

## ESPIRITUS INCORPORADOS: THE ROLES OF PLANTS AND ANIMALS IN THE AMAZONIAN MESTIZO FOLKLORE

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**ABSTRACT.**—The Mestizo ethnomedicine of the Peruvian Amazon [consists of] a group of models which identify the symptoms of illnesses, provide the options of therapy and recategorize the natural environment. Models of witchcraft endow animals and plants with different roles from [those] they have in everyday life: plants and animals "are" embodied spirits controlled by means of power songs (*ikaros*). Spirited animals can function either as illness projectiles or even as their senders, whereas the mother spirits of the *ayahuasca* vine and other plants are the source of all medicinal knowledge.

### INTRODUCTION

The client's perspective of the Mestizo health behaviour system in two Amazonian villages (San Rafael and Nuevo Progreso) recognizes various types of evil that can cause illness. Intentionally inflicted evil or witchcraft is the most variable of all illnesses. Witchcraft (*hechiceria*, *brujeria*) may be caused either by evil spirits (*mal de aire*), by animals and their spirits (*mal de agua*, *mal de monte*) or by men (*mal de gente*), the latter being the most dangerous of all illnesses, the [meanest] variety of witchcraft. Evil animals and evil spirits are subordinated to evil persons who may use them as weapons. Thus the dangerous cases of *mal de monte* and *mal de agua* are cases of *mal de gente*.

The roles of plants and animals from the viewpoint of the cognitive systems utilizing them have been studied only recently (Chiappe *et al.* 1985, Luna 1986), whereas the corresponding information from coastal and highland Peru has been available for a relatively long time (Valdizan & Maldonado 1922). In what follows I shall supply material for reconstructing the Amazonian client's perspective.

### MAL DE AGUA

The evil inflicted by the animals and spirits of rivers and lakes and by the water itself is called *mal de agua*. The most common symptom is unbearable pain in the lower abdomen. *Mal de agua* affects mainly women who bathe during menstruation, but it may affect any person who happens to be close to water. There are no other symptoms: headache, fever, diarrhea and vomiting are absent. The responsible animals are the pink river dolphin (*bujeo colorado*) and the boa snake. They can smell when a menstruating woman is bathing and follow the smell tracks. They are very powerful animals: dolphins carry projectiles with them whereas boa snakes radiate heat which makes people sick. *Mal de agua* is treated by healers who use tobacco, power songs and suction to extract the evil. Here Juan Silbano relates a personal account, which suggests that the blood from a woman had activated the pink river dolphin:

I have suffered *mal de agua*. Afterwards I have never canoed alone, since the river dolphin chases me. When I went to a healer for the first time, he said that there had been a woman bathing in the river and therefore the water had harmed me. I had terrible pains, I was about to go crazy. I went to a healer in Iquitos and he sang me a power song (*me ha cantado*). Still I feel pain now and then, when I'm near to water. It's right here in my stomach, not in another place. It sticks like a spine. The river dolphin has bewitched me. The healer blew tobacco smoke to cure me and he sucked my stomach. He searched and found where the pain was and he extracted the spines. When you are thus bewitched, you cannot eat fish which contains either bones or phlegm. *Boquichico* is the only fish without phlegm. (TKU 87/212)

The pink river dolphin is not utilized for alimentation since it is considered very powerful. The guardian spirit of aquatic animals is the *Yacumama*, or the mother of the river. It "is" (from the perspective of folklore) a large boa snake whose primary task is to punish excessive fishing (Regan 1983:89).

#### MAL DE MONTE

The evil may stem from the jungle (*monte*) instead of the river. *Mal de monte* is usually distinguished from *mal de agua*. *Mal de monte* includes snake bites, insect bites, skin infections, etc. These are cured by homemade plant remedies or by pills and injections. But there are more serious varieties of *mal de monte*. There are spirits in the jungle who can do serious harm. One is *shapshico*, or *chullachaqui*, which owns a garden in the jungle, and is very jealous about it. It is the guardian of plants and animals. The following account by Jose Huaniri suggests that *shapshico* is a spirit embodied in an animal. The apparent contradiction between being an animal and being invisible is solved since it is a case of *espíritu incorporado* which can have both these properties simultaneously:

This *shapshico* has his garden in jungle. If you cut a tree in his garden, he hurts you. He is a little man living there, an animal, a little demon. *Shapshico* uses projectiles. Healer will extract the projectile (*virote*) and you calm down. You cannot see a *shapshico* or speak with it. (TKU 87/194)

However it is in *mal de gente* [that] plants and animals enact their most complicated roles.

#### MAL DE GENTE

*Mal de agua* and *mal de monte* are considered as witchcraft, but the most dangerous (and sometimes the only) variety of witchcraft is *mal de gente* (evil of people). Other evils are lesser ones and turn really serious only when evil persons are involved. Evil people may inflict harm by means of evil spirits embodied in plants and animals, and thus the other varieties of witchcraft are subordinated to them. *Mal de gente* has several names: *mala gente*, *brujeria*, *hechiceria* and *embrujamiento*. In the following, the term witchcraft will be used.

The main symptom is sudden, unbearable pain, but any illness may be due to witchcraft. The pain may be located in the stomach, lungs, chest, head, foot, throat

or back. Persistent fever, infected wound, skin irritation, or any illness whatever that is difficult to cure may be due to witchcraft. Also accidents, family or neighbour problems and economic setbacks are sometimes seen as signs of witchcraft, especially when they co-occur with some persistent illness. The origin of witchcraft is interpersonal envy. The mechanism of witchcraft was explained to me by Hipolyto Lachuma as follows:

For example, *gringo*, we are here, and you have some good like plantain, manioc, meat or fish. Then comes a man, a witch, who asked you to sell or donate a kilo of fish, but you don't sell because you need it yourself. The man gets furious and returns to his place to make witchcraft. He may harm you by snake bite, or by animals that fly. When you go to your garden you may encounter a snake and you are frightened, you get fever and you have been done harm, this is witchcraft. The snake bite leaves a little wound, and you may think that it will heal easily. But no, it will enlarge, and you feel like the wound is eating you little by little. You can't sleep, you are not tranquil since you feel like you are being eaten. Then you go to healer who knows more. He takes your pulse and says that you have been harmed, since you didn't want to donate fish and because of this vengeance you have been harmed. It affects very quickly. Within two days you may be dead, since the pain gets more intense and fever gets higher. The symptom is pain, in any part of your body, pain you cannot resist. It hurts a lot, as if a hot iron was stuck into you. And you have to look for a healer. If he knows he will cure you. He extracts the evil, for example the evil of *chullachnqui*. (TKU 87/202)

Hipolyto's account suggests that a "normal" harm caused by an animal (e.g., a snake bite) is recategorized as a "serious" case of witchcraft when the pain turns out to be persistent.

#### WORMS, BEETLES AND OTHER MICROBIOS

The cause of persistent pain is a *projectile* shot by someone. The theme of an arrow-like shot (e.g., fairy shot) has been rather prevalent in various world traditions (cf. Honko 1967). Small animals like beetles and worms have functioned in causes of illness. The Mestizo model of witchcraft attributes illnesses to spirits and projectiles, and ascribes various versatile properties to them, which allows them to fulfil multiple causal roles: they are able to enter human bodies and intervene with normal bodily functions, yet they are invisible to an untrained eye and are seen only by specialists who control them by power songs (*ikaros*). A number of things can function as projectiles: fish bones, wooden sticks, animal and plant spines, insects (especially worms and beetles), very [small] animals (*microbios*), and various kinds of phlegm (from trees, human innards or from water). *Microbio* seems to be a collective terms for [small] animals, ranging from visible beetles and worms to invisible "microbes." They eat the victim and if they are not extracted, the victim is bound to die. Different *microbios* have different effects. A beetle that is shot into the victim's head causes madness. Here's Juan Silbano's story:

I was once bewitched because of one girl I was in love with when I was 18 years old. I was like crazy. I was in pain, I didn't recognize my mother or

anyone. I went round and round like a madman. My father said to me that let's go, since he didn't know what it was. We went to Iquitos. I don't remember since I was so desperate (*estaba en desesperacion*) but my father told me later. Anyway, the healer came to see me. He said that I had been bewitched because the girl I was in love with had a husband and there was vengeance. It took six or seven days to cure me, that I could stand up again. The cost was 250 *intis*. He extracted spines from my mind (*sentido*). He sucked my head with force and I felt as if he ate me. He extracted beetles (*papasitos, papasos*) from my head. With them the husband had wanted to kill me. If I had died, the girl would have returned to her husband without further ado. Witchcraft hurts, hurts, hurts, hurts. I was like a madman, ran through the jungle and didn't know where to go. The little animals in my mind ate me, they itched. The healer extracted beetles from here [forehead], here [sides of head] and here [back of the head]. (TKU 87/212)

A worm or any other *microbio* that is shot into the victim's muscle eats the victim alive. I witnessed the treatment of such a case. Before the treatment it was described by Don Pablo as follows:

All animals can be used to do harm; insects, *microbios*. The witch studies all of them, for example various worms in order to kill us. I have cured many cases and I know all the animals. Especially they use *microbios*. If we didn't study these, we would die. Witches use, assisted by demons, also other things like trees or spines of different animals. And also the vomit of dogs. Dogs, you know, eat grass because it's a *purga* and then vomit it. Witches study this vomited grass in order to kill with it. They put it in our throats so we cannot eat. I once extracted grass from a person's throat. [...] I have one patient whose leg is about to rot. He was in hospital for two months but it just got worse. There are worms (*gusanos*) in his leg which eat him. It's witchcraft, done by means of worms which were placed there to eat the person until he dies. The witches bewitch us by means of worms. I will cure this patient when I go to Iquitos. I'll extract the worm by sucking. Worm has its power song, and if you don't know it, it may kill you. All the witchcraft has its power song. The witches utilize all kinds of *microbios* to harm us. They study all the *microbios* to kill us. (TKU 87/215)

I found out that it was witchcraft. In fact, there were four *microbios* there. I have extracted already one, and tonight I will extract the rest three. Then I can prescribe some plant remedies for the wound, since only after the evil has been extracted, it makes sense to treat the wound, for then the *microbios* aren't there anymore eating the flesh. Then I will find out what plant remedy to use, how to prepare it and so on. The *microbios* have to be extracted by night, for the tobacco (*mapachu*) will be the strongest then. (TKU 87/218)

Recently the *microbios* have become more prevalent, I was told. Earlier the main cause of witchcraft was a kind of head-on collision with a powerful witch, whereas nowadays the main cause is either a demon or a *microbio*. According to Don Pablo, their presence/absence is relative to the amount of rainfall:

The soil contains lots of *microbios* during the wintertime. They enter us and cause ulcers and cancers and all that. They come from the soil. Now it's summer and there are hardly any *microbios*, for the soil is dry. (TKU 87/215)

In order to do harm by means of an animal, the witch has to know the power song (*ikaro*) of the animal in question, and the power song is also needed in extracting the projectile. Curing power songs are received from plants, evil songs are from demons.

#### SECOND-LEVEL ETHNOBIOLOGY: CIENCIAS VEGETALES

The metaphor of *ikaro* ascribes a power song to each causally interactive entity, especially to humans, their illnesses, spirits, projectiles, trees, animals and plant remedies. Also houses and paths can be protected from evil by power songs. Power songs form the basis for causing and treating illnesses. By learning these songs the healer (*curandero* or *medico*) learns to cure illnesses, and the witch (*brujo*) learns to do harm. The knowledge obtained by the healer is more powerful than the knowledge of the witch, since it takes more time to learn the art of healing. Power songs are described by Julio Siri, a young healer, as follows:

All power songs are dialects. They are songs, but in different ways. There are many different power songs. [How do they work?] The *medico* sings the power song of the evil which he tries to cure. He takes his *purga* and begins to sing. The *medico* has power songs for different evils. Every illness has its power song. If it's an illness of witchcraft, the power songs change totally: our knowledge of them is on the spiritual level of plant sciences (*ciencias vegetales*). There are lots of power songs and the type of power song you use depends on the illness you are going to treat. [When the plants are used in curing, do they also have their power songs?] Yes, all plants and trees have their spirits. When you treat with a plant, you concentrate and call its power song. With the authorization you have, you treat the patient. In order to cure with plants, you have to know their power songs. You can cure without knowing the power songs, but then you are not a *medico*. You have to talk with the plant, since the plant is a living thing, it has a spirit. The plant dies when it's chopped down. You have to talk to it. You ask: "Listen, grandfather (*abuelito*), I have this illness and want you to cure me." There are strong illnesses which you don't resist and which require that you know the science of trees (*ciencia de los palos*). You don't treat illnesses alone. If you have an illness which you cannot cure, you have to take a diet and cure it together with the plant. When you prepare a cure for the first time, you have to ask all plants for help, but if you know the plants very well, you can just talk to them. (TKU 87/208)

The knowledge encapsulated in power songs is available to humans through healers and witches. Healers and witches tap the same sources of information, but with different goals, as explained by Don Pablo. The *purga* used by him was the *ayahuasca* vine (*Banisteriopsis caapi*), by far the most widely used hallucinogenic plant in Amazonian shamanism:

The *brujos* study power songs in order to do harm. The *medicos* learn different power songs than the *brujos*. But the *medico* has to know the power song of the evil done, otherwise he cannot extract it or cure. In order to learn these power songs of evil, you take the *purga*; the mother spirit (*madre*) of *ayahuasca* appears and says, "Listen, this is the power song of the evil which is done." The *brujos* have to know the power song of the worm in order to do harm with it and the *medico* has to know the power song of the worm in order to cure the illness caused by the worm. [Are the power songs of *brujos* and *medicos* equal?] Well, the *medico's* power songs are for medicine, and the *brujo's* power songs are for demons. The *brujos* have power songs of the demons, which means that they study the demons, they don't study God. *Medico vegetalista* studies for God. Thus in order to be a good *medico*, you have to study well, all the *brujos* of jungle, of people, of animals, and of water. Thus you can cure. If you don't study all this, you won't cure. The *medico* has to know the power songs of *brujos* which are quite similar except that they are from demons. Witchcraft is a plant demon (*demonio vegetal*); the demon tells the *brujo* to take this-and-this to kill somebody. And the demon teaches the *brujo* the power song needed. (TKU 87/215)

Here Don Pablo characterizes witchcraft as a plant demon, which suggests that the ultimate source of knowledge (for both curing and inflicting illnesses) is in the "realm of plants." Indeed, Julio Siri had a special word to pick out this slice of reality, *espacio vegetal*, or plant space. In general the spirits of nature are neither good nor evil per se, but may be used for both purposes by humans. Here Julio Siri sketches the plant space:

There are white and black spirits. The white one is good. I don't know it very well, since I am an apprentice, I am learning more all the time. This white spirit speaks spiritually with you, saying for example that this patient has this-and-this and should be treated with such-and-such power song, and with such-and-such plants. It's not a spirit of the dead, but of the plant space (*espacio vegetal*). It's the spirit of the plants, of the medicinal trees. Here in the jungle, there are trees which are *curanderos*, and trees which are *brujos*, which kill us. Speaking on the level of science (*hablamos en el nivel de la ciencia*), all trees are full of spirits, and you cannot take whatever *purga* you like, since there are too many spirits. A *maestro curandero* knows how to protect himself from evil spirits and how to let the good spirits teach him. [...] All spirits are good, if you know how to treat them, how to work with them. If you don't know, they are all evil to you. Just as there are good people and evil people, so you can treat evil spirits. (TKU 97/208)

What we have here is a reflective second-level model concerning the first-level model of herbal medication and illness extraction. The model of spirits and power songs gives an epistemic ground or justification for particular treatments just as the model of projectiles justifies the use of suction in extracting the illnesses.

#### THE MULTIPLE USES OF *ERYTHROXYLUM CATUABA*

The use of the bark of the tree *Erythroxylum catuaba*, known in Amazon as *chuchuhuasi*, is another clear example of the plant transformation induced by an *espíritu*

*incorporado*. Almost every house in San Rafael and Nuevo Progreso has a bottle hanging on the wall which contains bark of *chuchuhuasi* "marinated" in *aguardiente*, strong alcohol distilled from sugar cane. I inquired about its use and I was told that it is good for rheumatism and pain (cf. also *Manual*). Later on, I found out that it would be extremely unwise to drink cold drinks when suffering from rheumatism, since rheumatism results from the overheating of blood which, in turn, results from an excessive exposure to cold. *Chuchuhuasi* is also used in the prevention of bleeding after child-birth: it is mixed either with boiled water or *aguardiente*.

In addition to its "common sense use," it was tapped as the source of spiritual knowledge. In the village of Indiana I spent some time with a healer named Brahulio Tuanama who used *chuchuhuasi* with *aguardiente* to treat all sorts of illnesses. He called the drink *chullachaqui*. The word stems from Quechua and it means "unequal feet." The guardian spirits of the jungle are thought to have unequal feet when embodied in human form (Huaman 1985:345 ff.) Brahulio told me that he "consulted" *chullachaqui* by means of taking little sips of his drink regularly.

*Chullachaqui* is drunk in order to learn to cure, to be a *medico*. You [addresses me] can learn to cure. You take this to your country and you cure little children. [...] Evil animals are *brujo's* spines. You drink this and they disappear. (TKU 87/140)

Brahulio could have provided an explanation of why *chuchuhuasi* is effective for rheumatic pain, for the model of spirits embodied in the drink would presumably give a fine-grained account of the mechanisms of pain. But he had consulted his alcohol-based source of knowledge quite frequently, lately.

### CONCLUSION

The plants and animals interacting with the Amazonian Mestizos seem to have both "down-to-earth" and "theoretical" aspects. The former are utilized when witchcraft is not suspected, whereas the latter aspects, i.e. spirited animals and plants, are referred to when an illness is diagnosed as a case of witchcraft. The aspect actualized depends on the level of model used in the interaction. The boundaries amid adjacent models are not so sharp and a switch from one model to another can take place in the course of one consultation.

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## BOOK REVIEW

**The Fascinating World of the Nightshades.** Charles B. Heiser, Jr. New York: Dover, 1987. Pp. ix, 200. \$5.95 (paper).

The "nightshade family" (Solanaceae) has few rivals in the plant kingdom for sheer number and diversity of genera and species used by human beings—as foods, medicines, poisons, drugs, and ornamentals. One could not hope to survey the family systematically in a slim volume, nor is that Heiser's intention. Rather, the book is a selective celebration of the "nightshades," an unabridged and corrected republication of his earlier popular work, *Nightshades: The Paradoxical Plants* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1969). In a new preface, Heiser notes changes in scientific names of the plants discussed and refers to the published proceedings of two major Solanaceae conferences held since his book was originally published. Otherwise, however, there has been no attempt to expand or update the earlier text. For his purposes, this seems unproblematic.

Following a brief prologue that sketches the principal characteristics of the family, nine chapters focus on New World "peppers" (*Capsicum* spp.); the potato; eggplant; tomato; black nightshade or "wonderberry" (*Solanum nigrum*); a variety of lesser food plants; several containing powerful alkaloids, such as mandrake, jimson weed, henbane, and deadly nightshade; tobacco; and flower garden ornamentals. In each case, superb line drawings by Marilyn Miller (and sometimes photographs as well) complement the text. While treatment of the botany of the plants varies in detail from chapter to chapter, each is accompanied by selected references to refer the reader to the more technical literature.

For each plant discussed, we are given information on its homeland and traditional uses; the plant's "discovery" by Westerners; economic and other factors involved in its adoption and diffusion; folk beliefs, especially in Western communities; cultivation techniques; and general botanical description. Throughout, the emphasis is on the "story" of the plant, and the stories told are, indeed, fascinating. The general reader is well-served by this accurate compendium and the professional will find much of interest, too. The very attractive price should make it a potentially useful supplementary text in undergraduate courses on Economic Botany.

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