

ALTHOUGH the term "shaman" appears sporadically in the literature on Mexico, ethnologists have not come to grips with the problem of whether shamanism exists in Mexico.

Examination of sixteenth century Spanish chronicles and modern ethnographies of Mexican communities reveals no evidence of classical Siberian shamanism accompanied by spirit possession in pre-Conquest or modern Mexico.

Lowie and Herskovits advocate broad definitions of shamanism which include non-possessional types found in North America and other areas outside of Siberia. Lowie defines a shaman as any person who has direct communication with supernatural beings through dreams, visions, or spirit possession.¹ This definition of a shaman seems to me to be too broad because it is not restricted to curers and could include witches and laymen. Herskovits proposes a narrower definition of a shaman: "The shaman is an individual endowed with supernatural power to heal, or one who by calling his spirit can find out what is beyond time and space."² For the purposes of this paper a shaman is defined as an individual who has received power to cure and divine direct from supernatural beings through dreams, visions, or spirit possession.

Even non-possessional shamanism is rare in Mexico. The Mexican "curandero" usually learns his healing art from an established curer without a direct gift of power from supernatural beings. Redfield refers to the Mayan "h-men" of Chan Kom as a "shaman-priest" but presents no evidence of direct communication of the "h-men" with supernatural beings.³ Bennett and Zingg also refer to Tarahumara curers as shamans although the knowledge of shamanism must be taught by established curers. The Tarahumara curer does have direct contact with supernatural beings, however, when he sends his soul to converse with water people who kidnap the souls of his patients.⁴

Foster clearly states that the curers of Tzintzuntzan "are not shamans in the

1 Robert H. Lowie, *An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Rinehart, 1940), p. 548.

2 Melville J. Herskovits, *Man and His Works* (New York: Knopf, 1948), p. 371.

3 Robert Redfield and Alfonso Villa Rojas, *Chan Kom, a Maya Village* (Publication, Carnegie Institution of Washington, no. 448, 1934), p. 76.

4 Wendell C. Bennett and Robert M. Zingg, *The Tarahumara: an Indian Tribe of Northern Mexico* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), pp. 255-256, 259-260.

sense that they receive power from the supernatural, and their ability is simply the result of the centuries of accumulation of folk knowledge."⁵ (Foster 1948: 266). On the other hand, Foster believes that Popoluca curanderos may be shamans because they talk in an unintelligible language with mountain dwarfs called "chaneques" in order to recapture the lost souls of their patients.⁶

Ethnographies of Cahita, Mixe, and Zapotec Indian groups in Mexico are vague about the source of the curer's power and present no evidence of shamanism.

The Valley of Mexico seems to be the only area in Mexico where curers receive their power direct from supernatural beings. I recently investigated a case of shamanism among Nahuatl-speaking Indians which presents some remarkable parallels to Siberian shamanism. My investigation was carried out in 1952-53 during the course of a community study in the pueblo of San Francisco Tecospa, delegacion of Milpa Alta, Federal District, in the southern extreme of the Valley of Mexico.⁷

Don Soltero Perez, the only shaman in Tecospa, is an old man who is a highly respected member of the community. He received his curing power in 1918 during the Revolution shortly after he and his wife had moved from Tecospa to San Nicolas Tetelco where they were living with friends. One night during a bad storm lightning struck the house where they were living and knocked all the inhabitants unconscious. Everyone in the house revived quickly except Don Soltero who recovered consciousness very slowly and remained in a daze. The next day a female curer treated him successfully but he continued to lose consciousness once a week over a period of about six months.

When Don Soltero lost consciousness his spirit was kidnapped by the "enanitos," dwarf-size rain deities who have existed in the Valley of Mexico since Aztec times. The enanitos, also known as "los aires," are described in Tecospa as little men and women who stand about one and one-half feet high, wear long hair, dress and live like the Indians of Tecospa, and speak the Otomi tongue. They live in caves in the hills and mountains where they store big barrels containing clouds, rain, lightning, and thunder. When the enanitos are angry with a human being they blow their breath at him, causing him to fall ill with the common disease

5 George M. Foster, *Empire's Children: the People of Tzintzuntzan* (Publication, Institute of Social Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution, no. 6, 1948), p. 266.

6 George M. Foster, "Some Wider Implications of Soul-loss Illness among the Sierra Popoluca" (in *Homenaje a Don Alfonso Caso*, pp. 167-174, Mexico: Impr. Nuevo Mundo, 1951), p. 169; and personal communications.

7 This study was financed by a grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research which is gratefully acknowledged.

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known as "aire de cuevas." This disease usually is inflicted on bad persons who offend the enanitos by trespassing in their caves, by carrying food near their caves without giving them any of it, and by pointing or calling to a rainbow. "Aire de cuevas" is rarely fatal if the sick person is treated by a curer specializing in treatment of this disease. The enanitos kill individuals who do not believe in them and good people whom they want as their servants in their caves, which constitute the earthly paradise known as Tlalocan in Aztec times. Victims of the enanitos are killed by lightning, drowning, and "aire de cuevas."

Don Soltero fell to the floor as though he were dead each time that the enanitos attacked him. His limbs became rigid and his teeth started grinding when he hit the floor but soon his body became limp. The enanitos forced his spirit to accompany them to their caves where he saw many other little people, houses, maize, squash, a great variety of other vegetables, and water. The enanitos wanted Don Soltero to become a curer, and they told him they would not let his spirit return to his body until he agreed. They beat him until he agreed, but after his spirit returned to his body he would change his mind, deciding not to become a curer. Each time his spirit returned to his body he felt sore all over his body from the beating he had received at the hands of the enanitos.

After six months Don Soltero made a permanent agreement with the enanitos to become a curer because he knew they would kill him if he did not capitulate to their demands. When the agreement was concluded the enanitos presented Don Soltero with a staff, three curing stones, and a spirit wife.

The staff, called a "vara," is a short stick of wood decorated with carvings which symbolize Don Soltero's power as a curer. It is invisible to everybody except Don Soltero and the enanitos. Don Soltero left the staff in the caves of the enanitos.

The three curing stones which Don Soltero received from the enanitos were bright yellow and translucent. One stone was shaped like a cannon. The second stone was shaped like a doll and the third like a duck. When Don Soltero's soul returned to his body he found these three stones in his pocket. During a night thunderstorm when Don Soltero is asleep these stones may leave his house never to return but they are replaced by other stones which come to his house on their own power.

Don Soltero's spirit wife is an enanita who lives in a cave with other enanitos. If Don Soltero had refused to marry her she would have killed him in revenge. Nobody can see the spirit wife except Don Soltero and the enanitos. She and Don Soltero have children who live with their mother in the cave. Don Soltero has not been allowed to have sexual relations with his human wife since he became a curer. Once when he tried to sleep with his human wife after becoming a curandero, he

had an attack and fell on the floor as though he were dead. During this attack his spirit was forced to go to a cave where it was beaten by the enanitos. So now Don Soltero concentrates all his sexual activity on his spirit wife. The marriage of a curandero and an enanita lasts for eternity, so when Don Soltero dies, his soul will turn into an enanito and join his spirit wife in the caves of the enanitos where he probably will continue curing.

Don Soltero is called a "curandero de aire" because he specializes in curing the disease of "aire de cuevas" caused by the enanitos. He and all other "curanderos de aire" die twice a year; their spirits then go to a cave of the enanitos where they receive instructions for curing. The first yearly death of the curanderos occurs in October or November when the rains have ended. All the curanderos die at the same time, remaining dead for half an hour or an hour while their spirits attend the general meeting of curanderos and enanitos.

Orders for curing are given at this meeting by the chief of the enanitos, who is called "yecacoatl" in Nahuatl and "culebra de agua" in Spanish. Yecacoatl is a big snake in charge of making rain and storms. He tells the enanitos which barrels to pour down on the earth. The Indians say that before a cloudburst the culebra de agua can be seen in the dark clouds lashing its tail back and forth. Yecacoatl tells the curers which groups of enanitos will be in charge of rain-making for the coming year since a different set of enanitos makes rain each year. Last year the enanitos of the hills named San Miguel and Teotli were in charge; the year before the enanitos of Popocatepetl and Ixtacihuatl made the rain. One night last year, when there was a downpour of rain accompanied by thunder and lightning, Don Soltero said that the enanitos of San Miguel and Teotli were competing against each other to see which group could make the most rain. While the enanitos of San Miguel and Teotli were making rain, the enanitos of the other hills and mountains took a vacation and rested. Yecacoatl also tells the curers which curing implements such as eggs, stones or herbs they are to use most in treating the disease of "aire." The curers turn in all their curing stones at this meeting when they are given new ones because the stones get tired working and must rest. The second yearly death of the curanderos occurs in March just before the rains begin.

When Don Soltero treats a patient suffering from "aire de cuevas" the enanitos tell him which curing stone or herbs to use and help him remove the aire from the patient's body. Don Soltero begins a treatment by rubbing the patient's entire body with an unbroken egg.⁸ This procedure is called a "cleaning" because the egg is supposed to absorb some of the disease in the patient's body. After this initial cleaning Don Soltero breaks the egg in a glass of water to diagnose the illness.

⁸ The egg treatment is a European trait introduced into America after the Spanish Conquest.

Four years ago Don Soltero treated Don Bernardino Mesa who ached all over his body. When Don Soltero dropped the broken egg into a glass of water the egg-white rose in the shape of a whirlpool and little bubbles formed on the surface of the water indicating that Don Bernardino had "aire de cuevas." In performing the second cleaning Don Soltero filled his mouth with water which he kept there while he placed one end of an egg on top of the patient's head and sucked on the other end of the egg. He repeated this procedure over each of the patient's temples, his heart, his elbows, and the palms of his hands. Then Don Soltero asked the patient whether there was any part of his body that hurt particularly. Don Bernardino told him that his shoulders hurt, so the curer sucked them in the same way. The "aire" in Don Bernardino's body passed through the egg into the water in the curer's mouth which Don Soltero spit on the floor after the sucking. Then he took the same egg in his hands and rubbed the patient's entire body with it.

Laying the egg aside Don Soltero next began to cure Don Bernardino with his doughnut-shaped curing stone. After filling his mouth with water, Don Soltero sucked through the hole in the stone on the same parts of the patient's body which he had previously sucked with the egg. During both suckings the patient felt the "aire" leaving his body. He felt as though something were pulling on his skin. After sucking, Don Soltero blew through the doughnut-shaped stone on the same parts of the body he had sucked. Then he rubbed the patient's body with two other curing stones.

Don Soltero cracked the second egg used for cleaning the patient and dropped it into a glass of water to see whether there was any "aire" left in the patient's body. If there is no "aire" left in the body, no part of the egg rises. But if any of the egg white rises, the patient still has some "aire." The amount of "aire" left is indicated by the amount of egg that rises. If the second egg shows that the patient still has "aire," he must return the next day for a repetition of the entire treatment. The treatments are repeated daily until the egg diagnosis shows that no "aire" is left. The first egg used in the treatment is thrown into the fire immediately after the diagnosis, and the glass is cleaned with ashes, soap, and water. The second egg is thrown into the milpa. These precautions are taken because the "aire" contained in the egg is contagious.

Sometimes the enanitos tell Don Soltero to clean a patient by rubbing him with herbs such as Santa Maria, ruda, jarilla, and estafiate. He also may add rosa blanca or bola de fuego. When Don Soltero uses the herb treatment he first cleans the patient with an egg, then with a curing stone, and finally with the herbs which are substituted for the second egg cleaning described above. He holds the herbs together in a bunch, rubbing them over the patient's entire body. After the treat-

ment these herbs may be thrown out in the milpa or the curer may take them to a cave of the enanitos to return the "aire." The eggs and herbs are provided by the patient's family. Don Soltero charges one peso per treatment in Tecospa and three pesos or more per treatment when he cures in other towns.

When a person suffering from "aire de cuevas" does not improve after three or four cleanings, Don Soltero tells him that the enanitos must be placated with a food offering called a "tlacahuili" in Nahuatl. The content of the "tlacahuili" depends on the foods requested by the offended enanitos through the curer. The meal for the enanitos is prepared by a female relative of the patient. Such a meal may consist of soup, rice, mole verde, tamales, tortillas, and a little bottle of pulque. The tamales and tortillas are tiny, and the other foods are served in small portions on child-size dishes. Don Soltero takes the food to the cave of the enanitos who sent the sickness.

After the patient's treatments have been completed Don Soltero gives him a purgative called "rositas" which is purchased in a drug store. Two days later the patient takes a temazcal bath which completes his cure. Any "aire" remaining in the patient's body after the curer's treatments leaves through the patient's sweat during the temazcal bath.

"Aire de cuevas" sickness sometimes is treated by a relative of the patient, but this is a risky procedure because an amateur often lets the "aire" escape so that it infects other persons in the house. The amateur cleans the patient for "aire" by rubbing him with eggs or herbs including ruda, pirul, and Santa Maria. Such a treatment may relieve the sick person but it will not cure him completely. Last year when Cisto Mesa got "aire de cuevas" working in the milpa near the caves of the enanitos his mother cleaned him with two eggs. Some of his "aire" escaped and the mother got "aire" sickness too, so she had to call Don Soltero to clean her and her son. Treatment of "aire" by individuals who are not curanderos is rare in Tecospa.

Don Soltero also knows how to cure the disease called "aire de noche" (night air) or "espanto" (fright). "Aire de noche" is a dangerous air exuded by earth-bound ghosts who try to frighten living persons to death. Anybody who sees one of these ghosts immediately falls ill. The symptoms of this illness vary but the most common are chills and fever, listlessness, and loss of appetite. Don Soltero treats "espanto" by rubbing a young, black chicken over the patient's entire body, concentrating on the area over the heart where the "aire de noche" is concentrated. The chicken is often killed or crippled by the "aire de noche" it absorbs from the patient's body. After this cleaning Don Soltero rubs and blows on the patient's body with his curing stones. Eggs never are used to treat "aire de noche." Don Soltero uses the same treatment to cure evil eye sickness in children. In Tecospa evil

eye sickness is produced intentionally by the local witch and unintentionally by another man who is not a sorcerer of any kind but was born with very strong vision. When either of these men looks at a child with longing he puts something evil into the child's heart. Symptoms of evil eye sickness are crying, vomiting, and diarrhea.

Don Soltero is considered to be one of the best "curanderos de aire" in the entire Milpa Alta area, and he treats many out-of-town patients. My informants told me that he is so good that doctors often call him in to help them in difficult cases. Like other "curanderos de aire" Don Soltero was born destined to become a curer. He did not inherit his calling or require any training from human beings to learn his healing art.

When Don Soltero gets drunk, as he is fond of doing, the enanitos punish him for failing to attend to the sick. His spirit wife made him fall down on the way home when he got drunk in Milpa Alta last year, and he suffered a big cut on his head. Sometimes the enanitos give him an attack when gets drunk and whip his spirit in their caves.

The enanitos not only aid Don Soltero in curing but also help him work his fields. He is the only person in Tecospa who can grow lettuce in his field. All the crops he plants produce earlier than the same crops grown by other people in town. He gets fresh vegetables all year from the caves of the enanitos located in his fields. He even gets fresh vegetables in May when all the other fields in Tecospa are dry and empty. He eats these vegetables for lunch when he is working in the field but nobody else is allowed to eat them. The enanitos who guard Don Soltero's fields give "aire de cuevas" to anybody who tries to steal his crops.

Although Don Soltero's curing techniques are totally different from those of the Siberian shaman, there is a striking similarity in the way the Mexican curandero and the Siberian shaman receive divine power to cure. The fullest account of the Siberian shaman's call to curing is contained in the life history of a Gold shaman recorded by Leo Sternberg who labels the shamanistic call "divine election." Divine election is characteristic of all Siberian shamanism.

Sternberg states that the gift of shamanism in Siberia always comes against the desire of the chosen individual. The future shaman usually is afflicted at puberty with a serious disease accompanied by fits, fainting, and hallucinations that torture him for weeks. During one of his fits or while he is dreaming, his electing spirit appears to him, commanding him to become a shaman and offering to help him. The elected one refuses to accept the burden at first, persisting in his decision until he is exhausted by spirit threats or tempted by the promises of the spirit who has chosen him. He finally submits to the spirit's demand and recovers from his

illness. From the moment of his submission the powerful spirit who healed the shaman helps him to heal others and proves useful in many other ways.

The Gold shaman's account of his relations with his spirit wife is so similar to Don Soltero's experience that I quote it below. The 20-year-old future shaman had fallen seriously ill for the first time in his life when his prospective spirit wife appeared to him.

Once I was asleep on my sick bed, when a spirit approached me. It was a beautiful woman, her figure was very slight, she was no more than half an arshin tall (about two feet). Her face and attire were quite as those of one of our Gold women. Her hair fell down to her shoulders in short, black tresses. . . . She said . . . "Now I am going to teach you . . . the old shamans have died off and there is no one to heal people. You are to become a shaman."

Next she said: "I love you. I have no husband now, you will be my husband and I shall be a wife unto you. I shall give you assistant spirits, you are to heal with their aid and I shall teach and help you myself. Food will come to us from the people."

I felt dismayed and tried to resist. Then she said: "If you will not obey me, so much the worse for you. I shall kill you."

She has been coming to me ever since and I sleep with her as with my own wife but we have no children. She lives quite by herself without any relatives in a hut on a mountain but she often changes her abode.⁹

Like the Mexican enanitos, Siberian spirits punish the shaman for disobedience of the suggestions they make for his mode of living and ceremonial details. If the Siberian shaman continues to disobey his spirits, they will kill him.¹⁰

The Siberian shaman also shares Don Soltero's power to enter the other world. The Siberian, however, can perform this feat whenever he chooses, whereas Don Soltero can enter the other world only when summoned by the enanitos.

In summing up this comparison, Don Soltero's shamanistic experiences show the following traits characteristic of classical Siberian shamanism: divine election accompanied by forced acceptance of the shamanistic call, forced marriage to a spirit wife of dwarf size, curing and divining with the aid of supernatural beings, punishment by supernatural helpers for disobedience, and the ability to enter the other world.

Unfortunately, I do not know whether other "curanderos de aire" in the Valley of Mexico share all of Don Soltero's shamanistic experiences. Divine election accompanied by forced acceptance of the shamanistic call is, I believe, typical of all "curanderos de aire" in the southern part of the Valley of Mexico. This call

⁹ Leo Sternberg, *Divine Election in Primitive Religion* (Proceedings, 21st International Congress of Americanists, p. 473 et seq., 1924), pp. 476-477.

¹⁰ Waldemar Bogoras, *The Chukchee* (Memoirs, American Museum of Natural History, vol. 11, Leiden, 1909), pp. 300-301.

inevitably occurs during an illness. Curing and divining with the aid of supernatural beings is another trait that probably is universal among "curanderos de aire." Don Soltero is the only curer I know, however, who has a spirit wife. I have no information for the area outside of Tecospa on the curandero's ability to enter the other world or on his punishment for disobeying the enanitos.

The resemblances between Mexican curing and Siberian shamanism may be due to independent developments or to the survival in Mexico of a shamanistic cult diffused from Siberia during ancient migrations to America. There is no historical evidence to prove either of these hypotheses.

Today the Mexican "curanderos de aire" are old people and they seem to be dying out. Younger curers learn their art at spiritualist centers in Mexico City or Xochimilco. Spiritualist curers are supposed to receive divine power to cure from spirit helpers but they also receive human instruction in curing at the temples. There are no spiritualist curers in Tecospa but the Indians sometimes consult spiritualists in Xochimilco or Mexico City when they are suffering from grave illnesses such as bewitchment which the local "curandero de aire" cannot cure.

The pattern of curing in the mestizo village of Tepepan near Xochimilco indicates a trend evident throughout the southern part of the Valley of Mexico. In Tepepan the "curanderos de aire" and the spiritualist curers are equal in number but the majority of the local inhabitants go out of town to consult urban spiritualists or doctors for serious illnesses. Belief in the enanitos and the disease of "aire" is still strong in Tepepan and shows little prospect of disappearing but today most families in town call on one of their elder members to cure a simple case of "aire" instead of consulting a "curandero de aire" as they used to do ten or fifteen years ago. If the well-known treatment of cleaning the patient with herbs and eggs fails, the sick person usually consults a spiritualist curer. Doctors do not know how to cure "aire," according to local belief.

Mexican shamanism probably will disappear within two decades when Don Soltero and the other "curanderos de aire" in the Valley of Mexico are dead. The spiritualists could be called shamans, of course, but their visions of Christian angels are a far cry from the pagan dwarfs who bestow power on Siberian shamans and Mexican "curanderos de aire."

Belief in spirits who assist in curing and divining is also common in Guatemala although sources on Guatemalan curing reveal no positive evidence of shamanism.

The Pokomam-speaking curers described by Gillin probably should be classified as shamans. One of these curers healed with the aid of a dwarf spirit named Don Avelin Caballero Sombregon. Other curers called on similar "devils" or "sprites" to bring back a patient's soul which they had magically stolen and hidden in the mountains or brush, thus producing fright sickness in the soulless victim.

Gillin does not specify whether these curers contact their spirits in dreams or visions but he does say that the curers talk directly to their spirits. He fails to disclose whether the curers received a divine gift to cure directly from supernatural beings.¹¹

The Chorti Indians in eastern Guatemala and the Mam-speaking Indians of Chimaltenango in northwestern Guatemala believe that the diviner receives information from a spirit who causes his leg to twitch in code-like response to questions. Wisdom identifies the Chorti spirit as a possible representative of the sun god.¹² Wagley quotes a Chimaltenango diviner as saying that God causes the leg to jump.¹³ These spirits do not communicate directly with the diviner through dreams, visions, or spirit possession. Neither Wagley nor Wisdom mentions any shamanistic gift of power received by the curer direct from supernatural beings. Wagley reports the presence of divine election in Chimaltenango where curers are stricken with critical illness and recover only by accepting the curing call from God. It is preordained by God that certain men become curers and this fate is discovered by divination during the illness of the elected individual. The Chimaltenango curer apparently acquires his curing power through training.¹⁴

Divine election accompanied by grave illness also is reported by La Farge for curers in the Guatemalan villages of Santa Eulalia and Jacaltenango. La Farge refers to "born shamans" in his publications on these two villages but offers no evidence that curers communicate directly with supernatural beings. He defines "born shamans" as "individuals who possess certain innate faculties, primarily magical, but who also enter to a greater or less degree into the religious structure."¹⁵ He classifies curers, witches, soothsayers, prayermakers, and dance captains as "born" and "selected" shamans.¹⁶ Such a sweeping definition of shamanism seems inappropriate for general usage because it embraces individuals who have little or nothing in common with Siberian shamans.

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11 John Gillin, *The Culture of Security in San Carlos: a Study of a Guatemalan Community of Indians and Ladinos* (Publication, Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, no. 16, 1951), pp. 107-108.

12 Charles Wisdom, *The Chorti Indians of Guatemala* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), p. 344.

13 Charles Wagley, *The Social and Religious Life of a Guatemalan Village* (Memoir, American Anthropological Association, no. 71, 1949), p. 72.

14 *Idem*, p. 74.

15 Oliver La Farge, *Santa Eulalia: the Religion of a Cuchumatán Indian Town* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), p. 149.

16 Oliver La Farge and Douglas Byers, *The Year Bearer's People* (Publication, Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, no. 3, 1931), p. 143.