

THE MAYAN HEALERS: A TRIBUTE

Kenneth Johnson

I would like to thank all of those who have lent their support to the Curandera Project. As my colleague, Anita Garr, remains in Guatemala, the research and collecting of information will continue – and we shall continue to publish it in future works, for this is an ongoing project which, ultimately, has no end. But now the book itself is here. You can find it at: http://www.jaguarwisdom.org/blog/jaguar-wisdom-electronic-shop/#wp_cart_anchor

It is now time to say a few words about Mayan healers, and about the debt of gratitude that I owe to these people.

First of all, we found that the world we explored while writing this book is a world in transition. Before the arrival of the Spanish, there were schools that trained potential healers in accordance with a cosmovision that was common throughout Mesoamerica. For millennia, Maya healers took care of the health of the people, their energetic as well as their physical health. Archaeologists have even found remains of teeth with inlays, serving as evidence that a type of dentistry was practiced among the Classic Maya. When the European invasion took place, the schools of the healing arts were shut down.

Nonetheless, some of this knowledge was preserved. In the midst of difficult and desperate circumstances, social resistance and survival strategies helped to ensure the preservation of the ancient healing practices.

Sometimes, in the present day, traditional Maya healers find themselves in the role of outsiders. The “official” health agencies often look down upon them and regard them as relics of ancient superstition. Midwives who are not “registered” as part of the government’s mandated health system work “undercover,” as it were, and are often afraid of being found out by the authorities.

At the same time, there is a groundswell of indigenous pride that exists in many Mayan communities and which continues to grow stronger over time. People are once again becoming proud of their culture. In this respect, many of the practices of traditional medicine are assured of survival. Others are not; we hope that we may have played a role in preserving a few pieces of knowledge that have not yet come to light among the general public.

Our work was undertaken in two very different communities. San Cristobal de las Casas in Mexico is a large city with a substantial population of what Doña Crecencia calls “the urbanized Maya.” There are also a number of expatriates who frequent San Cristobal, and therefore it is not unusual to encounter traditional healers who have also been influenced by contemporary “New Age” philosophy. One of our sources, Don Lauro de la Cruz of the small town of San Juan Chamula, near San Cristobal, is an excellent example of this cultural fusion. His gift for healing manifested very early in his life, but his parents were Christian evangelists who thought that their son’s gifts were tricks of the devil. Consequently, they gave him up to the city’s most well known “devil worshipers,” the Tibetan Buddhist monks who have a colony in San Cristobal. Sent to Dharamsala and trained there by Tibetans, Don Lauro is a cross-cultural blend of different world traditions.

Momostenango, Guatemala, where the larger part of our research was conducted, is a very different place indeed. It has long been known as a bastion of Mayan traditionalism, a place where the rituals and ceremonies attendant on the ancient Mayan Calendar are still practiced, and where indigenous medicine is far more common – and available – than its Western counterpart. While some of our Momostecan sources are well traveled individuals, others have rarely been far away from the Guatemalan highlands. It is not unusual to meet elderly people who speak no Spanish but only K’iche’ Maya – especially if they are from the villages rather than the town. Despite the fact that foreigners have a lively interest in Mayan culture, there are many long-time expatriates in Guatemala who have never even heard of Momostenango, despite the fact that its reputation for “preserving the ancient ways” is well known among the Maya themselves.

The traditional healer seldom charges a large amount of money. His or her clients are economically under-advantaged; they are the village Maya living in a Spanish-speaking world. The traditional healer also considers her or his healing skills to be a gift, whether from the spirits or from the energies associated with one’s day sign, the Mayan Calendar day of one’s birth. Days associated with healing are Q’anil (Lamat), which is the day of herbalists; Ajpu (Ahau), which is a day for those born with the talent to resolve our issues with our ancestors and even past lives; Kan (Chicchan), the day for those with a gift for healing spiritual or psychological illnesses; and of course Kawoq (Cauac) and Tijax (Etnab), the days sacred to female and male healers in general.

Healing is a gift, and a gift is not a gift unless it is freely given; the healer's life is a life of community service. The healer receives a symbolic honorarium which is often left to the discretion of the patient – in small communities, everyone already knows who you are and how much you can afford. I deeply remember the generosity of these healers, who were often called away from working in their cornfields or cooking the family dinner in order to attend to a patient who could pay only in vegetables and perhaps with a chicken. And yet the healer gives equal care and attention to all those in need, not just the wealthy.

I want to thank the healers for allowing us into their homes. I can remember searching behind furniture and under beds, looking for a place to plug in my laptop and start taking notes. Sometimes I couldn't find one; electricity can be sparse in the villages. Sometimes there were several translators involved when we interviewed those who spoke only K'iche'. Throughout all the bumbling and fumbling, the healers continued to be gracious, friendly and fully engaged.

To the healers of the Maya world, therefore, we owe a great debt of gratitude. May their paths continue to survive and to flourish.