



The author James Williams with Doña Toñia

Doña Toñia, a Mexican-Yaqui Curandera

text and photos by James E. Williams

My interest in traditional Mexican healing practices, or *curanderismo*,¹ began in 1978 in the old part of Tijuana. At the time, I was involved in the serious study of herbal medicine, visiting herbalists and traditional healers along the border one weekend each month over a period of two years. At first, my quest into Mexican *curanderismo* was largely intuitive and experiential, an inner calling rather than a strict intellectual pursuit, and it remained secondary to my academic interest in the ethnobotany of the region.² However, as time passed, I became aware of a body of hidden knowledge about *curanderismo*, and I developed an interest in uncovering and recording this information.³ Though I found the information I sought elusive and fragmented, I gradually gathered experience in the use of plant remedies and healing practices, as well as a beginner's knowledge in Mesoamerican shamanism, healing, and mysticism.⁴

During my studies and journeys in Mexico—long before I was to meet the *curandera* Doña Toñia, who later became my primary mentor and my friend—I developed a number of contacts with indigenous and mestizo healers, both along the border and further into Mexico. The cultures of particular interest to me were the Zapotec, an indigenous people native to the Oaxacan highlands of southern Mexico, and the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of Guerrero, a mountainous state bordering the Pacific Ocean to the west of Mexico City. I was also deeply interested in the mestizo-Yaqui people of the Sonoran desert, along the Mexi-

can border with California and Arizona.

One of my other notable contacts was an elderly herbalist, a *hierbera*, in the city of Taxco, high in the central highlands of Mexico. Doña Alvira, an elderly woman well known for her knowledge of healing plants, especially the preparation of plants for cleansing ceremonies, *limpias*,⁵ was a kind and generous soul who shared openly her understanding of plant medicines. From her, I learned about the fresh herbs and flowers used for *limpias*. Among her favorite plants were Mexican sage and basil. These she bundled together and used to brush the recipient's body.

Thanks to these formative introductory years, I gradually developed a sense of what Mexican *curanderismo* is about, and how it differs from shamanic healing.⁶ For example, I learned that there are many different forms of healers—both *brujos* and *curanderos*⁷—and they may work their healing in different ways. While visiting in Oaxaca, a city known for its well-kept colonial architecture and considered to be one of Mexico's most magical places, I often frequented a popular sidewalk cafe on the *zocalo*, the beautiful tree-filled central park. I sometimes sat for hours over coffee or a *mescal*—the local liquor made from the agave plant—writing poetry. It was there that I first met an older Indian woman selling handmade cotton *rebozos*, the cotton or wool shawls often worn over the head by traditional Mexican women when in public.

An astonishingly peaceful looking Zapotec woman, Doña Maria had long white

braids framing a wrinkle-free face set with wise brown eyes. At first, I thought her just an attractive Indian woman selling crafts; however, I was soon to discover that this was not the case. One evening, while I lingered over my drink, she approached me, after having watched from a distance for at least an hour. She sat down across from me, smiled, and looked gently and deeply into my eyes. Then in a melodious and sympathetic voice, she spoke at length about the nature of sorrow between a man and a woman, about the meaning of life, and about the ability to accept that which is not capable of being understood—the mystery of life. Without this quality, she told me, life can become unbearably difficult. After this extraordinarily beautiful intuitive monologue, she vanished into the gardenia-scented night.

At the time, I was suffering from a love affair gone astray, of which I had said nothing, and I found her words to be both healing and true. Stunned at first by this unexpected encounter, I immediately transcribed what I had just heard into my notebook, later composing a poem based on her words. Subsequently, I had the opportunity to spend more time with her, discussing Oaxacan customs. From this encounter, I learned that a *curandera* may appear unexpectedly when the time is right and provide just the means needed for one's healing or awakening. While Americans have been programmed to expect shamans to exhibit stereotyped manners or methods, Doña Maria taught me that there are many approaches to healing—sometimes it is through poetry, some-



The curandera Doña Alvira and her daughter in Taxco, Mexico.

times through medicine or ceremony, and sometimes via the passing wind.

After many years of studying Mexican *curanderismo*, I eventually developed a strong though informal apprentice relationship to Doña Toñia, a Mexican-Yaqui *curandera* living on the American side of the border. Originally, I went to her in 1994 seeking an explanation for a series of extraordinary and frightening dreams seemingly triggered by my relationship with a Mexican woman, also of Yaqui heritage. In the process of exploring the meaning and nature of these dreams, I gained many insights into my own nature and relationships, as well as further knowledge in Mexican *curanderismo*.

First Meeting with Doña Toñia

The day I met the *curandera* Doña Toñia did not begin like any other. In a tremendous burst of noise and excitement, a flock of crows landed in the uppermost branches of the large sycamore tree at the corner of my front yard. The early morning sun glistening off their backs gave them an iridescent, silvery appearance.

As I watched the crows preening themselves, a satin black feather appeared, dropped by one during the morning ablutions. For a moment, lifted by a thin breeze, it hung there, a dark ink line poised upon a sheet of clear blue sky. Then it spiraled slowly downward through the branches without touching a single leaf and landed gently on the ground. Carefully I retrieved it, marveling at its elegance, and thanked my errant guests for their gift; although concerned about its portent, I remembered to be respectful of the messengers. I had been

taught that, at moments such as these, when nature speaks directly to one, attention is required, especially when crows or ravens appear—birds frequently associated with magic and death.⁸ The flock of twelve then impolitely flew off towards the northwest.

Later that morning, I was introduced by a Mexican friend to a local healer. This meeting was to be full of coincidences and mystery—to begin with, this *curandera* lived not in Mexico but in my own neighborhood. My first contact with her was by telephone. When I called, a woman answered in a deep, firm voice expressing confidence, and from her tone, I gathered that she was mature but not old. She spoke in formal Spanish and responded politely to my questions. I asked if she received clients, and if she gave readings and performed *limpias*. She said that she did both, so I proceeded to discuss prices with her. They seemed fair, and I briefly explained my situation.

She said that if I was in need of a *limpia* and it was important, she would be free that morning. She instructed me to bring seven white carnations, four fresh limes, sugar, salt, clear alcohol, and several live branches from the California pepper tree, *el pirul*.

Within an hour, my friend Catalina from the state of Chihuahua and I were standing in front of a small, immaculately kept, sand-colored stucco house. As we approached the entrance, we were directed towards the rear of the house by a young boy, whom later I found out to be one of Doña Toñia's many grandsons. As we approached a small tool shed, a short woman in her late fifties appeared in the doorway of the shed, poised like a guardian of the entrance to a secret

world. She wore a pink floral dress, draped informally over her stout body. Square shoulders suggested strength and determination; mahogany skin tones revealed indigenous heritage. She greeted us with a friendly but formal warmth—a typical Mexican way of saying little but implying much.

Doña Toñia's place of work was in the unpainted plywood shed toward the rear of her family home, a home overflowing with her extended family of adult children, their spouses, grandchildren, cousins, and nephews. From the outside, there was nothing to suggest that her *officina* was anything more than a simple, weather-worn tool shed. Inside, it was filled with every imaginable object related to her healing and magical work. There were candles of various sizes and styles—mostly tall, cylindrical glass votives in pinks and greens—and statues of Catholic saints stood beside Buddhas and Taoist gods. Chinese dragons arched on shelves along the back wall. A coyote skin hung near the door. Curvaceous wooden staffs from different types of trees stood in one corner, and many wood and metal pentagrams hung under a narrow shelf, which held dozens of bottles of multicolored medicines. There were dried herbs and roots, stones of many types and sizes, decoctions of flowers in water and oil, and just barely enough room for three chairs. Between her own worn swivel chair—which was positioned so she could see people coming up the driveway—and two mismatched wood and metal straight-backed chairs was a small table. Upon it, a worn deck of blue Spanish Gypsy cards waited.⁹

There were no windows in the shed. The only light entered through the door, which she kept open a crack. There was an old lamp, missing its shade, in one corner of the room, but its bare light bulb was seldom used during the day. There, in the faint half-light, the smells and odors of traditional Mexican healing were distinctively present. As I sat there for the first time, the initial assault of visual stimuli gradually receded, and the incense and perfumes elevated the space, creating a feeling of protection and safety, and making the shed seem larger than it was. A slit of light from the door fell upon the table, illuminating the cards.

After my friend and I were seated, Doña Toñia sat down and immediately took control of the conversation. "Tell me your situation and why it is causing you difficulty," she said. I began by describing a few of my dreams, which I cannot divulge in full in this writing. However, I can say they were dramatic and extraordinarily vivid dreams about the sudden deaths of close friends and family members, and about bizarre and

frightening places in Mexico. Later, another theme began to recur in my dreams, taking the place of the nightmares. These new dreams were of a mountain village populated by many friendly *brujos*. An ancient church, situated at the far end of a small central square, stood out among the old, white adobe houses. It was not any larger or of a different color than the other buildings—they were all whitewashed and faded—but its vibration was distinctly different and compelling.

The church had a heavy door of rough pine carved with intertwining geometric patterns, similar to those found at the ruins of Mitla in Oaxaca. Inexplicably, I was drawn into the foreboding darkness. There were no windows. Inside, a thick aromatic fog or incense smoke concealed several large statues of frightening mythological-looking creatures, resembling different animals mixed together, that came to life challenging any intruder who walked along the pews.

For years, my dreams of this mountain village had continued—filled with Mexican Indians, *brujas*, cacti, churches, candles, strange animals, and all sorts of colorful handmade folk objects. It was to understand the purpose and meaning of those dreams and for my own healing that I had come to see the *curandera*. She listened attentively to my dilemma, her eyebrows rising from time to time. She then told me that my dreams were indeed strange and filled with many images of the *curandero's* work, but that she couldn't say what they meant. Whether she didn't know or was reluctant to say still remains unknown to me. She suggested that I ask for deeper guidance from within myself, and from the invisible spirits and saints that she believed surround all of us.

She then began the first of many instructions. This involved the use of the herb *Ruta chalepensis*, *la ruda*, or common rue—a plant of European origin commonly used in Mexican folk healing and magic and frequently grown in household gardens.¹⁰ She instructed me to choose a plant. Then, after informing it that I needed its help, I was to carefully remove the plant with its roots intact and to place it, roots touching the ground, between my feet and legs.

Doña Toñia continued to gently instruct me, "With folded hands as in prayer, close your eyes and inhale deeply. Gathering all of your energy, ask for guidance from the plant. You must keep your eyes closed. Wait until you see a light." She explained to me that this was a means of calling those that could help, and she told me to listen carefully to what was said and to follow whatever advice or intuition was given.



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After conveying these instructions, she shuffled the deck of Spanish Gypsy cards, which were similar to Tarot cards, and began laying the cards on the table one at a time. As she placed each one down, she named it, welcoming it as an old friend, and whispered a prayer. She informed me that all was well in my cards, except that "a White woman" was adversely influencing me. At the time, my ex-wife was causing me considerable unnecessary difficulty, so I assumed that she was speaking about her. However, I remained unclear as to the significance of her words.

Initially, I was skeptical about Doña Toñia's divinatory abilities, but over time, I have found her to be uncannily accurate. Later, at another reading, she told me that I would be involved in a lawsuit. Since I consider myself a person of integrity, I doubted that such an unsavory condition would loom over my future. However, again she proved to be correct. In less than six months, I had to initiate legal action against an associate for embezzlement of funds.

That first day, she collected the cards and laid them out again, confirming her original reading: "Yes, there is a White woman who is interested in you and putting attention towards you. I can't tell if she is intentionally trying to harm you or if she is just overshadowing your relationships." I later learned that Doña Toñia placed considerable importance on how one can be affected adversely by another person in ways that most Americans could never comprehend. Malicious intent is considered a very real and serious force in Mexican *curanderismo*.

She then told me that everything else—money, health, and travel—looked fine, and said that there was no problem between me and the Mexican woman whom I associated with the onset of my dreams. "If you wish,

you can let go of her, but I think you will be together again. I can teach you a method that never fails to recall a former lover. However, I sense that she is stubborn, and this may obstruct your reunion," she said.

"Yes, she is very stubborn," I reflected out loud, painfully recalling past events.

"Does she have any Indian blood?" she immediately asked, looking straight into my eyes, with her piercing gaze.

"Yes," I said, "her grandfather was pure Yaqui from Sonora."

"That explains it!" Doña Toñia snapped, her dark eyes burning. "I should know. I am half Yaqui, and those Yaquis are the most stubborn of any race on Earth. On top of that, they never forget and never forgive a wrong, imagined or otherwise. You certainly know how to pick them."

She then instructed me in a method to bring back a lost lover. I thanked her for the advice, but I explained that I didn't feel it right to use magic to control another. She corrected me, saying that she preferred to call it magnetism and not magic. "I understand," she added. "But just in case you need it some time, remember the details correctly."

She then reviewed her instructions for the technique, which I will call "speaking into water." Although I never intended to use it, I listened carefully. The method involves using water as a medium to contact another's spirit. A glass of water is placed over the name or photograph of the person one wishes to contact. One then speaks into the glass, repeatedly calling the person's name and expressing one's intention. She cautioned me to speak gently, with tenderness, to open my heart, and to be persistent.

After completing the session of cards and giving me other instructions, she suggested we prepare for the cleansing ceremony. She informed me that, traditionally, three *limpias* should be performed. There was no time line for conducting these, but each should be done when I felt the need. In time, I learned that six or even nine *limpias* may be suggested, and that, in the state of Guerrero, *limpias* are performed routinely once a week or on an as-needed basis.

We went outside where she gave further instructions. Placing a plain bath towel on the ground, she told me to lie down on it. She explained that she would begin her prayers and invocations while brushing me with a bouquet of carnations and *pirul* branches, which she bundled together as she spoke. She instructed me that at certain moments, she would call out my name in Spanish and that I should immediately reply in a loud voice, "*Ya voy*," meaning, "I'm coming now." She emphasized that it was



Doña Toñia prepares items at her altar for a cleansing ritual.

very important that, whenever called, I respond clearly and loudly, and even exaggerate for better effect. She explained that this calling was designed to activate or revive one's spirit. She then took the four lemons I had brought and, after preparing them by cutting a cross in each, she arranged them side by side—but not touching—in a small, shallow bowl filled with a mixture of the rubbing alcohol, salt, and sugar.

As I lay face down on the old towel on a cement slab behind her house, she placed the bowl on the ground near my feet and lit the alcohol. As the flame shot upward two feet or more, I began to question why I repeatedly put myself in such unusual circumstances. As she prayed and chanted softly, summoning and enticing various saints and favorite spirits, she brushed me vigorously with the bundle of *pirul* branches and carnations. First, she brushed down my back, from head to feet. Then, turning me over, she brushed my front, starting at my feet and continuing to my chest and face. The branches whipping at me were painful at moments and particularly uncomfortable on my face. As she worked the branches and flowers over my body, I began to smell the flowers, their fragrance released by the bruising. Every so often, interspersed with her invocations, she called out my name, to which I promptly responded according to her previous instructions. "*Voy*," I yelled.

The whole procedure lasted only a few minutes, but it seemed long enough to me. Then, she instructed me to jump vigorously in the pattern of a cross, back and forth across the fire, without stopping or burning my pant legs, until the fire burned itself out.

I began hopping back and forth over the fire—alternating forward and backward and then from left to right and right to left. This process took several minutes to complete, leaving me exhausted. After I had finished this part of the ritual, she carefully examined the remains of the burnt lemons. She informed me that no negative energy was left in them, which was a good sign, and that all had been successfully cleansed by the fire. I felt reassured, even if I didn't completely understand the portents that she saw.

To complete the ceremony, she rubbed an aromatic mixture of rose water and essences of various herbs and perfumes on my chest and back. While doing this, she recited a final group of prayers, while crossing herself in the manner of Catholics. She then dipped the remaining branches and flowers into an aromatic water and, using the bundled plants as a whisk, blessed me and the four winds.

After the *limpia*, she again reassured me that all was well with my cards. She said that, with the successful completion of the ceremony, my path in life was open and clear and I could now proceed confidently with any plans. I felt indescribably different—a little lighter and freer—almost as if I had just woken from a sound nap. Though I still did not have comprehensive answers to my dreams, I had the sense that I was beginning a process, a journey of not just intellectually understanding them, but living them.

The Healer's Path

Like many *curanderas* from Mexico, Doña Toñia inherited her skills through her family tradition.¹¹ Her father, who owned a

small ranch in the state of Sinaloa and a sea salt business on the Sea of Cortez, was a well-known *curandero* in a region famous for its *brujos*. Much of her knowledge came directly from his tutelage. He, in turn, had been taught by his father and an aunt, both traditional Yaqui Indians from Sonora. Doña Toñia explained that she had been born with the gift of healing, *el don*, and that this gift came from the Yaqui side of her family, which manifested in her strong personality and interest in the art, as well as her talent.

The purpose of the healer's path is to attain knowledge to help others, she told me. Besides requiring innate talent and the daily exposure inherent in a family tradition, the path of *curanderismo* may be cultivated directly.¹² This is best accomplished under the tutelage of one or more seasoned healers. For Doña Toñia, these were her father and her great-aunt. In addition, modern urban *curanderos* often study astrology and other areas of metaphysics to complement their traditional training and natural abilities, as she also did. One distinction of the *curandero's* path is that knowledge can also come through dreams, from illness, and directly from nature, especially from animals and plants. In this regard, *curanderismo* is similar to indigenous shamanism.

For some *curanderos*, though not for Toñia, dreams play a significant role. They inform, teach, guide, and warn of future events. Though she was not able to provide specific details, I learned from Toñia that my own dreams were similar to what Mexicans and Indians experience when they embark upon the *curandero's* or *brujo's* path. I now believe that her assessment was correct.

From the dreams and from her guidance, I came to accept that the first lesson along a path of healing is the confrontation of one's inner demons. I had always prided myself on being able to confront and manage my fears, having encountered several serious life-and-death threats during my travels in Alaska and South America. However, when these dreams first appeared, the unusual and frightening nature of the events that occurred in them often verged on unbearable. Unnerved by their unexpectedness, I would frequently force myself awake in order not to confront them.

As I progressed in my understanding of my dreams, I realized that there are two parts to the lesson of fear. The first is the overpowering emotion itself, and the second is the confrontation. Over the time that I have worked with Toñia, the nature of my dreams has changed as I have confronted the fear. In later dreams, I bought a house on the edge of the village and made a home there. In the house, there is a garden of San

Pedro cactus growing in the shape of a cross. I suspect that these more recent dreams indicate that I am settling into the work.

Illness can play a significant role in influencing the *curandero's* path. A healer receives and treats people suffering from illness, pain, and all forms of mental and emotional disturbances. But the illness that comes upon the healer is of a different nature and is a powerful teacher. Such illnesses usually appear mysteriously and manifest severely, often taking the healer to the edge of death. Moreover, they are often either impossible to diagnose by conventional medical means or recalcitrant to any form of treatment. Therefore, the healer is forced to live with the illness or to find a cure unaided by others. The finding of a cure becomes a process or journey that the healer must undertake without a map. Occasionally, the illness disappears spontaneously, leaving the healer humbled, having to surrender completely to the acceptance of a power greater than the self. During this ordeal, which I refer to as the transformative disease process, the healer often finds animals or plants that assist in the cure. These can appear as physical—though magically intelligent—creatures or plants, or they may appear in dreams. One of Doña Toñia's favorite plant allies is a dried, brown tuber from Peru, which she told me has magnetic properties that she can use to draw in powerful positive energies that protect her against harm.

According to Doña Toñia, knowledge—both innate and acquired—is essential, but a *curandero* requires power in order to perform the work successfully and safely. Therefore, a central component of the path of *curanderismo* is the development of mysterious sources of power that can influence people's lives, events, natural phenomena, and sicknesses. This power comes to the potential healer either at birth or through teachers, as mentioned earlier, or the healer must go in search of it. The seeking of power, by visiting power spots and collecting magical objects, is a distinctive characteristic of *curanderismo*. However, in the female tradition of Mexican *curanderismo*, it is more common for the woman to wait for this magical power to arrive than to actively seek it out.

Doña Toñia is convinced that time and age enhances, rather than limits, power. Even young children can have considerable power, but as one ages, the power strengthens. Doña Toñia has accumulated numerous power objects, and she told me that in order to understand this type of power, one has to receive and use these objects with respect and good intention. When she was younger, Doña Toñia traveled to many dis-



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tant sites in Mexico to obtain her objects; now that she is getting old, her daughter makes the trips for her. According to Doña Toñia, one must gather considerable knowledge and power, as well as a variety of plant helpers and power objects, if one wants to cure illnesses and influence fortunes.

Illness and Treatment

To a great degree, Doña Toñia sees the world as full of magical forces. Dreams cross into waking, and life blends with death. Hers is a world view where the unseen interacts with and upon the seen. However, she contends that instead of allowing oneself to be passively acted upon by invisible forces, one should actively manipulate them whenever possible. She believes that it is of the utmost importance to align oneself, by magical means if necessary, with beneficial forces and to be aware of ever-present negative influences, natural or otherwise. To her, knowledge of how to influence these forces is power.

Ritual sorcery, as practiced by Doña Toñia, involves the use of various power objects, such as wooden staves, pieces of magnetic iron ore, copal incense, various perfumes, and candles of various colors, impregnated with essential oils. *Limpías* are used to effect magical transformations; that is, changes that defy conventional logic or that would normally be beyond the client's control. A *curandero* who is powerful enough can employ magical intent without ceremonial ritual. To accomplish this, she explained, one has to first identify the negative energetic forces and then, by focused attention, disperse them.

Doña Toñia's healing work has totally permeated her life. In between raising children and grandchildren, she has been available to her clients any time of the day or

night, and a steady stream arrives at her door seven days a week. Her clients are largely poor Mexicans and Mesoamerican indigenous people who come for physical healings, *limpias*, fortune telling, and solutions to the stubborn problems of life.

In addition to treating the typical forms of Mexican folk illnesses—*el susto* (soul loss), *mal de ojo* (the evil eye), and *mal aire* (bad air)¹³—Doña Toñia has been frequently called on to improve financial matters and correct troubles in love or marriage. She said her clients generally fall into four main categories. Some have serious problems at home, which she called *disharmonia*, or lack of harmonious relationships. Some suffer from *disgracia*, or a sudden plunge of luck, such as loss of a job. Some suffer from the consequences of poverty, such as chronic ill health or the inability to find decent employment, and some suffer from sicknesses of the soul, *las enfermedades de la alma*. These last, she said, are the most serious.

Diagnosis is performed by a combination of reading the cards, studying the burnt limes from the *limpia* fire, and using her own psychic ability to see evil entities and sense negative influences. From her view, the causes of these conditions are complex and can include social pressures, unfavorable natal astrological influences, black magic or *mal ojo*, the work of *los duendes* (mischievous troll-like entities), or poor natural magnetism. Because these conditions are largely or completely beyond the control of the suffering individuals, they require intervention of a *curandera* before positive change can occur. As a first step in resolving problems, Doña Toñia always advises her clients to clean themselves and their immediate environment, explaining that evil forces come from darkness and do not like pure water, sweet smells, or cleanliness. Beginning with *limpias* and the use of perfumed oils, waters, and sweet-smelling incense, she initiates her magical interventions.

She told me that one feels best and has the best luck when the forces of good and evil are in balance or, better yet, in one's favor. Mood, she believes, is an indicator of magical forces: a depressed, pessimistic, or bad mood indicates imbalance or, worse, that one is under a spell. She emphasized that when one is feeling low in energy or one is in a bad mood, it is imperative not to make important decisions, confront difficult people, or try one's luck in love or money. At those times, she informed me, it is better to wait until the balance of invisible forces changes for the better, or—if necessary—to engage in an act of sorcery to shift the balance more in one's favor. She was very insistent on this matter.



Doña Toñia's altar displays an eclectic array of items from numerous cultures.

Also, she informed me that to be an effective healer, the *curandero* needs to be aware of natural environmental forces that influence and affect one's mood. For example, during the quarter moon, when the concave side faces down—like an upside-down bowl—negative influences can flow down from the moon to Earth. This is a time to wait, as the negative lunar influences are too strong. A better time to conduct healings is when the moon is like a standing bowl, holding back the flow of lunar forces.

A Case of Soul Alienation

Early one spring morning, I made my way up her steep driveway. Although the morning coastal fog was still lingering, I saw several women already standing in front of her place of work. In the small room, surrounded by the *curandera's* objects, a mother and daughter sat in the dim light. The women waiting outside were the girl's sister, an aunt, and a friend.

The client, an adolescent of about seventeen, was suffering from a form of lassitude. The mother, speaking for her, explained with exaggerated emotional expressions that she was concerned about the girl's lack of interest in life and her refusal to speak at times. The woman said her daughter often wandered around the house at night, without sleeping. At other times, she often overslept; it was sometimes nearly impossible to wake her. She rarely spoke, and seemed to be in a daze.

Doña Toñia listened attentively, smiled at the girl in a reassuring manner, and began her inquiry. She asked the girl several questions: if there had been a sudden fright, if there had been an accident, and if her behavior had involved drugs, or a boyfriend. Answering for her daughter, the mother said that none of those things had occurred, while

the girl sat shyly, leaning upon her mother's shoulder and staring off into no direction in particular. Doña Toñia soon announced it did not appear to be a serious case of soul loss, *el susto*, but a case of soul alienation, or *los nervios*.¹³

As Doña Toñia laid out her divination cards, she observed that there were several difficult influences surrounding the girl, oppressing her on several sides. Then, looking up from her cards, Doña Toñia squinted, not because of the half-light but in order to shift her attention to the other worlds. She focused sharply on the spaces surrounding the girl, scanning for negative energy, shadows, and abnormal movement. As she did so, she saw several *duendes* who were robbing energy from the girl, hiding in the shadows and trying not to be seen. Doña Toñia advised the mother that three *limpias* should be performed and that candles laced with incense should be placed in the girl's room. The first ceremony was completed later that morning, and though I wasn't present, Toñia informed me later that the girl was improving dramatically, expressing more energy and happiness.

A Case of El Susto

During my earlier studies of *curanderismo*, I had become interested in those cases involving severe psychological alienation or soul loss. Toñia informed me that these situations were very difficult to treat and often terribly frightening to the person and the family. Typically caused by a sudden fright or psychological trauma, *el susto* required great care on the part of the healer. The soul, already afraid and withdrawn, could easily be frightened further away by excessive noise, rapid or inappropriate movements, or malevolent people. Speaking with a seriousness I had seldom seen her exhibit

before, Doña Toñia explained that a special and very powerful *limpia* was needed to entice the soul back.

"The person may appear bored with life. Others languish in melancholia," she said. "In mild cases, the soul usually is close by, often hiding in the earth beneath the person's feet. In more serious cases, it travels very far away. That person dies."

One particular case stands out in my mind. A petite Nicaraguan woman, whom I will call Isabelle, had been diagnosed as suffering from depression by a psychiatrist at a local community mental health clinic. Conventional treatment, which had involved the use of antidepressant medications and talk therapy, had proved ineffective. When I first saw the woman, brought to Doña Toñia by a friend, she had barely enough energy to walk on her own and was reluctant to speak.

Tragically, Isabelle had lost all of her family during the civil war. Her parents, husband, and young children had all been killed by the death squads that had invaded her village near Managua. She had escaped but she repeatedly experienced terrible nightmares and suffered immensely from a feeling of guilt for having survived when the others didn't. In addition, she was involved in an extremely abusive relationship, which included physical and emotional violence, and the use of alcohol and drugs.

Doña Toñia said that the unspeakable violence that the woman had suffered had dramatically disturbed her soul (*alma*), which was very sensitive, until it could no longer remain within her body. Doña Toñia recognized that the woman's affliction was a severe form of *el susto*. She said her soul had remained behind in Nicaragua, and unless the body and soul could be reunited, there was no hope for a cure. Nine *limpias* were performed over a period of several weeks in order to prepare a clean place for the return of the soul. In this case, Doña Toñia used red and white carnations bundled with *pirul*, rosemary, and rue, and she sprayed Isabelle's body with sweet-smelling flora-scented waters. Within four weeks, the woman's moods were remarkably improved. A soul-calling ritual was also performed, similar to the ritual for speaking into water, which I described earlier. Due to an innate resiliency, she recovered rapidly, and after several months, Isabelle had the strength to leave the abusive relationship without guilt. Finally freed from much of the pain she had been carrying for so many years, she moved to another county and began her life again.

Learning the Art of Curanderismo

Of all the ceremonies that I assisted with, one in particular comes to mind. Doña Toñia

required clear and sunny days to conduct *limpias*, and the weather had been unusually cold and overcast for early summer. The client, a woman nearing fifty, had moved to San Diego three years earlier, and during that time, all sorts of bad luck had befallen her. Toñia diagnosed a form of *disgracia*, a type of ill fortune and illness caused by outside negative influences. Although the exact cause remained unknown, Doña Toñia called for a *limpia* in order to begin the cleansing and healing process.

The day scheduled for the ceremony was auspiciously sunny with a light breeze. Upon her arrival, the client told us that two strange events had occurred earlier that morning. First, a hummingbird had flown up to her, hovered near her for several minutes, and then touched its beak to her toe as she sat outside. Later, shortly before she left her house to drive to Toñia's place, a small ferret-like animal had come up to her sliding glass door, peered at her unafraid, and then scurried off. When I mentioned that the animal was rare in urban Southern California, Toñia said that certainly both visitors had been spirits trying to connect with her.

I prepared some *pirul* branches, selecting green and supple ones, and then trimming and cutting them to form a flexible whisk. These Doña Toñia bundled with red and white carnations. Interestingly, she chose not to mix other herbs or flowers into the bouquet, noting that this particular *limpia* needed to be kept uncomplicated. She mixed the alcohol, salt, and sugar, and cut a deep cross into each of the four limes, which she arranged in her pan, as was her custom. The few morning clouds had cleared and, as we went outside to begin the ceremony, a brilliant sun shined in a clear sky.

Toñia lit the alcohol and then cleansed herself with the flames by brushing her hands and feet in the fire. Then she rubbed florascented oils on the woman's wrists, ankles, neck, and forehead, as well as on the center of her chest, back, and stomach, all the while reciting invocations. She stepped back, extended her hands towards the woman's body, closed her eyes, and began praying quietly. I noticed the woman was shaking and swaying forward and backward. When Doña Toñia opened her eyes, she stated that this woman had been on many long voyages, and that somewhere during these travels, her energy had been significantly disturbed, resulting in the series of misfortunes. In addition, she said there were numerous bad entities surrounding her. When asked, the woman admitted that she had traveled extensively all over the world for several years previous to settling in San Diego.

By then, the fire was burning hot, scorch-



*Staring into the fire,
Doña Toñia said there was
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ing the limes and opening the crossed cuts made earlier. Doña Toñia instructed the woman to roll up the legs of her slacks and to dance over the flames. In addition, she was to wave her hands among the flames and brush them along her body as part of the cleansing: first by oils, then by fire, next by the plants, and finally by water. Staring into the fire, Doña Toñia said there was excessive negative energy present and that I should start jumping over the flames in order to help drive out the dark forces surrounding the woman. Exhausted, the client stood aside while I completed the fire cleansing for her.

Next, Doña Toñia told the client to lay face upward on the towel, and she began brushing and whipping her with the branches and flowers. Then, turning her over, the *curandera* brushed her back. After she finished working with the woman, Doña Toñia thoroughly cleaned and swept the area, running fresh water from a hose so we could wash and brush water over our heads and arms, completing the ceremony. Though Toñia felt there was still considerable work remaining for this client, she considered the *limpia* successful. The woman stated that she felt lighter and happier. That she had not experienced any dizziness during the ceremony was considered a good sign.

Working with Los Medicos

Like most *curanderas*, Doña Toñia often offers commonsense advice and objective insight, in addition to some herbal medicines and other natural remedies, but she believes that her main work is in interpreting and influencing the supernatural world and providing her clients with the knowledge of how to do this for themselves. Although she believes that many illnesses are prevented from healing by supernatural

forces over which doctors and drugs, or even herbs and acupuncture, have no power at all, she refers clients with serious physical ailments to *los medicos*, professional doctors such as myself.

Once, she sent me a thirteen-year-old Mexican boy, a client who had been going to her for some time without improvement. Because this gentle boy was extremely overweight and he hadn't responded to her traditional suggestions of dietary changes or herbs, I ordered a blood test for thyroid hormone and found it to be very low. Within a few weeks after I put him on a holistic treatment of natural thyroid medication and vitamin supplements, his energy returned and he was able to lose weight. This case illustrates the cooperation between the different systems of healing and medicine that I often experience with modern *curanderos*.

Another incident that illustrates Doña Toñia's willingness to cooperate with conventional medicine involved a teenage boy who lived several houses down the street from her. Doña Toñia told me that, late one night, she had answered an urgent knock on her door and found the boy standing on her steps in obvious distress, crying and cradling his arm. Although she had never associated with the boy or his parents, who were White Anglo-Americans, she recognized him and invited him in. He told her that he had hurt his arm in an accident with friends, but that he was locked out of his house. Afraid to wake his parents, he had somehow found his way to her steps without knowing what he was doing there.

When she examined his arm, she found it was broken. She had her daughter, who spoke English, call his parents. They came and took him to the local emergency room. After that, she didn't see the boy for several weeks. Then, one day, the boy again appeared on her doorstep, this time complaining about severe pain in his arm. He told her that the doctors had said it refused to mend properly. She assured him all would be well and sent him on his way.

Several months later, the boy and his parents came to speak with her. They said that they had no idea why their son had gone to her in the first place, and that they were very concerned because his arm still hadn't healed properly and wouldn't respond to any conventional treatment. He was still in a great deal of pain, and they were afraid of further complications. The boy had insisted, without any rational explanation, that they go to see Doña Toñia for help. The parents, who were embarrassed and apologetic, presented their story. Before sending the family home, Doña Toñia assured them that everything would be all

right and that she would pray for them.

She told me that she believed the boy had attracted some very dark and negative forces that had not only caused him to break his arm but also prevented the healing. She said she had seen a muddy field around his arm, and the presence of more than one shadow behind him. She performed a cleansing ritual for him involving invocations, prayers, the burning of incense and candles, and the use of magical intent, without his presence or knowledge and in the privacy of her studio. A week later, the parents and the boy returned, this time overtly expressive of their appreciation. Admitting that they didn't understand what had happened or why, they gratefully accepted what they thought was the power of her prayers. The boy's arm was miraculously free of pain and was healing rapidly.

The Practical Wisdom of a Curandera

In very pragmatic ways, *curanderos* deal with discomfort, ailments, and bad luck in matters that involve social, economic, psychological, religious, physical, and supernatural concerns. *Curanderos* are also adapting to modern diseases and conditions, such as diabetes and drug addiction.

During one of our afternoon talks, I began discussing how the apathy of today's youth is contributing to the increasing drug problem. Doña Toñia responded with such conviction that I asked if she had any experience in treating drug addiction, and if so, what her viewpoint was. "It is not only a problem with the young," she informed me, "but also with older people. This is a big problem. Not only do many parents come crying to me about their children, but even mature adults come to see me, trying to break the habit and get their lives back."

She informed me that there are several ways to work with addiction and they all involve the use of rattlesnake medicines. She reported that her primary treatment includes soaking rattlesnake powder in certain wines and then mixing them with herbs; the concoction is drunk a glassful at a time to aid in the detoxification process. After the initial cleansing with the rattlesnake wine, rattlesnake capsules are swallowed for up to three months to improve the body's strength. *Limpies* are also performed to clean away negative influences.

Doña Toñia is also very fond of helping people gain more money. For this, she has many methods, some more complicated than others, but she emphasizes that all require a great deal of patience and attention to detail, and all rely on the use of perfumes, candles, and incense. For this purpose, her favorite carrier is a green honey laced with different

fragrances—green being the color of money.

In one case that I observed, a mother was having serious financial problems caused by her son's gambling. By the time she came to seek advice and intervention from Doña Toñia, the woman's situation was getting bad. Doña Toñia helped the woman prepare several jars filled with oil, green honey, coins, and notes inscribed with her petitions. The mother was sent home with a specially prepared scented candle and specific instructions on how to complete the ritual.

A month later, the woman returned. Her son had made a dramatic turnabout. He had found a job and had become more respectful to his mother. Six months later, the son personally came to visit Doña Toñia and thanked her for helping him regain his life. Transformed into a different person, he had found part-time employment, returned to school, and adopted a more positive image of himself and his future.

Conclusion

Based on my personal observations, I believe that the modern urban *curanderos* help their clients to attain a sense of control over their environments, to reduce the apparent omnipotence of fate, and to re-align themselves with their true destiny. Magical rituals are used to seek power, often in the form of money, for those individuals who have no recourse other than manual labor and the low-paying service industry. The counseling offered helps immigrants deal with the stresses of adapting into a completely new, and often dangerous, world. The reading of cards allows the *curandera* to place past negativity within an ordered symbolic setting and to reframe the future into one that is positive and full of possibilities, rather than one that is feared. Clients emerge with a sense of renewal and clarity, and a greater feeling of self-worth, which in turn enhances their chances at succeeding.

As for myself, I underwent two more cleansing ceremonies with Doña Toñia. My third and final *limpia* was performed under a beautiful autumn sky, in the presence of some friends. In addition to the required red and white carnations and *pirul*, I brought an abundance of other flowers, incense, tobacco, cigars, salt, sugar, and clear alcohol. The extra items were to honor and intoxicate the spirits, as I had been taught in the Amazon, and Toñia welcomed my additions.

Rain had fallen the night before, and the trees were wet and shiny. A powerful wind blew as Doña Toñia began her prayers and lit the alcohol. Stirred by the wind, the fire seemed to burn higher and stronger than before. I jumped back and forth until the flames died down and I was exhausted. Then

I lay down, surrendering to the process, allowing Doña Toñia to sweep the plants across my body. The scent released was sweet and strong, and it enveloped my senses. As she prayed over me, the wind settled, the fire died out, and I was at peace. After the third cleansing, I began to notice that my life was going smoother—though not perfectly—and I felt better. The dreams of the mountain village still return from time to time, and I have begun searching in the highlands of southern Mexico and Guatemala for this magical place.

My friendship with Doña Toñia continues, and I spend as much time as my busy schedule allows, listening to her magical stories of Mexico and her instructions regarding her perfumed medicine. Two things impress me most about her work. The first is how complex and complete each ritual is, and how there is informality amidst formality. The other is how she nurtures the strength of spirit in each client. The outcome, after all, is a measure of one's own spiritual strength.

My own experiences with Doña Toñia have made me realize that I am not that different from her other clients. Whether we are illegal migrants or educated Anglo-Americans, we all worry and suffer, and we experience joy, happiness, and relief when conditions that appear beyond our control are remedied. We all seek happiness, security, and love amidst life's vagaries. It was, after all, to find the answers to my own questions on such matters that I originally went to Doña Toñia. Within her world, I began to gradually understand that there is no clearly defined line between question and answer, between thought and perception, between light and dark. Life remains a great mystery.

Notes

1. *Curanderismo* is the art and practice of healing as performed by a *curandero*. Derived from the verb *curar*, which means "to heal" or "to cure," *curandero* (masculine) or *curandera* (feminine) is a Spanish word that literally means "one who cures." Originating in Mexico and the American Southwest, but also practiced in various forms in other Latin American countries and in Hispanic ethnic communities in the United States, *curanderismo* is a mixture of indigenous healing practices and rituals stemming from pre-Hispanic roots, combined with Catholic prayers, symbolism, and religious overtones. In addition, some *curanderos* employ Tarot cards, practice astrology, and even utilize Eastern spiritual practices and New Age concepts.

2. The ethnobotany of northern Mexico was of special interest to me, partly because I had settled in San Diego, across the border from Mexico, and partly because I was fascinated with the spell Carlos Castaneda wove around the indigenous mystical traditions of the Sonoran desert. Over time, my interest in traditional Mexican methods of healing grew steadily and my fascination with Castaneda's work diminished, though I retained a desire to understand the terminology used in his books.



The Mexican-Yaqui curandera Doña Toñia conducts a limpia, or cleansing, of a patient.

3. I initially encountered many obstacles to my studies of *curanderismo*. The first was that this healing system is predominantly practiced by marginalized indigenous peoples and poor mestizos. Since most of these individuals are illiterate, or have minimal formal education, it is difficult for them to communicate their complex knowledge in an organized fashion to an educated outsider who speaks a foreign language. Knowledge in this system is nonlinear, rooted in oral apprenticeship lineages and family traditions, both of which are largely taught empirically, making verbal expression of the experiences or methods nearly impossible. Many Mexicans are reluctant to speak openly, even amongst themselves, about such matters, and to complicate things, there is an innate suspicion of outsiders, especially White North Americans.

4. In Mexico today, there still exists a vast intact, though diverse, legacy of traditional healing practices. These practices frequently take place in remote rural areas and indigenous villages, although with increasing migration to urban areas, traditional healing is now also commonly found in the crowded cities and marginalized indigenous communities throughout Mexico, California, and the American Southwest.

5. *Limpías* are cleansing rituals performed in all parts of Mexico and the American Southwest. They are not dissimilar to North American Indian smudging rituals using sage or tobacco and feathers; however, Mexican *curanderos* favor the use of live plants, and may even use eggs or live chickens brushed along the body.

6. In theory, the differences between shamans and *curanderos* are well defined, but the boundaries sometimes overlap in actual practice. Shamans are usually, though not always, indigenous healers who are directly involved with traditional ancestral practices. Shamanic rituals are often accompanied by chanting, typically performed in the shaman's native language or in a magical language. In contrast, *curanderos* conduct their work in Spanish, and they frequently incorporate Catholic symbols or prayers. However, the line between the two is not always one of absolute difference, but often one of shades and degrees.

Many Latinos consider *curanderos* to be merely diluted versions of traditional shamans. However, in my experience, the difference is more complex. Indigenous New World shamans operate from traditional concepts derived directly from tribal lineages. They often have extensive knowledge of and personal experiences with entheogenic plants, and they commonly use tobacco in ceremonies. Shamans typically employ deep trance states involving profound shifts in consciousness during their work.

Curanderos, on the other hand, use an admixture of indigenous rituals, Catholic rites, and European magic systems. They may or may not use tobacco smoke, but they usually do not use entheogenic plants. In my opinion, the distinguishing feature of *curanderos* is that they serve a different type of client—those of mixed ancestry, the mestizos. They also tend to serve more urban clients who typically require quicker access to the supernatural world than traditional all-night or week-long shamanic rituals allow. *Curanderismo* is a hybrid of indigenous shamanism, pre-Hispanic mysticism, and European magical systems, with an emphasis on transforming the everyday life of clients through healing and through enhancing personal power.

7. In Mexico, a country rich in magical and mystical traditions—and the Latin American country with the largest remaining indigenous population—it is considered important to differentiate between *curanderos* and *brujos*. Those individuals who concentrate on healing and helping are considered to be benign and are referred to as *curanderos*. They do not, as a rule, use entheogenic plants or perform ceremonies to summon natural phenomena, such as rain or wind. Those who use supernatural powers to control or harm others, or manipulate the weather or events, are considered *brujos* and are feared and avoided. However, in the daily

reality of village life, the practices of each group overlap considerably. At times, *curanderos* may perform acts of sorcery to control others, while *brujos* frequently perform healings and are considered good or bad depending on their use of the art (Scheffler, 1983).

8. Mexican *curanderos* hold many beliefs in common with indigenous shamans, including a belief in the power of animal spirits. Certain animals have more affinity to spirit power than others: coyotes, pumas, snakes, hummingbirds, and hawks are among the most common of these. Some, such as crows and ravens—which are associated with black magic, bad luck, and death—are said to be able to traverse multiple dimensions; traveling freely between the inner and outer worlds, between life and death, and between waking and dreaming, they often serve as messengers to humans from these other worlds.

9. Although such cards originate from European Gypsy traditions, it is not uncommon for Mexican mestizo *curanderos*, especially in the northern part of Mexico, to incorporate card readings into their consultations.

10. Doña Toñia, like most urban *curanderos*, does not collect plant medicines from the wilds, though she often grows an herb or two in pots or in the ground alongside her house. Most herbs are bought in *boticas*, specialty herb stores, in the Hispanic areas of Los Angeles, or across the border in Tijuana. There are also stores that specialize in the magical artifacts of *curanderismo*: candles, incense, and oils. *Matricaria recutita*, known as wild chamomile or manzanilla, is one of the most commonly used herbs. It is thought to restore the natural balance in a person's body. Other herbs commonly used for their ability to spiritually cleanse or align the body are *ruda* (rue) and *romero* (*Rosmarinus officinalis*), or rosemary.

11. In Mexico, a country where the family is of great importance and maternal lineage is still common, information, experience, and intuitive knowledge are passed along from mother to daughter. Though *curanderos* can be either male or female, most in Mexico are women. Transmission of knowledge is usually from woman to woman, or man to man. However, it is not uncommon for cross-gender training to occur. Growing up within a family tradition and observing an older family member practice is the most common means by which a *curandera* is trained. In addition to the transmission of knowledge of healing and magical rituals, many ceremonial objects are passed on in this way. If there is no one in the family interested in carrying on a tradition, as happens more and more in recent years, knowledge may be transmitted to a person outside of the immediate family and even outside of the socio-economic group.

12. Additionally, some *curanderos* feel that they have been "called" to the path of healing as a vocation. They may then seek out tutelage under various established *curanderos* or *brujos*, as well as studying books on medicine, herbology, astrology, or other subjects at will. Some may have dreams that indicate the vocation. Others may be compelled to follow the path after a severe illness from which they recovered by apparently magical means, or after spirits instructed them to undertake such a path as payment for their cure. Others may possess *el don*, "the gift" of healing, which is usually present from birth.

The gift of healing or spiritual insight also requires acceptance and faith; the process of becoming a healer unfolds spontaneously and intuitively, but under the guidance of another healer acting as a mentor. The natural predisposition may begin at birth or in early childhood, or it may be acquired later in life. It is generally accompanied by a sign: either a natural mark on the body, usually read in the lines of the palms or soles of the feet, or a phenomena of nature such as an eclipse or unusual winds or weather. A distinctive behavioral trait or other unusual characteristic of personality that manifests early in life may also be considered a sign of a *curandero*.

13. McAndrews (1995) summarizes the most common disease types according to Mexican folk healing as *susto*, *mal de ojo*, and *mal aire*. *El susto*, or soul loss, is usually caused by a severe unexpected fright or an astounding event in a person's life, and it most commonly affects infants and small children. *Mal ojo*, the "evil eye," is a magical illness caused by the look of a person with malicious intent; it usually affects infants and young children, and if not diagnosed and corrected, it can adversely affect an individual into adult life. *Mal aire*, or "bad air," may be caused by the lingering soul of a dead person, and it is treated with *limpias*.

14. An increasingly common condition among modern Latino women, *nervios* is an extreme alteration in mood characterized by anguish, or even paradoxical symptoms suggestive of overwhelming boredom, and accompanied by physical symptoms of fatigue, aches and pains, and headaches. When the condition is severe, the patient may suffer hysteria, called *ataque de nervios*, (Oquendo, 1994). Treatment is composed of dietary changes, suggestions for improvement in relationships at work or at home, massage, and the use of herbs such as *valeriana* (*valerium*), *hojas de naranjo* (orange leaves), and *pasiflorina* (passionflower).

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