

# **O Corpiño: Spirit possession in Galicia, Spain.**

## **ABSTRACT.**

### **INTRODUCTION**

While I speak a Picture presentation of Galicia **will be shown**. Each picture (has) goes with a title; they just **try to catch your eye** while I tell you the story of an evil possession that has **taken** place in this region of Spain, Galicia. My **only intention is to** help you (to) understand the case of Eva from a Medical Anthropology perspective. Afterwards, I would be more than pleased to answer any of your questions **Eva or I** could have raised on your minds.

### **I. EVA'S STORY**

Eva is twenty nine years old. Her husband, José, has been working in Switzerland for the last fifteen years, coming back home to Galicia once each summer. Eva lives in a rural parish in inland Ourense since she got married nine years ago. She lives with her two kids, Ana and Jose Manuel, in her husband's Parents rural house which is set on the same parish where she was born. Ramona, her husband's sister, **also lives** with them. They all work the *horta* (subsistence "vegetable garden") of the house and take care of a twenty milk - cow farm.

Eva has started an abnormal behaviour just a few months. Her **parents'** in law have been happy with her since she lives there: she is a hard - **working** and enterprising person, **always taking** always good care both of the house, the farm and her kids, being also sincerely nice and tender with them. Eva collaborates at all works needed at the different seasons without complaining or a hesitation. Now, it takes time and patience to involve her even on the smaller task. She seems sad, crying at everything, and even **worse**; Eva has started to eat badly. Her surrounding world has becoming less and less appealing to her; even her kids seem to be weird when she sits in front of them without a movement for hours. Eva can not take out of her mind that José, her husband, has a

pregnant lover in Switzerland. “He is not coming back again”, she **obsessively repeats** to herself.

Her **parents’** - in- law were not worried until her careless behaviour with their grandchildren started. They don’t want to disturb her son José working far and alone in Switzerland; they went to Eva’s brothers who live not far **away**. Her brothers are regularly in touch with Eva, and are already worried about her rare behaviour. They are family and trustful persons: they collaborate regularly with Manola and Pedro (Eva’s parents in law) with the potatoes seasonal recollection, the cows and the **regular** works needed at the farm.

They have all decided to visit a Social Security Public System’s Doctor at the village head of the county. The Family Doctor diagnoses Eva the beginning of **Anaemia**. He orders her to rest, and to avoid hard work; the Doctor set her on a high iron diet and prescribed her some medicines. They get back home full of hope, now something starts to make sense. But this feeling of release won’t last too long.

They decide to visit a private doctor at the Capital city (*Ourense*) after a month of non visible recovery (“a paid doctor”, they called). This is a well-known doctor which a neighbour has told them has solved her relatives’ similar behavioural problem. The Ourense’s Psychiatrist gives them diagnose of **Depression** after three paid sessions of two hours speaking alone with Eva while her relatives were waiting **outside**. He also orders two different private paid analyses. The psychiatrist tells Eva’s relatives that she has something on her nerves (“*ten algo dos nervios*”) which has somehow a relationship with her previous **diagnosis** of Anaemia. The psychiatrist prescribes her new pills, banning the previous medicines and advices her relatives to make all **that** they could to make her husband **come** back definitely from Switzerland. He also tells them not to worry too much and to **cheer up** a bit.

Eva's behaviour not only is not improving two months later, but gets frankly and openly worse. Now, she speaks openly and loudly of her husband's pregnant lover, getting to the point of hitting one of her kids. She is rude to her parents' in law even in public social meetings. Eva even denounces them of abusing her brothers and other relatives. Nobody knows exactly what to do with her. Her mood changes every five minutes, becoming impossible to be at her side in the same room. Her brothers become hopeless, her kids avoid her, scaping from the room any time she enters (in)( it), her parents' in law leave her alone, and Eva starts to stay most of the day lying in bed.

They all agree not to call José, but her mother in law has had a bad hint from the beginning of her misbehaviour: Manuela suspects a "*mal de ollo*" or "*meigallo*" (evil eye or curse). Manuela and her neighbour go in secret to speak with a well-known local "curandeiro" (quack doctor) without telling anyone in the house. They both describe Eva's behaviour to him and tell him every single detail. The "curandeiro" tells them back what they have already suspected: "This illness is not a doctor's disease. Eva has a "*meigallo*". Someone has evil eyed her and she has got a bad air ("*mal aire*") inside her soul". He can definitely help Eva: if she makes a pilgrimage to "*O Corpiño*" (literally: little body), Eva would eventually get her "*meigallo*" out. A bad spirit has entered her body and must be getting out of her body and soul. Eva has to follow his advice step by step, and exactly. If she does so, she will hopefully improve her health.

At this point, the summer comes and Eva's husband lands for his month vacation. Eva providentially improves. She is again the old Eva, full of energy and always ready to do whatever is needed at home or at the farm. She has again a nice word and a smile to everyone. Her husband is not even told of her past misbehaviour: Eve's seems to be so well that everyone starts to forget the now bad old times.

Alas, Eva's misbehaviour reappears again two months after the summer, being her conduct even worse than before. She spends all day long in bed, not getting out of the house and not eating at all. After three months she has lost ten kilograms. They see the doctors again and they give her new pills and advice once more. Her brothers and parents' in law start to desperate. It seems that nothing works. Nothing appears to help fractionally Eva. At this point, Manuela decides to talk openly and convinces everyone to go and pay a visit to the "curandero" with Eva after a couple of days of discussions and family meetings. Manuela, her neighbour, Eva's brothers and of course Eva get together to visit the local *curandero*.

The *curandero* describes them a woman that must have cursed Eve. He tells them this information without even allowing them to speak a word, just after crossing the front door of his consultation room he describes in full detail the "meiga" (witch) that has caused Eva's "meigallo". He prescribes a pilgrimage to the well-known *Romeria do Corpiño* as her treatment. The *Romeria* is celebrated each 24<sup>th</sup> of June in a chapel near Lalin, an inland village in the geographical centre of Galicia. They have to stay there for seven days before the day of the *Corpiño's* Virgin, and make Eva go through the same ritual each day, specially the last day on the Virgin's procession. They must take Eva every day inside *Corpiño's* Chapel during the noon mass, and once inside, they have to succeed each day in making her receive communion and kiss the image of the *Corpiño's* Virgin offered by the priest. The day of the *Corpiño's* Virgin, they have to succeed in getting Eva under the Virgin's icon during the noon holy procession. The "curandero" gives them a little sack with herbs and written prayers tied with a nice red bow. He tells them that if after the seventh day the bow is untied, Eva's spirit possession would be out and her health would dramatically improve. In that case, the bad air inside her soul would have been expelled out of Eva's body.

Eva's relatives drive in two cars to O *Corpiño* early each morning, and drive back home after the diary ritual during the week. They are all at her side during the whole seven days of the ritual at *Corpiño*: his brothers with [their](#) wives, her [parents](#) and sister in law, all the family. They, together, help Eva each day to cross the entrance of the Chapel during the noon mass. They all [surround](#) Eva [to](#) take her to receive [communion](#) and kiss the *Corpiño*'s Virgin. Eva crosses the entrance of the chapel each day. Eva passes under the Virgin's icon the day of the main procession at noon. Eva struggles fiercely each day against her relatives trying to avoid them to make her enter the Chapel. She enters each single day in a state of ecstasy or trance. They have to force her to receive communion and they must force her face, her lips over the Virgin's Icon. Eva even hits each day her brothers, that after the first day [they](#) need the help of even the eldest members of the family to complete the ritual. Eva's force and energy seems magically to increase to a point where even the help of the [surrounding](#) public is necessary to dominate her and to get her inside the holy areas. They together scream: "*botao for a, botao fora*" (expel it out, expel it out). Eva calms down each day after the day ritual when she gets driven unconscious back home.

The 25<sup>th</sup> of June, after [completing](#) the seventh day ritual Eva awakes [at](#) home feeling as living inside a [brand new](#) body. Her face seems right again: no sight of the hideous last days face, no signal of her bad humour. She seems the old Eva. A few days [later](#), José gets back for his month of summer vacation. He announces that he has been offered the retirement at his Swiss firm. He has worked [for enough](#) years to receive a good pension and enough money to open a Bar in a near village and enough savings to start to build their long planned own house.

Since [then](#), Eva's behaviour has been normal, nobody has complained again of her behaviour. Eva has never visited a [doctor](#) or psychiatrist again. She makes an annual

pilgrimage to *Corpiño* at the beginning of each summer with her mother in law and her now three kids. Eva and Jose have started to build a house and a small farm on a land inherited by Jose near his parents'. They have opened a bar ("*Suizo*" is its name: Swiss) in a nearby village and they hope to move in six months to their new home.

## II. GALICIA IN SPAIN: SOME BASIC DATA.

This has been a story of a spirit possession in *O Corpino*. One story out of the thousands you could see and hear any 24<sup>th</sup> of June in *O Corpino*, Galicia. If you are just a bit curious, you must have some questions running in your mind: what exactly happened to Eva? Was Eva really possessed? But, getting farther on your curiosity, if you are becoming anthropologists, some other questions must be on your minds: what sense has all this to Eva? Why Eva and her relatives didn't trust the psychiatrist and went to a "*curandero*"? Why does Eva need the help of relatives to make sense and solve her life problems? How her Galician culture helps her even without her openly knowing it? What are the cultural trays??? of her culture?

In order to help you (to) understand Eva's case, we need some cultural, geographical and economical context. That (it) is what I will give you now. Afterwards, you could hopefully build your anthropological analysis of the case of Eva on your own.

Let's start with some data about Galicia. Galicia is a modern complex society. Galicia is one of the seventeen Autonomous Communities which articulates politically Spain since 1981, after forty years of fascism during Franco's dictatorship. Galicia is situated in Europe; it is an old Middle Age Kingdom just above Portugal, with borders with the Atlantic Ocean to the west and north. It is divided into four administrative regions or provinces: *Lugo*, *Ourense*, *Pontevedra* and *A Coruña*. Galicia's landscape is hilly and relatively uniform (between 200 and 700 meters of altitude). Higher mountains

ring the interior and have maintained Galicia traditionally isolated from both Spain and Portugal (the last two high ways built that connect Galicia to Spain are four years old).

Villages are ordinarily small and isolated, the parish being the common denominator among the widely dispersed villages of a locality. Annual precipitation is moderately high, exceeding the 1000 mm. in most places, but it is only of limited benefit, because the badly eroded soil retains little moisture. The terrain favours animal husbandry over cultivation, and the former is the premier agriculture activity; nonetheless, the farm population is large and fairly evenly dispersed, resulting in the subdivision of the countryside into small landholdings, or “*minifundios*”. Families generally own and cultivate the “*minifundios*”, and the inability of those farms to support a growing population has resulted in a higher than average migration from Galicia since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Overseas emigration was higher (during) between 1920 and 1935, while emigration since World War II has been to the industrialized countries of Europe (mainly to Germany, Switzerland and France) but also to the Spanish areas of Madrid, the Basque Country and Catalonia. Rural population is lately getting older because of the migration from rural areas to the cities on the coast.

Primary production (agriculture, forestry and fishing) dominates the region’s economy. Subsistence farming prevails among the “*minifundios*”, with potatoes and corn among the leading crops and pigs among the leading livestock. Underemployment plagues the agricultural sector, and large numbers of migrant labourers periodically leave Galicia in search of seasonal work elsewhere in Spain. Galicia’s industrial sector is not well developed, and most of its centres are on the processing of primary commodities. Fish processing is of particularly importance, and sawmills are widespread. The installation of a petroleum refinery in *A Coruña* has stimulated industrial development in that Province, while *Ferrol* and *Vigo* have major shipbuilding

works. The mountains of the region produce considerable quantities of timber. Galicia's economy remains underdeveloped, however, accounting for a disproportionately small percentage of Spain's gross domestic product.

Galicia's culture and distinctive language (Galician) have developed in relative isolation, showing a great affinity with Portuguese by proximity, and with Celtic cultures because of former Celtic settlements. The cultural and political dominance of the old Kingdom of Galicia by the Kingdom of Castile has since submerged the literary uses of Galician. Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975) has persecuted Galicia's culture and Galician language in spite of the fact that Galician was the mother language of the majority of rural inhabitants of Galicia. After 1975 and as far as today, Galician and Spanish are the official languages of the Autonomous Community of Galicia.

Galicia has been historically isolated from the rest of Europe. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century Galicia has a population of around four millions (of) inhabitants: a subsistence agriculture and a development industrial agricultural sector, a strong fishing sector in permanent crisis, a short industrialization concentrated in four coast towns, and a growing up services sector (with tourism as the main drive). Christian Roman Catholicism has been the main religious Church, being during the Franco's dictatorship the official and the only one allowed. Galicia is thus a modern complex society. Rural inland we can find a growing older population and a development of an industrial farming sector, with subsistence peasants sector side by side with modern agricultural factories. On the coasts and in major cities, we would find a Galicia starting its industrial development in more urban classic capitalism drive (growing migration from Africa like in the rest of Europe, poverty, homeless people in the streets...).

After this short introduction about Galicia, we could start to understand Eva's case from an anthropological perspective.



### III. BUILDING A MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY VIEW OF EVA'S CASE IN GALICIA.

**Cultural Anthropology** studies human beings as cultural and social products. It assumes that we, human beings, need the social group to survive. Taking that as a fact Cultural Anthropology explores how each human culture shapes its human beings. In doing so, it looks into the culture of a human society as a whole. Anthropology looks to each culture as a *whole relative* to that concrete society. Relativism and holism are the logical bases of this social discipline.

**Holism** states that a culture is an integrated whole with meaning. Each element of a culture has sense only inside that single whole. *O Corpino* pilgrimage is a cultural element within Galician culture. We **cannot** understand a custom, a belief or a norm of a single culture unless we grasp that whole which gives sense to it. When Eva's relatives decide to take her to *O Corpino*, which makes sense to them because the culture they all share. Cultural Anthropology is a scientific discipline which describes those wholes in order to understand them from outside.

The **cultural relativism** is the second basic pillar of Anthropology. It stands as a defence against the cultural ethnocentrism that each culture teaches through the process of socialization. A custom, believe or even a feeling are part of a culture. Each culture teaches its member as **if** all **other** cultures were mainly wrong. Relativism states that each culture builds sense, and that sense is relative to that culture. It affirms that culture is diverse and all **of** them valid inside their own single contexts.

Each human child would learn to be human differently depending on which group **he** grows up. Each part of his or her culture would have been tough and learnt as having sense by socialization. For an anthropologist, human beings are cultural social beings. We are born inside a culture and we would become part of that single culture sharing its values and local perspectives. There are as many cultures as different ways

human beings have historically adapted to the various ecosystems of the Earth. There is not only a culture, human beings have developed a great diversity of CULTURES.

Each culture gives its members the background to face any possible event. As in all cultures, in Galicia there have existed traditional ways to understand, face and cure the so-defined illnesses, including what in our days are called “mental illnesses”. There have always and everywhere existed ways to classify, explain and to face madness. A local anthropologist of the University of Santiago de Compostela, Marcial Gondar, says it clearly speaking of a case of “*meigallo*”:

“Illness is both something objective and also a culturally built meaning. It is a factual event and a cultural meaning. The identity of the illness (his/her roles and status) depends both on the culture where he or she belongs, and also to the historical moment in which that single culture lives. If we want to discover the meaning of being ill, we need to know: first, the system of values of this single society and time; second, the knowledge about the illness developed, both on the high cultural level and also on a more popular level; and finally, the institutions of care and cure generated” (Marcial Gondar 1992: 17).

Medical Anthropology is a part of Anthropology, and *it studies medicine as a cultural phenomenon*. It understands and explains medicine as a cultural constructed element. One of the biases which conforms Medical Anthropology is that each cultural group has built its way to face illness thought out its historical development. Each culture includes a **Medical System**. For instance, Acupuncture is a medical technique of the Traditional Chinese Medicine and Medical Anthropology would study acupuncture inside its cultural context of origin.

A **Medical System** is the complex set of values and beliefs of a culture about illness and health. It is the integrated complex set of practices, knowledge, believes and

values which define illness, the illness processes, the possibilities of cure and treatment, and its uses inside that concrete culture. Each culture defines health and illness through its Medical System.

**Biomedicine** is the Western scientific medicine observed by Anthropology as a cultural construct. Modern western medicine has as a basic theoretical viewpoint the idea that the human body is a machine composed of different systems and parts. A healthy body is a well-functioning machine; a sick or injured body is a machine in need of repair, either mechanical repair, or combined treatment to eliminate pathogens which are causing harm. The basic curative framework of Western medicine involves the use of chemical therapy, either ingested or injected, and mechanical correction, through surgery or mechanical devices to alter positioning or function. Preventive medicine deals with ways to prevent the body-machine from breaking down, and how to keep it immune to pathogens. The work of a biomedical doctor is to diagnose the illness, to tell it to her patient and follow the treatment. A biomedical doctor doesn't see one named individual as just a person; he sees cases of illnesses through the bodies of his patients. To biomedicine patients are isolated, they are cases of illnesses, without paying much attention to his familiar network or context.

This Biomedical System builds the common sense of the Galician peoples. But it is not **only** in Galicia. The first doctor and the psychiatrist where Eva was, were part of the biomedical system that works in Galicia. We are going to call **Galician Medicine** to the “unofficial” Medical Systems that coexist side by side with the Biomedicine in Galicia. They existence and meaningfully working are evident in Eva's case.

The **Galician Medicine** assumes the individual as a spiritual being, with a holy soul or spirit which gives life to its body. This soul comes from the Christian God. There are two kinds of illnesses: illnesses of the body which “*albeites*” or “*compoñedores*” fix; illnesses of the spirit when this is lost or stolen; finally there is also the illnesses that are a mixture of both. There are different treatments and specialist for each kind of disease: “*curandeiros*”, “*meigas*” (witches), “*albeites*”, “*menciñeiros*” (specialists in herbs) with different names in different areas of Galicia. A local specialist in medicine work is mainly to identify what it is wrong within the patients’ spiritual context; *his job is to give meaning to the disease inside the patient’s social and familiar context*. Once he has diagnosed, he would apply the correspondent remedy.

Then, we have that two medical systems coexist in Galicia. First, we can find the official Biomedicine at the Social Security Public System, free of charge for any legal worker in Galicia. But inside it, we **can also** find the doctors who have a private paid consultation. Eva illness pilgrimage covered both: first, the officially free medical system: a family doctor; then, the paid private doctors: a psychiatrist. We **also have** in Galicia the whole set of **beliefs** and practices of the Galician Folk Medicine, with *curandeiros*, *albeites*, *romerías* and *meigallos*.

The “*mal de ollo*” (evil eye) or “*mal de aire*” (evil air) occurs when someone or some animal looks badly or sends a bad spirit to the later ill. An animal, a bad person can cause this evil influence. The variance of symptoms or this disease is wide through Galicia, but the coincidence is on an abnormal behaviour of the ill, out of the normal: lost of appetite, malnutrition, misbehaviours towards clear and wild madness. Treatment once detected the evil eye implies seeing an specialist, generally a “*curandeiro*”, but the concrete cure also varies from a village to the next province: from a short prayer to the

need of locate the cause in order to fix a drink with some part of its/her/his body (heart, skin, clothes).

The “*meigallo*” (spirit possession) is also called: “*ramo cativo*” (little spirit possession), evil of envy, “*feitizo*” (charm or spell), “*espiritado*” (one with an spirit inside). It includes a whole complex of symptoms caused by the entrance within the ill’s body of an evil spirit. Somehow, the evil eye is the minor disease and the “*meigallo*” the major illness, both with a similar origin: the contact with an evil agency. Symptoms of “*meigallo*” also vary through out Galicia, but there is a coincidence in a weird and abnormal mad behaviour of someone who was perfectly normal until recently. Traditional treatment includes the visit to a “*curandeiro*” or “*meiga*” who will prescribe from a simple rest to a pilgrimage to a *Romeria* as the *Corpiño*. In Galicia there have been plenty of places where to pilgrimage in these cases, being the *Corpiño* just one of the most famous because it is specifically for “*enmeigados*”.

The *Corpiño’s Romeria* takes place each June in Loson, a parish of Lalín, a small village inland rural Galicia. The 24<sup>th</sup> of June is the day of the *Corpiño*’s Virgin and her icon comes out of the Chapel in procession at noon mass co-celebrated with no less than five priests. That day the place of *Corpiño*, generally empty (in 2002 had 138, 67 males and 71 females; and less inhabitants, 155, in 1991), is crowded from early in the morning when the masses start towards late at sunset when the masses end. The tradition says that is of good fate to pay a mass for the dead or just in case of any illness (see pictures). The ritual for a person with the spirit inside varies, but the general rule says that he or she has to enter the Chapel after getting under the Virgin’s icon during the procession. Once inside the chapel the possessed must receive communion and kiss the Virgin. The belief states that once the devil enters the holy areas of the Chapel it would fight fiercely to avoid the contact with holy places and icons, hitting anyone who

forces it to enter **into** holy contact. The tradition says that **once** the ritual is completed the evil gets out of the former possessed body and flies away. This is a delicate moment because, once a devil has left this body, it could enter any other body in the **surroundings**. Inside the chapel and thought out the development of the procession is easy to see people in trance surrounded by its relatives and crowded with others that generally **cover** their mounts with a holy water wet handkerchief, a silver coin or any other holy powerful objects. In the words of a Galician anthropologist:

“Every 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> of June peoples under a spell or possessed come to the sanctuary to heal out the “meigallo”. The ritual stipulates that first the ills must resist the entrance inside the church, swearing and cursing at the same time. Relatives must share this evil aptitude and with the **surrounding** people they must together reprimand and rebuke the devil. The ill must kiss the saint icon once the mass is over to cause cure. This is a critical moment because the evil could enter any other present body. In order to avoid that evil influence people present must close their mounts. The faithful believers cover their own mouths or they try to avoid the yells of the possessed with a holy water wet handkerchief” (Vaqueiro 1998: 333).

#### **IV. A CONCLUSION?**

How can an Anthropologist explain Eva’s case? But maybe, **explaining is too strong a word**. I must rephrase my question: how could an Anthropologist help you to understand Eva’s case? Now, the question heads to the point of any anthropological fieldwork: it **points** to the desire goal of any social science. It **points** to allow you, here, far and away from the land field, here, far from *my* Galicia, to have a better picture of our complex reality. I would like to think that thought out the selection of data I have presented to you, I would have helped you a bit in that fuzzy direction.

But, just in case, I would like to end this presentation outlining **(you)** some basic points I have tried to transmit **to** you:

1. First, less signal that Eva faced her problem never alone on her own. She did everything facing always her relatives. While the biomedical doctor gave her an answer and a solution to her body problems, the *curandero* offered her an understanding and solution-to-come in her family context. As a local anthropologist says it: “the *meigallo* fulfils two functions: one individual allowing a openly manifestation of a personal problem; and a social function as well, allowing the expression of a religious conception of the world where there is a eternal faith between the Evil and the Good, between God and the Devil” *Enciclopedia Gallega*, under “*meigallo*”. While the biomedical illness helped really her body, the Galician Medicine helped her and her world, her family and her desire future.
2. Second, it was the whole community which was involved during the ritual at the *Corpino*. It was not the problem of an individual and her family; it was the problem of the whole community there presented. Getting Eva inside the Chapel, helping her to get rid of her bad air or spirit was a community goal. I hope that I have given you enough data to give you context and help you build an idea of the complexity of that society in our day’s Galician peasant’s community.
3. Third and now from a more philosophical point of view: Eva’s reality is not just her body. All **that** was involved there during the ritual played a part to build a collective behaviour that ended given sense to the complex situation that Eva was **going through**. Then, we can affirm that reality is complex and constructed within culture.

4. Finally, I hope I have been able at least to suggest (you) enough questions that you can rise???? now here or take home. Hopefully, they would help you question your own safe reality in order to open your mind to other cultures and experiences. If I have got that far, it is more than enough.

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