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Abstract

Deep South Texas is one of the poorest parts of the country and as a result of the extreme poverty the population faces many problems, from high unemployment to the drug trade. The vast majority of the population is Mexican origin. This paper suggests that one way that the population deals with circumstances beyond their control is to resort to the use of magic. The anthropological and sociological literature shows that this is a common phenomenon among many people of the world but this research uses the rational choice explanatory model to analyze and explain the experiences of the people. The actions of the people go beyond mere superstition; they are rationally calculated decisions based upon the cost and benefit to themselves. Purveyors of magic are found almost everywhere, from small herb shops to major department stores. Data was collected from these sources. The research showed that for the purveyors of such items there is an extensive and lucrative market for magical paraphernalia. The purchase of a votive candle or talisman brings to the believer a chance to change their life for the better.

INTRODUCTION

The belief in magic, as many scholars have pointed out, is found almost everywhere (Durkheim 1965 [1915], Frazer 1951 [1890], Malinowski 1954, Stark and Bainbridge 1996, Tambiah 1999, etc.) and in the Rio Grande Valley, magic is an important part of the lives of many of its inhabitants. Describing the Mexican Americans of the area in question Nall and Spielberg note, "Magico-religious or propitiatory ritual practices are a common trait of Mexican-American folk culture" (1967:303). This paper describes how magic is inextricably interwoven to the cultural fabric of the people in the region.

If we consider the ubiquitous existence of magic paraphernalia in a wide variety of stores as an indicator of the extent that magical beliefs among the Mexican American people of the Valley, then one must conclude that magic is important an important part of their lives. Magical paraphernalia are sold in *verberias*, which according to Trotter and Chavira are stores that sell herbs, perfumes, oils and candles (1997). Magical candles, sprays and perfumes are also in regional and national grocery and chain variety stores. Why would such major retail stores sell such items unless there is a demand for these items? Would it be economically feasible to sell these things? The contention of this paper is that there is a demand by the people for such products so there is a market.

The study of magic as part of a religious system has been an important area of research for

scholars in the social sciences since the 19th century (Bellah 1964). In an early description, Durkheim commenting on the importance of magic in society states, "to be sure, the belief in magic is always more or less general; it is frequently diffused in large masses of the population, and there are even peoples where it has as many as the real religion" (1965[1915]:60). The observations of Durkheim are still valid today. Although Durkheim was using functional analysis to explain magic, this paper will use rational choice theory to explain the use of magic among the Mexican Americans who live in Deep South Texas.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MAGIC

It is important to begin any discussion of magic with some of its defining characteristics. Magic has as one of its most important characteristic the control of supernatural forces by man (Trotter and Chavira 1997 [1981]. Marwick states, "...the activities or craft of the magician, a person who, suitably prepared, performs rituals aimed at controlling impersonal supernatural forces held responsible for the succession of events" (1975:12). Individual knowledge gives the person the ability to control supernatural powers (Evans-Pritchard 1976)

Another important characteristic is its clandestine or secret nature (Keefe 1982). Mauss and Hubert state, "We call 'magic' any ritual that is not part of an organized cult, such as the private ritual, which is secret, mysterious, and tending at one extreme toward the prohib-

ited" (1961:1088). Magic rituals are not like the rituals of organized religion which tend to be highly visible and public, rather, because of its selfish nature it is performed out of the sight of the general public.

Lastly, magical words are an important part of any magical system. Mauss states, "normally verbal rites in magic are called spells and we see no reason for not continuing this custom" (1972 [1950]:54). Verbal invocations are as important as material substances in fulfilling the purposes of magic. Evans-Pritchard reports that among the Azande, "the magician addresses (sima) the medicine and tells them what he wants them to do" (1976: 177). Use of appropriate words causes the medicine to work. Words are power and the right combinations of words, allows the magician to control the supernatural forces (O'Keefe 1982). Webster states, "If there is power in wishes, threats, or commands unuttered, how much greater must be the power of words which affirm or describe what the magician wants to come to pass" (1973:92). The spells used to control events can be positive, or negative, meant to harm people or their property. Yet, it is always the group that categorizes the harmful from the benign.

Due to the socially unacceptable nature of magic many in society often find it difficult to understand. Bernard points out that verbal magic makes the process better to understand (1938). Spells coalesce the goals and desires of the person using magic.

HOMEOPATHIC AND CONTAGIOUS

In understanding magical beliefs, it is important to differentiate the types and varieties of magic. Frazer identified two types of sympathetic magic: homeopathic magic (imitative magic) and contagious magic (1951 [1890]). He believes that both branches of magic are under the category of sympathetic magic because "...things act on each other at a distance through secret sympathy..." (Frazer 1951 [1890]:54).

Homeopathic magic or imitative magic is based on the principle that 'like produces like.' The so-called 'voodoo doll' is an example of the homeopathic principle. A wooden, wax, or cloth image is created in the likeness of the individual one wishes to influence. If the doll is harmed, then the person is harmed (DeVos and Suarez-Orozco 1990).

Contagious magic is based on the principle that once a thing has been in contact with a person a bond is established that lingers on. According to Frazer, contagious magic "...proceeds upon the notion that things which have once been conjoined must remain ever afterwards, even when quite dissevered from each other, in such a sympathetic relation that whatever is done to the one must similarly affect the other" (1951 [1890]:174). Frazer's understanding of magic still holds true today, at least for the Mexican American people in South Texas.

Although, the people who live in the Rio Grande Valley are predominantly Roman Catholic with a long Christian historical tradition they will resort to magic to solve their immediate problems. Sometimes it is difficult to determine the boundary between magic and religion. Davis states, "Since there is no universal essence of religion or magic behind the actual religions and magics we find in human experience, no single predicate can sufficiently define the phenomena" (1980:211). In other words, since there is no clear defining characteristic the boundary between orthodox religious belief and magic stays obscure. Such is the case in the Lower Rio Grande Valley where one finds in grocery stores votive candles dedicated to saints like Saint Joseph next to votive candles dedicated to El Chango Macho, a pagan image.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The ethnographic technique, to include methods of participant observation and in-depth interviews, has been an important part of the social sciences and throughout at least five decades has produced some remarkable urban studies (e.g., Gans 1982 [1962], Liebow 1967, Suttles 1968, Whyte 1993 [1943], etc.). As Suttles notes, participant observation allows for a sense of intimacy with the community. He states, "When observing from a great distance, one is apt to invent all sorts of irrational mental mechanism to account for the behavior..." (Suttles 1968:12).

Participant observation and informal interviews were the main data collection techniques employed in this study. Following this method, 22 *verberias* were visited in McAllen, Edinburg, Weslaco, Pharr, Mission and Alamo and talked with the owners or employees about the operation of the stores. I also, visited ma-

major retail giants like Walmart, Kmart and Walgreens and local grocery stores like HEB, Pronto and Junior's. At the non-*yerberia* retail stores I spoke with either the managers or persons who were responsible for ordering candles.

In *yerberias*, sometimes I would visit in the guise of a customer to observe the interactions of the owners and employees with the other customers. Inventories were made of the type of goods the merchants had for sale. Candles, herbs, amulets, aerosol sprays, oils, ointments, statues, and sacred pictures were all sold. Services such as *limpias* (cleanings) or card readings were usually available as well.

RESEARCH LOCATION

The location of the study was conducted in Hidalgo, county, located in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, twenty miles north of the Mexican border. The area is not actually a valley but an alluvial plain bordering the Rio Grande River. The land area of Hidalgo County is 1,569 square miles (County and City Data Book 1994). The area is warm to hot most of the year, which makes it an ideal climate for agriculture.

For the people who live in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, there are many stresses and strains they must confront on a daily basis, from high unemployment and poverty levels to the drug trade. Writing on magic many years ago, Malinowski stated that, "Both magic and religion arise and function in situations of emotional stresses: crises of life, lacunae in important pursuits, death and initiation into tribal mysteries, unhappy love and unsatisfied hate" (1954:87). Malinowski's comments are still timely when analyzing the socioeconomic problems of the area. This paper will attempt to prove that although magic might be functional it is also very rational.

According to the Census Bureau, the population was 569,463, with about 88.3% being Mexican origin (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). The population of Hidalgo County is young with 38.8% of the population being under the age of 25 (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). This deep South Texas county remains a major port of entry community into the U. S. and staging center for U.S. agricultural migrant streams.

The people of Hidalgo County have to deal with difficult economic circumstances because it is one of the poorest areas in the country:

36.3% of families have an income below the poverty level (County and City Data Book 1994). There is little if any industry on the American side of the border (U.S. Census Bureau). On the Mexican side of the border are *maquiladoras* (assembly plants, established by American industrial giants to take advantage of low Mexican wages (Bailey 1988). The economy is geared towards agribusiness, tourism and retail. The unemployment rate is always higher than most of the nation. In 1994, the unemployment rate was 14.3% (County and City Data Book 1994). During the winter months thousands of elderly visitors converge on South Texas to take advantage of the weather and lower cost of living (Texas Department of Economic Development 1997). Maril states, "The Mexican Americans of the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas are among the poorest people in the United States" (1989:4). The per capita income level for Hidalgo County, \$10,085, (U.S. Census Bureau 1996), makes the area one of the most economically deprived areas in the country.

It is a part of the United States characterized by economic deprivation and for those that live in the *colonias* a standard of living closer to the third world than the first (Holz 1993). *Colonias* are substandard subdivisions with inadequate water supplies and electricity which usually lack paved roads and proper drainage. The land is cheaply acquired, there is little in terms of adequate infrastructure and most homes are self-made (Ward 1999). There are over a thousand *colonias* in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, with the majority of them being located in Hidalgo County. The *colonias* are pockets of concentrated poverty in an economically deprived area. While unemployment is high in Hidalgo County, within the *colonias* it is oppressive. The incomes are very low with part-time and seasonal employment being common. Credit histories are virtually non-existent (Dabir 2001).

RATIONAL/UTILITARIAN MODEL

The relationship between religion and exchange is not a new idea. Marcel Mauss wrote in his classic, *Le Don*, "Money still possesses its magical power and still linked to the clan or individual. The various economic activities for example the market, are suffused with ritual and myth" (1990 [1950]:72). When someone decides to turn to magic to solve economic

problems it is a rationally calculated move. As Weber notes, "...religiously or magically motivated behavior is relatively rational behavior, especially in its earliest manifestations" (1991 [1922]:1) To perform magical or religious behavior implies a benefit for the individual (Iannaccone 1997).

Many contemporary scholars are using rational theory in explaining religion (Finke, Iannaccone, Stark and Brainbridge, etc.). Although there are critics of this theoretical model (Bruce, 1993, Spikard 1998, etc.), it is relevant to explaining why Mexican Americans use magic. Collins refers to this perspective as the rational/ Utilitarian tradition (1994, p.121). This theoretical tradition includes the work of scholars like Homans (1961), Blau (1964), Hechter (1983), and Coleman, (1992). Although there is some disagreement concerning the focus the underlying bond is exchange. According to Münch, Coleman sees social interaction as "...basically an economic transaction that is guided by the actor's rational choice between alternative outcomes of an outcome taken in terms of its benefits and costs..."(1992:138). The rational/utilitarian model rests on the belief that human beings make choices that they expect will maximize their rewards and/or minimize their costs. In other words people will always try to increase their advantages and decrease their disadvantages. Exchange is key to understanding this theoretical perspective. Collins states "Exchange operates according to an underlying principle: if I give something to you, you should give something of equal value in return" (1994:139). This sentiment is echoed in Iannaccone's analysis of rational choice theory and religion when he states, "Individuals act rationally, weighing the cost and benefits of potential actions, and choosing those actions that maximize their net benefits" (1997:26).

Exchange is not limited to just the choice of individuals, but to groups as well. Blau states, "Social exchange, broadly defined, can be considered to underlie relations between groups as well as individuals..."(1964:4). Although individual choice is important in this perspective it is the individual as part of the group that will create a religious market. Would a large grocery chain sell religious candles if they did not make a profit?

As Homans points out, people want to change

their lives when they are not getting much out of it (1959). The purchase of a candle means a potential reward, yet, as Stark points out, there is a difference between rewards and what he calls compensators, which are "...intangible substitutes for the desired reward..."(1996:36).

Magical solutions may not actually reward the individual (in other words change their economic or educational opportunities) but they provide an explanatory framework for a positive change. Supporting this idea, Douglas states, "We should recognize that the possibility of magic intervention is always present in the mind of believers, that it is human and natural to hope for material benefits from the enactment of cosmic symbols (1989[1966]:61). In the lives of the people of the Rio Grande Valley, given low income and low educational attainment levels, magic remains a viable option.

MEXICAN AMERICAN MAGIC

Simmons points out that magic and witchcraft have been a part of the Mexican American religious experience since the sixteenth century (1974). In one of the earliest sociological descriptions of Mexican American religious beliefs, Bogardus writes of the Mexican American, "Ceremony, ritual, the supernatural, exert a special influence over him" (1934:63). As some scholars have pointed out, Mexican American religious practices are different from other groups in the United States (Mirande 1985, Murguia 1989). Contemporary Mexican American religious belief spans the spectrum from the very traditional and conservative Roman Catholic to those who use magic. Williams discussing Mexican American religious belief states,

All the data we have on Mexican Americans indicate that religion, notably Roman Catholicism, in the past played a compelling role in everyday life. It was not just that people attended church...but that their lives were permeated by religion. Within the home, altars and other religious symbols were often prominently displayed(1990:22).

Although religious beliefs have changed over time, the fact remains that Mexican Americans still are highly spiritual. Mexican American religious experiences are syncretic, which is reflected in their practices. Where organized

religion leaves off and magic begins is not always clear as will be shown in the following sections.

CANDLES

Most *yerberias* and grocery/variety stores have a wide selection of candles for various purposes. Detailed information was collected from 22 *yerberias* and from 29 retail stores. The candles from the retail stores were inventoried and categorized according to being either traditional Roman Catholic or non-traditional magical candles. Retail stores, like H.E.B. or Walmart, have a section devoted to selling candles devoted to, Jesus, the Virgin Mary or some untraditional figure like the famous *curandero* (traditional healer) Pedro Jaramillo. The burning of votive candles is widely accepted Roman Catholic practice. There is no contradiction between faith and practice in the burning of the traditional candles. However, people can be uncomfortable with less traditional candles. At a grocery store where I was counting the candles a young woman was buying a candle dedicated to Pedro Jaramillo. When she saw I was looking at her she put the candle back and got a plain white one.

The candles sold in the *yerberias* have both religious and magical symbols, sometimes mixed together. In the case of the strictly magical candle, you are able to write down the name of the individual you wish to enchant. Most candles are bilingual and have a spell written in both Spanish and English. Following is a brief description to better illustrate the variety of candles and their functions.

There are two types of *veladoras* or candles sold. One type has an inscription embossed on the glass containing the candle and the other type, *compuestas*, have a label that the *yerberia* has placed and you can write down your name. The *compuestas* are considered more powerful than the regular *veladoras* and as a consequence are more expensive. At one *yerberia* they were double the price of a regular *veladora*. The worker at the *yerberia* said this was because they contained special incense and herbs which made them more powerful. The candles that people buy reflect their desires.

There is a brisk business in the selling of votive candles. Managers at both K Mart and Walmart said that they sold a lot of religious candles. This is consistent with HEB's estimate

that they sell between 200 and 300 candles per week in McAllen and 540 per week in Elsa. This empirical fact further lends support to the thesis that the poor are more apt to rely on candles to control their circumstances since the median family income of McAllen is \$23,809 compared to only \$9,544 in Elsa (County and City Data Book 1994). An average of 400 candles in every HEB would mean that they are selling 1600 candles per month at each store. The candles at HEB sell between .99 cents and \$1.59 which means each store sells between \$1,600 and \$2,500 in candles each month. Based upon the data I collected at the stores, twenty five percent of candles at all non-*yerberia* retail stores are non-traditional. Examples of non-traditional or magical candles:

- 1) Yo puedo mas que tu (I have more power than you). The inscription states "To gain over others. To gain control over others. To gain power for yourself. You will gain your objective. Will bring person to you rapidly. The person you desire will enhance their love towards you. Protection from your enemies. Your partner will do as you command. Use to obtain success. This candle reflects a desire to be in control of social relationships and greater economic success."
- 2) Chango Macho: Espiritu de Buena Suerte (Chango Macho: The Spirit of Good Luck). Chango Macho is a popular figure of good luck and is represented as an African king surrounded by money, jewels and gold. The person who burns this candle will obtain amor (love), tesoros (treasures) and riquezas (riches).
- 3) El Indio Poderoso (Lucky Indian Spirit [English translation on the candle]). The written spell invokes the Holy trinity. "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, invoke your power and end my affliction. break my chains and protect me from my enemies."
- 4) Amar y Ser Amado (To Love and Be Loved). The inscription promises, "You will be amazed by the love you will receive. You will be loved and have some one at your side all the time. Make your

dreams realities”

All four candles described an interest in controlling the forces which govern love, money and power. For many people who live in Hidalgo County, money and power are beyond their control. They are at the mercy of shifting economic conditions, such as the freeze in 1983 that destroyed the citrus crop and left many without work. As Stark and Bainbridge observe, “One important feature of magic is that it deals in relatively specific compensators for relatively specific rewards” (1996:105).

Other candles reflect a more ominous intention. Evans-Pritchard makes the distinction between magic and sorcery. He views sorcery as criminal activity whereas magic is perfectly acceptable to the members of society. Magic can be destructive and still be considered good because it is directed against a transgressor (Evans-Pritchard 1976). Sorcery or bad magic is used out of jealousy, greed, lust, or some other negative feeling. The methods and techniques of magic and sorcery are the same but as Kieckhefer note, “The difference between positive and negative magic lay not in their basic conception but in the purposes they serve” (1990:81). Invoking the spirit of Chango Macho, the spirit of good luck, is good because it is done to get a better job or more money. As Lieban notes, establishing a relationship with an evil spirit is the defining characteristic of sorcery (1977). Two examples reflect a negative form of magic:

- 1) *Muerte contra mis Enemigos* (Death for my enemies). The candle bears an image of a skull and cross-bones surrounded by fire.
- 2) *Separar* (Breakup). A picture of a rattle-snake poised to strike is pictured on the candle. It is used to breakup a relationship.

According to one *yerberia* employee, there is a special room in the *yerberia* that these kinds of candles can be used because people do not want to take them home. They are unwilling to let family or friends know they are burning these candles because they know they are doing something wrong. Non-*yerberia* retail stores do not stock candles that can be considered sorcery.

In addition to *veladoras*, there are candles in the shape of naked men and women. The candles come in three colors, black, red and white. They are sold only in *yerberias*. According to one *yerberia* owner, the colors reflect the motive of the person burning the candle. For example burning the red candle is used to win someone’s love. If there was not a desire by the people to control events they would not be buying candles but on the contrary it is very lucrative market, each HEB store alone every year sells between \$19,200 and \$30,000.

TALISMANS

All *yerberias* sell a wide variety of talismans that bring luck or ward off evil. For example, the *ojo de venado* (deers’s eye), is used to keep harm away from infants. The *ojo* is a seed with a picture of some religious figure like the Virgin Mary or San Martin Caballero (Saint Martin of Tours). The majority of talismans sell for less than five dollars.

Saint Martin a common figure in many of the talismans, is indicative of the flexible nature of Mexican American magical beliefs. Saint Martin is the patron saint of soldiers but I was told by one *yerberia* worker that people use his image to bring luck to business.

The syncretic nature of the talismans is evident in the mixing of mainstream Roman Catholic religious figures with magical material like horseshoes. However it is not only Christianity that is being used in the talismans. For example, *Hotei*, one of the seven lucky gods of Japan and Kali, Hindu goddess of death and regeneration are popular. The Chango Macho can be ultimately traced to West Africa. Yet each of these figures are transformed into something that is part of the conceptual framework of the population. The syncretism of eastern and western traditions can be extreme, for example during one visit, I asked a *yerberia* owner about Kali, a fairly fearsome looking goddess with six arms and was told she is a form of Santa Barbara.

MISCELLANEOUS MAGIC

Finally, in addition to the *veladoras* and talismans, most *yerberias* (and even some grocery stores) sell lotions, powders and aerosol sprays with magical properties. The belief is that you can smear, sprinkle or spray power on yourself or whatever you want to influence. For example, the Lucky Indian spray or

Chango Macho spray will bring good luck to your home. There is a connection between all form of supernatural paraphernalia. For example you can buy a candle dedicated to *Los Siete Potencias Africanas* (Seven African Powers), as well as buy a spray and talisman.

CONCLUSION

Popular understandint of the large number of *yerberias* and grocery/retail stores selling magical solutions to everyday problems could be explained as superstitions of an ignorant people. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. Homans states, "social behavior is an exchange of goods, material goods but also non-material ones, such as symbols of approval or prestige" (1959:606). Those who are using magic are exchanging a few dollars for the hope of a better life. As long as economic conditions in Hidalgo County remain dismal spending a little money with the hope of bettering your economic conditions will remain a rational choice. As Metraux states concerning Voodoo in Haiti, "As long as medical services are nonexistent in the country districts, so long may the voodoo priests be sure of a large clientele" (1972:61). The same thing holds true for South Texas.

The kinds of items sold in the *yerbaria* and grocery/retail stores shows a rational attempt to return some control to their lives. The items sold are not expensive but the potential return on their investment is great. People who believe in their efficacy state they know someone who because they purchased a talisman or candle, won the lottery or got a better job. The "empirical evidence" shows that the stores are accommodating the desires of the people by giving them what they want. Thousands of dollars are spent each month by the people in their attempt to control the uncontrollable.

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LIFE, DEATH,
 ————— *and* —————
 IN-BETWEEN
 ————— *on the* —————
 U.S.-MEXICO
 BORDER
 —————
Así es la vida
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