

FOLK CURING WITH A PSYCHEDELIC CACTUS IN THE NORTH COAST OF PERU

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IN the growing body of literature on ethno-psychiatry, discussions of folk healing utilizing psychedelic drugs in the diagnosis and cure of illness has been found somewhat rarely, with a number of writers concerned with peyote (e.g., Schultes 1938; LaBarre 1938, 1947, 1960; M. E. Opler 1936; M. K. Opler 1940; Aberle 1966; Stewart 1944; Spindler 1952; Barber 1941; Arth 1956; Slotkin 1956; McGlothlin 1967; Wallace 1959). Any effective study of curing in which drugs are used to cause alteration in consciousness merits the collaboration of anthropologists focusing upon cultural beliefs and values and psychiatrists concerned with psychological mechanisms such as suggestion, catharsis and possession. Benjamin Paul (1963:35) has pointed out that cultural factors are involved in man's susceptibility and response to illness. The anthropologist's task in such an inquiry is to "investigate how cultural patterns mediate between conditions of climate, economy, sanitation, diet, child rearing, daily routines and social contact on the one hand, and death, disability and disease on the other.

Perhaps the persuasive argument for ethno-psychiatric collaboration which focuses upon healing with psychedelic drugs is Wallace's study of "Cultural determinants of response to hallucinatory experience" (1959). The phenomenon of hallucination, which in Western culture is often viewed as either mental or physical disease, may and often does receive different perception and evaluation in a cross-cultural setting. Due to the wide range of types of experiences that pharmacologic agents can cause, there is a real need to relate the conditions precipitating and surrounding an event of hallucination to the context of experience (p. 62). As Wallace argues, most auto-experiments with psychedelic drugs show important physiological changes and alterations in behavior, with few cultural controls, if any, being employed. Wallace's study of the intake of Peyote among Whites and American Indian subjects points up the dramatic cultural difference in clinical responses among these two groups. The areas affected were mood shifts, breakdown of social inhibition, feelings of contact with reality, idiosyncratic vs. culturally-patterned responses to hallucinations, and therapeutic benefits or permanent behavior changes between the two groups. While the White group showed variable and extreme mood shifts, agitated depression, anxiety or euphoria, the Indian group exhibited stability of mood, a feeling of religious reverence and often expectation of cure of physical illness. The author's conclusion that "both personal character and personally and culturally determined values concerning the homeostasis of subject experience may affect response to experimentally induced changes in sensation and perception" is crucial here (p. 64). The question arises: in what way do the pharmacological effects of the drug interact with, influence and are influenced by the situational factors in shaping the clinical picture? This is a basic concern in a study of the interaction of situational and psychological factors in folk healing.

This paper is the result of an anthropological pilot study of a Peruvian coastal village, which was undertaken during the summer of 1967.* Under the aegis of the

* My thanks to Dr. C. A. Seguin, Director of the Institute of Social Psychiatry, for his advice and guidance in this study.

Institute of Social Psychiatry of the University of San Marcos, Lima, a series of studies are underway at the time of this writing, by psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers dealing with the subjective aspects of healing and drug use in a rather unusual (but not unique) Mestizo community called Valleseco (a pseudonym). About 10 per cent of the adult male population are engaged in part-time folk healing in which diagnosis and cure of illness are inextricably linked to a psychedelic cactus, *San Pedro* (*Trichocereus pachanoi*).†

This investigation will deal with the following:—

- a. Brief ethnographic sketch of Valleseco, including the belief system regarding illness;
- b. The role of the folk healers *vis-à-vis* the community.
- c. The function of folk healing in Valleseco.

As Wallace (1961) suggests, an investigation of how the patient's and community's theories of illness and its treatment are conceptualized is the first step toward collaborative effort. The additional psychological and psychiatric studies in preparation will add important dimensions to this ethno-psychiatric endeavor.

BRIEF ETHNOGRAPHIC SKETCH

The coastal region of Northern Peru is an area of both large-scale plantations and small scale land holdings, where such crops as sugar cane, cotton, rice and maize are cultivated. Although the major part of the coastal surface is desert, fertile land is found in alluvial spreads formed at the mouth of rivers draining westward from the Andes. Irrigation is an important factor in obtaining abundant vegetation from the excellent soils. Valleseco, situated on a rich agricultural plain, has a population of 1,123 and is predominantly an agricultural community. (Censo Nacional 1961.) Land holdings range from over 2,500 acres to small plots of two-three acres each, with an average land holding of 200 acres. Few links to the written past exist, although it is believed that Don Lorenzo Callaipo founded Valleseco around 1520. He governed the community as a political leader (*cacique*). The community was first recognized by Bolivar in the second decade of the nineteenth century and afterwards as a district by Marshal Ramon Castilla in the mid-nineteenth century (Miranda 1959). Despite the fact that most of the families in Valleseco possess land, unemployment is widespread due to an intense drought that has plagued the region in the last decade. Farming, the mainstay of the economy, has been in decline due to the severe shortage of water, although some of the more fortunate families have built small wells on their property. The community is built on a typical Spanish pattern, with a Catholic Church, school, adobe houses, and commercial buildings surrounding a large central square. There is a bus service which links the community to the major market and occupational center of Chiclayo, some twenty-five miles to the southwest. Valleseco lacks both electricity and a sewage system, and there is no medical service available in the community.

In this peasant village, kinship ties are all-important, as few voluntary associations apart from the family are well-developed. Relatives are most often chosen as Godparents for children at birth or at first communion, and social gatherings more often than not take place within the bosom of the family. The establishment

† In 1959, the French ethnobotanist Claudine Friedberg identified the cactus *San Pedro* as containing 1.29 per cent of mescaline per/kg of fresh material.

of confidence relationships between people is not believed to be easy, and security in interpersonal relations is most easily achieved from family contacts.

The people of Valleseco are nominally Roman Catholic, but many pagan beliefs can be found. Rites and dogmas of the Church are superficial and poorly understood, and saints are adored not as the representative of Christ, but as personal gods (see Holmberg 1954). The village priest, although a full-time specialist, is one of the largest private landholders in the community and actively engaged in farming.

FOLK BELIEFS CONCERNING ILLNESS

There has been some discussion of popular beliefs concerning illness in the coastal area of Peru, but some distinctive features in this community are worthy of mention. Here, certain medicinal and magical plants containing mind-manifesting alkaloids are used in a celebrated method of curing disease which has attracted national tabloid acclaim as far away as Lima, some 450 miles to the south (*El Correo* 1967:6).

The coastal peasant recognizes empirical etiology of illness, but the empirical cause, however, is always derived from an ultimate supernatural cause. Empirical cures are secondary or supplementary to the utilization of magical and supplicatory techniques (Simmons 1955). A major etiological category is called *El Aire*, encompassing disease-producing vapors or airs which are believed to emanate from tombs, graves or ruins of sacred places. In Valleseco, pains in various parts of the body, paralysis of extremities, pneumonia and gastrointestinal disturbances are often attributed to *mal aires* (see Valdívía 1964; Simmons 1955). Illness may also be caused by sorcery on the part of someone who wishes to cause harm to another. *Daño*, with a varied symptomatology, has been discussed by several Peruvian psychiatrists. This type of severe illness is believed caused by vengeance or envy and is usually manifested after unfortunate events such as bad luck, disaster or loss of prestige.

The greatest elaboration of magical beliefs and practices in Valleseco is associated with that aspect of culture involving the greatest uncertainty. Lacking medical facilities and a well-balanced diet, and possessing poor hygienic facilities, many villagers who are faced with the uncertainty of illness consult the *mesa* (table) of a folk healer. His curing kit is quite different from that of an impersonal doctor whom they might choose to visit in a brief consultation in a neighboring town. The patient's fears are allayed by ritualistic curing sessions in which the healer and the patient drink a potion made from a mescaline cactus, *San Pedro*, in an all-night cleansing ceremony.

Power to cure is believed to reside not so much in the folk healer (although it is generally acknowledged that some folk healers are much more empirically wise than others), but in the power of the substance used by the healer. While under the intoxication of the drug, he divines the cause of the illness and prescribes herbs to administer to the sick person. Although all of the healers in Valleseco utilize *San Pedro*, different techniques characterize curing sessions. The passing of an object over the body of the sick person to symbolically extract the illness is widespread. Some curers use a small rodent called a *cuye* which is subsequently killed. Its internal organs are examined to discover where the illness has afflicted the patient.

There is some variation in the potion to be drunk. Generally the cactus is cut into pieces and boiled several hours in a large tin of water until only the essence remains. Some healers add leaves such as *Condorillo* (*Lycopodium sp.*)§, *Misha* (*Datura arborea*)‡ or *Hornamo* (unidentified), which increase the purgative and psychedelic effect. The potion causes nausea and heavy vomiting, which is believed important in purging the sick person of impurities.

The *materia medica* and *magica* of the folk healers deserves some detailed discussion. The curer at times is called upon to help a person who believes that he has been bewitched. Tables are also laid to bewitch or make love magic. A folk healer would never admit to such practices but attribute them to others. As a result, the curer's table not only consists of medicinal herbs, but charms and defenses of all kinds. There are several categories of items laid out during a curing session:

1. *Stones*: (piedras). These constitute the largest category. Many are highly polished and oddly shaped. Each one had its own name and the curers believe that each of these stones adopt the form of persons and animals which then attack enemies. Each stone, moreover, can receive orders from the curer. Some stones are called "herb stones" as the *maestro* (healer) under the influence of the drug receives a vision to help him select the right herb to prescribe.

2. *Defenses*: (*defensas*). A series of highly polished wooden sticks (*palos*) are kept at the head of the table in a protective file. At least one rather elegantly carved sword is present. These defenses are believed to keep evil spirits from approaching. Placed below the sword and sticks are various religious statues and holy pictures, such as the Virgin of Mercy, the Cross of Chalfon, a religious picture of St. Martin de Porres and various crucifixes.

3. *Huacos*: These are pottery vessels of some antiquity, which abound in the region (of Chimu and Mochica eras in particular). They are used for love magic, i.e., to cause a man to become enamoured of a woman or vice-versa.

4. *Minerals*: Oddly shaped mineral chunks of silver and gold are placed on the table. The lump of silver is believed to bring good luck. The gold nugget is thought to help a person encounter *huacos*, the archaeological vessels used for bewitching.

5. *Bronze pole*: In a manner similar to that used with the *cuye*, a hollow stick is rubbed over the body of a sick person, in the form of a cross, so as to remove the illness on to the object.

6. *Assorted items*: These include phallic symbols of silver believed to make a man virile. They may also be used as fertility charms. A shell in the form of a female vulva, believed to create harmony among a married couple, may also be present. A variety of shells, used to imbibe the brew of *San Pedro* or liquid tobacco snuff, are placed on the table.

7. *Bottled herbs*: (*pajas*). The generic term, *paja*, refers to a group of herbs bottled in a liquid substance and used in curing. These medicines are prescribed by the healer at the end of the session, after he has received a vision from the drug.

8. *Perfumes*: Occasional bottles of perfume, including orange-flower water, are brought to the healer by his patients.

THE RITUAL

Before discussing the ritual in these folk healing sessions, one should note that since such activity is outside the law, the suspicion of healers toward out-

siders is an expectable phenomenon and a factor limiting entry into such sessions. I observed two folk healing ceremonies in Valleseco and interviewed several of the folk healers currently practising in the community. Information was cross-checked wherever possible with informants concerning both the ritual and the system of beliefs. Intensive discussions with healers in non-ritual context concerning techniques, *materia magica* and *medica* were also held.

The following is a description of one such session which took place on the property of Don M.:

Under a thatched, open-air shelter located some distance from his farmhouse, a *maestro* assembled three patients who had come to him from a town some four hours to the north by bus. The ceremony took place at night and was conducted without any artificial light. The *materia medica* and *magica* described above was laid out on a cloth, with the patients seated along one side of it. Don M. had an apprentice to assist him in the ceremony who had been with him two years. A mixture of tobacco and water was inhaled from a shell as a nasal snuff by the assistant. At the same time, air was gulped to help bring the liquid snuff more quickly into the lungs. The *maestro* began to sing rather melodic lulling songs, which began with the Lord's Prayer in Spanish. It was followed by fairly spontaneous verses, with Latin occasionally mixed in with Quechua.|| The singing was accompanied by the rhythmic manipulation of gourds functioning as rattles, which at times were beaten without singing. After about an hour of the singing, the essence of *San Pedro* was drunk by the healer, his assistant and all the patients. The cup containing the potion was tapped lightly against the stones, swords and polished sticks of the *mesa* to enhance its effects. Occasionally, a patient, the healer or his assistant left the shelter to vomit up some of the potion which was strongly emetic. More singing followed, with prayers addressed to the Virgin Mary and to God. Occasionally the song recited the help that the healer would be able to give to the sick person. Each person in his turn stood up while the assistant removed one of the ornate swords from the table, placed it firmly in the ground between the feet of the sick man or woman and placed the patient's hands upon the handle. The apprentice then took tobacco in his nose as snuff, bending down to the ground at the region of the feet, the midsection and finally the head of the patient. This was repeated with the sword held firmly behind the patient. Then the sword was rubbed over every part of the patient's body, with care taken to follow the form of a cross (during this part of the ceremony, the patient stood with his arms outstretched). All of the patients were treated in this manner. The healer then spent several minutes either privately or in front of the rest of the group discussing the symptoms, problems, etc., of the patient. When this was completed, the songs were resumed. At one point, the assistant rose, sprinkled water in the air and cut the air with his sword to drive out "evil spirits". At another point in the ceremony, the healer rubbed together some of the many polished stones which were laid out on the cloth, causing electric sparks to fly in the darkness of the night. Finally at dawn, after being under the influence of the drug from about 10 p.m. to 5 a.m., the last series of songs were sung and the ceremony was over.

When questioned, the healers claim that under the continuing effects of the cactus they are able to learn the nature of the illness troubling the patient. Kluver

§ Identified by the Javier Prado Museum of Natural History, Lima.

† Identified by Friedberg (1960:25).

|| Quechua is not spoken by the coastal peasants.

(1966) in his study of mescal, provides support for such claims, as he speaks of the possibility of the appearance of some object in a hallucination under the stress of affective need (p. 4). The healers are proud of the visions they receive while under the effects of the potion which are stimulated by the striking of the herbal stones. Herbal remedies used to cure patients appear to the healers in a vision. *Pajas* (herbs) which have roots in antiquity are found on the healer's *mesa* along with his *materia medica*. Some healers use the *cuye* in place of the sword described above. I was unable to obtain information on bewitching ritual. One healer in particular said he would not bewitch anyone because it was against the injunctions of the Church.

The existence of healing sessions in Valleseco is known and discussed openly. Healers who practise sorcery upon others are feared by many people and there is a strong belief in the efficacy of their powers. An elderly widow, Sra. J., recounted the story of how her husband had been bewitched by a *brujo* (witch) at the behest of a jealous younger brother. He gave his brother a magical potion in a drink. The bewitched man was said to have "dried up" and subsequently died, although he was young and previously in good health. Many of the healers themselves are suspicious of their colleagues whom they believe wish them harm or envy their successes. Defenses laid out carefully at the sessions are believed to protect the healer as much as the patient. One of the most famous and well-known healers in the community is reputed to have died through the machinations of another healer.

THE ROLE OF THE HEALER IN VALLESECO

Although the data do not permit quantitative generalization, certain patterns concerning the relationship of the healers to the rest of the community emerge. As discussed earlier, poverty has existed in Valleseco due to drought in recent years and agricultural activity is very much limited. All of the folk healers are part-time specialists who practise their rituals at night and work their farms during the day. Although many healers show little conspicuous outward wealth, subtle differences set them apart from their fellow farmers. Many live in houses of brick construction with calamine roofs. Many own trucks which they use for commercial cartage of wood carbon or other goods. Some own impressive farmhouses and fairly adequately sized farms. Some have expensive bicycles for their children. Some have wells (expensive to construct) which are used to irrigate small groves of fruit, the sale of which serves as an additional source of income. Others have livestock in abundance, personal property such as radios, record players, kerosene lamps, etc., which they received from grateful patients. Healers frequently receive presents of food and animals from patients and collect additional fees for feeding patients during the treatment period (generally two-three days). Neither the need to seek work elsewhere (prevalent in this region) nor the need to sell land at very low prices is present.

Village reputation has it that the curers have on hand cash earned from healing, and many keep barking dogs to warn of thieves in the night. When questioned about the economic level of the healers, the villagers admit that these specialists do not go hungry. Some healers will accuse their colleagues of looking for easy money by learning to cure. The richest folk healer in the village, who lives some five miles outside the community, runs a small hotel for his patients. He has a generator, pump, truck and other valuables given to him by grateful patients. As

far as I could determine, healers are not envied their margin of economic safety in difficult times. Rather they enjoy great prestige and admiration and have a reputation throughout all of Peru. The skill of individual healers is a common topic of discussion and patients come not only from the community but from distant parts of Peru. They may travel hours or even days to spend time with a healer recommended to them by a relative or friend. Moreover, the community as a whole and individual members receive benefits from these folk healing activities.

THE FUNCTION OF FOLK HEALING IN VALLESECO

Let's look in more detail at the benefits that folk healing has brought to this community. The function of folk healing in Valleseco is by no means an isolated phenomenon, but may be related to many other aspects of behavior. It would be difficult indeed to understand folk healing as it exists in this community without visualizing the interdependency of this behavior to all other aspects of social life in the community.

In this region of presently parched, agriculturally unproductive communities, Valleseco stands apart in many ways. Despite its relative isolation, the community benefits from a bus service which links it to the main market and occupational center of the region, to Lima and thus to the rest of Peru. While the motives of the owner of the bus company may have been purely economic in establishing the bus line five years ago, in many ways the healers are benefited since patients are brought to the community rapidly. Before the bus service was put into operation, patients had to come on donkey from the main road. Now a patient can take the six o'clock bus, speak with a folk healer, and if in agreement over treatment and fees, the patient can remain a few days for treatment. The existence of the bus service which permits easy contact with the outside world explains in some measure the high degree of commercial activity characterizing this agricultural community. A one-to-five ratio of stores to households present in the community is high, even in Peru where miniscular business activity is widespread (personal communication, Dr. Matos Mar). Moreover, despite the small amount of cash involved, each of the many small front-room "stores" where soda, beer and canned foods are sold attempts to realize some cash transaction daily. A pharmacy in particular appears to benefit greatly from folk healing, as the pharmacist (*empirico*) maintains a small hotel and occasionally feeds visitors for a fee. He is on good terms with the healers and often fills prescriptions prescribed by them, as well as recommending healers to prospective patients.

In addition, folk healing channels a source of cash income to an important segment of the population. Although it was difficult to obtain precise figures on this, it is said that over one hundred men and three women are engaged in folk healing. Each *maestro* in addition employs one or two apprentice-assistants who actively participate in the ritual and receive fees for their work.

Much of the ritual used by the healer is syncretized with Roman Catholic beliefs. It was interesting to observe a Roman Catholic Mass the day following attendance at a folk healing session so as to observe the great amount of ritual taken intact from the Church ceremony to that of healing. Many of the orations of the folk healers are lifted almost intact from the Catholic liturgy and incorporated into the curing ritual. Latin prayers, somewhat garbled but still familiar to the villagers and other patients in a land where Roman Catholicism is found in

over 95 per cent of the population, are also recited. Prayers addressed to God, the Virgin Mary, St. Martin de Porres and other saints supplicate and ask for cures to be effected through intervention on behalf of an ill person. The sprinkling of water in the manner of a priest dispensing holy water also characterizes the curing ritual. Even the biography of St. Cipriano, who is believed to be the patron saint of folk healers, is interesting to discuss in this context. Before his conversion to Christianity, Cipriano was one of the best known magicians in the world, with absolute dominion over evil spirits who would harken to his every command. When asked to effect love magic on a young Christian woman by a young man who was in love with her, Cipriano was unable to succeed since the girl had placed herself under the protection of the Virgin. Through the divine grace of Jesus and helped by the cross of St. Bartholomy, she was able to resist. Cipriano, who was incensed by his inability to work his spell on this woman, was advised by Lucifer that the God of the Christians is God of all that is created. Cipriano became a Christian, was martyred and became a saint.

Several healers maintain chapels on their property which are dedicated to the Virgin, to St. Cipriano or other saints, and many in fact consider themselves deeply religious. There is a general sense of wellbeing expressed by the villagers concerning these chapels. Some contain "relics" or very special kinds of statuary. One folk healer had a statue of the Virgin Mary, which appeared to be dated from the Spanish Colonial period. It was housed in a separate building adorned with flowers and incense. Found in a *huaco* (sacred shrine), the statue was said to have appeared to the healer in a vision obtained from *San Pedro*. Another healer had a cross formed naturally from a tree trunk which was placed in a small chapel. Occasionally the village priest would say Mass in this small sanctuary.

Although the fame of these folk healers is known throughout Peru, many writers have labeled such behavior "charlatanism". Sal y Rosas (1961) makes a fine distinction between the highland healer, *Jampeck*, curing within the confines of an Indian peasant community, and the "Charlatans" of Lima and other coastal areas. Tricking patients when under the effects of *San Pedro* is also mentioned by Gutierrez-Noriega (1950). This aspect of folk healing is difficult to dismiss lightly. Collective belief in the efficacy of the drug and the skill of the healer does effect cures to patients often suffering from psychosomatic disorders. Whether these cures are "temporary remissions" or not does not concern us here. The first-rate empirical knowledge of the healers concerning the rich pharmacopoeia available to them is undeniable and even cited by Sal y Rosas in his discussion of Charlatanism. The ability of the curer, whose skills are well-touted, his firm and confident manner in dealing with his patients, his boasts of the healing he will achieve, his use of familiar religious prayers and supplications to the Virgin, God and other saints—in short, the potency of the suggestive phenomena at work cannot be ignored. Certainly as Lastres (1951) indicated, artifices are employed in the curer's art. Yet, each patient becomes the focal point of group concern and is in the lime-light for some time during the curing ceremony. Lastres' judgment that healers take advantage of the credibility of the public is a harsh medico-centric distortion, less damaging to the healer who works within a belief system that often results in cures than the invector. One can quote Wolberg that "cultural symbols and values are the medium through which the individual patient approaches what is offered to him in psychotherapy. His response to the strategies of the therapist will be circumscribed by the meaning they have for him in terms of his general life view".

(1961:121.) One cannot agree with Lastres either that the healers "make sick people believe that they have been bewitched by their enemies". Given the nature of the etiological cause of illness present in coastal Peru and substantiated by Simmons (1955) in a public health survey, such beliefs are an integral part of the world view of the believers and certainly not introjected to patients by folk healers seeking an easy income. This is not to dismiss failures, too, which mark the career of folk healers. Complaints have been lodged with the police against healers who exacted large sums of money for cures they never effected.

Finally, it would appear that the community as a whole benefits in a somewhat diffuse manner from the fame of the folk healers. Various projects such as roads, wells, medical centers and the like, of great aid to Valleseco, may in fact be the partial benefit of the reputation enjoyed by the community in competition with other such small farming areas equally needful of these finite resources.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have focused upon folk healing in a coastal village of Northern Peru where a psychedelic cactus, *San Pedro*, is employed to diagnose illness and effect cures. The system of beliefs and concepts pertaining to illness among the users of such a substance has been delineated. The set of techniques employed by the curer in ceremonial context has been discussed as well as the system of social relations present in the social milieu. Patterns of stress and conflict, equally important in such a study, have only been hinted at. Certainly the inability of the coastal peasant to effectively control his environment in times of drought results in psychic strain and stress. The recent opening of the community to the outside world by means of a modern road, a bus service and a soon-to-be-completed highland road certainly threatens the isolation of the village. Radios and movies, now more easily accessible to the villager, bring new patterns of consumption and contrast to his way of living.

The uncertainty of illness, needless to say, has non-temporal roots, and one might note that there is some evidence that folk healing utilizing a mescaline cactus has roots in antiquity. Friedberg, in her study of Peruvian ethnobotanical materials (1959) notes that certain Mochica ceramics (ca. 1200 A.D.) in the Anthropology Museum in Lima (1960) possess decorations having an evident relationship to the ritual of utilizing a cactus with hallucinatory effects. Such folk healing has been cited by Gutierrez-Noriega and Lastres as related to ancient rituals propitiating the moon.

The flourishing of folk healing—with the overtones of charlatanism and exploitation of the fears and uncertainties of individuals faced with illness—places Valleseco in a somewhat special category of peasant village. Yet folk healing cements together a system of social relationships in Valleseco and results in mutual benefits both material and spiritual in nature which accrue to the members of the community.

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