

# FOLK HEALING PRACTICES IN VENEZUELA

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## Introduction

In recent years, ethnomedicine has become the subject of an interdisciplinary approach, in which medical doctors, anthropologists, pharmacologists, botanists and psychiatrists are cooperating. Ethnomedicine covers the medical concepts and practices, the health care system of tribal groups all over the world and folk beliefs and rites of some segments of modern society. There is an increasing interest in this field among the general public too, due to sensational accounts in the media about magical operations of Filipino curers and about miracles performed by faith healers in the Usa and Europe.

Many people in the developed countries are no longer satisfied with the exorbitant cost of modern medicine, inspite of spectacular progresses, because the sophisticated technology can only benefit a limited group of patients. Who should make the choice to put someone on a life-saving machine or let him die? People are also dissatisfied with socialized medicine and the impersonal treatment in state hospitals, further by drug abuses, the superspecialization of physicians and long waiting lines in clinics. The traditional family doctor, who knew about the personal problems of his patients and their families has disappeared. Modern doctors count on laboratory tests and are not interested in the private life of their clients. The ontological and existential categories of the disease are no longer taken into consideration. Not the patient, but the symptoms are treated (Jacob 1978: 150).

Moreover, the World Health Organization is aware of the fact, that there are neither enough funds nor enough modern doctors available to serve the whole world population. Therefore physicians in the developing countries are asked to rely also on the knowledge of existing folk-healers. In Malaysia and China these curers were taught a rudimentary knowledge of hygiene, so that they may work in the back country, referring serious cases to modern clinics, while treating routine cases on their own. Experiments of this kind were apparently successful.

In many third-world countries, Western-trained doctors come from the upper classes and fail to understand the customs and beliefs of their fellow citizens in the countryside. It would be important for them to study anthropological material, in order to obtain a better understanding of the attitudes of their patients.

In recent years, more and more people both in the Western and non-Western world and coming from all social classes, consult folk-healers and physicians, who work on the fringe of modern medicine, practicing nature therapy or homeopathy. Many search for alternative ways to cure their chronic diseases. Faith-healing is practiced in many Pentecostal and today even in Catholic Churches all over the world.

Even modern physicians came to realize that many illnesses have both physiological and psychological roots and psychosomatic medicine found many adherents. Ackerknecht (1971: 117) states: « There is no such thing as a purely somatic disease, without psychological factors being involved in its production and evolution and there is no psychic disease which does not involve somatic elements ».

What is the difference between ethnomedicine and scientific medicine? Foster (1976: 773-782) says, that in our modern world we take natural causes of diseases for granted, while members of folk cultures usually blame supernatural forces for their illnesses, especially when their afflictions are persistent and badly defined. While modern physicians rely on chemical and herbal remedies, folk-healers combat supernatural forces with supernatural means, although they may also use herbal concoctions. Personalistic systems, in which illness is believed to be caused by an active purposeful intervention of a sensate agent that may be supernatural (ghost, god) or human (witch), are widespread among tribal groups and in the less educated sector of developing societies



(Foster & Anderson 1978: 53), although they may be entwined with naturalistic systems where illness is explained in impersonal terms and treated with matter-of-fact cures and remedies. In societies in rapid process of transculturation, both etiologies are accepted. Acute illnesses are considered to have natural causes, they are treated by modern doctors. When the ailment is more severe and persistent local curers are asked to exorcise the evil spirits, that may cause the illness (Foster & Anderson 1978: 258).

In the non-Western world, disease is not only a physical but also a moral problem. Folk-curers are aware that it may be an expression of social tensions and does not only concern the patient but also his reference group. The curative value of rites may be negligible, but they fulfill important social functions of appeasement. Kleinman (1980: 72) distinguishes between disease, the malfunction of the bodily system, and illness, that refers to the psychosocial experience and meaning of a perceived disease. It includes primary and secondary responses to disease and is culturally constructed. This distinction and the fact that illness experiences are culturally determined lead to the establishment of general criteria to guide the health care seeking process and to evaluate treatment approaches that exist prior to individual episodes of sickness in a given culture. The cultural setting has to be taken into account, when a modern physician makes his diagnosis. Kleinman is right when he says that modern medicine only cures diseases, while folk practices heal illnesses with rites that are culturally determined and geared to body and mind of the patient and his reference group (Kleinman 1980: 82). The holistic approach to sickness by folk healers is stressed time and again in the literature. The sickness theory system of a particular group embraces beliefs about the nature of health, causes of afflictions, remedies, curing techniques and rites and attitudes of healers towards patients and patients towards healers (Foster & Anderson, 1978: 38). All these are subjects of ethnomedical research.

Most people in all countries of the world are aware of the fact that modern medicine is successful in curing acute diseases, controlling epidemics and decreasing the rate of infant mortality. When operations are necessary, a modern doctor is consulted, but when it comes to chronic illnesses, folk-healers are often more successful. The patient is convinced that the magic rites will help him to overcome his sickness and solve his problems. The healer is a friend and helper, priest and psychiatrist, all at the same time.

Folk-medicine is a magico-religious phenomenon and cannot be separated from the world view and the magico-religious concepts of the society under observation. This is well stated by Mbiti (1970: 220-221), when he describes religion, magic and medicine in West Africa. The religious-medical specialist treats not only sickness but also misfortunes. The curer knows that health problems may originate in anxiety, that in its turn is caused by financial problems, feeling of loneliness, lack of social adaptation, loss of a partner, dissatisfaction with one's job or one's life. The healer works like a psychotherapist. He helps his client to overcome his problems or to look at them from a new point of view. Magic rites play a decisive role in this setting. The health care system in many societies of the non-Western world gives psychosocial support, re-establishes harmony between men, society and the environment, the community and the family, and assists the patient to reintegrate into his group.

As it is often the case in countries, as Venezuela, where modern health care systems exist side by side with traditional practices, modern folk curers adapt etiologies, therapies and rituals, that may be traditional or modern, in order to meet the expectations of traditional and new clients, who are in process of acculturation. Literate healers read about magic operations in the Philippines, others get hold of books about meditation and others become spiritists. Spiritual healing becomes increasingly popular, not only in Venezuela. Spiritualism, practiced by these healers is shaped by the teachings of Allain Kardec. It is considered to be civilization's attempt to structure and pattern and validate the nearly universal belief in spirits that may harm human beings, who can be dealt with by means of human intermediaries. Folk-beliefs all over the world blame witches for misfortunes and illnesses. Witchcraft is a cultural knowledge system with its own internal coherence and plausibility (Evans-Pritchard (1937). Magic works, because people believe in it. This was well explained by Cannon (1942) in his classic article on Voodoo death. Healing rites, performed by spiritual healers, also work, because people are convinced that they must be successful. Faith is the most important component in folk-medical practices.

Modern spiritual healers update traditional therapies by the incorporation of real or feigned elements from scientific medicine. (Foster & Anderson 1978: 261). Curers become more sophisticated, but more materialistic, as we shall see later.



Clients usually have ambivalent feelings towards the spiritual healers. They believe that they are able to control magic and spirits, but they may also have the power to use them against their enemies.

In Venezuela the folk culture has undergone rapid changes in the past decades, thus folk healing practices are also changing rapidly. Healers use different methods in order to impress their clients. Traditional indigenous medicine has declined but at the same time ancient and modern rites were absorbed by the Cult of Maria Lionza, that has spread over the whole republic in the course of the past 40 years.

The research for this paper was undertaken over the past ten years in different parts of Venezuela. Unfortunately I could not obtain the assistance of a physician in order to follow-up the cases, which I observed. Thus I could not verify miracles or failures. Self-healing and spontaneous remission should be considered before being impressed by apparent miracles. I visited most of the curers that will be considered in this paper several times and established bonds of respect and friendship. Research is still in progress.

### **The roots of Venezuelan folk medicine**

Venezuela is a country in transition. Only 30 years ago 3/4 of the population lived in rural areas, cut off from the modern world, today only 20% live in the countryside and even they are in touch with the achievements of the 20th century. Most children go to school and TV, electricity and water pipelines are now taken for granted. The standard of living is higher in Venezuela than in most other Latin American countries, due to the country's oil wealth. Still folk-medical practices are widespread and more sophisticated modern curers adapt traditional methods to the demands of middle-class clients, in order to solve their problems of health, love and money. Venezuelan folk medicine is rooted in ancient traditions that were kept alive orally over the centuries. They come from Africa, Amerindian tribes and medieval Spain. Today it is often difficult to say and also of little importance for our investigation, which ethnic group made the largest contribution to the medical patrimony and which trait came from where.

Venezuelans are pragmatic when it comes to decide to whom to turn in case of sickness. Minor diseases are considered to have natural causes and are often treated exclusively at home with herbal remedies or patent medicines bought in the stores. Badly defined and chronic afflictions are frequently considered to be caused by envy, witchcraft or spirits. The patients consults a *curandero* or spiritist. While many resent paying only a nominal fee at state clinics, they readily pay large sums to healers, even if the results are not always convincing. Thus we find a dualistic concept of causes, responsible for ailments: naturalistic and supernaturalistic and a choice is made between doctors and *curanderos*, although today often both are consulted at the same time.

The Venezuelan population is of mixed ancestry. Along the coast and in the central valleys, most peasants are of African descent, while *mestizos* and *zambos* (Indian/black) predominate in Eastern and Southern Venezuela. In the Andes, Spanish settlers mixed with Amerindians. Thus medical traditions differ from region to region. For the purpose of studying Venezuelan folk practices, it is necessary to learn more about African, Amerindian and old Spanish practices and beliefs. Mbiti (1970) described the magico-medical system of Africa south of the Sahara, where religion, magic and medicine form a unit. Diseases are usually considered to have supernatural causes and are treated accordingly. Diseases and misfortunes are religious experiences of a special kind. The medicine-man or healer plays an important social role, he often is priest and diviner at the same time. Therapeutical rites are often magic in nature. Charms should ward off misfortune and illness. Herbal bathes are prescribed for cleansing. Spells are uttered over the patients in exorcistic rites. All these different magic acts have no value in itself, but they help the client who believes in them, to increase his faith in himself and overcome anxiety and insecurity. The magic world view may also act in a negative sense. A person may be convinced that he is bewitched. This fear acts upon the vegetative nervous system, gradually causing real organic ailments. In Africa possession trance is a well known phenomenon. The healer is possessed by spirits, who through his mouth prescribe the proper treatment, thus making sure, that the patient obeys his orders.

The Amerindians of Venezuela also believe that diseases are caused by supernatural agents, that may be introduced into the body of the patient by a sorcerer. The shamans work with the aid



of spiritual guides, whom they receive in trance or who give them advice in visions and dreams. The object, that causes the ailment has to be removed from the body of the sick person by sucking or with the aid of tobacco smoke, blown over the person or by spells, accompanied by rattles. Curing rites may last for many hours and are usually held during the night. Amerindian shamanism is very similar all over the continent, as we know from the literature. Both African curers and Amerindian shamans have a good knowledge of medical herbs. Folk remedies used by the peasants today are usually based on these traditions.

Venezuela medical folk concepts were also influenced by Spanish traditions. The hot/cold complex is typical. It is rooted in the humoral pathology of Hippocrates (Foster 1978: 3-19). "Hot" plants are used to prepare remedies against "cold" diseases and vice versa. Rules of avoidance of special foods during pregnancy are also derived from these concepts. Health is primarily the state in which the constituent substances are in correct proportion and when this proportion goes out of balance it has to be restored by the physician. The "evil eye" complex might have originated in Spain too, although it can be further traced towards the Middle East from where it might have spread to Europe, Africa and later to America (Maloney 1976).

Modern medicine is now available to most Venezuelans for little or no cost. There are dispensaries in most villages. Physicians, who graduate from the University have to work at least one year in the interior of the country. More affluent members of the society go to private clinics or to the USA for surgery or more sophisticated treatment. Still ancient magico-religious concepts with regards to illness and therapy are persistent even in the upper strata of society.

When it comes to minor ailments, most people of all classes treat themselves. About 65% of all illnesses disappear anyhow, before they are brought to the attention of doctors or curers and this is true for most countries of the world. Even delicate remedies are available without prescription in the drugstores and many women know how to give injections. When the sickness gets worse, the patients usually consults a doctor, but when he loses patience, he may visit a curer, while still under treatment in a clinic. There are many types of curers and often the sick person moves from one to the other, a practice that can get rather expensive. Sometimes Pentecostal faith-healers are also consulted. The

decision how to deal with a chronic disease depends on financial means, faith, attitudes towards folk- and modern medicine. The patient does not decide on his own, his illness becomes the problem of the whole family.

### **Types of curers**

*Herbalists.* In many rural areas and even in the cities there are many folk-healers, who work exclusively with herbal remedies. They may be men or women and usually they are older and well respected in the community. Either they prepare the remedies themselves or give prescriptions. They may have helpers, who gather roots and herbs in the woods. Sometimes certain remedies can be purchased in stores, specializing in roots and plants. Usually herbalists grow some popular herbs in their backyards. As a matter of fact, most Venezuelan peasants grow an assortment of medical plants and goodluck plants in their kitchen-gardens. Some well-known herbalists are visited by salesmen of the pharmaceutical industry in order to receive free samples of new drugs, just as physicians. A few educated herbalists consult books. They usually diagnose with the help of the urin of the patient, that is examined when held against the sun. Others look their clients into their eyes, observe their behavior in general or study their palms. Consultations may take some time, as the curer asks questions about the general health condition of the patient, his private life and assorted problems. Most herbalists prefer matter-of-fact treatments, but sometimes they state that the herbal remedies have to be blessed before being taken by the patient or the sick person has to pray while taking the concoction or while preparing the infusion.

Herbalists usually obtain the knowledge of herbs by experience or through apprenticeship. Sometimes they inherited their knowledge from their fathers or grandfathers. They never claim supernatural vocation. They act like modern doctors and may even give injections.

Many Venezuelans of all classes know large amounts of medical plants; and often these folk remedies are remarkably effective. Pompa (1972) and Pittier (1970) collected many important data on curative plants and their use in folk-practices. Most herbs are used in dry state. Leaves and flowers are dried in the sun and then



kept in containers, until they can be used. Infusions are prepared, which have to be drunk or which may be used for massages or ointments. They also may be taken as gargles. Sometimes herbal infusions are mixed with rum or fruit juices. Roots are grated and then also used to prepare infusions or ointments, which may be placed on wounds or abscesses. Other ointments, such as *copaiba*, are prepared from the sap of trees.

Many herbs can be obtained in the numerous *perfumerías*, that opened in recent years in towns and cities. While the majority of these herbs serve medical purposes, there are a number of plants that are exclusively used in magic rites. For example: the *zabila* plant (*Aloe vera*) is placed behind the entrance door of a house to serve as filter against evil. When evil is sent against the owner of the house, the *zabila* withers away, but the house and its inhabitants are not harmed. The plant has to be replaced immediately and burned. *Ruda* (*Ruta graveolens*) is used to cure children when they suffer from evil eye disease. *Pasote* (*Chenopodium ambrosioides*) is planted around the house to bring luck and ward off evil.

Herbalists are consulted by friends and relatives. Prominent curers in this category may draw clients from a large area. They are not feared, as they never work magic. Usually herbalists charge a fee of about 20 Bolivares for each visit. They have their working hours. Often a secretary writes the prescriptions, as the curer himself may be illiterate. Herbalists earn much less than spiritual healers, but usually make a good living, even if they have no outside jobs.

*Curanderos*. This term refers to any kind of healer, but usually not to pure herbalists. *Curanderos* may be spiritists, spiritual healers, herbalists/spiritists or shamans. Modern *curanderos* adopted practices from different sources in order to satisfy the more sophisticated clients. They treat both health problems and misfortunes. The majority of their clients come from the lower strata of society and rarely from the more educated upper-middle and upper classes, yet there are number of spiritist/curers, who may only cater to the higher classes, offering special services in more pleasant surroundings.

Generally speaking *curanderos* believe that at least the major part of illnesses and problems brought to their attention have supernatural causes and it is their task to deal with the evil powers in an adequate way. Their rites are utilitarian and their

client's outlook is pragmatic. Any treatment is all right, as long as it helps to solve the patients' problems. *Curanderos* usually believe sincerely in their own powers, that presumably enable them to combat evil influences. The faith in their own powers is the secret of their success. For me they are good psychologists, who are quick in grasping what is really wrong with the client and make him feel more secure. Most *curanderos* work in good faith, but today temptations are great and sometimes fees are charged that surpass the means of the humble folks, that still form the bulk of their clients. Yet there is an unwritten law, which states, that any discussion of the price would annihilate the efficacy of the treatment.

*Curanderos* are not consulted by the people who live in their own village, as relatives and neighbors may be afraid of their spiritual powers. It is always preferable to consult a curer, who lives far away and knows nothing about the private life of the client. This shows the ambivalent feelings, people usually have towards curers.

The majority of *curanderos* are members of the lower or lower middle class. Some had an elementary education, some are illiterate, but I never encountered a healer who had gone to the University. Life histories reveal that most *curanderos* had their calling during late adolescence by some unusual experiences. Many say that they used to live a bad life, until God punished them for their sins with a serious illness, which no physician could cure. At last they promised to repent and God took the illness away from them or they saw a curer, who worked a miracle. They say that they became the assistant of the curer, who taught them many secrets. Others say that they received the call directly from God, who sends them spirits, that whisper the right diagnosis in their ears. Others claim that they were visited by spirits already when they were very young and then were urged in visions to develop their mediumistic or spiritual powers. The *curanderos* always make a point, that they only work in favor of their clients and humanity and that they are not interested in materialism. Some state that they have special guardian spirits, who inspire their diagnosis, others communicate with the spirits of dead doctors or curers, who make the right diagnosis. Some may receive spirits in trance, who then speak from their mouth, giving instructions, making magic operations or conducting the proper healing rites. *Curanderos* are usually older men and women, while mediums are usually women.



Venezuelan *curanderos* do not only cure diseases, mostly by means of magic rites, but they also solve all kinds of problems of their clients. Students beg for protection, before they take an exam and are surer of themselves, when they wear a consecrated charm around their neck. People in search of jobs also buy charms from the curers, who may appease them when presenting themselves to a prospective new boss. Women whose lovers have disappeared ask the *curandero* to summon the faithless friend by means of tobacco smoke and incantations. Others, who have troubles with neighbors and relatives, consult the *curandero* in order to combat witchcraft and chase evil away. When someone has financial problems or bad luck in his business, he is convinced that sorcery is involved. The *curandero* has to exorcise the shop. The *curanderos* always claim that they only work "white magic" in favor of their clients, yet a magic rite in favor of one person may cause damage to his foe, if both believe in this process. Thus it is difficult to make a clear distinction between so-called white and black magic and in my opinion this is of no importance.

Most *curanderos* work only during certain hours of the day or only on certain days of the week, while special ceremonies are performed during the night. Some are full-time curers, others have outside jobs. Most live well. Consultations or check-ups cost between 20 and 30 Bs, but special work is expensive and may cost over 1.000 Bs.

Usually the curers work in their own homes, where a room is set aside for ceremonies and consultations, some have their "offices" in a different village.

In the cult-room there is usually a large altar, decorated with litographs of saints and spirits, flowers, candles, jars containing water, rum or *cocuy*, containers with herbs and remedies and sometimes books. The *curandero* sits on a chair behind a desk or in front of the altar. The client has to sit down and questioning begins. The curer diagnoses the disease according to the story told by the patient. Some healers claim that they know exactly what is the matter with the client, as soon as he enters the room, as he has the proper vision or receives instructions from his guardian spirit. Some curers diagnose while (supposedly) in trance, others smoke a cigar or gaze into a cristal ball in order to get the right inspiration. In some cases only a personal object or piece of wearing apparel of a sick person is brought to the curer by a relative.

Generally speaking the procedure is as follows: The patient approaches the *curandero* and the illness is labeled. Then the curer decides that the cause of the ailment is supernatural: evil sent by a witch, a foe, an unfaithful lover, a business competitor, a jealous husband, an evil spirit or offended saint. The illness might be caused by a crime or sin committed by the patient or one of his relatives. *Curanderos*, who believe in reincarnation and Karma may also blame a crime committed by the client in a previous life for the ailment. In any case, an exorcistic rite has to be performed in order to cleanse the body from all possible evil influences. In case of a sin, confession in public may be useful too. The curer prescribes the proper treatment, which he executes or which is executed by one of his helpers, in a later session. The exorcism is made with the aid of tobacco smoke, incense, water, through bathes in herbal extracts, by sucking the illness from the body or with the aid of spells. This, however, is not enough. The client has to be protected against new attacks of evil forces. This is done by means of protective herbal bathes, perfumes and charms, which may be applied to the body of the patient, to his car, his house or his bed. Finally the symptoms of the disease are treated by means of herbal remedies or drugs bought in the store. They may be applied matter-of-fact or in connection with certain prayers or taboos.

Usually the treatment is not carried out on the same days as the illness is diagnosed. The patient has to buy the paraphernalia necessary for the proper ritual and provide the money for the curer.

As it is believed that misfortune, emotional and personal problems, have supernatural causes too, the treatment for such afflictions are almost identical. Again exorcism are important. Charms and perfumes may ward off evil and magic rites may send the evil influences back to their origin. The exorcism of the evil possessing the patient leads to symptom relief. Psychosocial problems are thus solved in an appropriate way. As interpersonal problems are often somatized, the somatic symptoms disappear when the psychosocial problems are no longer apparent. It is important that at least one member of the reference group (family) of the client is present when the rites are performed. This helps the client to feel reintegrated into his social network. Usually many people, known or unknown by the client, are present when he is exorcized and group response is of great importance to make the



ritual a success. The magic cures work, because the *curandero* inspires confidence and people have faith in his powers. The patient is sure, that he is cleansed from all evil through the exorcistic rites. Unconsciously or consciously his own vital energies are reactivated, in order to combat disease. The illness as an expression of anxiety disappears, because the mental causes that provoked it no longer exist.

*Curanderos* are successful when the diseases are psychosomatic, chronic and vaguely defined. Headaches, pains in the stomach or back, allergies that are unsuccessfully treated by modern physicians disappear as soon as the patient comes to terms with himself and does no longer dread witches and envy. I do not pretend that *curanderos* are able to treat any kind of disease. Many are well aware of their limits and when they diagnose cancer or some other serious ailment, they may refer the patient to a physician or to a hospital. Yet *curanderos* are proud to say that often physicians from the city may send them cases, which they were unable to treat and which the healers could handle successfully. In case of terminal diseases, *curanderos* may not perform miracles, but they may help the dying patient to come to terms with himself and pass away in peace.

Are *curanderos* really successful? This question can be answered in the affirmative. Although they cannot work miracles, which are often attributed to them, they are successful, when psychosomatic ailments are involved. Of course apparent "miracles" may have other reasons, such as spontaneous remittance or self-curing. As some patients consult modern physicians and *curanderos* at the same time, it is difficult to say, who of the two are really responsible for the curing.

Unfortunately very few follow-up studies have been done so far. I often spoke to patients again, long after they were apparently cured by a *curandero* and they were still convinced that the previous symptoms did no longer appear. Others admitted, that although they had no more headaches during a certain period of time, all of a sudden the ailment reappeared.

*Curanderos* must be successful at least in the eyes of their clients, otherwise their homes would not be invaded daily by hundreds of patients and they would not pay high prices for magic work.

In the following section I want to describe different methods of healers and evaluate their success.

## Folk healers

1. Guillermo is about 35 years old and has an elementary school education. He was working in a factory until he met his present common-law wife, who is about 10 years older than he. She used to be a medium ever since she was a young girl, having been initiated into spiritual healing by her own mother. She still practices as a medium and receives spirits, that perform special healing and exorcistic rites. G. is intelligent and rapidly understands what is wrong with his clients.

He practices with his wife in their home in a town, about 100 kms. from Caracas. They live in a comfortable house. Two rooms are set aside for the rituals. The "office" contains an altar with the usual litographs, flowers and candles. The walls are decorated with drums, Indian souvenirs and statues of saints. There is a desk and chairs in the room. G. dresses casually and only enters the room barefooted. When a patient arrives, he is placed on a chair in front of the altar. G. asks a few preliminary questions concerning the problems, illness, general background, and then lights a cigar. Looking at the client and then at the glowing part of the cigar, he now begins his diagnosis. From the expression on the face of the client he can see, whether or not he is on the right track. When he seems to hit the weak spot of the client, he tries to elaborate on the subject. « Your husband has a girl friend and ran off with her, because she is young and you are old. She is afraid of you and has put a hex on you, hence your afflictions. You should talk to your husband, he has problems too, but cannot get away from the girl ». « You have no serious health problems, but you should be careful with your bronchia and should not drive at night, as your sight is bad. » « Something is wrong with your female organs. I can see that the doctor suggested an operation, by all means, go and have it done as soon as possible. But wait, there is something else: your mother in law hates you and this hatred causes your headaches. Before you are operated, we have to work on you. » « Do you have a blue car in the family? Be careful, something might happen to the car and his driver, if we do not perform magic work. »

Some clients consult G. in order to obtain a general check-up and obtain some orientation, others come when they are afflicted by an illness. When during the diagnostic session, G. prescribes an *ensalme*, *despojo* or *trabajo grande*, the client is treated by



G.'s wife, who performs the proper ritual immediately or in a special session on Friday night. The treatments that usually have exorcistic character are performed in front of the altar. The practitioner smokes a cigar and blows the smoke over the client, while uttering magic spells. Incense may also be used. Then he touches the afflicted parts of the body of the patient with a crucifix. The abdomen might be rubbed or touched with the crucifix. In other rites, the client has to consecrate a candle to the spirits, who divell in the altar and utter prayers to his saint of special devotion. *Trabajos grandes* are performed only once a week in a more solemn fashion. The wife of G. falls in trance and receives a powerful spirit, that works on the clients. Patients have to submit to a *velación*: the patient is placed on the ground and candles are lit around him. He may be covered with a sheet, with flowers, magic powder or dirt and has to remain quiet until the candles are burned down. The medium in trance may give advice how to deal with a situation, she may give a violent massage to the client in order to get rid of an evil spell or she may prepare a charm, that will keep bad influences away. These *trabajos grandes* are expensive and may cost 1.200 Bs. while ordinary check-ups can be had for 30 Bs. *Ensalmes* or *despojos*, the shorter rites described above cost 40 or 50 Bs.

The clients come mostly from the neighboring cities: Maracay, Valencia or Caracas, some are peasants from the rural areas to the south. A few clients seem to be quite affluent, arriving in new cars and wearing a lot of jewelry. The majority of the patients are women, but there are also some businessmen and peasants. Some clients are Spaniards or Portuguese of working-class background. Children are treated only when their mothers are present.

2. Arcangel is about 60 years old, white and seemingly of lower-middle class origin. He has a high school education and has read many books. He claims that he used to have visits of spiritual beings when he was very young, but did not pay any attention to these signs. He was married and worked in a white collar position for 25 years and then was formally called by the superior spirits of the universe to become their receptacle. He left his family and moved to an isolated valley about 120 kms. from Caracas, where he installed a spiritual center about 15 years ago. Every weekend he receives about 150 clients and some more during the week. He claims that he has no materialistic interests

and only takes what people are willing to offer him. He works with powerful spirits, that God Father sent to him. These spirits rule the universe. There are different groups of spirits, who abode in different areas of the sky. He believes in Karma and reincarnation. A. claims that he can go on spiritual voyages and visit spiritual centers in other countries such as the Philippines, India and the Usa, where he obtains informations. He says that he has to develop his spiritual powers continuously in order to give better service to his clients. When he goes on these spiritual trips, his body remains at home. He also claims that when a spirit takes possession of his mind, his soul is gone, thus he never remembers what occurred during trance. Actually while I observed him he was never in trance for one single minute, but he acted out his spirit role in an appropriate way to the satisfaction of his clients.

The center is managed by ten devout assistants, who perform the ritual acts, while A. only offers consultations. He is very strict both with clients and the assistants and keeps unwanted strangers away. The rules of the center are printed.

The center consists of a large altar room, where at least 100 people can be seated and another smaller "office" with a small altar, where medical consultations take place. There are at least 60 beds, that can be rented by the clients, as well as bathing facilities, shacks, where hammocks can be placed and a large kitchen. There is plenty of space for the cars, in which the clients arrive. They have to be in the valley Saturday afternoon and can only leave Sunday afternoon, when all rituals are properly performed.

When a client arrives, he is immediately submitted to a cleansing ritual, that takes place in the river behind the compound. Two of A.'s assistants wash the faithful with a mixture of rum, herbal essences and ammonia, that is poured over their head. Then spells are said, while the body is touched with a crucifix, and then the client has to submerge four times in the water. At around 8 p.m. clients and assistants congregate in the altar room and A. begins the rituals in front of the altar, decorated in the usual way, with Christian prayers. He then blesses the people, moving through the crowd and after an hour he (supposedly) falls in trance in order to receive a spirit. Then clients approach A., who is sitting in front of the altar, and tell their problems. He asks them questions: «What is your name, your



age, where are you from, did you consult a doctor, did you see another curer, why do you come and want to see me? » Then he suggests symptoms and the possible causes of the afflictions. He believes that abortion is a dreadful sin and that women get ill, because God punishes them for this crime. Children who are not baptized are also prone to afflictions of all kinds. During the nightly consultations he elaborates on the spiritual causes of diseases. He then gives orders to his assistants to perform certain magic acts. These orders are written down and are executed the following day. The consultations may last until dawn. While supposedly in trance, A. smokes one cigar after another and drinks large amounts of rum and *cocuy*, but without apparent effects. From time to time he gets up and receives another spirit. In order to differentiate between these spiritual entities, he tries to change his voice or accent. Finally people retire to their beds. Early in the morning the magic rites start in the yard and on the bank of the river. They consist of incantations, blowing smoke over the patients, massages, burning candles ecc. in much the same fashion as seen in other centers. Around noon, A. enters the small consultation room and those who have been properly cleansed and exorcized can now approach the spirit of a famous Venezuelan doctor, who speaks from A.'s mouth. These consultations are semi-private. A. makes a diagnosis based on the answers he receives from his patients and then gives prescriptions: injections of Vitamin B 12, antibiotics, but also *compuesto No. 1, 2 or 3*, remedies that are prepared by his assistants on the base of herbs and roots, which can be purchased right in the center. In the evening most clients return to Caracas, Maracay or Villa de Cura.

A. claims that he treated patients, who came from as far as Bogota and the Usa. He is successful, because he removes the psychosocial causes of the afflictions, before treating the symptoms. He inspires confidence and has a great reputation.

3. Ezequiel is about 45 years old and illiterate. He claims that he received his powers through the intervention of the Holy Spirit. He used to be very poor and lived a bad life in Caracas and God punished him with blindness. One day a nun led him to the statue of *El Nazareno* in a large church in Caracas, and all of a sudden he could see again. A voice told him that he should become a healer and since then this voice always whispers in his

ear, whenever he has to diagnose a disease or prescribe a remedy. He claims that it is the Holy Spirit or perhaps a spirit sent by God.

E. works in a shack in a small hamlet, about 100 kms. from Caracas, but he lives in a town in the Aragua Valley. He claims that he maintains 5 homes, 5 wives and an assorted number of children. He also owns a ranch. His clients are mostly lower-class and come from the neighboring cities. They pay 20 Bs. for a consultation and the same for magic work.

Each day at least 50 new patients arrive. They have to write their names on a list, pay the fee and receive a number. When their number is called they have to show their identification cards. The healer does not listen to the patients' stories and treats them very badly. He shouts bad words and behaves in a very disagreeable way. Seven secretaries sit around a table, to whom he shouts the prescriptions. Private consultations in the back-room are rare. He does not even spend 5 minutes with each client, yet they seem to be satisfied. The prescriptions usually indicate the paraphernalia the client has to bring for the magic work the next time he comes: rum, candles, perfumes, lemons, a piece of red cloth and a home-made doll.

When the consultations are over, magic work begins. Again numbers are handed out and the clients are called forth one by one. Exorcistic rites are performed. The client sits on a chair and is covered with the red cloth he had to bring. E. now waves a red flag over him mumbling spells. Then he lets an old *zamuro* bird (vulture) fly over the patient. The red cloth is thrown into a corner and at the end of the ritual, all the cloth is burned carefully, as all the evil influences that remained in them must be destroyed. Sometimes E. smokes a cigar over a client, sometimes he massages the body of the patient. He once gave charms to students, who had failed their final exams and had to present themselves again, but he also said «you have to study, otherwise the charms won't help».

E. performs a special *trabajo* once a month on the banks of a river about 40 kms. away. Exorcistic rites take place in the water. Each client has to bring a big candle, that is hollowed out and stuffed with gunpowder. At the end of the ceremony, all the candles are blown up. At such a ceremony, at least 200 people are present.



E. treats illnesses and misfortunes in the same way. According to his ideology, they are caused by evil influences and envy and one has to combat evil in order to succeed. Although he treats his patients badly and does not take much time for each client, he is financially very successful. I talked to many of his clients, who are convinced that his exorcistic rites are just what they need and they come back whenever they have a problem to solve or an illness to treat.

4. Claudio is about 50 years old and a mulatto from the Barlovento area. He is strictly a herbalist, whose father and grandfather were already famous curers in the area. His clients come from Caracas and the neighboring villages. He only works when the sun comes out, because his patients have to bring their urin, which he carefully examines holding it towards the sun. He is literate and in his comfortable office he has several medical books as well as botanic works. He is regularly visited by the salesmen of pharmaceutical factories in Caracas, and he says that he also makes use of modern remedies, when he feels that they may be helpful. He grows some herbs in his background but usually ask people to get the proper herbs on their own.

C. told me that he does not believe that spirits may cause an illness, however, if a patient is convinced that his disease is due to magic or sorcery he reluctantly performs magic rites too, in order to please his client. He is well aware of the fact, that persuasion and faith may work miracles.

5. *Snake doctors.* Venezuelans are greatly afraid of poisonous snakes, although they are not too frequent in the country. Today anti-serums may be obtained quickly in rural dispensaries, yet peasants usually rely on local specialists for treatment, whenever they are bitten by a snake. It is generally believed that snakes will not attack, when one carries tobacco in one's pocket or smokes a cigar. The specialists also use tobacco smoke to disinfect the wound. They then cut it open so that blood streams out in abundance. Then incantations are uttered. Some curers put cheese on the wound, others use tobacco leaves. The treatment is often successful, it must be admitted, however, that not all snakes are poisonous, and that some poisonous snakes may have just discharged their poison before biting the victim.

6. *Evil eye*. The belief in the power of the evil eye (*mal de ojo*) is still prevalent in rural and urban areas. People think that certain persons intentionally or unintentionally are able to cause evil simply by looking at a child. As we mentioned before, the evil-eye-complex is very ancient in Europe and Africa and may have originated in the Middle East. It is most likely that it was introduced to the New World by Spanish settlers. In Venezuela people believe that infants and children up to the age of 5 or 6 may be afflicted. Babies usually wear red threads around their wrists, sometimes also red peonia (*Ormosia fastigiata*) seeds or an *azavache* stone. All these charms should ward off the evil eye.

The symptoms of evil eye disease are the following: vomiting, lack of sleep, crying, lack of appetite, diarrhoea, high fever and desiccation. The sick child is brought immediately to a specialist. There are older men or women in almost every village, who deal with this illness. The curer takes the child in his arms, uttering a magic spell or a prayer. Then he may beat the child with plants such ruda and repeat the incantations. The sign of the cross is made several times over the infant. Surprisingly enough the children treated in this manner usually get well. It might well be, however, that the mothers also apply other herbal or chemical remedies at the same time. The ritual appeases the mother and gives her more confidence in the acts, she performs for the benefit of the child.

7. *Magic operations*. Rosenda is about 45 years old and of lower-middle-class origin. Years ago he used to work as a male nurse in a small country hospital, but later became a truck driver, before settling in a small village about 130 kms. from Caracas, where he opened his practice. He has been a *curandero* now for many years, with a well established clientele, who come from the rural areas of Barlovento and from Caracas and other cities. He has regular working hours during the week and once every two weeks he performs magic operations.

R. works in a room, decorated with an altar, on which the usual candles, flowers and statues are found. The room also contains a desk, several chairs and a hospital bed. His wife is his assistant.

Consultations take place during the day. R. smokes a cigar and listens to the complaints of his clients, before he dictates treatment procedures to his wife. He is not in trance. R. likes to



dress like a doctor in a white gown. When he performs operations he wears a green doctor's outfit, complete with gloves and cap.

Operations take place in the room and no outsiders are permitted to enter. It was a great privilege that I could take pictures of these procedures. R. pretends to fall in trance in order to receive the spirit of a famous doctor from Trinidad, who speaks from his mouth with a slight English accent. When in trance he smokes cigarettes and drinks rum. The first patient comes in, a woman of maybe 50 years of age supposedly with a tumor in her abdomen. She is placed on the bed and exposes her abdomen to the "doctor". Her head is covered with a white cloth.

R. then makes a subcutaneous injection into the belly, probably a slight anaesthetic. He then takes a razor blade in one hand and makes a light scratch on the skin. He now pushes the belly down with his fingers, pretending to open a hole in the abdomen, in order to tear the tumor out with his own hands. Yet what he does is only a light massage. He then scratches the skin a little bit and finally dresses the non-existing wound in an elaborate way, telling the woman not to touch the bandages until she will come back in two weeks. After reciting a short prayer over her, he orders two men to carry her out, as she was too exhausted from the operation to walk by herself. I saw several operations of this kind, also one on the eyes of a client. I was able to talk to some patients after two weeks. The man who was operated on his eyes did not feel better and was submitted to another "eye operation" that very day. The woman with the tumor said, that right after the operation she felt much better and had no more pains. I suggested, however, that she should consult a physician, in order to find out whether she really had cancer or not, and she promised that she would go to the hospital.

R. is successful, because his magic operations may speed up the natural healing process and increase confidence. He also works successfully with psychosomatic patients: a girl, about 18, who was rather stout, decided to lose weight, until she came to a point where she could no longer retain food. She was no longer menstruating and could barely walk. Her mother brought her to R., who gave her magic treatments (exorcism, *ensalmes* ecc.) that restored her self-confidence. When I met her, she had already gained some weight and was on the way of recovery.

R. knows about magic operations performed in the Philippines and read about Arigo, the famous healer in Brazil. The danger of

performing "magic operations" lies in the fact that patients, who really suffer of malicious tumors, may first try their luck with curers and only arrive at the hospital for a real operation when it is too late.

### Saints and illnesses

Folk beliefs that associate saints with certain illnesses are common in many parts of Venezuela, mostly among the descendants of Spanish settlers in the Andes. These concepts are of course Spanish Christian in origin. According to folk traditions saints are considered to be intermediaries between God and men and are asked to help human beings in every phase of life. The cult for saints has utilitarian aspects. The saints are requested to help, a promise is made and is paid as soon as the service is performed. Saints are considered to be ambivalent, neither good nor bad, and to have their little weaknesses. The saint of special devotion plays an important role. He is invoked whenever there are problems. Other saints are associated with certain illnesses.

St. Blas is invoked when someone suffers from pains in the throat. St. Vincent Ferrer is responsible to relieve headaches and St. Lorenzo will help when the back hurts. Prayers to saints, who are the most popular curers, can be obtained in printed form from peddlers or in the *perfumerías*.

*José Gregorio Hernández*. He is the most popular saint in Venezuela and is worshipped by Catholics, spiritists and spiritual healers alike. José Gregorio was a medical doctor, who died in 1918 in an automobile accident in Caracas. During his lifetime he always had compassion for the poor and downtrodden and owned a clinic in Caracas where he treated the dispossessed free of charge. Soon after his death people started to visit his grave on the cemetery of Caracas and news spread that miracles had occurred. The sick carry herbal concoctions and chemical remedies to the cemetery to place them for some instances on his grave, in order to increase their effectiveness. People make promises to José Gregorio and when they become well again, they walk on their knees from the entrance of the cemetery to the grave. Caravans of sick people and their relatives make pilgrimages to the birthplace of



the saint in Isnotu in the Andes. Today a modern church was built there only with the money donated by those who recuperated, thanks to José Gregorio's intercession. Crutches and votive tables decorate its walls. Every day there are advertisements in the newspapers of Caracas giving thanks to José Gregorio Hernández for the miracle performed.

The ecclesiastical authorities are reluctant to accept all the stories about miracles, yet the process leading to his eventual canonization is well on its way in Rome, and Venezuelans are eagerly waiting for further decisions. Many priests encourage the devotion and participate in pilgrimages.

The faith in José Gregorio Hernández is not only limited to Catholic worshippers. He has also become one of the powerful spirits of the *Corte Medica*, summoned by spiritual healers, whenever they have to treat serious illnesses or solve serious problems. Magic operations are supposedly performed by José Gregorio himself. His statue decorates the altars of all Venezuelan *curanderos*. His spirit was also incorporated into the cult of Maria Lionza, as we shall see in the next section.

The devotion of José Gregorio has spread to the Dutch Islands, Santo Domingo and Colombia.

*The cult of Maria Lionza.* The cult is the most important magico-religious manifestation outside of the Catholic Church. Over the years it absorbed most of the traditional folk belief, superstitions, magic and therapeutical practices that existed in the country before and, in recent years, also some concepts and rituals from abroad. It can be compared to the Brazilian Umbanda, that has also assimilated Amerindian, African, spiritistic and Christian practices into one system.

There are a number of spirits, that are summoned by the cult leaders (*bancos*) to manifest themselves in the possessed mediums, who speak from the mouth of their *materia* and can then be consulted by the faithful. These spirits are considered to be intermediaries between men and God, who resides above the pantheon of divinities as the Creator. He is removed from the daily life of the people and gave power to the spirits, who can help, whenever a problem arises in the world. The intermediaries are not altogether good or bad, they are neutral powers, who can be induced by prayers and offerings to solve the problems of the faithful. These concepts are basically African. Just as in Westa-

frica, the rites are essentially utilitarian in nature. Misfortune is blamed on evil magic or envy. The culprits have to be found, punished and neutralized. People have to be protected against evil magic with the aids of charms, perfumes or powders. As we have seen, all these beliefs are deeply rooted in the Venezuelan folk-culture. Catholicism has also influenced the cult, as most adherents consider themselves to be good Catholics. The saints are also considered to be intermediaries, yet they are not summoned to possess the mediums.

Spiritism à la Kardec flourished in Venezuela among the middle classes at the turn of the century and gradually filtered down to the lower strata of society in a more vulgar form. It has influenced the cult.

The cult is based on an Amerindian myth about an Indian girl that is raped by the guardian spirit of a lagoon and turns into the protector of rivers and mountains. Indian practices, such as smoking cigars or sucking the body of the patient, were also incorporated into the cult.

The cult of Maria Lionza is a socio-religious phenomenon that has to be studied from different angles. I have been observing the cult over the past 20 years and noticed that the practices do not only vary from cult center to cult center, but there occurred many modifications with regard to general features too. While the cult was only popular in the Central States in 1960, it has spread all over the country in the past two decades. A formal leadership is lacking and so far nobody was able to codify the belief system. Each cult leader works more or less on his own, rites and divinities are added at will. There is some competition between the *bancos*. Some semi-intellectual leaders are reading books on esoterism, meditation, oriental religions and the *cábala*, adding new dimensions to the ritual.

Little or nothing is known about the cult of Maria Lionza in the past century. It is most likely that magico-religious activities widespread during the colonial period among semi-civilized Indians continued in the mountains of Central Venezuela during this time. There are indications that at least one cult center, in which Indian spirits were summoned for curing purposes, existed in San Felipe, capital of Yaracuy, around the first World War. In the 20s, the dictator General Gomez had a lover, who supposedly was a priestess of the cult. She propagated the faith among his followers. It is likely that the cult spread from Maracay, where



Gomez resided, to Caracas in the 30s. Only in 1943 Caracas newspapers mentioned the cult for the first time. It seems that it only became popular during the dictatorship of Perez Jiménez in the 50s. He had a statue for Maria Lionza erected in the heart of Caracas. Offerings and letters of petition are placed on foot of the statue every day. The erection of the statue coincided with the emergence of the cult into the open. Maria Lionza and the cult are frequently mentioned in newspapers in the 50s and 60s. Centers opened in the cities of Central Venezuela and in the 70s in other parts of the country. Today there are centers in Curaçao, Barranquilla, Santo Domingo and Cartagena. It seems that the cult is mainly urban, catering to the spiritual needs of immigrants, who poured into the cities in the 50s and 60s. Later the cult was introduced into rural areas by migrants, who returned home. Folkcurers, who previously worked with herbs and magic incantations, all of a sudden adopted Maria Lionza and the spirits of her "court" to help their clients more effectively. The cult was briefly persecuted during the Caldera regime, but today the main sanctuary, the mountain of Sorte, became a National Park.

When I began to study the cult 20 years ago, Maria Lionza, the Indian girl who became the guardian of nature, was the central figure of the cult and was summoned by the mediums in every session. Other important figures at that time were the Don Juanes, spirits of mountains and rivers, who are rooted in Amerindian mythology as well. Today they have lost importance. Historical figures were popular and are still summoned frequently: these are the *Caciques indígenas*, native Indian chiefs, who fought against the Spanish conquerors. Other spirits are the heroes of Independence: Simon Bolivar and Negro Primero. Other spirits may have originated in the Spanish-American folk literature, some are fun-loving and when summoned entertain the audience with obscene jokes. The spirit of José Gregorio Hernandez has gained in importance over the past decades, especially when medical work has to be performed.

In recent years African deities were introduced into the cult, due to Cuban influences and Santería practices, that spread from Miami all over the Caribbean. The *Siete Potencias Africanas* are the seven most important Yoruba divinities of the Cuban Santería pantheon. Their Venezuelan worshippers wear colored beads and ribbons, just as in the Santería and make bloody sacrifices, a

practice that was never popular in the cult before, yet they ignore the connections with Santería and Africa.

The ritualistic trance is all important, just as in other Afro-american cults. In Venezuela the mediums rarely undergo a formal initiation ceremony, there are, however, schools, where future mediums are trained by experts, who call themselves parapsychologists. The spiritual forces are developed and the proper behavior of the spirit role is learned. Trance is induced by hyperventilation, fasting, smoking cigars and sometimes by dancing. The mediums claim that they can be possessed by a number of different familiar spirits. The possession trance is a state of dissociation, which can be explained by autohypnosis, hypnosis, drugs, sensory deprivation and physiological stress. It seems to me that it is something like a conditioned reflex that can be learned. The mediums claim that they do not remember anything they do when in trance, as the spirits control their bodies, thus they are not responsible for any act committed during possession. Some mediums might really be in trance during a session, but certainly a number of them put on a show to impress the faithful. The majority of mediums are women, usually of middle age. Life offered them only little opportunity to gain self-esteem through personal achievements, some might have been prostitutes, who were used to stand in the center of attention, but now lost attraction for men, some of these women are in great need to escape reality. I would say that the majority of the mediums sincerely believe that they can help the people to solve their problems with the aid of spirits.

Rites are performed in private homes or in small temples. Anybody in need of spiritual help is admitted, provided that he participates in good faith. Working sessions take place twice or three times a week, but in the meantime the cult leader may also offer private consultations, usually for a small fee. Few cult leaders live on what they receive from the adherents and have outside jobs as well.

From time to time the *bancos* organize pilgrimages to the mountain sanctuary in Sorte to perform special magic work or pay for favors received from the spirits. The water of the Yaracuy river, that originates in the mountain, is considered to be sacred and a bath may provoke a miracle. During Holy Week or a holiday up to 40.000 pilgrims may gather in the forests and foothills of the Serranía de Sorte. They arrive on foot, by private car and by



bus. The sessions in the urban cult centers usually start with a Catholic prayer to the Virgen de Coromoto, the protectress of Venezuela. Then the leader, surrounded by the mediums, smokes a cigar in front of the altar, that is decorated in the usual way with litographs, candles and flowers. After cleansing the mediums with the aid of cigar smoke and rum, they fall in trance, one by one, announcing the name of the spirit that has arrived. The women usually wear large crosses on colored ribbons around their necks and go barefoot. The adepts now line up in order to consult the spirits. The medium listens to the client and then dictates prescriptions to her secretary or she may start a treatment right away: blowing tobacco smoke over the afflicted part of the body, pouring rum over the client's head, uttering spells or massaging. Sometimes several mediums are possessed at the same time. While in trance they drink a lot of rum and smoke cigars. When they are possessed by the African spirits, they may dance in hot ashes or glass shreds, without getting hurt. The spirits are asked by the faithful to solve their problems and cure their illnesses.

Occasionally a merry spirit arrives and entertains the audience with jokes. The sessions usually last for several hours and take place mostly during the night. The cult leader rarely goes in trance. At the end of the session he has to wake the mediums, by pouring water over their heads, by blowing into their ears or by slapping their faces.

The rites carried out in the sanctuary of Sorte are similar, but emphasis is placed on treatment of misfortune and illness. Flagellations and massages are common. The sick are submerged into the river and washed with "magic soap". In recent years *velaciones* became very popular. They serve to enhance the general well-being of the client or cleanse him from all evil. Magic operations may be also performed.

The cult copes with all basic needs of the people. They derive strength from the rites and may actually become cured, as the illnesses are often psychosomatic in nature. The cult leaders are good psychologists. Their practices are not new, but sometimes more sophisticated than those of simple folk-healers. The cult has absorbed the practices of Indian shamans, Spanish magicians and African curers and adapted them to the needs of the new urban population.

In the centers people come together, who would have no other way to socialize. Some might not even have relatives in the city

and feel lonely and deprived. In the centers they meet people, who are afflicted by the same diseases, who have the same problems and the same basic needs. It is easier to solve the problems together. Often possession trance is therapeutic for the mediums themselves. The conversation with the spirits satisfies those, who are longing: for moral, spiritual and social assistance. People come to the centers when they are frustrated and disillusioned. As the cult gives a positive answer to many problems, it has gained a wide popularity and can be considered to be a positive force in the country, that has to be taken into account, in spite of abuses and increased commercialization.

## Conclusions

From the brief descriptions we can see that *curanderismo* is still important in Venezuela. The reasons for its success are several: in the first place, many illnesses treated by the *curanderos* and herbalists would disappear anyhow sooner or later without therapy. In the second place, other illnesses are cured because the healers use herbal remedies, that have positive effects. The main reason, however, why magic treatments work, is, because people have absolute faith in their healers and are convinced that they will be cured. The patients' favorable expectations are reinforced by the setting of the curing rites, the psychological techniques used by the healers and by the support of the whole community. The suggestibility may be further increased by music, monotonous singing or the presence of a large crowd.

The healer corresponds to the social role which he is expected to perform. Each culture creates a characteristic type of conflict, that is handled by the individual in a healthy or unhealthy way, depending on its environments, constitution ecc. These cultural conflicts appear as culture-bound illnesses. The leader knows from experience, how to deal with these specific illnesses. He may arouse the emotions of the patient as a therapeutic means. He also manipulates fears and guilt feelings of the patient.

Little difference is made between emotional and physical illnesses, as they are considered to be caused by envy, witchcraft and the intercession of spirits, in psychological terms: by guilt feelings, hostility, jealousy, emotional problems and fear. The *curandero* uses techniques that reintegrate the patient into his group,



makes him susceptible to suggestions and increases his faith in himself. Confidence is aroused by culturally meaningful symbols.

Magic, religion and medicine form a unity. The peasants and lower-class inhabitants of the urban slums are concerned with this world here and now and do not worry about salvation in an after-life. They seek means to cope with the problems immediately in a proper way, through the intercession of supernatural beings. Saints are not worshipped, but they are asked to help and so are the spirits of the Cult of Maria Lionza. Their services have to be paid. Supernaturalism is important, to control nature and to overcome adversities. One searches for miracles from benefactors, such as in real life.

The supernatural concept with regard to the causes of diseases is still widespread in Venezuela today, in spite of great progress in modern medicine. The therapy of the *curanderos* is geared to the reconciliation of disturbed social relationships, in order to rid the patients from pathological symptoms. Ethnomedical studies are important for modern doctors, who work in rural areas, in order to understand the attitudes and practices of the peasants, and further research should be made available to them.

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## Summary

Venezuelan folk healing practices are rooted in African, Amerindian and Spanish traditions, that gradually became syncretized over the centuries. Supernatural etiologies are still present, in spite of the availability of modern medical care at practically no cost. Minor and acute diseases are treated matter-of-fact at home or in modern hospitals. Herbalists also treat their patients in a similar way. They have a wide knowledge of medical plants. Most folk-curers, however, combine magico-religious treatments with herbal cures and are successful, because their patients, afflicted with chronic or badly defined psychosomatic diseases, have faith in their supernatural powers to deal with evil forces, that may be the cause of these illnesses. Misfortunes are dealt with in a similar fashion.

The paper describes the practices of different types of curers and deals at length with the utilitarian cult of Maria Lionza, that over the past few decades has absorbed most of the ancient folk practices, as well as many rituals from other sources and adapted them to the needs of a growing urban population.

## Sommario

Le pratiche della medicina tradizionale venezuelana trovano la loro origine nelle tradizioni africana, amerindiana e spagnola, che nel corso dei secoli hanno subito un processo sincretico. Etiologie sovrannaturali sono ancora presenti, nonostante la possibilità di ricorrere gratuitamente alle cure mediche moderne. Sia le malattie minori sia quelle acute vengono di fatto curate in casa o nei moderni ospedali. Anche gli erboristi,



la cui conoscenza delle piante medicinali è assai vasta, curano i pazienti allo stesso modo. La maggior parte dei guaritori però unisce pratiche medico-religiose alle cure mediante erbe ed ottiene successo poiché i pazienti, afflitti da malattie croniche o cosiddette psicosomatiche, credono che i poteri sovrannaturali di cui i guaritori sono in possesso consentano a questi di porsi in contatto con le forze maligne che potrebbero essere la causa della malattia. Le sventure vengono trattate nello stesso modo.

L'articolo descrive le pratiche di differenti tipi di guaritori e si occupa infine del culto utilitaristico di Maria Lionza, che negli ultimi decenni ha assorbito la maggior parte delle antiche pratiche tradizionali nonché rituali di varia provenienza, adattandole alle necessità della crescente popolazione urbana.