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Indigenous Treatments and Healers

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Indigenous treatments and healers are found in many ancient ethnomedical systems and draw their extensive knowledge and therapeutic techniques from ancient native wisdom and healing traditions. Most have little formal medical education but believe they have received a divine gift to heal from the greater realms of medicine. Today, many depend on indigenous healers and treatments for their health, just as others rely on biomedical practitioners, pharmacists, chiropractors, massage therapists, and psychoanalysts. Indigenous healers—also known as lay folk healers, traditional healers, *curanderos* (in Latin America), and medicine men and women (in indigenous cultures)—treat physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health problems. In the Western world, indigenous treatments and healers have been shaped by a unique Native American worldview that equates good health with homeostasis and harmony and embraces knowledge gained from European, African, and Asian healing traditions.

Diagnostics in traditional medicine go beyond the parameters known to biomedicine, extending the classification of conditions beyond the biomedical model. Indigenous healers, who are knowledgeable in many folk conditions that are unknown to biomedicine, may, in fact, be able to more adequately treat illness by considering both the natural and supernatural elements of causation. In Latin America, conditions such as *empacho* (a blockage in the stomach or digestive tract), *bilis* (over-reactive bile), *susto* (fright or soul loss), *envidia* (envy), *celos* (jealousy), *mal de ojo* (evil eye), and *nervios* (emotional instability) are diagnosed and treated according to an ancient equilibrium model of health. Thus, restoring the patient's energy equilibrium (physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual) becomes the healer's primary objective. The healer's reputation depends on his or her ability to adequately classify, identify, and effectively treat disease.

The folk medicine classification of disease comprises three main categories: physical conditions, emotional diseases, and diseases of the spiritual realm. Diagnosing involves the careful interpretation of physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional signs and symptoms. Common treatment protocols (depending on the condition) include *limpias* (cleansing), purification rituals and enemas, sweat baths, herbal remedies, prayer, massage, bonesetting, personal and dietary modifications, and spiritual advice. Faith is an important modality in indigenous healing practices. Traditional therapeutic

techniques (based on longterm observation and experimentation) are applied with the invocation of divine intervention.

There are parallels between patients and healers that allow the patient's own perceptions of illness to be considered in the diagnosis and treatment. In contrast to the emphasis on diagnostic equipment found among biomedical practitioners, in folk healing practices, there is more therapeutic touch to the afflicted areas between healer and patient. Indigenous treatments possess a unique mystical element that comes from the summoning of the healing spirit of God, angels, saints, and benevolent spirits and signals a holistic approach to the folk healing regimen.

A wide range of medical specializations and specialty practitioners exists in traditional medicine and in world healing traditions, each having its own particular cultural elements and linguistic terminology. In Latin America, these specialists include herbalists and leaf doctors (*yerberos/as* and *docte feys*), village healers and shamans (*curanderos* and *chamanes*, or medicine men and women), massage therapists (*sobadores*), lay bonesetters (*huesero/as*), channeling healing mediums or seers (*espiritistas– lloles* and *videntes*), midwives (*parteras*), healers who remove illness by sucking the afflicted area (*chupadores*), bush doctors (experts in jungle survival), and snake doctors (experts in snakebites).

Herbalists (*yerberos*, leaf doctors) treat diseases of physical and emotional origin. They possess extraordinary and sophisticated knowledge of plants. A [p. 246 ↓] legitimate yerbero knows the bioenergetic properties of plants, their botanical classification and divisions, and the effects that herbs have on the human body. Most important, herbalists provide a powerful spiritual element while working with the spirit energy of the plant. They know the general use and applications of medicinal plants—tinctures, syrups, and infusions—and have knowledge and understanding of acceptable strengths and dosages. A great deal of the advances made in pharmaceutical trials working in the research and development of new therapies for chronic illnesses (such as cancer and AIDS) are the result of ancient ethnobotanical lore and therapies.

Midwives (*parteras*) are common throughout the world, particularly in developing countries, where women who live in isolated rural villages depend on them for prenatal care, birthing, and postpartum care. Another type of healer, a *chupador/a*, is a healer

who sucks on an afflicted area with his or her mouth to extract foreign objects (such as glass, dirt, mud, corn, chicken bones, twigs, and nails) that may be under the skin, causing illness or imbalance in the patient.

Village healers (*curanderos*) and shamans (*chamanes*) are well-respected community members who treat medical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health problems. Massage therapists (*sobadores*) treat physical ailments (folk conditions such as *empacho*, *mal aire*, and constipation) and emotional illnesses (such as *bilis* and *nervios*). Lay bonesetters (*hueseros*) are a type of folk chiropractor or sports therapist; they bind and reset bones and realign displaced joints.

Espiritistas (healing mediums, *cajas*, shamans, faith healers, *videntes*) heal with the help of spirit. Not to be confused with *espiritualistas* (spiritualists, spiritual healers who pray for divine intervention), *espiritistas* (spiritists) use mediumistic healing techniques that go beyond the sensorial aspect to incorporate a knowledgeable and benevolent healing spirit. Spiritist healers (mediums) are found in all world healing traditions and deal specifically with diseases of the supernatural realm. They are masters of spirits and possess a unique specialization as soul doctors. With the help of the spirit world, they serve as counterwitchcraft specialists in removing spells, conducting exorcisms, and removing negative energies from patients. Spiritists can repair the loss of the soul (caused by *susto*); reestablish the circulation of the body fluids within the body; identify, locate, and expel pathogenic agents sent by a sorcerer; and invoke supernatural powers and master the ritual orations. Thus, a spiritual healer heals by performing rituals that reestablish the connection between the ill patient and the universe.

Spirit healers provide the patient with a spiritual consultation, examine the spiritual framework (spirit biography) of the ill patient, and identify the source of the ailment. They believe that the only way for the patient to achieve integral healing is by activating the patient's soul, which allows important spiritual, emotional, mental, and physiological processes to take place. Spiritual therapy, therefore, involves working with the patient's soul, mind, energy, and biological system and providing the patient with a multidimensional adjustment of spirit, mind, and body. A genuine healing medium teaches patients to act on internal direction and learn to discriminate between thoughts motivated by strength (faith) and those by fear and illusion (characteristic of human

weakness). A patient's treated soul, mind, and emotions are then ready for optimal performance in the flow of healing energy between the patient and cosmos.

All traditional healers aim to maintain health through a particular focus on prevention, diagnosis, and improvement of physical and mental illness and through a variety of holistic therapeutic techniques. Traditional healers in the United States are not recognized by the government and do not interact with the health care system. This is not the case in some developing countries, where allopathic and alternative service providers work together to meet most (if not all) of the primary health care needs of their people. Although some view folk healers negatively or consider them dangerous because they are unregulated or unorthodox, folk healers may be more accessible and affordable than biomedicine, particularly among rural populations, for whom biomedical facilities and economic resources are limited.

Focusing on the patient rather than the disease, traditional healers understand the patient's unique mental constructs and thus may be more effective at treating illness that requires behavior modification. They are aware of culture-specific norms, values, symbols, and metaphors, which helps them to build trust and confidence with their patients, ultimately lowering the patient's psychosocial resistance to the healing process. The healer's unique cultural understanding of the patient's belief system (which, for Latinos, is rooted in Catholic, indigenous, and African beliefs) enhances his or her ability as a psychoanalyst and spiritual adviser. Folk healers employ important mediation principles with their patients, allowing [p. 247 ↓] greater flexibility and less control in the healer– patient relationship.



Figure 1 Typical marks from coining

Specific Latino cultural norms that express the collective and unifying processes through which Latinos establish their identity, existence, and relationships (particularly the patient–healer relationship) include *personalismo* (personalism), *respeto* (respect), *confianza* (trust), *fatalismo* (fatalism), *humildad* (humility), and *familismo* (familism). Sharing similar cultural knowledge, norms, and lay beliefs with their patients helps traditional healers provide patients with bidirectional consultations and plans of treatment, which in most cases do not interfere with biomedical therapy and optimize the patient's treatment outcome.

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See also

Further Reading

Avila, E. (1999). *Woman who glows in the dark* . New York: Tarcher Putman.

Hayes-Bautista, D. E., & Chiprut, R. (1998). *Healing Latinos: Realidad y fantasia* . Los Angeles: Cedars-Sinai Health Systems.