



Spiritual Afflictions and Sorcery Accusations among the Miskitu

Johan Wedel

Abstract. – Among the Miskitu people of Eastern Nicaragua, illness and other afflictions are often said to be caused either by a spirit directly or through sorcery where a sorcerer is said to have “worked” with one or more spirits. Local healers make this distinction by examining the symptoms of the afflicted and by using various divinatory techniques. To diagnose an illness as caused by sorcery may, however, lead to interpersonal conflicts, revenge, and physical violence directed at both the supposed sorcerer and the healer. By presenting narratives about healing, suffering, and spiritual beings, I explore how afflictions by spirits are understood and dealt with, and examine how the healers handle the consequences of a sorcery diagnosis. [Nicaragua, Miskitu, spiritual afflictions, sorcery, healing]

Johan Wedel, Ph. D. in Social Anthropology, lecturer and researcher at University of Gothenburg (Sweden). – He has done fieldwork in Cuba and Nicaragua. Research interest: Medical Anthropology, Religious Healing, Cuba, Nicaragua, Santería, Miskitu, Afro-Caribbean. – Publications: see References Cited.

Sorcery and witchcraft have been studied from a number of perspectives (see, e.g., Stewart and Strathern 2004 or Kapferer 2003 for an overview) although less attention has been given to the issue of sorcery accusations in relation to healing. In this article, I am interested in how sorcery and spiritual afflictions are understood and related to illness and healing, and how healers deal with the fact that a sorcery diagnosis may lead to severe negative social and physical consequences for both the accused sorcerer and the healer. I will focus on the Miskitu people of eastern Nicaragua,¹ among whom I carried out anthropological fieldwork during eleven months from 2005 to 2008.²

Many ailments and problems among the Miskitu are considered spiritual in origin and treated by healers according to Miskitu theories of illness cau-

sation.³ The healers use dreams and various forms of divinatory techniques to determine if the affliction is caused by a spirit directly or through sorcery. In the first case, it is said that the problem is relatively easy to resolve and most healers find these cases uncomplicated. If, however, sorcery (*brujería* or *hechicería*) is said to be the cause and a sorcerer has “worked” with one or more spirits and “sold” the victim, the case is often considered both difficult and dangerous (see also García 1995).

Generally speaking, as shown by Kapferer (2003), West (2007), and others, sorcery is related to both destruction and regeneration. Miskitu healers who deal with sorcery cases must be familiar with how sorcery is performed in order to heal their patients. They are, therefore, also potential sorcerers. Many of the healers I spoke to would agree that some of them “work double”; they heal but also perform morally wrong or evil “works.” A healer

1 The Miskitu people in Nicaragua number approximately 100,000 people and the majority lives along the Atlantic coast in the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN). About 50,000 people also live in Honduras (Dennis 2004: 23).

2 Research for this article was carried out in the port town of Puerto Cabezas (also known as Bilwi), the regional capital of the North Atlantic Autonomous Region and mainly funded by the Swedish Research Council. Most of the interviews were carried out in Spanish. An interpreter was used when people only spoke Miskitu.

3 Miskitu cosmology and illness etiology has been influenced by indigenous, Christian (mainly Moravian and Roman Catholic), and Afro-Caribbean beliefs. The Miskitu have a long history of relations with foreigners. In the mid-1600s, Miskitu-speaking groups began to intermarry with Africans who had escaped slavery (Dennis 2004: 26f.; Offen 2002).

said that “someone who knows how to do good things can also do bad things.” What is considered sorcery, and who may be deemed a sorcerer, is further dependent on one’s point of view. Followers of some of the Protestant churches in eastern Nicaragua, for example, would label all healers as immoral sorcerers.

Among most people, sorcery is perceived as a rather vague and ambiguous concept. To perform love magic (*yamni kaikan*) is considered immoral and, therefore, sorcery by some people, while others would accept this kind of magic as legitimate. For Miskitu women in Honduras, for instance, sexual magic is a way to gain access to men’s wages (Herlihy 2006). Several of the healers I met claimed that their clients often asked them to perform all kinds of sorcery, from love magic to hurting someone, commonly by offering large sums of money or sexual favors. People in general were also said to have some knowledge about sorcery and magical works. Discussing sorcery with a healer, he said that “on the Pacific side [of Nicaragua] people kill each other with machetes and guns, but here we use sorcery.” Another healer warned me of the magical skills of the Miskitu women and said: “If you get together with a Miskitu woman who is malicious, you will never get back to Sweden.”

During fieldwork, I was often told that sorcery took place in poor neighborhoods or impoverished villages. A healer told me that “in [the town of] Puerto Cabezas, sorcery is only performed in [the neighborhoods] El Muelle and El Cocal which are the poorest ones.” When discussing supposed sorcery attacks in some of the poor Miskitu villages along the Rio Coco in northeastern Nicaragua on the border to Honduras, he said: “The situation is at the bottom. It’s like ‘save yourself if you can. This is your problem, not mine.’” In a similar vein, in a recent comparative study of two Miskitu villages in the South Atlantic Autonomous Region, Jamieson (2008) showed how sorcery accusations are more common in an environment of poverty and competition for scarce resources.⁴

Sorcery is commonly said to have been learned by a master and through various books about “occult sciences.”⁵ Young men were often pointed out

4 For a comparative discussion of the relation between witchcraft/sorcery, sorcery accusations, and poverty, see Thylefors (2002).

5 An often mentioned book when discussing sorcery was “El Libro de San Cipriano” (The Book of Saint Cyprian). The book, which has appeared in many editions and with various authors, has been widely used in Latin America for all kinds of spells and magical works. Some of the healers I met called the book “diabolic” and related it to sorcery, while others said they occasionally used it when healing.

as sorcerers because of their supposed natural curiosity and because they did not understand the social consequences of sorcery acts. The teachings include how to provoke illness and accidents by using spirits, objects, substances, Christian prayers, and psalms and may involve “working” with a victim’s photo, name, sweaty clothes, footprints, or something else that has “belonged” to the person, or that looks like him/her, such as a doll (see also Dennis 2004: 220; cf. Wedel 2004: 53 ff.).

There are many reasons for a sorcery attack. I came across several people who claimed that a sorcerer often causes illness and suffering, because he has been rejected by a beautiful girl. His revenge will then often bring illness upon several other people as well. Feelings of jealousy could also result in sorcery. It is also said that someone who has learned how to perform sorcery must try his skills on someone. A healer explained: “He has no choice, or he will become affected himself. The bad spirit demands him to do something.”

Some skilled sorcerers are also said to be shape-shifters and able to transform themselves into monkeys, eagles, and other animals. When I interviewed healers about sorcery cases, the narratives often included physical evidence of sorcery and a spiritual battle between the healer and the sorcerer. Sorcerers were also said to provoke symptoms of illnesses such as aids, diabetes, and cancer. As these were spiritually provoked, biomedical treatment was said to be ineffective (Wedel 2009a: 51). A healer, who had healed many people with sorcery problems, concluded that: “Sorcery is done everywhere and with a photo, clothes, underwear, or the hair. One cannot trust anybody these days. The government must punish them [the sorcerers], but they set them free.”

People who are accused of sorcery often have to flee and go and live somewhere else. They are also sometimes mistreated or killed. In the national newspaper *La Prensa* (2003b) it is retold how a sorcerer was burned to death in his house after being blamed for a number of suicides among young girls. Another sorcerer from a small village was badly beaten and mistreated after being accused of bewitching sixteen young girls. In another case, the population reportedly stabbed a sorcerer to death (*La Prensa* 2003a).

Miskitu Spirits and Spiritual Afflictions

Spiritual afflictions and sorcery are closely related to the spirits of the Miskitu worldview. Here I wish to describe some of the most important ones. A

well-known spirit in Miskitu cosmology is the *sirena* or *liwa mairin*, often described as a female or male mermaid. This spirit, which is said to be very good-looking and a great singer, lives in water and is related to the human reproductive system. The *sirena* may become in love with a human being and appears in dreams having sex with the person. When this takes place, it is said that the victim will suffer from symptoms similar to gonorrhoea. Male *sirenas* can also make women spiritually pregnant, followed by a miscarriage. The spirit may also affect the fetus of a pregnant woman with a normal pregnancy and cause miscarriage.

If the relationship with the *sirena* deepens and the person accepts a “pact” with the spirit, it may materialize and bring gifts and fulfill all kinds of wishes. In the end, however, the person will drown in the sea or the river. When someone dreams about bathing in the river and wakes up with bruising, it is a sign that the person is being haunted by the *sirena*. In a story told by a healer who came from the Rio Coco area, a young man made a pact with a *sirena* and one day he disappeared: “We were looking everywhere. On the fourth day in the morning, we found him [dead]. He was bleeding from his nose and his body was still warm. We found him one kilometer upstream! He had been drowned by the *sirena*.”

As the spirit is the guardian of everything related to water, it may also punish fishermen with accidents or inflict paralysis if they have been fishing too many lobsters or turtles (see also Dennis 2004: 142f.). The *sirena* may also punish women with illness, if they have, for example, entered the water while menstruating. When the *sirena* is said to be the cause of an illness, a “work” directed to this spirit can be done in order to heal the afflicted. A healer told how he once treated a man who was very sick and unconscious because he had been “sold” to *liwa mairin* by a sorcerer. To undo the sorcery and heal the patient, blood from a black hen was poured into the river while reading a prayer.

The *duende*, *duhindu*, or *swinta* is another spiritual being in the Miskitu cosmology. This spirit is a kind of gnome living in forests and mountains. It protects the wild animals of the forest and may punish hunters with illness and madness, if they have hunted too many deer or wild pigs. Three kinds of gnomes exist: white, black, and red. In stories about afflicting *duendes*, people usually refer to the red gnome, *duende rojo*, which is considered the rudest and most dangerous. The *duende*, which can be both male and female, may also become in love with humans. The person who accepts a pact with the spirit will receive gifts and money, and will be

taught the art of music and herbal healing. This is nonetheless a dangerous relationship as the spirit may ask for something in return, such as the life of a relative. In the following story, told by a man in Puerto Cabezas, a young woman was becoming rich through a pact with a *duende*:

In a village upstream of Rio Coco there was a girl named . . . who made a pact. The *duende* brought a whole deer to her house. At night he was singing for her and dancing. He brought her things of gold. But then he asked for the life of her father, older brother, and child. She rejected. But the *duende* [nevertheless] taught her how to heal with herbs and she is now a *curandera* [healer].

The *duende* can also make a person disappear and take her/him to another dimension. During fieldwork, I came across several stories about people who had been carried away by the spirit. In 2006, in the town of Puerto Cabezas, for example, a male student was gone all of a sudden. On a local radio channel it was speculated that a friend’s mother had “sold” the student to a *duende*. In another story about *duendes*, which was related by a *curandero* in Puerto Cabezas, a man had suddenly disappeared in the mountains:

In 1993, a young man named . . . took his car to *las minas* [the mining area in the North Atlantic Autonomous Region]. On the way he stepped out of the car to do his physiological necessities and he disappeared. His family, the authorities, and everybody continued to look for him without rest. Three weeks passed. I was working at a radio-station at the time and took up the case. I called the civil defense, the Red Cross, the civil society, friends, everybody, to get together a commission to find him – and it worked! We found him on the road to [the town] Waspam a month after he had disappeared. He had scratches all over his body. When he came back, he was cured by a *curandero* and began to talk. He told me it was like a dream. A “little guy” with a big hat [i.e., the *duende*] had taken him to the mountains. He was given food. Sometimes he was taken to Puerto Cabezas where he could see his friends, but he could not talk. He was like invisible. When they had to cross rivers and streams, they flew over them.

In another story, told by the Nicaraguan ethnologist Avelino Cox Molina, an elderly man was also abducted by a *duende*.⁶

A long time ago, an old man was taken away by a *duende* and had been gone for six months. A *sukia* [shaman] said that he had been punished for doing something wrong but that he would return. The *sukia* also said that he could

6 Personal communication, October 15, 2006.

be found at a certain place at a certain time, but if they missed that specific time, he would be gone forever. They found him at that place. He was dumb and could not talk, so the *sukia* hit his mouth and made him talk. He wasn't crazy. He told that the *duende* was a female. He said: "She showed herself. She undressed and said that she wanted to live with me, but I was afraid. I wasn't ill-treated but was not allowed to leave. Day after day, it was a torture. I could see the people who went looking for me." He told that he had been shown many curative plants and today he lives by healing people.

Both temptation and fear are present in many stories and visions about *duendes* and they seem to mirror humans in many ways; they are herbal healers and musicians and show feelings of love and jealousy. Their similarity to humans was also a topic after the hurricane Felix had devastated villages and forests in the RAAN in 2007. As the forest, their natural habitat, had been destroyed by the hurricane, the *duendes* were said to have come into the villages and into people's houses asking for help. This was especially the case in the village of Krukira which was almost completely destroyed by the hurricane. The population was severely affected and had to rely on foreign donations to survive. I talked to a healer who had visited the site after the disaster. He told the following story:

Krukira was badly affected by the hurricane and all the houses were thrown aside. Everybody was traumatized and afraid. People dreamed about *duendes* and became sick. Some people could see them. They [the spirits] were asking for clothes and food and said they also had a right to the donations. A 25-year-old girl, who had contact with the *duendes*, then said "they are coming to say goodbye because they are leaving the village," and they left.

Another common figure in the Miskitu cosmology is *prahaku*, the powerful spirit of wind and space. It can provoke convulsions, high fever and even death, often when someone is exposed to a strong wind and dark clouds. The spirit may also show itself as a spider and can steal the shadow of a person (Cox Molina 1998: 31). There are many stories about sorcerers who have used *prahaku* for evil purposes, such as causing rainstorms or bringing down lightning. At one occasion, I went with a friend who is also a *curandero* to visit a young man who was very thin, had severe pain, and was walking with crutches. He told that three years ago he was working on a boat when he was surprised by a sudden heavy rain and strong wind. He had fallen and hurt his leg, been hospitalized, and went through various medical therapies, but had only become worse. He

talked to the healer who divined by using Spanish cards. The healer then concluded that someone had done a spiritual work with the client:

The accident was not natural; it was caused by someone who did a "work" with *prahaku*. It was done because of [quarrels over] a woman, because of hatred and revenge. His enemy is doing "filthy things" so that he will not become well. He needs protection. The person who is doing this is powerful, he knows things.

Another spirit in the Miskitu cosmology, *ubia*, may occasionally appear as a human being, and is related to forests, mountains, and hills. Those who meet him will become sick with convulsions and high fever. A man, who used to be a hunter as a youth, told how he once met *ubia* in the forest:

I was walking in the forest, when I suddenly saw an enormous black man with a huge penis and red eyes. I tried to get my thoughts together and repeated "God, don't abandon me." I was soaked with sweat and shaking with fever. When I arrived at my house, I was half dead. I told my mother to prepare some herbs because I had seen some rare things. Then I became unconscious. At night I woke up and my family asked what had happened. I told them I would tell them tomorrow. If you see a spirit, you should not tell about it right way, then you could die or become dump.

Other spirits that can be mentioned is *cadejo*, a dog-like creature with a smell that may cause diarrhea; the spirit of the *ceiba* or silk-cotton tree (*sisin dusa*); and *wakambay*, a dangerous one-legged, horse-like, spirit. The *muertos* or *isingni* (spirits of deceased persons) may also cause various afflictions and should be avoided. Especially dangerous is the spirit of someone who has died a violent death. An encounter with this spirit may cause a serious affliction known as *latawira*. In this case, the person will become dangerous, violent, and suicidal, and have frightening visions of a threatening *duende* covered in blood. In addition to these spirits, there exist various spiritual helpers, such as angels, saints, or blue-eyed men, who may assist healers when dreaming, divining, and healing. Some healers (i.e., shamans) may also turn afflicting spirits, such as the *duende*, *sirena*, or *prahaku*, into spiritual helpers when healing and attending patients.

Miskitu Healers

Three kinds of healers can be found among the Miskitu: the *profeta* (prophet), the *sukia* (shaman), and the *curandero* (herbal healer). The term *curan-*

dero, healer, may also sometimes be used to signify the *profeta* and the *sukia*. Outsiders may use the term *espiritista* (spiritist) for all three categories as well as the patronizing *brujo* or *hechicero* (sorcerer). The healers may often call themselves *médicos naturistas* (natural doctors), *médicos indígenas* (indigenous doctors), *agentes sanitarios tradicionales* (traditional health agents), or simply *especialistas* (specialists).

The most highly respected, but also most uncommon form of healers, are the *profetas* or *prapit* (prophets). They are said to get their abilities of healing and foreseeing the future after being struck by lightning or by suddenly receiving a strong spiritual force. The prophets have an extraordinary close contact with the spiritual world and were earlier known by the name *ukuly*, which can be translated as “maker of weather and wind” (Cox Molina 2003: 15). They are closely associated with the forces of nature and concerned about the wellbeing of the community (see also Pérez Chiriboga 2002: 212 ff.). One example is Dora,⁷ a well-known *profeta* who lived in a poor neighborhood in Puerto Cabezas. She used dreams, hand-reading and occasionally Spanish cards when diagnosing her patients’ problems. As she often undertook sorcery cases, both she and her family were under a constant threat from sorcerers: “If we look away, they [the sorcerers] will kill us. We are afraid and very alert.” Dora was in her early fifties, when I met her. She had been receiving spiritual messages for more than forty years:

When I was seven years old, I began to have revelations and dreams about things that were going to happen. I woke up in my bed and said I saw things. My father scolded me and hit me on the mouth. He said that I was in contact with the devil and brought me to a Catholic priest, but after four days it always came back. Today I am fifty-one and the dreams never stop. Thank God I am shown in the dream which medicine to use. In the dream, a tall man with blue eyes and long hair is talking to me. Sometimes I see *duende*, monkeys, sorcerers, and things that people do in secret. If I hear the sound of a bell ringing loud, it means that someone is going to die. When I am awake, I can also see if someone is a sorcerer or hear a voice that says what is going to happen. A spider also warns me when there are going to be problems; it shows itself in my room and goes up and down.

Some time ago, one of my sons was killed with an axe in Rio Coco. During his funeral, there appeared a coral snake and they said that I had sent it, but I didn’t. Later, my husband tried to commit suicide in his bed with knives and a rope. My other son drank a lot and became

like crazy. I myself got a terrible pain in my stomach, in my eyes, and in my whole body. I said: “This is not right; it must be because of sorcery.” Then I found out that it was the wife of my other son who had performed sorcery using my photo and prayers. She is from Honduras and looks like nothing, but she has her things. During three days I demanded that she gave me the photo and finally she did [showing me the photo with her eyes cut out]. If my husband dies, it’s because of sorcery. We are in this, in the middle. Sometimes I am thinking of quitting, because my son was killed by sorcery, but I have to continue. I can’t abandon my work.

Another *profeta* is José, a man in his forties from a village along the Rio Coco. He has studied to become a catechist at the Catholic Church and is currently working part-time as a healer. He is well-known for his abilities to deal with problems caused by sorcery and has been healing people since he was a child. He claimed that young people often were exposed to sorcery: “The bad, evil ones do this to the healthy youngster because they don’t want to smoke marijuana, absorb cocaine, or inject heroine.” José is said to have large amounts of “positive energy” which makes him able to affect the weather and induce rain, foresee the future, and heal spiritually caused illnesses:

When I was four, I was hit by lightning. When I was six, I began to receive divine information. At eight, I dreamed about an earthquake which then took place in Managua. Successively, I have been hit by lightning five times. The last one left half of my body paralyzed for two weeks. I am expecting to receive two more because they are seven in total. Of these, one is possibly very dangerous. This is what it means to be a *profeta*. I dream and receive visions of small persons and angels who come with certain biblical text, prayers, psalms, and proverbs. These I use to heal because they chase away the bad spirits. They are secret because with the same prayers a sorcerer could kill me. I also use herbs and perfume.

I have several celestial doctors working with me. Saint Michael the Archangel helps me. If a soul is plagued by a supernatural potency, I heal and make it like new again. Saint Martín de Porres is a divine doctor and surgeon. He helps me operate on everyone who has been affected by a negative potency. Saint Gabriel, Saint Raphael, and the Virgin of Guadalupe also help me.

People here study magical prayers with demonic books. They work with spirits in the great forests, with the spirits of the dead, with the water spirit, and with the spirit of space, to [magically] introduce things into the stomach and into the blood of people. When I am facing this kind of situation, I must be well protected, because the sorcerers are not in agreement with what I am doing. They must be punished and this must be reflected in the [Nicaraguan] Constitution, so that the healers are protected. But now they just carry on with their work, killing people.

⁷ All names are pseudonyms in order to protect informants.

The second category of healers, the *sukias* (shamans), has been heavily oppressed by the Moravian Church (Dennis 2004: 210) and today there are few left in Nicaragua. In Puerto Cabezas, for example, which is the major town in the region, there are no *sukias* to be found. As with the *profetas*, *sukias* are “called” by the spirits. Most *sukias* first become ill and lie unconscious for about a week. During their recovery, they have visions and dreams and begin to sing in an archaic language which is difficult to understand for non-initiated Miskitu speakers. The *sukias* are then isolated for months or even years and have to follow certain rules and will receive spiritual instructions in their dreams on how to heal with herbs and plants. They often specialize in certain kinds of afflictions and may become possessed while healing (see also Pérez Chiriboga 2002: 202 ff.).

Ana is a *sukia* in her fifties from the upper Rio Coco area. I met her on one occasion, when she made the long trip to Puerto Cabezas to visit family and friends and to work as a healer. Her story is rather typical regarding how she became a *sukia*:

Everybody who becomes a *sukia* first gets sick and unconscious and then begins to sing. When you begin to sing, you become well and the discomfort you feel disappears, but you will then have another mentality. When I was fourteen, I suddenly became very sick and was taken to the hospital. I had fever and headache, but they didn’t do anything. I left the hospital, but became unconscious and was taken to a house by the river. I began to sing. I dreamed about a man who said that when I woke up, I should first drink a red soft drink [i.e., red Fanta].

When I woke up, I was in an unfamiliar place and could not speak. I was told that I had been lying with closed eyes for seven days. Then I had a vision of the same man again who told me that for one year and six months I should only drink certain liquids and soft drinks, and only eat certain white food. After one and a half year the man appeared again and told me that now I had the power to act as a specialist in natural medicine. From that moment, the man never leaves me and since then I have been curing people with medical plants. I either dream about which plants to use or immediately make a diagnosis. In the last case, I am not aware of what I am saying, but I have an assistant that writes everything down. I can also mention the treatment in my song. When I have finished, we go and look for the remedies and apply them.

I could also sleep with a patient’s shirt. In the dream I talk to the patient and I am told what he has; if it’s because of sorcery, bad spirits, or if it has to do with the [medical] doctors. In the dream I see everything, everything. It’s like when we are talking to each other now, face to face. I am also a midwife and I attend a lot of deliveries. As my spirit doesn’t like blood he could move away for some time, but he never leaves me.

Ana used a table with flowers, perfume, Florida Water (Cologne Water), coins, lit candles, and red Fanta during a healing ritual which I observed. She danced around the patient with herbs in her hands while singing. She explained the procedure:

I offer the bad spirits to come to the table and drink and I give them coins to set the patient free. It’s like becoming a friend with the spirits. When I treat a patient, it’s like the spirits are acting like doctors. The spirit of space that comes to me is a bright man with a lot of light. The *duende rojo* (red gnome) also comes, but he is very aggressive and rude and does not come close. All things on the table have their function; they help to make the spirits leave the patient. The flowers are blessed and the Florida Water has a smell that the spirits don’t like. They are “blocked” and won’t disturb the patient more.

Ana was unwilling to heal patients who had been the victims of sorcery despite her great healing abilities. She explained:

When someone is disturbed by bad spirits, I take care of it. But if it’s because of a “criminal hand” [sorcery], I immediately transfer the person to someone else. To deal with these situations means to have many strong enemies. When they cannot finish off the therapist, they go for the family members. To avoid this situation, I don’t want to get involved in sorcery cases.

In another narrative, a *curandero* in his late fifties from the Rio Coco area told how his wife became a *sukia*:

When we got married, everything was normal and my wife didn’t know anything about medical plants. First, she began to speak in her sleep about plants. She became unconscious, like dead, and only woke up from time to time to ask for coconut water. She then began to sing and spoke about lightning and angels. That’s how it began. For one year she was prohibited [by the spirits] to have sexual relations, otherwise she would lose her power. The spirits told her how to heal. Once, a chap was lost in the mountains for four days. He had been taken by a *duende*. When he came back, he could not talk, but my wife gave him a [herbal] bath and healed him. She became very good at healing and people came all the way from Managua to see her.

My wife asks the patient to give her a coin and his used shirt, which she hangs by her bed. In the dream, the spirits show her if someone has performed sorcery. She tells me to go and find this and that plant. It’s like she is the doctor and I am the nurse. If the problem is caused by a spirit, it’s easy [to heal], but if someone has provoked *grisi sikhnis* [mass possession] with prayers and sold a person to the *duende*, it is very difficult.

The most common form of healer is the *curandero* (female: *curandera*). The *curandero*, sometimes



Fig. 1: Divination with a key stuck into a bible (Photo: Johan Wedel).

also called *hierbero* (herbalist), may, or may not, treat spiritual afflictions and generally has a vast knowledge about curative plants and herbs. Some *curanderos* may specialize in treating certain spiritual afflictions and sorcery cases by using herbs, substances, objects, smoke, and prayers. Compared to the *profeta* and the *sukia*, the *curandero* does not need to receive a spiritual gift in order to become a healer. Anyone who learns about the healing properties of plants may become a *curandero*, although many *curanderos* also receive spiritual information in their dreams on how to treat their patients. Herbal knowledge is often passed on from the *curandero* to his/her children but could also be learned from a master or to some extent from other media, such as radio programs and books about herbal medicine.

Susana is a *curandera* in her forties who lived in a wooden house with a large patio in the outskirts of Puerto Cabezas. She has been a healer for more than twenty years:

My grandparents were *curanderos* and I learned a lot about plants from them. First I began to heal people with *nervios* (nerves), dizziness, and headache. There are people who think that headache is always because of bad spirits, but it's often from nerves, high blood pressure, or because people don't drink enough water. I examine the patient to see what she has. Her body will tell me. If she is weak, looks depressed, feels dizzy, has convulsions, talks to herself, count her fingers and things like that, it's because she has been bewitched by bad people. I am also helped by my dreams. Through my dreams I know what is going to happen. People come to my house all the

time. I live by this, I save lives. The sorcerers disavow my work. Those who work with black magic and have contact with the bad spirits don't want the *curanderos* to succeed. They know that we save lives. They sometimes try to kill us to have a clear path, but I always ask God on my knees to help me and to give me energy to continue.

Pedro is another *curandero*. He is in his sixties and lives with his family in a large house in Puerto Cabezas. He is a renowned healer and is always busy attending clients. As a form of divination he used a key which had been stuck into a bible: "In the bible there is a secret. It talks about when God helped the Israelis to cross the Red Sea by making a path. There [at this page] we tie the key in the bible." Pedro and the client held the key between their fingers while Pedro asked "yes" or "no" questions. If the answer was "yes," the bible spun away. If the answer was "no," nothing happened (see Fig. 1):

I and the patient hold the key and I say a prayer. I say the patient's name and ask if he, for example, has a tumor. If it is "yes," the bible spins away. I can ask if someone has been bewitched and the bible answers. I ask if they used the *duende rojo* (red gnome), *liwa mairin* (the mermaid), or *prahaku* (spirit of the wind and space) and then ask which herbs to use to heal. If they [the sorcerers] have worked on a very high level, I have to send the patient to someone else, maybe to someone who works with celestial angels. In this way we work together to heal and save lives.

In these days people often come here because they have been bewitched. People come with diabetes or allergy, but it's not for the doctor [to cure]; they have been bewitched. They could be told by the doctor that they have cancer, but it's not; it's because of sorcery. If it's legitimate cancer, I am told that too [through divination]. If someone is very thin and has aids, I can see if it's legitimate or because of sorcery. It can also be that someone has sent a bad spirit to a house and I help people get rid of it. Many are also envious of my work, because I heal a lot of people. They could send a *muerto* (spirit of the dead) to my house and make it go up in flames. I, without knowing anything, could lose everything, until I kill myself. So I have buried protection [protective herbs and objects] to protect my house.

In Puerto Cabezas, there also exists a few *curanderos* who are said to have received the gift of healing by some kind of spiritual force. One example is Emilia. I visited her in her large concrete house where she lived with her family. She received her clients in a nearby shed. Inside, there were shells with herbs in small bags and containers, books, candles, and a crystal ball. There was also a bed and a table with chairs where she divined for her clients by using Tarot cards and palm reading. In very difficult cases she used the crystal ball: "I use it for 'strong things,' like when someone is lost at sea, or to see if someone was killed. It gives like a vision. No children can be present and I have to be alone. I learned it in Belize."

Emilia received about 25 clients a day and charged 100 córdobas (about 6 US dollars) for each. This resulted in an exceptionally high income compared to local standards. Her story resembles that of a *profeta*, although she was not considered powerful enough to receive this epithet:

When I was a child, our house was hit by lightning and I became like dead for five days. A [medical] doctor took care of me and kept me in a pool with a lot of ice to see if I would recover or die. All my skin was coming off, but I survived. Then, at the age of seventeen, I began to dream about angels. They showed me what I had to do and what was going to happen. In the dream they took me to the forest and taught me about plants. When I woke up, I went there to look for them.

One night in a dream I was told that a certain girl would become ill at twelve o'clock and that nobody except me would be able to save her. I was shown a plant and told that it would make her well. At exactly twelve she became ill. First I didn't want to go [to the girl's house]. Then I got like fever, so I finally went there and brought the herb I had been shown. The girl drank the herb mixed with water and quickly became well. After that everybody said that I was a spiritist.

When I dream, there is a kind of white angel who tells me what is going to happen. It also teaches me about

herbs. Sometimes when I read the cards [for clients], it talks to me in my ear and tells me which treatment to use. When my husband died and I had to wash his body, it withdrew for three years but now it's coming back again. A lot of people come here, for abortions and sometimes to kill someone, but I say "no, no." I don't advise them. Because of my work I have a lot of enemies. One always needs to have [spiritual] protection.

Individual Cases of Sorcery

Many healers emphasized the problems created when sorcery was said to be the cause of an affliction and were well aware of the social consequences of sorcery accusations. A *curandero* explained:

In [the village of] Tuapí, a lady got breast cancer and a *curandero* said it had been provoked by a certain person. The sick lady died and her family went to the house of the accused woman saying they were going to get revenge. After two months, the accused woman died. This has now provoked a very serious conflict between these two very large families. Who is to blame for all this? The *curandero*, he provoked it. Even if we see things, it is sometimes better not to say anything to avoid problems.

The same *curandero* also claimed that healers sometimes invented a sorcery diagnosis in order to make money and that clients were vulnerable in their encounters with healers:

A person who has a problem may ask three, four *curanderos*. One of them says one thing, while another says another thing. People don't know what to believe, they get traumatized. When a person is weak and desperate, he can get all kinds of ideas in his mind. If, for example, the [spirit] *sirena* or a [spirit of the] dead is attacking a person [directly], the *curandero* may lie and say it's because of sorcery in order to charge more money. The [afflicted] person will then think that someone did it.

Many healers I talked to were reluctant to accept cases that were said to be caused by sorcery, as the sorcerer could strike back. One of these healers, who had specialized in healing sorcery victims, claimed that dealing with sorcery was dangerous and that "all of us who treat sorcery problems have paid a high price. Three of my family members have died under strange circumstances, of sorcery." Another healer told how he was attacked by a sorcerer after he had cured several people:

The sorcerer was angry. He sent spirits to my house to scare me. Rocks were thrown at my house and there was a banging on the door, but there was no one there. At night,

the table was dragged around in the house and it sounded like the doors were opened. Something was bouncing on the roof until it was bent. I went out with a flashlight, but couldn't see anything. I got scared and had to cleanse the house with herbs. I also cleansed myself and my family with an herbal bath. Then it all stopped.

A Miskitu woman who was a reverend in the Moravian church in Puerto Cabezas told that she had talked to several sorcerers about how to perform sorcery. She gave an example of a common way of how to bring illness onto an unknowing victim:

Someone may greet you by hitting your chest saying: "How fat you have become." In his hand there is something for you. When you get home, at night, you begin to cough blood and suffer from what looks like tuberculosis. The doctor will examine your chest but not find anything, even though you are bleeding from your mouth. Today the sorcerers are doing this with delayed effect, they have become more professional. This means that you will get sick after a month or a year and not suspect anything.

The supposed "professionalization" of sorcery was of great concern to many of the healers I talked to. It was said that the sorcerers were constantly inventing and learning new forms of sorcery and that the healers had to exchange more information to respond to this situation. In the following case, Laura, a woman in her late twenties, told how she became the victim of sorcery. She lived with her four children and husband in a small wooden house in a poor neighborhood of Puerto Cabezas. A few years ago she began to have pain in her stomach:

I had pain in my belly and felt a shivering in my body, but I didn't know what it was. Then one Sunday, I felt a strong pain. I felt very warm and was trembling. My husband gave me herbs to drink and washed my body with them. After about five hours I felt a strong pain as if I was going to give birth. My husband then took out galvanized nails and stones. I fainted of the pain. Then I vomited balls of hair in the form of a cross. In total, my husband took out 18 stones during two months. I felt a little better thanks to the [herbal] medicine which I drank all the time. I was also treated with [herbal] vapor. It [the objects] came out little by little during two months. I became very thin. After three months I was ok again.

Laura's husband, Santiago, who is a well-known *curandero* and diviner, gave his version of what had happened:

She had pain in her body and in her belly. I gave her [herbal] medicine to take out the things she had in her belly. First, two five-centimeter galvanized nails came out vaginally. She was afraid, so I had to take them out.



Fig. 2: Objects said to have been magically introduced and then removed from a patient's body (Photo: Johan Wedel).

Then I took out stones which were from the graveyard. They came out successively. When they came out, she lost a lot of blood. In total, it came out 14 galvanized nails and 18 stones. We kept everything that came out [see Fig. 2]. We have very clear evidence. It was made by a sorcerer because of envy. We never found out who it was. Sorcery is made with the victim's name and through prayers. In the prayer, the sorcerer mentions, for example, a frog or a [galvanized] nail and this will then take form. It is sent through the air to a specific person and materializes.

Santiago also told that to undo the sorcery and make his wife well, he had to know how the sorcery had been carried out. He used a form of divination where certain spiritually prepared herbs are applied to the victim's forehead or neck in a state of unconsciousness (see Wedel 2009b: 56). The afflicted person will then begin to answer the healer's questions:

When I used the herb, she told me what I had to do. She also told me which prayer the sorcerer had used. The sorcery had been done with a [spirit of the] dead and with 8,000 cordobas [about 440 US dollars]. To undo the sorcery, I had to use the same amount of money and read the prayer backwards, beginning with the last word and



Fig. 3: Herbs and object used in healing (Photo: Johan Wedel).

reading it to the first. It's a lot of money. One could die because of lacking money.

In another case, Santiago was visited by a man in his fifties who came from the countryside. Santiago explained the patient's problem:

This man has pain in his body and belly and it has been going on for one year. He swallows air. Sometimes phlegm is coming from his nose. I gave him some herbs, but it didn't work. Now I am preparing other herbs with holy water [to inhale and to drink, see Fig. 3]. In my consultation [divination with Spanish cards], I saw two things: He has been fishing at night and has caught a cold, but it's also supernatural [sorcery]. He could imagine who has done it; a woman in his village. I have prepared a herb with a cross [made of needles, see Fig. 4]. This will make him well, but the other one [who performed the sorcery] will also become ill. I cannot undo the prayer because I don't know it. [Therefore] I cannot undo it [the sorcery] completely. It will remain and it will look for its owner.

In the following case, a woman in her early twenties suddenly became very sick and was treated by Ana, the *sukia* from Rio Coco mentioned above. The woman told the following about what had happened:

I rapidly became very sick, like I was going to die. I had a terrible pain in my stomach and I couldn't breathe. I became very dizzy and I fainted. I took some pills, but it only made it worse, so I went to her [to the *sukia*]. She told me that I had walked on some sorcery made for

someone else, but I got it instead. I was sick for a week, but thank God her medicine made me well.

The *sukia* gave her version of the event:

I first gave her tetracycline as I thought she had an infection, but she only became worse. Then, during the night, I dreamed and saw what had happened. She had gone to visit a friend but took a shortcut. A man had prepared something there on the path for another woman, but this girl stepped on the *maleficio* [cursed object]. I treated her with plants. The bad spirits won't bother her more, but she's still under my supervision.

The narratives presented above point to the fluidness and transgressiveness of sorcery. The sorcery act is said to create an entity that has to be "undone" by the healer in order not to provoke harm and misfortune. The sorcerer presumably also has the potential of creating illness and suffering through objects or transforming the non-material into the material. The subsequent healing process of the sorcery victims often implies a reversal of this process.

Mass Possession and Sorcery

When a large group of people are struck by the mass possession phenomena known as *grisi siknis*, sorcery is always said to be the cause. *Grisi siknis* or "crazy sickness" has been considered a "culture-bound" syndrome or disorder, as it is said to afflict only people of Miskitu origin (Dennis 1985,



Fig. 4: Objects used against sorcery when healing a patient (Photo: Johan Wedel).

2004). The victims of *grisi siknis* will first experience a period of headaches, dizziness, and anxiety, and they may hear voices. When the attacks begin, they lose consciousness and become violent, rip off their clothes, and suffer severe convulsions. They are considered dangerous and extremely powerful physically and may run around together with other afflicted, hurting themselves and others with machetes and knives, and menacing people while waving off invisible assailants. They may also run into the bush and disappear, or throw themselves into the river or the sea, a situation that puts the victim's family under great stress. The attacks, which are often repeated on two or three occasions at the same time each day, may last over a period of several weeks or even months if no healer intervenes and brings an end to the crisis (Wedel 2009a, 2009b).

People's stories about *grisi siknis* often include severe pain in a certain body part, convulsions, trance, frightening visions, and objects that have been magically introduced into the body of the sufferer. The afflicted have also been said to vomit coins, metal nails, hair, and insects.⁸ As with the individual sorcery cases discussed above, it is said that the evildoer creates these objects by using certain prayers and that they "travel by the wind" and "materialize" inside the body of the victim. The objects, which can only be removed by a skilled

Miskitu healer, and a severe pain in a certain body part, combined with the other symptoms of *grisi siknis*, are all important signs that a malicious sorcerer is involved.

Grisi siknis is highly contagious and, as with individual cases of sorcery, mainly affects poor villages or neighborhoods, or boarding schools and workplaces where many people are living or working together. The person most likely to catch the malady is an adolescent man or woman, although cases from eight years up to eighty have been recorded (Trübswasser et al. 2005: 84). In the last decade, several outbreaks have been exceptionally violent. Medical personnel have never found any organic cause of the *grisi siknis* problem despite extensive tests of patients' blood and urine and of the drinking water at affected sites. Healing is performed by a few highly skilled Miskitu healers. Since a few years, many outbreaks have been resolved by health teams consisting of both healers and biomedical employees (Wedel 2009a; see also Dennis 2004: 216).

Many of the healers and other people I met during fieldwork called for a regional law where sorcerers could be put to trial and sent to jail, a claim that is also strengthened by the fact that Miskitu healers have been the only ones capable of controlling the outbreaks of *grisi siknis* and offer a cure (see Wedel 2009a). A healer, who had treated several cases of *grisi siknis*, said: "We help people. It's a kind of social work we do, but we are not protected by anyone. As sorcery is not a crime in

⁸ See also Cox Molina (2003: 43); Trübswasser et al. (2005: 85); Espinoza Blanco (n. d.).

Nicaragua, we cannot point out the sorcerer. If we do, we could be accused of causing trouble.”

I will now take a closer look at three cases where *grisi siknis* was diagnosed and treated. The first case took place in 1997 and is described in a master thesis by Hans Peter Rupilius (1998). The study focuses on an outbreak of *grisi siknis* that took place among workers during an excavation of a canal near a village called Kukalaya. First, two men became weak, lost consciousness, and began to have convulsion. They also became incontinent, bit their tongue and lips, and hit their head and arms. Two or three men were needed to hold them down. Within two days, a total of forty men had become afflicted and were having convulsions. The nurse based at the camp could do nothing. A biomedical theory that there had been some kind of drug in the drinking water was discarded.

A well-known *profeta* was then called in and began to heal the two first afflicted with prayers, herbal baths, and steam. The two patients rapidly regained consciousness and became better. The healer proposed that there were two reasons for the outbreak: First, a *duende* (gnome) had caused the affliction because the workers had not asked the spirit for permission to enter the area of the construction site. Second, someone had also performed sorcery. The healer read the palms of some of the afflicted and found that one of them was an impostor. Subsequently, she began to heal the patients with herbs, although they did not get much better. The *profeta* then had a dispute with the supposed impostor and accused him of being a sorcerer who impeded the healing of the victims. She decided to carry out a test and asked all present to drink an herbal mixture. Everybody became stronger except the accused man who began convulsing, spitting saliva, and having visions. The people present took this as evidence of the man's guilt and wanted to lynch him. The police was also present during the event and managed to take the man away from the scene. His house was later burnt to the ground and he was chased away from his village. The healer cleansed the ground of the camp with herbal liquids and “bought” the ground from the gnome with two coins. After that, everybody became well (Rupilius 1998).

In another case, during the final months of 2003 and the first months of 2004, a number of remote villages along the Rio Coco were struck by *grisi siknis*. In one of these villages, more than a hundred persons became afflicted, about one-third of them severely. The sufferers lost consciousness, had convulsions, and experienced scary visions of spirits with knives and blood. They also became aggres-

sive and began to run around together in the village, threatening and frightening people. A team consisting of biomedical personnel and a *profeta* and two *curanderos* were sent to the village. Extensive tests of the drinking water and of the victims' blood and urine were carried out, but nothing abnormal could be found. The healers arranged a meeting with the villagers and said they would do everything they could to heal the victims, that they would discover who was behind, but also that they would not reveal the names of the sorcerers. They also warned the sorcerers to continue with their evil deeds and threatened them with prison if they did (see Wedel 2009b: 55 ff.).

As a form of divination, similar to the procedure discussed above when the *curandero* Santiago treated his wife, a special sacred plant was placed in the forehead of the first person afflicted. In a state of unconsciousness, the person began to speak and respond to the healer's questions about how to treat the patients, which herbs to use, and who had provoked the outbreak. The *profeta* concluded that a sorcerer had performed a “work” with several spirits, including the spirits of the dead and the water spirit *liwa mairin*. The afflicted were then treated with herbal baths and steam, and the village was repeatedly cleansed with herbal liquids and smoke. Antisorcery objects were also buried at various places. All those activities were said to weaken the evildoer and force him to leave. The supposed sorcerer was never openly accused, but his name had been mentioned during the divinatory process and he left the village. After about a week, all the afflicted were healed.

In a similar case, which took place in the beginning of 2004, two *curanderos* were sent by the local health authorities to a small village, as about a dozen teenagers were said to be suffering from *grisi siknis*. The Miskitu healers formed part of a small health brigade that also included a gynecologist and a psychiatrist. The patients had severe convulsions and the villagers were upset. One of the healers gave his story of the event:

When we arrived, the villagers were already suspecting a man. We told them that we had come to heal, not to accuse anyone. We made a contract with the villagers. We wrote a document which said that even if we would find out the identity of the sorcerer, we would not reveal it, and that we would not accuse anyone as it is against the law. It was delicate because people wanted to know. We told them that if they demanded the name of the sorcerer, we would leave. We said: “If we reveal [the identity of] the sorcerer and he is killed, then we will go to prison.” Apart from that, the sorcerer also has a family.

Then we went on to heal the patients. The three guys had an unbearable pain in their right leg, while the girls had pain in their belly; it swelled up as if they were pregnant. The girls lost consciousness and wanted to run away. When we tied them up, they became even crazier. They had an incredible force. With closed eyes they threw people at the walls and tried to bite us. We began to treat the patients with herbal baths and prayers. From the women's vagina it came out metal nails, broken needles, and candles. It was incredible. The gynecologist and the psychiatrist saw it. They became very scared.

Then the other healer made a "work" so that the sorcerer would come to us. He came the same afternoon and he said that people were accusing him, but that he hadn't done anything. He said: "I know my people. During the war they would accuse you for being a Contra or Sandinista and they would kill you." I told him that "we know who the sorcerer is, but we are not here to accuse anyone, but if he continues, we will accuse him." He got scared and left. We also cleansed the village with herbs and after a week everybody was cured. It was difficult, a very high level. Both of us [healers] were really afraid. We had to use everything we had. Thank God we made it. Today, the sorcerer lives in another place, like a normal man. He both cures and bewitches people.

In the case of *grisi siknis*, the healers know by experience that as long as the sorcerer has not been identified, there is widespread anxiety and the victims cannot be cured. Therefore, in order for the healing procedure to be successful, the healers must identify the sorcerer through divination and then convince him to end his "criminal acts." The healers are nevertheless in a precarious position as they may cause a situation of revenge and physical violence directed at the supposed evildoer, who may also strike back by physical or supernatural means. In addition, the healers could themselves be accused of sorcery, as *grisi siknis* is sometimes said to be provoked by a healer who then asks for a large sum of money in order to heal the victims. As shown in the three cases above, the healers have various ways to convince people that the sorcerer has been identified, that he has stopped his evil acts and preferably also left the place of the outbreak. In the first case, a sorcerer was pointed out in public and this almost led to a lynching, while nobody was openly accused in the two following cases.

Conclusion

Becoming and working as a *profeta* or *sukia*, and to some extent a *curandero*, is dependent on the spirit world and the healer's spiritual helpers. These assist the healer when dreaming and divining, and when understanding the origin of the affliction and

deciding the treatment. The narratives show how Miskitu healers rely on the spiritual aspects of plants and on their spirits to distinguish if afflictions have been caused directly by a spiritual being or through the acts of a sorcerer. The spirits also function as a protection against occult forces and sorcery. Some of these narratives appear to be irrational and beyond reason. They are, however, entirely logical and real from the Miskitu healers' perspective where transformations between the nonmaterial and material may occur, where spiritual beings exist in other dimensions, and where sorcerers are capable of sending magical objects to provoke illness, suffering, and death.⁹

Sorcery accusations may lead to severe social consequences, bloodshed, and physical violence towards the accused. Healers may also themselves be accused of sorcery or of inventing a sorcery diagnosis in order to make money. They fear the sorcerers who are said to constantly invent new ways to harm people and who may take revenge on the accusing healer. Therefore, many healers refuse to take on sorcery cases and instead send supposed sorcery-inflicted patients to someone else.

Accusations towards certain persons are most likely to take place when a large group has been afflicted, such as during *grisi siknis* epidemics. In these cases, healers are making attempts to formalize the healing process with written contracts saying that the identity of the sorcery should not be revealed. This may also threaten the supposed sorcerer in more general terms without pointing out a specific person, and, in so doing, giving the accused a change to leave without being hurt physically. Some healers also claim for legal measures against the supposed evildoers. In this worldview, sorcery is a real threat and a criminal act, and the sorcery diagnosis is a palpable and inevitable part of the healing process.

9 In a recent article, Nadasdy (2007: 37) argues that anthropology needs to have an agnostic attitude towards seemingly irrational statements and strive "to build a theoretical framework that can accommodate the possibility that there might be some literal truth to what ... [indigenous people] tell us." In a similar vein, Kapferer (2003: 22) says that cosmologies connected with magic and sorcery "may stand radically apart from reason, even outside reason. This is their maddening challenge to a discipline founded in the problem of reason." Discussing the "true understanding" of the relationship between human selfhood and spirit, Willis (1999: 197) similarly points out: "Our own exploration as anthropologists of ways of knowing and being developed and perfected in foreign cultures has brought us to the 'edge' of a new territory ... for which as yet we have only the sketchiest of maps."

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