

# RELIGION, MAGIC, AND MEDICINE IN HUAVE SOCIETY

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## INTRODUCTION

The Huave Indians of Mexico live in four major farming and fishing villages and scattered hamlets on sandbars that encircle large salt water lagoons on the south coast of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Surrounded on land by the communities of their more numerous Zapotec-speaking neighbors, the approximately 15,000 Huaves have been dominated by them politically, militarily, and economically since before the Spanish Conquest. The Zapotecs have historically formed a buffer between the Huaves and Mexican society, and, as a consequence, until recently Huave culture has existed in relative isolation from that of the nation as a whole. San Mateo del Mar, home of the Mareños, is the largest (population 5,500) and culturally most conservative of the Huave-speaking communities, and the religious beliefs and healing practices of its people comprise the subject of this paper.

Like many other Indian villages of southern Mexico, San Mateo is fairly representative of what has been termed a "closed, corporate peasant community" (Wolf, 1957). San Mateo functions as an almost exclusively endogamous unit. There is little travel outside of the township, and few individuals emigrate. New members are not welcomed into the community, and those who leave for extended periods are not easily reintegrated. All land is corporately owned by the town. The right to use it depends on one's having been born in the town, on usufruct, and on the fulfillment of communal obligations.

Mareño society functions within the framework of a complex, age-graded, civil-religious hierarchy of office-holding, in which all males are required to participate at the lower levels, and through which few can rise to the top. Group sanctions are strong, and social and economic leveling mechanisms involving ridicule, loss of status, and often expensive ceremonial obligations insure a high degree of conformity to social norms and cultural traditions. Fear of isolation and degradation within, or exile from, the community has proved sufficient to forestall unconventional behavior that endangers social cohesion.

Like other Mesoamerican Indian communities, San Mateo maintains a complex of customs that represents a syncretic blend of Pre-Columbian indigenous elements and Conquest period Hispanic traditions (cf. Madsen, 1967; Adams and Rubel, 1967). The Dominican Order's 16th and 17th century administration of the Huave region is cited in historical records (Burgoa, 1934), reflected in the Spanish colonial grid-pattern of San Mateo's layout and in the imposing stone church that stands in its center, and manifested in the community's contemporary ecclesiastical-civil organization, religious beliefs and practices, and concepts governing magic, witchcraft, illness, and curing (cf. Foster, 1953, 1960). (For treatment of the Mareño civil-religious organization and *cargo* system, see Cheney (1976) and Diebold (1969); for description of Huave religious ceremonies and mythology, see Cheney (1968, 1972), Cook and Leonard (1949), Monzón (1943), and Warkentin and Olivares (1946); and for that of the Isthmus Zapotecs, see Orozco (1946).)

Following a two-hundred year hiatus during which Mareño society was left much to itself, the mid-20th century witnessed the arrival in San Mateo of new outside influences for change in the realms of religion and medicine. Since the 1940s, fundamentalist Protestant missionaries from the United States have resided for varying lengths of time in San Mateo. They have learned to speak Huave, have transcribed the language, and have converted about one hundred adults to their faith. These missionaries have also provided limited health care and education on nutrition, hygiene, and preventive medicine. In the 1960s, a Roman Catholic missionary

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arrived from the United States and assumed the role of parish priest. In addition to refurbishing the ancient church and swaying more than one hundred adults to a contemporary version of Roman Catholicism, the priest has constructed a clinic and brought physicians and nurses who have rendered a broad range of primary care and health-related education.

Today, as in the 16th century, missionaries function as agents of directed change—both religious and medical—in Huave society. The following pages will examine contemporary Mareño religious, magical, and medical concepts and practices, including the interaction between traditional and innovative interpretations of illness and approaches to healing.

## RELIGION

In the Mareño cosmology and mythology, mankind, nature, and gods are closely interrelated. The main characteristics of the complex belief system are: (1) a blending of pre-Columbian religious elements and 16th century Spanish Catholic beliefs and practices; (2) concepts of dualism—north and south, night and day, hot and cold, male and female, living and dead—and of harmony in celestial, supernatural, natural, and interpersonal relationships; (3) fatalism—acceptance of powerlessness to control one's destiny in a morally indifferent universe where fate is capricious; (4) perpetual interrelationships between persons living and deceased; and (5) interdependence of man and nature.

## MAN AND NATURE

The sun and the moon are deities who directly affect the welfare of the Mareños. By their Huave names, the sun is male (*téât neyt*: father day), the moon female (*müüm kaaw*: mother month). The sun is constant, whereas the moon is changeable and quick to take offense. A pregnant woman who brazenly gazes at the moon's eclipse will be punished and bear a discolored or deformed infant. Anyone audacious enough to point at the new moon will have the nail of his forefinger blackened. The importance of the moon and the sun for life processes is keenly felt, particularly the moon's regulation of menstrual cycles and the ocean's tides. When she is eclipsed, the church bells are rung wildly to revive her.

The stars are believed to be distant, remote gods that affect the destiny of other peoples in other places, but have no influence on the people of San Mateo. Mareños are familiar with Huave and Spanish names for major stars and constellations, and as nocturnal fishermen they accurately tell time by looking at the night sky; but they attach no special importance to celestial formations.

The heavens are inhabited by powerful beings called *téüt montéòk* (fathers, they who rapidly cause, transform). Led by a senior, or elder (*nahtáàng*) *téât montéòk*, these supernatural entities rapidly appear and disappear in the form of thundershowers; the sound of thunder is their horses' hoofbeats, a flash of lightning, the stroke of their machetes. The *montéòk* are protectors of the Mareños, but will brook no insult and with their swords of lightning will strike dead anyone defiant or disrespectful toward them. It is believed that, as the Mareños have their own *montéòk* who provide rain and defend them, all other peoples have their own heavenly benefactors (*montéòk mol*; *montéòk* of foreigners, strangers). *Montéòk* can travel from place to place, battle each other, aid their own people, and castigate whomever their wards are fighting. An important heavenly being is *tata rayo* father thunderbolt. There is some confusion as to whether this entity represents a particularly powerful, perhaps chief *montéòk* or whether, as some Mareños deduce from his hispanicized title, he entered Mareño cosmology only after the Conquest.

In traditional Mareño belief, the world is flat and circular. Earthquakes occur when the giant who supports the world occasionally has to shift its weight from one shoulder to the other. Earthquakes, so common in the region, are not considered noteworthy or portentous; they apparently cause momentary consternation only in little children and, much to the Mareños' amusement, some inconvenience to sleeping chickens and turkeys who are knocked off their perches.

Although Mareños have names for the four points of the compass, they view the world as being of two halves, north and south. East and west are significant only because they are the places where the sun and moon rise and set, because they delineate the path of these celestial bodies. Unlike other Mesoamerican peoples, the Mareños do not associate specific colors with the four cardinal directions or divide the horizon into quartiles (Foster, 1945; Peterson, 1959). The Mareño world is essentially bipartite.

The north and south do not in themselves possess qualities of gender, but the meteorological forces which emanate from them do. Hence, the north winds (*téùt iant*) are masculine, the south winds (*müm njarek*) feminine. The *téùt iant* are said to originate from the nearby mountains to the northwest, and are constant and predictable. During late fall and winter, the sand-bearing north winds cause everyone discomfort; the *téùt iant* are therefore often maligned, even cursed. Though one may speak with impunity against the steady north winds, it is thought foolhardy to be disrespectful toward and risk antagonizing the female, capricious, and often vengeful *müm njarek*. Though the south is the source of the prevailing mild sea breezes, from it also come storms, hurricanes, and tornados, all considered feminine and called *müm ndeekkoyk*. The name is derived from the term “to move about (while) walking”—like a woman. Such tempests are said to be ended by the appearance of a small benevolent turtle with a large gourdlike shell, it stops the storms by forcefully blowing and by pushing away the rain clouds with his left forefoot. Both the turtle and the accompanying rainbow are called *ndeektàmpoh* (make, or push on the left turtle).

Mareños consider sacred all things in nature that sustain life. These are not the European-derived Aristotelian metaphysical elements of fire, earth, air, and water. Rather, they are the sources of the life forms on which Mareños depend for subsistence: *nahngah lât* (sacred earth); *nahngah ahüt* (sacred rain); *nahngah blòmb* (sacred fire); *nahngah ndek* (sacred sea); and *nahngah kinük* (sacred salt). Though the elements that create sustenance are sacred, food in itself is not. Salt is considered sacred not because it comes from the sea and is edible, like fish, but because it is an integral part of the sea which also provides fish. Food assumes a sacred quality only when it is associated with a holy ritual like the atole and tamales that are served during the ceremonial festivities that commemorate saints' days.

Mareños feel themselves closely bound to representatives of the animal world. According to legend, the people of San Mateo are descended from a pair of dogs who long ago mated where the town is now located. Though Mareños indicate no reverence for these totemic ancestors, their supernatural sanctions against homicide include the killing of dogs. Though no other animal enjoys the status of mythical kinship with Mareños, wanton destruction of any animal is considered reprehensible, and the slaughter of an animal for purposes other than securing food is a sin for which the perpetrator must answer in the afterlife.

No doubt, the bond that links man and animal most strongly is a local manifestation of a widespread Mesoamerican trait, the interdependent relationship of an individual with his *tonal* (*ombasneh* in Huave), his animal counterpart, or alter ego. The Huave word for the human counterpart is *néàmbasuuk* (the body of himself, or real self). A Mareño's animal counterpart is believed to be born the same instant as he is, in the immediate vicinity of his home; later it moves to a safer place in the woods, fields, or sea. Because such counterparts are always wild animals, they seek their natural environs away from human communities. Some Mareños maintain that although long ago everyone used to have an animal counterpart, only a few do today. Opinions on this topic and willingness to discuss it vary. Some say it is customary to place a shallow bowl of sand or ashes, the surface of which has been smoothed and covered with a cloth, under the bed of a pregnant woman, and that immediately after she has given birth, the bowl is uncovered and its contents examined for the spoor of the newborn's animal counterpart. Others vigorously deny the practice; one scoffed at it calling it a “a Mixe custom, perhaps a borrowing, or something.” At any rate, few know what kind of animal they have as counterpart, and guesses are often made on the basis of an individual's physical characteristics. For example, it is believed that a person with a hunched back probably has a turtle as his counterpart, and an individual with prominent canine teeth is thought to have his fate linked to a shark.

A few select people are believed to have as spiritual alter egos either the south wind (*müm njarek*) or *téàt montéòk*, or *tata rayo*. These fortunate people have learned through dreams of their possessing these signifi-

cant counterparts. The human counterparts of the forces are said to work only toward the good and are called on to help cure individuals whose illnesses have been diagnosed as having been sympathetically caused by injury to their animal counterparts.

### GODS AND SPIRITS

Mareños acknowledge the existence of an omnipotent creator deity that has power over all life. This supreme God has sent the monteok to provide for the Mareños, as he sends the monteok of other peoples to care for them. However, this God is remote from the Mareños and deals with them only in the afterlife. His aid or forgiveness is never sought in prayer, and he is referred to by the same Spanish-derived term as are all other saints and deities: *téat ndios*. Similarly, the Devil only deals directly with the deceased, though Mareños must cope with his minions as they do with individual minor gods, i.e., saints. The Devil and his assistants are interchangeably called *neméèch* (bad, evil one) or *diablo*, and, as with sacred Christian entities (God, Christ, and the saints), they were probably introduced into Mareño cosmology by Dominican missionaries.

Of approximately equal importance to the Mareños are San Mateo, patron saint of the town, and the Virgen de la Candelaria. Saint Matthew, referred to as *Téat Patrón*, is considered the father of the townspeople, and Our Lady of Candlemas, *Müm Candelar*, the mother—though they are not considered to hold these positions through any marital or parental bonds. According to traditional beliefs, San Mateo's spirit is embodied in his image which hangs above the church altar. This is considered to be the real San Mateo and is never taken from the church (though his spirit may wander at will); a second image kept in the reliquary chapel near the town hall is considered to be an intermediary and is used in ceremonial processions. Some say that if at night one sits quietly in the churchyard and is alert, one can see San Mateo's spirit emerge from the church and walk abroad, and that the Patron shows his disapproval of someone or some occurrence by rapidly shifting his eyes from side to side or by furiously shaking a hand or a foot. Others, however, maintain that San Mateo became angry with his people for having allowed the American priest to take over the church and touch his image, and that therefore his spirit has gone away and has forsaken the Mareños, leaving only a wooden statue.

The spirit of the Virgen de la Candelaria, too, is believed to dwell in her image above the altar, while her image in the reliquary chapel is believed to be an intercessor, which is carried about town during religious fiestas. Considerable confusion exists between the identity of *Müm Candelar* and the deity *Nic Miôr*, for whom no translation exists, and who is believed by Mareños to be an ancient goddess, the primary deity of the Huaves before the arrival of the Dominicans. In San Mateo, the process of blending *Nic Miôr* and the Virgen *Müm Candelar* seems to have been similar to the 16th-century phenomenon in the Valley of Mexico where the Aztec goddess *Tonantzin* melded with the Virgen de Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico.

Some Mareños claim that *Téat Patrón* and *Müm Candelar* are peers, whereas others feel that *Müm Candelar* is more important because she, in the form of *Nic Miôr*, antedated San Mateo's arrival in town and because her fiesta is more important. Those who feel the two deities are equals point out that it is only the inclement rainy weather of San Mateo's saint's day celebrations (September 20, 21, 22) that makes the difference, but that some preeminence should probably be given to *Müm Candelar*: in her virginal honor high civil officials are supposed to remain celibate, at least during the ritual spring pilgrimages to the sea; to her, offenders against the law are expected to prostrate themselves; and before the arrival of the American priest, her image occupied the exact center of the entablature behind the altar, whereas that of San Mateo was situated slightly to one side.

Of less importance in the Mareño pantheon are the other manifestations of the Virgin Mary (*Virgen de los Dolores*, *Virgen de La Concepción*, *Virgen de la Soledad*, *Virgen de Guadalupe*, *Asunción de la Virgen*) and different representations of Christ (*Jesús*, *Jesucristo*, *San Salvador*, *Santo Niño*, *Corpus Cristi*)—all considered separate entities and honored on different ceremonial occasions. Of approximately the same importance are the saints *San Isidro*, *San Juan*, *San José*, as well as *Santa Cruz* and all large crosses blessed in the church that

stand in streetcorner chapels and at strategic places around town. These saints and sacred objects are referred to as—and are accorded the respect due to—gods. Indeed, all crosses are considered holy in themselves, not only symbols of holiness, for they are believed to have the power to protect Mareños from evil, provide a means through which to communicate with the dead, and, like all other essential elements of the Mareño world, are deemed sacred: hence, *nahngah cruz*.

### THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

Mareños believe in an afterlife and feel that one's fate after death is contingent on the kind of life he has lived on earth. The afterworld is separated into three parts: heaven, hell, and purgatory. Mareño beliefs concerning these places and the nature of the afterlife are vague, and presumably these concepts, together with their Spanish names, were introduced by the Dominicans. Only purgatory, in Huave called *mekîèyolol* (leap into well), appears to hold particular significance for the Mareños.

According to a common rural Latin America belief, young children who die before puberty are sinless (i.e., sexually pure), and therefore, as *angelitos* (little angels), go directly to heaven. All adults who die first go to *mekîèyolol*, where they are judged by God and must answer for their conduct in life. Those who have killed a human or a dog are required first to eat the body of their victim, which has remained in the same state since the instant of death, before being allowed to proceed to heaven; those who have committed cold-blooded murder or incest must go to and remain in hell. Similarly, he who has killed any animal frivolously has offended God and his generosity in providing animals for man's benefit, and the angry God will chastize him and force him to consume the animal's body before allowing him into heaven. A man or a woman who has never married or cohabited with a member of the opposite sex must explain himself to God for this sin. If the person pleads his case convincingly by showing he tried but that his approaches were always rejected by others, God will relent and save his wrath for the person who forced the deceased to live alone throughout eternity; but if God is not satisfied with the excuse, the unmarried person must remain in purgatory for a time before being admitted to heaven.

If an individual has made a pact with the Devil or his helpers during life to obtain good luck or wealth, he must pay his part of the bargain by going to live in hell after death. If he has killed a cat who is a vampire and minion of the Devil, the deceased must descend to hell to apologize to the Devil before ascending to heaven.

In Mareño weddings, the bride and groom are given lighted candles to symbolize their bond. In journeying to and in living in the afterlife, these candles are said to help them to see their way and eventually to find one another. If an individual has sexual relations with an unmarried person after his spouse's demise, the flame of the latter's candle will flicker and die, and he or she will become lost in the afterlife. However, a widow's or widower's sexual intercourse with someone who is or has been married, who has lit a candle in a wedding, is not thought to endanger the welfare of the deceased spouse. To the extent that this tradition retains its force as negative sanction, it functions to restrict access to widows to older, married men.

Mareños believe the spirits of the dead return to town and walk the streets at night. Indeed, it is felt their right to do so, for they, too, must breathe and take some exercise—although not as much as the living—and between approximately eight in the evening and three in the morning, they are free to wander. The beginning and end of this period are signalled by ringing of the church bells. The American priest, however, has pointed out the traditional early morning bellringing was probably introduced by the Dominicans to mark the time for matins. People believe it foolish to venture outdoors during those hours unless for specific, necessary errands or perhaps in a drunken state. Either way, the spirits of the dead will not harm the living out of respect for legitimate activities or in repulsion at the “stained” incoherence of drunkards. But those up to mischief like loitering, robbery, or clandestine amorous adventures put themselves in danger of encountering the spirits of the dead.

There are three manifestations of the deceased: (1) *néambalóòch* (he who frightens), apparitions that scare people for fun and whose victims experience fright and a spine-tingling sensation, but suffer no permanent injury; (2) *Angúuchneh* (encountered him, or her), spirits of people who died before their time, in their youth, and who, regardless of their behavior during life, have become malevolent because they are under the control of the Devil. They appear in the form of little sand-twisters and harm humans and animals who fail to remove themselves from their paths by entering and injuring their souls (*omeâats*: heart) or by creating ailments that later develop into large pustules or subcutaneous tumors; and (3) *Chéapchéapblômb* (blinking light, or fire), spirits of people who have died of violence and appear in frightening forms with heads like balls of fire and bodies of birds or skeletons, but who do not harm, wish only to communicate with the living, and follow forlornly behind individuals who flee from them in understandable terror.

Though fear of the walking dead may in the past have proved a sufficient enough deterrent to limit nocturnal mischief, it no longer does. Most crimes are perpetrated at night, and the establishment of a night-time police force in the early 1960s and the current tendency of youths to stand about after dark at soft-drink stands under new corner streetlights indicate that fear of encountering dead spirits no longer keeps people indoors at night.

After the death of an individual, his links to the living do not disappear. For example, when a group of elderly men are drinking and a bottle inadvertently tips over, the incident may be taken as a sign that a recently deceased drinking partner wishes temporarily to rejoin his friends; one of the men may spill some liquor on the ground for him, and the dead man is thereupon considered included in the conversation and in the serving of drinks. Also, the love and hatred shared by individuals may continue after the death of one of them; both may suffer injury by prolonging such feelings. A special practitioner (*néasomüy*) uses important crosses as intermediaries to establish temporary communication between dead and living individuals to help resolve and then permanently dissolve their relationship, so that each, in his separate world, may thereafter exist in peace.

Mourning for the dead is an important duty of the living. Because angelitos—little children—have gone directly to heaven, they are not mourned at all. Others, who must spend a year in purgatory, are mourned in the graveyard on Wednesdays and Fridays of each week for twelve months to help insure their ascension to heaven. A few Mareños have adopted from the Zapotecs the custom of mourning nine days (the *novena*) and the belief that ascension takes place 40 days after death. Some women now wear black as a sign of mourning when they chant and leave flowers on the graves of recently deceased relations. All Souls Day (the Day of the Dead), the second day of November, when the deceased are said to return for a visit and be feasted by their families, is ritually celebrated in San Mateo, as it is throughout Latin America.

#### MAGIC AND WITCHCRAFT

Though some people know the species to which their counterparts (*ombasneh*) belong, few know which individual animal is their counterpart. Such knowledge, in fact, is considered dangerous to the community, for it enables one to transform himself into that animal, and thus to become a witch, a *naywuniay*. The word, however, and probably the concept, appear to be borrowed from the widespread Mesoamerican, originally Nahuatl (Aztec), term *nagual* and the associated complex of ideas known as nagualism (Foster, 1944). The distinction between the concepts of *néambasúük* and *ombasneh* on the one hand, and *naywuniay* on the other, is underlined by the belief that, unlike most Mareños, witches not only can transform themselves into and thus have some control over their animals counterparts, but also can temporarily assume the forms of other wild and domestic animals.

It is commonly held that although transforming witches of both sexes used to be fairly numerous in San Mateo, only one nonpracticing witch remains. Apparently one particularly skilled and irascible witch lost a test of wills with the new Evangelist God a few years ago and subsequently died. Many people were impressed by the power of the new deity, and the witch's remaining but less adept colleague decided to turn to fishing.

Though Mareños insist there are no more witches, their equivocal attitudes and hesitancy to discuss the subject indicate a continuing preoccupation with witchcraft. This ambivalence would seem to stem partly from confusion regarding the nature and activities of witches due to differing Mesoamerican and European traditions—the first (naywuniay) characterized by transformation and intrusion of foreign elements into victims, the latter (brujo) by pacts with the Devil and sorcery. Other considerations include the difficulty of identifying witches—who tend to disguise their status to avoid retaliation—and the care taken to not annoy a potential witch by openly speculating on rumors of his sorcery.

The process of learning to practice witchcraft is in itself dangerous, for one takes the chance of being possessed by the Devil because of making mistakes in ritual. The madness of one young man is generally attributed to his errors in concocting potions out of bones he stole from the town graveyard. Similarly, if a cat disappears for a few weeks, then returns to prow and wail at night, it is thought to have made a deal with the Devil. If on inspection the cat has a small tuft of spikelike hair at the tip of its tongue, it is proof that he is in league with the Devil and sucks the blood of people at night and transports it to his master. Black cats are especially suspect. Although the person who kills such an animal must chance having eventually to face the wrath of the Devil, the deed is considered worth the penalty, for it is believed vampire cats can take enough blood from an infant to weaken and kill him. These beliefs, along with domesticated cats, were presumably introduced by 16th-century Spanish colonists.

Thus, considerable consternation and secrecy surround the subject of witchcraft. Though it is claimed that the transforming witches have all died, and with them the malevolent practices of injecting foreign elements into their victims, it is generally agreed that some diagnostic curers (neandüy) are also witches, proficient in both “white” and “black” magic.

The most common type of sorcery employed in San Mateo is called *nahmel check* (to leave [an] offering). A burnt offering of candle stubs, copal, and flowers which has been cursed and dedicated to the holy earth is left in the path of the intended victim, who, if he passes close by, will be afflicted by the malignant power of the offering. The practice may be resorted to by an individual who, for example, having lost litigations through rulings of the town council, feels he has been wronged, and therefore appeals to the higher power of the earth to injure his victorious opponents. However, the all-knowing earth is essentially neutral and just; if the person making the offering is himself in the wrong, the evil intent of his offering will rebound and sicken him instead. If his incantations, explanations, and offerings are not appropriately performed, the earth may be unresponsive or even redirect the ill will toward him. It is therefore considered wiser to pay an expert, a neandüy, to perform the magic. The offerings are not hidden; people will watch to see whether an intended victim is sure of his justness, whether he confidently walks near the offering or changes direction to avoid it. However, it is understood that disputants are seldom entirely right or wrong, that both parties usually are to some degree culpable. Leaving a burnt offering is considered a risky affair at best, and one should be sure before resorting to it because the earth will fairly distribute the illness-inflicting malice to all persons involved according to the measure of their guilt.

## MEDICINE

Mareño beliefs concerning health and illness are based on a concept of balance: one's good health is predicated on success in maintaining equilibrium internally, interpersonally, and in relationships with nature and with the deceased. Basic to this concern for balancing opposites is the hot-cold syndrome, probably derived from Hippocratic humoral pathology—folk versions of which are common throughout Latin America today (Foster, 1978)—which was presumably introduced into San Mateo by the Dominicans. According to this simplified version of classical medicine, illness is caused by a temporary disequilibrium of hot and cold bodily properties and may be cured by reestablishing the balance. This is particularly true of food, drink, and herbs which regardless of actual temperature, are classified “hot,” “cold,” or “temperate” according to their intrinsic qualities. A person who suffers from a cold, i.e., respiratory, illness has been exposed to cold weather, or

has eaten too much of a "cold" food and should be given "hot" food and kept warm, whereas one who is ailing from a "hot," i.e. intestinal, sickness should be helped in the opposite fashion. However, it is imperative that the remedies be applied in limited, moderate amounts, for the shock to the system from excessive attempts to redress the balance could prove more injurious than the original sickness. Hence, an overheated person should not be splashed with cold water, nor should a person who is temporarily "cold" be given "hot" food like beef.

Though the ideal is balance, Mareños believe that in actual temperature people are normally more hot than cold, that the center of the body is warmer, the extremities cooler. The vital center is the *omeáats*: heart, soul, source of thought and emotion. Most illness is believed to result from the intrusion of external elements into this principal, vulnerable organ. It is thought that the body's relative temperature changes during the life cycle: small children are relatively cold, but steadily increase in heat until puberty; a plateau of high heat is maintained during the (reproductive) years of adulthood: and from the early fifties to old age, bodily heat is lowered.

Certain individuals are believed to be intrinsically hotter or colder than others, depending on their ability to function regardless of temperature extremes. A man who does not suffer discomfort during nocturnal fishing excursions is deemed cold; a woman who does not mind spending long hours by the cooking fire, hot. However, the hot-cold classification does not reflect individual personality traits like friendliness, irascibility, or sexuality. People in a constant state of disequilibrium, such as individuals given to emotional excesses or adults who do not cohabit with members of the opposite sex, are felt to be most susceptible to illness. Despite the importance of hot and cold properties and of the maintenance of equilibrium, however, imbalance is generally viewed symptomatically rather than causally.

#### ILLNESS CATEGORIES

According to Mareño classification, illnesses may be grouped into four general categories. The first category is *ata mandar* (God, or Father, sends), and embraces afflictions that can be explained by natural phenomena and illnesses that can affect many people simultaneously. It includes individual cases involving temporary imbalances of hot and cold, wounds, broken bones, common colds, as well as periodic outbreaks of malaria, smallpox, and familiar childhood diseases.

The second category, *narangüüch* (caused by deed, event), comprises illnesses resulting from strong emotional experiences, of which seven types are recognized:

1. *monshing* (literally, they of long nose) is suffered by an individual who has been publically shamed and manifests itself by involuntary twitching of his facial muscles and the repeated brushing of his hand across his face during sleep, as if he were bothered by someone;

2. *nahküy* (his, or her, anger) results from suppressed anger and is characterized by ill temper and loss of appetite;

3. *nahpakmböl* (strong, sudden fear) is caused by fright, often by having barely escaped detection in an illicit act, such as murder, robbery; or adultery. Symptoms include bad dreams, pallidness, weight loss, and loss of appetite;

4. *Nisoit* (roughly translated as *pecado*, or sin) is associated with sexual intercourse. However it is not the act itself, but the participants' temporary high temperature and obliviousness to their surroundings that makes them vulnerable to this illness. Accordingly, symptoms of *nisoit* vary with associated emotional experiences, usually interruption or discovery of sexual activities;

5. *Aran pensar* (to make *pensamiento*, thought) is caused by dwelling on the loss of a lover who has left the village, or a relative or friend who has died. The person suffering from *aran pensar* manifests despondency, loses interest in food, emits frequent deep sighs, and sometimes thinks he glimpses the form of the departed individual;

6. *Ahir lasta* (to have *lastima*, hurt) is caused by a dead person thinking about a living one, either kindly or malevolently. The gravity of the symptoms, which include ailments of the ear, eye, throat, and skin, varies with the intensity of the deceased's emotions and thoughts;

7. *Angiüchneh* (struck him) occurs when an individual encounters a small whirlwind, which carries the malignant spirit of the walking dead. The symptoms of this ailment include pustules and tumors, especially *côak* (literally, spider), large, suppurating sores that will not heal.

All physiological illnesses are believed to be "God-sent" ones that can later develop into emotional afflictions. When one suffers acutely from an ailment sent by God, it may be complicated by an earlier event or deed that has increased the individual's vulnerability and may have preceded the onset of symptoms by as much as a year. Unlike God-sent ones, emotional illnesses tend to last for a long time. Emotional afflictions affect not only the person who committed a specific act, took part in an event, or has a relationship with the dead, but also can be transmitted to his or her offspring. However, the transmission occurs only cross-sexually to members of the first descending generation, to mothers' sons and fathers' daughters, not to collateral or affinal relations or to members of ascending generations. By Western medical definitions, such emotionally induced illnesses would be: cancer, tuberculosis, chronic amoebic dysentery, blindness, epilepsy, asthma, psychosomatic illness, neurosis, and psychosis.

Another major affliction is *nianahlüy* (sudden sickness), caused by injury or death of one's animal counterpart. The sudden onset of a major illness indicates that the counterpart has been seriously injured. If the illness is followed by the individual's death, then the animal died of injuries that were probably inflicted by a human hunter. If the person recovers, it means his counterpart has survived. Some claim *nianahlüy* can occur in a person who has both a primary and a secondary counterpart, that either the first was merely hurt or that only the latter, less important one has died.

Another common source of illness is *ohneahkan* (eye of the people, or evil eye). Only young children are afflicted, usually unintentionally, by this European-derived malady, which is manifested in sudden high fever, by unconsolable crying, and sometimes by convulsions. To keep a child from being thus injured, either a small palm cross or, less frequently, a dried cocoon—both of which attract the power of the viewer's glance—is hung on a necklace around a child's neck. If the cocoon bursts, it is said to have successfully served its function by having absorbed the potentially dangerous gaze; but the child remains well if the one who gazed simply touches him on the head before departing. If a child becomes ill from the evil eye, the family attempts to determine which person outside the family was responsible for the illness. That individual then comes to the home, touches the child's head, and wraps a length of thread soaked in his spittle around the child's arm or leg, and the child becomes well again. Cases of mild epilepsy, stammering, or stuttering are believed to have developed from unsuspected and hence unremedied instances of the evil eye.

Witchcraft and demon possession also are believed to cause much illness. The former is thought to cause intrusion of foreign elements and animals into a victim's body and long, lingering illnesses. Possession by devils manifests itself in idiocy, hysteria, and mania.

#### DIAGNOSIS AND THERAPY

San Mateo has four types of traditional curers. The most common are the *neandüy* (he or she [who] knows), who number between 30 and 35 and specialized in diagnosing and prescribing for illnesses. If home remedies fail to relieve his symptoms, the sick person (or his relatives) will seek the aid of a *neandüy*, who will take his pulse and determine the body temperature by touching the patient's wrists, inner elbows, backs of knees, and temples, while closely examining his face and gathering background data from him and his family. After determining the nature of the illness, the *neandüy* recommends either a home therapy or refers the patient to a specialist. For God-sent illnesses, he may suggest they be waited out or that the symptoms be relieved by special foods, drinks, and herbs. For minor emotional illnesses, he will commonly advise patient and family to pray at the family altar. If it is a case of the evil eye, he will so inform the sick child's family, which will try to find the individual responsible for the affliction. For illnesses caused by the intrusion of

foreign elements into the patient's body through witchcraft, the neandüy will attempt to remove the objects by cupping or sucking. An undetermined number of neandüy are believed also to be witches. If a patient inadvertently consults the practitioner responsible for his illness, the cure is nevertheless efficacious, for the curer-witch has only to negate his own previous magic to relieve the symptoms.

About ten midwives (*nshey*), middle-aged and elderly women, who may have been married at some time in their lives but need not have borne children, practice in San Mateo. Some are also neandüy.

A small group of practitioners are massagers (*neashind*: he or she [who] rubs). About a half-dozen specialize in giving alcohol massages for aches and pains, treat minor God-sent illnesses with herbal teas, and try to draw out illnesses by passing eggs of black hens over the affected areas of the patient's body. Apparently, the neashind have begun their practice only in recent decades, having acquired the techniques from massagers and bone-setters in surrounding Zapotec towns.

The most prestigious curers are the incensors (*neasomüy*: he [who] makes smoke), of whom eight currently practice. Unlike the neandüy—who may be either male or female, vary in age, receive knowledge of their craft in dreams, and may also be witches—the incensors are invariably elderly men who have learned their art through long years of apprenticeship, are steeped in religious lore, and never employ black magic. Their reliance on 16th century Spanish Catholic tradition is evidenced by their therapeutic use of confession, prayer, exorcism, and rituals involving symbols of the crucifix and multiples of the number three. Moreover, while the neandüy may charge several hundred pesos for their services, the neasomüy receive only small gifts and are provided with food and liquor.

As their name suggests, the neasomüy burn copal incense, considered a sacred substance. Their specialties are extreme cases of emotional illness, demonic possession, and injury to animal counterparts.

If a neandüy has diagnosed a serious emotional illness resulting from shame, suppressed anger, fright, or "sin," he refers the patient to a neasomüy, who will help the patient recall, confess, and discuss the deed or event that caused, or at least exacerbated, his affliction. The incensor will burn copal three times, offer flowers, and pray to sacred crosses, repeating in detail the patient's account; in the final session he blows mouthfuls of alcohol on the afflicted part of the patient's body. He will also use earth from the place where the event took place, and if much time has elapsed between event and treatment, he will dig deeper to acquire earth (usually sand) that was at the surface when the episode occurred. Because the sacred earth has witnessed and knows everything, the description of the event must be accurate to satisfy the earth and permit the cure to take effect. Where the three sessions are held depends on distance, the patient's condition, and the nature of the illness. If the site is far away and the patient cannot be moved, earth from that place may be brought and placed on the patient's chest, or his clothing may be taken to the site.

If the site is nearby, the patient and the neandüy will pray there. In cases of suppressed anger after intrafamilial rancor, it is believed most effective to pray in the patient's home. If the symptoms are not alleviated after three sessions, two more series of three sessions may be held; if the patient still does not improve, it is assumed the diagnosis was incorrect, the patient cannot remember the exact occasion, or he refuses to confess for shame or fear of possible retaliation. For a terminal illness diagnosed as being emotionally induced, it is recommended that the patient still consult an incensor to make his confessions and die in peace rather than linger and suffer.

For sickness caused by the dead and living dwelling on one another, the neandüy goes to one of the great crosses, makes offerings, and prays to communicate with God and through him with whoever in the afterlife might be involved in the patient's illness. The patient and the incensor may not know exactly which deceased individual is causing the problem, but the crosses and God usually do, and in this respect the cross at the graveyard entrance is deemed particularly efficacious. God and the dead are then expected to chastise the deceased individual, either by forcing him to stop thinking of a living individual (*ahir lasta*) or by making him pay a final brief visit to one who longs for him (*aran pensar*). The treatment may also be repeated a maximum of nine times. If the neandüy's efforts do not cure *ahir lasta*, the more serious of the two ailments, either another diagnostician is called in or it is assumed that the identity of the guilty deceased has not been discovered and that a different incensor should try his skill.

Illnesses after encounters with known malevolent walking dead are considered more serious. If, after an incensor's nine pleas, the deceased does not cease to afflict the patient, the neandüy will stab his knife into the ground at the base of a cross, will try to exorcise the dead spirit by whipping the patient (and others in the family to keep the evil spirit from transferring into their bodies), and will attempt to drive it away by burning feces to create a foul odor and by loudly cursing its name.

If a person is plagued by devils (*nemeèch*), usually manifested by manic fits, his bed is frequently moved to different parts of the house and kept canopied to hide him from demons. To fend off evil spirits, a fishnet of tiny crosses is hung over the patient, sacred salt is placed on his chest, and crosses are drawn in soot placed on his forehead and cheeks. People suffering from possession are never left unguarded by family members. In the calm periods between attacks, afflicted persons attest to the presence of demons whose strange, evil voices torment them.

In cases of injury to animal counterparts, the incensor enlists the aid of a man who is the human counterpart of the *téat montèok* (or *tata rayo*) and a woman who is that of *müm njarek* (mother south wind). The man is called *nashang niandiow* (carrier of one who is sick), the woman *nashang nasop* (carrier of smoke or copal). The man stands in front of the patient or carries him, the woman with burning copal symbolizing the storm (*ndeekkoik*) stands behind. As the patient is moved from place to place in his home, his injured animal counterpart is magically moved out of danger by the *montèok* while the *njarek* conceals the movement from whatever or whoever threatens it.

Mareños claim to practice various types of preventive medicine. To avoid infection, it is common to apply a drop of fresh urine to a new open wound. Also, immediately after a jolting fall, it is advisable to taste the urine of someone who has not had the same experience to prevent the subsequent development of broken bones, sprains, and ruptures not immediately apparent because of the shock of the fall. To forestall illnesses from shame, suppressed anger, fright, or sin, adults are often whipped with branches and children sprayed with mouthfuls of water immediately after an incident. In fright, it is believed the blood rushes to the heart to protect it, dangerously increasing its heat and leaving the rest of the body temporarily cold, dry, and vulnerable to invasion by sickness. If the limbs are whipped or sprayed with water, the blood courses back to the extremities. Whipping is believed especially efficacious for suppressed anger because striking a person will anger him and release the heat of his rage, enabling him to return to a state of balanced temperature.

Another prevention of emotionally induced illnesses is to get drunk as soon as possible after a potentially injurious episode. When drunk, one's body is rendered inhospitable to external malignant forces that might intrude during the vulnerable state after a strong emotional experience.

Generally, preventive medicine means maintenance of the status quo, for major community changes are believed to incur the anger of and the punishment by Mareño deities. For example, about ten years ago the overcrowded cemetery was enlarged to double its size, but soon thereafter an epidemic caused so many deaths as to quickly fill the graveyard anew. By 1971 the cemetery was again severely crowded. But rather than augment the graveyard's size, and perhaps precipitate another epidemic, the municipal officials decided to leave matters as they were, to simply pack corpses more densely into the present space.

#### TRADITIONAL MEDICINE AND CONTEMPORARY CHANGE

Since the mid-1950s, traditional and modern medicine have coexisted uneasily in San Mateo. The efforts of missionaries and health care personnel to convert Mareños from the old to the new system apparently met with initial resentment from the traditional curers. However, many Mareños and especially the neandüy, now seek out physicians and nurses, not only for medical aid, but also to acquire familiarity with innovative techniques with which to augment their own repertoires of curative skills and to undercut the new competitors. In addition, many Zapotec merchants in the marketplace now stock and prescribe medications that range from aspirin to teramycin. Some neandüy now treat their patients with modern pharmaceuticals and give injections, though their traditional causative theories of illness remain essentially intact. In one case, a man

sought the care of a neandüy, complaining of the pain he felt in his buttock after receiving a penicillin injection from a doctor. The neandüy diagnosed the problem as resulting from stale medicine, injected a needle into the painful area, withdrew a syringe of blood, and claimed to have removed the bad medicine. When the symptoms subsided, the patient was not certain as to which practitioner he owed his cure.

In 1967, the resident physician calculated that, through the trust he had gained during two years in town, the Mareños who sought his help had increased from nil to approximately 75 percent, but that only about two percent relied exclusively on him for medical care. Most people regard a physician as an alternative to the more familiar neandüy, not as a practitioner of a more efficacious type of medicine. While modern medical techniques may work well enough for cuts, broken bones, and common God-sent illnesses, they are generally considered ineffective in coping with emotionally induced illnesses, demonic possession, or injury to animal counterparts—in which the incensors specialize. Hence, individuals suffering from illnesses diagnosed as belonging to these categories often do not receive a physician's attention until all traditional treatments have failed and the patients are near death; the doctors' inability to cure subsequently reinforces the belief that these afflictions are indeed impervious to modern medicine.

An exception to this pattern is the attitude of those Mareños who have converted to Protestantism. Though they still hold to the hot-cold system and prefer—out of modesty—to have their babies delivered by midwives rather than by a male doctor, the Protestants do not otherwise seek the aid of traditional curers, instead holding to the germ theory of medicine and consulting practitioners of Western medicine. They were converted by individuals some of whom were themselves trained in medicine, and their religious instruction was complemented by an explanation of the causes of illness that, like fundamentalist Protestant religion, is mutually exclusive with the more traditional Mareño beliefs. The strong concept of “brotherhood” expressed by the Protestants and their practice of periodically confessing their failings and seeking the counsel of the congregation perhaps provides some of the same psychotherapeutic functions served by the incensors.

In the main, however, Mareño culture is extremely conservative in concepts of health and illness, and traditional curers still wield considerable influence. Furthermore, although San Mateo is opening increasingly to the Zapotecs, they as well as the inhabitants of Huave communities that have become more acculturated to Mexican national culture share most Mareño beliefs and customs regarding traditional medicine, including the hot-cold syndrome, the evil eye, injury to animal counterparts, the effects of strong emotional experiences, witchcraft, and demonic possession. Hence, the community's increasing integration into the regional society hardly precludes the maintenance of traditional Mareño concepts of health, illness, and magic.

A last example may illustrate the manner in which traditional concepts respond to innovative situations. In August of 1971, at the peak of the rainy season when the area around town was flooded, a virulent epidemic of equine encephalitis broke out which killed about 250 horses, caused the deaths of 86 people, and seriously sickened hundreds more. Through the efforts of the missionaries, medical aid was flown in, and within a month the epidemic was brought under control. The town council took no action except to aid in burying the dead.

The first two fatalities were attributed to the deaths of animal counterparts. When a few more people died, the outbreak was interpreted as being God-sent. When it became rampant, older Mareños suspected the epidemic was sent by the Patrón, San Mateo, as an expression of his anger at his people for having permitted the introduction of electricity into town the previous month. Some concluded that the outbreak was punishment for having allowed the priest to take over the church and for letting him persuade them to have electricity installed, which necessitated the destruction of some streetcorner chapels to make room for utility poles. Younger Mareños and Protestants tended to resist and even scoff at these ideas, instead viewing the epidemic as a natural event—in accordance with both the concept of God-sent causation and modern medical theory—and claiming that the epidemic had spread from someplace else. However, when it was pointed out that none of the nearby communities had suffered an outbreak, they evinced confusion and dismay, for this information forced them, albeit reluctantly, toward the interpretation of the conservative Mareños: that the plague was sent by the community's Patrón exclusively to punish his people for deviance from tradition, for allowing in outsiders, for acquiescing to and participating in change.

## CONCLUSION

San Mateo is a conservative society in which primary importance is placed on maintaining equilibrium, on sustaining a balanced dualism in all matters human, natural, and supernatural. Yet, the Mareños are preoccupied by the discrepancy they perceive between such an ideal, harmonious status quo and the reality of the circumstances in which they live. Punishment for collective and individual deviance that threatens community cohesion is manifested not only in negative social sanctions, but also in supernatural castigation. For example, some Mareños believe that their people were abandoned first by their ancient goddess, Nic Mior, for allowing the Dominicans into town, and later by their patron saint, San Mateo, for yielding the church to the missionary priest. The venomous gossip's unborn child may be disfigured because of her anti-social behavior, while a person's discovery of the identity of his animal counterpart (which provides the power for witchcraft) presages his own death. Epidemics and individual illnesses do not just "happen;" people are acted upon by external forces or bring affliction upon themselves. There is no Huave word for "fate" or "luck," and Mareños use the Spanish equivalents only in speculating about persons or events to which they attach little importance; in matters of potential community concern, culturally-congruent explanations grounded in magico-religious tradition are always found.

Though the division of Huave cultural phenomena into categories or religion, magic, and medicine may serve to facilitate description and analysis, such compartmentalization is hardly consonant with a Mareño conceptualization of the world, in which these elements are intertwined and interdependent. And to note the crucial functions served by Mareño magico-religious customs in reinforcing traditional values and maintaining social cohesion is to recognize but one example of the universal human tendency to sustain sociocultural continuity. More significant, perhaps, has been the repetitious phenomenon of external change agents seeking to modify Huave culture and society through a combination of magico-religious and medical means. Indeed, for conservative Mareños, 16th century Dominicans, and 20th century competing Protestant and Roman Catholic missionaries alike, the interlinked realms of religion and medicine have represented a central arena in the struggle between forces for cultural continuity and change.

Ironically, although it is under the aegis of proselitizing missionaries that modern medicine has been brought into San Mateo, the villagers' use of these resources varies inversely with the perceived religious orientations of the health care providers. As was evidently the tendency of their colonial period forebears, the Mareños of today are accommodating those aspects of externally-introduced medicine which most efficaciously mesh and conflict least with their own beliefs and practices. Through increasing acculturation into regional Isthmian society and greater ease of access to health care facilities, the Mareños will most likely adopt the help-seeking behavior of their mainland Huave and Zapotec neighbors, which is characteristic of Mexican peasants in general: dual utilization of professional and lay healers, in accordance with traditional interpretations of the etiology and prognosis of illnesses, and in recognition of the relative efficacy of different approaches to the treatment of God-sent and emotionally induced afflictions (cf. Foster, 1967:184-193).

San Mateo's amalgam of religious, magical, and medical customs represents both the core value system of Mareño culture and the target of competing external forces for change. In light of the village's history, it is probable that this most conservative of the Huave communities will continue to selectively absorb religious and medical innovations as it moves gradually toward integration into the Isthmian regional context of Mexican society.

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