Building Rapport 'Curing' and 'Charming' as Cultural Intimacy in Everyday Bureaucratic Encounters in the Northern Ireland Farming Community

Irene Ketonen-Keating

ABSTRACT

How does sharing hidden but valuable magical information help Northern Ireland (NI) Catholic and Protestant farmers build rapport? I suggest that it serves as a form of cultural intimacy by emphasising common beliefs, while downplaying possibly conflicting ethnoreligious identities. Magical practices such as 'curing/charming' remain common among NI farmers. It refers to asking a person with 'the cure' for a specific condition (such as bleeding or heart disease) to heal a sufferer. During nine months of fieldwork, conducted between 2012 and 2014, I learned that farmers, inspectors, and NGO staff often discuss 'curing' during their bureaucratic encounters. One person mentions a relative who is sick. The other then provides contact information for a healer with 'the cure' for such an ailment. Both Catholics and Protestants practice 'curing' in very similar forms.

KEYWORDS

Cultural intimacy, curing/charming, farming, traditional healing, Northern Ireland

This article examines how beliefs in 'magical' healing serve as a form of cultural intimacy in the Northern Ireland (NI) farming community. Magical healing in NI is interchangeably called 'curing' or 'charming' (Moore 2010: 111). 'Cultural intimacy' refers to the 'recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality . . . ' (Herzfeld 2005: 3). Herzfeld adds that it 'is that part of a cultural identity that insiders do *not* want outsiders to get to know yet that those same insiders recognize as providing them with a comfort zone . . . ' (2013:491).

Beliefs in magical healing assure common sociality because they designate 'insiders' (farmers) who share these beliefs and 'outsiders' (urban people) who do not. The beliefs are a 'source of external embarrassment' because farmers know that urban people may view them as old-fashioned

superstitions. This particular cultural intimacy is especially important, because it is shared by both Protestant and Catholic¹ farmers. It draws the two groups into an ‘insider’ identity as farmers, rather than ‘outsiders’ who may be sectarian enemies. Beliefs in magical healing also widen the concept of a ‘farming community’ by including farm inspectors and Farmers’ Advice Centre (FAC)² staff as ‘insiders’ who also believe. In fact, magical healing is a relatively common topic of conversation during bureaucratic encounters between farmers and inspectors or FAC staff. I argue that FAC staff and farm inspectors actively use these conversations to build rapport with farmers, and to emphasise their common identity as members of the farming community, while de-emphasising sectarian identities and their status as ‘bureaucrats’, both of which may cause tension during their interactions with farmers.

Literature Review: Curing/Charming, Indigeneity, Building Rapport

Based on fieldwork conducted in 1951–1952, Rosemary Harris defines curing/charming by stating that many rural people in NI believe that ‘certain complaints could be healed if the sufferer would go to an individual possessing, usually by inheritance, the “gift” of curing certain diseases, normally by recitation of a charm’ (1986: 154). Ronnie Moore is the only ethnographer to have extensively studied curing/charming in NI within the relatively recent past. He describes curing/charming as practised in 1995–1996 in two rural NI communities. He found that in both towns, curing/charming consisted of ‘combinations of actions [which] . . . could involve the laying of hands on affected parts of the body, prayers or incantations, the use of smoking sticks and/or specially prepared substances or powders, or acts unseen’ (2010: 113).

Moore notes that both of his fieldwork communities were ‘small, encapsulated market towns in NI. The local economy is mostly agricultural’ (2010: 106). One was the mostly Catholic Ballymacross. It was located in an attractive mountainous landscape, but the land was relatively poor and sheep farming was the predominant form of agriculture. The Catholic Church and Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) provided people with opportunities for socialisation and recreation. The local pharmacist had an important role in Ballymacross, which had neither a health centre nor a general practitioner. The pharmacist had a strong knowledge of his neighbours’ lives and was available throughout the day and night. Informally, people consulted him as

they would a doctor (2010:107–108). The second community Moore studied, Hunterstown, was overwhelmingly Protestant. Most residents traced their roots to England or Scotland. Farms were larger and more prosperous than in Ballymacross and a livestock centre was also vital to the economy. People were informally divided into the ‘good living’, that is, observant Protestants, and those who self-identified as culturally Protestant despite not practising religion. The Orange Order, a fraternal organisation accepting members from all Protestant denominations, was active during certain festivities of the calendar year. Local people had easier access to biomedical healthcare than those in Ballymacross, as Hunterstown had its own health centre, medical doctors, and pharmacists (2010: 108–110).

Moore emphasises that although there were differences between Ballymacross and Hunterstown, both rural Catholics and Protestants shared beliefs in supernatural healing. He adds that:

information on cures and charms was not normally volunteered but was usually spoken of only at times of crisis, often introduced by a family member or close friend in a personal and private context . . . the act of recommending a cure/charm was interpreted as an act of neighbourliness in both towns, and the process bound local people together in a special locally understood way. (2010: 111–112)

Even Protestants who do not view the practice ‘favourably’ will sometimes resort to it when biomedical methods have failed. Moore quotes a Protestant informant as explaining that ‘You don’t think you need them [person with cure/charm] until the time comes, then all the ideas of religion, and your teaching goes by the wayside, because if you see a sick child you would do anything’ (2010:114). During my fieldwork, it was also one of the few topics discussed by both Protestants and Catholics with members of the other ethnoreligious community. Farmers and their family members are ‘rural’ regardless of how many people live in their town and this common identity was emphasised over Catholic or Protestant identities during bureaucratic encounters.

Two terms often used to analyse magical healing practices, ‘indigenous’ and ‘peasant’, are both problematic in reference to NI. Regarding Scotland, Ullrich Kockel notes that the localisation of belonging to a larger ‘Scottish nation’ means becoming indigenous, ‘from here’, is possible for anyone who is willing to engage with, and take care of, their place within that nation (Kockel 2017:381–382). In NI, however, Protestants are for the most part adamant that they are *not* Irish, but British. And yet, many utilise curing/charming to treat various health complaints.

The term ‘peasant’ does not quite work for Northern Ireland, either. As stated by Susan Carol Rogers, ‘it is clear that by virtually any of the available “scientific” definitions of peasants, there are no peasants left in France today’ (1987:57) and the same applies to NI in the twenty-first century. Although the vast majority of farms are family farms, they are ‘productive, capital intensive, and well-integrated with the rest of the economy . . . they produce primarily for the market, are significant consumers of machinery, chemicals, credit and . . . enjoy a standard of living virtually identical to that of urban dwellers’ (1987:57). However, curing/charming, with its origins in Irish (and possibly, Scottish) peasant society as noted by Rosemary Harris (1986), remains quite common in the present-day farming community.

Building rapport between bureaucrat and client is an important element of many high-stakes bureaucratic encounters. From the bureaucrat’s perspective, rapport can increase the client’s willingness to cooperate with regulations that may seem rigid or unnecessary. From the client’s perspective, rapport can result in less rigid enforcement of regulations by the bureaucrat or ‘insider’ advice on how to comply with the least amount of inconvenience. This can be seen in many bureaucratic contexts, both medical and non-medical. For example, Johan Lindquist (2012) describes how informal brokers in Indonesia build rapport with potential migrants to Malaysia. Many describe their own migration experiences while ‘retain[ing] familiarity as a [fellow] villager, thus creating a basis for trust’ (2012:78). Tactics can include ‘charming style and discreet jokes’ or ‘material evidence of success, good standing, and easygoing manner’ (2012:78).

In a specifically medical context, Patricia Kingori examines data collectors’ ‘close . . . and intimate encounters [with] research participants and community members’ (2013: 368) in Western Kenya. Her study is focused on interactions between local data collectors and people participating in medical research. She found that the bureaucrats (data collectors) were ‘asked to be . . . human and empathize with those in need’ while visiting homes to enrol participants in medical research (2013: 368). This was an important way for data collectors and research participants to build rapport. For example, empathetic actions such as data collectors giving the families of research participants small sums of money for medical needs not addressed by the study they were enrolled in were important because medical research was often the only way local people could access healthcare. However, not all local needs were covered in this way, leaving significant gaps in access to care. Often, only certain family members were eligible to

enrol in a study, excluding siblings and other relatives also in need of treatment (2013: 36).

Methods

Observations regarding curing/charming are a part of my wider dissertation research project examining the role of cultural intimacy surrounding European Union (EU) agricultural subsidy applications and farm inspections in NI. Another lens for examining curing/charming is embodying the EU, as discussed in a special section of the *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* in 2019. One of the main articles examines how Roma are marginalised in Eastern Europe through sensorial and material inscriptions of the body, and especially through the accusation that they have a characteristic, unpleasant smell which is identified with a lack of cleanliness (Recleş and Ivăsiuc 2019).

Another article examines how a Romanian male sex worker can claim a ‘modern’, Western identity by explicitly self-identifying as ‘gay’, in opposition to other male sex workers from Eastern Europe, who primarily self-identity as ‘normal’, masculine men. The gay sex worker is then able to position his fellow sex workers as homophobic, backward East Europeans (Trofimov 2019: 39). Anika Keinz and Paweł Lewicki (2019: 1) summarise the purpose of the special section by stating that they: ‘focus on processes of Europeanisation and the work of colonial legacies and their impact on the production of the European body, a body that is always already racialised, classed and gendered. [The] “European body” can be observed in discourses and practices that constitute the normal/desired/legitimate body . . .’.

Similarly, my work builds on such concepts of embodiment. It examines how members of the farming community in NI treat the sick body through the magical intervention of curing/charming. I conducted my fieldwork there for a total of nine months. My first period of pilot research took place in August 2012. I conducted a longer three month period of fieldwork in 2013 (June–August). This included living with a local family, and conducting participant-observation of their farm activities. My third fieldwork period (2014) was focused on participant-observation in three different contexts. From March to May I observed the process of completing the European Union (EU) Single Farm Payment (SFP) forms at the Farmers’ Advice Centre (FAC). The FAC is a community organisation, which advises farmers on EU-related tasks, such as completing subsidy applications,

appealing failed inspections, applying for grants, and buying insurance. It is historically Catholic, but today also has Protestant clients. FAC staff held a traveling ‘clinic’ that visited thirteen geographically remote communities (ten Catholic, three Protestant) to assist farmers who might have had a difficult time visiting the FAC’s office in Williamsville.

In June and July, I conducted participant-observation of twelve Best Farm inspections with two inspectors. Best Farm is a private, ‘voluntary’ programme farmers can choose to join in order to receive better prices for their livestock from abattoirs. Best Farm includes keeping records in a specific format, following certain standards of animal welfare, and inspections every eighteen months. Participating in Best Farm additionally reduces the likelihood of being selected for certain types of EU farm inspections, since it is clear that the farmer is already observing high standards of quality.

I first heard ‘curing/charming’ briefly mentioned during my fieldwork in 2013. In 2014, while observing bureaucratic interactions such as FAC staff members helping farmers with completing EU forms, or Best Farm staff inspecting farms, I noted that cures/charms were discussed quite often in these situations. I had opportunities to listen to conversations about curing/charming between Catholic FAC staff and Protestant farmers, between Protestant inspectors and Protestant farmers, and Protestant inspectors and Catholic farmers. The ‘farming community’ of NI also includes people in these ‘bureaucratic’ positions, because they are almost always part-time farmers raised in farming families. Locally, they are described as being ‘from a farming background’. I argue that the cure/charm works as ‘cultural intimacy’, by creating a sense of ‘insiderness’, since it appears to be confined to the farming community and may be considered ‘backward’ by more urban people. Indeed, Harris mentions that curing/charming was sometimes stigmatised as ‘poor and “mountainy”’ during the 1950s (1986: 155). Because mountain farmland is generally of low quality, farmers located on these hill farms areas are usually less affluent than those with better quality lowland fields. They are also sometimes imagined as ‘less educated’ and ‘more superstitious’ than lowland farmers.

Due to these negative perceptions, I was reluctant to ask direct questions about curing/charming. I did not want to decrease rapport with research participants by mentioning a topic they might be embarrassed to discuss with an ‘outsider’. Curing/charming was, however, repeatedly discussed in front of me because it had such a vital role to

play in defusing tension during otherwise difficult encounters. This indicates its importance to local communities, but investigating the topic was nonetheless tricky. I had to show interest in curing/charming the same way I showed interest in other more mundane topics, without portraying it as something exotic or disregarding it as irrelevant to the operation of rational bureaucracies.

Curing/Charming as Cultural Intimacy: 'She May as Well Try It, Sure'

One day in early May 2014, I accompanied Kate (a Catholic FAC staff member) on her visits to farms in the Coorleigh area. This was only a few days before the 15 May SFP deadline, which meant that Kate was under pressure to complete hundreds of forms quickly. And farmers realised that they had little time to have their paperwork done without mistakes or missing information, because these problems would result in a delay in receiving their SFP. Approximately three-quarters of Coorleigh residents are Protestant. The area is close to NI's northern coast, and is very scenic. Many farms had a spectacular view of sandy beaches and ocean peeking out from between the rolling hills where their fields are located. Kate and I set out early in the morning. She explained that the farmers we would be visiting today were 'Protestants I have known well for years'. However, two factors contributed to tension. Interactions between Catholics and Protestants in NI often include difficulties. Also, we had to drive through several entirely Protestant towns, which Kate had previously mentioned as an unpleasant necessity.

Although NI today is substantially safer as a result of the Good Friday Agreement,³ isolated incidents of sectarian violence do still take place. These are often directed at people perceived to be in an area belonging to the other ethnoreligious community (Jordan 2009). Kate and I had driven together on this same road to complete some errands in Coleraine a few weeks earlier. On the way back I had felt thirsty, and asked Kate to stop at a petrol station so that I could purchase some cold drinks for us. She refused, pointing at the British flags displayed on light poles, and told me 'I can't stop *here*. We'll have cold water when we're back home'. This incident demonstrates Kate's discomfort with Protestant spaces.

At one of the eleven farms we visited that day, a farmer (Ruth) discussed her family's SFP form with Kate and mentioned that a neighbour had cancer. This was done in hushed, solemn tones. Kate looked

uncomfortable and worried. She then mentioned that she knew someone with ‘the charm’ for cancer, and asked me to retrieve her handbag from the car, so that she could find the healer’s phone number for Ruth. This took some time, since I needed to go around the house and through several gates. When I returned, and gave Kate her handbag, she sorted the contents for a list of phone numbers, and then wrote the healer’s phone number down for Ruth on a small piece of paper. Kate added that ‘she [the neighbour] may as well try it, sure.’ Ruth agreed that this was so, and thanked Kate. This was the first time I heard curing/charming discussed. My impression was that Kate had provided Ruth with more information while I was gone. It was clear that they had deliberately had the conversation before I returned. To Ruth, I was an ‘outsider’ with an American accent, whom she had never met before. Because I was affiliated with a university and studying a ‘modern’ bureaucracy (the EU) she may have felt that discussing a ‘magical’ healing practice in front of me was inappropriate, and that I might view it as ‘backward’ or not scientific.⁴ Given Kate’s discomfort with Protestant spaces and interactions across the sectarian divide, I am sure that she mentioned curing/charming only because she was confident that Ruth believed also. Kate put effort into decreasing tension and would not have made eccentric suggestions, which would have increased tension.

Excluding me also allowed Ruth and Kate to emphasise their mutual belonging in the farming community of NI, whose members share beliefs and practices. This building of cultural intimacy was especially important to avoid emphasising their uncomfortable ethno-religious difference, or the fact that Ruth’s family farm was located in a far better place than Kate’s. Kate’s family lives in the Comeragh Mountains. Although they are as scenic as the north coast, spring comes a full month later, and the rocky land is difficult to farm.

The fact that curing/charming in this case was discussed in relation to cancer provides evidence for strong belief in magical healing among farmers. Cancer is a serious, much feared illness, so joking would not be appropriate the way it might be over a minor complaint like a rash. Also, Kate felt comfortable offering the healer’s name to Ruth immediately, without attempting to ascertain if Ruth ‘believed’ in the power of curing/charming. Kate knew that her offer would be appropriate for any member of the farming community. However, I do not know if Ruth ever did contact this healer. In this vignette, I had an opportunity to listen to curing/charming discussed between a Catholic FAC staff member and a Protestant farmer.

The second time I heard curing/charming discussed at length in NI was in 2014, when I accompanied Elizabeth on a Best Farm inspection. She was a woman in her late thirties, with two small children. Very unusually, she was married to a Catholic farmer, despite being Protestant herself. This was my second inspection with her.

When we arrived on the scheduled dairy farm, I immediately noticed that the farmer, Norman, and Elizabeth appeared to know each other. ‘Norman’ is generally a Protestant name, and he and Elizabeth were also around the same age. Later, alone in the car with me, Elizabeth mentioned that she had briefly dated Norman’s brother (Sammy) before meeting her husband. On the farm, Elizabeth and Norman discussed weddings, holidays, farms, and health issues while Elizabeth conducted her inspection. When the latter topic came up, Norman mentioned that his neighbour, Arlene, had cancer. At first, she had tolerated the treatment well, but then it had started to make her sick. Also, according to Norman’s description, her arm was ‘burned’ when a chemotherapy drip came out of a vein. Norman then mentioned that his mother might be able to ‘charm’ it, because she has ‘a charm for burns. She only needs to know your name, and the place [on your body] where you were burned’. Nevertheless, he did not specify whether or not his mother had offered this help to Arlene, or what her reaction had been. In a slightly more humorous tone, Elizabeth asked Norman whether this charm also worked on animals. Her family has a cow, which is sunburned every summer. She then added that the cow does not have a name – ‘would we have to christen it?’ Norman was not sure, but added that his mother was ‘kept busy during the summer with sunburns’, so the charm does work on them, as well as on more serious burns.

In this example, Elizabeth and Norman did not need to build as much rapport as Kate and Ruth in the previous one. Not only are Elizabeth and Norman both Protestant, but they have known each other well for years. This is reflected in their many topics of easy conversation, the common acquaintances they were able to discuss, and Elizabeth’s slightly joking manner when discussing Norman’s mother’s healing abilities. However, she did not discount them entirely, and did inquire for further information. ‘Charming’ animals might be viewed as slightly humorous (especially in contrast to a human suffering from cancer) but farmers are naturally concerned with the health of their livestock. Harris (1986) notes that many charms are considered effective for both humans and animals. Elizabeth immediately recognised the importance of naming to the charm’s effectiveness,

and tried to reason out how it would work. Elizabeth, a Protestant inspector, discussed curing/charming with a Protestant farmer in this example.

That evening, after I had returned home from accompanying Elizabeth on Best Farm inspections, I mentioned to my friend Kate that a charm for burns had been discussed. I added that it was unfortunate that I had not known about it when her cousin (Ciarán) was in the hospital a few weeks previously for burns and bleeding. Kate immediately replied that her family had had both charms said for Ciarán. I had not known about this before, which again shows that there were some instances of curing/charming during my fieldwork that I did not hear about. Ciarán was scalded by hot water in a household accident. During his subsequent Emergency Department hospital visit, he was also found to be suffering from unrelated internal bleeding. He passed away within a few weeks of his diagnosis. Although he was greatly mourned by friends and family, no interest was shown in his biomedical condition, and no autopsy was performed. Ciarán’s death had no effect on belief in curing/charming among his friends and family. He died after receiving two cures/charms and biomedical treatment at the best hospital in NI. Informants recognised that his condition was simply so serious that no treatment of any sort (supernatural, biomedical) was effective. The healer (Conor) who said the cure/charm for bleeding was a politically active farmer who had hosted FAC’s Fermanagh clinic in his own home. This is an additional example of the overlap between bureaucracy and traditional healing.

In July 2014, I accompanied another Best Farm inspector (Allen) on an inspection to a beef and sheep farm in Boynagh. This is a ‘mixed’ community where most residents are Catholic, and some are Protestant. Allen himself was in his late thirties, married with young children, and engaged in part-time farming with his brother. The latter information came up when he explained how he schedules specific farms to be inspected. Allen selects ones close to his own farm for days with good weather, so that he can ‘get home faster, and do my own chores’. This is especially important during the summer, when hay or silage is being cut. These crops can be ruined if they are not harvested while still dry. This statement shows Allen identifying himself primarily as a farmer, whose bureaucratic tasks are arranged around his own agricultural work.

During a conversation I had with Allen while driving to our first inspection several days previously, I discussed a Catholic pilgrimage to Slemish mountain on St. Patrick’s Day, which I had attended with

a local family. Allen then immediately asked where we had parked. When I mentioned the Presbyterian church near the mountain, he looked very pleased, and said ‘that’s my church’. In this casual way, he identified himself to me as a member of the Protestant community.

The first farm that morning in Boynagh belonged to a Catholic family. During the beginning of the inspection, Allen and the farmer (Seamus) discussed this year’s silage crop, and the utility of waste potatoes as cattle feed. When we arrived at a shed used for storing cattle meal, Allen pointed out large tree branches growing through the ceiling. He then asked ‘is that holly for charming ringworm?’ This comment sounded curious, rather than approving or disapproving. Seamus replied that it was not. He added that in his ‘father’s time’ they had been used for drying potato sacks, ‘and the branches were just left up there’. In this conversation, the tone was more neutral than in the previous conversation about curing/charming Kate and Elizabeth had had with farmers. Seamus denied that the branches were a charm. The rest of the inspection proceeded fine.

The conversation continued to revolve around farming and the weather. It was clear that Allen and Seamus did not know one another’s histories and families the way Norman and Elizabeth had. An additional factor is that Norman and Elizabeth were around the same age and from nearby local communities. Allen’s home community, on the other hand, was very far from Boynagh. Also, Seamus appeared to be in his sixties, and was therefore much older than Allen.

As we drove to our next inspection, I asked Allen for more information about the holly. He explained that ‘holly’s used to prevent ringworm in cattle. But it has to be male holly. That’s the one without the red berries’.⁵ He also added that ‘it’s a part of charming . . . which some people might call “witchcraft”’. He sounded surprisingly comfortable providing this explanation, although the term ‘witchcraft’ might be interpreted as more sinister than ‘charming’ or ‘curing’.

The next farm we visited was owned by Jonathan, a Protestant man in his forties. This inspection also proceeded well, with Allen providing small hints for correct answers while checking Jonathan’s milking parlour and tank room. After Allen finished the inspection, we went into the farm’s kitchen to complete the forms that are a part of Best Farm inspections. As Allen went question by question, he casually mentioned that ‘on our first farm today, they had some branches near the ceiling [of the shed]. I asked them if it was for hanging holly to prevent ringworm, but the man said it wasn’t’. Jonathan replied with scepticism: ‘but that’s just a myth’. Allen then argued that ‘there’s

men that swear by it . . . as soon as they put up the holly, they had no more bother with ringworm’. Jonathan did not comment, and Allen returned to asking Best Farm questions.

This conversation shows that Allen himself does believe in the effectiveness of holly against ringworm. Although he does not directly say anything about his own views, he presents evidence that ‘many’ farmers have found it effective. Jonathan’s disbelief may be influenced by his overall desire to be modern. His milking parlour, tank room, and farmhouse all appeared to be new and very efficient. Throughout the inspection, he had pointed out features to Allen that were at a higher standard than the requirements. For example, when only warm water was required for washing equipment, he used more expensive hot water. The milk his farm produced was picked up every day, instead of weekly, and his equipment serviced regularly, instead of servicing only to resolve problems.

At this farm also, rapport between the inspector and farmer had been developed mostly through farming talk. Allen had mentioned being pleased that his brother, who is a Best Farm inspector as well, had a work assignment cancelled the previous day, so that he was able to spend the entire day cutting silage on the farm he shares with Allen. Allen additionally expressed sympathy for Jonathan’s sheds [barns], which had not yet been cleaned out, although the cattle had been living outdoors for several months. Allen noted that it was difficult to get everything done on a farm, because there was so much work to do. He acknowledged directly that it is not possible to do everything perfectly. As a farmer himself, Allen understands this. So in the previous example, he and Jonathan build rapport through their common experiences with challenges encountered by farmers. Allen, a Protestant inspector, discussed curing/charming with both Protestant and Catholic farmers.

Traditional Healing: My Experience

In 2019, I returned to NI to attend the wedding of the nephew of a key interlocutor. I had conducted research on Kate’s farm frequently, and become very familiar with her family, both close and extended. I had conducted participant-observation of various farm activities such as moving cattle and bringing in the peat with many of her nieces, nephews, and cousins. At the wedding, I was placed at a table with NGO staff and farmers I knew quiet well, including Conor, a renowned

healer with ‘the cure’ for bleeding. This time, I had a personal reason for wanting to learn more about the practice of curing/charming. I had been diagnosed with infertility by specialists in biomedical reproductive health care in both the North American university town where I was currently living, and in my native Finland. I desperately wanted a child of my own, despite having a close and loving relationship with my young stepson.

I asked John, the FAC staff member I was seated next to, if he could ask Conor whether he knew of anyone with a cure for infertility. Perhaps stopping a woman’s ‘bleeding’ (menstruation) could lead to pregnancy? John knew Conor very well, and thought it was more appropriate for him to ask Conor these questions on my behalf, rather than switching seats so that I could discuss my predicament with Conor directly. I described my situation to John: that I hoped for a child, but had been diagnosed with infertility by two doctors. I had not yet attempted any biomedical treatment, as my partner was not ready to take that step. Could Conor perhaps help me? John’s response was illuminating regarding curing/charming, but not what I had personally hoped to hear. He explained that the cure/charm was always passed down father to daughter or mother to son. As such, it would not be appropriate to have a cure/charm for infertility, because sexual modesty precluded opposite gender parents and children from discussing the topic together in sufficient detail to pass such a cure/charm onto the younger generation. Menstruation was not ‘real bleeding’, and therefore not something Conor could charm. John suggested that prayer would be my most appropriate recourse.

This suggestion demonstrates the good rapport I had with John. Prayer is generally not discussed between Catholics and Protestants in the farming community, because the topic can be fraught. It easily calls attention to the different prayer practices of the two religious traditions. However, John felt comfortable sharing this suggestion with me. I was perceived as ‘Protestant’ in NI, because I am a baptised Lutheran, despite my many connections to Catholicism, such as graduating from a Catholic high school and starting my college education at a Catholic university.

How can we understand my eagerness to try ‘curing/charming’ for a serious medical condition? Clearly, the lens of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2013), so helpful to understanding why members of Northern Ireland’s farming community share information regarding curing/charming with one another, especially across ethnoreligious boundaries, does not apply to me, the anthropologist. I offer two explanations.

Although Jeanne Favret-Saada notes that she has sometimes been asked to ‘de-witch’ people who have read her book, but who hail from ‘cultural traditions . . . not include[ing] witchcraft’ (2012: 48), I would question how common such cultural backgrounds really are. Although Finland is often thought of as a modern, secular society, references to religious healing are common enough among people of my parents’ generation (born during World War II).

I mentioned my predicament (an infertility diagnosis) at one family party, and an older cousin (in her seventies) immediately suggested a solution. She promised to post a copy of the miraculous Kozelshchyna icon of the Mother of God to my home in the US. This icon blurs the boundaries of ‘the three-cornered constellation’ of magic, science, and religion (Nader 1996: 259). Clearly, as a part of Eastern Orthodox prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary, it is religious. The magical aspect can be seen in the form the prayers take. It is not enough to simply invoke the Mother of God. It is necessary to have a copy of the specific icon (the Kozelshchyna), and the prayers must be repeated exactly as written. The Eastern Orthodox Church has no special standards for a ‘miracle’. If a person feels that they have been granted a miracle, then this is accepted by the Eastern Orthodox Church. There is no process to examine whether a biomedical (scientific) explanation might be responsible.

Conclusion

In his recent work on cultural intimacy, Herzfeld mentions examples ranging from ‘sexual naughtiness to bribery and bureaucratic mismanagement’ as practices that help ‘insiders’ feel a sense of community (2013: 491). To this, I would like to add inspectors, farmers, and advice centre staff discussing ‘magical’ practices of healing during their otherwise ‘rational’ bureaucratic encounters. More research is indeed needed on this topic. Narratives of curing/charming are one type of cultural intimacy within the NI farming community.

This cultural intimacy is important because it helps build rapport between farmers and advice centre staff, as well as farmers and inspectors, and rural Catholics and Protestants. The latter is particularly important, given the violence that has historically existed between the two ethnoreligious communities, and the tension that continues to be a part of their relations today. Curing/charming both creates and reinforces intimacy between rural people, especially in situations

where they are trying to downplay differences between Catholics and Protestants or farmers and inspectors.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Douglas A. Feldman, late Professor Emeritus at SUNY Brockport, for his invaluable advice on the medical anthropology aspects of this article. I would also like to thank the participants of 'Health, Intimacy and Care in Times of Crisis', the session at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting in 2015 where I presented a first draft of this paper, for their insightful comments. They are Nancy A. Konvalinka, Staci Rosenthal, and Maryna Bazylevych. My gratitude also goes to the two anonymous peer reviewers who greatly improved my writing. This article would not have been possible without my interlocutors in NI, who generously shared their lives with me.

Irene Ketonen-Keating earned her Ph.D. in 2017 from the State University of New York at Buffalo. Her dissertation examines Northern Ireland farmers and European Union (EU) bureaucracy before Brexit. She served as a Visiting Assistant Professor at SUNY Brockport 2016-2019, as Chair of the Editorial Committee for 'Reviews & Critical Commentary' at the Council for European Studies (CES) 2014-2015, and as a Visiting Research Associate at Queen's University Belfast 2012-2014.

E-mail: ireneket@buffalo.edu

ORCID: 0000-0002-1324-2522

Notes

1. Today, 'Catholic' refers to people of Irish descent, who are almost always 'nationalists'. In the NI context, a nationalist is a person who would like to see NI united with the Republic of Ireland. 'Catholic', 'Irish', and 'nationalist' are therefore usually synonyms referring to the same community. A 'republican' is a person who accepts that the use of armed force to unite NI with the Republic of Ireland is necessary under some circumstances (Feldman 1991; Harris 1986; Kelleher 2006; Sluka 1989; Wilson and Donnan 2006). 'Protestant' refers to people of British (i.e. English or Scottish) descent, who are almost always unionists. A 'unionist' is a person who would like to see NI remain a part of the UK.

Unionists who support the use of paramilitary violence in continuing NI’s membership in the UK are ‘loyalists’ (Feldman 1991; Harris 1986; Kelleher 2006; Sluka 1989; Wilson and Donnan 2006). ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ are used in the farming community, because they do not have the same explicitly negative connotation as political labels.

2. All research participants, organisations, and places are identified by pseudonyms. Specific descriptions of them have been altered to protect confidentiality. The Farmers’ Advice Centre (FAC) is a pseudonym for what was historically a Catholic organisation.
3. The Good Friday or Belfast Agreement (1998) includes a devolved Assembly for Northern Ireland, which is organised around the equal consent of British unionists and Irish nationalists. It recognises the special relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland through the creation of a Ministerial Council that operates across the Irish land border. It additionally promotes cooperation between the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales through a British–Irish Council (Kelleher 2006: 212–213). It also includes a decreased British military presence, and the decommissioning of IRA weapons (CNN 2015).
4. Unfortunately, anthropology has a long history of portraying Ireland as ‘primitive’ or ‘backward’. For discussion of this problem, see Kelleher 2006, Nadel-Klein 1995, Peace 1989, Shanklin 1985, and Taylor 1996.
5. Ballard 2009 and Woods-Panzaru et al. 2009 are relatively recent, comprehensive accounts of herbal healing in NI. However, neither mentions holly at all.

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