

Curanderismo:

Mexican / Chicana Folk Healing and Holistic Health

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Curanderismo is a creative process that utilizes culturally appropriate methods for curing disease and misfortune. It is an alternative method of health care which emphasizes a holistic approach to diagnosis and treatment. There are social, psychological, physical, and spiritual factors which provoke illness; and the healer deals with the dual elements of natural and supernatural forces.

The term curandera or curandero comes from the Spanish verb curar, which means to heal. A folk healer does not separate her religious and spiritual beliefs from the diseases that she treats, but rather, she incorporates them into the interventions. The spirituality in this medicine is, for the most part, Christian, Native, or a combination of both. Curanderismo is healing and religion practiced simultaneously.

Indian Medicine

The relevance of Curanderismo has not changed since the Toltec, Aztec, Mayan, African, and Spanish came together to share their medicine ways. The Mayans invented the zero, and this knowledge was thousands of years old before the West discovered it. Mayan people found different ways to cure. Healers used surgery, herbs, the temazcal (sweat lodge) and other natural elements.

The expressions of art, medicine, and culture in the Aztec renaissance, Texaco and Tenochtitlan, were sophisticated and impressive. The Aztec had developed superb architecture, sculptural art, pictograph manuscripts, an exact science of time, a complex religion, and a tremendous knowledge of medicine and herbs. Aztec medicine was highly spiritual. In all treatment and diagnosis, spiritual forces were included. Below are examples of a few of the specialists (although there were many more):

The Tlamatinime. Spiritual wise men and scientists who functioned as healers, teachers, and spiritual leaders. Men who have 'firsthand knowledge of the character or nature of things.' They conducted soul retrievals by reproducing for patients their true face.

The Teixtomani. An elite group of physicians in charge of therapy and grasp of psychology. They developed concepts about ego formation and psychic structure (similar to Freudian concepts).

The Ticiti. A healer who specialized in the different techniques of reducing anxiety and stress (psychologist).

The Tepatiani. The doctor who uses massages for treatment. Now called *sobadora* y huesero.

The Tettacuicuitiani. The doctor who uses suction or leeching to remove illness. This procedure is now extinct.

The Tescupanine. The doctor who uses illusion or persuasion to cure.

Indian Medicine was much more advanced than Spanish/Black. Beside the above mentioned specialties, the Indian healers were wonderful herbalists; they documented over 300 medicinal herbs and their medicinal uses. Mexican herbs are among the best in the world.

Aztec Medicine is still very much alive and thriving. I am currently studying the Aztec Medicine system called the *Nawi Ollin Teotl* System (The Essence of the Four Movements). This system is an ancestral formula used to make decisions and is utilized by the indigenous pueblos of Mexico in their resplendent development. It includes the organic workings and relationships within the human body, nutrition, use of herbs, breathing, exercise, and self-evaluation.

Spanish Medicine

When the Spanish came to the New World in the 15th Century, their medical knowledge was an eclectic combination of Arabic medicine and health practices, Judeo-Christian religious symbols and rituals, and medieval European witchcraft. This knowledge was organized into two very well defined theories - the Rational and the Spiritual.

The Rational. The rational approach was introduced into Spain by the Moors, who had acquired it from the ancient Greek physician Galen, and before him, the Chinese physician Ho. It was a system based upon "humors." Within the Greek theory of humors, the human body is composed of four elements - black bile, yellow bile, blood and phlegm. Sickness developed when one of these humors was not in perfect equilibrium. The Chinese theory contained six humors, with the addition of wood and metal. The Chinese humors were sub-classified into yin and yang components, a division which continues to figure largely in modern Chinese medicine.

The consensus was that humors determined mental disposition and physical health by virtue of their relative proportions. It was the healer's art to ascertain the imbalance of humors and correct it.

The ancient Chinese principles of hot and cold properties of foods and physical conditions also came with the Spanish to the New World. Foods were considered hot or cold in essence rather than in actual temperature, and certain combinations were considered healthy or unhealthy. Hence milk and pork are still never served at the same time because digestion of two 'cold foods' results in indigestion or Empacho. A menstruating woman not eating lemons or bananas is another example: Menstruation is a 'hot' condition and both these

fruits are 'cold' to the system; cramping will result. Certain physical conditions were considered hot or cold, and were treated with the opposite type of food, or at times, cold conditions were treated with cold foods. For example, in Susto (a cold condition), a glass of cold water is preferred to warm liquids because the soul must be shocked into the system.

The Spiritual. This approach placed the responsibility for an illness in events that were linked with curses, the evil eye, punishment for sins, and magic. The judeo-Christian contribution was the concept that all healing ability was a gift from God and that only God can heal. In general, illness was considered possession by evil spirits, resulting from not following God's laws.

This 'spiritual' type of traditional medicine was what the Spanish promoted throughout the conquered countries. The other 'rational-scientific' approach was reserved for the upper-elite classes in power, like the Spanish governors, prosperous miners, and owners of haciendas.

Black Medicine

It has been established that the Black slaves introduced to Mexico were originally from the Belgian Congo and Guinea. They believed that human personality has several components: The body, which disappears after death. The 'breathing soul' is like a puff, wind or breath. The 'sleeping soul' is the part of the personality that leaves the body, such as during sleep or daydreaming.

The last and most important part of the personality is not represented in the living human being, but in one who is dead. In Western society, this concept would vaguely be called the 'spirit of the dead.' It is the form that the ego takes when it leaves the body accompanied by the soul-shadow of an individual, and it is converted into an ancestral god. Human personality then, since it extends beyond death, is invested with additional powers, and it is the object of more fear and love. As a consequence, following this line of thought, the ancestors are considered an integral and continual part of the family, the clan or tribe. The vitality of this theory is so extensive that it dominates Black culture, including medicine.

The diagnosis of an ailment is requested from the ancestral god Orisha, Voda or Loa. Therefore, Black medicine has institutionalized the method of 'mythic possession.'

Throughout the American continent, the crucial merging of Indian Medicine with Spanish and Black Medicine has bequeathed to us the legacy of Curanderismo.

Sources: *Sources of Curanderismo*, Doris Alarcon Taylor.
History of Psychology in Mexico, Thomas Ybarra
Woman Who Glows in the Dark, Elena Avila

Some General Terms Describing Illness

- Mal de ojo* Evil eye. Admiring an infant or small child with a concentrated gaze. Child will develop fever and irritability.
- Envidia* Envy from wishing we had what other have. Results in physical, mental, and spiritual illnesses.
- Empacho* Blockage in digestive tract resulting in various digestive complaints.
- Fright resulting in soul loss. The symptoms are varied and result in physical, mental, and spiritual illnesses.
- Es.banto* Fright caused by contact with ghosts.
- Mal Aire* Bad or evil air comes from too much exposure to the evening air Results in facial paralysis, ear aches or a cold.
- Too much yellow bile in the body from strong anger or rage.

Caida de mollera

Fallen fontanel caused by pulling nipple from baby too quickly. The infant develops dehydration, listlessness, vomiting and diarrhea.

- Mal Hecho* A hex or curse by an evil thought or by the works of a witch or brujo.
- Resfriado* A cold.
- Possession Possessed by negative energy.

Heating Objects or Actions

Dichos Proverbs or sayings. *Hierbas* Herbs. *Agua Bendita* Holy water.

Copal Incense from the resin of the copal tree. *Velas* Candles.

Limpias / Barridas Spiritual cleansing which involves a healing ritual.

Oraciones Prayers and incantations.

Arbol de Vida Tree of Life. *Rosario* Holy Rosary.

Baile, poesea, canciones / alabanzas Dance, poetry, songs, chants.