

Cultural Psychiatry and Medical Anthropology

An Introduction and Reader

Edited by

ROLAND LITTLEWOOD

&

SIMON DEIN



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CHAPTER TEN

The Effectiveness of Symbols (1949)

Claude Lévi-Strauss

In this paper Lévi-Strauss (1908–), the founder of anthropological structuralism, offers a model of shamanic healing which owes much to Mauss. As a number of commentators have argued, the essential mechanism – ‘as if [comme ci] to abolish in the mind’ – is rather mysterious. What actually is the link between the physiological and social bodies? Is it really as ‘tight’ as argued here and did the woman actually understand the song (Laderman 1987) or can fairly non-specific factors such as relaxation or avoidance of fear play a part? Dow (1986) has developed Lévi-Strauss’ idea into a more generalised notion of healing in which a pre-existing social ‘mythic model’ already contains possible modes of distress and their symbolic resolution.

The first important South American magico-religious text to be known, published by Wassén and Holmer,¹ throws new light on certain aspects of shamanistic curing and raises problems of theoretical interpretation by no means exhaustively treated in the editors’ excellent commentary. We will re-examine this text for its more general implications, rather than from the linguistic or Americanist perspective primarily employed by the authors.

The text is a long incantation, covering eighteen pages in the native version, divided into 535 sections. It was obtained by the Cuna Indian Guillermo Haya from an elderly informant of his tribe. The Cuna, who live within the Panama Republic, received special attention from the late Erland Nordenskiöld, who even succeeded in training collaborators among the natives. After Nordenskiöld’s death, Haya forwarded the text to Nordenskiöld’s successor, Dr Wassén. The text was taken down in the original language and accompanied by a Spanish translation, which Holmer revised with great care.

The purpose of the song is to facilitate difficult childbirth. Its use is somewhat exceptional, since native women of Central and South America have easier deliveries than women of Western societies. The intervention of the shaman is thus rare and occurs in case of failure, at the request of the midwife. The song begins with a picture of the midwife’s confusion and describes her visit to the shaman, the latter’s departure for the hut of the woman in labor, his arrival, and his preparations – consisting of fumiga-

tions of burnt cocoa-nibs, invocations, and the making of sacred figures, or *nuchu*. These images, carved from prescribed kinds of wood which lend them their effectiveness, represent tutelary spirits whom the shaman makes his assistants and whom he leads to the abode of Muu, the power responsible for the formation of the fetus. A difficult childbirth results when Muu has exceeded her functions and captured the *purba*, or 'soul', of the mother-to-be. Thus the song expresses a quest: the quest for the lost *purba*, which will be restored after many vicissitudes, such as the overcoming of obstacles, a victory over wild beasts, and, finally, a great contest waged by the shaman and his tutelary spirits against Muu and her daughters, with the help of magical hats whose weight the latter are not able to bear. Muu, once she has been defeated, allows the *purba* of the ailing woman to be discovered and freed. The delivery takes place, and the song ends with a statement of the precautions taken so that Muu will not escape and pursue her visitors. The fight is not waged against Muu herself, who is indispensable to procreation, but only against her abuses of power. Once these have been corrected, relations become friendly, and Muu's parting words to the shaman almost correspond to an invitation: 'Friend *nele*, when do you think to visit me again?' (413)²

Thus far we have rendered the term *nele* as shaman, which might seem incorrect, since the cure does not appear to require the officiant to experience ecstasy or a transition to another psychic state. Yet the smoke of the cocoa beans aims primarily at 'strengthening his garments' and 'strengthening' the *nele* himself, 'making him brave in front of Muu' (65-6). And above all, the Cuna classification, which distinguishes between several types of medicine men, shows that the power of the *nele* has supernatural sources. The native medicine men are divided into *nele*, *inatuledi* and *absogedi*. The functions of the *inatuledi* and *absogedi* are based on knowledge of songs and cures, acquired through study and validated by examinations, while the talent of the *nele*, considered innate, consists of supernatural sight, which instantly discovers the cause of the illness – that is, the whereabouts of the vital forces, whether particular or generalised, that have been carried off by evil spirits. For the *nele* can recruit these spirits, making them his protectors or assistants.³ There is no doubt, therefore, that he is actually a shaman, even if his intervention in childbirth does not present all the traits which ordinarily accompany this function. And the *nuchu*, protective spirits who at the shaman's bidding become embodied in the figurines he has carved, receive from him – along with invisibility and clairvoyance – *niga*. *Niga* is 'vitality' and 'resistance',⁴ which makes these spirits *nelegan* (plural of *nele*) 'in the service of men' or in the 'likeness of human beings' (235-7), although endowed with exceptional powers.

From our brief synopsis, the song appears to be rather commonplace.

The sick woman suffers because she has lost her spiritual double or, more correctly, one of the specific doubles which together constitute her vital strength. (We shall return to this point.) The shaman, assisted by his tutelary spirits, undertakes a journey to the supernatural world in order to snatch the double from the malevolent spirit who has captured it; by restoring it to its owner, he achieves the cure. The exceptional interest of this text does not lie in this formal framework, but, rather, in the discovery – stemming no doubt from a reading of the text, but for which Holmer and Wassén deserve, nonetheless, full credit – that *Mu-Igala*, that is, 'Muu's way', and the abode of Muu are not, to the native mind, simply a mythical itinerary and dwelling-place. They represent, literally, the vagina and uterus of the pregnant woman, which are explored by the shaman and *nuchu* and in whose depths they wage their victorious combat.

This interpretation is based first of all on an analysis of the concept of *purba*. The *purba* is a different spiritual principle from the *niga*, which we defined above. Unlike the *purba* the *niga* cannot be stolen from its possessor, and only human beings and animals own one. A plant or a stone has a *purba* but not a *niga*. The same is true of a corpse; and in a child, the *niga* only develops with age. It seems, therefore, that one could, without too much inaccuracy, interpret *niga* as 'vital strength', and *purba* as 'double' or 'soul', with the understanding that these words do not imply a distinction between animate and inanimate (since everything is animate for the Cuna) but correspond rather to the Platonic notion of 'idea' or 'archetype' of which every being or object is the material expression.

The sick woman of the song has lost more than her *purba*: the native text attributes fever to her – 'the hot garments of the disease' (1 and *passim*) – and the loss or impairment of her sight – 'staring . . . sleep on Muu Puklip's path' (97). Above all, as she declares to the shaman who questions her, 'It is Muu Puklip who has come to me. She wants to take my *niga purbalele* for good' (98). Holmer proposes translating *niga* as physical strength and *purba* (*lele*) as soul or essence, whence 'the soul of her life'.⁵ It would perhaps be bold to suggest that the *niga*, an attribute of the living being, results from the existence of not one but several *purba*, which are functionally interrelated. Yet each part of the body has its own *purba*, and the *niga* seems to constitute, on the spiritual level, the equivalent of the concept of organism. Just as life results from the cooperation of the organs, so 'vital strength' would be none other than the harmonious concurrence of all the *purba*, each of which governs the functions of a specific organ.

As a matter of fact, not only does the shaman retrieve the *niga purbalele*; his discovery is followed immediately by the recapture of other *purba*, those of the heart, bones, teeth, hair, nails, and feet (401–8, 435–42). The omission here of the *purba* governing the most affected organs – the

generative organs – might come as a surprise. As the editors of the text emphasise, this is because the *purba* of the uterus is not considered as a victim but as responsible for the pathological disorder. Muu and her daughters, the *muugan*, are, as Nordenskiöld pointed out, the forces that preside over the development of the fetus and that give it its *kurgin*, the natural capacities.⁶ The text does not refer to these positive attributes. In it Muu appears as an instigator of disorder, a special ‘souls’, thus destroying the cooperation which insures the integrity of the chief body’ (*cuero jefe* in Spanish, 430, 435) from which it draws its *niga*. But at the same time, Muu must stay put, for the expedition undertaken to liberate the *purba* might provoke Muu’s escape by the road which temporarily remains open; hence the precautions whose details fill the last part of the song. The shaman mobilises the Lords of the wild animals to guard the way, the road is entangled, golden and silver nets are fastened, and, for four days, the *nelegan* stand watch and beat their sticks (505–35). Muu, therefore, is not a fundamentally evil force: she is a force gone awry. In a difficult delivery the ‘soul’ of the uterus has led astray all the ‘souls’ belonging to other parts of the body. Once these souls are liberated, the soul of the uterus can and must resume its cooperation. Let us emphasise right here the clarity with which the native ideology delineates the emotional content of the physiological disturbance, as it might appear, in an implicit way, to the mind of the sick woman.

To reach Muu, the shaman and his assistants must follow a road, ‘Muu’s way’, which may be identified from the many allusions in the text. When the shaman, crouching beneath the sick woman’s hammock, has finished carving the *nuchu*, the latter rise up ‘at the extremity of the road’ (72, 83) and the shaman exhorts them in these terms:

The (sick) woman lies in the hammock in front of you.
 Her white tissue lies in her lap, her white tissues move softly.
¹The (sick) woman’s body lies weak.
 When they light up (along) Muu’s way, it runs over with exudations
 and like blood.
 Her exudations drip down below the hammock all like blood, all
 red.
 The inner white tissue extends to the bosom of the earth.
 Into the middle of the woman’s white tissue a human being descends.
 (84–90)

The translators are doubtful as to the meaning of the last two sentences, yet they refer to another native text, published by Nordenskiöld, which leaves no doubt as to the identification of the ‘white inner tissue’ with the vulva:

<i>sibugua</i>	<i>molul</i>	<i>arkaali</i>
blanca	tela	abriendo
<i>sibugua</i>	<i>molul</i>	<i>akinnali</i>
blanca	tela	extendiendo

...

<i>sibugua</i>	<i>molul</i>	<i>abalase</i>	<i>tulapurua</i>	<i>ekuanali</i>
blanca	tela	centro	feto	caer haciendo ⁷

'Muu's way', darkened and completely covered with blood owing to the difficult labor, and which the *nuchu* have to find by the white sheen of their clothes and magical hats, is thus unquestionably the vagina of the sick woman. And 'Muu's abode', the "dark whirlpool" where she dwells, corresponds to the uterus, since the native informant comments on the name of this abode, *Amukkapiryawila*, in terms of *omegan purba amurrequedi*, that is, 'woman's turbid menstruation', also called 'the dark deep whirlpool' (250-1) and 'the dark inner place' (32).⁸

The original character of this text gives it a special place among the shamanistic cures ordinarily described. These cures are of three types, which are not, however, mutually exclusive. The sick organ or member may be physically involved, through a manipulation or suction which aims at extracting the cause of the illness – usually a thorn, crystal, or feather made to appear at the opportune moment, as in tropical America, Australia, and Alaska. Curing may also revolve, as among the Araucanians, around a sham battle, waged in the hut and then outdoors, against harmful spirits. Or, as among the Navaho, the officiant may recite incantations and prescribe actions (such as placing the sick person on different parts of a painting traced on the ground with colored sands and pollens) which bear no direct relationship to the specific disturbance to be cured. In all these cases, the therapeutic method (which as we know is often effective) is difficult to interpret. When it deals directly with the unhealthy organ, it is too grossly concrete (generally, pure deceit) to be granted intrinsic value. And when it consists in the repetition of often highly abstract ritual, it is difficult for us to understand its direct bearing on the illness. It would be convenient to dismiss these difficulties by declaring that we are dealing with psychological cures. But this term will remain meaningless unless we can explain how specific psychological representations are invoked to combat equally specific physiological disturbances. The text that we have analysed offers a striking contribution to the solution of this problem. The song constitutes a purely psychological treatment, for the shaman does not touch the body of the sick woman and administers no remedy. Nevertheless it involves, directly and explicitly, the pathological condi-

tion and its locus. In our view, the song constitutes a *psychological manipulation* of the sick organ, and it is precisely from this manipulation that a cure is expected.

To begin, let us demonstrate the existence and the characteristics of this manipulation. Then we shall ask what its purpose and its effectiveness are. First, we are surprised to find that the song, whose subject is a dramatic struggle between helpful and malevolent spirits for the reconquest of a 'soul', devotes very little attention to action proper. In eighteen pages of text the contest occupies less than one page and the meeting with Muu Puklip scarcely two pages. The preliminaries, on the other hand, are highly developed and the preparations, the outfitting of the *nuchu*, the itinerary, and the sites are described with a great wealth of detail. Such is the case, at the beginning, for the midwife's visit to the shaman. The conversation between the sick woman and the midwife, followed by that between the midwife and the shaman, recurs twice, for each speaker repeats exactly the utterance of the other before answering him:

The (sick) woman speaks to the midwife: 'I am indeed being dressed in the hot garment of the disease.'

The midwife answers her (sick woman): 'You are indeed being dressed in the hot garment of the disease, I also hear you say.'
(1-2)

It might be argued⁹ that this stylistic device is common among the Cuna and stems from the necessity, among peoples bound to oral tradition, of memorising exactly what has been said. And yet here this device is applied not only to speech but to actions:

The midwife turns about in the hut.

The midwife looks for some beads.

The midwife turns about (in order to leave).

The midwife puts one foot in front of the other.

The midwife touches the ground with her foot.

The midwife puts her other foot forward.

The midwife pushes open the door of the hut; the door of her hut creaks.

The midwife goes out. . . (7-14)

This minute description of her departure is repeated when she arrives at the shaman's, when she returns to the sick woman, when the shaman departs, and when he arrives. Sometimes the same description is repeated

twice in the same terms (37-9 and 45-7 reproduce 33-5). The cure thus begins with a historical account of the events that preceded it, and some elements which might appear secondary ('arrivals' and 'departures') are treated with luxuriant detail as if they were, so to speak, filmed in slow-motion. We encounter this technique throughout the text, but it is nowhere applied as systematically as at the beginning and to describe incidents of retrospective interest.

Everything occurs as though the shaman were trying to induce the sick woman - whose contact with reality is no doubt impaired and whose sensitivity is exacerbated - to relive the initial situation through pain, in a very precise and intense way, and to become psychologically aware of its smallest details. Actually this situation sets off a series of events of which the body and internal organs of the sick woman will be the assumed setting. A transition will thus be made from the most prosaic reality to myth, from the physical universe to the physiological universe, from the external world to the internal body. And the myth being enacted in the internal body must retain throughout the vividness and the character of lived experience prescribed by the shaman in the light of the pathological state and through an appropriate obsessions technique.

The next ten pages offer, in breathless rhythm, a more and more rapid oscillation between mythical and physiological themes, as if to abolish in the mind of the sick woman the distinction which separates them, and to make it impossible to differentiate their respective attributes. First there is a description of the woman lying in her hammock or in the native obstetrical position, facing eastward, knees parted, groaning, losing her blood, the vulva dilated and moving (84-92, 123-4, 134-5, 152, 158, 173, 177-8, 202-4). Then the shaman calls by name the spirits of intoxicating drinks; of the winds, waters, and woods, and even - precious testimony to the plasticity of the myth - the spirit of the 'silver steamer of the white man' (187). The themes converge: like the sick woman, the *nuchu* are dripping with blood; and the pains of the woman assume cosmic proportions: 'The inner white tissue extends to the bosom of the earth. . . Into the bosom of the earth her exudations gather into a pool, all like blood, all red' (84-92). At the same time, each spirit, when it appears, is carefully described, and the magical equipment which he receives from the shaman is enumerated at great length: black beads, flame-colored beads, dark beads, ring-shaped beads, tiger bones, rounded bones, throat bones, and many other bones, silver necklaces, armadillo bones, bones of the bird *kerkettoli* woodpecker bones, bones for flutes, silver beads (104-18). Then general recruitment begins anew, as if these guarantees were still inadequate and all forces, known or unknown to the sick woman, were to be rallied for the invasion (119-229).

Yet we are released to such a small extent into the realm of myth that

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the penetration of the vagina, mythical though it be, is proposed to the sick woman in concrete and familiar terms. On two occasions, moreover, 'muu' designates the uterus directly, and not the spiritual principle which governs its activity ('the sick woman's muu', 204, 453).¹⁰ Here the *nelegan*, in order to enter Muu's way, take on the appearance and the motions of the erect penis:

The *nelegan*'s hats are shining white, the *nelegan*'s hats are whitish.
The *nelegan* are becoming flat and low (?), all like bits, all straight.
The *nelegan* are beginning to become terrifying (?), the *nelegan* are becoming all terrifying (?), for the sake of the (sick) woman's *iga pur-balele*. (230-2)

And further, below:

The *nelegan* go balancing up on top of the hammock, they go moving upward like *nusupane*. (239)¹¹

The technique of the narrative thus aims at recreating a real experience in which the myth merely shifts the protagonists. The *nelegan* enter the natural orifice, and we can imagine that after all this psychological preparation the sick woman actually feels them entering. Not only does she feel them, but they 'light up' the route they are preparing to follow – for their own sake, no doubt, and to find the way, but also to make the center of inexpressible and painful sensations 'clear' for her and accessible to her consciousness.

'The *nelegan* put good sight into the sick woman, the *nelegan* light good eyes in the (sick) woman . . .' (238).

And this 'illuminating sight', to paraphrase an expression in the text, enables them to relate in detail a complicated itinerary that is a true mythical anatomy, corresponding less to the real structure of the genital organs than to a kind of emotional geography, identifying each point of resistance and each thrust:

The *nelegan* set out, the *nelegan* march in a single file along Muu's road, as far as the Low Mountain,
The *nelegan* set out, etc., as far as the Short Mountain,
The *nelegan*, etc., as far as the Long Mountain,
The *nelegan*, etc., (to) Yala Pokuna Yala, (not translated)
The *nelegan*, etc., (to) Yala Akkwatallekun Yala, (not translated)
The *nelegan*, etc., (to) Yala Ilamalisuikun Yala, (not translated)
The *nelegan*, etc., into the center of the Flat Mountain
The *nelegan* set out, the *nelegan* march in a single file along Muu's road. (241-8)

The picture of the uterine world, peopled with fantastic monsters and dangerous animals, is amenable to the same interpretation – which is, moreover, confirmed by the native informant: 'It is the animals', he said, 'who decrease the diseases of the laboring woman'; that is, the pains themselves are personified. And here again, the song seems to have as its principal aim the description of these pains to the sick woman and the naming of them, that is, their presentation to her in a form accessible to conscious or unconscious thought: Uncle Alligator, who moves about with his bulging eyes, his striped and variegated body, crouching and wriggling his tail; Uncle Alligator Tiikwalele, with glistening body, who moves his glistening flippers, whose flippers conquer the place, push everything aside, drag everything; Nele Ki(k)kirpanalele, the Octopus, whose stick tentacles are alternately opening and closing, and many others besides: He-who-has-a-hat-that-is-soft, He-who-has-a-red-colored-hat, He-who-has-a-variegated-hat, etc., and the guardian animals: the black tiger, the red animal, the two-colored animal, the dust-colored animal; each is tied with an iron chain, the tongue hanging down, the tongue hanging out, saliva dripping, saliva foaming, with flourishing tail, the claws coming out and tearing things 'all like blood, all red' (253–98).

To enter into this hell *à la* Hieronymus Bosch and reach its owner, the *nelegan* have to overcome other obstacles, this time material: fibers, loose threads, fastened threads, successive curtains – rainbow-colored, golden, silvery, red, black, maroon, blue, white, wormlike, 'like neckties', yellow, twisted, thick (305–30); and for this purpose, the shaman calls reinforcements: Lords of the wood-boring insects, who are to 'cut, gather, wind and reduce' the threads, which Holmer and Wassén identify as the internal tissues of the uterus.¹²

The *nelegan*'s invasion follows the downfall of these last obstacles, and here the tournament of the hats takes place. A discussion of this would lead us too far from the immediate purpose of this study. After the liberation of the *niga purbalele* comes the descent, which is just as dangerous as the ascent, since the purpose of the whole undertaking is to induce childbirth – precisely, a difficult descent. The shaman counts his helpers and encourages his troops; still he must summon other reinforcements: the 'clearers of the way', Lords-of-the-burrowing animals, such as the armadillo. The *niga* is exhorted to make its way toward the orifice:

Your body lies in front of you in the hammock,
 (Her) white tissue lies in her lap,
 The white inner tissue moves softly,
 Your (sick) woman lies in your midst . .
 . . thinking she cannot see.

Into her body they put again (her) *niga purbalele*. . . (430–5)