

ANTHROPOLOGICAL QUARTERLY**CONTENTS****HEALING AND THE BODY POLITIC:
DILEMMAS OF DOCTORING IN ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK****JANET M. CHERNELA and JEFFREY DAVID EHRENREICH**
Guest Editors

- Introduction: Practice and Representation
in the Construction of Efficacy** JANET M. CHERNELA 111
- License to Practice? A View from
the Rain Forest** DOROTHEA S. WHITTEN 115
- Hippocrates in the Bush** JEAN E. JACKSON 120
- First Aid, Second Thoughts, Third World:
Reflections on Medical Bricolage** JEAN-PAUL DUMONT 123
- X **Shamanistic Journeys and Anthropological
Travels** JANET M. CHERNELA and ERIC LEED 129
- "You Killed My Baby!": The Dilemmas of
Medical Intervention During Fieldwork** KENNETH M. KENSINGER 134
- Worms, Witchcraft, and Wild Incantations:
The Case of the Chicken Soup Cure** JEFFREY DAVID EHRENREICH 137
- Collecting Medical Specimens in South America:
A Dilemma in Medical Ethics** JUDITH KEMPF 142
- Healing Dilemmas** DONALD POLLOCK 149
- Medicine, Land Loss, and the Guarani** RICHARD K. REED 158
- Concluding Discussion: The Anthropologist
as Healer** MICHAEL HARNER 162
- REVIEW ARTICLE**
- The Anthropology of Development: Discourse,
Agency, and Culture (Review of Hobart, ed., An
Anthropological Critique of Development: The
Growth of Ignorance, and Escobar, Encountering
Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third
World)** DAVID D. GOW 165
- BOOK REVIEW**
- (Trompf) Payback: The Logic of
Retribution in Melanesian Religions** JOEL ROBBINS 174
- BOOKS RECEIVED**

SHAMANISTIC JOURNEYS AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL TRAVELS

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This article offers two instances of the anthropologist's engagement in local curing sequences as examples of the agreement of identities between anthropologist and shaman. This similitude of culturally disparate roles is rooted, we believe, in the power generally derived from the foreign and apart. It also comes from the nature of shamanism as the world's only universal "specialty," a congerie of cures, techniques, and packaged knowledge. We conclude that the identification of the anthropologist as shaman is not necessarily a misidentification. In their travels both define and cross boundaries wielding a power that is essentially relational and communicational: derived from a manipulation of otherness, and from the use of words as things. [Tukanoan, shamanism, language, Tourette's Syndrome, medical anthropology]

The Anthropologist Narrates Her Travels

I¹ did not want to be in São Gabriel da Cachoeira when Senhora de Cuelhar was possessed by a spirit which caused her to inexplicably burst forth with a stream of foul language, curses, and vituperations. The air force plane on which I traveled to my field area in the Brazilian Northwest Amazon had stopped for a night to take on fuel and supplies in this small community of 2,000 situated below the confluence of the Uaupés with the Negro rivers. Here it was decided that the permission of the Brigadier General of the Brazilian Air Force was needed before I could proceed or return. A stopover turned into a long, empty wait of forty days and nights.

During this pause in the journey local opinion was embroiled in a debate concerning the illness of Senhora de Cuelhar, whose symptoms were all the more sensational because she was a moral bulwark of the town, the wife of a minor official and manager of the local pharmacy. Her illness mobilized the factions of the town's spiritual leadership. Her person became the arena of medico-magical competitions.

Official decree had divided the frontier region of the Upper Rio Negro into provinces of Catholic and Protestant missionization. Settlements to the northwest (where Brazil borders Colombia) were assigned to the Catholic Church, and those to the northeast (along the Venezuelan border) assigned to the Protestants. São Gabriel da Cachoeira was the neutral territory in which the administrative headquarters of both ministries were located.

The Catholic Church was the first missioniz-

ing influence of the region. Jesuits and Carmelites entered the Upper Rio Negro in the seventeenth century. Protestants were the more recent arrivals, and a large portion of their members tended to be converts from Catholicism. As elsewhere in Latin America, Protestant denominations in São Gabriel had experienced a recent growth in numbers of followers. Even so, the traditional elites continued to be practicing Catholics and the de Cuelhar family was no exception to this pattern.

The first arrangements made by the household of Sra. de Cuelhar, therefore, were made through the Bishop in São Gabriel. A priest was delegated to perform the sacrament for the exorcism of evil spirits. A room was made ready with crucifix, holy water, and some statuary. A rite, several centuries old, was performed, consisting of a series of texts, including the Litany of Saints, recitation of the Our Father, several creeds and prayers, reading of Gospel passages, and the specific prayer of exorcism, a Latin text based upon the pre-Vatican II *Rituale Romanum*.²

Sra. de Cuelhar appeared to be calmed by the procedure and the temper of the town was soothed, until, after some ten days, she shocked her family with another intemperate outburst. This time it was the turn of the local Protestant missionary. In contrast to the priest, the New Tribes' missionary carried no paraphernalia, nor had he specialized clothing or images. The only object attributed with power by him was the Scripture. Both pastors agreed—the one following Martin Luther and the other St. Augustine—that the power of the Word alters moral and physical states. This power comes not from the fact that it is understood, but from

the fact that it is believed.

The Protestant missionary prayed long and earnestly with Sra. de Cuelhar. This, too, appeared to have its effect for a few days until she resumed her outbursts.

The political delicacy of the situation was apparent to me. The Catholic Church controlled all routes of access to the Northwest Amazon, and could easily have prohibited my entry into the indigenous area. Nevertheless the case stirred me, and when I was asked to consider it I found myself challenged irresistibly. I reached for my store of explanatory resources. In my baggage I carried *The Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy*, which promised in its preface to make the informed physician "master of the situation," allowing even the educated lay person to look up symptoms, find "diagnosis" and "treatment." In the anthropology department of Columbia University the manual was recommended as indispensable in fieldwork both for one's own health care and for carrying out minor clinical tasks for the Indians. According to the manual Sra. de Cuelhar's symptoms accorded with the Gilles de la Tourette's syndrome: "Facial blinking, grimaces, . . . shouting and barking . . . and [for] about half the patients, coprolalia." Coprolalia, it seemed, was an odd set of symptoms described as "compulsive swearing" (Merck 1977: 1452). There was even a medication recommended: "The dramatic response to haloperidol, a dopamine antagonist, suggests an organic basis" (p. 1452). This description seemed to fit the behavior so perfectly and to be such a clear promise of relief, that I mentioned it to my circle of friends in São Gabriel. They smiled, as one does when a child is wrong and unaware of it.

Anthropological Travel, Curing Sequences, and Shamanism

When I arrived in the Brazilian Uaupés and identified myself to the Tukanoan Wanano as an "anthropologist," they immediately knew who I was and what I wanted. Perhaps this category of social being had originally been sketched by Gordon MacCreagh or William McGovern who had collected artifacts and rituals along the Uaupés River above the cataracts at Ipanoré in the first decades of this century (MacCreagh 1926; McGovern 1927). It had been more recently fleshed out by Robin Wright, an anthropologist who had studied shamanism on the nearby Içana River the year

before. As I carried a tape recorder, was a confessed anthropologist, bore gifts and western medicines, it was presumed that I was there to collect chants and distribute medicines. Though I did not intend to study shamanism, this initial identification made it easy to do so.

The Wanano take great pride in their rhetorical skills (Chernela 1993). For them, language is the fundamental boundary marker of clan and nation. Wanano is a member language of the Eastern Tukanoan family; Wanano speakers and speakers of other languages in that family (here called by the collective terms Tukano and Tukanoan) have strong linguistic loyalties. Norms militate against code-switching or in any other way combining elements from "other's" languages in everyday speech. The artful use of language is a key to elite status among the Tukano and they were not adverse to performing before an interested, recording stranger who also carried western medicines. This clearly contributed to my value as a visitor.

More importantly, western diseases against which the Wanano had no cure took the youngest and oldest of the community in periodic epidemics. I was invited to stay in Yapima with the plea: "Our children die of coughs, we have no help."

The western medicines I carried made me a valuable exchange partner, and shamans sought me out to present chants to me. The notable exception was Ricardo Teixeira, said to be the most powerful shaman in the river basin, who remained aloof. Only after a year, when his granddaughter was bitten on the foot by a scorpion, did he consult me. Along with the Merck I carried a second health manual designed for field missionaries. My *Missionary Health Manual* told me that the body would absorb the toxin if given the time, and that neotropical scorpions are fatal only in rare cases, mostly involving children.

The nine-year old was a slight child, and so in possible danger. Following the manual's advice for treating scorpion bites with cold, I sought a section of the river where she might comfortably place her legs in flowing water. I sat her on a smooth boulder at the edge of a small waterfall, under the overhang of large shade trees, and joined her there with my tape recorder and tapes of children's stories set to music. The stories were in Portuguese, a language Ricardo did not speak. (I was searching for resources at hand that might entertain—perhaps this "childish" music had appeal to all children.) There, as she dangled her leg in the current, we

played and listened away the hours, while the pain dramatically receded from her hip, down her leg, into her foot, and finally remanded entirely.

The family was pleased and sought a form of “repayment” for services rendered. Ricardo soon called me to his home, and even into his inner sanctum, a compartment within the larger house shielded against neighboring family members by several barriers of palm screening through which he was handed his food by a favorite daughter. This separation from the group is one of the precautions taken by shamans in the communal homes of the Tukanoans. Ricardo’s apartness within the group whose health was his moral responsibility only much later seemed a key to the problematic of his power.

Ricardo’s summons and public recognition was an honor, especially as women were perceived as polluting of this enclosed, highly-controlled space. It was only after I began recording his extensive vocabulary of chants, songs, and techniques that I realized that my acceptance as an “anthropologist,” which meant a shaman, a specialist, and perhaps a rival (though not necessarily an equal) in the curative arts, had effaced prior distinctions of gender. At some point he had ceased to regard me as a woman.

Over the next several months I recorded many of Ricardo’s chants until my tape recorder was destroyed, fused by a lightning strike. As this occurred immediately after Ricardo had summoned me to his presence and I had replied that I was busy at the moment, the event did not lessen his considerable pride or reduce his reputation as the most powerful shaman of the area.

Ricardo’s chants were not in Wanano or in any Tukanoan language I recognized. I wondered if the language was the secret, specialized sphere of shamans. Much later, when I played these chants for Jonathan Hill, he noticed that many of Ricardo’s chants were in Arawakan and similar to those he had collected among Arawakan-speakers in Venezuela. The chants of lesser shamans were commonly in a Tukanoan language. Like so many of the most powerful shamans, Ricardo Teixeira had traveled widely in his career, apprenticing among the Arawakan-speaking Baniwa of the Aiari River. His power and reputation among his own people rested upon an enormous repertoire of songs, incantations, and charms accumulated in his travels, many in Arawakan languages not understood by the Tukanoan Wanano. This seemed to

raise, and to simultaneously answer, a question basic to language and efficacy: How is it that words have power even when they are not understood? In particular, why is it that certain words and performances seem to have power *because* they are beyond everyday comprehension, “foreign,” or even “meaningless” to audience and actors performing them?

The Shamanistic Journey and Anthropological Travels

The argument here is that the power of the shaman is essentially relational and communicational, arising from the shaman’s performance which often represents and makes visible boundaries between domains, even as these are crossed. Researchers in the Uaupés have pointed out that the shaman is the most important specialist in Tukanoan culture (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971, 1975, 1977; Hugh-Jones 1979). As a mediator between social and supernatural worlds, between inside and outside, the body and the forces that govern the state and condition of the body, he is an advocate on behalf of his group, kinsmen, and clients against evil: enemy sorcerers, disease, malevolent spirits, and other threats to the well-being of those in his care.

Not only is shamanism the world’s only pan-human “specialty,” it is defined by the very idea of specialization which implies “turfing”: the creation of boundaries and the compartmentalization of knowledge, the proliferation of subdivisions and esoterica, the preservation of knowledge in formulae and sacred languages.

The present approach is grounded in ideas presented in Mary Douglas’ 1970 essay on pollution, power, and taboo: order in general is made by the exaggeration of difference and the setting apart of that which is joined. The domain of the sacred is created and articulated through the taboo, the act of setting apart, defining, naming, and drawing boundaries.

Shamanism and the Boundary Arts

The act of fence-building, separating, and defining is perhaps the primal act creative of any order, an act that transforms a difference into an antithesis—one which may be bridged through shamanic arts. The shaman does no more or less than create the domain of the sacred, the apart, just as Moses performed an act of sacralization when he fenced

around Mount Sinai and forbade contact with it to all but priests and the initiated (Exodus 19: 12-24). Similarly, the procedures of the shaman create a "world set apart" and establish the proper and rule-governed means by which it is entered, its powers engaged and channeled.

Much of the activity of the Tukanoan shaman is involved in creating enclosures or shields which protect the vulnerable. A powerful shaman (Wanano: *yai*) encircles a threatened individual, house, or village with a protective wall of tobacco smoke, woven like a fish fence, and made more powerful by being augmented with power-generating incantations that block out invading spells and influences.

The shaman not only marks those boundaries that set apart and establish the integrity of a body, collective or personal, he also sets himself apart. The specialized compartment within the longhouse separated the prominent shaman of Yapima from the polluting influences of co-residents and visitors. This "separation" of the shaman from the group he serves renders him sacred, special, and powerful. As a means of setting the shaman apart, it is the source of the journey as the prominent metaphor in shamanic ritual.

The Shaman as Traveler

The shaman is strongly identified with travel itself. A Tukanoan shaman bridges domains through both thought travel (using a hallucinogen to experience travel) and active travel. Apprenticeship to a shaman of a different tribe or language-group is one means by which the novice practitioner obtains foreign songs, spells, and incantations which are often considered more powerful and effective than those recited in comprehensible tongues.

Ricardo Teixeira, the widely-known Wanano shaman from the Uaupés River, apprenticed among the Arawakan-speaking Baniwa of the Aiari River. His vast repertoire of songs, spells, and incantations included many in Arawakan which were not understood by the Wanano. By territorial or imaginary passage, the shaman sets himself apart, acquires powerful foreign spells and drugs, and makes his body a vehicle and a conduit of exchanges between domains. Through dreams, smoke, hallucinations, and visions, through the mediations of animal spirits, images, and chants, the Wanano shaman physically bridges domains and tries to restore violated integrities.

In his study of Tukanoan shamanism in the Colombian Uaupés, Reichel-Dolmatoff finds that "prolonged sojourns in different regions are a fairly common feature of apprenticeship" as shamans (1975: 78). But he attributes this frequency of exchange to the "absence of language barriers" (p. 78). To the contrary, it is the *presence* of carefully maintained language barriers which gives an added sacredness and power to the magical utterances acquired among speakers of mutually unintelligible languages.

The Value in Weirdness

The incomprehension of the uninitiated establishes the boundary distinguishing the specialist practitioner from the amateur, and one specialist from another. The shaman is not only "one who knows" but one who knows things not generally known. The less familiar his instruments, the greater their potency. Tambiah (1968) notes that the ritual words used in a Pali Sinhalese healing ceremony are in a variety of tongues, some unintelligible to the ritual participants. The unintelligibility of sacred, ritual languages suggests, Tambiah argues, that the words are used differently than in normal communication; the magic words are conceived as things, causes, and acts rather than as vehicles of meaning.

It was Malinowski's observation that the magical word is an attribute of the relation between man and thing (1935, v.2). In this sense the uncomprehended word *is* an object rather than a word, and comprehension becomes a performance that demonstrates the exclusive abilities of the specialist. Most importantly for our purposes here, the performative power of the uncomprehended word lies in its exotic or foreign qualities. Malinowski summed up these traits and pointed to their significance in the concept *weirdness*.

The conception of words and formulae as power dictates a different communicational structure than we find in place in the modern world, where the value of something or somebody is directly proportional to how many know that thing or person. Within shamanistic cultures it is secrecy rather than publicity that sanctifies. Fredrik Barth noted this structure of contained, bounded, and packaged knowledge among the Baktaman of New Guinea, among whom "the value of information seemed to be regarded as inversely proportional to how many shared it" (1975: 217).

It is clear that the shaman specializes in communicational actions—uttering words, “seeing” the normally unseen, defining, naming, explaining, singing, manipulating ritual objects, defending—and takes a moral responsibility for the physical condition of the patient. The wielder of the power of words and symbols appears to “cause” the change in condition of those who submit, physically, to his or her ministrations. Yet the “cause” of the cure is neither in the utterances of the shaman nor in the body of the patient, but in the union of the two, and in the relations the shaman embodies between worlds carefully kept separate.

Power is not inherent in things foreign and alien *per se*, but in the relations established between that which is strange and that which is familiar. It is thus in order to generate a particular and palpable power that the shaman separates himself from his familiars and makes himself a stranger.

The notion of the power in things foreign has at times been extended to the foreigner himself. If the shaman makes himself strange in order to be-

come a mediator, strangers and travelers of all sorts are traditionally regarded as potential mediators, as shamans, and as capable of transformative power. Like the uncomprehended word, the foreigner may be perceived as or serve as an instrument of power—standing for and representing bodies of information unknown to the unspecialized witness. The historical frequency with which one finds the stranger acting in the role of shaman suggests something of the importance of the role of shaman as a natural channel of intercultural exchange and influence.

If shamanism is the art of defining and bridging separate worlds, this would explain why, traditionally, anthropologists/strangers, and boundary-crossers in general, have been regarded as potential shamans and have often performed this role. Where ethnographers operate as shamans, their authority derives not from degree or Manual, but rather from the power in “otherness” and from their dabbling in the exchange of the foreign or esoteric.

NOTES

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¹The first person relates the experiences of Chernela, an anthropologist who lived in the Amazon between 1978 and 1985.

²Reporting of the rites of exorcism is based upon interview and research rather than firsthand observation.

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