

Medicine and religion

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“L'alternativa fra ‘magia’ e ‘razionalità’ è uno dei grandi temi da cui è nata la civiltà moderna”

Ernesto de Martino 1957

Sud e magia

Any review of the history of anthropology can establish two facts. The first is that the prominence of investigations into religion in our discipline is associated with a historical boundary between science and belief that is at the origin of our knowledge and practice. For a considerable time, religion was the paradigm of the world of the irrational, belief, mysticism and otherness; a *pensée sauvage* logic – or lack of logic, depending on the point of view – that the anthropologist had to decipher using deductive formulae or clever ethnographic abductions. The second is that the prominence of the issue of otherness and irrationality, which classic investigations into religion staged so well, largely prevented anthropology from recognising indigenous medicines as local sets of knowledge and practices. Classic works like Tylor's *Primitive Culture* or Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, both full of references to native therapeutics, absorb the medical phenomenon within more urgent issues for their age such as religion, the world of “primitive” beliefs and, in short, the enigmatic landscape of cultural otherness.

Probably one of the texts that best portrays this problematical relationship between religion and medicine and, at the same time, restores some sort of order is *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* by Evans-Pritchard. Partly because the ethnographic approach helps to dissolve some prejudices about the ways of thinking of other cultural worlds, and partly because of his theoretical skill, he suggests to us that empirical logic is not unknown to the Azande. Curiously, his strategy not only brings us closer to, and makes us more familiar with, the culture of the informants but also

maintains the rationality of scientific thought. He simply uses two questions to order the worlds of belief and science: a mystical “why” and an empirical “how”. The latter question recognises the native as a pragmatic social actor, who Malinowski had attempted to represent in his monographies several years before, and as a subject who is capable of ordering and interpreting reality from facts that are expressed in causes and effects. The former, however, appeals to the social and existential sphere of human misfortune which, although it does not contradict empirical knowledge of cause and effect, does make it complete by providing a set of values and meanings. Now, does not the cohabitation of facts and values always involve some degree of mutual contamination or fertilisation, depending on how you look at it? In addition, no less important, does the very identity of medical anthropology depend on discovering the values behind the facts, whether they are shamanic or biomedical, and at the same time showing their materiality and pragmaticity? Despite their diversity, the texts in this section speak to us of how facts and values contaminate each other and how anthropologists can account for this intricate relationship.