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EXAMPLES OF IMITATIVE MAGIC AMONG THE CHOL INDIANS

John Beekman*

To understand the thinking and practices of the monolingual Chol Indians who live in southern Mexico one must first of all master their language. To determine the basis of their thought patterns involves a careful study of their culture. The following examples of imitative magic have been collected over a period of several years and reveal a certain pattern of thought which can be adapted and used by one who is interested in advancing the culture of such a people.

If men eat the top tamales of a pile, they will begin to perspire much. Perspiration is related to the forehead. The Chol words for 'top' and for 'forehead' are the same.

Pregnant women, who carry a bad odor which often lasts even after the child has been born, are said to have eaten rotten eggs at some time during their pregnancy.

A certain part of a chicken's stomach is called, 'it's coldness'. If this part is eaten it will cause one to become very chilly.

If we eat the foot of a turkey when we are small we will not be able to dance any better than a turkey when we become the leader of the religious ceremonies.

If we eat sugar cane when it is a bit black, we will have much trouble with tooth decay.

When the rivers are high, the white foam that collects in certain spots along the banks is scooped off the top and drunk to cure or prevent tuberculosis. Tuberculosis is known as the 'white cough'.

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If a long machete is used to cut the umbilical cord of a new-born boy, he will grow to use a machete well. If the umbilical cord is cut long, he will be long-winded. If too long, then he will grow up to be an adulterer. When the cord sloughs off, it is tied to the top of the house or in the top of a tree. This assures that the boy will climb agilely and fearlessly.

A baby born with two or three kinks in the umbilical cord will become very wealthy. The Chol men used to wear a red cloth sash into which they tied their money. Two or three kinks of the cord were compared to the two or three ties in the belt indicating much money.

The fruit of trees known as wap, ac'te', and bayal have a white fruit. Anyone who eats this when young will age quickly and their hair will turn white.

The fruit of a tree called tue' has a hairy blossom which is very curly. Boys who eat this fruit will have only curly headed daughters who will all die early in childhood.

If a young girl puts an empty gourd upon her head like a hat, her children will be born without hair.

When shelling corn for seed purposes, any that drop on the ground must be picked up quickly before the chickens or pigs eat them. If the pigs or chickens eat any of the seed-corn, the remainder of the seed will be eaten by birds after it has been planted.

The cobs from which seed-corn has been shelled are hung inside the house and not burned till the new corn crop is in ear. If these cobs are burned sooner, the growing corn will be burned by the sun and die.

A certain ulcer found in the scalp of children is shaped like a miniature ant hill. To cure this growth ant eggs are dug up and boiled in water and then applied hot to the sore. This is supposed to kill the ants inside that are making their hill.

From the above examples it may be seen that imitative magic is used by the Chols to explain unknown causes and to gain desired goals. The latter purpose can be adapted and used advantageously as a tool for teaching. For example: Water that has been bubbled (boiled) prevents bubbles in ones stools (diahrrea). The Chols have no metaphors nor proverbs and make little use of the simile. In view of this, this type of thought structure, where it can be used naturally, has unexplored possibilities in teaching morals, hygiene and other basic truths.