believers. In fact, God had called Ramon through dreams and visions long before any of us had arrived in the Philippines.

One of Ramon's key contributions was his leadership as the church continued to wrestle out how to apply God's teachings in the Bible to the Alangan context. The AFM missionaries encouraged and gave council as Ramon and the other church leaders contextualized their new faith, but the decisions were largely theirs.

One example was the church buildings which they chose to build. When we first arrived, we began by holding church on our front porch. However, the believers soon wanted to build a building for God. The native church leaders feared that the Alangan would feel uncomfortable in a concrete and tin-roofed building like the lowland Filipino believers favored, so they chose to build with native materials. Over the years, as the Alangan have had increasing exposure to outsiders and lowland Filipinos, they have chosen to add a cement floor and tin roof to keep down maintenance costs. However, even today, they insist on keeping their bamboo walls so that any Alangan, from any walk of life, will feel comfortable coming to the house of God.

Another example of the Alangan church leaders' own contextualization was their dress. The leaders knew that lowland Christians dressed very formally for church, and expected them to do so as well. However, they knew that if new interests from deeper in the mountains came to church and saw everyone in clothes, they would feel uncomfortable in their loin-cloths. The leaders feared that these highland Alangan would not come to church, and would be turned away from God. They decided to seek the middle ground by wearing a shirt with a freshly laundered loincloth and bare feet. Over the years as the Alangan have become more accustomed to clothes, the church leaders have moved to wearing slacks. However, they continue to largely go to church barefoot. The Alangan church leaders' care has paid off. In the twenty-four years that I have worked with these people, I have never heard of an instance of architecture or dress causing offence or preventing an Alangan from coming to Christ.

Among the neighboring Tawbuid people, where I currently work, the native church leaders have also chosen to contextualize their dress for the sake of mission. In their home churches, where clothes have become normal, they dress quite formally. However, when they go on expeditions into the interior in search of individuals and villages open to the gospel, they adopt a more incarnational approach. Many times they dress only in small loincloths, just like the highlanders, and rub the soot from the bottom of a cooking pot over their skin. This helps them look more like the highlanders who sleep in the ashes and charcoal of their cooking fires. As these leaders trek through the mountains, highlanders often ask them why they go to such lengths since it is clear from the light color of their thighs that they are used to wearing clothes. This opens the door to conversations with the highland Tawbuid who are usually so closed to outsiders that they refuse to talk.

As mentioned above, one area in which the missionaries on our projects have often taken the initiative in contextualization has been at the point of conversion. Western Christianity has largely seen sin as the foundational human problem, Satan as the instigator of sin and all evil, and Christ's forgiveness and redemption as the solution, the point at which a person is saved.

However, for the animistic Alangan, sin is a non-issue. Their culture only recognizes four sins: murder, adultery, stealing, and inappropriate anger. If a person can avoid these sins, as several people have been known to do since infancy, they are perfect in the culture's eyes. Even if a person sins, however, it has no impact on their ultimate destiny. Each organ of the body is believed to have a spirit, and each of those spirits go to different places upon death, whether or not the person sins.

The Alanagan also knew of Satan before any missionaries came. In

their understanding, however, he was the weakest of all the spirits, simply sitting on people's shoulders whispering temptations, while the other spirits truly wield power and regularly tortured them.

My family, just like every missionary who came before us, began by teaching the people about sin, Satan's temptations, and Jesus' gracious forgiveness of our sins. The Alangan recognized each of these terms. They nodded their heads in agreement as we taught. But, in fact, they were interpreting them far differently from what we meant. They agreed with our teaching, according to their interpretation of it, but sin simply was not an issue they were concerned with. Sickness, fear, and demonic activity were what consumed their lives and what they felt the need of redemption from.

It was in the same series of meetings mentioned above where my family finally understood this, and switched from approaching redemption as forgiveness of sins to redemption as freedom from the spirits. Once the Alangan grasped this with joy and relief, once they met Jesus for themselves as he freed them from their slavery to the demons and reconnected them to their long-lost Father God, then sin started to matter to them. Once they met Christ as he saved them from terror, they fell in love with him and wanted to please him. It was in redemption from the fear of the spirits that the Alangan first found salvation, not in redemption from guilt.

Not all of our experiences of contextualization turned out well, however. It is interesting to note that most of the cases in which contextualization went awry were instances when the missionaries initiated it. Not all of the missionaries' attempts were harmful, however a higher proportion of their endeavors backfired. This does not mean that missionaries should not participate in the discovery/contextualization process. The missionary often has a broad spectrum of experiences and information, and can prove to be a fertile source of ideas for the indigenous church leaders to draw on. However, this observation does indicate a need for a genuine respect for, and openness to, the local believers' own assessments of how best to apply biblical teaching as the Holy Spirit actively leads them.

Both the Alangan and the Tawbuid tribes are very musical. In fact, at one point, the Tawbuid language was sung, not spoken. Certain areas of the highlands continue this practice to this day. However, their music is far, far different from ours. In time, we realized that their musical system is so different from Western music that a well-trained Alangan musician (most are) will never be able to fully grasp the Western system or vice versa. The systems appear to be mutually exclusive.

Wanting to allow the church to grow up with indigenous musical expressions of praise to God, we talked to several of the most accomplished Alangan musicians, asking them to sing Alangan songs in church on

Sabbath. They did, and for more than a year we heard at least one Alangan song each Sabbath.

In time, however, it became clear that some people were becoming uncomfortable. Finally, the native church leaders came to us and asked us to stop encouraging the members to sing Alangan songs to God. Astonished, my parents politely asked the reason. "You see," they explained. "We have many kinds of songs. We tell our history through one kind, we tell stories through another. We make up poetic songs on the fly to comfort our crying babies or to woo lovers. However, every type of song which we use in a spiritual way, always is used to contact the spirits which we now realize are Satan's demons. Even though we speak to God when we sing Alangan songs in church, nevertheless since it is a spiritual context our minds and hearts automatically feel like we are calling the demons. It brings an attitude and spirit into church which is not of Christ."

Another issue arose several years later when a number of volunteers, who believed very strongly in herbal medicine, came to work with us. Now, please understand that I am not against herbal medicines when they are used correctly. However, when working cross culturally, it is important to be cautious since, to the local people, many objects and practices have meanings which are very different from what they mean to us.

Several months into the volunteers' term, the leaders of all of the Alangan churches gathered together and came to my parents. Very carefully and politely, they informed my parents that the volunteers were teaching the Alangan believers to return to witchcraft and demonic power.

Astonished, my parents asked how that could possibly be. "You see, it's like this," the leaders replied. "Since ancient times we have known that certain trees and plants have inherent healing properties. Many others, however, only heal when they are gathered with, or used with, incantations to the spirits. The volunteers that you have brought here first asked our people to teach them all of the plants which we used to use as medicine. Now they are insisting that the believers use *all* of these plants, even the ones which only have power from the demons."

The volunteers had been well intentioned. Indeed, they had done an honorable thing by first learning the people's own medicinal plants, and then teaching their use rather than handing out expensive and unsustainable medical care imported from far away. However, their attempt at contextualizing their health ministry failed, and even caused harm to the church, because they did not consult the local church leaders before implementing their contextualization.

There has been discussion, in recent years, as to the role of contextualization in missions. Daniel Shaw posits that contextualization implies the missionary coming to the local people group with a body of

knowledge, and seeking techniques to communicate this knowledge in a way which is understandable in the local context. Shaw indicates that rather than contextualizing the missionary's perception of Christianity to make it understandable within the local people's culture, the missionary should facilitate the people themselves discovering God from within their own cultural context (2010:208-214)

In my own mission experience, I have found this approach to be valid and preferable, once there are local believers, and as God begins to develop leaders from among them. At times, cultural dynamics or God's preparation of an unreached people group allow them to discover God without a great deal of intervention on the missionary's part. However, in the beginning stages, it is often unavoidable that the missionary must make his or her own best attempt at contextualizing the message of God's desire and provision to save the people. Once the initial resistance has been removed and the local people have come to a measure of faith and desire to learn, then the missionary can move to the role of guiding and supporting the Spirit-led believers as they themselves discover what God's Word teaches, and what his truths look like lived out in their own context.

Used in these ways, contextualization will prove a great blessing and a powerful tool to reach the unreached with the Good News. Indeed, effective contextualization is often the key which the Holy Spirit uses to unlock a movement among unreached peoples.

## Works Cited

Shaw, R. Daniel. 2010. Beyond Contextualization: Toward a Twenty-first-Century Model for Enabling Mission. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34, no. 4:208-214.



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