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Going Native in the Peruvian Amazon: the Anthropologist as Fortuneteller

Key words: Peruvian Amazon, Iquitos, naipes, ethnoprojective device, emotional expression, psychotherapy, suggestibility

Abstract: Marlene Dobkin de Rios, a recognized anthropologist who has been studying for many years the traditional healing practices using plant hallucinogens in the Peruvian Amazon, this time describes her auto-ethnographic experience of working as a fortune-teller in the native Peruvian community. She analyses her experience through the lens of modern theories of emotions and hypnotic states, arriving to the conclusion that we need not call upon metaphysical explanations for the power of fortunetelling: simply we must understand the context and the players.

During the course of my doctoral research in the Peruvian Amazonian city of Iquitos, I lived in an urban squatter settlement at the foot of the Amazon River for most of a year in 1968 – 1969. I stumbled onto the role of fortuneteller, utilizing a deck of playing cards called naipes which had a long tradition of use for more than 400 years throughout Latin America. In several publications (Dobkin de Rios 1969, 1972, 2006) I wrote about the experience I had during that year, becoming a curiosa, or the gringa (White woman) who knew things. My research that year was on the use of, particularly ayahuasca (various Banisteriopsis sps.) containing harmine and harmaline and used in traditional healing.

I first came across the naipes in preliminary fieldwork I conducted the year before in Salas, in the summer of 1967. This was a north coastal Peruvian



МЕДИЦИНСКАЯ АНТРОПОЛОГИЯ И БИОКРИТИКА

Научный, образовательный, научно-популярный журнал

village where it was reputed that more than 100 men and women used the hallucinogenic cactus, San Pedro (Trichocereus pachanoi) containing mescaline, to treat emotional and psychological disorders. Both periods of fieldwork were funded, the first by the Foundations Fund for Research in Psychiatry and the second by the Institute of Social Psychiatry of San Marcos University, Lima, Peru.

I had always had an interest in understanding supposed paranormal phenomena and I was interested to see that one evening a healer in Salas had instructed his wife to bring the naipes deck of cards down to the healing area. When I tried to obtain information on the cards the healer brushed me aside. However, at the Institute of Social Psychiatry in Lima, the secretary showed me how to read the cards and I was able to buy some small books in the neighboring city of Chiclayo near Salas, which instructed the reader on the meanings of the cards. One book was written by a woman reputed to be Napoleon's confidante. By the time I arrived in Iquitos the following year, I fell into step with fortunetelling, providing the service out of my floating houseboat. Initially I refused any payment for the service, since I was effectively living in a very poor community, but on the advice of both a senior anthropologist and a psychiatrist I began to collect a small fee for the service, still considerably less expensive than any competition I would have had in the city proper.

Over the course of the following years, I published an article looking at the stressors that emerged from a given card reading which could be used by a curiosa to tap at important areas of concern to the individuals who came in numbers to my balsa hut to learn about their future. One could predict that at least 3 major stressors would emerge from a given card reading, that could be woven into the storyline that the fortuneteller presented to the client. I was amazed at the speed in which my reputation spread throughout the community of 11,000 people. I would be woken up early at dawn as men would seek out their fortune before making an important business decision. Many women, too, came to see me or pulled me into their small homes as I walked around the community, to find out if their erstwhile lover would return to them or if their sick child would recover from an illness. I became very dramatic in my readings,



pausing and exclaiming at good fortune and becoming sad at losses or treachery of significant others in the medieval prose of the cards. At the end of a day I found myself tired from the pressure of clients who came to see me and I could commiserate with my hard working neighbors whose life was full of physical labor on a daily basis.

In this paper, I want to try to understand what happens when an anthropologist is perceived to be a person of metaphysical talent and knowledge within the culture being studied, effectively “going native.” I originally termed the naipes as an ethnoprojective device which from a psychoanalytic perspective permits entry into the private psychological world of the client, access not so easily available by traditional interviewing techniques. In the years subsequent to my initial fieldwork I have gone on to become a psychotherapist myself, learning both about hypnosis and suggestibility which I want to examine in light of my fortunetelling experiences, as well as new data coming to light on the perception of emotional expressions. I will argue that the anthropologist who takes the trouble to learn the cultural symbols of divinatory systems like the naipes becomes a performance agent in the culture being studied. While we must be careful in this process about loss of objectivity, if we follow the cultural pathway of in this case fortunetelling, the opportunity for gaining access to personal feelings, expectations and values of our informants is hastened along.

Fortunetelling Success in the Amazon

While it is tempting to view myself as a talented Individual who finally found her place in life reading the naipes, the underlying structure of the cards as communication of emotional states needs to be examined. It is useful to look at the way in which emotional expressions have important communicative function. Emotional expression is an outward manifestation of inner states and Darwin early on provided the basic message that emotional expression functions in this way. He wrote about emotions of relatively short duration which are intentional states that entrain changes in motor behavior, physiological and cognitive changes in the individual. A sensitive perceiver can note postural changes and facial expressions, especially one trained in hypnosis where there is always a need to monitor motor and cognitive feedback to the messages being presented



in a trance state. In fact, one could argue that the hypnotherapist him/herself actually goes into trance during the induction of a client.

In 1972, Ekman and colleagues vindicated Darwin's ideas that emotional expressions are universal and directly associated with underlying emotional states. In fact, emotional facial expressions are viewed as communicative signals (Nesse and Thubault 2009). Ekman is one of several researchers on the cross-cultural consistency of emotional expression (see: Ekman and Davidson 1994). After reading Ekman's work, it has clarified for me the 'success' I achieved as a fortuneteller, "going native" during my year of research. Emotions are about pleasure and pain, approach and avoidance. Both valence and intensity characterize emotions. Unpleasant emotions include tenseness, nervousness, stress, upsets, sadness and depression. These are in contrast to pleasant emotions such as alertness, excitement, elatedness, happiness, serenity and relaxation. Nesse and Ellsworth (2009) argue that a clear taxonomy of emotions may not exist but the one thing that was very clear to me in the naipes readings I conducted was the volatility of the Belen residents' emotional expression. As stressors and negative events were chronicled during the card reading, the client would dialog with the cards, exclaiming, being happy, sad, suspicious or angry at the attribution of evil to particular significant others in the milieu who might be faulted for bad luck, witchcraft or just downright malice. The title of my first paper in this area was "Fortune's Malice", from Robert Browning's poem to indicate overall the gross negativity of the messages of the cards.

The work of Ekman is helpful in this context. He postulated hardwired programs that link basic emotions such as happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, anger, surprise and contempt in his neurocultural theory. These emotions are socially learned and are cross-culturally recognized. Using the term micro-expressions, Ekman postulates that appraisals of specific emotions are associated with specific facial movements, quite brief which invite scrutiny. He argued that they could last from 1/5 to 1/25th of a second and produced non-verbal leakage of about a person's true feelings. As a psychotherapist, I can be in the midst of a counseling session and what appears to be "out of nowhere," a client begins to cry or become agitated. Listening carefully and attentive to the micro-



muscular movements of the face, a skilled therapist learns almost to predict when that moment may arrive.

In the fortunetelling activity I conducted during fieldwork, I apparently was seen to be a “cultural specialist,” a stranger who had come from far away, taller and different looking, with gold jewelry and golf shoes to negotiate the mud, a status position that said there was no need for the client to hide their feelings. While individuals are relatively better at recognizing emotional expressions from members of their own cultural group, the *curiosa* transcends that constraint. I often had the feeling that I personally was entering into a light hypnotic trance along with my clients as I remained motionless and cast a constant glance in their direction. Moreover, people were now paying for their fortune to be told and had the right to be expressive.

Since I kept notes on each reading (student that I was...), I found that clients would remember the fortunes that occurred, my hits so to speak, and forget or re-align the predictive failures to meet their own expectations and desires. For example, I never read a death card but at least on one occasion a client told everyone she knew that the gringa predicted the death of her little daughter whose father had stopped by to give the woman money for the child’s food for the month. This “good fortune” ended up being used for the wake and since I had predicted money in the household, the client creatively changed the fortune around to indicate the prediction of death. Moreover, each card reading was a mini-story with several combinations and permutations possible to be interpreted by the client.

Suggestibility and the Naipes

More and more evidence is accumulating that suggestibility is a psychological characteristic of altered states of consciousness. Anthropologists rarely use the term suggestibility while in the psychological, psychiatric and hypnosis literature, suggestibility is often used to indicate a person’s propensity to respond to suggested communications, or a particular state of mind favorable to suggestion. Eysenck (1975, p. 1077) defined suggestion as a process where one or more persons cause one or more individuals to change without a critical response of their judgments, opinions, attitudes or patterns of behavior. Interest



is in who elicits suggestibility. It is important if the communicator is seen as a high-status individual. Moderate levels of anxiety increase social influence. Simon (1990) sees suggestibility as an adaptive device that affords the individual a capacity for denial, illusion and false or overly optimistic beliefs, to enable him/her to cope with stress and situational conflicts. This overall psychological homeostasis confers crucial survival advantages. Schumaker (1991) argued that human beings are suggestible animals due to our survival needs. These states allow us to transcend reality, to create social cohesion and to permit social control, emotional discharge and flight from the self. Simon has argued that bounded rationality, a human tendency to learn from others or to accept social influence – or docility – contributes to survivability. Human fitness from a Darwinian perspective of survival can be enhanced by docility which induces individuals to adopt culturally-transmitted behaviors without independent evaluation of their contribution to personal advantage.

Conclusion

Those of us who study altered states of consciousness cross-culturally are always amazed at what a small proportion of the human brain appears to be utilized. In this paper, the magical results of fortunetelling have underlying explanations at work. Whether we are looking at probability statistics for the presence of misfortune cards used by curiosa healers; whether we are focusing on emotional expression through perceptions of micro-muscular movement in facial expression, or if we are looking at a light trance hypnotic state of both curiosa and client, there are mechanisms at work that demand focused attention and clarity of vision to understand. We need not call upon metaphysical explanations for the power of fortunetelling: simply we must understand the context and the players.

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МЕДИЦИНСКАЯ АНТРОПОЛОГИЯ И БИОЭТИКА

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