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A Peruvian Curandero's Séance: Power and Balance

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Northern Peru has long been reputed to be a major region for *curanderismo* [shamanistic folk healing] as practiced by mestizo *curanderos* [folk healers] in night healing séances involving the use of hallucinogens, elaborate and culture-specific psychotherapy, and syncretistic religious symbolism in which Indian beliefs and folk Catholicism are functionally blended. Since the 1960's such practices have been attracting increasing attention from scholars (cf. Friedberg 1959, 1960, 1963; Chiappe 1967, 1968, 1969a, 1969b; Dobkin de Rios 1968, 1968-1969, 1969a, 1969b; Seguin 1969, 1970; Rodríguez Suy Suy 1970; Sharon 1972). This paper is meant to contribute to our growing knowledge of northern *curanderismo* by concentrating on the dynamics of the night séance of one *curandero*. It is based upon ethnographic data gathered during two field seasons (summer 1970, and fall 1971) of apprenticeship to the *curandero* Eduardo Calderón. The focus will be on the central goal of Eduardo's séances, balance of power, as expressed in the symbolism of his curing rituals.

Studies by Gillin (1945), Cruz Sánchez (1948, 1950), Friedberg (1960, 1963), Chiappe (1968), Dobkin de Rios (1968), and Sharon (1972) have independently verified that the focal point of all northern Peruvian night healing séances to cure witchcraft is the *mesa* [table], an altarlike arrangement of power objects laid out on the ground. Eduardo also works with a *mesa*. As with other *curanderos*, the power objects of his *mesa* have all been acquired under special circumstances during his years of practice as a *curandero*. Each object has a personal significance to him and embodies a special "account" or story representing a projection of his own inner psychic power. This account becomes activated together with the accounts of the other power objects on the *mesa* whenever they are manipulated at night under the catalytic influence of the psychedelic

San Pedro cactus, imbibed in liquid form (mixed with black tobacco juice or alone) by the *curandero*, his two assistants, patients, and accompanying friends. Taken as a whole, the *mesa* symbolizes the duality of the worlds of man and nature — a veritable microcosmos duplicating the forces at work in the universe.

Eduardo's *mesa* is divided into two major (though unequal) zones, called *campos* [fields], which are kept apart by a third neutral *campo* between them. The left, and smaller, side of the rectangular *mesa* is called the *Campo Ganadero* [Field of the Sly Dealer (Satan)]. It contains artifacts associated with the forces of evil, the underworld, and negative magic, mainly fragments of ancient ceramics and stones from archeological ruins, along with cane alcohol, a deer foot, and a triton shell. This zone is covered by Satan, whose negative powers are concentrated in three staffs, called Satan's Bayonet, Owl Staff, and the Staff of the Single Woman. These are placed upright in the ground behind the artifacts of the *Campo Ganadero*. A sorcerer would use this negative zone for witchcraft or curing for gain; a benevolent curer needs it for consultation in cases of witchcraft, adverse love magic, or bad luck, because this is the realm responsible for such evils, and consequently it is also capable of revealing their sources. The number thirteen is associated with this zone.

The right, and larger, side of the *mesa* — called the *Campo Justiciero* [Field of the Divine Judge, or Divine Justice] — contains artifacts related to the forces of good or positive magic, including images of saints, crystals, shells, a dagger, a rattle, three perfumes, holy water, wild black tobacco, sugar, sweet lime, and a five-gallon can of San Pedro infusion. This zone is governed by Christ — considered as the center or axis of the *mesa* and Lord of all three fields — whose positive powers are focused in the crucifix at the center of the *mesa* as well as in eight staffs (called Swordfish Beak Staff, Eagle Staff, Greyhound Staff, Hummingbird Staff, Staff of the Virgin of Mercy, Sword of St. Paul, Saber of St. Michael the Archangel, and Sword of St. James the Elder). These staffs and swords are placed upright in the ground behind the artifacts of the *Campo Justiciero*. The sacred number twelve (for the twelve apostles and the signs of the zodiac) is associated with this field. The crucifix is the focal point for the 12,000 accounts of the *Campo Justiciero*, as well as for the sacred number seven (the "perfect" number of Christianity and the symbol of seven "justices" or miracles of Christ).

The Middle Field (*Campo Medio*) between the other two fields contains artifacts of a neutral nature in which the forces of good and evil are evenly balanced. This zone is governed by St. Cyprian (a powerful magician who was converted to Christianity), whose neutral powers are focused in a Serpent Staff, the Staff of Moses. The neutral or balanced objects are: a bronze sunburst, a stone symbolizing the sea and the winds, a glass jar containing magic herbs that Eduardo considers to be his

spiritual alter ego, a statue of St. Cyprian seated on a deck of Spanish divining cards with divinatory runes at his feet, a "fortune stone," and a crystal "mirror" with a cat amulet on top of it. The sacred number twenty-five — i.e. twelve plus thirteen — is associated with this Middle Field. The artifacts of the Middle Field are symbolic of forces in nature and the world of man which can be used for good and for evil, depending on the intention of the individual. For Eduardo, who is a "white" shaman, the emphasis is on good, in accord with the pact he made when he was initiated. This commitment is further emphasized by the fact that the *Campo Justiciero* is the largest field of the *mesa*. Here is how Eduardo explains what the concept of balance governing the *Campo Medio* means to him:

The *Campo Medio* is like a judge in this case, or like the needle in a balance, the controlling needle between those two powers, between good and evil. The *Campo Medio* is where the chiefs, the guardians, those who command, those who govern, present themselves since it is the neutral field — that is, the dividing field between two frontiers where a war can occur over a dispute. That is the place where one has to put all, all, all his perseverance so that everything remains well controlled.

The Middle Field represents the core of Eduardo's philosophy, for the opposing forces of the universe — as manifest in this microcosmos known as a *mesa* — although giving birth to the struggle between good and evil in the world, are not conceived of as irreconcilable. Rather, they are seen as complementary, for it is their interaction which creates and sustains all life. The Middle Field, in addition to symbolizing the concept of balance or the complementarity of opposites, also provides guidance for practical action because it is the focal point of the *curandero's* supernatural vision or sixth sense, which is activated by the San Pedro infusion. It is this vision or capacity to "see" that distinguishes the *curandero* from other men and permits him to divine and cure. The Middle Field, as a neutral, balanced area, helps focus the *curandero's* supernatural faculties on the problem at hand, thus making possible his therapy.

A night healing session is the event which provides the proper environment for the focusing of the *curandero's* vision and the manipulation of the forces of the *mesa* in order to solve the patients' problems. There are two parts to the session: ceremony and curing. The ceremonial division lasts from about 10 p.m. until midnight and consists of a series of prayers, rituals, and songs or chants (including whistling) performed to the rhythmic beat of the *curandero's* rattle. At periodic intervals a mixture of boiled San Pedro cactus and wild black tobacco juice is taken through the nostrils by the *curandero* and his two assistants. Nasal imbibing is called "raising," which Eduardo defines as a libation, offering, or tribute to the cosmos intended to "clear the mind." The first division of the seance terminates with the drinking (at midnight) by all of a cup of

pure San Pedro infusion. The purposes of the ceremonial division of the session are to invoke the forces of nature and guardian spirits, to balance the opposing forces operating within man and the cosmos, to make the patient susceptible to therapy, and to focus the *curandero's* vision on the problems at hand. The following are the phases of the ceremonial division of the *séance* as observed by the author and later explained by Eduardo from taped replays:

1. Opening of the account of the entire *mesa*. Between invocations to the forces of nature and the "four winds and four roads" — i.e. the cardinal points — the *curandero* orally sprays the *mesa* twelve times with substances from the *Campo Justiciero*. This same phase is repeated at the end of the entire *séance* to close the account.

2. Prayers addressed to God, the Virgin Mary, Christ, and the saints of the Roman Catholic faith.

3. Invocations to sacred hills, lagoons, archeological shrines of pre-Columbian Peru, the ancients, and other *curanderos*, alive and dead.

4. "Raising" the seven justices of Christ and the 7,000 accounts. The *curandero* nasally imbibes seven servings of boiled San Pedro cactus mixed with wild black tobacco juice. Each time he holds his dagger, rattle, and the crucifix from the center of the *mesa* over his head. The *curandero's* two assistants "raise" the same mixture once only, and do not handle the crucifix. These acts activate the center or axis of the *mesa*.

5. Chant addressed to the personages of the Christian tradition — i.e. Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the apostles, saints, angels — and to miraculous events in their lives, sung to the rhythmic beat of the rattle and interspersed with whistling.

6. "Raising" the 12,000 accounts of the *mesa*. The *curandero* nasally imbibes four servings of San Pedro and tobacco. His assistants imbibe one serving. These acts activate the *Campo Justiciero*. Twelve symbolizes the eleven faithful disciples of Christ plus Paul, who replaces Judas.

7. Chant relating the life of Christ (birth, deeds, death, and resurrection). It is intended to invoke his presence in spirit.

8. Imitation of the mass. The *curandero* lifts a mixture of perfume and holy water above his head and then drinks it.

9. "Raising" the 25 and 250,000 accounts. Only the *curandero's* two assistants perform this operation, imbibing one portion of San Pedro and tobacco each. Twenty-five in *curandero* symbology is obtained by adding the twelve disciples of Christ (the eleven faithful plus Paul) to thirteen — i.e. the eleven faithful plus Paul and Judas. In this act the two assistants activate not only the Middle Field governed by the sacred number twenty-five but also the *Campo Ganadero* governed by the number thirteen. However, the negative accounts of the *Campo Ganadero* are carefully balanced by the Middle Field.

10. Chant addressed to all the forces of nature and the "ancients"

(Indian and Christian). This chant is addressed to the activate collective forces of both *campos*, *Justiciero* and *Ganadero*.

11. "Raising" the San Pedro remedy. The two assistants nasally imbibe three servings of San Pedro and tobacco in the name of the San Pedro brew. Each portion is literally raised along the side of the container of San Pedro. Then the sign of the cross is made over the brew before it is imbibed. After the assistants have "raised" the brew, everyone else present must perform the same operation. The *curandero* abstains from this operation.

12. "Raising" and purification of the *curandero* and San Pedro brew. The *curandero* stands up, holding the herb jar — his alter ego from the *Campo Medio* — as well as his dagger, rattle, and a cup of pure San Pedro — all from the *Campo Justiciero*. Then his two assistants raise individual portions of San Pedro and tobacco from his feet to waist, waist to neck, and neck to the crown of the head before imbibing. While this is being done, the *curandero* chants a song in his own name.

13. "Raising" the San Pedro remedy. This is performed once only, and by the *curandero*. He then drinks the first cup of pure San Pedro brew. When he is finished, everyone else present is allowed to drink the pure brew. The two assistants are the last ones to drink.

14. Cleansing of all present. While one assistant holds his seat before the *mesa*, the *curandero* steps out in the open beyond the staffs at the head of the *mesa*. One by one, all present must be rubbed down with the *curandero's* rattle. Finally the *curandero* rubs himself. The stage is now set for the curing acts.

In sum, opening prayers and invocations lead to the activation of the center or axis associated with the number seven — i.e. the crucifix. Next, the right side of the *mesa*, associated with the forces of good and the number twelve, is activated. Then the neutral Middle Field, associated with the number twenty-five, is activated by the two assistants. In the latter process the smaller left side of the *mesa*, associated with the forces of evil and the number thirteen, is also brought to life through the balanced mediation of the Middle Field. After this the two assistants activate the forces of the San Pedro brew. Then they "center" the *curandero*, which allows him to give the San Pedro brew a final activation and initiate its consumption at midnight. Finally the *curandero* cleanses all participants in the séance, including himself.

A shorthand formula for the numerical buildup of power involved in the activation of the accounts of the *mesa* is: $3+4=7+5=12+13=25$. Eduardo gives the following explanations for these numbers: 3 represents the trinity of Christianity, the three planes of the cosmos (hell, earth, and heaven), the pyramid, the triangle, and the tripartite division of man into body, mind, and spirit; 4 represents the four cardinal points, the "four winds and roads," and the four elements of nature; 7 represents the seven

“justices” or miracles of Christ, the seven seas, the seven rungs of Jacob’s ladder, the seven virgins, the seven churches of early Christianity, the seven seals on the book of life mentioned in Revelation, the seven angels, the seven planets, the seven martyrs, the seven metals, the seven capital sins, the seven spirits, the seven hours required for the preparation of San Pedro before the session, the seven somersaults performed to exorcise attacking evil spirits in serious crises during the curing acts, the four cardinal points plus the three planes of the cosmos, and the center or axis of the *mesa*, i.e. Christ; 5 represents the five senses of man, and the four corners of the mesa united to a central fifth point (the crucifix) via the “four roads”; 12 represents the twelve disciples (with Judas replaced by Paul), the twelve hours of the day, the twelve signs of the zodiac, the twelve months of the year, completion, unity, and the *Campo Justiciero*; 13 represents the eleven loyal disciples plus Paul and Judas, as well as the *Campo Ganadero*; 25 represents the twenty-five balanced accounts of the *Campo Medio* in which polar opposites are united.

In the ninth phase of the ceremonial acts, i.e. “raising” the twenty-five and the 250,000 accounts of the *Campo Medio*, the balancing of the forces of evil or darkness implied in the number twenty-five involves a skillful power play. According to *curandero* folklore, St. Paul, the great lawyer of Christianity who replaced Judas and thus restored balance to the “incomplete” ranks of the eleven disciples through the “complete” number twelve, gathers the positive forces of the *Campo Justiciero* (particularly the Virgin of Mercy, patron of the military forces of Peru, and St. Michael, the commander of the celestial armies). Then, through the balancing power of the *Campo Medio*, he moves into the *Campo Ganadero* to remove Judas temporarily from the domain of Satan. The rationale behind this process is that Judas, as one who has fallen from grace, has a certain affinity with the forces of light — despite his residence in hell — which makes him the most likely candidate to serve as “informer” regarding the evils performed in the *Campo Ganadero* which he knows so well. But the power of the number twelve, by itself and as part of the number thirteen (i.e. $12+12+1=25$), is required to concentrate enough force to perform this balancing act.

There seems to be an apocalyptic undertone to this numerical symbolism and repetitive increase of sacred power. A review of the mystical experiences of St. John the Divine contained in the Book of Revelation in the New Testament confirms this. For example, the idea of the “four winds” and the four cardinal points, although having Indian antecedents, probably received some reinforcement from the following passage: “And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree” (Revelation 7:1). There are also four beasts — a lion, a calf, an animal with a man’s face, and a flying

eagle — corresponding to the Four Apostles, around the throne of God, which provides a central fifth point, like the crucifix of the *mesa* in relation to the four cardinal points. We also have the Four Horsemen of war, destruction, hunger, and death.

The number seven is found throughout the whole book — i.e. the seven churches of early Christianity symbolized by seven golden candlesticks surrounding Christ, seven stars in Christ's right hand symbolizing the seven angels of the seven churches, the seven seals on the book of life as held by the seventh angel, the seven angels with seven trumpets who usher in the millennium, seven plagues, the red dragon with seven heads and crowns, and the beast from the sea also with seven heads. But the following passage gives us a clear indication of the number's use in association with Christ, the sacrificed Lamb of Christianity: "And I beheld, and lo, in the midst of the throne of the four beasts and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven heads and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent forth into all the earth" (Revelation 5:6).

Six is found in the number 666 used to mark the followers of the devil on their right hands or foreheads. The following passage may indicate where the idea of multiplying the accounts of the *mesa* by the thousands comes from: "And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands" (Revelation 5:11).

Twelve is very clearly an important number associated with completion or salvation, for Jerusalem, the holy city in heaven promised to the elect after the millennium, embodies the number: twelve gates (three at each cardinal point) associated with twelve pearls, guarded by twelve apostles, and named after the twelve tribes of Israel; twelve foundations of twelve precious stones named after the twelve apostles; and a wall 12,000 furlongs in length, height, and breadth. In addition, at the end of the book, the tree of life, nurtured by the water of the river of life flowing from the throne of God, has twelve fruits which are replenished every month. A power buildup is associated with the number twelve when it is squared (12×12) in reference to the 144,000 elect. This is the number of servants of God sealed on their foreheads with the seal of the living God by a fifth angel, ascending in the east from among the four angels at the four corners of the earth just before the destruction of the world. Finally, we have twenty-four elders surrounding the throne of God, which provides the central, "balanced" number twenty-five, the sacred number governing the Middle Field.

It is interesting to note the number of times the *curandero* and his assistants "raise" San Pedro and tobacco through their nostrils during the ceremonial division of the seance, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of "raisings" during the séance

"Raisings"	Number of incidences	
	<i>Curandero</i>	Assistants
<i>Mesa</i> , 7,000 accounts	7	1
<i>Mesa</i> , 12,000 accounts	4	1
	—	—
Subtotal	11	
<i>Mesa</i> , 25 and 250,000 accounts	0	1
San Pedro (by 2 assistants, patients)	0	3
		—
		Subtotal
		6
<i>Curandero</i> (by 2 assistants)	0	1
San Pedro (by <i>curandero</i>)	1	0
	—	—
Total	12	Total
		7

From Table 1, it can be seen that the *curandero* is "centered" — that is, he "raises" the symbol of the center seven times early in the session. Then he "raises himself to an incomplete number (eleven, the number of disciples after the betrayal by Judas) or state of imbalance (in terms of completion, or twelve). After performing the mass he maintains the dynamic tension of this imbalance by abstaining from the next two "raising" rites (for twenty-five and San Pedro). Because the herb jar in the *Campo Medio* is the *curandero*'s spiritual alter ego, it is understandable that he abstains from the "raising" of the number twenty-five (symbol of the *Campo Medio*), for in effect he is overseeing the delicate task of "raising" his own soul as well as activating the negative forces of the *Campo Ganadero* and, because the *mesa* is a projection of his own inner powers, those of his own nature, both balanced by the *Campo Medio*. While he maintains this detachment, the assistants also "raise" themselves to an incomplete number (six, the number of the devil in Revelation) or state of imbalance in terms of the center, or seven. They escape this dilemma by imbibing for the seventh time while "raising" the *curandero*'s corporeal self as he holds his activated alter ego, the herb jar. They thus center themselves and establish their capacity to do this for the patients later on in the curing rituals. Now that both his alter ego and corporeal self are "raised," the *curandero* is finally in a position to complete or integrate himself by "raising" the San Pedro infusion and then drinking it at the twelfth hour of clock time, midnight. This climactic culmination of events leads to activation of all his personal powers at the birth of a new day, realized by balancing the opposing forces of the microcosmic *mesa* and of his own psyche.

Thus the ceremonial division of the séance consists of a balanced power buildup. This power is then applied in the second part of the session,

which lasts from midnight until 4 to 6 a.m. and consists of the actual curing acts. During the curing division of the séance, each person present must take a turn before the *mesa* while the *curandero* chants a song in his name. Then everyone concentrates on the staffs and swords placed upright in the ground at the head of the *mesa*. One of these artifacts is supposed to vibrate, because it is the focal point of the forces affecting the patient. It is given to the patient to hold in his left hand and over his chest, while the *curandero* chants the song of the staff to activate its account and cause its powers to become manifest. While everyone now concentrates on the patient, the *curandero* begins a long divinatory discourse in which he relates what he "sees." Sometimes others present see the same things as the *curandero*. According to Eduardo, the purpose of the discourse is to get the patient's subconscious to release whatever blockages are causing his problem. Once terminated, two assistants (one behind the patient and one in front) "raise" the patient from foot to waist, waist to neck, and neck to crown with a liquid provided by the *curandero* (usually the San Pedro and tobacco mixture, but other liquids — often a perfume — may be chosen) while he chants a final song. Then the patient must nasally imbibe a liquid provided by the *curandero* while holding the staff by one end over his head. This is called "raising the staff." Finally an assistant or the *curandero* rubs the patient with the staff, sprays it orally with whatever liquid is indicated, and returns it to the head of the *mesa*. After all present have had a turn before the *mesa*, the *curandero* closes the account with a final invocation to the "four winds and four roads" combined with a ritual purification of the *mesa* — performed by spraying it twelve times with substances from the *Campo Justiciero*. Thus the number twelve associated with Christ can be seen as an apt symbol for completion and the saying "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending . . ." (Revelation 1:8). Before departing, each person must be orally sprayed with a mixture of water, lye, and white corn flour while the *curandero* makes the form of a cross in the ground where the *mesa* stood and sprinkles the four corners of the area and the outlines of the cross with the same white corn flour mixture.

In conclusion, analysis of the spatial arrangement of power objects on Eduardo's *mesa* and the structure of the curing séance reveal the symbolic expression of his major goal: balance of power. Through ritual and the mediation of the Middle Field, the opposing forces of the *mesa* — and of the *curandero* — are activated and brought into meaningful, balanced interaction. The power generated by the ritual manipulation of power objects is then applied in solving patients' problems. The creative synthesis between aboriginal shamanism and Christian symbology manifest in Eduardo's art seems to be directly relevant to those who seek his services. It appears that shamanism in northern Peru may be more than a colorful relic left over from the Indian past.

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