
REVIEWS

Claire D. F. Parsons, ed., *Healing Practices in the South Pacific*. Laie, Hawaii: Institute for Polynesian Studies, 1985. Pp. xiii, 250, maps, tables, appendixes, bibliography, index, US\$22.50 cloth.

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Traditional healing practices and practitioners are often resistant to the kind of detailed inquiries that anthropologists have wanted to undertake because of both a history of repression from imposed, imported health care systems and traditions of secrecy attached to medical knowledge. These circumstances require an investigator to devote considerable resources to identifying and then establishing rapport with informants. In addition to being difficult to conduct, such studies are also subject to criticism for small numbers of informants and mixed motives on the part of both investigator and informant(s). Once access is granted, however, Pacific societies often reveal flourishing systems of knowledge and practice that parallel and to some extent complement Western health care systems.

All this may induce some investigators who have learned a considerable amount about indigenous healing during the course of fieldwork on other topics to avoid publishing their results. Yet it is precisely their long residence with the host society and the rapport acquired that allows them, often fortuitously and indirectly, to learn about beliefs and behaviors many recently decolonized peoples are adept at camouflaging or concealing from the attention of physicians, government officials, and missionaries. These inhibitions make all the more welcome the

advent of this volume. It is a preliminary contribution to the study of healing practices in the Pacific.

The very nature of this attempt to assemble accounts of healing practices from all areas of the Pacific results in limitations on the information presented. Some of these are alluded to by Parsons in her preface; others are discussed by the authors of individual chapters. Most of the chapters are based on fieldwork that was undertaken with different topical focuses, which may account for the lack of integration of these works with studies of healing practices in other Pacific societies. Despite efforts to include all culture areas, this volume focuses on Polynesian societies (Samoa, Tuvalu, Tikopia, Tonga, East Futuna, Rarotonga, Pukapuka, Tahiti, and New Zealand Maori) with only one Melanesian society, the Kiai speakers of Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu, included. Micronesia is not represented.

The eleven chapters range from detailed descriptions of autochthonous concepts of disease diagnosis and treatment (Macpherson, Parsons, Ludvigson, Biggs, Baddeley, Hecht, and Hooper) to attempts to relate indigenous healing practices to the overall health status of a population (Macdonald and especially Chambers) and descriptions of specialized practitioners (Kinloch). The primary focus, however, is on traditional healing, with most authors making only limited attempts to present a holistic picture of contemporary healing practices in these societies. Some are content to list recipes for plant medicines and descriptions of treatments; others seek to understand the roles of patients, healers, and concepts of illness in the social systems in which they are embedded. Hooper and Macpherson provide valuable insights into historical changes in "traditional" medical paradigms. The resulting smorgasbord is both a strength and a weakness of the book.

The predominantly ethnomedical approach of these authors results in enough topical overlap that cross-cultural comparisons almost leap out at the reader. Similarities such as ghost sickness, the need for secrecy in medical knowledge, the danger of incorrect performance of therapeutic techniques, and the perceived dichotomy between Western and traditional illnesses are abundant. Yet Parsons, in her preface, has explicitly ruled out such an analysis as premature, alluding to the preliminary nature of some of the analyses presented. In light of such warnings, it is disappointing that only a few authors discuss the limitations of their data and analyses. Biggs is to be commended for his fine discussion of methods of presentation for ethnomedical data and of the problems encountered in data collection.

The reader would have specially benefited if Parsons had used her

final chapter, on New Zealand Maori healing, as a case study on the often formidable problems of field investigation into traditional healing. Since most of the volume's authors are associated with the University of Auckland and have been trained in New Zealand, it is not surprising that a number of articles make allusions that may puzzle readers from other countries. This is especially apparent in the brief explanation Parsons offers for the last-minute substitution of her "Notes on Maori Sickness Knowledge and Healing Practices" for the chapter that a Maori scholar decided not to present. My discussions with other New Zealand anthropologists make it clear that there is much more going on here than meets the eye and a close reading of Parsons's chapter reveals that her research was conducted in a highly charged political atmosphere. The significance of healing practices in the ongoing revival of *maoritanga* seems to be critical to evaluating this chapter. Furthermore, this may be only an extreme example of the kinds of wider cultural and political factors that impinge on this type of research in any society.

Overall, this is a valuable contribution to the study of indigenous healing systems in the Pacific and one that should stimulate additional research and analysis, especially cross-cultural comparison. Well produced with useful maps and reasonably priced, this book will be a useful addition to the library of anyone interested in traditional medicine.