

THE MEANING OF EXPERIENCE:
THEORETICAL DILEMMAS IN DEPICTING A PERUVIAN
CURANDERA'S PHILOSOPHY OF HEALING¹

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[E]xperience has to be lived by each one of us. I'm not going to live the same experience that another lived! Each one has to live his own experience, each one has to live his own life as it should be. (Isabel C., Dec. 1988, Chiclayo)

In 1995, Professor Armin Geertz presented a paper at this Congress in which he very succinctly outlined some of the post-modern challenges to the study of religion which face contemporary scholars.² In that paper, he re-emphasized his call for an “ethnohermeneutic” approach to the study of religion. As I understand it, this approach seeks to overcome the oppositional poles of positivist and hermeneutic inquiry by *locating* and *making explicit* the perspectives of both researcher and subject of inquiry in the production and the presentation of knowledge.

In this paper, I want to address how this “ethnohermeneutic” approach to inquiry fits into my own research agenda, as an ethnographer and anthropologist. I also want to outline some of the dilemmas I have encountered in attempting to apply the method which Professor Geertz advocates. If my presentation emphasizes concerns and questions more than answers and insights, it is because this is very much a work in progress.

The context of my research is the following. For more than fifty years, an ancient tradition of shamanic healing in northern Peru has been studied by Peruvian and international investigators alike. In this

¹ The author wishes to thank the editors for including this paper in the conference proceedings. Ideas from and/or portions of this paper have been incorporated into an article which recently appeared in the *Journal of Ritual Studies* (Glass-Coffin 1996) and into the introduction to the author's recently published book (Glass-Coffin 1998). Travel to Mexico City for participation in the XVIIth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions was made possible by a grant from the Department of Sociological, Social Work and Anthropology, the College of HASS, and the Office of the Vice President for Research, all at Utah State University.

² Ed. Note: See pp. 49-73 in this collection.

region, male healers called *curanderos* conduct all-night curing ceremonies called *mesas* to diagnose and cure their patients of sorcery and sorcery-related illness. Like shamans in other parts of the world, they “see” beyond the boundaries of the physical world and interact with tutelary spirits and powers in order to facilitate both diagnosis and cure. To this end, they utilize a ritual-altar (also called *mesa*) and ingest the psycho-active *San Pedro* cactus (*Trichocereus pachanoi*).

In northern Peru, sorcery has many manifestations—emotional, economic, psycho-social, and somatic—but the power to harm derives from unseen forces rather than empirical causes. These forces are manipulated and directed against the victim by sorcerers. Also, in this class of illness, the sufferer is a victim of intended harm. The sorcerer uses his power to effect the sorcery, but his services are contracted for this purpose. Furthermore, the perpetrator is most often someone who shares a close personal relationship with the victim—a family-member, friend, business-partner, or neighbor. When confronted with “why” they seek to harm, “envy” is the most common motivation given. Finally, the role of the shaman is ambiguous. In his role as a sorcerer or *malero*, he may be called upon to effect the harm. In his role as a healer or *curandero*, he called upon to effect the cure.

The data from these studies are rich, but only discuss the work of *male* shamans.³ For this reason, from April 1988 to September 1989, I conducted long-term ethnographic research in northern Peru among eight female shamans to assess the impact of gender on illness cosmology and therapeutic strategy in the region. One of these women—Isabel—is the focus of this paper.

Until my work with Isabel, I understood accusations of sorcery in terms of tensions which link “individual distress to a social world where mistrust and suspicion are an integral part of relationships, even between close friends and relatives” (Joralemon and Sharon 1993: 253-254). In the economic and social context of contemporary Peru—especially urban and peri-urban Peru where accusations of sorcery are most prevalent—conflicting agendas of self and society conspire to create this problem. Wage laborers and merchants com-

³ For a selection of previous ethnographic studies on Northern Peruvian shamanism, see Giese 1989; Gillin 1947; Gisiken 1977; Joralemon 1983, 1984, 1985; Joralemon and Sharon 1993; Polia 1985, 1988a, 1988b, 1990; Sharon 1972, 1976, 1978, 1979; Sharon and Donnan 1977; Skillman 1990.

pete fiercely in a market where both jobs and buyers are limited. In contrast to subsistence-based economies of the highlands and of former times, *individuals* are pitted against one another to make money in ways which directly clash with social obligations to family and community (Taussig 1980; Glass-Coffin 1992b). The result is a world view at once atomistic, adversarial, and oppositional.

In a recent publication, Joralemon and Sharon summarized the *mesa* symbolism of the male healers working in this region of Peru. They conclude that the oppositional and adversarial world-view which underlies accusations of sorcery is concretized in the healer's *mesa* as oppositional forces influenced by Christian concepts of good and evil. A *malero* manipulates the spirit powers represented and embodied in the objects on the left side of the *mesa* to capture the victim's shadow-soul and effect the sorcery. A *curandero* recovers the victim's shadow-soul and thus restores health by mediating (or at least dominating) the malevolent *and* benevolent spiritual powers represented on the *mesa*. The actions which the shaman directs towards these the object symbols of the *mesa* transact suffering because these forces correspond to and condense forces at work in the patient's life and in the universe (see Polía 1988b: 27-28). As Sharon summarizes it,

Curandero/Ganadero dualism⁴ frequently translates into Christian versus pagan, that is, good versus evil, or to put it in society terms, order and stability versus chaos and disruption. In effect, a ritual movement from the right, with its predominantly Christian icons and healing herbs, to the dangerous left, with its pagan, antisocial overtones, can be perceived as a journey beyond the status quo, or natural order, into the supernatural. The elaborate battles with spirits and ritual "cleansings" aimed at "throwing away" or "turning around" sorcery signal the incredible power being marshalled in this murky realm inhabited by ill-defined forces and beings associated with ... ambiguity. (Joralemon and Sharon 1993: 166).

The ritual process is patterned—the healer invokes the powers of the right, then of the left, then the right sides of his *mesa* in a three-part ritual format that "replicates a shamanic journey in the classical sense" (Joralemon and Sharon 1993: 166). In this journey, the shaman travels from the domain of the defined, the named, and the

⁴ These terms refer to the names given by shamans to the right and left sides of the *mesa* respectively.

ordered world of social-mores to the chaotic, unconceptualized, ambiguous "murky realm" of that which is outside the cosmos of cultural activity and back again. His power to cure comes because he has attained harmony in his own life by mastering both poles of this dialectic. In the absolutist dichotomies of Christendom, his power to cure comes because he has attained harmony in his own life by mastering both good and evil. As a liminal figure, he has traveled to the edges of social order and returned. His journey transcends this primordial struggle between the knowable and the inchoate and transforms it into passage for his patients. According to Sharon, the patient's participation "is not much different from his participation in orthodox religion: It is activated when expedient and experienced vicariously" (1978: 146-147).³

This model is somewhat different from what I saw during the months I participated in Isabel's rituals. The right-left-right pattern was not apparent on her *mesa*. Nor was her shamanic journey transformative in the sense that patients could benefit vicariously from her actions. This is not to say that the dialectic of order/chaos has no place in Isabel's ritual. On the contrary, she describes sorcery as the condition of being "empty", "self-less" or of "living without making a difference"—all of which describe the inchoate "other" world that exists beyond the realm of the mundane. But, unlike the male healers summarized above, the only pattern I saw in Isabel's rituals was her insistence that patients actively participate in their own cures and make their own decisions, guided by their own experience. When she directed her patients to walk or run around the ritual arena, they (we) would sometimes ask her for direction—should we run toward the left or towards the right. Chiding, she would answer, "It's up to you which way to go. It's your life, your own decision!" Like the male healers discussed above, Isabel's exhortations were symbolically charged. When she admonished the yawning patient for being "tired of life," or warned him from retracing his footsteps because "that was yesterday and yesterday is past," she clearly communicated the correspondence between the ritual performance of the *mesa* and the social and physical worlds represented there. But for Isabel, healing required the patient's active engagement—the journey from inchoate to well-defined was their (our) journey.

³ See also Joralemon 1983, 1984, 1985; Joralemon and Sharon 1993; Polia 1988b.

The same philosophy held true for her opinion of my ethnographic methods. "I want you to learn something very well," Isabel told me on the first night that I participated in her all-night ritual. "Whenever you help another person here [at] my *mesa*, whenever you contribute, you are living. You are experiencing and that is the way you enter into the movie [of life]...to live is to experience." Later, when I began taping her *mesa* ceremonies, she would often challenge me, saying, "You should save your tapes. They are expensive and you will learn very little from them. What you write won't come from what you record but from what you live—from what you experience. Reality isn't observed or recorded, it is lived!"

Experience. This became the metaphor which organized my understanding of female healing in Peru. But, because experience is one of the most problematic concepts in contemporary scholarship, this has made writing about Isabel's healing philosophy most difficult. First of all, as a way of knowing, experience is grounded in reflexive engagement with the world. It eludes abstraction and analysis because these distance the experiencing subject from the context and process through which experience occurs.⁶ Secondly, the link between experience and its perception is never that of a one-to-one correspondence. Rather, one's perception of the world "out there" changes according to the way the senses encode received data and according to emotional and interpretive landscapes which influence how "reality" is perceived. Thirdly, experience is personal, and to a large degree not sharable. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz reminds us, "whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else's inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness. It's all a matter of scratching surfaces" (1986: 373). Finally, there is the problem of what we mean by the term experience itself. Epistemologically, experience stands somewhere between an external reality (whatever we take that to be) and its representation through expression. Experience is, in this sense, an essential component of human consciousness in which—although ineffable—we all participate equally. But for Isabel, experience is not something which happens to us all in equal measure. According to her conceptualization of the term, experience means

⁶ For recent discussion of etymological origins and common-sense meanings of the term, see Desjarlais 1993; Turner 1985: 226; Steedly 1993: 26.

more than just passing through or undergoing a particular event (Ayto 1990). For Isabel, experience cannot be passively received. It must be actively engaged. When we engage it, we awaken and define what she calls the *yo personal*—the personal I—as well as something she calls *decisión propia* (self-decision or autonomy of will). It overwhelms and transforms us—defining both subjectivity and agency.⁷

According to Isabel, there are many who pass through life without conscious awareness of either. In cases like this, as Isabel explains, “one lives, goes to sleep, wakes up, eats, [and] drinks but one doesn’t understand life.... One loses oneself in drinking, in drugs, [and] in vices to sustain oneself in that emptiness” (Glass-Coffin 1992a: 328). Those who are in this condition sometimes become Isabel’s patients. According to Isabel, *daño*—the intentionally caused harm we gloss as sorcery—comes like this.

When I had asked Isabel if I might document her curing ceremonies, she answered with a qualified “yes”. Before agreeing to my request, she told me I would have to participate in one of her *mesas* so that, with the aid of the mescaline-bearing *San Pedro* cactus (ingested by all present), she could “see” my intent. During the course of that first *mesa*, Isabel decided that I was more in need of her services as a healer than most of the other patients present! During that first session, sometime after the *San Pedro* had opened her “third-eye,” she called me to her side.⁸ “What is your full name,” she asked. I told her. With slightly slurred speech and swaying a little from the psychoactive effects of the *San Pedro*, she spoke.

You are a good woman. I have looked within you and have seen the beating of your heart. But—there is a “but” here—so many years studying for your degree, just a piece of paper. And yet, you take nothing with you. You have studied a lifetime and yet you have nothing, you are worth nothing. All of us want to own our own lives ... to create something that we can call our own.... That is why you have been studying.... But you walk around empty.... For all you have studied and all that you have seen, you have actually experienced very little. You must...find

⁷ This assessment of “experience” with its emphasis on defining subjectivity and agency has been explored by many generations of philosophers, psychologists, logicians, and scientists. For a good summary of these, as well as a discussion of differences between epistemological and ontological approaches to the concept, see Desjarlais 1993. For more explicitly feminist perspectives, see Scott 1991; de Lauretis 1984; Steedly 1993: 24-43.

⁸ More detailed accounts of this event are recorded in Glass-Coffin 1992a: 309-310.

your own road, your life, your self, your *don* [gift or talent]. (Glass-Coffin 1992a: 309-310)

Isabel's assessment that I lacked "experience" resonated deep within me and squared with my own perceptions of my life. As one high-school friend used to tell me, I spent much of my adolescence "trying-on identities like hats in a hat shop." Chameleon-like, I was somewhat famous among my circle of friends for reflecting the likenesses of others. During those teen-age years, I remember "feeling like a sprig of wheat, blowing in the wind, changing and reacting according to the whims of the gusts. I felt empty, and I felt somehow at the mercy of the world around me" (Glass-Coffin 1992a: 292). I think this tendency grew out of a desperate need for approval and validation from others. Instead of a core that could withstand the criticisms of what others thought, I found it easier to refract their expectations in order to feel good about myself.

From where I sit now, I think this "other-directed" orientation was an expected component of adolescence which should have dissipated with age. But, for reasons beyond the scope of this paper, it didn't. Instead, this lack of experience became the focus of many subsequent sessions with Isabel. For her, my lack of "experience" seemed to sum-up her conceptualization of my illness.

Because of Isabel's emphasis on lived experience and engaged participation as the source of healing for sorcery related illness—as well as the even more complicating factor of my own relationship to her as an active participant in this process—I have been faced with a "double-dose" of the dilemma of how to adequately represent her philosophy of healing to other audiences. On the one hand, her definition of experience defies description and translation because it is a metaphor for a shamanic journey—which must be embraced by each sufferer to transcend illness. For Isabel, "experience" is the defining characteristic of "this world"—the world in which we live and work and in which our actions make a difference. It is also the process that rescues and resuscitates one who has been captured to that "other world" that exists beyond the "boundaries of conceptualization" (Myerhoff 1976: 102-103) where one is separated from both self and community. On the other hand, experience and its categorization or representation work at cross purposes. *All* textualization freezes the ineffable quality of lived experience. It "fixes" life on paper, both essentializing and reifying the emergent. As Clifford summarizes it, "words and deeds are transient (and authentic), writ-

ing endures (as supplementarity and artifice). The text embalms the event as it extends its 'meaning'" (Clifford 1986b: 115-116). In addition, "experience," in Isabel's philosophy of healing, emphasizes the emergent. At once ineffable and supremely located, it cannot be squeezed from three dimensions into two.

To address this dual-pronged dilemma, I opted in my dissertation for an experiential account of my own relationship with Isabel, since this was the only "experience" I felt I could really know or responsibly portray. But in that document, I opted for a three part, completely non-integrated narrative. Stylistically, this was divided into "scholarly," "descriptive," and "experiential" registers. These were constructed linearly, in a progression that allowed me to establish scholarly credibility and ethnographic authority before attempting an account of my own relationship to Isabel's healing philosophy. My dissertation committee tolerated this somewhat confessional style because it portrayed the reasons experience emerged as a root-metaphor in my research. It explicitly addressed the overlap between Isabel's healing philosophy and my own preoccupations and interpretations. But there are at least three problems when ethnographies take such a confessional tone.

First, the reader who hoped to gain a feel for "what it is like" to be in Borneo or Bangladesh by reading an ethnographic account might well ask "whose life is being portrayed here, anyway?" (Geertz 1988: 129-149). Secondly, when unframed "experiential" accounts are privileged, the resulting narrative may undermine the problematic politics of its production. Rather than highlight the conscious, intersubjective negotiation of experience, first-person accounts may, in fact, reify and essentialize the writing and the written-about.⁹ Finally, when experience is invoked without distinguishing between its epistemology and its ontology "one [also] risks losing an opportunity to question either the social production...or the practices that define its use" (Desjarlais 1994: 887).¹⁰

As I contemplate revisions of the dissertation, I must address these reservations, while adopting a more integrative narrative style. I am

⁹ See Clifford 1988; Scott 1991. See also Haraway 1991a; Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, & Cohen 1989; Steedly 1993: 242-243 for discussions about why a focus on "experience" is particularly problematic for feminist scholars.

¹⁰ I am indebted to Robert Desjarlais (1994) for his cogent framing of this argument. See also Scott 1991; Steedly 1993: 24-31; Williams 1979: 164-170 for similar critiques.

certainly not the first of my profession to face this challenge. In recent years, some of my colleagues have used sensorial metaphors—motion, vision, sound, and taste—to describe the “embodied” aspect of experience.¹¹ Others have used storied narrative, in which the ethnographer often figures as a main character.¹² These “impressionist tales” as Van Maanem recently characterized them, “comprise a series of remembered events in the field in which the author was usually a participant....[They] present the doing of fieldwork rather than simply the doer and the done” (Van Maanem 1988: 102). Still other ethnographies—while not explicitly “storied” or “embodied”—highlight the interstitial nature of experience in other ways. Interpretive, dialogical, and polyphonic texts problematize space, time, and voice to give the reader a feel for the multilayered complexity of lived experience (Clifford 1986a, 1988; Marcus, 1994; Tyler, 1986).

Success or failure at evoking experience depends upon many things. As Clifford Geertz cautions, “we cannot live other people’s lives, and it is a piece of bad faith to try” (Geertz 1986: 373). But, we can forge bridges between our own and others experiences if, as Michael Jackson has recently suggested, we assent that selves and others are mutually constructed. To quote at length from Jackson, this view of experience,

stresses the ethnographer’s *interactions* with those he or she lives with and studies, while urging us to clarify the ways in which our knowledge is grounded in our practical, personal, and participatory experience in the field as much as our detached observations. Unlike traditional empiricism, which draws a definite boundary between observer and observed, between method and object, radical empiricism denies the validity of such cuts and makes the *interplay* between these domains the focus of its interest. (1989: 3)

Much like what I understand the “ethnohermeneutics” of Professor Armin Geertz to be, the approach I seek would explicitly position both the author and the author’s viewpoint while “grounding” interpretation in “natural,” observable phenomena.

This is, of course, much easier said than done, and leads me back to the “work-in-progress,” warning at the beginning of this paper. One way to overcome some of the post-modern problems of portray-

¹¹ See Desjarlais 1992; Feld 1982; Haraway 1991b; Howes, 1991; Stoller, 1989.

¹² See, for example, Jackson 1989; McCarthy Brown 1991; Steedly 1993; Stoller 1987.

ing experience is, according to Shank, to “create so persuasive a presentation of past experience that it appears ‘real’ to the reader’s mind...[even while acknowledging] the virtually molecular binding of the textual to the real” (1995: 91). This suggests an emphasis on description, rather than interiority, but also requires a commitment to a narrative approach whose focus is a *rendering* of the actual, a “vitality phrased”, an imaginative construction of a common ground. Some will balk at this stance. But, to quote Clifford Geertz again, “the moral asymmetries across which ethnography works and the discursive complexity within which it works make any attempt to portray it as anything more than the representation of one sort of life in the categories of another impossible to defend. [But] that may be enough” (1988: 143-144).

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