



## BOOK REVIEWS

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*La Voz del Kultrun en la Modernidad: Tradición y Cambio en la Terapeutica de Siete Machi Mapuche.* By Ana Mariella Bacigalupo. Ediciones Universidad Católica de Chile, 2001. 271 pages. N.p.

In her book, *La Voz del Kultrun en la Modernidad* (*The Voice of Kultrun in Modern Times*), Ana Mariella Bacigalupo reviews the lives and traditions of seven Machi spiritual healers among the Mapuche of Chile. These lives are set—in the first part of the book—in the context of the rich cultural heritage of these Mapuche peoples from the south of Chile.

With a methodology drawing heavily from life histories, Bacigalupo interviewed these seven practitioners. She not only interviewed them but established a dialogue. We might remember the way dialogue has been defined by scholars like Denis Tedlock, Louise Burckhart, and Jorge Klor de Alba. It is a dia-logic encounter between two logics and two ways of constructing the world of ritual, of illness and health, of evil and good, of sacred and profane, of life and death. These two logics are present in Bacigalupo's dialogues with the Machis. She asked and recorded but also entered into their world by letting them heal and protect her. Her knowledge emerges from this "participant-observation," which is the preferred mode of field research in anthropology. No other way is suitable for such an enterprise, and Bacigalupo uses it masterfully. Research on oral religious traditions, like the one here, requires these methodologies, which could be considered innovative within the religious research field.

Transmission and practices in indigenous religious traditions operate in an oral mode. As some scholars have noted, oral thought is prone to juxtapositions, unlikely combinations, and unexpected associations. It is inscribed in an ordering always marked by movement and change and ready to cast experience into narratives. They cannot be approached with the same methods as other religions. One of the great contributions of this book is to present the results of a study done with a methodology suitable for the religious cosmologies of the indigenous populations of the American continent.

During these “dialogues” we discover these two worlds in confrontation and the process by which these endowed powerful healers keep their traditions by changing them and adapting them to modernity. As paradoxical as this might seem, this process appears quite seamless through the pages of this book, which reports the results of field research by the author. At the end of the first part Bacigalupo describes this process. She elaborates self-reflexively on the prejudice of some anthropologists who invalidate certain of these healing rituals because they have been altered by the incorporation of other elements alien to them. For them, they are not “pure” enough. This issue is the starting point of one of the basic insights and contributions of this book. It is the description of the way by which these ritual specialists retranslate these alien elements into their own Machi cosmivision. Machi healers are masterful in incorporating, resignifying, and reconfiguring these elements and giving them a symbolic meaning within their own frame of reference.

As other peoples of indigenous origin in the Americas, the Mapuche of Chile construct their worldview around certain basic concepts. First of all there is duality. This is in fact a synthesis and a fluid connection between what we may call opposites. For them, “rituals are useful to sustain equilibrium between opposed and conflictive forces,” and “this notion is different from the Christian abstract ideas of good and evil” (16). Bacigalupo proceeds to analyze how every deity and powerful spirit has a beneficial aspect (*cara*) for humans and a negative one that punishes and could damage them. She proceeds then to describe the other entities of this divine pantheon.

Word and sound, especially that of the Kultrun (ritual drum) are at the base of auditive/oral thinking, which is at the root of Mapuche epistemology. The herbal remedies are shaken while the animal protectors dance with the sound of the Kultrun in order to become able to heal. The Machi drums the rhythms of the Kultrun on the ill person’s body to frighten away the bad spirits. Everybody present grasps the beneficial force of this rhythm and participates in it. The Machis’ practices enhance a dramatic performative ritualization of the fight against evil forces, illness, and death.

As she reviews some of the particularities of the Machi cosmivision, Bacigalupo reminds us that she is speaking of the consensual cosmivision and in no way implies that it is reproduced exactly alike by every Machi she has interviewed. As is well known, in oral religious traditions the personal creativity of the practitioner as well as her circumstances and the process of what has been called “cultural change” are at the root of this variability in permanence. This does not imply degradation or degeneration of the ritual and belief system but, rather, “Other” orders of values in which process and transformation are not only tolerated but appreciated.

A careful review of the concepts of illness and health within the context of Machi cosmological beliefs reveals little connection to the standard pathological entities of the medical establishment. Medical and sacred realities fuse in the author’s accounts of Machi healing rituals. Spiritual illness is corporeal. No mutually exclusive categories separate the realm of the spiritual from the realm of the corporeal. In Bacigalupo’s life histories Machi healers do not even make a

point of clarification on this issue. Matter and spirit, body and soul, are one and the same. Dreaming is also an activity of connection with the ancestral and spiritual world. These spiritual healers do not do any psychoanalytic or psychological interpretations. Their dreams are true visitations from deities, ancestors, or protector spirits. They again fuse the realm of the spiritual to the physical. Dreaming is considered as real an experience as the wakened state. The “majority of Machi are women” (30). When speaking about the spirit possession rituals during the curing session, Bacigalupo points out that “their spirits are usually considered feminine or with both feminine and masculine qualities” (30).

In the second part of her book Bacigalupo elaborates on the lives of five Machi women—Nora, Rocío, Pamela, Marta, and Fresia—and two men—Sergio and Jorge. She does a very nuanced analysis of how gender defines, limits, or expands their curing and transcendent powers. The life histories on which she has chosen to focus reveal the interactions between the permanence of traditions and their transformations. Gender issues enrich her analysis and explain some of the complex interactions between the Machis’ intracommunity healing powers as these interrelate with the political and military powers of the wider society. Every one of them has a distinct worldview, even when sharing one cultural context. There is no obligation to reproduce it in an orthodox way. Flexibility and openness to improvisation are not only possible but accepted. The author theorizes on this variability, calling it *polisemia armonica* (harmonious polysemy) (259).

A rigorous and detailed ethnography complements this study throughout, thus allowing us to approach this elusive reality without idealization but with the respect due to the originary inhabitants of America, the *pueblos originarios*, as they call themselves. Their beliefs and practices are often hermetic and hard to understand.

Studies like this one could provide insights opening a path toward an ethics of respect in the academic world and the wider society. Bacigalupo ends her book expressing her gratitude for the generosity and friendship with which the Machis supported her during her field study years: “This work intends to help propagate and legitimate the teachings of the Machi as social performers, intellectuals and spiritual intermediaries who re-create the Mapuche universe shaping a new future for their medicine.”