

Magico-Religious Elements in the Traditional Beliefs of Maillardville, B.C.

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Superstitions form an era of folk culture in which the folklorist may at times feel that he is betraying the trust of his informants. Most people are indeed pleased to impart all sorts of information on traditional cooking, singing, dancing, remedies, customs, the telling of tales, etc., but appear somewhat apologetic or superior toward what they see as "superstitions." In our particular case, the embarrassment was twofold: the traditional beliefs were "different" in the sense that they belonged to a past rural era and seemed to have lost their function and their relevance, and they were "French-Canadian" in a community where integration to the Anglo-Saxon majority means socio-economic success.

In their article, "Changing Agricultural Magic in Southern Illinois: A Systematic Analysis of Folk-Urban Transition,"¹ H. Passin and J. W. Bennett make a valid distinction between knowing, believing and practising superstitions. These may correspond to various stages of the loss of homogeneity and of the increased urbanization of rural folk communities. We will see that, in Maillardville, superstitions are known and also that, in case of emergencies or as a last resort, some very specific ones are also practised.

As the word "superstition" frequently occurred, I found that my informants used this term to refer to beliefs or actions in which the logical link between cause and effect was not clearly perceived by the practitioner. Yet from generation to generation they are handed down and, to a certain extent, still held or performed.

The beliefs and actions which do not appear totally irrational often follow the laws regulating sympathetic magic (e.g. the various cures for

¹ In *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965).

warts). We see sympathetic magic taking two forms: it is either *homeopathic magic*, which rests on the association of ideas founded on similarity (“like produces like” and “an effect resembles its cause” — Frazer’s Law of Similarity) or *contagious magic*, which rests on the association of ideas founded on contiguity (“things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after physical contact has been severed” — Frazer’s Law of Contact):

From the first of these principles, namely the Law of Similarity, the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it; from the second he infers that whatever he does to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact, whether it formed part of his body or not.²

It would be a mistake to assume that the modern, educated person is immune from the workings of this type of logic. This is indeed why the investigation of traditional beliefs, still so close to one’s own past, is so valuable. In the words of Ruth Benedict: “More than any other body of material it makes vivid the recency and the precariousness of those rationalistic attitudes of the modern urban educated groups which are often identified with human nature.”³

The corpus of traditional beliefs and remedies used for this article was collected in Maillardville, B.C., whose history from rural settlement to suburban area is briefly given here.

Some thirty French-speaking families arrived in British Columbia from the province of Quebec (mostly from Sherbrooke and Hull) in 1909, to take up residence near the Fraser Mills, which, owing to labour disputes with their employees, had decided to send east for loggers and sawmill workers, giving these people an alternative to their usual emigration to the United States.

The settlement was given the name of Maillardville in 1912, in honour of its first priest, Father Maillard. More people continued to arrive until, by 1921, ninety-eight families lived there. Since World War II, a great many more French-speaking families and individuals have come to live in Maillardville, now a part of Coquitlam and a suburb of Vancouver. By 1959, half a century after its foundation, the number had increased to

² J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (London, 1959), p. 11.

³ Ruth Benedict, “Folklore,” *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 6:288. Quoted by Don Yoder in “Folk Medicine,” in *Folklore and Folklife*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago, 1972), p. 212.

540 francophone families, 128 of which indifferently used French or English at home.⁴

These newcomers, although tracing their origins to Quebec, often came from the Prairies, where their parents homesteaded at the turn of the century or where they themselves arrived later. Others were born in the United States, where their parents had emigrated from Quebec; but they too spent some years, if not most of their working life, in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. They formed a distinct group from the 1909 pioneers, but their joint interest in the public schools vs. parochial schools controversy of the 1950s did much to unite the inhabitants of the little community against the threat to their language, their religion and their culture. Yet, in spite of the determination of some of its residents, the community, although physically recognizable, is culturally surrounded and probably soon to be absorbed by the larger, predominantly English-speaking group.

This is the general background of the thirty-five people interviewed from the fall of 1973 to the spring of 1974. Thirty-five may seem a relatively small number of informants; however, I found that I was by then obtaining the same information without any new additions to my collection.

I collected from them 220 remedies, ranging alphabetically from "Anaemia" to "Worms," and some 200 beliefs, mostly signs and presages (through parts of the human body, animal behaviour, accidental human actions, various occurrences, etc.) to anticipate good or bad luck and to foretell visits, deaths, marriages, etc.⁵

I must add that the great majority of my informants warned me from the outset that they "did not know anything"; then, some of the older ones conceded that they "used to know a lot about it, but could not remember any of it offhand." And, indeed, their first reaction was to say that they took aspirin for a cold and went to see the doctor for anything else, but they later remembered many old remedies. With regard to the traditional beliefs, most of them were called "superstitions" — especially those in which other people believed — but it was also recognized that some coincidences did occur and that, indeed, the dropping of a knife was sometimes followed by a male visitor.

⁴ These figures come from the *Programme-Souvenir des Fêtes du Jubilé de la Paroisse Notre-Dame de Lourdes, Maillardville, C.B., 1909-1959*.

⁵ These were collected in a mimeographed booklet in the form of a "Report to Informants": "Some Traditional Beliefs and Remedies of Maillardville, B.C." (1974).

My informants ranged in age from fifteen to eighty-five, but the majority (half of them) were between the ages of sixty-five and seventy-eight. I wish to thank them here for their patience, their generosity and good humour. One family in particular was kind enough to provide nine informants spreading over three generations. While many were interviewed on their own,⁶ I have also attempted, whenever possible, to interview together members of the same family (husbands and wives, sisters), sometimes of different generations (mothers and daughters), as I was interested in possible discrepancies and the cultural loss suffered by a population still struggling to retain some of its customs and beliefs.

I will briefly give two examples of this, using two mothers interviewed with their daughters. To a list of questions based on illnesses/remedies and signs/beliefs collected in French Canada (which formed one part of the investigation), the first mother (fifty-six) was able to give twenty-one answers, while her daughter (fifteen) could only give seven; the second mother (sixty-six) gave seventeen answers and her daughter (thirty-four) only nine. Admittedly, figures do not mean very much, but if we compare the answers given, we get a better picture of the loss of detail:

- (1) MOTHER: "When your right ear is buzzing, someone is speaking well of you; when it is your left ear, someone is speaking ill of you."
 DAUGHTER: "When your ears are buzzing, someone is talking about you."
- (2) MOTHER: "If you drop a knife, you will receive a visit from a man; if you drop a fork, it will be a visit from a woman."
 DAUGHTER: "When you drop a knife or a fork, you will have a visitor."

In some cases the answer given by the mother was a traditional one (e.g. "A rainbow means that it will rain the following day") while the daughter gave an answer which she recognized as being "English" ("There is a pot of gold (*un chaudron d'argent*) at each end of the rainbow"). We have here a contrast between what seems to be a meteorological principle (or apparently based on verifiable experience, whether true or not) which it is possible to believe, and the most irrational fantasy. It is these latter irrational elements, magical and religious, still present in a good many traditional beliefs known to my informants, which I have attempted to examine here. I have been able to check these beliefs against

⁶ The random interviews took place mostly at the Foyer Maillard and at the Arts and Crafts meetings of the Golden Age group at the Place des Arts.

similar ones found in Pierre DesRuisseaux's book *Croyances et pratiques populaires au Canada Français*,⁷ and in Carmen Roy's excellent study of the *Littérature orale en Gaspésie*.⁸ Most of the time, the origin of these traditional beliefs can be traced to much older, European folklore.

Many of these beliefs found in Maillardville reflect a strong faith and typical Catholic concerns. For instance, great concern is shown for the deliverance of the souls in Purgatory. This appears in connection with shooting stars ("If you have time to cross yourself before a shooting star disappears from the sky, you help a soul get out of Purgatory"); the same holds true if you have time to say "*Jésus, Marie, Joseph!*" — this was told me no less than sixteen times. The same is true with dreams ("If you dream that someone is dead, it may mean that this person is in Purgatory and needs your prayers"); or with a particular incident ("Two people who say the same thing at the same time are saving a soul from Purgatory"). The first instance may be assimilated to prayer, and in a quite orthodox way gain indulgence for a soul; the second could be seen at best as a psychological phenomenon; but the irrationality of the third puts it in good place among magical beliefs.

Even the rational notion that concentration can in some cases rid one of the hiccups needs to be reinforced with a formula: one is made to say, "*J'ai le hoquet — Qui l'a fait? — C'est Jésus — Je n'l'ai plus,*"⁹ sometimes once, sometimes three times, other times seven times, but always holding one's breath. All variants include the name of Jesus.

The special powers attributed to the wedding ring or *jonc* (used as a remedy, sometimes in conjunction with iodine, against the spreading of scurf, or used as a means of divination of the sex of an unborn child and the oniric vision of some future spouse) come from its having been blessed during the sacrament of marriage, when some of the supernatural properties of the blessing were then transferred to the ring.

Some unusual and obsolete advice was given to me: a little cross made of small branches of sorb-tree (*cormier*) and put on a fence will stop sorcerers from passing through; the same cross on a barn or stable door will ward off curses put on farm animals. (This advice, witchcraft redeemed by the form of the cross, belongs to an older and more rural era and makes use of a tree uncommon in British Columbia but frequently found in Quebec.)

⁷ Editions du Jour (Montreal, 1973).

⁸ Bulletin No 134, No 36 de la Série Anthropologique (Ottawa, 1955).

⁹ Three variants of the formula were given to me. Van Gennep mentions another variant in *Le Folklore du Dauphiné* (Paris, 1933), (C. Roy, p. 75).

If many beliefs make what is presumed to be a wise use of religious symbols, the unnecessary use of the sign of the cross will bring bad luck: the same magic, enhanced once more by the Christian symbol, makes an unlucky occurrence of the crossing of hands when four people meet, and of the accidental crossing of the knife and fork when setting the table.

Again, we see a superstitious belief being "reinforced" or "justified" by the addition of a Christian element in the following prediction: "If, during midnight mass, the moon shines on your barn, it will remain empty and there will be no hay; if the barn stays in the dark, there will be a good harvest."

Some very old, non-Christian beliefs are found in Maillardville and are fairly widespread. For instance, the symbolic significance of salt (used in many cultures for exorcising devils) and its endowment with magical properties survive in the traditional throwing of spilled salt over the left shoulder to ward off bad luck. Equally old, the positive qualities linked to the right and the negative ones linked to the left are found in such sayings as: "If your right ear is buzzing, someone is speaking well of you; if it is your left ear, they are speaking ill of you"; "If your right eyelid is twitching, some happiness will come your way; left eyelid will mean unhappiness." (Yet, paradoxically, an itchy left hand will receive some money, and an itchy right one may have to give it away.)

A black cat, probably because of its customary association with witches (it is thought), cannot cross your path without bringing bad luck. The very well known belief that walking under a ladder brings bad luck (seven years in some cases) was mentioned by almost all the informants. Breaking a mirror is thought to produce the same result, and opening an umbrella in a house is often believed to bring the worst possible luck. A bird flying into a house is a sure sign of imminent death, and so is a dog baying in front of a house.

All these are beliefs which most people of European ancestry have heard at one time or another. On the side of good luck, the charms or magical objects believed to embody favourable powers are equally familiar ones: a four-leaf clover, a horseshoe, or a rabbit's foot. But perhaps more powerful are the personal good luck charms which experience has "proved" to be successful in directing positive forces toward their owner. These, as well as the former, can often be seen on Bingo tables.

Successful gardening followed certain rules. But vegetable gardens are much reduced and people now say that they plant their garden when they feel like it. If pressed, they will, however, admit that planting should be (and used to be) done at certain times. A woman whose childhood was

spent on the Prairies reported that tomato plants had to be started in a hothouse on March 19 (St. Joseph's day). Many people agree that potatoes and tomatoes should be planted during the full moon (potatoes planted when the moon is on the wane will be very small). Peas must be planted from the rising moon to the full moon, and cucumbers, according to one person at least, should go into the ground before sunrise.

Beliefs and traditions making use of the phases of the moon or the season may be based on experience. For instance, the majority of the women informants also saw the full moon as a time when many children and many domestic animals are born. Insane people and farm animals are said to be made more nervous by the full moon. These two beliefs were said to come from observation and no attempt was made to suggest a cause for them.

We have seen that sympathetic magic can take different forms. Associative or metonymic thought can be seen at work in the belief that a woman whose breast itches will soon receive news from her son. Substitutive or metaphoric thought is clear in the beliefs that an itchy foot is a sign that "one will go somewhere, maybe just on an outing"; that the length of a white hair or thread found on one's clothes indicates the length of a letter soon to be received; or that if a child's baby tooth is swallowed by an animal, the child will grow a permanent tooth resembling that of the animal.¹⁰

An amusing use of sympathetic magic can be found in some divinatory "shower" games. At a "wedding shower" a woman puts a 10-cent coin in cold water and places it on a girl's forehead, asking her to shake her head to make the coin fall. The number of times she will have to shake it before succeeding will give her the number of years she will have to wait before getting married. Similarly, at a "baby shower" the number of shakes it takes to make the coin fall indicates the number of children a woman will have. As an added twist, one can pretend to be putting the coin on the woman's forehead, leaving only the wet imprint, and let her worry when nothing happens; kinder souls do not wet the coin, which will then fall much faster.

The manipulation of the signs shows that the players are perfectly aware of the value to be attached to the symbolism used, but the principle

¹⁰ Sometimes the reason is forgotten and there only remains the injunction to throw baby teeth in the fire. This custom has in fact been abandoned, and teeth are now left under the child's pillow to be traded for a small coin by the Tooth Fairy or the child's Guardian Angel.

is not different from the one on which rests a good many remedies, often the only recourse against some serious sickness.

It is in the realm of sickness and its cures that all aspects of the supernatural are most often present, from sympathetic magic to miraculous cures performed by the Virgin. The medieval Christian Church is at the origin of this widespread faith:

The principles of religious healing, rooted in antiquity, were channeled into Christianity, where healings in the name of the deity were permitted . . . Through its systems of blessings, benedictions, and its wide use of sacramentals (essentially expressing the belief in the holiness of material objects) the medieval Church ministered to and encouraged the principles that we consider basic to folk medicine of the magico-religious sort: the idea of the availability of supernatural powers for healing, and the mediation of that power through material objects as well as human healers.¹¹

Whereas a great many natural remedies (plantain leaves, smoke or *boucane*, burdock, garlic, onion, urine,¹² goose fat, mutton fat, salted pork rind, "chicken shit") have on the whole been replaced by pharmaceutical mixtures and ointments, one may still resort in Maillardville to magico-religious practices when science is not always successful or when it is not worth consulting a doctor (e.g. warts), or when some frightening emergencies occur (e.g. profuse bleeding).

Certain remedies are mysterious and, their origin long forgotten, they sometimes seem to come from some witch's recipe book ("If you suffer from pleurisy, soak in water a little bit of umbilical cord, all dried up, and drink it all up"). Others may seem equally irrational, such as the advice, to someone suffering from the mumps, to "rub his throat against a pigs' trough." In fact, this remedy originates in an observation made in France a long time ago: "When children have the mumps . . . they are made to rub their neck against a pigs' trough, because of the belief that this is the way pigs (which are very prone to the disease) cure themselves."¹³ Because this temporary relief sought by sick pigs was not known to my informants, their "remedy" was turned from a reasonable analogy of presumed treatment and cure into a nonsensical "old wives' tale." It is not always possible to trace the origin of old beliefs and remedies, but

¹¹ Yoder, *op. cit.*, pp. 201-202.

¹² We must make the distinction between urine, also widely used in other societies as a cleansing agent and mild antiseptic, and "twins' pee" (*la pisse de bessons*) which takes on the added powers attributed to twins.

¹³ A. Orain, *Folklore de l'Ille-et-Vilaine. De la vie à la mort*, (Paris, 1897 and 1898), quoted by C. Roy, p. 79.

many of them would probably appear less whimsical if one knew what reality started their use.

In his article on the typology of cures, Ake Hultkrantz gives a useful working definition of magic, as it is used in the majority of healing methods. It is the "cultivating (of) a thought or carrying out (of) an action which in a supernatural way or by virtue of a traditional, irrational procedure is believed to lead to the wished for result."¹⁴ This enables him to define as magic irrational cures where, however, the supernatural does not play the principal part, but where "a false conception of the reality or of the efficiency of the cure forms the basis of treatment."¹⁵

Methods of substitution and transfer are probably seen as being irrational by the very people who use them. The field of wart removal is perhaps more profusely fraught with supernatural remedies than any other. Warts are seen as originating in the contact with a toad: not only do they resemble the toad's pustules, but the liquid contained in these pustules is thought to irritate the skin. In the treatment of warts, we find such advice being given as: "Rub a pea or a bean against your warts and throw it behind you on the road. If someone picks it up, your warts will disappear."¹⁶ This method of transfer, based on the Law of Contact, also applies to other substitutes for the wart: a potato which is either thrown away, buried or hidden; a cent; a whitened bone found on the way and thrown as far as possible; an onion; an apple peel. A wart can also be "sold" for one cent, "given" to a dead man or to a white horse, made to "die" by passing a needle through it or tightening a silk thread around it, or "poisoned" by early morning saliva. The particular power attributed in so many cultures to menstrual blood is even found here in the advice given to rub a stained sanitary napkin against a wart.

Elsewhere, we find the cleansing property of water enhanced by religious attributes: the *Eau de Pâques* (Easter water) and the *Eau de Mai* (May water), used in the past by the people of Maillardville. On Easter morning, at dawn, the father used to go and collect some water

¹⁴ Ake Hultkrantz, "The Healing Methods of the Lapps. Some aspects from the point of view of comparative religion," in *Papers on Folk Medicine*, ed. Carl-Herman Tillhagen (Stockholm, 1963), p. 329.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

¹⁶ I was also given the advice to wrap the pea or bean in a little piece of bright paper, or to put it in a little box before throwing it away, to draw attention, in the hope that someone might notice it and pick it up faster. When told that it was not very "nice" to trick someone into picking up my warts, my informant seems unsure that the warts were also picked up. Upon reflection, she concluded that it was probably the case, but that she had never thought about it.

from a fast-running stream, usually against the current. It would keep for a very long time and people would often wash with it, as it protected against all sorts of skin ailments and eye irritation. Although this custom was mentioned to me by nine people, whose fathers used to collect Easter water and whose mothers used it for the family, it is no longer carried out. Someone said: "Where would we go to find clear running water in Maillardville, nowadays?"

The analogy between Easter water and holy water was made more than once by my informants, and no doubt the same analogy is made between Easter water, holy water and May water. But Van Gennep reminds us that the ceremonial cycle of May

is often directly related to water, either popularly or liturgically, since water is blessed again in church during Pentecost, as it is on Holy Saturday. But it would be wrong to suppose that it is the holy water of Pentecost has influenced the holy water of the 1st of May: the two groups of beliefs and practices have evolved in different directions, although several folkloric customs are performed, according to the countries, at different times of the Cycle. . . .¹⁷

The mother used to collect the first water fallen in May; it had the same properties as Easter water and would also keep for a considerable time. The month of May, or "month of Mary," is particularly dear to Roman Catholics and endowed with special mystical attributes. But these attributes are comparatively recent ones. Much older and far more widespread are the magical elements of the May cycle, which would be consciously rejected by the people of Maillardville but nevertheless cannot be overlooked since in so many countries the Christian traditions and the ancient pagan cults have harmoniously if somewhat paradoxically merged.

To conclude this review of some of the magico-religious elements contained in the traditional beliefs of Maillardville, we must mention the powerful *arrêteurs de sang*¹⁸ (bloodstoppers, who often double as *arrêteurs de feu*, "fire" stoppers) whose offices are still sought in emergencies. Most of my informants have heard of someone who has the gift of stopping blood; many of them (eight people out of thirty-five interviewed) have themselves this gift. It can be obtained in different ways: by trans-

¹⁷ Van Gennep, *Manuel de Folklore française contemporain*, 5 vols, (Paris, 1943-1953), quoted by C. Roy, p. 77.

¹⁸ They are well-known practitioners of folk medicine. Cf. Richard M. Dorson, "Introduction" to *Folklore and Folklife*: "Strictly in the realm of folk medicine fall the bloodstoppers, burn healers, wart charmers, cancer curers, and such specialists who through inherited or transferred powers can remedy ailments beyond the capacities of medical doctors," p. 4.

mission from a member of the opposite sex¹⁹ (some people think that the gift must be asked for and that the person who transmits it then loses it himself or herself); it can be a gift of the seventh son or the seventh daughter; it can be given by the possessor of the gift on his death bed. The last two methods are hearsay, as all my informants had acquired their gift directly from a member of the opposite sex; none were on their death bed and none were known to have lost the gift afterwards. The prayer or formula said is a secret and it is believed that if this secret were revealed (especially to a person of the same sex) the guilty or careless person would probably lose the gift. It is also believed that, in some cases, it is enough to *think* of an *arrêteur de sang* to stop the bleeding. An example was given where thinking of a dead grandfather who had the gift was enough.

To what extent can it be said that there is a folklore specifically of Maillardville? In other words, in what way is the French-speaking resident of Maillardville different from his English-speaking neighbour or from the cousin he may still have in Quebec? If we eliminate such aspects of folklore as cooking, where the problem is relatively simple, we are left with an almost insoluble problem at this time, as very little research has been done so far. We have seen that a great number of beliefs belong to a common European source. I have found only three cases of influences obviously acquired in the sixty-odd years of Maillardville's individual existence. One is an Indian remedy for gangrene, another is a wedding custom partially borrowed from Ukrainian tradition in the case of a mixed marriage, and the third is an interesting combination of the effects of industrialization on an American custom: the Wedding Shower-Tupperware Party. These influences, *combined with* the old French-Canadian stock, may help to differentiate to some extent French Maillardville from other cultural groups.

The area of traditional life which Dorson calls "social folk custom" and which we have considered here emphasizes group interaction. In a community like Maillardville — strongly attached to its past yet inevitably turned toward a different future, submitted to the pressure of many new and various ethnic influences, faced with dispersion (already it has reached over the river, without benefit of church or school of its own) — this aspect of traditional life is the most seriously threatened.

The changes have been too rapid for the three generations present in Maillardville to have come to terms happily with the discrepancy be-

¹⁹ This is confirmed in DesRuisseaux, p. 179.

tween inherited and shared beliefs regulating the planting of vegetable gardens, the ordinary events of a small rural community, the health of people who had to “make do” with what was easily available — and a newly imposed lifestyle where gardens have lost their essential usefulness, where the next door neighbour’s beliefs and customs are sometimes alien enough to defy recognition and translation, and where “twins’ pee” can no longer cure ear-aches but can only be seen as a joke.