ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Pathogenic Emotions: Sentiment, Sociality, and Sickness Among the Tzotzil Maya of San Juan Chamula, Chiapas, Mexico

by

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In this dissertation, I address the constitutive role of emotional ideologies in personal experience, social control, and the cultural production of illness among the Tzotzil Maya of San Juan Chamula. Among the highland Maya, a broad swath of everyday negative emotion has been pathologized. Several “complexes” of related emotions (including anger, fear, sadness, embarrassment/shame, and envy) are thought to be physically dangerous to self and/or others, and both their experience and expression are closely managed at the individual and social levels. These “pathogenic emotions” are the natural and inevitable consequences of everyday social life in small-scale communities, and are managed almost exclusively within the folk medical system, usually through household therapies or shamanic curing.

Four questions serve to orient the dissertation: 1) What are the emotional concomitants of social life in small-scale, rapidly modernizing, “post-peasant” agrarian communities, and how is emotional experience theorized at the local level?; 2) How do individuals and society manage the intense, negative (and often disruptive) emotions that are a direct and inevitable consequence of everyday life in such communities, while simultaneously maintaining deep commitments to an idealized socio-moral order which disvalues these negative emotions in favor of a marked sociocentric ethos of cooperation and harmony?; 3) How do “pathogenic emotions” articulate with the local ethnomedical system, and what is the significance of the resulting “medicalization” of negative emotion? and 4) What are the social functions of these cultural ideologies of sickening social experience and dangerous emotions?

This project blends the methods and research goals of medical and psychological anthropology, situating analysis at the fluid juncture between social life, psychological experience, and physical sickness. In doing so, it challenges simple assumptions regarding the clear segregation of mind from body, self from society, and thought from emotion. Indeed, highland Maya “pathogenic emotions” serve to mediate between these dialectic contrasts, yielding an ethnotheory of the dangers of strong emotion that is at once familiar and strangely foreign—a reshuffling of familiar categories in which organs can wander, the heart can think and talk, the emotional states of others can penetrate bodily boundaries, and unreconciled anger can kill.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1—Introduction

• Introduction and Background to the Research
• Emotion Illness Among the Highland Maya
• Emotion Culture, Control, and the “Standardizing of Emotion”
  o Feeling Rules, Expression Rules, and Emotion Work
  o Feeling Rules as Ideologies of Emotional Control
• Highland Maya Ethnomedicine: An Overview of Research
• Study Site and Period of Fieldwork
• San Juan Chamula: Community Overview
  o Location, Geography, and Climate
  o Demographics
  o Agriculture and Land Base
  o Religion
• Data Collection Methods & Analysis
• Plan of the Dissertation

Chapter 2—From Emotion to Sickness: Conceptual Approaches to the Body-Based Expression of Psychosocial Distress

• The Universality of Somatization
• Somatization, Symbols, and Idioms of Distress
• Kleinman and Somatization
  o The Mindful Body: Physical Symptoms as Social Communication
  o Embodiment of Meaning as an Alternative Approach?
  o Symptoms as “Embodied Metaphors”
• Emotion, Sensation, and the Embodiment of Social Distress: A Rapprochement Between Idioms of Distress and Embodied Approaches
• An Attention-Based Model for the Somatic Framing of Emotional Distress
  o Stage 1: Origin of Distress or Dysfunction
  o Stage 2: Attentional Processes, Interpretation, and Amplification
  o Stage 3: Social Communication of Symptoms
  o Stage 4: Presentations of Symptoms within Local Medical Institutions
Chapter 3: Emotion, Affect, and the Language of Experience among the Tzotzil Maya

- Where’s the Emotion? The Covert Encoding of Affect in Language
- Tzotzil Emotion Talk: Lexical Encoding of Affect
  - “Presenting Affect”: Tzotzil Speech Genres
  - Drunkenness and Emotional Expression
  - Scolding Speech and Indignation
  - Prayer, Petitioning, and Pleading
  - The Interactional Value of “Politeness”
- Affect Verbs, Body States, and the Language of Experience

Chapter 4: Emotion and Organs: A Somatically-Based Psychology

- “Heart” as Center of Self and Seat of Emotion
  - Heart and Ethnophysiology
  - Heart and Ethnopsychology
  - Head, Heart, and Memory
  - Heart Size and Emotional Reactivity
  - Heart and Personality Types
  - Heart Metaphors and Emotion Vocabulary
- Metaphorical Versus Literal Interpretation of Organ-Based Emotion Language
- Assessing the Propositional Status of Tzotzil “Somatic Idioms: of Emotion
  - Implications for the Translation of Tzotzil Emotion Talk
  - The Generation and Dynamics of Emotion
  - Highland Maya Psychodynamics: Emotional Ethnophysiology

Chapter 5—Illness and Emotion-Based Distress: An Overview of “Pathogenic Emotions” among the Highland Maya

- Illness and Emotion-Based Distress: An Overview of “Pathogenic Emotions” among the Highland Maya
  - The Shame Complex: Shame, Embarrassment, and Humiliation
  - The Sadness Complex: Sadness, Worry, Grief, and Depression
    - Sadness and Sickness
    - Anxiety and Worry
    - Grief
Chapter 6—Anger and Its Vicissitudes among the Tzotzil Maya

- Anger and Its Vicissitudes among the Tzotzil Maya
  - Anger as Primordial “Social Sickness”
  - Anger and the Language of Illness
  - “Encountering Anger”: Conflict (k’op) and the Causes of Anger
- Ideologies of Emotional Pathogenesis: The Sickening Effects of Anger
- The Dangers of Anger: Stories of Conflict, Discord, and Death
- “Swallowing Fevered Words”: The Development of “Fevered Heart Sickness”
  - Vulnerability and Resistance
  - Onset and Progression
  - Venting and the Morbid Exchange of Anger
  - “Buried in the Heart”: The Problem of Suppressed Anger
  - Anger and Contagion
  - Anger and Nursing Children
  - Anger and Livestock
  - Anger and Crops

Chapter 7—“Feelings of the Fevered Heart”: Ethnosymptomatology of Pathogenic Anger

- “Feelings of the Fevered Heart”: Ethnosymptomatology of Pathogenic Anger
  - Heart and Chest: “Something Balled Up In My Heart”
  - Fevered Heart, Squeezing Pain
  - Respiration
  - “His Head Becomes Mixed Up”: Anger, Perception, and Thought
  - Head Pains
  - Thermal Sensations
  - Mental and Cognitive Alterations
Chapter 8—The Personal Management of Pathogenic Anger: Prophylaxis and Emotion Work

- The Personal Management of Pathogenic Anger: Prophylaxis and Emotion Work
- “Emotion Work” Strategies
  - Alcohol and Anger Management
  - Modification of Environment
  - Empirical Treatments
  - “Enlarging the Heart” Through Prayer
  - Visual Alterations

Chapter 9—“Settling the Fevered Heart”: The Institutionalized Management of Anger Sickness

- “Settling the Fevered Heart”: The Institutionalized Management of Anger Sickness
- The Role of the Curer: Advocate Before God
  - Diagnosis Through Pulsing
  - The “Questioning”
  - Shamanic Prayer
- Shamanic Management of Pathogenic Anger in Adults and Children
  - Hidden Anger, Hidden Curing: The Dyadic Curing of Anger
• “Settling the Heart”: Triadic Curing and Mutual Reconciliation
  o Drunkenness and Moral Culpability for Aggression
• Drawn in With the Milk: Curing Pathogenic Anger in Children
• Desperation, Divine Punishment, and the Curing of “Requested” Illness
• Personal and Social Functions of the Shamanic Management of Anger

Chapter 10—Emotion and Social Control: The Role of Anger, Fear and Anxiety in Promoting Harmony and Reconciliation

• Harmony Ideology and Social Control
• Conflict and Harmony in Highland Chiapas
  o The Nature of Conflict among the Tzotzil Maya
  o The Social Topography of Conflict and Violence:
    o The Centrality of the Family
• Harmony Ideology and the Importance of Reconciliation
• “Asking Pardon” and “Forgetting Anger”: The Central Interpersonal Dynamic in Highland Maya Conflict Resolution
• The Threat of Covert Aggression: Witchcraft, Sickness, and the Moral Economy of Anger
  o Manifest and Latent Functions of Witchcraft Belief
  o The Function of Reconciliation: Ensuring Cooperation in an Agrarian Community
  o Changing Economies, Ideological Stasis: The Persistence of Harmony Ideology
• Conflict and Illness: A Medico-Moral Motivation for Reconciliation
• Discussion and Conclusions

Chapter 11—“Anger Sickness” in Comparative Perspective

• Anger-Related Conditions Outside Latin America
  o Hwa-byung in Korea
  o Popokl in Highland New Guinea
• Anger Sickness in Latin America
  o Colerina and “Congestión” in Andean South America
  o “Swallowing Frogs” in Northeast Brazil
  o Bilis, Muina, and Coraje: Anger in Central Mexico
  o Coraje among the Amuzgos of Oaxaca
  o Cólico among the Tzeltal Maya of Southern Mexico
Chapter 12—Discussion and Conclusions

Appendices
Appendix I: Sample Mayan Explanatory Models Questionnaire
Appendix II: Colonial Zinacantec Tzotzil “Heart-Based” Expressions

List of Figures
Figure 1.1—Regional Map of Chiapas Highlands
Figure 2.1—An Attention-Based Model of Somatization and Embodiment
Figure 2.2—An Attentional Model of a Somatically-Biased System
Figure 7.1—Biomedically Defined Regions of the Abdomen
Figure 7.2—Highland Maya Ethnoanatomy of the Abdomen and Location of Organs
Figure 7.3—Biomedical Regions of the Abdomen
Figure 7.4—Location of Me’ Vinik Organ According to Highland Maya Ethnoanatomical Models

List of Tables
Table 2.1—DSM-IV Symptoms of Somatization Disorder
Table 2.2—Rating of Symptom Usefulness in Cross-Cultural Diagnosis of Somatoform Disorder
Table 3.1—Tzotzil Affect Verb Suffixes and Glosses
Table 3.2—Tzotzil Affect Verb Forms Derived from –kap (“to become angry”)
Table 3.3—Tzotzil Affect Verbs Derived from –mich’ (“squeeze, as though in a fist”)
Table 4.1—Colonial Zinacantec Tzotzil Heart-Based Emotion Expression
Table 4.2—Principal Organic Associations of Various Basic Emotions in Tzotzil
Table 4.3—Chamula Tzotzil Terms for the Origin or Cause of Pathogenic Emotion
Table 4.4—Chamula Tzotzil Terms Expressing the Development of Emotion
Table 4.5—Chamula Tzotzil Terms Expressing the Expression of Emotion
Table 4.6—Chamula Tzotzil Terms Expressing the Suppression of Emotion
Table 4.7—Chamula Tzotzil Terms for the Conversion of Emotion into Sickness
Table 4.8—Chamula Tzotzil Terms for the “Metabolism” or Management of Emotion
Table 6.1—Emotions Attributed to Plants in San Lorenzo Zinacantán
Table 7.1—“Heart/Chest” Pain Descriptors Characteristic of “Fevered Heart”
Table 7.2—Anger and Pain Expressions Derived from the Verbal Root –ti’
Table 10.1—Categories of Conflict in Zinacantán