

PHOTOESSAY

## Curanderismo: A Picture of Mexican-American Folk Healing

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A curandero's working altar, showing objects that include the historical influences on Mexican American healing traditions. Photo by Robert T. Trotter, II, Ph.D.

**C**uranderismo, from the Spanish verb *curar* (to heal), is a complex healing tradition found in Mexican American communities throughout the United States. This tradition has a history that is shared with other Latin American cultures, while containing unique elements from Mexican history and the Mexican-American experience in the United States.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CURANDERISMO

It is possible to trace at least seven historical roots in modern curanderismo. It includes beliefs originating in Greek humoral medicine (ideas of balance; the influence of the hot and cold on the body) interwoven with practices

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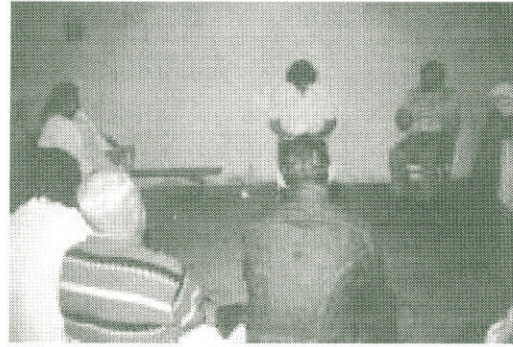
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from early Judeo-Christian healing traditions. Other roots derive from Europe in the Middle Ages, utilizing Old World medicinal plants and magical healing practices from Medieval witchcraft. Moorish influences from the conquest of Southern Europe are clearly visible in curanderismo, including folk illnesses such as *mal de ojo* (the evil eye), homeopathic concepts, and common home remedies for conditions such as earaches (garlic [*Allium sativum*]), burns (*Aloe vera*), and stomachaches (orange [*Citrus aurantium* L.] leaf tea). There are significant Native American traditions included in curanderismo, such as folk illnesses from pre-Columbian times (fallen fontanel; also known as *caída de la mollera*) and the extensive pharmacopeia of the New World, with treatments for everything from intestinal parasites to abortifacients. Furthermore, curanderismo is not locked into the past. *Curanderos* (male healers) or *curanderas* (female healers) track develop-



A curandera treating an illness (*mal de ojo*) involving the supernatural, rather than natural part of the material. Photo by Robert T. Trotter, II, Ph.D.



Healer applying the spiritual level of healing. Photo by Robert T. Trotter, II, Ph.D.

ments in parapsychology and New Age spirituality, as well as tapping Eastern healing traditions. Curanderos and curanderas have incorporated these global elements into their own practices, along with modern biomedical beliefs, treatments, and practices. On the United States–Mexico border, it is not unusual for healers to recommend prescription medications, which can be purchased legally in Mexico without a prescription, for infections and other illnesses. Each of these influences can be found in visual form in the objects that are used by curanderos on the altars that they use as their primary work benches. These alters contain the physical tools and the symbolic elements that are necessary for the types of healing practiced. These objects include herbs, crucifixes, holy water, pictures of saints, and candles used for rituals, among other objects.

### TYPES OF HEALING PRACTICES

Classic curanderismo follows three healing practices. These are (1) material approaches to healing (physical treatments and supernatural healing practices), (2) spiritual healing and spiritualism, and (3) psychic healing. These are called, respectively, the *nivel material*, *nivel espiritual*, and *nivel mental*. Traditional healers state that health and illness contain a duality of “naturally” and “supernaturally” caused illness. The natural source of illness is essentially a medical model of disease, including germ theory, genetic disorders, psychologic conditions, and dietary causes for medical conditions. These are seen as best treated by physi-



cians and by herbal remedies. The healers also recognize a parallel supernatural source of illnesses that are not amenable to treatment by the medical establishment.

Curanderos and curanderas are fully aware that the conventional medical system does not recognize the existence of magic or of supernatural causation, and these healers use this as an important cultural justification for their practices, because it allows them to deal routinely with problems that are ignored by conventional physicians—problems of a social, psychologic, and/or spiritual nature, as well as physical ailments. The total list of problems presented to the curandero or curandera is nearly inexhaustible and includes virtually every uncomfortable human condition.

#### EXAMPLES OF THE LEVELS OF HEALING

The curanderos and curanderas believe that healers work by virtue of “a gift of healing” (*el don*). Individual healers may have the gift for working in one, two, or all three of the areas of practice, although more work on the material level than in the other two areas. The material area includes some purely physical practices, such as midwifery, herbal treatments, and folk massage, and the *remedios caseros* (home remedies) used in Mexican American communities are part of this tradition. The supernatural part of this practice includes cures for common Mexican-American folk illnesses such as *susto* (soul loss; literally “fright of the soul”), *empacho* (digestive blockage), *caída de la mollera*, *espanto*

(soul loss), and *mal de ojo*, as well as treatments for *brujería* (witchcraft). In contrast, the spiritual healing process is parallel to the channeling found in New Age groups in and shamanistic healing around the world. Individuals enter an altered state of consciousness and make contact with the spirit world by opening their minds to spirit voices, by sending their spirits out of the body to gain knowledge at a distance, or by allowing spirits the use of the body to communicate with this world. Finally, the mental level has been described as the ability to transmit, channel, and focus mental vibrations (*vibraciones mentales*) in a way that affect the patient’s mental or physical condition directly. Both patients and healers are confident that the healers can effect cures at a distance by using this technique.

Research on Mexican-American folk medicine has produced a very high number of useful, insightful, and culturally competent healing strategies that range from proven herbal cures to therapeutic models and to identifying key cross-cultural problems when they are presented in medical clinics. The practices are dynamic and, while maintaining contact with the past, change to accommodate the present and future.

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