

JAARS SPEEDING THE WORD TRANSCRIPT

Speaker
Dr. Amy West
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Interviewer
Arthur Lightbody

Primary Topic(s)
How the Balangaos' worldviews influence their response to the gospel

Other Topics
The importance of relationships in Balangao culture

Location Discussed
Philippines

People Group (if named)
Balangao

Announcer:

Welcome to *Speeding the Word*, coming to you from the JAARS Center in Waxhaw, North Carolina, where JAARS speeds Bible translation for all people. And now our host Arthur Lightbody.

Lightbody:

Our special guest today is Dr. Amy West. She spoke recently at a JAARS meeting—we were celebrating the completion of her Ph.D. She told us accounts of her time with the Balangao in the northern Philippines, telling us about their spiritual journeys and how it relates to their worldviews. Now here is Amy.

West:

I'm here because we share a common vision. We want to see lives transformed. We are a diverse body. God has gifted us in different ways. He has given us different skills. He did that because He expected us to be a team. In achieving our goal of transformed lives, like I said, God has given us different skills.

My part has been in cross-cultural training, and my focus has been in the Philippines. I appreciate Jim Akovenko giving me this opportunity to report back to you about my research that has turned into this dissertation. The full title is, "Response to Death: The Powerful Influence of Assumptions, Relationships and Ritual on the Balangao Christians in the Philippines."

My research isn't the first contact JAARS has had with Balangao. In fact, JAARS has been closely linked to God's transforming work there since the very beginning. That is when our pilots first helped Jo Shetler and Anne Fetzer, now Hopkins, begin their work there. You see, in 1962, before I was even born, Jo and Anne hiked two days into that head-hunting region because they had a vision. They wanted to see lives transformed, so they went to translate God's Word for a people that did not have it. They were so thankful when that first airstrip was built. It was only 450 feet long when Wayne Aeschliman first landed on it. He wiped the sweat off his brow and said, "My aircraft carrier was longer than that, and we had hooks!" We say our pilots are the best in the world. But they were so thankful because it turned their two-day hike through the mountains ... into a 21-minute flight. Their JAARS radio was their only connection to the outside world.

In 1982 this New Testament was dedicated. It sold out and has been printed again three times since then. In the beginning there were no known believers in Balangao. Today there are, they tell us, close to half of more than 20,000 Balangaos that have come to know Christ. God has done awesome things in Balangao.

This morning, the focus is sharing what we learned in my research about the powerful influence relationships have in effecting the way Balangaos respond in crises, specifically when a family member dies. For Balangaos—and all of us, for that matter—our faith walk is a long journey. Throughout the journey we are vulnerable to Satan's tactics, especially in time of crises. The Balangaos view crises different than we Westerners do, and thus they have different issues than we do that need to be addressed from God's Word.

In our cultural workshops in the Philippines, it became clear to us that we needed to research their issues more, so we could be strategic in addressing them with God's Word. Crises can wear us all down. In our emotional vulnerability, we can panic and cave in to temptations.

In Balangao, the leaders struggle in crises to not follow a lot of the familiar traditional ways that are tied to the spirit world. Ways that violate their new allegiance to God—that's what drove me to this research. Some Balangaos still respond to death in almost all of the traditional ways, but a large number are beginning to reflect their new Christian beliefs and choosing new ways of responding. It started with the early believers who began stopping certain overt practices that were tied to the spirit world. Believers have made great strides in this over the last few decades, with the help of the translated Word of God. But we've noticed, especially in a crisis, even believers are vulnerable to group pressure—to the relationships around them pressuring them to go back to those traditions that are tied to the spirit world. Good relationships matter, even years later.

When doing interviews, we explained to Balangaos that what they endured when a family member died was quite different from what we Westerners endured. So we asked them if they would please help us understand the pressures they come under, the anxieties they face, the tensions that they go through in the time of death, so we could then take that to help our colleagues who work in similar cultures around the world, so we can be strategic in addressing those from God's Word.

When someone dies in Balangao, the family is the one to care for the body until it is buried. That could be anywhere from two to six days, depending on the status of the family. So a widow or widower is expected to stay by the casket of their dead spouse throughout the entire wake. There are rules about eating and sleeping. They have rules that forbid bathing and changing of clothes during that whole time. They have rules regarding whether or not to show emotion. In fact, they are not allowed to show any joy, even when reminiscing with friends. During the entire time they worry about relating properly, not only with their neighbors and the blood kin of the dead spouse, but also relating properly to the spirit world.

Throughout the wake people come, especially older ones. And they give advice. This would be 24/7, reminding the family of the consequences others have experienced when they've failed to do all the spirits require. Imagine the pressure, when you are already tired and exhausted and deeply in debt by now. In this research, our objective was to find ways to counter that group pressure. Our desire was to discover what believers needed in order to help them stand firm in their new allegiance to Christ. We found there were three areas that were crucial in transforming a people's way of thinking, relating and responding in crises.

Those areas are assumptions, relationships and ritual. It is not just introducing new truth. Their assumptions—the way they think about death, the way they think about what causes death, the way they think about what happens to the soul after death. And their assumptions about what the proper ways are to relate to people and to spirits. And their assumptions about what is needed in order to successfully transition the soul of the dead one into the next world. How many of us had to think about that when a family member died? There is biblical precedence for addressing these three areas.

In fact in the book of Acts, Paul and the other apostles challenged traditional ways of thinking and relating and responding also. Jesus and the apostles, as we read through the New Testament, challenged the traditional ways people interacted. They introduced new ways of thinking, relating and responding that reflected people's allegiance to God. Balangao believers need to also process their ways of thinking, relating and responding using God's Word.

When we listened to the Balangaos tell us their experiences, we gained insight

into the struggles they faced in those three areas. Their problems and questions are different than ours. Did anyone in the family receive a sign that this death was going to happen? If the spirits give a sign that someone is going to die, can that death be stopped? Who in the family is going to donate the animals necessary to provide for the dead in the next life? How should a Christian respond to the thread of gossip, or the gossip that does happen during a wake? What needs to be done to prevent people from putting curses on us because we responded improperly? What can we do to thwart curses?

Lightbody:

This is Arthur Lightbody again. I hope you enjoy listening to *Speeding the Word*. We'll hear more from Amy next week. I'd like to hear your comments. Maybe you are interested in knowing more about Bible translation. Call me at 1-800-890-0628. When you hear the recording, punch in my direct line: 6048. I'll send you a great DVD called "Contagious," which is about the spread of God's Word orally. Please call and ask for it. "Contagious" is a great eight-minute video for home viewing, for your home church or missions group.

Announcer:

We hope you have enjoyed *Speeding the Word*. We'd love to hear from you. If you are interested in finding out more about JAARS or Bible translation, give us a call at 1-800-890-0628, or look us up on the Web at JAARS.org.

