

Folklore



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Encountering the Irrational: Some Reflections on Folk Healers

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IN 1985 I had the opportunity to make several visits to a small village in the district of Cloppenburg in Lower Saxony. This place has about 2,000 inhabitants. Low German is still ordinarily spoken, and the majority of the population are Roman Catholics. Only the ancient medieval gothic church would indicate to a stranger that this community has existed for hundreds of years, since the village was practically razed to the ground at the end of World War II. Post-war reconstruction and eager modernization during the 1970s were responsible for destroying the few buildings which the bombing had spared, thus giving the village a totally new appearance. Originally the population consisted chiefly of farming families, but now less than a third of those of working age are on the land. There are two textile factories, employing maybe a hundred workers between them. A high proportion of the villagers work in a small town a few kilometers away, where they are employed in factories or in the service industries. However, work is not always easy to find; the region has, at present, the highest percentage of unemployment in the German Federal Republic. A further problem is alcoholism, which affects a good many men, both old and young.

The work of the village farmers has seen many great changes during the last twenty years. Present-day agriculture is rationalized and mechanized; the new methods ensure higher profits on the crops, but at the same time the many-sidedness of old-style farming has been sharply curtailed, for the sake of increased productivity. Nobody now makes butter from his own milk, for instance; it is all sent to the dairies. Slaughtering pigs, and preparing pig-meat products is no longer a domestic activity. It is increasingly rare for farmers to keep rabbits or hens for home consumption. There is still, however, one thing which stands out in sharp contrast to this modern picture of farm life: the practice of old traditional folk medicine. As soon as one of the farm animals falls sick, one immediately sends for a healer who, by the help of special prayers, restores it to health.

In this German village, modern life has not been able to drive out the age-old practice of folk medicine, even though many of the old beliefs associated with it have quite disappeared. Thus, for instance, supernatural forces are not nowadays considered a valid explanation of the origins of illnesses. Yet many of the younger villagers have seen how their grandparents would place a broom across the door of the house to protect them from the Evil Eye and the illnesses it could inflict. It is only a few years ago that an old woman died in the village who, it was said, could put the Evil Eye on people.

As soon as I made enquiries from some villagers about traditional healing methods, I was told that I ought to ask the 'Treschen' family.¹ The head of this family, Herr H., a farmer aged fifty-six, is always sent for by the other farmers when they have any trouble with their livestock. Everyone knows he can heal them, with the help of certain prayers. He was described to me as being rather difficult to approach, but as I already knew Maria, one of his daughters, I asked her to ask her father if he would be willing

to talk to me on this topic. Herr H. asked his daughter whether I too 'believed' in this type of medicine; to this she said yes, so he invited me to visit him. I went, but with very little hope. I know from personal experience that it is no simple matter to get first-hand information on folk medicine, and the villagers had told me that my visit would be in vain: 'He won't give away his prayers; he never gives them to anyone,' the neighbours stated emphatically. However, my forebodings soon disappeared. Herr H. welcomed me warmly, and we were able to spend a whole evening talking in the main room of his farm.

Once when I was getting hay in for the cows, I threw the hay-rake down, like that, but somehow the points sprang back at me and got me in the hand, and blood gushed out. I just sat like this for a minute (pressing one finger on the wound), and then spoke the words.²

Selig der Tag,	Blessed the day,
Selig die Stunde,	Blessed the hour,
Selig die Wunde,	Blessed the wound,
Selig, was ich sage.	Blessed, what I say.
Ich schwöre Dir,	I adjure you,
Du sollst nich bluten,	You shall not bleed,
Nicht schwellen,	Not swell,
Nicht zerren,	Not be inflamed,
Nicht Weh tun.	Not give pain.

In the name of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost:³This must be said three times on end, and then three Hail Mary's to follow. And you must hold the wound closed all this time, and it all goes completely. I never saw any sign of it again—no more bleeding, the wound didn't swell, no inflammation. The important thing is always to do everything in God's name, in God's mercy.

The holy prayers which Herr H. knows can help both men and animals, but it is generally only for healing their livestock that the other farmers ask his services. He also told me this story:

At D's, there was a horse that was so stiff it just couldn't get up any more. They used to overfeed the horses there, and so if they were kept idle for a few days and then suddenly worked too hard and got into a sweat, they would be in such pain that they would be in agony in the stable. It would catch them all at once, and they would go all stiff. I was over at D's place ten times at least, if I was there once; even this autumn I was there a few times. So in I went, and I said:

'Our Lord Jesus Christ was bound, like this creature. He was free again, like this creature. Now be better, like this creature. In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.'

After speaking this prayer, Herr H. made the Sign of the Cross three times over the swollen parts of the animal, and immediately afterwards, so he said, the horse was able to stand up.

Here are some other prayers which Herr H. uses in the circumstances indicated.

Against the colic:

Bist du verfangen von Wasser oder Wind,
So komme dir zur Hilfe die liebe Gottesmutter mit ihrem Kind.

If you are afflicted by water or by wind,
May God's dear Mother and her Child help you.

May God bless you, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Three Our Fathers.

Against cramp and colic:

God the Father, have pity on this beast, drive out the evil wind and the cramp, out into the wide world where neither Christian man nor heathen man may be. God bless you.

God the Son, have pity on this beast, drive out the evil wind and the cramp, out into the wide world where neither Christian man nor heathen man may be. God bless you.

God the Holy Ghost, have pity on this beast, drive out the evil wind and the cramp, out into the wide world where neither Christian man nor heathen man may be. God bless you, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, amen. Three Our Fathers.

Against sprains, say three times:

St John and St Peter rode over the bridge, the horse sprained a foot. St Peter jumped down and prayed to God that vein to vein, sinew to sinew, should twine and bind together. May God bless you, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Three Our Fathers.

Against dislocations:

When Jesus and Mary were riding to Jerusalem, they came to a high, steep bridge, the foal sprained a foot. Then our dear Lord got down and blessed him from top to toe, from limb to limb, from vein to vein, so it did not smart and it did not swell, and so it slowly passed away. Then Mary and her dear Child went over the bridge. In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Three Our Fathers.

To stop bleeding:

Jesus and Mary were riding to Jerusalem and trod upon an iron bridge, the blood was turned awry (verrücket). Please bring back marrow to marrow, vein to vein, bone to bone, and blood to blood. In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Three Our Fathers.⁴

All these prayers are in standard (High) German, although Low German is the local dialect, and must be spoken so softly as to be unintelligible. One must always make the Sign of the Cross before and after saying them. When I asked whether there were particular days of the week on which the prayers might have greater or lesser power, Herr H. answered negatively: 'That I don't know, I have no experience of it. There are some who say it has something to do with the moon, but I don't much believe in that.'

As is normal in the practice of folk medicine, Herr H. does not take any money when he heals a neighbour's beast, since 'I only do it in the name of God.' If people try to insist on giving him money, he says they should put it in the collection in church. Herr H. learnt these prayers when he was about twenty from an aunt, who passed them on to him shortly before she died. He is very careful not to pass them on to anyone else in the village; the reason he gives for this attitude is that he fears others might use them mockingly or irreverently.⁵

In the instances so far described, the curative procedure consists almost wholly of reciting the relevant prayer. It is only for getting rid of warts that specific ritual action is required, and this consists of a method well known in folk medicine (albeit with many variations), which Herr H. knows and practices himself. He provides himself with a woollen thread with as many knots on it as the patient has warts, says one Our Father, and buries the thread in front of the house, 'and by the time the thread has rotted, the wart too has gone.'⁶

Herr H. told me that his aunt also knew other ways of getting rid of warts. One day, a relative of hers had died. She had a wart on her own finger at the time, and she said 'I'll give him the wart to take away with him.' She went to visit the dead man as he lay on the bier and rubbed her finger all along the body. According to Herr H., a few days later his aunt's wart had disappeared.⁷ The whole neighbourhood has complete confidence in Herr H.'s healing methods, the effectiveness of which is confirmed by daily experience. The advantages of this type of treatment over scientific medicine are obvious: 'For troubles of the circulation, a vet will draw off five or seven litres of blood so that it flows properly again. We just give a blessing; it's simpler, cheaper and healthier,' said Herr H. with full conviction. In the village, people do not puzzle themselves over what the source of his power can be; it is taken for granted that it resides primarily in the prayers themselves. When it became known that I had learnt the prayers, some of the neighbours asked me whether from now on I too would be using them for healing.

As was said above, the community only calls on Herr H.'s services when it is a matter of healing a sick animal, but in the same village there is another farmer, a little over thirty, who considers himself to have the ability to heal human beings by prayer. He is known as the *Gesundbeter* ('one who prays for healing,' from *gesund* 'to heal' and *beten* 'to pray'); many successes are attributed to him. People go to him either because they are ill themselves or on behalf of a relative, and not merely for minor illnesses but for serious diseases too, such as cancer—although in such cases one obviously does not refuse the normal treatments provided by academic medicine, and the *Gesundbeter's* role is to reinforce the effectiveness of the medical treatment, or, in hopeless cases, to reduce the patient's pain. This farmer is sought out by people from all over the region, not just by those living in the village. 'There are often seven or eight cars parked outside his door in the evening,' one woman told me in proud tones, speaking of this village healer. Formerly, he was not only a farmer but a land-surveyor, but he gave that up when the number of his patients steadily increased. People mostly visit him in the evenings; it is not unusual to see over a dozen patiently waiting their turn in the corridor which serves as his waiting-room. In his house there are many pictures of the Virgin Mary. In one corner of the corridor stands a small altar with a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, with flowers and lighted candles before it. In the evening after his day's work, he sees his patients in the kitchen; however, people do not hesitate to go and find him at any time of day, so the interview can just as easily take place in the stables or the fields. One gives him a brief description of the symptoms of the illness, and he replies with a few comforting words and promises 'to think about it.' Later on, but not in the presence of the person concerned, he recites the healing prayers; often he also prescribes some herbal tea for the invalid. He receives no money for his services, but people always make him presents—often considerable ones. His present car, for instance, was a gift from somebody he healed.

The parish priest is pretty sceptical about the activities of this healer; however, as the *Gesundbeter* is a pious man and always heals in God's name, the priest cannot find much to object to. The villagers are aware of his disapproving attitude towards their *Gesundbeter*, but that does not stop them going to him. A woman of fifty told me that the priest had said to her that whatever the *Gesundbeter* did, he himself could do as much, and that it was open to anyone to bring their troubles to him, the priest. This woman, who often visited the *Gesundbeter* because her husband has cancer, excused herself to me for not following the priest's advice by saying 'I woun'dn't dare bother

him with my requests, he's such a busy man.' Actually, it would never occur to anyone in the neighbourhood to go to the parish priest in cases of illness. Everyone 'knows' that it's not at all the same thing to visit the *Gesundbeter* or to visit the parson. To have dealings with the former is less formal, for he obviously belongs inside the village community, whereas with the parish priest one is always aware of the difference in status. And then, above all, everyone 'knows' that this farmer, with his prayers which he would never dream of revealing to anyone, can really and truly bring healing.

As a cultural anthropologist I have always felt special interest in all these irrational phenomena which constitute one aspect of folk medicine, not just for the sake of the phenomena in themselves but because they force us, by their very irrationality, to reflect upon the methods of our science, and thus they acquire a certain epistemological relevance. My first personal encounters with such matters arose during fieldwork in Sardinia, where folk medicine plays a far greater role than in Germany, as regards both practices and associated beliefs. Sometimes it involves curative methods based on rational, empirical data, e.g. the use of certain herbs; sometimes, however, healing is sought by means of certain prayers and/or ritual procedures, with the result that the whole curative procedure strikes us as irrational. As an example, I need only mention the whole complex of beliefs concerning the Evil Eye, still accepted as valid in present-day Sardinia. It has been estimated that 90% of Sardinians believe this force really exists⁸ and can cause various specific illnesses and disabilities, some of them fatal.⁹ Here, the etiological explanation proffered, the methods of diagnosis, and the means of healing all belong, without any doubt, to the sphere of irrationality.

An anthropologist finds himself perpetually confronted by irrationalism. He tells us, for example, that Hopi Indians obtain better harvests if they sing to their corn;¹⁰ that shamans in Gran Chaco can assume the shapes of all sorts of animals;¹¹ that one can fall ill or die through the power of the Evil Eye, or, as we have seen in the case of German folk medicine, that even today prayers can bring healing. The problem is how far we ought to profit from the outlook of our age, in order to reflect upon our own cultural system. We make things too easy for ourselves when we, as ethnologists and as members of modern Western industrial society, simply assign all these irrational phenomena *in globo* to categories labelled 'magic' and 'superstition.' We have just the same attitude towards them as towards museum objects that stay there in their glass cases—beautiful, valuable, to be examined and admired, but definitely useless 'museum pieces' which have no part to play in our everyday lives. There is a bottomless gulf dividing them from our world, and it is well guarded by a modern Cerberus: the sense of superiority and pride of Western educated man.

Whenever I report irrational phenomena or read about them in specialist publications, I feel a certain unease. I always have the impression that all this material we are amassing is no more than a gross caricature of a reality which is far removed from ours. The information we gather is assimilated into our own culture in the form of items of knowledge in an encyclopedia; it is fixed for all eternity in some many-volumed work, yet at the same time it is forgotten. It seems legitimate to ask ourselves whether we have really understood all the mass of ethnological material which has been collected from Frazer's time to ours. And after this question comes another, equally unavoidable: what tools does science offer with which to penetrate, and so to understand, the world of the irrational?

A cultural anthropologist is constantly concerned to improve his research tools. For some years now we have become more conscious of the need to use the 'emic' strategy in our investigations. We do not now say—or at least do not merely say—'This is how I see society X,' which would correspond to an 'etic' strategy. Instead, we say, 'This is how Society X sees itself.' Looked at from this point of view, the way we formulate our findings will look quite different from how it looks when we use an 'etic' strategy alone. In fact, however, it must be laid that the change in viewpoint does not entail as radical an alteration as might be supposed, since what the 'emic' strategy involves is, in the last analysis, to say, 'I see that this is how Society X sees itself.' The gulf between the observer and those observed is still there.

I do not wish to deny the methodological utility of this distancing. The scientist obviously has to keep his distance from the object of his researches if he is to reach valid conclusions. I simply mean that when we are doing research on a community and want to understand it from the inside, this separateness must temporarily be discarded, and the researcher tries to integrate himself as closely as possible with the people he is studying. This can indeed be done, within limits, and for a limited time. We can eat the same things as they do, share the pleasures of their festivals, work all day alongside the peasants, and even manage to feel a gut-hatred for some neighbouring population traditionally at enmity with the community we have identified ourselves with. Later, as scholarly researchers, our task will be to draw conclusions based both upon our experiences as individuals more or less integrated into the community, and upon our knowledge as external observers. The success and value of our work depends on how well we have kept the balance of these two points of view. But what is to be done about the irrational? Ought we not, perhaps, to 'feel' the irrational too, identify ourselves with this too, so as to understand it? And if so, what anthropologist would be capable of taking the step?¹² Yet if we cannot or will not take it, how can we claim really to understand phenomena of this type? It is no simple matter. Sharing as we do in Western society, our cultural heritage helps us to understand a great deal about the world, but at the same time it hinders us from perceiving other aspects of it. The anthropologist claims to want to 'see' other cultures, but the fact is that we, being actors within a particular social and cultural system, can only 'see' what we have been culturally pre-programmed to accept. Our reality (which is basically simply one among several possibilities) is based on rationality—or at least, as far as science is concerned, on a wish to explain everything in rational terms.¹³ We deny in advance and in principle that there can ever be objective reality in any phenomenon which fails the test of rationality, so witchcraft is accounted for as a social phenomenon, and the shaman's transformation into a jaguar as a metaphor. Beliefs are down-graded into 'superstitions,' unorthodox knowledge is not uncommonly labelled as humbug. Everything is forced to fit in with rationalism, the holiest dogma of our age; we might say, sacrificed to it. Our consciousness never perceives pure data, free from theories.¹⁴

Let us not deceive ourselves. Rationalism has enabled us to build the picture of the world on which all our pragmatic achievements are based, but it blinds us to all those irrational phenomena we constantly encounter as ethnologists, which simply belong in a different paradigmatic dimension. In so far as we try to understand them rationally, we destroy them.

If Farmer H., before discussing his healing methods with me, had asked me myself (instead of asking his daughter) whether I believed in them, I do not know what I would have replied. My education prevents me from believing in them. Before I came across

such things in my fieldwork, I had had no direct contact with them; the one thing I recall is that when I was a child in Barcelona one neighbour, a woman from Galicia,¹⁵ claimed to believe in witches, and that in my family we made fun of this. Yet on the other hand, my very 'rationalism' itself forbids me to deny *a priori* that the phenomena may be real. It has taught me to be sceptical. So, on the one hand, I can take a critical attitude towards Herr H.'s claims, while on the other hand I can also view with scepticism an orthodoxy which rejects the world of the irrational on the basis of a present-day paradigm of knowledge. We cannot deny *a priori* the existence of other realities. We know that our 'reality' is an interpretation, not what Kant called the thing-in-itself, and that interpreting means choosing one among several possibilities. Even physics does not reveal natural laws as absolute truths, but simply constructs models which correspond more or less closely with experience. Newton's mechanistic model for the universe 'worked' well and stimulated many technological advances, yet relativity and quantum theory have destroyed all its basic concepts. It was no more than a model, a culturally conditioned interpretation, thoroughly assimilated to the knowledge, possibilities and needs of its own time.

As regards epistemology in general, the cultural anthropologist is in a more privileged position than scholars in other disciplines. Through his contacts with other cultures he is constantly faced with different interpretations of the world, i.e. different 'realities.' Provided he tries to make his reports into something more than a mere collection of curios, provided he strives to free himself as far as possible from ethnocentric attitudes, and dares to step beyond a purely formal cultural relativism, he will perhaps find it possible to understand other realities and to point out to our science and our society new alternatives which might lead to further development. To me, the irrationality we constantly meet in fieldwork poses a challenge, and at any rate as far as folk medicine is concerned my experience makes it very difficult to accept the dogma *extra scientiam nulla salus*,¹⁶ 'no salvation except through science.' Perhaps our science has been rash in rejecting the knowledge and practices of folk medicine. The fact is, that all that has been taught for the past few centuries in every university in Europe has still not been able to drive the irrational out from many areas, even the highly industrialised Federal Republic of Germany. Perhaps we are guilty of a modern form of obscurantism when, for the sake of our paradigms, we refuse to accept that it could work? Dogma is, of course, indispensable to science; it provides the framework, the necessary system of reference for creating order out of the unknown.¹⁷ The question is simply whether it is not now time to relax our dogmatic rationalism just a little?

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NOTES

1. A nickname. The long-established families are usually known by nicknames.
2. These verbatim quotations are from tapes made during fieldwork. Prayers or portions of prayers which show rhyme and rhythmic patterns are here given in both German and English.
3. Similar prayers for blood-stopping are very widespread in German-speaking areas. See, e.g. Hans Zahler, *Die Krankheit im Volksglauben des Simmenthals* (Bern, 1898), p. 108; C. Seyfahrt, *Aberglaube und Zauberei in der Volksmedizin Sachsens* (Leipzig, 1913), p.129.

4. These three prayers belong to a type of which numerous examples are known throughout the German-speaking world, and which has attracted much attention from scholars because its structure and central formulae have demonstrable pre-Christian antecedents. *The Second Merseburg Charm*, in a ninth or tenth century manuscript, tells how 'Phol and Wodan went to the forest,' how Balder's horse sprained a foot, and how, after others had tried in vain, Wodan healed it: 'Bone to bone, blood to blood, limb to limb, thus be they fitted together.' See, for the text, J.K. Bostock, *A handbook on Old High German Literature* (London, 1955), pp. 16 ff.; for discussion, G. Storms *Anglo-Saxon Magic* (1948), pp. 107ff.; E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (London, 1964), pp. 122-4.

5. When some of the villagers heard from Maria that I had learnt her father's prayers, they were astonished, because they knew how very secretive he was about them. Maria herself was anxious about it. Her father had had two recent heart attacks, and she feared he had given me the prayers because he expected to die soon. But this cannot have been the reason. For one thing, I do not live in the village, and for another thing Herr H. knew that though I do take these methods of healing seriously, my way of life ensures that I will never put them to practical use as he does. In my opinion, it was precisely because I do not belong to the village community that I obtained the prayers relatively easily. It is obvious that his ability to heal livestock gives Herr H. a privileged status in the community. If he were to share his knowledge with someone else, he would lose this unique status and importance. But I, as a stranger standing outside the network of communal relationships, pose no threat to him, and can be neither his rival nor his successor.

6. This procedure is known not only in Germany—see, for instance, Gustav Jungbauer, *Deutsche Volksmedizin* (Berlin/Leipzig, 1934), p. 126—but also in many other parts of Europe. I myself had occasion to observe it in the Sardinian town of l'Alguer. There, one takes a blade of *Typha angustifolia*, (redmace) makes as many knots in it as there are warts, and says: *aixi com se'n va aqueixa buda, / aixi que se'n vagi la berruga*—As this plant shrivels away, so too may the wart shrivel away.' See Josep Martí i Pérez, *L'Alguer: Kultur-anthropologische Monographie einer sarchisehen Stadt* (Berlin, 1986), p.328.

7. A very common practice in German folk medicine; see Seyfahrt p.2., Jungbauer p.30.

8. Mario Atzori and Maria Margherita Satta, *Credenze e Riti Magici i Sardegna* (Sassari, 1980), p.94.

9. J. Martí i Pérez. pp. 305 ff.

10. Harold Courlander, *The Fourth World of the Hopis* (Greenwich, 1971), p.29.

11. Alfred Métraux, *Religi6n y Magias Indigenas de America del Sud* (Madrid, 1973), pp. 90 ff.

12. Carlos Castaneda has certainly taken this step. It is interesting to see how much ink ethnologists have spilled over his best-selling books, whether in absolute rejection or in passionate support. Castaneda's purpose may well have been to give a slight shock to the world of academic ethnology; naturally, the easiest way to retort is to refuse to take either the man or his work seriously. His works include *The Teachings of Don Juan* (Harmondsworth, 1970) *A Separate Reality* (Harmondsworth, 1971), *Journey to Ixtlan* (Harmondsworth, 1970), and *The Ring of Power* (Harmondsworth, 1971).

13. The importance of irrationality to the development of science, especially as regards the choice of paradigms, is an important thesis in Thomas Kuhn's *Die Struktur wissenschaftlicher Revolutionen* (Frankfurt a.m., 1973), a thesis partially contradicting Popper's rationalism.

14. Kuhn (*op.cit.*, pp. 75-6) cites an experiment devised by Bruner and Postman which exemplifies this well. The subjects were asked to identify a series of playing cards presented to them briefly, under controlled conditions. Some of the cards had been altered in some way; e.g. a 'six of spades' printed in red, or a 'four of hearts' in black. While normal cards were always identified correctly, the altered cards were almost always accepted and named as if they were normal, without any perceptible hesitation or surprise.

15. Among the regions of Spain, Galicia is that where belief in witchcraft has persisted most strongly. See, for instance, Carmelo Lis6n Tolosana, *Perfiles simbolico-morales de la Cultura Gallega* (Madrid, 1981).

16. Cf. the theologians' saying, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, from St Augustine's *De Baptismo* IV 17.

17. See Karl R. Popper, *Ausgangspunkte: Meine Intellektuelle Entwicklung* (Hamburg, 1979), p.78.