



A • M • E • R • I • C • A • N
A N T H R O P O L O G I C A L
A S S O C I A T I O N

Review: [untitled]

Author(s): Mary M. Cameron

Reviewed work(s):

Body and Emotion: The Aesthetics of Illness and Healing in the Nepal Himalayas by Robert Desjarlais

Source: *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Mar., 1996), pp. 98-100

Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the American Anthropological Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/648586>

Accessed: 17/07/2009 23:54

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=black>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Blackwell Publishing and American Anthropological Association are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

present during labor. The midwife or friend talked to the laboring woman, held her hand, rubbed her back, or did other small kindnesses one woman might do for another. In those cases fetal deaths, stillbirths, neonatal deaths, use of forceps, and cesarean surgery rates dropped, compared with control groups of women who experienced standard hospital procedures. This is a process that cannot be measured as simple mechanism, yet highly significant differences occurred. People bound by the orthodox American medical paradigm are not likely to change until more and more people read books like this one, turn to alternatives, and thereby threaten the profits of orthodox practitioners.

I have used this fourth edition in undergraduate teaching, and it is very effective in engaging both the intellect and the emotions that drive intellectual curiosity. It also offers new insight to the anthropological specialist. It is located in the real world where all women, even if they do not become mothers, think about childbirth. The description is vivid and the concepts are those of a mature scholar. One only wishes than an index, absent in the previous editions, might have been added to this one.

Body and Emotion: The Aesthetics of Illness and Healing in the Nepal Himalayas.

Robert Desjarlais. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992 (cloth and paper). xii + 300 pp.

MARY M. CAMERON

*Department of Sociology, Anthropology,
and Social Work
Auburn University*

Robert Desjarlais's *Body and Emotion: The Aesthetics of Illness and Healing in the Nepal Himalayas* is an engagingly descriptive focus on the body as it experiences emotions associated with many aspects of Yolmo Sherpa life, a Tibetan Buddhist people who live in the mountainous

Helambu region of east Nepal. To explore cultural shaping of the tactile and visceral, Desjarlais apprenticed himself to a shaman, a practitioner of the body who cures through ritual imaging that transforms the bodily experiences of his patients from suffering and distress to strength and comfort. Desjarlais's narrative technique conveys Yolmo knowledge of body and emotion through an "argument of images" rather than words, emphasizing sensory experience (p. 30). This matches the way Yolma portray illness as gripping images of fear and pain, attacks and anxiety. Desjarlais wishes "to advance a way of writing ethnography that includes the reader's body as much as the author's in the conversation at hand" (p. 19).

The book is organized into two parts, "Loss" and "Healing," each with five chapters containing figures, tables, and photographs. Chapter 1, "Imaginary gardens with real toads," is a sensitive and strong appeal to anthropologists and others interested in the relationship between culture and illness and healing to return to the spaces of the body and refocus on the emotions. Of chief concern for Desjarlais is "the 'aesthetic' nature of everyday life" (p. 19) etched on and through the body, a culturally based preobjective condition read by others, including shamans. Desjarlais's focus on embodied knowledge is sharpened by his own trance experiences in which images are "crystallized embodied forms of knowledge. Meaning, patterned within the body, [takes] form through images, which [are] then absorbed anew by the body" (p. 26).

Chapter 2, "Body, speech, mind," explores the meaning and experience of pain, body, and gender. An interaction between Meme the healer, an ill woman named Pasang, and Desjarlais demonstrates "how cultural categories shape the form, tenor, or meaning of bodily experience" (p. 37) in a rudimentary way. The spaces of the Yolmo body are a cultural house that reflect and become filled with the imagery of religion, society, domesticity, politics, conflict, and

other cultural geographies. The shaman's challenge is to treat both the inner and outer sanctums of this corporeal home.

Chapter 3, "An aesthetics of experience," focuses on Mingma Lama, an elder man who has lost several of his life forces to ghosts. Desjarlais argues that the suffering and pain of illness is experienced through a culturally constituted lens of aesthetic sensibilities (p. 68). Chapter 4, "Pain clings to the body," describes the power of funeral rites and the deceased family's chants to dissolve the "relational self" (p. 93). A village song describes pain as clinging to the body, making it weary, thirsty, and heavy. The pain of isolation, melancholy, and depressiveness resulting from the loss of a loved one is acute and tactile. Against this stirring backdrop Desjarlais critiques postmodern approaches to the anthropological study of emotion that structure the unbounded emotional into frameworks of disembodied "discourse" (p. 100). In chapter 5, "Soul loss," Desjarlais combines semantic analysis with phenomenology, the language of illness as part of its experience. He examines how loss of spirit (*bla*) results in physical symptoms as well as the inability to make decisions and function in everyday life.

Part 2 addresses the body's healing through imagery stimulated by the shaman's trances. The shaman's divinatory knowledge gleaned through dreams, a close relationship with a divine guru, and pulse reading awakens and rejuvenates the spiritual/life fortitude of the patient, described in chapter 6. Desjarlais charts stages of divinatory healing and interprets the words revealed by the shaman's deity according to Yolmo symbols of pain, space, kinship, and emotions, so that "social conflicts are given a tangible, objective form" (p. 179).

In chapter 7, "Metamorphoses," suffering is alleviated through direct and imagistic interaction between the patient and the shaman who protects the patient's body by manipulating forces in space and kinesthetically transferring suffering into other enti-

ties and spaces. In "A calling of souls," chapter 8, vital life forces of the weakened body are retrieved through chants that compel patient and listener participation in the healing. In chapter 9, "Departures," the shaman asks the helping deities to return to their domains. The immediacy of experience and how it escapes ethnographic description is compassionately told in a final story of sorrow in chapter 10, "Afterwords."

Body and Emotion contributes theoretically, methodologically, and substantively to the anthropology of experience and of medicine. Desjarlais expands the boundaries of the analytical concept of the "person" to include the body as invested with cultural meaning and locales of knowledge in its perceiving, experiencing and expressing capacities. Methodologically, the anthropologist's cultural knowledge can be a constraint, but can also illuminate ethnographic insight. Direct questioning of the Yolmo was often met with vagueness, requiring participant-observation on a "low-key level in everyday life" (p. 24). Desjarlais participated in the embodied knowledge of the Yolmo by a kind of cultural kinesthetic relativism in which his body became sensitive to, and mimetic of, the people around him. By having his body (and not just his mind) participate and observe, Desjarlais accessed Yolmo domains of knowledge and gained access to the shaman's world of trance, empathy, suggestion, exorcism, and healing.

The book is also an experiment in ethnographic writing. Refreshingly, Desjarlais does not rationalize his efforts in the all-too-familiar postmodern critique of anthropological representation; rather, his efforts bring the reader, and the reader's body, in touch with the Yolmo-wa, to let the reader "know" in the Yolmo way of knowing. This he achieves by using experiencing language, language of the senses, and language of the emotions, what he calls an "argument of images" (p. 30). He describes what happens to the body during healing such that it

"knows" it is healed, and in doing so, Desjarlais goes beyond the symbolic efficacy of healing to underscore the role of the kinesthetic (p. 195).

The numerous interpretations of Yolmo cultural symbols throughout the book, although necessary for defining the spaces and graces of the body, undermine Desjarlais's own critique of symbolic theories of ritual healing. But he breathes such life into the body that his critique of postmodern "discourses of healing" remains sound and intact.

One weakness in the book is that Desjarlais neglects discussing his apprenticeship with Meme. Other writers on spiritual healing in the Himalayas have pointed out that these relationships are relatively long-term, arduous, and require multiple trance experiences. Did Meme view him as an apprentice? Also, the narrative emphasis on body and experience tends to silence the people whose emotions we hear relatively little about directly. Indeed, the experiencing body becomes diffusely reified as it shifts from named individuals, to practitioners, to social categories ("women"), to spaces of illness and knowledge and things in motion, to a cultural body. Nonetheless, the book makes a significant contribution to cultural theories of the body and medical anthropology and can be used for teaching in upper-level undergraduate and graduate-level courses.

Sorcery and Shamanism: Curanderos and Clients in Northern Peru. Donald Joralemon and Douglas Sharon. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993 (cloth). x + 306 pp.

BETH A. CONKLIN
Department of Anthropology
Vanderbilt University

This remarkable ethnography explores a thriving tradition of urban shamanism.

Peru's northern coast is famous as a center of *curanderismo*, a folk healing system that blends popular Catholicism with indigenous symbolism. In midnight ceremonies held at backyard altars near cities like Trujillo and Chiclayo, mestizo shamans ingest mescaline brews of San Pedro cactus and perform songs, prayers, and ritual cleansings. The setting will be familiar with anyone who has seen Sharon's classic film, *Eduardo the Healer* (1978), about charismatic Eduardo Calderón, who is one of 12 curers examined in this book.

Sorcery and Shamanism looks at how shamans and their clients use the discourses of sorcery and curing to cope with economic chaos and gender politics in contemporary Peru. *Curanderos* work by manipulating complementary forces of good and evil, right and left, up and down. Joralemon and Sharon structured their text around a similar dynamic of examining *curanderismo* from two distinct vantage points, reflected in the book's two-part organization. Part 1, written mostly by Sharon, with contributions from Joralemon and Donald Skillman, focuses on shamans and the symbolism, metaphysics, and historical roots of their healing art. Part 2, written by Joralemon, looks at clients' experiences and the social impact of *curanderismo* from the viewpoint of critical medical anthropology.

This is collaborative research at its best. The text builds on multiple shifts in perspective, moving between shamans and their patients, cosmology and political economy, shamanism as belief system and shamanism as business. The result is one of the most comprehensive, richly nuanced studies in the ethnomedical literature.

Part 1 begins with short chapters on 12 *curanderos'* life histories and ritual practices. This broad scope is a welcome counterweight to tendencies that have plagued shamanism studies since Eliade's search for shamanic archetypes. Joralemon and Sharon explicitly reject reductionist approaches that represent ethnomedical be-