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THE POSITION OF *CHARACOTELES* IN THE
SPIRITUAL WORLD OF NATIVES OF SAN
PEDRO LA LAGUNA*

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Sturtevant in one review of techniques and findings in the field of the ethnoscience (Sturtevant, 1964: 49-131) emphasize the principles and procedures or techniques that requires to investigate particular semantic systems. The principal approach is center in which the study of the culture involves the discovery of the native principles of classification and conceptualization. It does emphasize in which must be avoid the use of definitions a priori" and the models with one foreign cultural content. Sturtevant said: *It is not a new proposition which that one important aspect of the culture is the set of principles with which a township classifies its universe"* (Sturtevant 1964: 100) and offers a series of arguments that have been tenets in the ethnographic tradition since Boas until the present.

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Fragment of ceremonial incense burner. Lago de Amatitlán. Figure of coyote with human ornaments; earmuffs, nose mask, necklace, and headdress. Classical period 500-700 AD. Photograph: Juan José Hurtado V.

The major emphasis which gives the ethnosciense is in classification and we can understand for classification the identification of the category or group which one individual or object belongs about the base of their observable characteristics.

The investigation in ethnosciense has concentrated in the classification such as are reflected by the native terminology, that is to say discussing as the people build their world of experience according the form as talk of them. (**Frake 1962:64**).

It is assumed that every person has an only system to perceive and organize the material phenomena as: things, events, behavior, emotions, etc. (**Goodenough, 1957**); the object of study is not this material phenomena themselves, but the form in which are organized in the mind of man.

According to above ideas exposed, in the recent short period of investigation of San Pedro La Laguna, stimulated for the fact that numerous sick people attended in the parochial clinic of these population or visited in their houses presented a component very marked of anxiety, stress, and fear, I decide to do although was short in time and in superficial form a study about the perception and organization by the Pedranos of their spiritual world. Also, they were very stimulating of this concern, the knowledge of the article of Benjamin D. Paul about cultural process of self-regulation of the mental disorders in these population (**Paul, Benjamin D. 1967: 150-165**) and ideas of Sol Tax and Robert Hinshaw about a structural model of system od beliefs from panajacheleños (Tax, Sol & Hinshaw, Robert, 1970: 186-187).

San Pedro La Laguna is a township of Department of Sololá with 24 Km² of approximate extension; border with San Juan La Laguna, Santiago Atitlán (townships of department of Sololá), Chicacao (department of Suchitepéquez) and Lago de Atitlán (Diccionario geográfico de Guatemala, 1962).

San Pedro La Laguna is connected with San Juan La Laguna by a municipality road of 2 km; with Santiago Atitlán by a road of 24 km and connect to this population with San Lucas Tolimán and coast townships, as well towards the ancient road going from Sololá towards the capital of the Republic. In addition, exist a regular service of passenger boat charge between San Pedro and Panajachel; there is a regular service of canoes towards Santiago Atitlán and service available towards San Juan and San Marcos La Laguna.

The basic ethnographic information about San Pedro La Laguna was initially gathered by Juan de Dios Rosales since the end of 1938 and a synopsis of the culture of San Pedro in terms of life cycle has been published in English and Spanish by Benjamin D. Paul. That is as a description of the changes occur since basic studies. (Paul, 1968: 93-158). Paul and his wife had published jointly an article in English about the recent changes of customs of marriage (Paul, 1963) and in Spanish (Paul, 1966).

The purpose of this article is present one summary description of the ideational structure of the beliefs of the Pedranos about the nature of spiritual world in general and particular form the position of the *characoteles* within this structure.

Goodenough has pointed out that cognitive organization of the experience consist in:

- a. Perceive and conceptualize the phenomena.
- b. A code or language to manipulate.
- c. A set of propositions about properties and mood of arrangement of a body of knowledge (Goodenough, 1963: 154).

When we talk of the beliefs of the people, we usually refer a this last, that is to say, to propositions that accept as true.

I. THE SPIRITUAL WORLD

The Pedranos do a distinction between the human spirits or soul (**spirit**) and the not human spirits (**Jawal**). The first class includes:

SOULS

SOULS of
living
people

SOULS of
dead
people

The second include a series of spirits that vary in importance and are collocate in a hierarchy in which top is located God as head or boss of the entire sacred family, below as subordinated the saint and guardians consider

as administrators of the natural world. Below in this hierarchy are collocate the spirits of animated and inanimate objects of natural world.

The next scheme presents in a tentative form this ranking of the not human spirits or **Jawal** using this substantive in this more inclusive level:

GOD

SAINTS
GUARDIANS

SPIRITS OF THE
ANIMATED AND
INANIMATE OF
NATURAL WORLD

The term **jawal** that I will give as equivalent to Spirit" is the substantive used in Tzutujil to refers to this intangible essence that for them have all the things of the real world. The term itself, can use in two contrast levels, as an inclusive term for all spirits and its below level as contrast term to refer to the class of spirit not human" that contrast with **soul** which in turn an inclusive term for the human spirits. The next scheme took of Douglas clear the above concept (Douglas, 1969:68):

JAWAL
(SPIRITS)

When the term **Jawal** uses with the possessive prefix **ru**, we have **rujawal** which refers to:

- (1) The specific spirit of an object.
- (2) The spirit of all class of objects.
- (3) The spirit in charge of objects and class of objects.

Two examples can illustrate the above:

- (1) **Rujawal ixim** spirit of this corn in particular.
- (2) **Rujawal ixim** spirit of all generic corn.
- (3) **Rujawal ixim** superior spirit, Mr. of corn, in charge of object and class of objects. (1-2).

In the same sense it understands a spirit of a particular hill (1-object), a generic spirit of the hills (2- class of objects) and a superior spirit, Mr. of hill in charge of the object and class of objects (1 and 2).

At arguing about the spirits which have authority delegate by God and jurisdiction about specific domains of natural world seems that use the word **AJAX** in two different contexts:

- (1) **Ajaw**: supreme maker, supreme owner of universe.
- (2) **Ajaw**: owners of specific domains or areas of natural world.

The word owner is used implicate sense of property but, probably is more appropriate say that the prevalent use is in the sense of jurisdiction or authority, also, the idea of guardians" will be appropriate.

This concept of jurisdiction finds very clear in the word **Chjalb'ey** that literally means guardian of way" guardians of places or specific areas, being their responsibility protect assigned areas of evil forces and diseases.

Ajxeja is a connotation the superior spirit of water, in other is the spirit of the drowned. We see here as Ajxeja used in a determine sense can be classified as **Jawal** no human spirit and in other as **Spirit** or human spirit; in the first case probably belongs to the category of **Ajaw**.

In summary, the spiritual world structured in San Pedro La Laguna is a composed amalgam of probably elements or pre-Hispanic origin some, other originated in the Spanish Catholicism and finally native spirits incorporated in the passage of time. I believe that there is a fusion almost complete of these elements, which as Wisdom does note the indigenous are not aware of such historic process occurred. (Wisdom, 1952:120).

II. THE HUMAN SOUL

SOUL OR AWANIMA

The Pedranos to refer to human soul sometimes use the term **Rujawal** (spirit) but more frequently they refer it as **soul**, Latin word took of the Catholicism, also they use the term **awanima** literally your name" that is something as the essence of one person located in the heart. It considers that there is not an unbreakable union between the soul and the body rather is capable of separate of this and travel on their own, precisely in these trips it believes that is exposed to a series of dangers and is many more vulnerable. If many of these trips match with the real time, many times this is not occur that, and the soul advance towards the future. The dreams are considered as signs" find by the soul when this is outside of body and it thinks that the dreams occur after that the soul had come back to this and are interpreted as clarifiers of present or predictions of future. Example of the above it is the interpretation that give to dream with a temascal (steam bath) that associate the idea of grave or near death; the fact of dream in a fight predicts an enmity or possibility of being an object of witchcraft by an enemy; obviously this motivates special forms of behavior or action.

It considers that each person born with a predetermined period of life, this is part of own destiny. One person can die occasionally before to have completed this predetermined period of his life, which raise special problems, thus, these souls annoy to the living persons, already they are convicted to remain on earth because of his premature death. A good example of this we have in the souls of the drowned or **Ajxeja**, angry spirits by a casual and premature death. The people do not know exactly that form takes the soul during his trips, according informers to the majority take the form of a bird (**Tziquín**) but, for others there is an evil transformation as occur with witches and *characoteles* (**'Isom**).

Make a summary of the above ideas we can say that the next propositions about the soul are generally shared by the Pedranos:

1. There is not an indissoluble union between soul and boy. (See Hinshaw, 1975: 113)
2. When the soul is in the body this is accommodated in the heart and in occasions this is abandon.
3. During the time that this outside of body is very vulnerable and this exposes to dangerous, specially with meetings with spirits that produce fear, diseases or bad luck. If such meetings occur the soul return sick and consequently, also, the body will sick.
4. In particular conditions the soul cannot return to body producing a particular disease. (Gillin, 1956: 152; Hurtado, 1973: 19).
5. The dreams can be interpreted as visions of soul during their exit of body, they have to see with the present or well predict the future.

III. IXIBINAJ, XB'NEL

It gives fear"

One of the dangers more important that de human or his soul confront is the meet with a member of the class of agents of spiritual world which have the particularity of produce fear, horror, intimidation. This category is called in tzutujil in generic for, as Ixibinaj (literal: it gives fear, horror). According to the investigation, the classes of agents that produce fear are:

K'isom or **'Isom** = people who transform, characoteles.

Kunamak'I = the death and ghosts.

Kabnak = the death, the soul of the dead, for many informers is the soul of the angry dead".

Ajaw = supreme owner of universe and the owners.

Jawal – **Rujawal** = terms already above described as no human spirits. It is probably that **Kunamak'I** and **Kabnak** as the death belong to this category that is in certain connotations the next terms.

Ajxeja = spirit of water who drown to people and the soul of drowned.

Chjalb'ey = spirits caregiver of the roads.

IV. K'ISOM, 'ISOM

Characoteles

The term characotel is frequently used by the native of San Pedro La Laguna and San Lucas Tolimán though it is not frequently recognized by the Santiago Atitlán (Douglas, 1969: 98). The Characoteles are human being men or women (though for the gathered information this situation occurs more in women) that have the magic ability to transform in animals, this transformation occurs almost exclusively during the night. One person already brings in its destiny or luck" the condition to be characotel which is sent by God". Its mission is frightening or scare to the people, to those unfortunates that he finds them.

It is interesting point out that the people have the condition of to be characotel has gave of God as part of his destiny or luck, in such a way themselves are not good or bad but, that simply exist, in certain form are excused by the others and it not hold for his actions, already they fulfill a mission.

The concept of characotel involve according to our informers, principally, magic transformation of individual, as is noted in several descriptions made:

Human being → animal → Human being

Douglas refers us: *a woman spoke of the meeting with 'isom convert in goat. She thought that since the moment that there are few goats in Santiago and that was even more rare that one finds some goat in the street at night, surely this must be an 'isom. The fact of scared her she identifies positively: ... I saw goats quite a few times, but I never scare... this goat scares me and because this is sure that is 'isom... (I saw goats, quite a few times, but never scare me and for this reason I sure that was an 'isom)*".

(Douglas, 1969: 100).

The mother of a young with approximately 18 years old refer me that this few weeks ago to return to her house after of midnight saw near of wall that

that borders the street a lump of human being", he felt a deep fear and he entered to the house with body shake, sweat and scared" since his experience explain in the sense that she had saw characoteles, he has to need of treatment with two different medicines to calm her"; probably which more help to calm to this young was the fact of his mother insists in the lump that he saw was a couple that they know, clandestinely semi-hidden in the dark.

The stories of characoteles that we have heard it principally refers to the form that an 'Isom assume is the form of big animal as cow, horse, donkey, goats, pigs, etc. although also as small animals as dogs, cats, weasel.

At same time we have received information of that characoteles can take the body of other human being, that is to say that the spirit of a characotel take the body of other person, here the concept is not really of transformation, but if of the intrusion of spirit of one characotel person in the body of other person; the next story illustrate the above mentioned: one of the midwives of township has meeting with many characoteles given her work demand her many outings during night. In one of these outings. *In front of me, go a characotel, although she has change of clothes, I recognized to Dolores. Sometimes she brings in front of her or behind me, with a single blink that she gives. I reach her, and catch and I see her face, her eyes shining as lights. I fight in the face and she excused me.*"

In the gathered information, it is not clear as a person characotel became or transform, say to for them jump in the air" they give three or four rounds and they go" already transform in animal, or well saying special prayers in secret they became as smoke in animal". The transformation occurs during the night and the characoteles only go for night, their mission is scare to people. Generally, they do not inflict physic damage to their victims, the damage is through of fear or violence for the characoteles is not exclude and one of our informers ensure that in the court of San Pedro La Laguna there are several demands presented by abused men by characoteles; this cannot to be proven. One of the forms of physic aggression that refer is that a characotel in form of woman can twist the testicles of a man who annoys her".

Several informers agree to ensure that characoteles in form of small animals as cats, dogs, possum, pigs are very dangerous thus, run between the legs of its victim, this will die in three or four days.

The appearance of characoteles generally is sinister, sometimes it sees clearly as an animal perfectly identifiable but its behavior is special, unusual or abnormal (examples: dogs behaving or strange form, cats meowing and with bristly back, turkey attacking attitude); the characoteles produce fear, a usual animal not cause fear but, when is a characotel, yes. The characoteles in human form walk general alongside walls along the streets, hid in the shadow. In San Pedro La Laguna is usual that the people at night walk in the center of the streets to avoid to be confused or taken for characotel. The people think that the characoteles are know each other, that they have meets in secret places and they belong to diabolic organization.

The culture of San Pedro represents undoubtedly a fusion of indigenous and Spanish influences; both are discernible in almost all aspects of the same although in the course of four hundred years such traditions has been merged in a cultural patron that obviously continues modifies.

I believe that there is a conflict between the traditional and the modern already has occurred important changes in the community (Paul, 1968). It possible that the system of psychological security of the Pedranos as defense against the uncertainty of spiritual world that border them are affected for the modern" in the sense of the old structures are not longer useful and the new not offers the security of above, this can frame within of usually it refers as an identity crisis". It would be one explication for the component of anguish, tension and anxiety that I perceive clearly in the attended patients and it stimulate me to made this superficial investigation.

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