Sometimes Copal is Just Copal:
Shamanic Healing, Psychotherapy, and the Meaning Response in San Antonio Palopó

Elliot Mitchell
March 9th 2012
Final Paper
Mundo Maya:
Socio-Cultural Field Research in Guatemala and Chiapas
Jay Levi
Abstract

Shamanism and Psychotherapy can be said to fill very similar socio-cultural roles, and many comparisons have been made between the theory and practice of each. During three weeks of field research in San Antonio Palopó, Guatemala, I examined this comparison by talking with shamans (ajk’ij), believers, and the general population about their thoughts, stories, and experiences regarding shamanic healing. While some aspects of the comparison do not hold, I argue that both practices, as well as many other forms of healing around the world, work by relying on similar psychological principals, namely the “meaning response.” But is this structualization an explanation of the phenomena, or a further mystification?

_The cure for the headache was a kind of leaf, which required to be accompanied by a charm, and if a person would repeat the charm at the same time that he used the cure, he would be made whole; but that without the charm the leaf would be of no avail._

- Socrates

_Psychoanalysis can draw confirmation of its validity, as well as hope of strengthening its theoretical foundations and understanding better the reasons for its effectiveness, by comparing its methods and goals with those of its precursors, the shamans and the sorcerers._

- Levi-Strauss

_The description in psychological terms of the structure of psychoses and neuroses must one day replaced by physiological, or even biochemical, concepts._

- Freud

Introduction

After my first day of field research in San Antonio Palopó, I went to bed preoccupied that I would never find an ajq’ij, a Maya shaman-priest. That night I had a dream that I would find an ajq’ij in a house with a green door. The next day, I eventually got the name of an ajq’ij, Emilio Sicaján. After asking around, I found him in the market. I introduced myself, told him why I wanted to talk to him, and he invited me up to his house. It had a green door. We spoke about his work and his beliefs. Eventually, I told him about my dream. His eyes lit up. He asked me if I knew my nawal, the day in the Maya ritual calendar—the Chol Q’ij—that I was born on. “Toj,” I said. In Mayan tradition, the day you were born on has strong connotations for your personality, occupation, and fate. Emilio thought for a second, smiled, and then said, “You know, today is Toj.”
Was all this a just a coincidence? Or might there something real to the shaman’s magic? I left that meeting convinced of the possibility of something profound, of some higher power that underlies our lives and that *ajq’ijab* (plural of *ajq’ij*) and other indigenous healers, shamans, and priests around the world can tap into. I spent the next three weeks talking to *ajq’ijab* and townspeople, and reviewing literature, trying to figure out if there is an empirical explanation for the shaman’s powers, all the while open to the possibility of something divine at work.

To tackle this question I compared shamanic healing with a discipline that it has often been compared to, psychotherapy, with the hopes of gleaning some information as to the nature, practice, and effectiveness of both through the comparison.

“Shaman” is an academic term used to describe healers and religious figures from indigenous cultures across the world, and shamanism can be described as a religious belief system where the shaman has power in the eyes of the community and comes into contact with the spirit world through dreams, visions, or altered states of consciousness, with the aim of benefiting the community and/or individuals within the community (Walter and Fridman 2004).

The comparison between the two has been largely influenced by the contributions of Levi-Strauss (1963) who explained various first-hand accounts of shamanic headlining using the psychological terminology of his day, and discussed similarities in the aims and practices of shamans and psychoanalysts. For example, Levi-Straus (1963) discusses an account of a Cuna healing ritual for a pregnant woman during a hard birth, attributing its efficacy to psychological processes sought in psychoanalysis. “In both cases the purpose is to bring to a conscious level conflicts and resistances which have remained unconscious… permitting their free development and leading to their resolution” (198). In both cases, this is accomplished by the acting out of a myth or story. In this way, and others, he says that “the shamanic cure seems to be the exact counterpart to the psychoanalytic cure” (199) except in the former a group myth is bestowed upon the patient, whereas in the latter the individual creates their own story.
Perhaps he was on to something. After all, the intellectual history of psychotherapy is very much related to shamanic concepts, as shamanism had a great deal of influence on the fathers of psychoanalysis—Carl Jung saw “shamanism as part of the heritage of analytical psychology” (Sandner and Wong 1997: 4).

Building on all this, many have emphasized other parallels between the shamanism and psychotherapy. Both emphasize the importance of dreams and often use dream interpretation as a part of the cure, especially Mayan shamanism (Levi 2010; Sandner and Wong 1997; Tedlock 1981; Tedlock 2004). The personality of the healer is also important to both. Shamans are subjects of divine election, a period when they are very sick and they look to their dreams and visions to heal themselves, therefore allowing them to heal others (the archetypical “wounded healer”) (Sandner and Wong 1997). Psychotherapists likewise use their self-insight on psychological-processes to help others, and can even be paralleled more literally, as Jung suffered severe illness and was struck by profound dreams early in life, as well as after his falling out with Freud (Sandner and Wong 1997). This, and the finding that personality of the therapist is highly related to therapeutic outcome (Wampold 2001), suggests that there is a certain type of personality or life story that lends itself to both shamanism and psychotherapy. Lastly, both methods aim to simulate a sense of control for the patient when dealing with difficult or uncertain situations (Hubbard 2002).

The body of evidence connecting shamanism and psychotherapy is vast and convincing, but the comparisons tend to deal with the archetype, mixing ethnographic accounts from around the world to make their arguments (Sandner and Wong, 1997).

The aim of my research was to ground the comparison between shamanism and modern psychotherapy in a specific ethnographic reality, using the case of San Antonio Palopó, Guatemala. To accomplish this, I looked at the aims, methods and practice of ritual healing, as well examining the question of efficacy. Certainly psychotherapy is effective (Wampold 2001). Is shamanism effective? If both are effective for similar reasons and under

---

1 While modern psychotherapists may shy away from proper dream analysis, the significance of dreams was a hallmark of Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis, and most contemporary psychologists would agree that dreams represent a pathway to the unconscious, and perhaps a glimpse to our innermost fears and aspirations (Sandner and Wong 1997).
similar circumstances, then perhaps there is something similar in their phenomenological nature.

Levi-Strauss (1963) argued that, under certain circumstances, the shaman’s magic is indeed effective, and he described the fearful, isolated, and hopeless situation of someone who has been “cursed” in a society where the group believes in the power of magic and the supernatural. Convinced they are doomed according to the most solemn traditions of his group” (167), he is abandoned by the group as a pariah and an object of fear. “Physical Integrity cannot withstand the dissolution of the social personality” (167), and the man dies. This account is consistent with modern findings in neuroscience, which demonstrate the detrimental health effects of long term stress, most notably heart problems and a highly compromised immune system (Carlson 2004, Collingwood 2007).

Based on this account, Levi-Strauss suggests three aspects to the efficacy of magical techniques, or the “shamanic complex”: “First, the sorcerer’s belief in the effectiveness of his techniques; second, the patient’s or victim’s belief in the sorcerer’s power; and, finally, the faith and expectations of the group…” (1963: 168). These three criteria are also important to the efficacy of psychotherapeutic techniques (Neu 1975), and recent meta-analyses show that first two are indeed strong predictors of the efficacy of psychotherapy, though not enough research has focused on the third point (Wampold 2001).

Based on all this, I borrowed on Levi-Strauss’s “shamanic complex” and examined the interplay between the beliefs of the healer, the patient, and the people of San Antonio. What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for healing? How do comparisons between shamanism and psychotherapy look in the light of this specific ethnographic case? And what can we learn about our own forms of healing from the comparison?

Methods

San Antonio Palopó is a town on Lake Atitlan in the Highlands of Guatemala. A little over 4000 people live in the town proper, almost entirely Kaqchikel speaking Mayans. Smaller, more isolated, and less touristied than many other towns on the lake, it seems a picture of indigenous life in medias res, known mostly to the outside world for its colorful
blue *huipiles*, handmade ceramics, and prominent onion terraces (Vigden and Schechter 2010). During my three weeks of field research in February 2012 I spoke with *ajq’ijab*, *comadronas* (midwives), believers and non-believers within San Antonio. I observed and participated in ceremonies, and visited sacred places. For some comparison, perspective, and more stories of healing I also traveled around the lake, to Santa Catarina Palopó, Santiago Atitlan, and other towns.

In general, I found it difficult to find *ajq’ijab* and talk to people from San Antonio about their views. For reasons that I will get into later, discussing *ajq’ijab* can be a very divisive and often taboo subject in the town, often equated with witchcraft. After some time, I found circles where I could engage in more open, honest discussion about the subject, but these relationships took time to form. Talking about religion and healing requires a bit more report than talking about the weather.

Most of my information about the healing process came from the healers themselves. My main informant was the *ajq’ij* of my dream, as it were, who I spoke with a few times a week. I also spoke with three other *ajq’ijab* and one *comadrona* in San Antonio. For a more open discussion about healing ceremonies, I also spoke with a handful of *ajq’ijab* in Santiago Atitlan, where attitudes are very different.

I introduced myself to *ajq’ijab* as a student and a curious person, interested in learning about their work. I talked to them about their practice in general, asking about their altars and their sacred objects. Sometimes I let them control the conversation, to see what interesting stories might come up, while other times asked more specific questions about the structure of healing ceremonies, their client base, and their thoughts on efficacy.

I also tried to do my best to participant observe, jumping on opportunities to observe ceremonies for others, and participate in ceremonies whenever possible. In San Antonio, I observed a large protection ceremony for someone going to the United States to find work, and hiked up to the White Cave that looks over the town (Spanish: “*Cueva Blanca*”; Kaqchikel: *Saqixuan*) with Ben (another student on the group), an *ajq’ij*, and two other informants for a small ceremony. I also observed a number of ceremonies in the *Cofradia* San Simón in Santiago, and participated in a very large group ceremony organized by prominent
indigenous organizations at the Mirador above Santiago. The ceremony was meant to wish for good things in the New Sun, the turning into the 14th Baktun this December 21st. It was a truly once in a lifetime experience.

Given the recent surge of academic and tourist interest in Maya Spirituality, there was a potential problem of the authenticity of the ajq’ijab I spoke with. Some people who describe themselves as ajq’ij are savvy businessmen preying on wealthy tourists, while others are Maya spirituality enthusiasts whose knowledge comes from academia, not through dreams and divine election (Molesky-Poz 2006: 88-90). Diego, an ajq’ij in Santa Catarina, described these people as Sanjurines, intellectual practitioners without a real divine connection. To what extent can I believe what the ajq’ijab told me? There’s no formal certification process, after all. In the end, if it was clear that they worked with the people of San Antonio, I felt their information was relevant. I also decided to believe that what the ajq’ijab told me was their reality, regardless of any “objective truth” to their claims. So long as they believe it, it is relevant to the healing process.

The introduction of money into the equation also complicated matters. For my project, I wanted to participate in a ceremony. At times when I brought it up, I felt that the price they asked was much too high, and I was preoccupied by the possibility that they were just trying to make a quick buck off a curious gringo. You can’t exactly haggle with a shaman, and sometimes it seemed they would say exactly the things that a good con man would say. Once money was brought up, I felt it complicated and strained our relationship.

As for speaking with the healed, I found this a bit more challenging. While I was unable to see a healing ceremony first hand, I was able to speak to a family in San Antonio who believed in and often used traditional healing, as well as a few other people who had been healed. Unfortunately, most were healed when they were very young, under the age of 1, or so long ago that they don’t remember the details enough to talk about it (they were very sick after all). Most of my information, therefore, comes from 3rd person accounts, and lacks in subjective, personal details. I chose to believe that, if not every detail, the main plots, points, characters and themes of each story are true.
I also tried to get a sense of the beliefs and attitudes of the general population. I spoke with a number of people with whom I had established relationships about their personal beliefs, and about their take on the views of the town as a whole. I also spent some mornings walking about the town speaking to people I bumped into and weren’t in too much of a hurry, asking if I could talk to them for a minute or two. I asked them what they thought about Sacerdote Maya (the Spanish translation of \textit{ajq’ij}), what they knew about them, what they do when they’re sick, and some demographic questions like religion, job and age. Given that my sample was far from random, and communication problems were frequent, I decided to forgo any formal statistics and instead go for the qualitative “sense” rather than quantitative percentages. All in all, I would estimate that I spoke with about 50 people from San Antonio about their perceptions of traditional healing.

As with Levi (2010), who undertook a similar project with \textit{ajq’ijab} in nearby Santa Catarina, I didn’t use a pen or paper in any of my interviews, except occasionally to write down some terms. This allowed me to establish more genuine relationships with the people I was talking to. I could maintain eye contact and not have to worry about writing down everything that was said. Also, given the at times controversial and secretive nature of their work, \textit{ajq’ijab} can be very suspicious. When talking with José Pedro, an \textit{ajq’ij} on the outskirts of San Antonio, I asked if I could write down the names of the nearby caves in Kaqchikel, and he became very suspicious. “Why do you want to write them down?” he asked. Confused and cautious, I tried to explain that I can never remember Kaqchikel words unless I write them down. He told me the story of a nearby cave in Patulul, with seven entrances. He was doing a group ceremony there, and one man, a gringo, had his notebook and pen out the whole time. There were a number of large, ancient, rocks there, which made it a very sacred and effective place for ceremony. The man later returned with some strong men and a truck, and took all of the rocks away (to sell, destroy, who knows). This had two effects: The cave is much less powerful for ceremonies, and José Pedro is very suspicious of gringos with notepads (Pedro, Field notes February 23\textsuperscript{rd} 2012).

At times, I felt like I was working on two very separate projects, one on the healing process and one on the perceptions of the town as a whole. Given the time constraints and the
strength of social relationships needed to get honest information about both, my project could have benefited from more time. Still, I feel that the information I collected was more than sufficient to address my research questions.

Maya Cosmology and *Ajq’ij*ab

Modern Mayan shamanism has its roots in the cosmology of the ancient Maya, though there is a high degree of syncretism with Catholicism. Central themes in Maya cosmology include a layered universe, with the sky, the earth, and the underworld (*xibalba*), all connected a central pillar, called the world tree or the axis mundi. The four cardinal directions also hold symbolic importance, and with the axis mundi make a quincunx, the Maya Cross, and a depiction of the layout of the world. Within this world attention is paid to the cycles, to the daily “births” and “deaths” of the sun, moon and stars, as well as to the other cycles that define life, the cycles of agriculture, and of human life (Tedlock 2004). Many prominent elements are heavily Catholic. The first part of any prayer must be to Jesus and God, before anything “Mayan.” Idols of Jesus, Mary, and the Catholic saints adorn all *ajq’ij*’s altars. Before they start praying, it all feels very Catholic. The Kaqchikel for God is *Ajaw*, which translates as “Heart of Heaven, Heart of Earth,” and throughout all of my meetings the main distinction between their practice and Catholicism was an emphasis on the importance of the earth, and the simultaneous separation and integration of body and soul (*adiosich*).

So, what exactly is an *ajq’ij*? *Ajq’ij* is a Kaqchikel word that translates as “councilor of days,” “keeper of days,” or “day counter,” in reference to their use of the 260 day Maya ritual calendar, the *Chol Q’ij*, in divination and ceremony. The *Chol Q’ij* is made up of overlapping cycles of 13 number days and 20 name days, or *nawals*, each *nawal* carrying a vast web of meanings for individuals, dream interpretation, and ceremony. The duties of an *ajq’ij* include divination, prayer, and ceremony.

There is a debate as to whether *ajq’ij*ab are shamans, priest, or something else. Borrowing on Tedlock (1992a) and Eliade (1951), a shaman is defined as someone who has received the power to cure and divine from “supernatural” sources via dreams, visions, or spirit possessions. Any *ajq’ij* fits the bill. But, the Spanish term for *ajq’ij* translates as “Maya
Priest” and ajq’ijab can also be said to fulfill priestly roles when their work functions for the benefit of the community more than just an individual (Tedlock 1992a). Given their dual roles, ajq’ijab can be described as shaman-priests if they work mostly for individuals and priest-shamans if their work is for the community. Overall, ajq’ijab work more for individuals, so they can be designated as shaman-priests, but considering the attitudes of the town (see more below), the designation of shaman by itself might be more accurate.

Many ajq’ijab (although not all of the ones I spoke with) have a bag of 260 red beans from the coral tree used for day counting, divination, and dream interpretation. Emilio gave me a reading of my nawal (Toj) and what it meant for me and my fate using a similar technique, but with a different type of seed (smaller, black and white). He started by telling me what Toj means in general,2 and continued with the associated nawals. In addition to the nawal they were born on, everyone has a nawal representing their past, a nawal representing their future, a nawal for their right arm and a nawal for their left arm, which together make a Maya cross. He then emptied the seeds onto the table, and took a small handful of seeds from the larger pile, and counted them out in groups of four, each group representing a day, with a few left at the end. He then explained what this configuration of seeds meant for me.3

This type of divination is also used in dream interpretation. If someone goes to an ajq’ij with a particularly troubling dream, the seeds will tell the meaning of the dream, and proscribe future action. A woman once went to Emilio after a dream where her sick son was pulled away from her arms. The divination reveled the meaning of the dream: the child would die. To prevent this, the woman had a ceremony to prevent this, and her child got better.

This is one of the many ways dreams are important to the work of ajq’ijab and to Maya spirituality in general. Dreams can be interpreted metaphorically or literally, but almost always foretell future events (Tedlock 1981). Dreams are important in the initiation, or divine

---

2 In short, Toj means “to pay,” or “the offering.” He explained that I have the capacity for great success, knowledge and riches, but in order to achieve this I have to constantly pay and give thanks, or I will be poor (in all senses) and continually sick.

3 Emilio counted ahead to N’oj, after which there was a black seed and a white seed. N’oj represents knowledge, and is my “future.” The white seed represented the capacity for future knowledge and success, but the black seed before it represented something getting in the way, a sickness, a soreness, a malaise. “You have a lot of great things you want to do, but how many of them have you done?” he asked. To get rid of the black seed I have to fulfill the requirements of my nawal and make the offering (Sicaján, Field notes February 14th 2012).
election of *ajq’ijab*, as they make it a practice to seek out things in their dreams, like sacred objects, or people in need of help.⁴

In addition to seeds, *ajq’ijab* have a number of other sacred objects that they keep at their altars, each with a unique story and use. Some are rocks with faces on them that look to be from ancient Maya times. Others are crystals and pieces of amber or obsidian. They start finding them during their divine election, when they first become aware of their *Don* (their gift and destiny) and continue finding them throughout their lives. A piece of obsidian that fell from the sky. A rock that looks like a large penis used for genital-related healing ceremonies. José Pedro was particularly proud of a small crystal marble had the letter “J” carved into it when he found it while working in the fields.

While the general format for most ceremonies is the same, a ceremony can be used for just about anything, from asking for a job or a wife to praying for a good harvest or good fishing, from wishing safe travel and protection to headlining illness or giving thanks.

Ceremony is centered around burning of colored candles, incense and other offerings while the *ajq’ij* prays, creating a connection, a communication, with the ancestors and the powerful forces in the world—God, *Ajaw*, Jesus, the Saints, the *nawals*, and nearby sacred places, among others—and asking them all for whatever is the purpose of the ceremony, the fire and smoke facilitating the communication. Each candle color has many different symbolic connotations, and different ceremonies call for different colors of candles. For smaller ceremonies, candles can be burned normally (upright) while crystallized incense is burned in an incense burner, while larger ceremonies, called “ritual burnings,” start with the drawing of the Maya cross or a *nawal* glyph using sugar. Many colored candles and various types of incense (called *copal* or *pom*) are piled on top along with other offerings like pure tobacco cigars, sweet bread, and chocolate⁵ in a symbolic configuration. The setup is ringed by flowers and/or flower petals and then lit aflame. During the ceremony, liquor, rosemary, seeds, more candles, incense and other offerings may be added to the fire. Things burned are

---

⁴ The scope of the significance of dreams in Maya cosmology and their use in ceremony is too vast to fully describe here. For more see Tedlock (1981; 1992), and Levi (2010) who explored the topic in nearby Santa Catarina.

⁵ If the ceremony is meant to do harm to someone, then things like chilies, salt and limes are used instead.
an offering to the Gods. During the ceremony at *Saqixuan*, Teodoro explained: “It is their food. They don’t eat food like we do, but the incense and candles sustain the Gods like food sustains us” (Teodoro, Field notes February 28th 2012).

The cost of these ceremonies varies greatly depending on the nature of want is being asked and the financial ability of the participant. Some *ajq’ijab* have set fees, while others only require the payment of ceremonial materials, but a donation is expected. And the materials themselves can get quite pricy. For things like treating illness and giving thanks, people will not be turned away if they are poor, but a smaller ceremony will be used instead.

Ceremony can take place near the *ajq’ij*’s altar, or in a number of nearby sacred altars that date back to ancient Maya times. These sacred places tend to be in caves, or at the highest point on a mountain, or other liminal locations at the border between sky and earth (peaks), or earth and the underworld (caves). There are altars all around the lake, and in nearby cities that are all often frequented by *ajq’ijab* because different locations have different uses. The cave at San Jorge near Panajachel, for example, has 7 altars, each with a different use, one of which is particularly powerful for healing. Across the lake, an altar at Cerro d’Oro, is often used by fishermen. *Saqixuan* is associated with San Martín, saint of mother earth and cultivation, and is often used by farmers to ask for a good harvest, and thank for a good one (there were fresh corn cobs in the cave from a recent offering).

To be effective, ceremonies must be carried out more than once, usually three to four times, as it is essential to give ceremonies as a thank-you after a successful ceremonial outcome.

**Perceptions and Use in San Antonio**

While responses were varied to say the least, it seemed that most people in the town have generally negative perceptions of *ajq’ij*, and don’t really know much about them. By far the most common response to questions about *ajq’ij* in San Antonio was something along the lines of: “Oh, you mean witchcraft? We don’t have that here.” Still, some informants estimated that 40-50% of the population believes in and uses ritual healing. However, most of
those people do not do so publicly. For example, my host brother, Santos, knew that a number of his friends practiced, but he had no idea which ones.

This is in stark contrast to perceptions a little over 40 years ago. When there wasn’t even a road, the first western medical clinic opened in San Antonio. At the time the population was less than half what it is now, there were 6 *ajq’ijab*, and nearly all of the population held spiritual/supernatural conceptions of illness and used shamanic healing techniques (Tenzel 1970).

These changes are drastic, but make sense given the religious and social changes of the last 40 years. Catholic Action was a movement of lay catholic priests, called catechists, launched in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s (Molesky-Poz 2006: 18). Tenzel (1970) made note of this movement. There were 50 catechists, lay catholic priests, at the time, pushing a purer version of Catholicism and fighting against indigenous beliefs (379). In contrast to the traditional Mayan beliefs, “Priests and Catechists argued for a rigid separation of the soul from the body, stressed the soul, and turned away from the materiality of the body, which they associated with the earth, sin, and the Devil” (Tedlock 1992b: 460). When the armed conflict escalated in the 80s, it became dangerous to practice Maya religion, as *ajq’ijab* en route to sacred places would become targets of the military (Tedlock 1992b). Parents stopped talking to their children about it. Plus, a wave of Evangelization was very successful, as “it became safer to be a Protestant than a Catholic” (Molesky-Poz 2006: 19). After the conflict, conversion in religion followed conversion in profession, as percentage of merchants and evangelicals both increased in the area (Carlson 2011: 123-151), both groups less likely to believe in or use traditional healing. Today, the Catholic Church in San Antonio, part of the Parish in Panajachel, preaches against traditional Maya ceremony.

Still, despite the taboo, there are a number of shamans in the town. I spoke with four, and knew about 3 others, and given the existence of individuals like Diego in Santa Catarina who practice only for their friends and family, it seems plausible that there could be upwards of 10 *ajq’ijab* in San Antonio. Compared to the proportions in 1970, it seems very plausible that a little less than 50% of the current population uses *ajq’ijab*. 


Based on my conversations, I believe that the pervasive attitudes are a combination of lack of knowledge (“my parents never told me”), lack of interest (“I have western medicine now”), and negative connotations (“the priest says its witchcraft”). All of this results in secrecy on the part of the believers, which intern perpetuates the common conceptions.

Farmers, fisherman, and poorer citizens seem to be the main users of *ajq’ijab* as their professions are more connected with themes in Maya cosmology, and poorer families tend to be less exposed to the forces of westernization.²

Overall, despite the taboo, there still seems to be a pervasive sense of the power of the supernatural. Those who don’t use *ajq’ijab* still fear the power of their “witchcraft,” or if not that, they believe in ghosts and spirits, or the divine powers of god. While they may not approve, the beliefs of the group seem to support the third part of the “shamanic complex.”

**Illness and Healing**

The general format of shamanic healing in San Antonio is as follows. When a sick person or their family comes to an *ajq’ij*, the *ajq’ij* starts by asking questions about the nature of the illness. The *ajq’ij* will then pray and divine the specific nature of the problem, and what is necessary for them to get better. Divination generally involves the sacred crystals, not seeds, and divination style varies from *ajq’ij* to *ajq’ij*. Some place crystals in water, others in front of a flame, while others say that they see numbers and letters in their hand, or simply hear the answer from God.⁷ The proscribed cure will generally involve a ceremony, and depending on the nature of the problem, some form of natural medicine (generally a tea made from wild herbs).⁸ The divination reveals the type of medicine to be used, and if the medicine is not prescribed by God, then it will not be effective.

---

² For more on Maya religion and Fishermen in San Antonio, see Welna n.d.
For trends in farming see Jenkins n.d.
³ Many psychologically based explanations for the divinatory powers of shaman have been offered. A creative presentational style and an empathic personality are essential, and some have cited the use of informants that provide them with town gossip to add embellishments to their divinations (Tedlock 2001). In addition, Groark (2008) described the psychological profile of a Highland Maya Community and their difficulties in effectively perceiving the internal states of others, suggesting that a particularly empathic individual, like a shaman, may be able to forge a strong empathic relationship with the patient and “see” things that other members in the community are unable to.
⁸ Some also seek Natural Medicine from *Curanderas* before considering a spiritual option. For an account of Health Seeking Behavior in Santa Catarina, see Nelson n.d.
Illnesses are often described as spiritual in nature. A common diagnosis is *asusto*, or “fright,” which is caused by one’s *adiosich* going missing. Dreaming is the *adiosich* leaving your body to traveling about the world while you sleep, “like a white dove” (Teodoro, Field notes February 28th 2012). Waking up in the middle of the night before your *adiosich* has returned, perhaps during a nightmare, leaves the body without the soul, and creates illness. Witches can also steal one’s *adiosich* in the middle of the night, as can spirits that come out in the cemetery at night. The ceremony for *asusto* is meant to return ones *adiosich*.

A very common illness type seen by *ajq’ijab* today are those that have no diagnosis or cure in western medicine. The doctors don’t know what’s wrong, and the diagnosis is witchcraft (sometimes even by the doctors). The cure here is to cleanse the body by removing unwanted spirits. This is usually done with the use of a foreign object that absorbs the malady, like an egg, that is then burned. *Maximón*, a figure representing San Simón and Judas Iscariot, among others, is believed to eat bad energies, and his clothing and hat are often used to cleanse in healing ceremonies as well. San Nicolas is the saint of healing, and ceremony will often be an offering to him.

While some illnesses are said to be spiritual, some have clear physiological symptoms, and in these cases the cure involves massage and psychical manipulation of the affected areas.

**Efficacy and Psychotherapy**

So, does it work? Nearly all of the people in San Antonio seemed to agree that if you have faith, then healing ceremony works, even the people who did not believe. Faith is said to be the most important predictor of success. Some *ajq’ijab* even refuse to do ceremony if they feel that a person doesn’t have faith. I heard story after story of successful healing ceremonies. All of the daughters in one family had grave illnesses when they were very young, and were healed by ceremony. “You could tell right away after the ceremony was over that she looked better,” they told me (Sicaján, Field notes February 21st 2012). Would they not get better if nothing was done? It’s impossible to say without a controlled study, so what people say about it is the best source of information. And I would point out that studies on the efficacy of psychotherapy are based on self-report too (Wampold 2001).
This is perhaps the most convincing encounter I had. While speaking with Emilio one day, I asked if he uses ceremony in his family. He told me that his 4 year old daughter was sick a few weeks ago, and he called her into the room. “Last week I was sick,” she said. “I had things on my leg. I didn’t know what they were. They were that color,” she said, pointing to Emilio’s black sock. That doesn’t sound good. “Yeah? Who healed you?” I asked, expecting her to say it was her dad. “Simón,” she said, pointing to the room with Emilio’s altar. She was referring to Maximón, Emilio’s figure of San Simón. “Now I’m all better,” she said happily as she pulled up her pajama pant leg a little. There was nothing there, certainly not a black rash. Emilio had done a healing ceremony using Maximón’s scarves to cure her. “It was witchcraft,” he said. “Ceremony is the only way to cure that.” Straight from the mouth of a 4 year old, almost unprompted, I was convinced. (Sicaján, Field notes February 23rd 2012).

Regardless of being able to prove the efficacy of ceremony for the individual patients, some have argued that healing ceremonies “work” because they perform important social maintenance functions for the group, creating a sense of wholeness and unity (Levi 2004; Tenzel 1970). Based on perceptions in the town, it seems that this is not the case in San Antonio, as the secrecy surrounding ceremony does not unify, and if anything creates social tensions.

Returning now to the comparison between shamanic healing and psychotherapy, there seem to be some major flaws. The first is one Levi-Strauss also noted: in psychoanalysis the patient does the talking, whereas in ceremony the shaman does all the talking and the patient remains silent (Levi-Strauss 1963: 183). Second, the comparison suggests that both are dealing with the same type of problems, as the shaman’s spiritual diagnosis has been interpreted as something psychological. However, Tenzel (1970) found that all of the people in treatment with ajq’ijab for so-called “spiritual” diseases were actually suffering from diagnosable medical conditions.9 Lastly, it seemed that a number of healing ceremonies were performed for people that were not actually there. The sick person was often working in the

---

9 While psychotherapy often involves administration of medicine, this is not generally considered to be for a “physical” problem, and regardless, the addition of medication is not a significant predictor of success of therapy (Wampold 2001).
United States, but so long as there was an article of their clothing there, the ceremony was still possible and effective. This fits with their explanation of healing, where the offering and request is made to God, and He carries it out. But somehow the idea of dropping your dry-cleaning off with your therapist being just as effective as a psychotherapy session seems ridiculous to say the least. Instead, while they may not look the same in their practice, it could be that both shamanism and psychotherapy, as well as many other forms of healing around the world, are all effective for similar reasons.

The Meaning Response

Moerman and Jonas (2002) introduced the “meaning response,” an attempt to better explain the phenomenon of the Placebo Effect. While some would suggest that the Placebo Effect is a response to the placebo itself. But the tablet itself is inert. Rather, any physiological effects of the placebo are a result of the meaning associated with the pill, not the pill itself. Without any other information, people who take either a blue or a red tablet, both inert, will believe that the red is a stimulant, and blue is a depressant, based solely on the meanings associated with their colors (Blackwell et al. 1972). A branded placebo will work better than an unbranded one, just as branded aspirin will work better than unbranded (Branthwaite and Cooper 1981). And exercise improves self-esteem, but only if you are told beforehand that exercise improves self esteem (Desharnais et al. 1993). Clearly what most would call the placebo effect is not a result of the placebo, but the meaning and expectations associated with the treatment.

Modern medicine is full of meaning. The title of doctor, the white coat and the sterile environment all convey healing. Relevant to Levi-Strauss, the doctor, the patient and the group all believe in the power of the cure. And cures that appeal most to our concepts of illness, like arthroscopic knee surgery (clean up a messy joint) are most susceptible to the “placebo effect” or the meaning response (Moerman and Jonas 2002: 473).¹⁰

¹⁰ This is not to suggest that medicine itself is ineffective, but rather the meaning associated with the treatment accounts for a certain amount of its efficacy, and the treatment and its meaning are inseparable (Moerman and Jonas 2002).
The meaning response offers a compelling explanation for the efficacy of shamanic healing. Just as a Doctor’s diagnosis explains the problem that will be fixed through the administration of powerful western medicine, the Shaman’s diagnosis offers the problem that will be resolved by the ceremony, though the power of God and the nawals. The cure is a story, a struggle against the antagonist presented in the diagnosis, and what Levi-Strauss was getting at with his discussion of “myth” (1963). The playing out of this story in the conscious and unconscious mind creates parallel and documentable changes in the physical body as these cognitions stimulate changes in the autonomic nervous system (Kirmayer 2004; Meissner 2011). In addition, the shaman’s touch can release endorphins and pain-killing endogenous opioids, easing the pain using exactly the same biological mechanism as chemical painkillers like morphine (Petrovic et al. 2002; Prince 1982), and natural medicine teas calm the nerves, helping fight the detrimental effects of long term stress. Even the simple authority of the healer as someone who has the cure cultivates hope in hopeless situations, attribution intention and solution to metaphysical forces, and restores a sense of control over what was once uncontrollable (Hubbard 2002).

Still, does this psychological explanation account for the efficacy with small children? Infants can very effectively perceive the facial expressions of their mothers (Montague et al. 2001). If a worried mother is put at ease by the ceremonial intervention, the child will be able to perceive this and will be calmed as well. A tea made from a very fragrant herb called Ruda is often used in these cases, and the herb is rubbed on the infants chest in a cross, which works like mentholated chest creams to improve breathing if the infant has a physical condition. Additionally, some have argued that an understanding of the language, metaphor, and symbolic concepts used during ceremony is not essential, but that the meaning response can be stimulated through movement and intention alone (Frenkel 2008).

The meaning response seems to describe not just shamanism in San Antonio, but also psychotherapy and most forms of healing all around the world (Kirmayer 2004). The main differences are in the nature of the story offered by the cure and its relevance to individual and group frameworks of illness. In psychotherapy, the story is more explicit, and the changes manifest themselves in the physiology of the brain more than in the psychical body. In
shamanism, the story fits more with the spiritual conception of illness, whereas our biological conceptions fit better with the stories offered in western medicine. Still, shamanic techniques can still be effective if you believe in western medicine. Those who believe in the functional connection but different ways of treating body and soul may find shamanism to be an effective addition to western medicine as its treatment of the spirit will complement the treatment of the body.

Conclusion

In three weeks of field research I looked at the shamanic healing practices of *ajq’ijab* in San Antonio Palopó and extended a comparison to psychotherapeutic forms of healing. While the two share similar themes and goals—use of dream interpretation, cultivating a sense of control, and others—a direct comparison between the two doesn’t quite hold, as the types of illnesses treated and they way they are treated differ substantially. Still, both seem to be effective, and it seems that both may be effective because they rely on similar mechanisms, namely the meaning response, which suggests that if patient and healer both believe in the cure, and the society does as well, then the cure will work. It seems that most forms of healing around the world are effective, at least in part, because of the meaning response (Kirmayer 2004).

This structuralization of healing across cultures seems to support a notion suggested by many—of an underlying sub-reality (Eliade 1951) or a collective unconsciousness (Jung 1981)—an underlying unity of the psyche and of mechanisms of healing that is concealed by the surface-level diversity of healing practices across cultures (Levi 2009).

But, is this attempt to structuralize the phenomena, to explain the power of faith with science, more akin to akin to Levi-Strauss’s description of “normal thought” or to the shamans “pathological” though, used “to supplement an otherwise deficient reality” (1963: 181)?

Indeed, this account leaves one question unanswered, and it’s a big one: how can we explain the efficacy of *in absentia* healing ceremonies with the meaning response? It seems there are two options. On the one hand, we might say that long distance ceremonies are less
effective or not effective at all. The only evidence for its effectiveness came from the mouth
of the *ajq'ij*. Perhaps any effects at all can be explained solely by the cultivation of hope in
desperate situations, the relief of stress, and the occasional administration of natural medicine.
But, what about the possibility that there is something real to the sorcerer's magic after all?

There is some recent scientific evidence for this. Meta-analyses have found a small but
significant effect of group prayer for the medical outcomes of sick individuals, when they
have no idea whether or not they’re being prayed for (Hodge 2007). And fMRI brain scans of
patients of traditional healers reveal significant changes in activity in certain brain parts when
the healer is thinking about the patient compared to when they are not (Achterbeg et al. 2005).

Perhaps faith is something in and of itself, and what scientists would call the
supernatural is as real as their microorganisms. Indeed, any attempt to apply science to faith
will reach the problem of demarcation, as both systems create the criteria for their own
validation. Discovering if faith in magic creates magic cannot be found through science, but
only through faith. Is an attempt to structurally apply science to non-science actually a further
mystification, hiding us from what’s really going on?
Works Cited

Achterberg, Jeanne, Karin Cooke, Todd Richards, Leanna J. Standish, Leila Kozak, and James Lake

Applbaum, Kalman

Carlson, Neil

Carlson, Robert

Collingwood, Jane

Eliade, Mircea

Frenkel, Oron

Groark, Kevin

Hodge, David

Hubbard, Timothy

Jenkins, Gwendolyn

Jowett, B.
Jung, Carl

Kirmayer, Laurence

Levi, Elena
2010 Dreams in Mayan Spirituality: Concepts of Dreaming From the Ancient Mayans to Contemporary Mayans around Lake Atitlán.

Levi, Jerome

Levi-Strauss, Claude

Meissner, Karen

Moerman, Daniel and Wayne Jonas

Molesky-Poz, Jean

Nelson, Chloe

Neu, Jerome

Pedro, José

Petrovic, Predrag, Eija Kalso, Karl Magnus Petersson and Martin Ingvar
Prince, Raymond  

Sandner, Donald and Steven H. Wong  

Sicaján, Emilio  

Tedlock, Barbra  
2001 Divination as a Way of Knowing: Embodiment, Visualization, Narrative, and Interpretation. Folklore 112: 189-197.

Teodoro  

Tenzel, James  

Vigden, Lucas, and Daniel C Schechter, eds.  

Walter, Mariko, and Eva Fridman  

Wampold, Bruce  

Welna, Benjamin  

Endnotes

1 According to Plato, (Jowett 1952)  
2 (1963: 204)  
3 According to Levi-Strauss (1963)