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Powwowing: A Traditional Pennsylvania German Healing Practice

Powwowing, or *Brauche* (*Braucherei*) in the Pennsylvania German dialect, is a magico-religious practice whose chief purpose is the healing of physical ailments in humans or animals. In the past it has had other aims as well, such as conferring protection from physical or spiritual harm, bringing good luck, and revealing hidden information. The practice has been present on this continent since the first German-speaking settlements were established in Pennsylvania, although as Don Yoder notes, it has its roots in much older German esoteric traditions (Yoder 1976).

In the following pages I will present my research on powwowing, with special emphasis on the practice as it has existed in central and southeastern Pennsylvania during the twentieth century. I will describe my fieldwork experience, acquaint you with powwowing rituals and some of the methods for training powwowers, and outline a tentative cultural model of healing among the Pennsylvania Germans which accommodates both powwowing and biomedicine.

I have performed ethnographic fieldwork on powwowing in Adams, Berks, Bucks, Lancaster, Lebanon, Lehigh, Montgomery, Schuylkill, and York counties. While I continue to investigate the subject, my most intense period of fieldwork was between August 1998 and October 2000. One of my main objectives was to document the existence of living, practicing powwowers and witness a powwow ritual. However, tracking down existing powwowers and powwow clients was difficult for three reasons.

First, there is a perception within the culture area that powwowing is no longer practiced. In fact, fewer than half of the people I spoke with had even heard of it. Second, former patients and practitioners are afraid that others will label them crazy, or at a minimum, old-fashioned and "dutchy." Finally, there is opposition to the practice by certain religious individuals who believe either that powwowing's efficacy derives from the devil or that spiritual healing should be the province of organized churches, as well as by those who believe powwowing is inconsistent with a modern, scientific worldview. Accordingly, my fieldwork involved a great deal of detective work. However, I was able to obtain information on at least eight living powwowers in southeastern and south-central Pennsylvania, and have reports that at least 8 to 12 others also exist in that region. I was also able to acquire material on 100 twentieth-century cases. Most of my data was based on first-hand interviews with powwowers, clients, and family members, supplemented by documentary research, survey data, and participant observation.

Powwowing Rituals

Powwowing rituals involve the use of one or more acts which I have classified as verbal, somatic, and material components. Verbal components are incantations, whether audible or subvocalized, somatic may be gestures or specific body positions, and material are the manipulation of physical objects. In the past, powwowers used Bible verses in their incantations or performed rituals prescribed in manuals such as John George Hohman's *Der lang verborgene Schatz und Haus Freund* (usually published in English as *The Long Lost Friend*, but more accurately rendered as *The Long Hidden Friend*), *Albertus Magnus Egyptian Secrets*, or even the *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*. However, only one contemporary powwower I interviewed used any manual or spell book other than the Bible. Few powwowers have ever admitted using *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, since this work is considered a "hex book," or a work of the devil by many of those who know about it. It can be speculated that the decline in the use of such books is a result of the 1929 York "Witch Trial" and the subsequent calls for "superstition" to be eradicated by the introduction of scientific education.

Three distinct ritual genres may be distinguished, which I refer to as Type I, II, and III rituals. Type I rituals are simple, easy to learn, and almost always used by non-professionals. There is no verbal component and their healing power is limited to one ailment. Examples are curing a wart by rubbing a potato on it, or passing a young child around a table leg to cure livergrown. Type II rituals also use relatively simple rituals which are quick and easy to learn, yet are used by professionals and non-professionals. No more than two components are used, but the ritual typically includes a verbal component. Healing is limited to a class of ailments (e.g., skin diseases, bleeding, burns). A good example of a type II ritual is the use of Ezekiel 16.6 to stop bleeding.

Type III rituals are complex, difficult to learn, and always used by professional powwowers. They involve more than one component and can heal a wide range of ailments. They take place in a special treatment area used for powwowing and the powwower generally receives a donation ("offering") for his or her services. A typical Type III performance would consist of the powwower's moving his or her hands over the patient's body, though not touching the skin, and "drawing" symbols such as crosses, while subvocally uttering complex incantations. Such a ritual takes 15-20 minutes and may be repeated three times. After running his or her hands over the patient, the powwower will make wringing motions with them in order to shake off the symptoms of the affliction—though not the affliction itself—removed from the client.

Types of Powwow Practice

Powwowers practicing during the twentieth century may be classified as either non-professional (the housewife, older relative, or neighbor whose clients are limited to those in his or her family or circle of friends) or professional (whose clients may be drawn from the general population). Professionals may be further subdivided into those who charge for their services (whom I term "entrepreneurial" powwowers) and

those who do not, but who may accept free-will "offerings" for healings performed. Professional powwowers, are sometimes referred to as "doctor" or "professor," while non-professionals use kin terms ("mother, granny, grandpa, aunt, uncle") or simply common modes of address ("Missus, Mister"). Professional powwowers typically treat a wider range of ailments (usually in a specially designated treatment room or area) and employ more elaborate rituals than non-professionals.

Recruitment and Training of Powwowers

Because of the secrecy surrounding powwowing, the actual recruitment and training process is difficult to fully describe. There are a variety of beliefs regarding the qualifications necessary to be a powwower, ranging from the belief that anyone can learn it to the belief that one must have very particular qualifications from birth, such as being the seventh son of a seventh son. Most who believe in the efficacy of powwowing have beliefs falling somewhere in between these two extremes, so that some qualifications are necessary, but these may be minimal. A common belief is that one must believe in God to be a powwower, although it is not necessary to be a Christian, so a Jewish person could do it. This is a belief held by Anita Rahn and Julius and Daisy Dietrich (both pseudonyms), who learned from Ruth Strickland Frey.

Calvin E. Rahn (pseudonym) (himself the seventh son of a seventh son) believed one had to be born with the power and then "win your own private war with the devil just like I did" (Lewis 1969, 180). Rachel Rahn claimed the ability to stop blood was congenital and was a requirement for further training as a powwower (Lewis 1969, 197). Perhaps this was what she had in mind when she informed my consultant Hazel Sauer (pseudonym) that she had the ability to become a powwower if she wanted to. Some also believe the power is passed down through families.

Other than powwowers who believe the power runs in families or who otherwise train their own family members, some (like Rachel Rahn and Preston Zerbe) recruit from among their patients, if they see someone whom they believe could learn the art. However, most training is at the initiation of the prospective powwower, who asks if he or she can learn.

Training procedures vary greatly, although there is one rule which is nearly universal, namely that only a woman can teach a man and only a man can teach a woman. The rule of cross-gender ("crossways") transmission is sometimes broken, as when Calvin E. Rahn taught his son Calvin M. Rahn (Lancaster County) and when the ability to powwow was passed down in the male line through the Blymire family (York County). Cross-gender transmission is used in other contemporary magico-religious practices, most notably initiation into Wicca or similar neo-Pagan sects. Calvin M. Rahn claimed that when one powwower trains another, the teacher gives up half of his power to his student. He also indicated that the two may end up becoming enemies (Beissel 1998, 54).

Training time can take anywhere from a few minutes (according to a Berks County powwower) to a year (according to a powwow trainee in Adams County). The training procedure used by Ruth Strickland Frey and passed onto Julius and Daisy Dietrich of Schuylkill County consisted of a 10-week program, with all information imparted orally. When the initiate returned for the second session, he (or she) must repeat all

the incantations and gestures perfectly. If he did, then that was a sign the initiate was meant to become a powwower. Otherwise, training ceased and the individual was gently informed that he was not meant to learn and that there were other ways in which he could follow God's will. Every week of training, the initiate had to repeat back verbatim everything learned in all the previous lessons. Incantations which had to be memorized were mostly in English, but some in Pennsylvania Dutch or High German.¹ The cumulative memorization ensured that the powwower would be able to perform all the complicated hand movements and incantations deftly and swiftly (as Daisy was able to) without having to pause and remember or worse, consult a book. This may have been intended to demonstrate the powwower's competence to the patient, and therefore increase his or her belief in the efficacy of the treatment and the powwower's power to heal.

Recently, however, Daisy taught a man to powwow without requiring him to come back for 10 weeks. Instead, it only took two, although he told me the second session was very long. He suggested she may have decreased the time required because he was coming from a distance. This suggests a degree of flexibility in her training method.

York County powwower Rachel Rahn also adopted a structured approach, believing that a prospective powwower must learn the cures for various ailments in a prescribed order. According to her, after learning how to stop blood (a congenital ability), the initiate's next step was to learn how to remove warts, then various other ailments, then the take-off, erysipelas, and tumors (Lewis 1969, 197). Because neither Mrs. Rahn, Daisy, nor Julius revealed anything more specific, it is impossible to accept or reject the possibility that all three used the same training program.

Aaron Boehm, a Berks County powwower, had an entirely different method. It was much briefer and easier, perhaps because he specialized in only one class of ailments, whereas Daisy and Julius can powwow for anything. Barbara Reimensnyder (1982) reports that she learned to powwow also using a simple method.

Calvin E. Rahn's training method, described more fully by Lewis (1969), was the most dramatic. Being the seventh son of a seventh son, he believed he was born with a great deal of power and struggled with the devil at a young age. He used this power as a "non-professional" powwower to minister to his family. When he decided to become a "professional," he realized he needed to increase his power and visited a very old woman named "Amy" on Garrett Mountain in Cumberland County. He never tried to contact Amy before leaving home, because "he know'd in his heart she would" help him. When he reached her, she did indeed accept him and allowed him to stay in her shack. After 21 days of prayer, fasting, and soul searching, Calvin had a vision. He was in Heaven sitting at a dinner table with St. Peter and many other people. After a time, St. Peter motioned for him to rise and directed him up a long, long flight of golden stairs. At the top of the stairs were five spirit guides, three American Indian males, one child, and one East Indian male. These spirits became his constant companions in his life ever since then. He named them, was able to perceive their presence, and used their powers to heal and remove hexes. However, these spirits also sometimes went off on "missions" of their own without consulting Calvin (Lewis 1969, 179).

Powwowing and Hexing

Hexerei, or black magic, is practiced by *hexer* (witches, or sorcerers) who put *hexes* (evil spells) on people. It is opposed to *Braucherei* (powwowing). The view of most who believe in the efficacy of powwowing is that the powwower is the enemy of the *hexer*, whose purpose is often to undo the hexer's black magic. As one Pennsylvania Dutch woman, an amateur historian named Geraldine, notes:

The Pennsylvania German feeling is that there are two life forces, *Braucherei*, the good life force based on Christianity, *hexerei*, or black magic, based in witchcraft. And I guess I kind of ascribe to that belief. And when it comes to anything that I consider black magic or devil worship or anything like that, I try to stay away from it... I simply feel that I'm not smart enough or powerful enough to deal with it.

However, the relationship between powwower and hexer is not always this straightforward, because the powwower (like the hexer) uses supernatural power, and (as one consultant put it), "what he can take off, he can also put on." An Adams County woman who at one point started powwower training, was frightened away: "Back in the old days, I think powwow was great. I think it could be good today, but black magic is the negative part of powwowing."

In fact, when the powwower is called upon to remove a hex from someone, he may use the power at his disposal to attack the hexer, in effect, putting a hex on the hexer. Therefore, the powwower does have the ability to throw hexes and is a potential danger himself. The murder victim (Nelson Rehmeier) in the York Witch Trial was, according to the defendants' testimony, a powwower who placed a hex on another powwower (John Blymire), who himself evidently possessed the ability to hex people (Lewis 1969, 22-23). The existence of *hexerei* renders the powwower's position in his or her community problematic. Since at least the mid-nineteenth century, some Pennsylvania Dutch clergy and church officials have condemned powwowing as the work of the devil. A saying collected by Thomas R. Brendle (Beam 1995, 100) from Egypt, PA, reflects this attitude: "*En Braucher hot en hadder Dod. Er is dem Deiwel ergewwe.*" ("A powwower has a hard death. He has given himself over to the Devil.")

Hexers, or evil witches, were sometimes called "hex doctors," but that term could also be applied to a powwower who removed hexes. Contemporary powwower Karl Herr's use of the word "*Hexenmeister*" to describe himself (Herr 2002), further complicates the issue. Hexers were not well-liked. They derived most of their income from hexing people whom others wanted revenge on. People always avoided a hex doctor's house, because they believed a hex doctor would torment you for coming too close.

Typically one would deal with a hexer by consulting a powwower, who could reveal the hexer's identity and recommend a counter-spell. The counter-spell would generally not negate the hex itself, but rather hex the hexer, who would then appear at the victim's house and beg for the counter-spell to be removed. A trade would then take place wherein each party would release the other from the hex.

One means of protecting a building from a hex is to place protective scrolls or triangular pieces of paper held by plugs of wood inserted in or near the windows and

doors of the structure. I have collected two instances of this practice from Schuylkill County and one from Lehigh. Daisy Dietrich reports using this method to protect a client in Schuylkill County several years ago. Another consultant tells of a Schuylkill County barn which was protected by scrolls containing "German special hex words to ward off the witches and evil spirits" placed in cubby holes and sealed in by plugs of wood. The owner pulled out the plugs once and "had a very bad day that day." Darla Biehl of Allentown reports a similar procedure to keep hexes out of a building, namely, folding pieces of paper into a triangles, placing three X's upon them, and placing the triangles in the windows. The X's no doubt are crosses, and the number three, so significant in powwow practice, may represent the Christian Trinity.

A Cultural Model of Healing among the Pennsylvania Germans

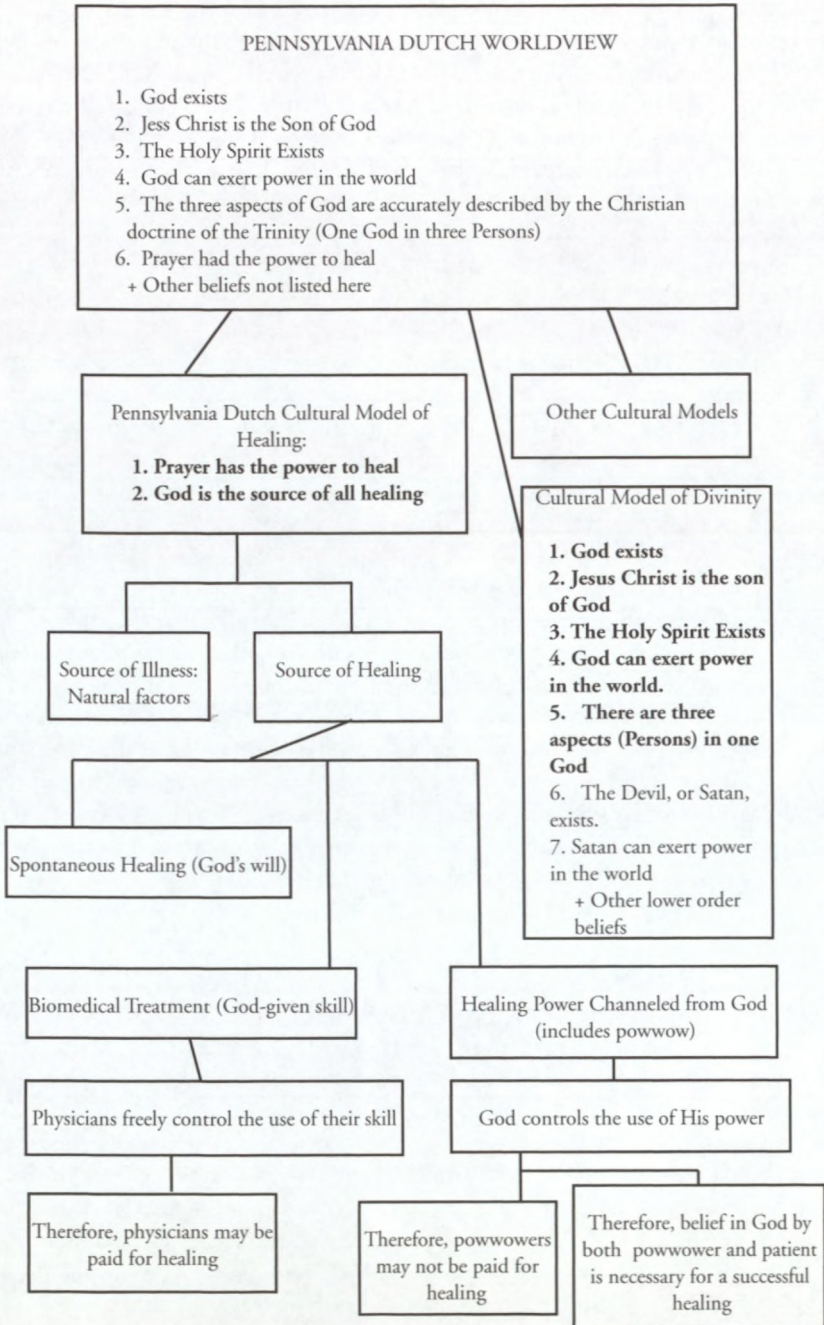
While belief in the efficacy of powwowing appears to be generated by personal experience, rather than cultural factors, beliefs about powwowing (why it works, how it should be performed, the role of God) fit within a larger cultural model of healing present among the Pennsylvania Germans. I constructed such a model based on a survey distributed to consultants and others identifying themselves as Pennsylvania Dutch or German and living within the culture area. Respondents indicated their reactions to a series of propositions using a 5-point scale (strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, strongly disagree). The propositions were based on statements from various consultants which I had collected in the course of my fieldwork. Propositions whose aggregate response fell into the two highest categories (representing "agree" and "strongly agree") were included in the model.

Since cultural models, as defined by cognitive anthropologist Roy D'Andrade (1998) are a type of cognitive schema,² or pattern in the mind which is used to understand concepts, they are hierarchical in structure. The highest, most inclusive level, is worldview, the basic cultural assumptions of the society. Each proposition on every level must be consistent with the propositions at all higher inclusive levels. I refer to propositions shared by two levels as "linking beliefs," so that, for example, the belief that "God is the source of all healing" is a linking belief between the cultural model of healing and the Pennsylvania German worldview.

All propositions with an aggregate response of "strongly agree" were placed at the level of worldview. These were all beliefs about the nature of the cosmos, divinity, and humanity, such as "God exists," "Jesus Christ in the Son of God," "The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is correct." Propositions with an aggregate response of "agree" were placed in lower level models nested within the worldview.

The diagram below depicts the principal features of the cultural model for healing among the Pennsylvania Germans, including aspects of the cultural models for powwowing and biomedicine that are directly related to worldview. Other elements, such as the belief in "crossways" transmission of powwow-listed above are not included because they have no identifiable (at this time) connection with worldview. However, they do form part of the model since they do not conflict with the worldview.

Note: "Linking beliefs" connecting worldview and cultural model are in boldface.



In this (revised) model, among believers in powwowing, the triune Christian God is ultimately responsible for all healing, whether by the intervention of powwowers or physicians, or the spontaneous remission of symptoms. Human practitioners and antibodies, then, are all under God's control. There is a devil who can act in the world, just as God can, but neither he nor his evil spirits cause most disease. Thus, the Pennsylvania Dutch have what medical anthropologist George Foster (1996, 1978) refers to as a "naturalistic" system of disease causation, although there are personalistic elements in the form of hexing and, as folklorist Brendle notes (Wentz 1993, 177-78), in the belief that certain diseases are caused by the will of God.

It is important to note that a "naturalistic" system is not necessarily a scientific one. For instance, a belief in the existence of humours (in the case of medieval medicine *sanguis*, *phlegm*, *cholera*, and *melancholia*), which still exists in folk medical systems around the world, is a naturalistic system of disease causation. In the case of the contemporary Pennsylvania Dutch model, natural factors include conventional notions of infection, as well as the notion that diseases are inherited (Brendle in Wentz 1993, 178). Belief in these natural factors as the cause of most disease is not unique to the Pennsylvania Dutch and is shared by most people throughout the United States.

However, God can act more directly, in some cases using people of faith as channels of divine healing power. Such individuals, including powwowers, cannot be paid because they are not using their own power (or skill) to perform the healing. A physician may, however, be paid because he chooses how he uses his skill (this implies a belief in human free will), even though the skill itself is God-given. God also answers prayers, by which anyone can obtain healing.

Because the dominant disease etiology is naturalistic, physicians are able to cope with most diseases. However, powwowing (the exercise of direct divine power through humans) is needed to deal with hexes (the exercise of direct demonic power).³ The faith of the patient is not required for biomedicine to function effectively, but it is for powwowing. In both cases, something harmful is removed from the body when healing takes place, whether that be a disease or a hex. The powwower is generally a respected member of the community, but his status is somewhat ambivalent. This may be due to the power the powwower wields and his or her status as a person chosen by God.

Concluding Statement

Contemporary powwowing appear to have more in common with healing prayer than with any form of magic, white or black. Powwowing no longer requires the use of charm books and rarely use material components. Powwowers speak less of their own power now than they did in previous times and usually are quick to credit God for their results. Yet, there remains much opposition to it in central and southeastern Pennsylvania, particularly from the various Mennonite groups. Some cite their belief that the Devil works the cures, others claim that it conflicts with medical science, and still others hold that spiritual healing is the exclusive province of the church.

Most of the people with whom I have spoken who oppose powwowing do not oppose spiritual healing *per se*, suggesting that powwowing's detractors still view it

as a magical practice, rather than a religious one, and that they draw a line between the two ways of mobilizing supernatural power. Perhaps this perception is behind the shift away from traditional white magic and toward a more generic type of spiritual healing—the powwower, knowing that he or she may be viewed as a witch by others, strives to eliminate those elements of traditional powwowing (such as material components and the use of spells) which might be seen by others as inconsistent with proper religious practice.

It is interesting that the one well-known living practitioner who embraces these traditional magical elements of powwow practice is a self-proclaimed “witch” whose religion is Paganism, not Christianity (RavenWolf 1997). While other living powwowers stress the Christian nature of the practice, she traces it to pre-Christian magical traditions and claims that anyone, of any religious tradition, can learn how to powwow. Thomas Barone (pseudonym), the man who recently learned powwowing from Daisy, represents an intermediate position. Before meeting Daisy, he used a few powwow charms from *The Long Lost Friend* and does not reject the label of “white magic.” However, he strongly opposes RavenWolf’s revisionist interpretation of powwowing, basing his practice squarely in Christian belief and Pennsylvania Dutch tradition. As Thomas notes, the Bible is more powerful than any charm book.

Based on my interviews with the families of powwowers, I believe that powwowing will likely persist in some form in central and southeastern Pennsylvania for at least two more generations. There is also a demand for it. I, myself, have been approached by a number of people seeking powwow healing, from a woman with a sick horse to another who believed she was possessed by the spirit of a witch. Powwowing’s future and development is uncertain, but I would not want to forecast its disappearance at any particular point. Thus far, to paraphrase Twain, reports for its demise have been greatly exaggerated.

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Notes

¹ The term used was “German,” but many natives refer to the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect as “German.”

² For a much more complete discussion of culture models and cognitive schemas, see D’Andrade (1996) and Strauss and Quinn (1997).

³ The theory of hexing needs further development, but most believe that hexing requires its own study to adequately understand it. For now, I speculate that one key difference is that powwowing is undertaken in the *hope* that God will respond by sending healing power to the patient through the powwower, whereas hexing is undertaken in the *expectation* that the hex (spell) will be effective in bringing direct demonic power (from the devil or other demonic beings) to bear against another human, animal, or object. In powwowing, God uses divine power (with the powwower as channel), but in *hexerei* (hexing), the hexer/witch uses demonic power (the source of which is the devil or other evil spiritual beings).

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