ABSTRACT. *Espanto* or *susto* has been analysed from various points of view in the last fifteen years. From a survey covering 109 case analyses collected in Nicolas Ruiz (Chiapas, Mexico), we reached the conclusion that this folk illness cannot be conceived of as a syndrome in the medical sense. A semiological analysis showed that *espanto* can be better described as an indigenous theory whose function is to relate illness events to other levels of reality.

According to indigenous belief, the Holy Earth and the chthonian spirits of the underworld play an important role in the origin of the illness. This origin is associated with an opening of the earth as is illustrated in the earthquakes or the volcanic eruptions forming the prototype of a fright experience leading to *espanto*; or, it is attributed to agents who inhabit locations where the earth presents a fissure (river, ravine, cave). It is through these holes that the Holy Earth exerts her power. Concomitantly, the body of the victim is believed to open itself to the influences of the bad winds of *espanto*. Trembling is another aspect of the phenomenon which is observed at numerous levels: first, during the fright experience; second, when the victim falls ill (chills jumping in bed); and third, when the *curandera* takes the pulse of the patient to see if the blood is afraid. These multiple analogies lead to the assumption that there is a meaning shared by these separate manifestations.

INTRODUCTION

Folk illnesses have been studied from several perspectives because scholars have realized that this phenomenon has many dimensions. In order to identify two possible levels of analysis, a distinction was proposed between the concepts of disease and illness (Eisenberg 1977). It was suggested that disease refer to the abnormalities of the organs and illness to the experiential dimension. This distinction however is not fully satisfactory to the medical anthropologist, who is concerned not only with the psychosocial aspect of the illness events but also with the symbolic discourse about illness. It is this discourse which more than the symptoms themselves provides coherence to the phenomenon.

The signs recognized in the patient point to a reality which is more than physical. They form the message of cosmological forces which have come to inscribe their power upon the body of men. The signs or symptoms speak mostly of the origin and destiny of the illness, of the spirits who brought it upon the patient and of the mortal dangers which attend its progress. They speak of transgressed taboos, of envious neighbors, of lack of respect for dietary regulations; they testify more to a state than to an illness properly speaking. And so one label can refer to the simultaneous presence of several illnesses like tuberculosis, malaria or a head cold.

The symptoms, then, have no meaning of their own; they assume coherence...
only when assimilated to other levels of reality, particularly the cosmological level (Young 1977), through a series of analogies which allow each level — the sick body or the activity of gods — to assume meaning by being reflected on another level. These relationships are often founded on phenomenological observations of daily life such that one might conclude that it is the senses rather than abstract thought which determine the basis of these logical relationships. The cosmological beings intervene at precise and recordable moments; they live in precise locations and they use meteorological events which are part of daily life to make themselves known. Sometimes even, the gods can be recognized by signs which will later be found on the sick body, marks which prove that the gods have visited the world of men.

The phenomenon of espanto offers an excellent example of this mode of thinking. We will first present an in depth analysis of the heterogeneous symptomatology of this illness and then show how these disparate symptoms come to have meaning. The analysis will illustrate that a study which limits itself to the symptoms attributed to this state is limited because all of the thought of folk medicine refers to a complex network of symbolic relationships between the spirit world and the sick body.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Belief in espanto is found throughout a vast geographical territory. It is known among most Andean countries of Latin American as well as in Guatemala, Mexico and the United States. The most universal trait of the belief is that espanto is thought to result from a magical fright through which the victim loses his soul. The soul thereafter remains captive or wanders aimlessly.

The phenomenon has received much attention under the name of susto. Many authors were impressed by the behavioral components of the state and did not hesitate to establish an analogy between it and a mental disorder. Rubel (1964: 270) attempted to abstract the cross-cultural elements and he proposed the following description: "(1) during sleep the patient evidences restlessness; (2) during waking hours patients are characterized by listlessness, loss of appetite, disinterest in dress and personal hygiene, loss of strength, depression, and introversion". Susto in this discussion is regarded as a behavioral discontinuity resulting from a combination of stressful events and from the vain efforts of the victim in trying to meet with the social expectations of the milieu.

In O’Nell and Selby’s (1968) survey, the symptoms depicted as characteristic of susto tend to be of a more organic nature. They include fever, muscular pains, complexion changes, nausea, vertigo, and stomach or intestinal upsets. These complaints generally accompany a variety of illnesses encountered in the tropical regions. Yet, the authors considered some of these manifestations as a response