

El curandero actual: Preserving Indigenous Identity through Mexican Folk Healing's Chants

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Introduction

Curanderismo is a syncretic form of Mexican folk healing whose origins date back to the Spanish colonization of the Americas. This medical system, drawing from both indigenous healing practices and Catholic spirituality, has been preserved throughout history by marginalized indigenous groups lacking access to biomedical healthcare. Today, variations of *curandero* practices are commonly practiced throughout Mexico as far south as the states of Oaxaca and Morelos and spanning far north, past the Rio Grande and even into Colorado. These practices coexist with modern biomedicine despite a long history of the repression of indigenous peoples by Europeans, and thus represent a reconciliation between these two cultures.

This paper seeks to analyze the extent of the reconciliation between indigenous practices and Western Catholicism present in modern *curandero* practices. Specifically, this investigation will focus on the role of chants, prayer, and music used by modern *curanderos* as facilitators of healing. Likewise, it will examine the proper historical and cultural contexts of modern *curandero* movements which celebrate specific healers who have died but whose practices and methods have been preserved. Finally, this analysis will be tied with the resurgence of indigenous identity promoted by the *indigenismo* movement for social change and activism in Mexico.

An Overview of *Curandero* Practice and Cosmology

The word *curanderismo* comes from the Spanish *curar* ("to heal") and refers to a system of folk healing utilizing natural products such as eggs and herbs in addition to song, chants, and prayer during ritual to treat illness (Torres 2006:5). Eliseo Torres, vice-

president for student affairs at the University of New Mexico and son of a *curandera* healer, describes this approach to healthcare as having various techniques in which practitioners develop unique specialties (Torres 2005:4). He too asserts that “the *curandero*... feels his power comes from God,” reflected in the common use of Catholic icons in both the auditory mode of prayer and chants as well as in the physical mode of crucifixes and candles (Torres 2006:21).

Curanderos are often the subject of folklore themselves and are celebrated beyond their deaths as great healers. Significant lives in *curanderismo* are remembered through legends retold and reshaped by adherents to the practices promoted by these healers. This is one way in which the cultural context which facilitates healing is constructed. As philosopher Claude Lévi-Strauss originally asserted while analyzing healing songs of the Cuna people of Panama, “narrative aims at recreating a real experience in which the myth merely shifts the protagonists” (Lévi-Strauss 1963:94). In the context of *curanderismo*, contemporary healers who ascribe to certain historical *curanderos*’ methods of therapies tap into their power via these retold legends which form part of the cultural framework around patients within this medical system.

Colonial Mexico and Repression of *Curanderismo* during the Spanish Inquisition

After analyzing the cosmology of practicing *curanderos*, it is necessary to examine the initial point of contact between the two cultures whose centuries of interactions have produced the Mexican folk healing performed today. This will place modern practices into the proper historical context, as the form of *curandero* healing performed today is syncretic and has developed over time. Spain’s colonial control of Mexico – called New Spain in the 1500s – represented the clash between the cultures of two of the world’s most powerful civilizations: the Aztec and the Spanish. During this period, the peoples of these distinct cultural groups interacted at a fundamental level, evident in the creation and growth of a new racial classification: the *mestizo*, children of peninsular Europeans and

indigenous peoples. Because many *curandero* practices are facilitated in the home and passed from one generation to the next, one can assert that the cultural exchange between the Spaniards and indigenous peoples also encompassed the realm of healthcare.

Additionally, it is important to examine the state of medical care within the burgeoning political establishment of seventeenth century colonial Mexico which created this cultural exchange. Due to a scarcity of Western doctors in the colonial era, "the [Spanish] Crown was politically conscientious in establishing a legal medical system for Spaniards, thus protecting the group in power" according to Noemí Quezada, historian of pre-Columbian Central America (1991:37). This meant that the indigenous peoples of the colony were left with only the *curandero* as their medical provider. While these healers were necessary in the attempts to maintain public health of the already marginalized indigenous groups, the *curanderos* were often publically tried by the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition on the grounds of accusations of "healing by incantation" or the use of a hallucinogenic "divinatory aid" (Quezada 1991:41). Such constant interaction between the *curanderos* and the Catholic Church in the attempts to catholicize the native peoples of Mexico impressed religious motifs, icons, and prayers on indigenous culture and healing.

Even after the presence of Europeans in New Spain for only a century and a half, evidence of syncretism began to emerge. Quezada relates the case of Agustina Rangel, a *curandera* sentenced by the Holy Office in 1687, who attributed her healing powers to "the grace of God and of the Holy Virgin" (Quezada 1991:49). Catholic religious icons had not existed in the pre-Colombian Americas of the fifteenth century. While this incorporation of Catholic beliefs into *curandero* cosmological understanding of healing may have been fostered in attempts to avoid incarceration or torture, the appearance of Catholic motifs lasts even today. Just as the Holy Office required people confessing of seeking *curandero* healing to recite the Apostles' Creed three times after attending mass (Quezada 1991:51), modern *curanderos* also "[say] the Apostles' Creed three times" during certain healing ceremonies (Torres 2006:24). This connection is important as it

provides evidence of the historical artifact of the Spanish Inquisition which shaped the cosmology of *curanderismo* practiced today.

El Niño Fidencio and the Fidencista Movement

One prominent variation of *curanderismo* is witnessed today in Espinazo, a city in the southern Mexican state of Morelos, where thousands of people make annual pilgrimages to celebrate the life of the *curandero* El Niño Fidencio who was born in 1898. Adherents of this *curandero's* specific modes of healing call themselves the *fidencistas* and have elevated this healer to the status of a folk saint. This is seen in their specific attention paid to Fidencio's age at death, which they claim was thirty-three, the same age as Jesus Christ at his death (Burbanck 1997:202-212). This celebrated parallel between the life of a folk healer and the most important Catholic religious figure once again reflects the role of syncretism in the construction of modern *curandero* cosmology. The holiness attributed to Christ in Western Catholicism is one quality which validates Fidencio's efficacy in healing. Another significant parallel between both figures is sexual abstinence. Another name given to El Niño Fidencio by his followers is "El Guadalupano," meaning "the son of Guadalupe," due to "Fidencio[']s never marr[ying] and remain[ing] a virgin" throughout his life (Burbanck 1997:202-212). These ideals of physical purity in the Catholic Church too expand the legitimacy of Fidencio's power in the minds of his practices' adherents.

The mechanisms for accessing Fidencio's power involve music, prayer, and trance which retell prominent biographical events as well as focus on Fidencio's status as a folk saint. Fidencio in life was said to surround himself with musicians who performed wherever he went to conduct healing ceremonies (Torres 2006:44). While living, he created a motif of music and dancing which characterized his particular variation of *curanderismo*. Hence, *fidencista* ceremonies are characterized by the central role of "melodic narrative..., singing, chanting, and praying to El Niño" (Torres 2005:19). During the later portion of his life, according to the *fidencistas*, El Niño Fidencio entered a trance after asking to be

left alone for three days in order to heal from an illness; he was later found with a slit in his throat when his followers returned to him (Burbanck 1997:202-212). Due to this, the nature of trance states is necessary to activate Fidencio's healing power, as the celebrated *curandero* died while in trance.

Eliseo Torres from the University of New Mexico recounts the works of a contemporary *curandero* known as Chenchito during his stay in Espinazo, the hub of *fidencista* activity, during a 1985 festival celebrating Fidencio. Torres recalls watching "over one hundred people [waiting] to receive Chenchito's blessing" (2005:76). During each healing performed by Chenchito, this *curandero* would "chant a prayer" as "his eyes rolled back in his head [and] his voice began to change" while putting on symbolic clothing in order "to become El Niño" (2005:77). This connection to El Niño Fidencio facilitated by trance is what empowers his *fidencista* adherents, as they channel his spiritual energy while diagnosing and treating afflicted members of their communities. Like music, trance is a central part of the life narrative of Fidencio used by the adherents of his practices. By retelling El Niño Fidencio's life through song and chants, the adherents of his healing methods contribute to the social and cultural construction of the connection that exists between every *fidencista* and El Niño himself. This connection is hence strengthened during trance states to the extent of blurring the separation between the *fidencista*'s individual identity and that of El Niño Fidencio. This is a manifestation of what medical anthropologists Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock call the "body politic" observed in various cultural contexts (1987:23). This anthropological phenomenon refers to "relationships ... about power and control" resulting from "expanding ... social controls regulating [a] group's boundaries" (1987:23-24). In the context of public health, *fidencistas* sacrifice their individuality in order to combat the threat of illness in the Mexican folk communities. Their personal habits too are often altered in order to reflect the purity of El Niño. Scheper-Hughes and Lock assert that a prevailing quality of the "body politic" is the "strong concern with matters of ritual and sexual purity" (1987:24), which is confirmed by Eliseo Torres in his case study of the *fidencista*

Chenchito who models his lifestyle to match that of Fidencio: one filled with rituals utilizing music and herbs to heal people without recompense and reflective of the chaste Fidencio (2005:24).

María Sabina and the Resurgence of Traditional Mazatec Ceremony in Catholic Churches

Another prominent figure in *curanderismo* whose work has drawn attention to Mexican folk healing and indigenous identity is María Sabina of the Sierra Mazteca in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. Before the 1950s, the Sierra Mazteca people were fairly isolated until banker and mycologist Gordon Wasson arrived in the Sierra on “self-financed research on the global use of hallucinogenic mushrooms” (Faudree 2013:80). In his visits to this area, he found himself as a participant in the *velada* healing ceremony of the Mazatec Indians, which utilizes hallucinogenic mushrooms partnered with Mazatec musical chants that are “highly structured, repetitive, elevated in diction and syntax, figurative, poetic [and] sometimes archaic” (Faudree 2013:81). These two elements induce a trance state on the healers, allowing Mazatec *curanderos* to “translate the words of divine sources... through words and visions” (2013:81) which are used in the diagnosis of illness. These highly structured chants too are themselves considered to have medicinal qualities in Mazatec culture according to Brown University anthropologist Paja Faudree in her work on indigenous revival in Mexico (2013:81). Within the Mazatec cultural framework constructed by the importance of language used in chants as well as the spiritual significance placed on them, the musicality of chants partnered with the psychoactive mushrooms used in the *velada* create a nearly-hypnotic environment which facilitates healing in the patient.

María Sabina was one of the *curanderas* adept in performing these *velada* healings whom Wasson encountered in his travels. In 1957, he published the first of many articles, titled “Seeking the Magic Mushroom,” in *Life* magazine, replete with photographs of this *curandera* to whom he appropriated a pseudonym. (Faudree 2013:83). He did this despite Sabina’s

warning that a great dissemination of this sensitive cultural information “would be a betrayal” to the Mazateca people (Wasson and Wasson 1957:304). This marked the beginning of the mycotourist influx in the Sierra Mazateca region of the 1960s. Soon after the publication of Wasson’s article, “*jipis* (hippies) flooded Huautla [Sabina’s village], seeking the visions and communication with primordial knowledge” Wasson claimed to have found (Faudree 2013:85). This type of cultural expropriation was problematic, as Americans pursuing “new age” healing or merely hallucinogenic experiences flooded the region, disrupting the customs associated with *velada* healing in the Sierra Mazateca region. In the Mazatec cosmology, these mushrooms used in ceremony were essentially spiritual beings, evident in the terminology used to describe them (2013:82), due to their necessity in facilitating communication with spiritual beings imparting knowledge on healers. Americans bought their way into these ceremonial healings kept private before the 1960s, while the Mazatec spent their lives within the cultural context which gives these ceremonies healing capabilities. The mycotourists’ actions too beckoned “divine retribution” as they did not observe the “taboos associated with the mushrooms” involving sexual abstinence, appropriate timing of mushroom consumption, and simultaneous use of other psychoactive substances like marijuana (2013:87). This hedonistic *jipi* (hippie) activity too was the basis of the Catholic Church’s movement into the Sierra Mazateca by the early 1970s (2013:76).

María Sabina, as well as her chants, gained initial fame from Wasson’s articles and are continually studied as a source of the resurgence of indigenous cultural in Mexico. Gordon Wasson also recorded Sabina’s chants during a 1957 *velada*, which are now accessible through the Smithsonian Folkways databases (Sabina 1957). These chants with alternating pitch and syncopation between repeated syllables have been the subject of analysis and fascination by poets, playwrights and authors alike ever since Wasson’s contact with the Mazatec (Faudree 2013:90). Sabina found herself converted into “an icon of ... indigenous culture” (2013:89) as her famous chants were performed in the traditional Mazatec language,

which prompted discourse on the meaning of indigenous identity and the “authenticity” of some ostensibly indigenous healers and practices.

Although the origin of this fixation on indigenous culture in Oaxaca began with misappropriation of cultural symbols and practices, it did result in the establishment of the Mazatec Indigenous Church: evidence of the syncretism witnessed today in *curandero* practices. These church services utilize songs and prayers in the indigenous Mazatec language and even include the use of the region’s hallucinogenic mushrooms as “the Mazatecs’ indigenous host... replacing Catholic communion wafer as the prime vehicle for divine purification and transformation” (2013:171). The influence of the Christian church was brought to this region in the 1970s to combat the seemingly immoral effects of the Mazatec mushrooms on touring Americans. Ironically, in a matter of decades, this paradigm was completely inverted, allowing for the coexistence of the Western church with the indigenous *velada*’s influence in Oaxaca.

Indigenismo and the Preservation of Culture through the Lives of Celebrated Healers

The lives of *curanderos*, their practices, and their songs are remembered by contemporary folk healers who recreate the methods of successful healers of the past. University of New Mexico professor Eliseo Torres cites the folk tales recalling the works of *curanderos* Teresita Urrea and Don Pedrito Jaramillo in addition to El Niño Fidencio in his works on Mexican folk healing (Torres 2005) and asserts that this retelling of *curanderos*’ stories is a common theme across Mexico. María Sabina too has been elevated to the status of a folk saint, even “a goddess” according to Latin American anthropologist Ben Feinberg (2006:115) in her home village of Huautla. There is a striking difference between these two healers’ nostalgic celebrations however. El Niño Fidencio’s death in 1938 was followed by decades of the adherents of his philosophies practicing his specific healing methods utilizing music and natural products for various conditions. As these methods worked during

Fidencio's life and for the *curanderos* who used his healing processes, they became part of the localized style of *curanderismo* in Espinazo. Sabina's healings, on the other hand, were already contextualized within the culture of the indigenous Mazatec of Oaxaca. Sabina gained attention as an individual within a larger cultural context, as Wasson specifically focused on her in the photographs and recordings he published in the 1950s. Sabina's death in 1986 (Feinberg 2006:115) is far more recent than those of Fidencio and other *curanderos* celebrated today as saints. This suggests that another cultural agent is at work.

Sabina is celebrated as an icon of indigenous identity within the *indigenismo* movement. Ben Feinberg defines *indigenismo* as "discourses of 'authenticity' ... in order to advance various political [and social] agendas" (2006:109). The attention placed on Sabina during her life has been utilized by this movement for the promotion of indigenous and mestizo groups in popular Mexican culture. Feinberg cites a Mazatec woman referring Sabina and her chants in the indigenous language as a claim to indigenous "authenticity" (2006:121). While this "strategic essentialism" runs the risk of one cultural group perpetuating self-attributed stereotypes, it does create a tangible form of sentient identity recognizable by members of other cultural groups (2006:117). Applied to Sabina, this is the grounds for *indigenista* groups' quoting her Mazatec chants on chapels constructed in her honor (Feinberg 2006:115) as well as their focusing on her life in the inaugural edition of *La Faena*, the magazine dedicated to the "Cultural Heritage of the Mazatecos" first published in 2000 (2006:129). Sabina proved to be the perfect historical figure whose internationally well-known life could be strategically used to divert attention to a continually developing social movement which had previously been used solely to romanticize a nostalgic past of the pre-Columbian era. As *curanderismo* continues to play a role in this growing discourse on indigenous practices as constituting part of modern national identity, it too helps reconcile the historic opposition of its practices by the Western Catholic Church still present in Mexico today.

Universalities in other Variations of *Curanderismo* Practiced outside of Mexico

Because *curandero* healing is the syncretic product of Aztec and Incan etiologies and Catholic ideologies, it exists across Latin America in various forms within multiple cultural contexts. By examining the similarities across the *curanderismo* varieties practiced within these separate contexts, one can draw conclusions about the overarching nature of the syncretic process which occurred during Spanish colonization across a wide expanse of civilization. Two specific phenomena related to those previously analyzed are the role of music using indigenous language in the Shipobo-Conibo *curanderismo* of the Peruvian Amazon and the coexistence of the Moravian Church with the Miskitu people's *curandero* healers, known as the *sukya*, in Nicaragua.

The role of indigenous language in Shipobo-Conibo *curandero* healings is specified and has a spiritual role in music which facilitates the curing of disease. Ethnomusicologist Bernd Brabec de Mori chronicles eight case studies of patients treated by Peru's *curanderos* in his 2009 publication in the Journal for Medical Anthropology. He provides an overview of "the fairly complex [healing] system" of this region, in which "for every disorder, there is an appropriate [indigenous] term" (2009:129). Likewise, "songs ... build a kind of foundation for further [healing] techniques" such as those involving the psychoactive product *ayawaska* (2009:131). The role of music in this Amazonian variety of *curanderismo* resonates with the importance music has in both the *fidencistas* movement and the Mazatec *velada* ceremony. Healers in these latter groups use music in order to facilitate trance states which allow the healing process to occur. While the *fidencistas* channel El Niño Fidencio himself through this trance, the *velada* practitioners like María Sabina enter trance in order to communicate with ancestral wisdom. However, Amazonian healers use music which is considered to have acoustically curative properties (2009:133-134). It too is important to note the similarities in the use of indigenous Shipobo-Conibo language in healings utilizing hallucinogenic *ayawaska* and Mazatec language used in the chants partnered with

the psychoactive mushrooms of the *velada*. This supports the importance of indigenous language as an integral facilitator of *curandero* practices and evidence that these languages have survived after centuries of persecution since the arrival of the Spaniards.

Comparisons can also be drawn between the Catholic Church's influence in both the *fidencista* and Mazatec healing cosmologies and the Moravian Church's influence in the Nicaraguan Miskitu's understanding of the *sukya* healer's legitimacy. According to anthropologist Mary Helms, "only the [Moravian] Church of God [was] found in Miskitu villages" after nearly 80 years of Western Church establishments in Nicaragua (1971:185). The resulting effects of this influence is evident in Miskitu cosmological understanding that "the [evil, disease invoking] shaman [whom the *sukya* combats] holds his power through connivance with Satan" (1971:186). This convergence of ideologies reflects that of the *fidencistas* who legitimize the indigenous healing practices used by El Niño Fidencio by comparing his life to Christ. This reveals a universal connection between Christian holiness and healing and between Christian evil with disease. The presence of hallucinogenic, ceremonially healing mushrooms in the Mazatec Catholic Church further extends this connection.

Conclusion

The influence of Western Catholicism, while gradually accommodated over the course of centuries, is inextricable from *curanderismo* as it is practiced today. This proves the reconciliation of the two clashing cultures of Spanish colonization – indigenous peoples and Westerners – has been achieved. Numerous artifacts of the cultural trauma created in the genocide and repression of native cultures pursued throughout Latin American history as the marginalization of indigenous peoples. Hence, *curanderos* filled the need of healthcare providers to these disadvantaged groups. *Curanderismo* was necessary for those who survived initial contact with the West, and its practices survived by accommodating Catholic ideologies into its cosmology of disease and treatment.

This form of healing, however, still preserves indigenous identity despite the syncretism observed in the Christ-like attributes appropriated to El Niño Fidencio to legitimize his healing power, the use of the Apostles' Creed in many common *curandero* rituals, and the placement of the Mazatec mushrooms used by María Sabina in Catholic Church services. In fact, it is by this syncretism that aspects of indigenous knowledge have moved to the forefront of Mexican identity. By celebrating the aspects of indigenous culture which shape modern *curanderismo*, practitioners and adherents of these methods take ownership of these phenomena as icons of their culture.

Thus, springs its use in the *indigenismo* movement to reclaim indigenous identity and advocate for historically disenfranchised groups. Unlike the "hyper-spectacularization and hyper-spiritualization of indigenous cultures" described by Karl Neuenfeldt in his depiction of modern "new age" healers (1998:74), members of this movement are part of these indigenous communities themselves. They focus on certain qualities of their cultural heritage in order to give themselves tangible, readily recognized identity. They seek not to create the "traditional cultural voyeurism" (1998:78) sought by "new age" healers that is reminiscent of the 1960s *jipis* who expropriated the ceremonial Mazatec mushrooms used by Sabina. Rather, they do the opposite; *indigenistas* use their identified symbols, such as those associated with *curanderismo*, in order to promote the rights of indigenous peoples and mitigate the historical wrongdoings that are a legacy of Spanish conquest.

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