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Restoring the People: Reclaiming Indigenous Spirituality in Contemporary Curanderismo

BRETT HENDRICKSON

Kalpulli Teocalli Ollin is a community of healers that promotes Mexican traditional medicine in Albuquerque, New Mexico. In their own words, they “are a group of men, women and families who are affirming, reconnecting and remembering the traditional ancestral methods in which people empower their own healing.” They add, “Through remembering that we are conduits of higher sources of cosmic energy, we have faith in the ancestral methods of our abuelitas and abuelitos [grandparents] in relearning how to heal ourselves, each other, and our communities, by sharing this medicine with our present and future generations.” Replete with indigenous art from Aztec codices, images and rhetoric on the Kalpulli’s website serve as an example of a move that some Mexican American folk healers, or curanderos/as, are making.1 Namely, some practitioners of this religious healing tradition are reconnecting to their pre-colonial indigenous past even as they embrace a metaphysical and universal message of wellness for all people. In so doing, they rhetorically distance themselves from the long-standing Catholic traditions of curanderismo.

Not surprisingly, this change has impacted the spirituality and, in some cases, the ritual practices of Mexican American religious folk healing. In this essay, I briefly profile curanderismo and its hybrid origins born out of the violence of the Spanish Conquest. I then give several examples of some contemporary curanderos/as’ reclamation of pre-conquest indigeneity. My aim is not to debunk or deny these recent efforts to re-connect with indigenous sources of the healing tradition. However, I conclude the essay with a critical assessment of this project in spiritual and historical reclamation. I suggest that this new move toward an ostensible indigenousness in curanderismo nevertheless serves to underscore the complexity of curanderismo’s long-standing Christian identity, an identity that is tied to colonialism and racial prejudice.

So, what is curanderismo? Generally speaking, it is a religious and folk healing tradition that is relatively common throughout Latin America, though in this essay, I limit myself to discussions of its Mexican and Mexican-American forms. Capable of treating a wide variety of physical, emotional, and social maladies, the curandera2 has a holistic understanding of a person’s health, which generally includes a sense of balance and wholeness. Therefore, in this
conception of heath, imbalances in the body’s energy or humors, fractures in one’s soul caused by fright or trauma, and sometimes the effects of cursing or witchcraft (brujería) are what leads to sickness. Throughout the centuries since the Spanish conquest, curanderos/as have developed various treatments and modalities to restore their patients to health. Key among these treatments are the administration of herbal and materia medica-based remedies, the praying of novenas and other sorts of intercessions to Catholic figures (saints, Mary, Jesus, etc.), personal and family counseling, the physical manipulation of the body in massage, bone-setting, midwifery, and energy-based therapies of cleansing, often referred to as limpias.3

The origins of curanderismo, most scholars agree, is in the combination of pre-Tridentine Iberian Catholicism,4 European folk medicine, astrology, and occultism, and the medical knowledge and understandings of the body and soul of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. However, due to the totalizing and often violent nature of Spanish colonialism and Catholic evangelism, it has long been unclear to what extent indigenous knowledge has persisted in the healing practices of curanderismo.5 My own position is that curanderismo developed from combinations that made sense and were efficacious for a wide variety of people including Spanish colonizers, indigenous people, and the new and growing mestizo population. Some traditions in these combinations can perhaps be traced to their specific origins, but it is more helpful to think that both Iberian Catholic and indigenous “ingredients” have been part of a process of creative engagement and refashioning for hundreds of years and continue to evolve into the present.

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, a recent development in a growing segment of Mexican and Mexican American curanderismo is to emphasize the Mesoamerican indigenous origins of the healing tradition, often over and above the Spanish Catholic influences. Examples of this shift are on display at a summer course on curanderismo at the University of New Mexico.6 This course, which has been held every summer for more than a decade, gathers curanderos/as from around the New Mexico area as well as from an alternative healing school in Cuernavaca, Mexico, to teach undergraduates, healthcare professionals, and others about the beliefs, practices, and ideational foundations of curanderism. In the summer of 2012, I participated in the course and carried out interviews with several healers. While much of the program focused on traditional herbal remedies often used by curanderos/as in the border region, a significant portion of the course emphasized Aztec spirituality and other indigenous elements in Mexican traditional healing. The speakers and teachers opened each class session with a prayer to the four directions and specifically invoked Aztec personages such as Tezcatlipoca, Quetzalcoatl, and Huitzilopochtli. They smudged participants with the pungent smoke of copal
Roadside Memorial, Route 130, Coles County, IL, courtesy Bruce Wicks
incense and encouraged us to be in touch with the earth and with our hearts. Several of the contemporary curandereros/as associated with the course told me that they remained faithful Catholics; however, one Albuquerque-based healer explained to me that she no longer prayed to Guadalupe or Jesus. In her healing practice, whenever a traditional Catholic prayer is called for in a particular ritual, she replaces these Christian names with the names of Aztec deities like Ometeotl. Likewise, she re-imagines the Christian cross as a symbol for the four cardinal directions, sacred in Mesoamerican religious life.⁷

Many of the curanderas active in New Mexico today were deeply influenced by Elena Avila, a path-breaking curandera and author who died in 2011. In 1999, Avila published a book about her experiences as a curandera entitled Woman Who Glows in the Dark: A Curandera Reveals Traditional Aztec Secrets of Physical and Spiritual Health. Given the title, it is not surprising that Avila frames her healing tradition within a fairly unbroken continuation of pre-Conquest Mesoamerican wisdom and spirituality. In the book, Avila describes her methods, one of which involves rescuing lost pieces of her patients' souls. She reports that “reclaiming these parts of oneself has been an important part of my culture for thousands of years.”⁸ Of course, the culture she is referring to cannot be the mestizo or Mexican American, which were born relatively recently. She understands her identity as a healer, and ultimately as a person, as a descendent of indigenous Mesoamericans.⁹

One of Avila’s Mexican mentors is a Mexico City-based man named Miktlan Ehekateotl Cuahtlinxan, or Ehe for short. Ehe claims to be an Aztec medicine man and the last scion of an underground spiritual healing tradition that has remained basically intact since the time of the Conquest. In addition to his interactions with Avila, which are discussed in her book, Ehe has also appeared in a feature length “hybrid documentary” released in 2009.¹⁰ A line from the film’s trailer introduces the plot: “Many people believe the Aztecs disappeared from the pages of history. Now, it is one man’s mission to bring a secret message from the past.”¹¹ To achieve this, Ehe locates and mentors an apprentice in the ancient arts of the Aztecs. Scenes from the movie feature intense training sequences, mysterious encounters in backrooms, and a denouement in which the young apprentice is buried alive and emerges anew from the ground. Interspersed with these plot elements are interviews with various experts, professors, anthropologists, and ethnic studies scholars who teach the audience about curanderismo and the vagaries of colonialism.

These examples—the New Mexico course on curanderismo, Elena Avila, Ehekateotl, and the movie about Aztec healing—share a similar understanding of Mexican and Mexican American religious and folk healing as an expression of ancient indigenous spirituality. These related instances of curandereros/as downplaying curanderismo’s European and Catholic sources in order to
celebrate a reclaimed Indian heritage and current identity help us to understand a developing spirituality that yet maintains a complex relationship with curanderismo’s folk Catholic past.

To examine this changing discourse, I would like to discuss two motifs that frequently appear in contemporary contexts of curanderismo. The first motif is the complicated relationship with Catholicism. In his study of curanderismo in East Los Angeles, Luis León describes one healer in that city who strongly identifies herself as Catholic while at the same time has to negotiate official Church disapproval. Despite negative comments from priests about her work, she states, “if you yourself are content [tranquila] that you are not harming anyone, then it’s good, and for that reason I go to Mass. . . . No one can help people without God.” León explains that, while official Catholicism and curanderismo can differ in specific understandings of divine power, it is more correct to consider curanderismo to be “not so much a discrete religious system as a logical extension of popular Catholicism: the difference is not one of kind but of degree.”

Despite León’s assertion, my own research indicates that some healers are softening, or even drastically limiting, their Catholic piety both to accentuate indigenousness and to appeal to a clientele that is uneasy with or critical of Catholicism. Tonita, a healer in Albuquerque, explained to me that some of her patients have felt uncomfortable with images of Catholic saints in her healing room. She has not removed them, but she is quick to assure her clients that they need not be Catholic to take part in curanderismo. In Tonita’s context, Catholicism is less and less a necessary component of healing rituals and practices even while it remains important to the healer’s own identity.

The second motif is the oft-repeated and romantic notion that indigenous spirituality is an unalloyed source of power and wisdom. The contemporary reclamation of Aztec indigenous identity in curanderismo often includes a millenarianism that celebrates a new era of re-discovery and revelation of ancient traditions that have long been hidden. Ehekateotl has explained that his own indigenous curanderismo descends in an unbroken line from the time of the Conquest, when it went underground to evade destruction. He relates that his tradition had to stay hidden for 468 years until it could re-emerge in 1989 to regain its place alongside other global indigenous wisdom.

Mexican anthropologist Francisco de la Peña situates this millenialism within a larger movement in Mexico and among some Mexican Americans called “mexicanidad,” or “Mexicanness.” Mexicanidad, explains de la Peña, “aspires to the restoration of pre-Columbian civilization and the re-Indianization of national culture. Its ideological universe is inspired by an idealized reinterpretation of the pre-Hispanic past and by the exaltation of an archetypal image of the Indian.” Earlier in the twentieth century, mexicanidad often
concerned itself with indigenous and mestizo radical politics against Westernization. More recently, however, the movement is often defined by universalist and New Age aspirations. In this latter permutation of *mexicanidad*, which includes contemporary recommitments to curanderismo, healers and others often explicitly link their own sense of indigeneity with a New Age desire to share sacred wisdom traditions from across the planet and thus usher in a new era of global health and understanding. However, de la Peña notes that, “in the cultural re-creation that is put into practice by *mexicanidad*, one can discern a contradiction between purity and faithfulness to indigenous culture and a strong tendency toward *bricolage* with all kinds of doctrines foreign to this culture” such as Eastern religious thought, astrology, parapsychology, etc.\(^{17}\)

In this process, the reclamation of indigeneity in contemporary curanderismo indicates a simultaneous desire to celebrate an imagined pre-Catholic past while yet participating in late-modern global exchanges of culture, religion, and commercial goods.

The examples and motifs that I have profiled above all suggest that an important segment of contemporary curanderismo is committed to reclaiming an indigenous origin in such a way that allows for a current self-identification with a perceived Native American and native Mexican spirituality. This phenomenon has inspired two understandable but mostly unfruitful responses. The first, mostly from participants, is that this is an exciting rediscovery of a secret indigenous past that has remained hidden for centuries. The second, mostly from outside critics, is that this cannot possibly be a true reclamation because it is highly unlikely that there is unsullied access to a wise and spiritual Aztec past in modern Mexico, much less in the United States.

To conclude, I would like to propose a more productive set of observations about this collection of narratives and behaviors. I suggest that these rhetorics of reclamation are consistent with a long-time logic in curanderismo: namely, healing is achieved with what works. Thus, this renewed commitment to celebrate the indigenous element of mestizo history is congruent with curanderismo because, like the tradition’s other modalities, this narrative is restoring wholeness. Additionally, it would be incorrect to say that Christianity has been totally excised from curanderismo. Curanderos/as continue to pray to Catholic saints and to attend masses and other events in Catholic ritual life, because these things, too, work to establish and maintain wholeness. But these healers do so with a modified narrative that has allowed for them to better integrate curanderismo into their day-to-day spiritual practice and identity. On the ground, this has sometimes meant de-emphasizing Catholic inputs to the tradition, emphasizing indigenousness, and incorporating a large assortment of alternative spiritual and healing traditions from around the globe. For the majority of healers, even those most committed to reclaiming a perceived
indigeneity, Catholicism remains an integral component of their identity, even if that part of their identity is not without its painful associations and creative recombinations. But this is not surprising: religion, colonialism, ethnicity, and wellness can only be understood as ongoing processes.

NOTES


2. Like many languages, Spanish has gendered nouns. A “curandero” is a male healer while a “curandera” is female. In this essay, for a group of male and female healers, I opt to use the term “curanderos/as.”


5. For two opposing viewpoints on the origins of the humoral tradition in Latin American curanderismo, see George M. Foster, Hippocrates’ Latin American Legacy: Humoral Medicine in the New World (Langhorne: Gordon and Breach, 1994), and Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano, Syncretism in Mexican and Mexican-American Folk Medicine (College Park: Department of Spanish and Portuguese, University of Maryland at College Park, 1989).


9. Of course, the Chicano rights movement of the 1970s likewise re-imagined and re-narrated Mexican American history as a continuation of indigenous identity in the mythical homeland of Aztlán. A multi-faceted introduction to the mythos of Aztlán is Rudolfo A. Anaya and Francisco Lomeli, eds. Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989). More research needs to be done connecting these previous cultural and political moves into contemporary Mexican American experience.

10. Shaahin Cheyene, Serpent and the Sun: Tales of an Aztec Apprentice, (Venice: Victory Films, 2009). DVD.


13. Luis D. León, “‘Soy Una Curandera Y Soy Una Católica,’” 114.

