FAITH HEALING IN THE NORTH CHILEAN ANDES OF PILGRIMAGE

J. van Kessel

In the popular sanctuaries of North Chile, as in the American Indian community faith healing is based on the notion that health and religion are interrelated. Sickness and premature death are connected with sin and guilt; healing and satisfactory life with penance, remission of sins and divine blessing. Life is a divine gift. One looks for restored vitality by way of a pilgrimage in a sanctuary, which is in a sense the 'centre of the world' and where 'heaven and earth meet'. This myth, analyzed by Eliade in his booklet The myth of eternal return has of old been alive in the Andes area and in the pilgrim centre of La Tirana, which therefore deserves our special attention (Van Kessel, 1980-a:113-152). In this contribution, after a brief outline of the historical and social context, we will describe the popular sanctuaries of North Chile as 'centres of popular medical practice' and subsequently the subjective process of healing which is taking place there. An analysis of the content of the pilgrim hymns will add to our understanding of a set of four pre-christian elements of this form of health care: the all-mother, sin, salvation¹ and vow² as a therapeutic model of the pilgrims.

The pilgrim songs and the legends about the origin of these sanctuaries may indicate that the medical myth of the Andes, although transformed and virtually disappeared from the consciousness of the pilgrims, still lies at the bottom of this popular medical practice.

1. The historical and social context (Tarapacá described in a nutshell)

The First Administrative Region of Chile -- also called Tarapacá and situated in the very North of the country, is a desert area which is as full of ores and other minerals as it is lacking in water. Towards the east the desert changes into the Andes Mountains. Some agriculture is possible on irrigated terraces in the

¹ Although it is possible to defend the term 'salvation' here, we will prefer the use of the terms 'life and health', because the expression 'vida y salud' is customary among the pilgrims and occurs hundreds of times in their hymns.

² Vow is used here as a translation of: 'promesa' or 'manda'.
mountain crevices, because the meltwater from the mountain tops flows to the west in small rivers. At higher altitudes, between 3500 and 4500 metres above sea-level, cattle breeding is possible on the scanty natural pasturelands, where 33,500 llamas and alpacas and 17,000 sheep are at pasture on 123,010.94 acres of wet pastureland, called "bofedales" (TEA, 1991:101; 120-121). Some 40 communities of herdsmen and about 70 agricultural villages comprise a total number of 9230 Aymaras, whereas the urban population of this Region comprises a total number of approximately 245,500 inhabitants (TEA, 1991:14; 87-88). As a result of the attraction of the mines and the coastal towns, the cultural and educational policy of the government in this area, and the ideology of progress, one should estimate the mestizo population in towns -- depending on its definition -- at least at 120,000 people; this is more than 13 times the above-mentioned number of Aymaras.

It is particularly this mestizo population which assembles every year in the pilgrim centres of La Tirana, Las Peñas and Ayquina, three virtually depopulated agricultural villages in the Atacama desert. One may add to this some eight smaller sanctuaries, where -- following the same pattern and with similar expectations -- every year a few thousands of pilgrims from the urban working-class areas assemble there in order to celebrate their festival and to fulfill their vow; vows which have nearly always been prompted by the hope of recovery, or arise from the obligation because of a recovery obtained.

The core of the pilgrim movement consists of the religious dance-associations, three of which have been described in the form of historical biographies (Van Kessel, 1987). These dancers have been recruited from militant working-class circles and are strictly organized according to the tradition and after the model of the local trade unions of miners, dockers and factory workers. Together the 280 associations, formed into three federations, have about 14,500 members, who have committed themselves for the minimal duration of three years. But the annual number of non-union pilgrims amounts to at least 85,000, or about 16% of the total population of this Region. The pilgrims are purveyors of a peculiar popular culture in which Spanish-Catholic popular religion and Aymara mestizship are conjoined with the mentality of a politically conscious and militant proletariat, formed in the course of more than a century of bloody labour struggle. The socio-economic and cultural-religious characteristics of this pilgrim population have been described before (Van Kessel, 1988:77-79).

Virtually the whole Andes area has seen the advent of the process of modernization, some places sooner than other places; in one place more gradual and in other places sometimes overwhelmingly fast and destructive, as was the case in Tarapacá in the years between 1860 and 1890, and again since 1970. In Tarapacá, which since 1850 has seen the development of a large-scale modern mining industry of saltpetre and copper, the evolution has led to the familiar