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**ETHNOMEDICINE
OF THE CHONTAL MAYA
IN THE MOUNTAINOUS REGION
OF THE STATE OF TABASCO, MEXICO**

Jorge E. Salazar

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PREFACE

Jorge E. Salazar received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Hampshire College, where he prepared a senior thesis on ethnomedicine in Mexico following residency there for five months. Currently Mr. Salazar is in his third year of medical school at the University of Miami. The writing and part of the fieldwork for this paper was made possible by a Hampshire College Threshold Grant awarded in May 1983.

Mark B. Rosenberg
Director

INTRODUCTION

In the southern area of the mostly planate State of Tabasco, Mexico is a mountainous zone reaching up into ranges extending north from the State of Chiapas. Much of this rural region remains isolated to modern transportation and is sparsely inhabited. The indigenous groups abiding in the tiny communities which dot the area have preserved many traditions from the past. Among these traditions are a set of medical beliefs and practices which are quite illustrative of their general conception of life and the world around them. In this paper, exemplary perceptions and practices will be discussed in an effort to depict the medical belief system.

This paper is based on six months of fieldwork, living in and visiting various Indian communities in rural areas of the State of Tabasco, Mexico. Five months of the fieldwork were conducted (July - November 1982). During this time, informal interviews were held with four reputable healers, three questionable healers (they called themselves healers but were not well acknowledged as such), and at least 20 families or individuals. In addition, considerable time was spent with one of the healers, discussing at length his theories and practice, and observing several healing sessions. During July 1983, a one month return visit to the area served to clarify and confirm the previously made observations. Because Spanish is a second language to these people and many speak it at only a basic level, communication was sometimes difficult and misunderstandings may have occurred.

During both periods ethnomedicine was not the only topic of investigation, as investigations into nutrition and disease incidence were performed simultaneously. This limited the depth of the investigation somewhat and put the investigator in a position which may have influenced what the informants said as well as the interpretation itself. The investigator is a westerner, and a student and firm believer of modern western medicine. Although an honest attempt at objectivity has been a prime concern, this bias should be considered by the reader.

THE PEOPLE

The people of mountainous Tabasco are mostly of Mayan ancestry, specifically of the chontal branch. A majority immigrated from the bordering State of Chiapas and nearby Guatemala (Estado de Tabasco, 1981). Their first language is Chol, an Indian dialect that is common in the area. Most of the people also speak some Spanish, and it appears to be replacing their Indian dialect, Chol (especially in the younger generations).

This is one of the poorest regions in Mexico (Edmundo, 1979), with traditional slash and burn agriculture and the raising of domestic animals serving as the basis for sustenance. Small wooden huts with dirt floors and thatched or corrugated metal roofs house large families and domestic animals alike. Generally speaking, the communities are composed of 400-600 individuals residing together in a central village and farming individual plots of the surrounding land. Central to each community is a Catholic church, a rural elementary school, and one or more household stores where non-sustenance goods may be

acquired.

THE SURROUNDINGS

The climate is hot and humid, with a rainy season that raises the water table by one to three meters. The land is fertile and the tropical vegetation lush. The people grow corn, beans, rice, various tubers, melons, and coffee. The numerous wild fruit trees provide additional nutrients. Sanitation is poor with open air defecation and unpurified water sources. Parasitism and other endemic as well as epidemic diseases--particularly of the respiratory and gastrointestinal tracts--are commonplace.

THE BELIEF SYSTEM: AN OVERVIEW

Underlying the more specific medical beliefs and practices of these people is an ethnomedical groundwork made up of two conceptual systems characteristic to most of Mexico (Currier, 1966; Foster, 1953). These are: (1) the belief in spirits (both as part of one's "being" and as threatening ambiental entities), and (2) the idea of hot-cold qualities of objects. A brief development of this conceptual groundwork will permit the reader to more fully embrace the specific descriptions of beliefs and practices as representations of a tightly integrated ethnomedical system.

Spirits

The notion of abstract entities, which may most inclusively be described as spirits, is one referred to in the greater part of disease etiology in the region. All people are believed to possess a body and a soul which together make up their total

being. Of particular importance, for both physical and mental well being, is the intactness of the soul. A person's shadow is intimately related to this spiritual concept, and is to many a concrete indication that such a thing exists. Most consequential to their medical beliefs are the ideas of the separation of the soul from the body, "loosely held" souls, and "sad" souls.

Human beings are not believed to be unique in their possession of a soul. All things (i.e., animals, plants, a particular location) are thought to possess spiritual counterparts. In addition, there are thought to be free-living spirits existing randomly throughout the surroundings. Through their actions of bodily intrusion and spiritual capture, these are the most suspected sources of disease.

Hot and Cold

Equally fundamental to the mountainous Tabasqueno's understanding of disease is the hot-cold conceptual framework. It is of particular importance in the rationalization of the actual pathological process threatening health and the subsequent treatment strategy to restore it. This dichotomous theory strongly associates health with a necessary balance and distribution of pseudothermal qualities in the body. These hot and cold qualities are possessed and transmitted, to varying degrees, by all natural and supernatural objects. Not necessarily reflective of physical temperature, these qualities are interpreted more from relative effects the objects are thought to have on the body as well as their relation to other objects whose classification in this system is known. For example, ice is considered by many to be hot because of its

capacity to burn skin, while aspirin is considered cold because of its ability to reduce fever. Imbalance or maldistribution of hot and cold in the body results from its inability to counterbalance excess exposure to hot or cold from one or more sources. The illness will manifest itself with symptomatology associated with the quality which is in excess (i.e., heat, burning = fever; cough, pain = cold).

It is interesting to note that few people, other than the native healers, openly refer to the hot-cold theory when discussing health. Nonetheless, most of their more specific beliefs, superstitions, and practices completely comply with the theory--obviously structured by it. Apparently, the theory has lost much of its importance as a theoretical point of reference. As the users of their first language speak correct grammar without consciously applying the rules, the people of mountainous Tabasco seem to follow the hot-cold theory without recognizing it.

For the purpose of organization, the remainder of this paper will be divided into four sections. The first section will deal with spirit intrusion, covering the agents responsible and the resulting diseases. The second section will be concerned with soul loss, briefly describing the disease "espanto" along with its causes. Following this will be a description of the traditional healers, their treatments, and their pharmacopoeia. Finally, there will be a short section on a few natural beliefs, where the hot-cold theory is especially evident.

SPIRIT INTRUSION

Mal Aires

Although people living in this region are very familiar with the notion of mal aires (bad winds) and the problems associated with encountering them, the colorful details of their existence and disease producing mechanisms are held by only a few outside the traditional healer circles. Careful attention to the descriptions reveals constant referral to the coldness and darkness (which is considered cold) of the mal aires and the things associated with them.

As was discussed earlier, mal aires have a variety of sources. People here, however, have especially associated their presence with the morning and evening dew. It is at these dusky hours that "the leaves and grass are weighed down with pure dew." This is also a time of exaggerated shadows and approaching or receding darkness. It may be recalled that spirits are believed to be intimately related to shadows, "...it is hidden in these shadows that the bad things form...." These "evil things" are thought to remain lurking in the darkness, waiting for an individual to come by.

"One should not be out before 6:00 a.m. or after 5:00 p.m. because this is the time when the trails are covered with dew and evil shadows...under every little leaf or blade of grass there is a little darkness for the evil to hide. It waits there, and when a man comes trotting down the trail barefoot--his feet cooled by the ground--he steps on this blade of grass and the evil goes into him. It is the coldness and the darkness of the blades of grass--who knows what evil winds swish around under them. Like

knives, the grass can pierce you, letting all the evil go inside."

As there are many possible sources of spirits, there are many different types of mal aires. The most common are rat winds, winds of the grass, and ant winds. In general, the difference from one mal aire to another is not the type of disease caused, but rather the severity of its strike and particular aspects of the symptomatology. A description of rat winds given by a healer will serve to exemplify the way in which mal aires are perceived.

The cold dew from the highest and coldest clouds appears under the leaf of a little plant that grows near the trails. Those little rat winds are always running around quickly--one moment they are here, the next moment they are there, and then back here again. They run around and say "chi," and grab that cold ice that fell (the dew from the highest clouds). It is pure dew that these little rats are, and they run to their little nests and hide...all the time they are doing their little mischief underneath the leaves. Then someone walks by, they jump into the person's shadow and enter the body to do their harm.

Congestion

Congestion is the most common disease consequential to spirit (mal aire) intrusion. The different mal aires penetrate the body by a variety of mechanisms. These include the pierce of a spine, the "cut" from a blade of grass, and the cold flowing from the ground to a bare foot. Congestion, which is literally "congestion," is thought to result from a mal aire going up into the intestine and causing a "knot" there. The general symptoms are weakness, chills, anorexia, and a strong pain in one or the

other side of the lower abdomen which intensifies with time. The "knot," which is palpable, can burst and the pain becomes intolerable as this approaches. If the "knot" does burst, the victim begins to vomit and has severe pains in the whole body because "the cold has spread." In one variation of congestion, the knot travels to the heart and bursts there, causing severe pains in the chest and bloody vomit. If this occurs, death will soon follow as the mal aire has burst the person's heart.

Disipela

Disipela is another disease which may result from the intrusion of a mal aire. In this case, the bad wind begins to cause problems in the lower extremities. Progressive swelling is the primary sign. As the swelling continues up the body, resulting from the spreading coldness, the afflicted begins to feel generalized discomfort and local pain. This swelling continues until the entire body is affected.

There are two varieties of disipela: white and red. In white disipela, the skin of the swollen areas remains pale, while in red disipela, the swelling is accompanied by the development of red patches on the skin. This rash, indicative of a more serious case, is said to be an external manifestation of the "cold burns" suffered internally.

Deseo de Puerco

Translated as "desire of pig," this is a serious disease that requires a lengthy and complex treatment by a traditional healer. It is most commonly, though not always, related to witchcraft. The following is a testimony given by a healer on the etiology of the disease.

When the person is sleeping deeply with their mouth open at 12:00 or 1:00 a.m., the brujo (sorcerer) sends a mal aire to their house to drop a piece of pig meat in the person's mouth. That person dreams they are eating pig. If a person does not burn the meat right away in their stomach (with garlic or something "hot"), a male and female mal aire are created and cause swelling in the stomach. These bad things have now found a home and right away they start doing their harm.

A bulging stomach with intense abdominal pain, anorexia, fatigue, and sometimes yellow eyes and skin characterize the disease. The illness progresses quickly, and in a short while (several days), the person may begin to lose consciousness and have body spasms. A horrible death follows, with panting and whole body convulsions similar to those of a murdered pig.

SOUL LOSS

Espanto

Espanto (fright) is one of the most common diseases in the area. Very simply, espanto is the loss of one's soul upon being frightened by something. The people describe it as a fright which shakes loose one's shadow and leaves the victim in poor mental and physical health. In some cases, the soul will be wandering around on its own, while in other cases it is captured by the spirit of the thing responsible for the scare. The person will feel weak, dizzy, anorexic, will not be able to sleep well, and will look sick, with a pale, blank face.

As in congestion, the degree of severity and specific symptomatology depends on the source. Most espantos are believed to be caused by domestic animals at night. Espanto can be caused, however, by almost anything. Human beings that appear

suddenly or that appear threatening may cause fright, as may an encounter with a wild animal. One can be espantado by falling down (especially near water) or even by dreaming of an espanto situation. Snake espanto is commonly fatal, while espanto from falling down is generally mild and easy to cure.

Sad Souls and Lost Souls

Some people are believed to have been born with loose souls or to have become that way as a result of some sort of hex. These people become espantado very easily, sometimes even spontaneously. Also, certain situations may act to "loosen" one's soul. Intoxication with alcohol or other drugs, for example, is commonly thought to loosen one's soul. People with loose souls may suffer from recurrent episodes of espanto.

Depressed or slightly psychotic individuals are sometimes referred to by healers as having "sad" souls. There are many ways one's soul can become sad. Having a depressing life can do it, or one's soul may have been saddened by one particularly depressing experience. In addition, one's soul may be bewitched by a brujo (sorcerer) to become sad, or the sad, wandering spirit of a dead person may sadden the soul of a susceptible individual.

HEALERS AND HEALING

Before discussing the various healing techniques that are used to cure these and other diseases, something should be mentioned about healers in general. In this area, the great majority are known as yerbateros (herbers). Despite the implication of the term, yerbateros do not view herbal preparations as the basis of their curative art, but rather as supplements to other healing procedures that they consider more

important. Their other procedures include psalming, massaging, and the employment of natural objects and animal parts in the transfer of hot or cold. In addition, there is the use of western medicine. Most healers have assigned traditional hot-cold values to modern medications, and have incorporated a great number into their pharmacopoeia. Religion also plays an important role in the healing process, as will be seen later in the discussion. Yerbateros claim to get most of their healing power from God and the saints.

Curative Techniques

Herbal remedies find their way into almost every treatment performed by yerbateros. Close to 40% of the herbal preparations are employed externally. These are prepared as mixtures of one or more types of leaves and/or flowers with grain alcohol, lard, vaseline, or water. In a few instances, herbs are used without preparation. Massaging--to a greater or lesser degree--always accompanies these external medications, and is in many instances, believed to play the principle role in the curing.

Internal preparations are almost invariably teas--although occasionally alcohol or other fluids are introduced just prior to consumption. Decisions regarding what herbs to use are based on hot-cold beliefs and experience (i.e., which hot herbs have worked best against a particular cold illness). Although there are preferred herbs to be used for any one instance, there is great flexibility in this choice, and alternate herbs can be used in case of unavailability of the required ones.

Stones and Other Objects

In the rituals which characterize healing in this region, magic, natural, supernatural, and religious powers all play a role. Certain objects are often used by the healer to apply, draw on, or symbolize these powers. These objects range from statues of saints to old keys to beautiful stones. In most cases, their involvement in the ritual is more of a passive one, but occasionally, as in the example here, the role is quite active.

Stones are a common item used in healing rituals. They are always distinctive for some reason or other and are inevitably accompanied by a history which describes the source of their power. One such stone was used to prepare teas by one healer. It was a smoothly finished and very heavy green stone about the size and shape of a railroad spike. The yerbatero called it an acha de rayo (hatchet of lightning), and described it as an extremely powerful stone that he had found embedded in a tree that had been hit by lightning. It is kept in a fire until very hot, and then placed in a bowl of water which quickly boils. Herbs are then added and a tea is made with the added "hot" quality of the stone.

Psalming

Psalming is an essential part of all healing ceremonies. It can be divided into two general categories: religiously oriented and magically oriented. Religious psalming is based on passages taken from the Bible (some slightly modified), and is accompanied by specific appeals to religious deities. The magical form of psalming is believed to be especially useful in the treatment of

congestion. It consists of a series of chants, said in Chol, that are specifically directed against the particular mal aire thought to be responsible. The chanting is perceived as having some special power against the bad winds. To illustrate, the following is a description of a healing ceremony for rat wind congestion:

After drinking a special herbal tea, the patient sits down in front of the healer, who begins to grind up garlic, a little tobacco, and herbida herb. These items are considered to be "hot" and "strong" enemies of the mal aires. While grinding up these things, he says the following chant:

We search all around in the darkness underneath the leaves. There, running around, is the little rat we are looking for (the rat wind). We take his little rat nose and mash it up well. We take his little mustache and all his tiny teeth and grind them up well, until they are in tiny pieces. All of his little head is all mashed up here with garlic and tobacco and herbida (herb).

By now the ingredients in the bowl that the healer uses for grinding are all in a fine dust. A little aguardiente (grain alcohol) is added and the resultant mixture is drunk by the patient. More of the same ingredients are put into the bowl and the chanting continues:

We cut up his right arm, and cut up all his little fingers. His little nails are all mashed up as well. Then, his left arm we grind, his little fingers and nails, all with garlic, tobacco, and herbida. We take off all of his ribs and mash them up. We remove his back and grind and mash it well. We take all of his fleas and all of his little rat hairs and grind them up to powder. Then his left leg all cut up and ground with his little foot and his little nails. His right leg is chopped and ground, then his right foot and

its nails--all mashed and ground into a fine dust with garlic. Then we get the tail and all the rat fleas of his tail and mash them up well. We dry his intestines and make them into powder and mix them well with garlic, tobacco, and herbida.

Again, aguardiente is added to the mixture and it is drunk by the patient. Now the chants continue without the accompanying grinding. Instead, they are interrupted with sprays of aguardiente which are blown upon the patient by the healer's mouth. These sprays are truly fascinating as they are produced in almost spray can velocity and consistency.

Now we go out to the jungle, growing beside the trails, and get the coloradito bug of the palo verde plant. We are going to get this bug and some wasps, and two different types of ants, and we are going to go to the nest of the little rat (all of these insects are "hot" and enemies of the rat winds). We are going to find this nest and these things inside. Then we are going to find his little trail--the one he uses as he runs here and there. We are going to cross this trail with the twelve apostles.

At this point, the psalm is finished and now a mixture is made of bumble bee, wasp, black ant, garlic, tobacco, herbida herb, and choshio herb, and it is ground up. When well mixed, a spine from the zorrón espinoso plant is placed into the mixture and used to perform multiple pokes of the patient. This poking is done while the entire psalm is repeated. The parts of the patient's body are poked so as to correspond to the parts of the rat wind being discussed in the psalm.

As a finale, the sign of the cross is poked on the patient's forehead and another on the back of his or her head. Now a prayer is said to God, and He is asked to make the same crosses with his blessing. The yerbatero makes the motion of the cross

over the patient's head with his hand saying:

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Here we are begging for Your justice. This bad that is making this man suffer, take it away, Lord, and put it on Your cross. Father put Your hand on his forehead.

This ritual served to illustrate several aspects of healing in mountainous Tabasco that have been discussed previously: the role of herbs, magical appeals, objects (the spine), animals (the insects), appeal to religious deities, and hot-cold beliefs. This is typical of all healing rituals performed--though they vary greatly with respect to complexity and duration.

Another example of a healing ritual that will illustrate the way in which the different aspects of these medical beliefs come together is the healing ritual for deseo de puerco (desire of pig). In addition, it hints of the extent to which impressing the patient may play a role in the curing. The ceremony is a complex one and will be described briefly.

The killing of a pig initiates the ritual, and certain parts are saved for later use. Lengthy prayers to a saint selected by the healer follow. Then, with the patient still sitting down in front of the small household altar, the verbatero slowly circles him or her. While he is circling, he chants a fast monotone in Chol, and rhythmically bathes the patient with alcohol sprays. After approximately five minutes of this chanting, a bowl is brought in with the lungs and trachea of the freshly killed pig. The healer takes the trachea, blows up the lungs, and holding the trachea shut so as to prevent deflation, passes them to the patient. The patient puts the trachea in his or her mouth and

breathes in the air contained in the lungs. The process is repeated twelve times.

Another five minutes of chanting and spraying, and another bowl is brought in--this time with portions of the pig's shoulder. These masses of bone and flesh are placed at various locations of the patient's body, beginning at the head and ending at the feet. Meanwhile, the chanting continues. After this procedure has been completed, the patient's head and body are brushed with a branch of leaves from a particular tree, accompanied by a different type of chanting. More prayers to the saint follow, and then a massage with certain herbs. Finally, tobacco, garlic, and herbida herb are chopped up in a bowl while magical (non-religious) chants are said. These items are placed in a small sack and thrown into a place in the jungle where no one goes. About 80% of the chants used during the entire ritual are religious psalms taken from the Holy Bible.

Treatment of Espanto

The treatment of espanto consists of religious psalming and is directed towards achieving the reunion of the soul with the body. This is performed mostly through the assistance of saints appealed to in psalms. The soul itself, however, frequently receives considerable convincing from the healer as well. In the case of a captured soul, the responsible spirit is convinced to release the soul. Another aspect of this healing process is a type of "warming" of the body with hot quality, so as to prepare it for receiving the soul.

Curing espanto is undoubtedly a ritualistic performance. The diagnosis is made through punsando (a special feeling for)

the pulse of the patient's wrists or feet. This will tell what caused the espanto. Then, depending on the diagnosis, the healer decides how many psalms will be given in total, how many per day, and which psalms will be used. The number nine is the magical multiple in the espanto ritual. It is the minimum number of psalms that must be given for a cure. For more severe cases, more psalms may be given, but only in multiples of nine. Psalms are usually given at a rate of three per day, so the minimum treatment is that of three days. Each psalm varies from five to fifteen minutes long. It is usually a direct or slightly modified passage from the Old Testament of the Bible, chanted from memory. Psalms are typically given one at a time, in the morning, afternoon, and evening.

The actual treatment begins with a ritual called a pasote. A candle is lit in a church, or before an altar in a home. The healer then asks a saint for permission to cure the patient and the strength to do so. The healer meditates, and permission is almost always granted. Now the patient may be psalmed for the first time. Before and after the psalm, the psalmista or verbatero (psalmistas specialize in curing espanto) rinses his or her mouth with aguardiente. Although most of the psalms are said in the patient's home, it is helpful if one to three psalms can be said at the actual location where the espanto occurred. This, however, is not absolutely necessary, and in many instances, the exact location is not known (most people do not remember the espanto situation). The power of the psalming is greatly enhanced by the utilization of some part of the animal (or thing)

responsible for the fright, in the psalming ritual. This may be a piece of snake skin, hair from a dog, etc.

On the final day of treatment, before the final psalm, branches of a certain plant are laid out on the floor and the patient lies on them, only to be covered by more. The psalm is then given. The top leaves are removed and a poking ceremony begins. Salt is first thrown over the patient, six times towards the head and six times towards the feet. Then the patient sits up and the sign of the cross is poked into various points along his or her body. Finally, two dead baby chickens are salted and passed over the patient in a "secret" way. These chickens are thrown away. The ritual ends as the patient asks the saint whose help has been called upon for his or her blessing, and the healer then asks that complete health be granted.

OTHER MEDICAL BELIEFS

Having examined supernatural illness, attention will now be paid to a few examples of more naturalistic beliefs. It must be understood that there are an innumerable number of these more specific diseases, and that their believed etiologies differ considerably from village to village. The few diseases discussed here are those believed to be most consistent and representative.

Mal Ojo

Mal ojo (bad eye) is a disease which very commonly affects infants in this area. The symptoms are fever, constant crying, diarrhea, and sometimes a red rash on the head. It is thought to be caused from the "overheating" of a child's head as a result of having been in contact with people who are "hot." Hot people are those who are drunk (alcohol is hot), pregnant (a hot state for

women), or simply have a hot personality (anger is considered hot). The glance of such people is considered to be very hot, and the baby, who possesses weak balancing forces, is unable to counterbalance this heat. The curing ritual involves the rolling of an egg (uncooked) over the body of the child. Chants and prayers are said. This egg is then broken into a big pan of water. People say that some parts of the egg will be cooked, and that the yoke will have "holes" in it from the "heat" removed from the child.

Tirosa

An interesting etiology, which is quite illustrative of the influence of hot-cold beliefs, accompanies this disease. All human beings are believed to have an "ice" in them, and when one exposes oneself to excess sun, this ice begins to melt, dripping into the intestine. These "drops of ice" are very "hot" and collect in the lower abdominal area, burning and causing pain. If the patient is not properly purged immediately, complications soon follow. These include the yellowing of the eyes, yellow, putrid sweat, ringing in the ears, and a general uneasy feeling of "burning up."

This illness also demonstrates the incorporation of western medicine into traditional healing. The typical cure involves the injection of penicillin (believed to be cold because it counters fevers). Occasionally, the penicillin is supplemented with two aspirins (also believed to be cold). Along with this cure goes the usual psalming and the external application of cold herbs.

Caida de Mollera

This is a childhood disease that occurs frequently throughout the region. It is, quite simply, the condition where the fontanel on an infant's head has sunken inwards. Several situations are believed responsible for such an occurrence: the child falls down, is banged on the head, or is left in a bad position in a hammock. In addition to the fallen fontanel, caida de mollera is often accompanied by diarrhea and fever.

This illness is typically treated at home, but occasionally a midwife or healer is consulted. There are three different methods for curing the disease. One method involves putting several grains of corn into a glass of water. A chant is then said:

We are going to pull it up. Corn suck on
water! Suck so it will come up! So it
will come up!

Then, the grains are taken into the healer's mouth with a little water, and he or she sucks on the fontanel several times. By the following day, the fontanel should have risen.

One of the most commonly used methods of curing this ailment involves holding the child upside-down near a fire, and shaking him or her vigorously. Chants that accompany this method include the following phrase:

That it will go down!.....head of pig
That it will go down!.....head of dog
That it will go down!.....head of cow etc....

The third and less common method involves pushing up on the roof of the child's mouth with one's finger. Simultaneously, the child's neck is massaged upwards, and the following chant is said:

That it will go up!....That it will all go up!

When one of these methods fails to give results, the others are often tried. In serious cases, a ritual involving the combination of all three methods is performed.

CONCLUSION

Despite the brief and descriptive nature of this examination, it is hoped that a general awareness of the cultural beliefs and practices associated with health in mountainous Tabasco has been nurtured. Having discussed both the underlying conceptual frameworks and their manifestations in actual perceptions, beliefs, and practices, an appreciation for the way medical beliefs are closely tied with a general conception of life has also, hopefully, been conveyed.

The unusual integration of magical, supernatural, religious, and hot-cold beliefs in a single ceremony demonstrates the way in which different, sometimes conflicting, theoretical dogmas coexist as the underlying framework for beliefs and practices in whom conflict is less evident. These same dogmas underlie their general conception of life and the surrounding world. The various curative practices described, including the utilization of herbs, western medicines, alcohol, animal parts, psalming, symbolic objects, and odd manipulative procedures exemplify common practical translations of the ethnomedical groundwork.

Many of the beliefs and practices presented in this paper are similar to those described by other authors in these and other areas of Mexico. As previously mentioned, the concepts of hot-cold and spirits-souls are common to most of Mexico and much

of Latin America. Nonetheless, it appears that there are specific aspects of the ethnomedical beliefs that are characteristic to each particular region. Some of the more specific beliefs and practices presented here are in fact quite different from those previously described in the literature. The author thus believes the description to be valuable not only of its own intrinsic interest, but also as additional data to compare, contrast, and consider with that presently available.

Clearly, much of what has been discussed is also of great value in the understanding of both the present health situation and prospects for change in the immediate future. Certainly a number of the perceptions and responses that characterize traditional health care in mountainous Tabasco have quite palpable implications--both for health in general and for the maturing role of modern medicine in particular. An understanding of the present medical system should be considered an essential aspect of any attempts at medical acculturation.