

# MEXICAN FOLK MEDICINE AND FOLK BELIEFS

*Curanderismo y yerbas Medicinales*

**Eliseo “Cheo” Torres, University Administrator,  
Professor, Author**

**[www.unm.edu/~cheo/Cheo's folk healing page.htm](http://www.unm.edu/~cheo/Cheo's_folk_healing_page.htm)**

# Traditional Mexican Healing Certificate Program

## Offered through the Center for Continuing Education, University of New Mexico

- First certificate program of its kind in the U.S.
- 9-10 modules totaling 400 hours
- Instructors are healers and faculty from Mexico City area and Cuernavaca, Mexico
- Hands-on curriculum will provide participants with knowledge and skills used by traditional folk healers, including diagnosing illness, preparing natural medicines, identifying and using medicinal plants, massage therapy, iridology, etc.
- Certificate continues to be offered through University of New Mexico's Continuing Education program
- **For further information, please visit:**  
**[www.unm.edu/~cheo/Cheo's folk healing page.htm](http://www.unm.edu/~cheo/Cheo's_folk_healing_page.htm)**

# Book: *Curandero: A Life in Mexican Folk Healing*

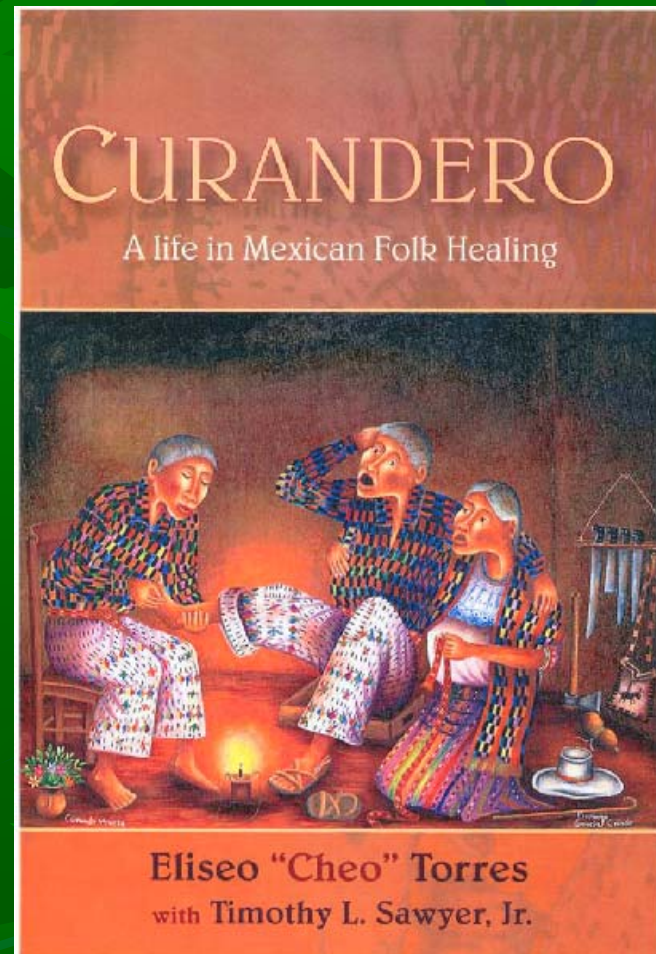
This book about my life and research in *curanderismo* is now available through the University of New Mexico Press. You can order it through my website, or by going to the UNM press website, or by getting an order form from me after class.

My website:

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UNM Press ordering page:

<http://www.unmpress.com/Book.php?id=10546036839987>



# **Book: *Healing with Herbs and Rituals: A Mexican Tradition***

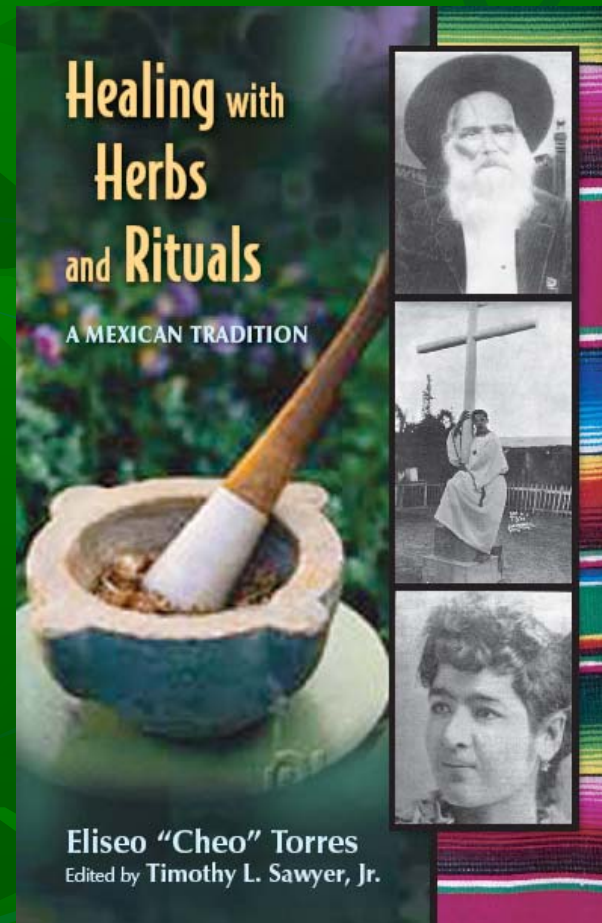
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# I. INTRODUCTION

## Influences of *Curanderismo*

- 1.) Judeo-Christian – gift from God and belief in God
- 2.) Greek Humoral – equilibrium of hot and cold
- 3.) Arabic – directing psychic energy
- 4.) European Witchcraft – supernatural forces
- 5.) African – *Santeria* blend of Catholic saints and African *orichas*

# Influences of *Curanderismo* (Continued)

- 6.) Spiritualism and psychic – spiritual trances and communication with spirits
- 7.) Scientific – germ theory, psychology and biomedicine

# Blend of Old and New Worlds

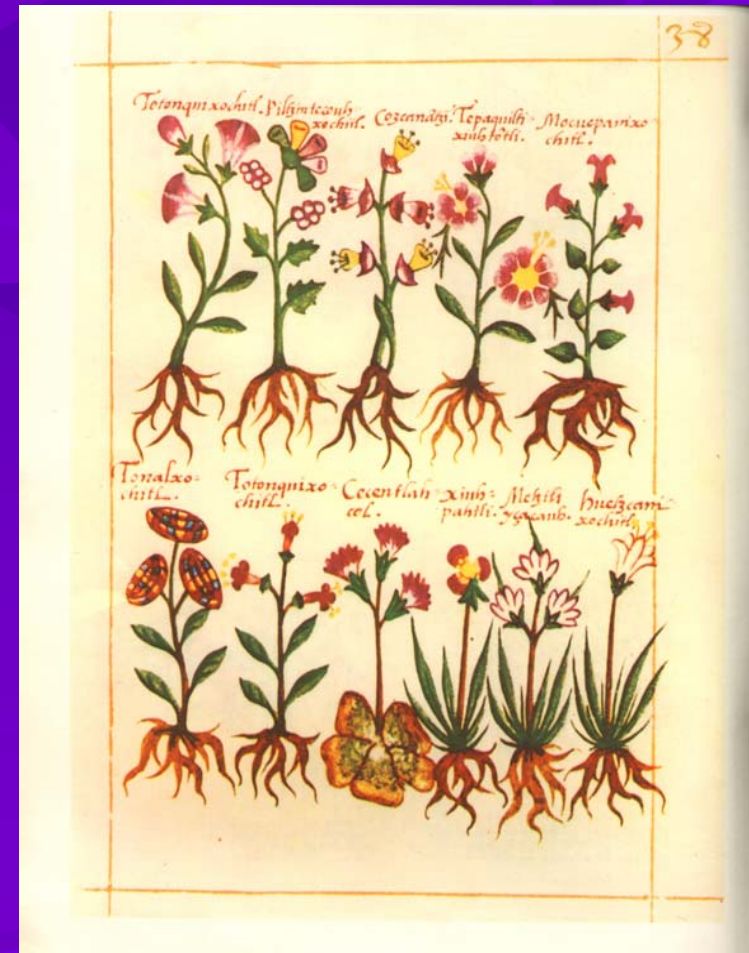
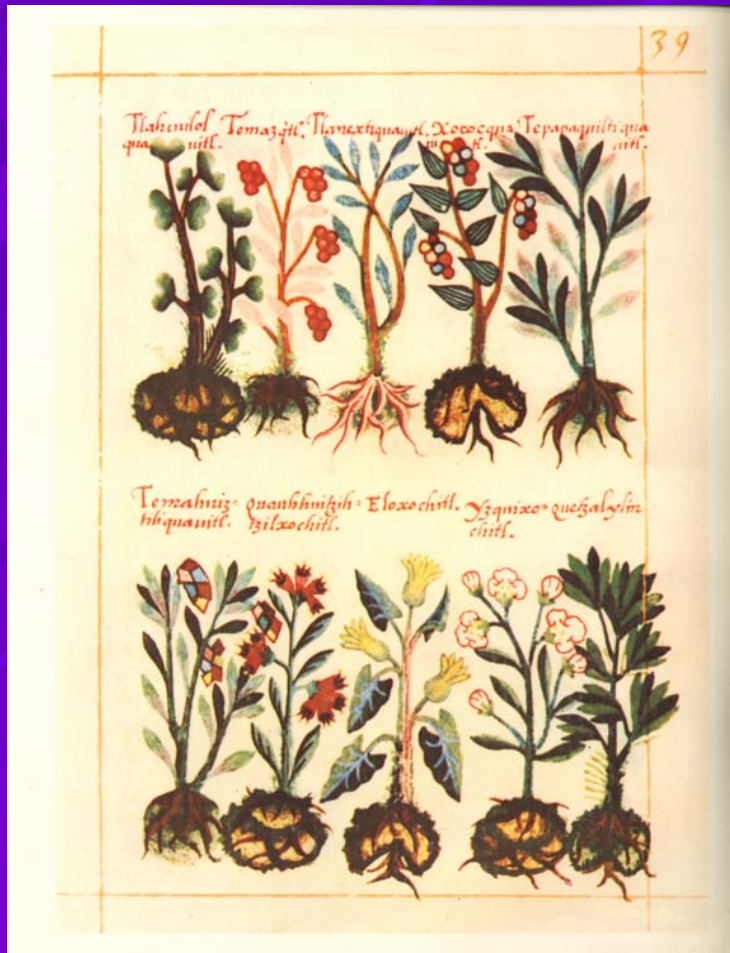


# HISTORY

- **1519 – Spaniards arrived in Mexico**
- **1521 – *Tenochitlan* and 3,000 medicinal plants destroyed**
- **1552 – Martin de la Cruz, Aztec Indian doctor, wrote first book (listing 251 herbs) on medicinal plants at School of Santa Cruz de Tlaltelolco; written 31 years after conquest of Mexico**
- **1554 – Cervantes de Salazar described Montezuma II's gardens; physicians experimented with hundreds of medical herbs**



# Pages from *Codex Badiano*





Traditional remedies of Europe and Asia have been blended with those of Aztecs and Mayans.



# Evolution of Medicinal Herbs

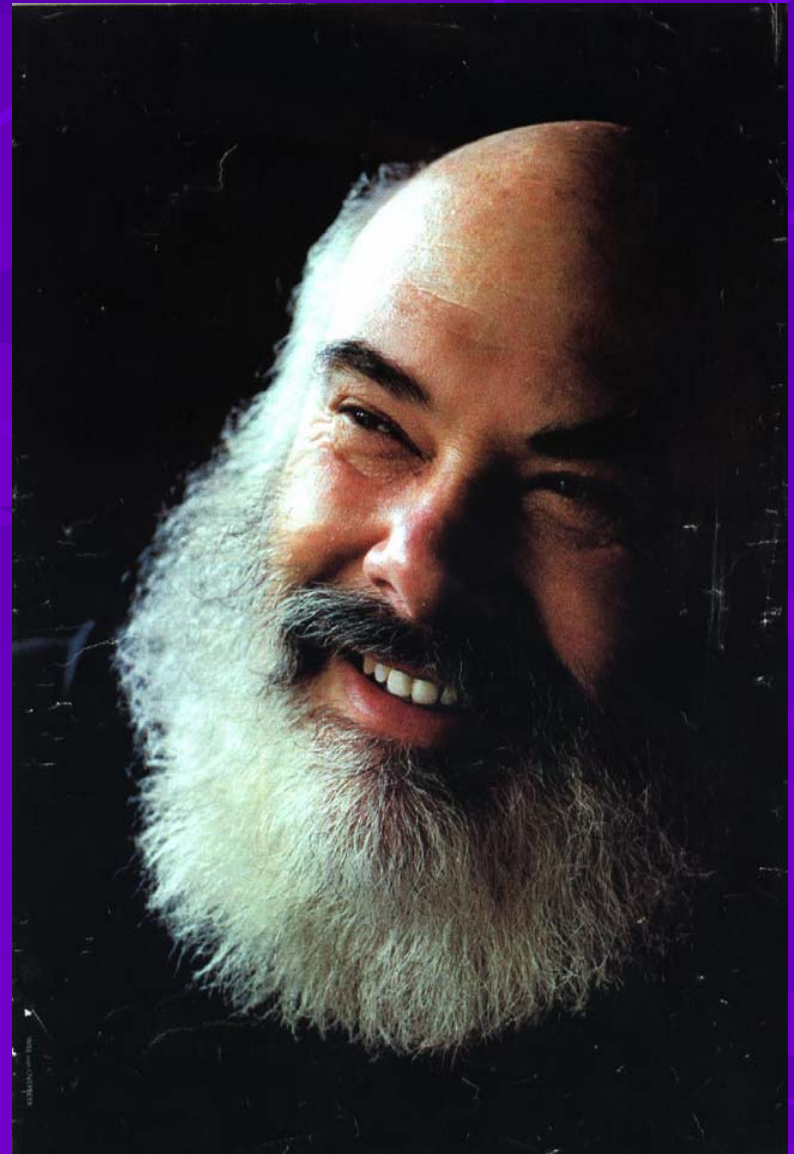
- Aztec pharmacology – 1,200 medicinal herbs
- Aztecs treated arthritis, gastrointestinal ills, hepatitis, etc.

Today, Curanderismo has influenced the revival of  
Alternative/Complementary/Holistic Integrated  
Medicine, including:

- **\$21 Billion in Consumer Spending**
- **Andrew Weil's Common Sense Approach – “Can't hurt, could help”**
  - **Less fat, animal food, stress**
  - **Eliminate or reduce intake of booze, cigarettes, coffee**
  - **Begin exercise, massage and hypnosis therapy**
  - **Use herbs, olive oil, garlic, ginger, etc.**
  - **Keep lots of fresh flowers**

# Andrew Weil

Guru of the  
“integrative”  
medicine approach,  
Dr. Weil preaches  
that modern medicine  
needs to pay more  
attention to the whole  
picture – mind as  
well as body.



## II. The Curandero's Three Levels of Knowledge

- 1.) MATERIAL – herbs, animals, eggs, water, candles, cigars, etc.
- 2.) SPIRITUAL – *Curandero* as medium; soul concept
- 3.) MENTAL – channels mental vibrations to patient

# 1.) Material Level

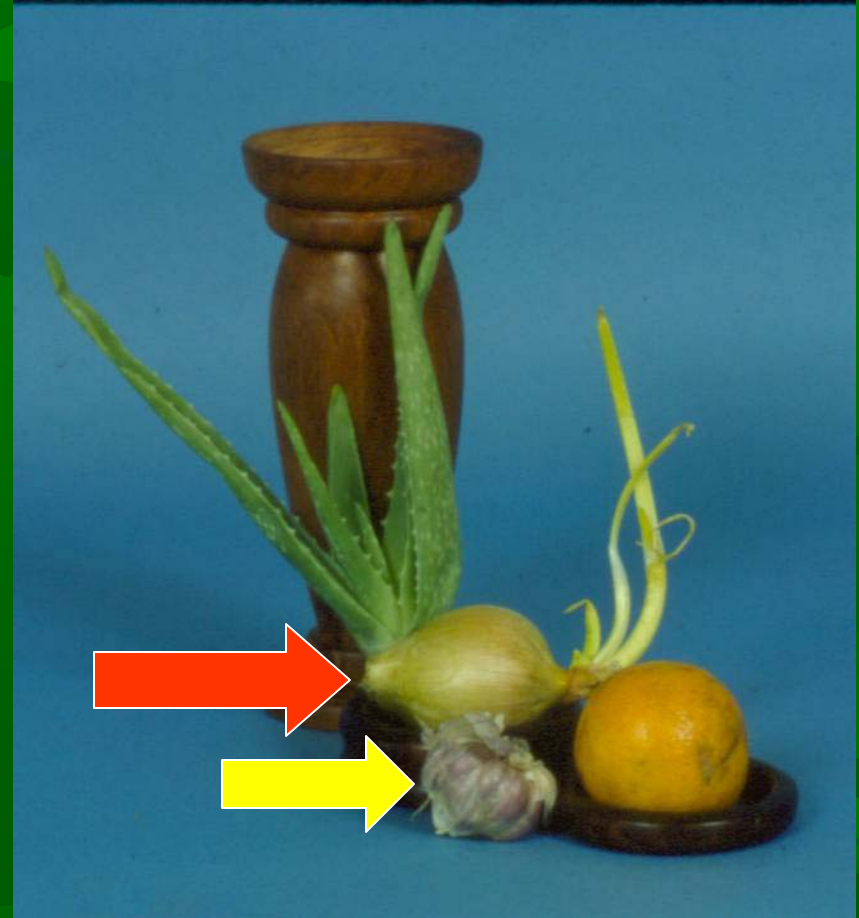
- Can use plants – Simple, Mixed, and Popular
- Water
- *Ajo Macho* (Elephant Garlic)
- *Piedra Iman* (Lodestone)
- Magical Perfumes
- Natural “Viagra”
- Snake Medicine
- Candles
- *Temezcal*



# Simple Medicinal Plants

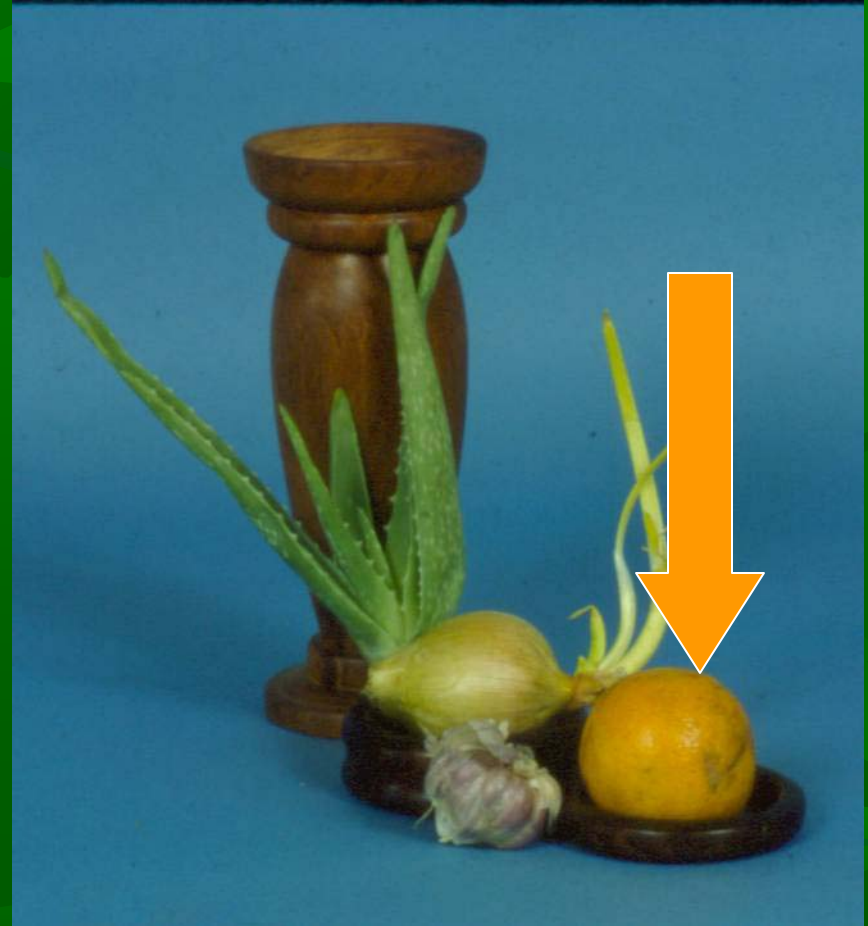
## Used for Food and Medicine

- **Garlic** – with olive oil for burns; clove in ear for earaches; in brandy for asthma; with brown sugar for coughs; with honey for dandruff; reduces cholesterol.
- **Onion** – treats anemia, bronchial complaints and asthma; cooked in oil prevents scarlet fever and diphtheria; as tea for coughs and sore throats; when hot, applied to boils.



# Simple Medicinal Plants -- Continued

- **Orange** – Leaves used as tea for digestion and stronger tea for insomnia; flowers and peel for stress and insomnia; tea from bark of bitter orange to improve appetite.



# Aloe Vera – *Zabilla*

Referred to as *Planta Milagrosa*, or Miraculous Plant

- 333 B.C. – used as medicine
- Member Lily family – onion and garlic (not cactus)
- External use – burns, cuts, rashes, acne and wrinkles
- Internal use – arthritis, rheumatism, stomach disorders and constipation
- Folk belief: brings positive vibrations and good luck



# Aloe Vera – Positive Vibrations and Good Luck



# Popular Plants

- *Chaya* – has been used as diet supplement by the Mayans since before Spaniards arrived in 1519. Chaya outweighs both Spinach and Alfalfa in protein, carbohydrates, calcium, iron, phosphorus, and Vitamins C, A, B-1 and B-2. Scientists are studying its anti-diabetic potential.
- *Tepezcohuite* – the Mimosa tree has properties that promote healing, esp. for burns. It also promotes healthy scar tissue formation in body cuts, wounds, skin irritations.

## Popular Plants -- Continued

- Cat's Claw or *Uña de Gato* is an herb from Peru's rain forest said to be an effective multi-purpose medicinal plant. Cat's Claw contains several Oxindole Alkaloids which stimulate the immunologic system. Research shows that Cat's Claw has antiviral, antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and anti-tumor properties.

# Spiritual Water – Used as Spiritual Food



# Man drinking Spiritual Water to help in Curative/Healing process





# *Ajo Macho* – Elephant Garlic

- One great clove (as opposed to Table Garlic – many cloves)
- Elephant Garlic used as powder or perfume to bring good vibrations and good luck



# *Piedra Iman (Compuesta) – Lodestone* signifies

- Gold – wealth
- Silver – good home and family
- Coral (red bean) – gets rid of envy and all that's bad
- Wheat – good husband, wife, marriage or relationship
- Horseshoe – prosperous job or business

# *Piedra Iman -- Lodestone*

- Soap
- Perfume
- Powder
- Amulet
- Stone

*All bring positive vibrations*



# Magical Perfumes



↑  
• Iman – Luck

↑  
• Contra Embrujo -- Against a Hex

↑  
• Yo Puedo Mas Que Tu (“I Can More Than You”) – Power Over Another

↑  
• Ven A Mi (“Come to Me”) – Attracts a Lover

# Packaged Herbal Compounds



- *Tlanchalagua* – Weight Loss
- *Sexogil* – for Impotence
- *Te Nervina* – for Headaches, Epilepsy, Neuralgia

# *Sexogil* – a “traditional Viagra”



# Snake Medicine

- NIH-Sponsored Research – using venom to destroy cancer and tumor tissue
- Venom – contains 60 proteins, toxins, and enzymes; destroys tissues and affects nervous system
- Folk Usage – stops gossip

# Snake Oil

- 1.) *Aceite* – for Rheumatism, Arthritis, other aches and pains
- 2.) To stop gossip – place drop for every letter of gossip's name on piece of paper, then burn paper





# Other Medicinal Oils



# Candle Rituals

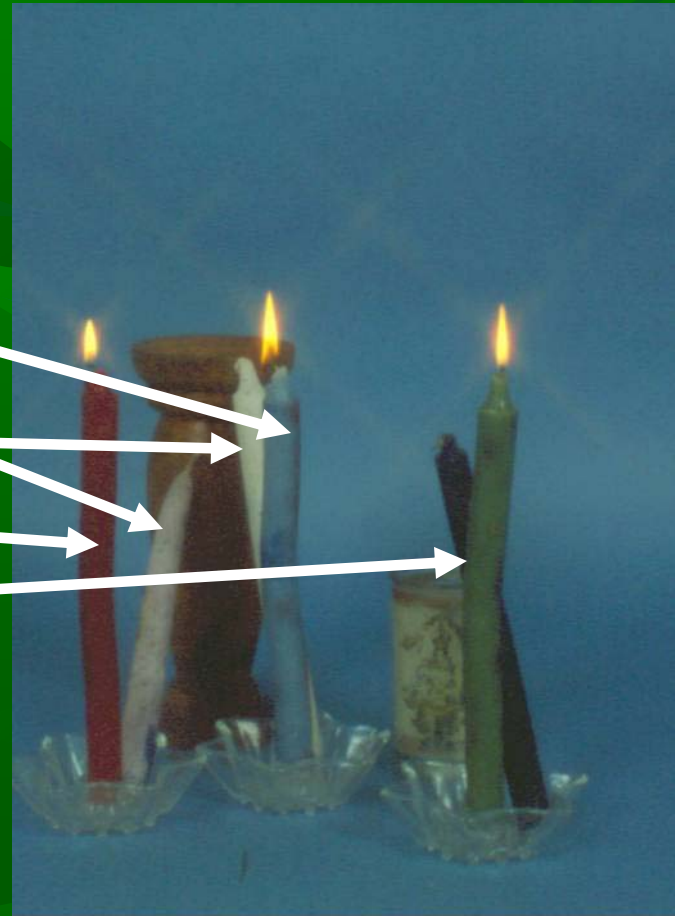
- **Color & flicker, pattern of melting wax used to diagnose illness**
- **Paraffin or animal fat used for different conditions**



# Candle Rituals -- Continued

## Significance of Candle Colors

- **Blue:** serenity
- **Pink:** good will
- **White:** purity
- **Red:** illness/love
- **Green & Black:** negative forces



# Traditional *Temezcal* Oaxaca, Mexico



*Courtesy of Laura de Franklin*

Oaxacan and New Mexican Healers Lauro & Laura,  
during UNM's Occupational Therapy Class on Healing  
in Oaxaca, Mexico



*Courtesy of Laura de Franklin*

## 2.) *Spiritual and*

## 3.) *Mental Levels*

- **Evil Eye – *Mal de Ojo***
- **Magical Fright – *Susto***
- **Other rituals**
  - *Caida de Mollera* (“tossing baby”)
  - *Empacho* (bolus of food lodged in digestive tract)
  - *Bilis* (suppressed anger)
  - *Muina* (outward rage)
- ***Sobador(a)* – a kind of *Curandero/a* who is a folk masseur(se)**

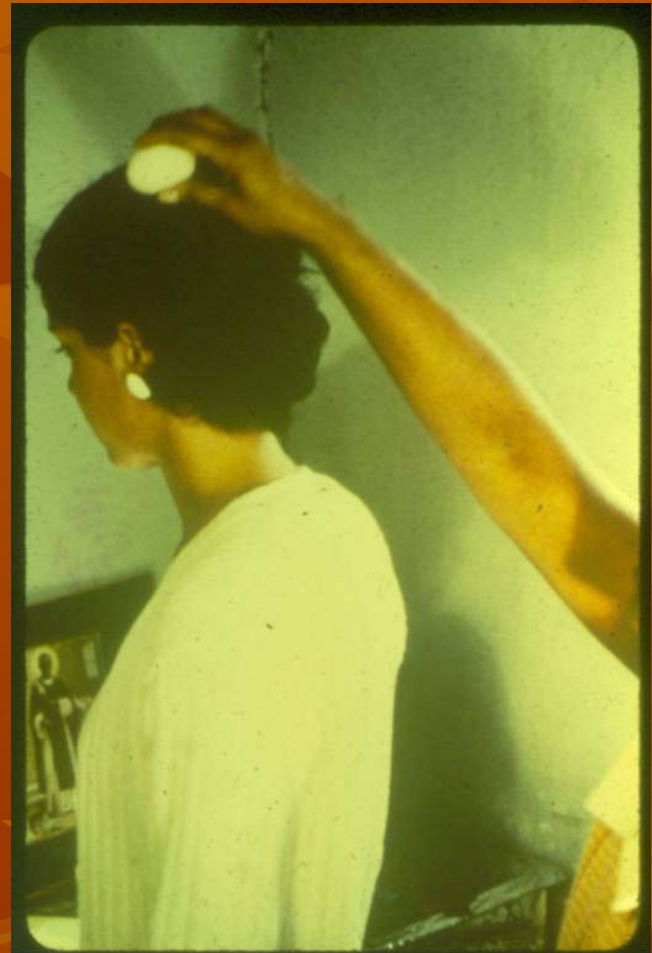
Spiritual/Mental levels:

*Curandero/a* as medium; soul concept

**EVIL EYE - *MAL DE OJO***

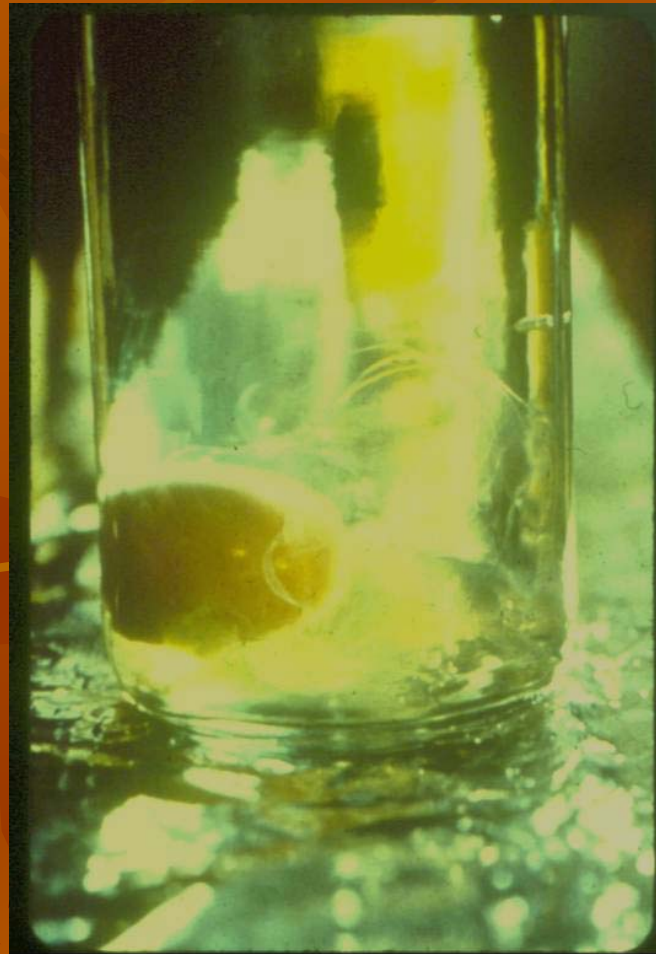
# Evil Eye – *Mal de Ojo*

- **Affects mostly babies and sometimes adults**
- **Egg used to absorb negative vibrations – can be described as a living cell, and thus used as a sacrificial object**





After Ritual – egg broken in glass and  
“read” or diagnosed for illness



# *Ojo de Venado* – “Deer’s Eye”

- In reality an amulet; buckeye seed adorned with red yarn and beads to ward off Evil Eye
- Worn as bracelet or necklace
- Similar amulets are found in 20 different countries
- Arabic origins



Susto – Loss of spirit, soul; Shock (but not life-threatening medical condition known as Shock);  
Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome?

**MAGICAL FRIGHT**

*(Susto continued)*

Client being swept with special aromatic plant (rue, basil), which  
“sweeps away” negative vibrations,  
retrieves lost soul



# Other Rituals

- 1.) *Caida de Mollera* (fallen fontanelle) – baby fall, tossing baby (dehydration)
- 2.) *Empacho* – (bolus of food lodged somewhere in digestive tract) – bloating, constipation, lethargy. Use massage and teas, not *greta* (lead dioxide) or *azarcón* (lead tetroxide) – highly toxic
- 3.) *Latido* (anorexia or hyperglycemia) – weight loss; administer raw egg, salt, pepper, and juice or soup – onion, garlic, and cilantro for 9 days

## Other Rituals (Continued)

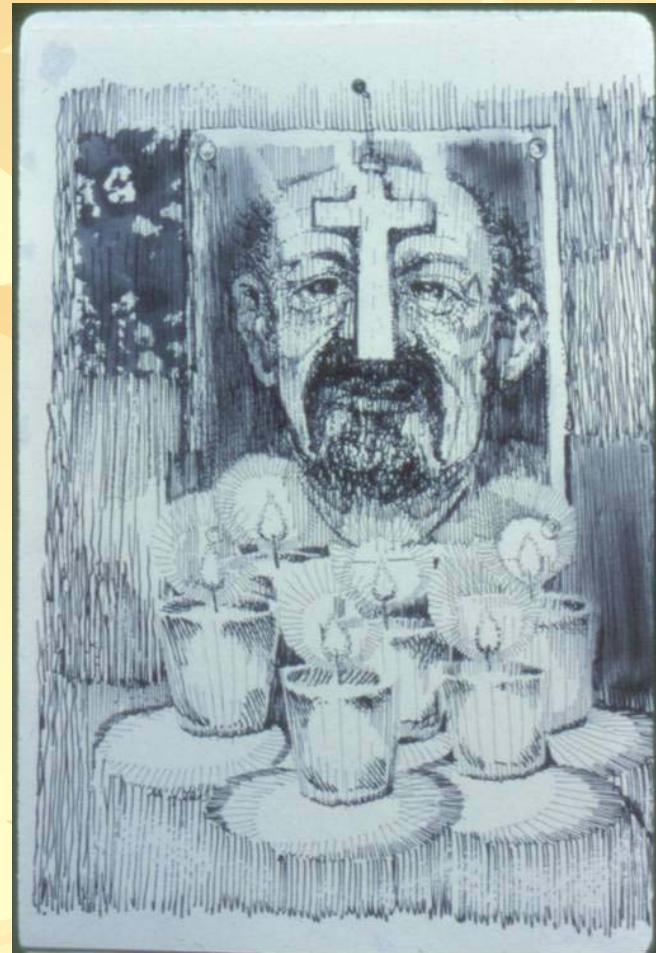
### 4.) *Bilis & Muina:*

*Bilis* – Suppressed anger; excessive bile; gas, constipation, indigestion; Epsom salts or other laxatives once a week for three weeks

*Muina* – “anger illness,” rage – subject may become paralyzed; sweep with three red flowers Wed., Thur., and Fri.; administer herbal tea; if this doesn’t work, person is slapped and shaken. Duke University Study: chronic anger leads to high cholesterol and other risk factors for early death

# III. Who Is a *Curandero/a*?

- Folk Healer working at different levels – Material, Spiritual, Mental
- *Curanderismo* combines both religious and supernatural elements/levels
- To become a *Curandero/a*, one either becomes an apprentice, or must have a gift (*don*)



# Who Is a *Curandero/a*? – Continued

- *Sobador/a* – Uses power of hands, touch; mind/body therapy – holistic approach
- *Señora* – Foretells future by reading cards; reveals influence of past; said to emphasize mental/psychic level





# *SOBADOR(A)* – Folk Masseur(se)

- Specializes in a *Sobadita* (sprain) and *Massaje* (massage)
- Massage Therapy – now a \$5 billion industry; reduces cortisol (stress hormone); releases endorphins (natural painkillers)

# Olive Oil

- Used by *Sobador/a* for therapeutic massage
- Also excellent (and very healthy) edible oil



# *Sobadora* – Specifically for *Sobadita* (sprain)



# *Sobadora* – performing a *Massaje* (whole-body massage)

- A *Sobadora* is also a good listener – which is essential to the healing process
- She employs holistic approach to healing – combining both touching and listening, a first step to healing



# Another Folk *Sobadora* – doing *Massaje*



# *Señora* – Card Reader



# IV. Modern Influence of Three Great *Curanderos/as*

## *Los Tres Grandes*

- 1.) **Don Pedrito Jaramillo (1829-1907)**
- 2.) **Niño Fidencio (1898-1938)**
- 3.) **Teresita (1873-1906)**

# *Curanderos/as*

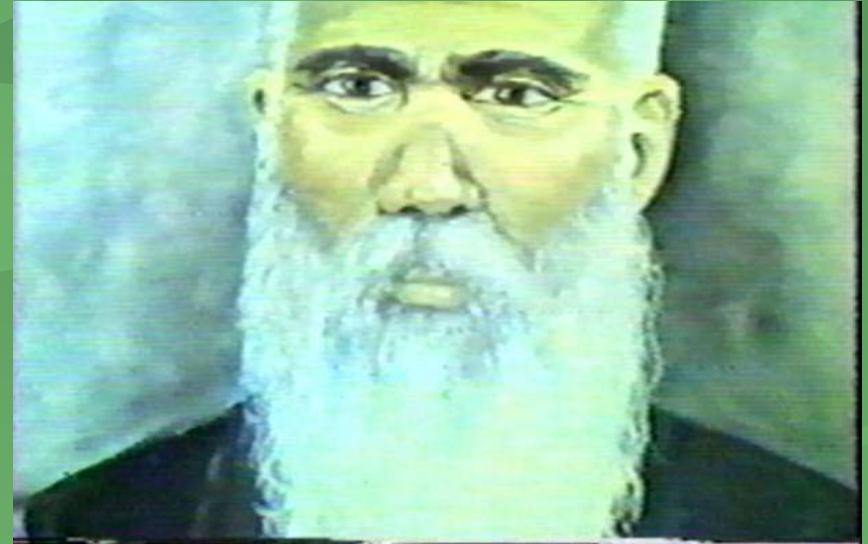
**Never cure in own name, but in name of a canonized saint such as the Virgin of Guadalupe or San Martin de Porras, or of a folk saint such as Don Pedrito, Niño Fidencio, or Teresita**





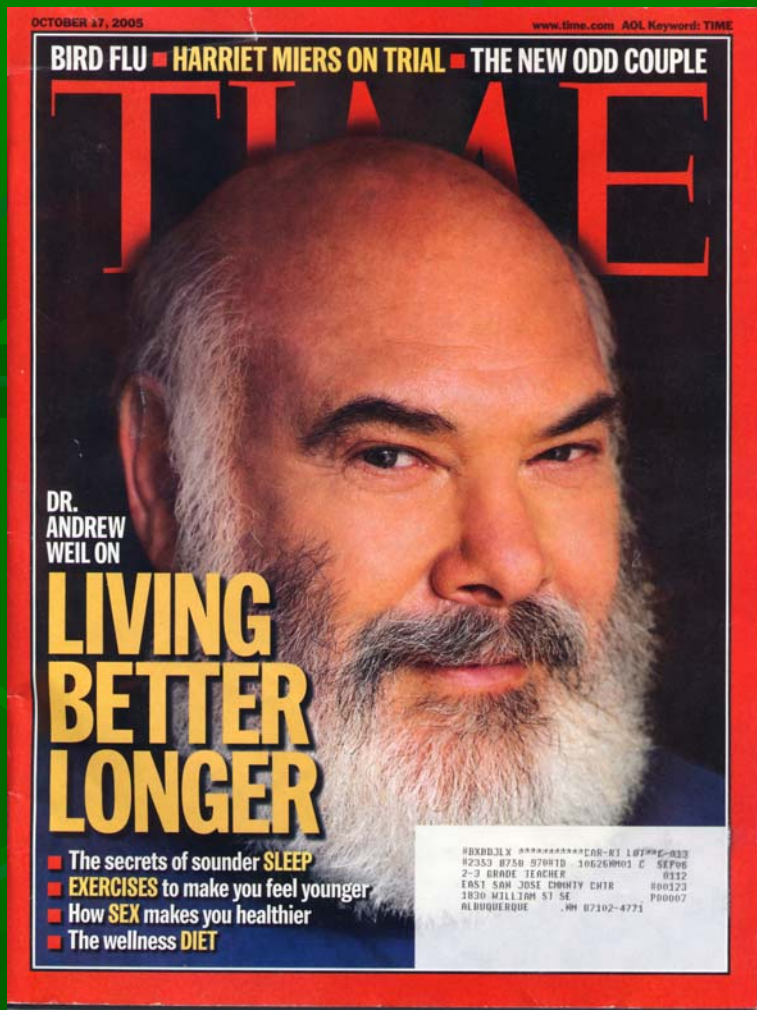
# Don Pedrito (1829-1907)

- **Healer of Los Olmos**
- **Adopted Severiano Barrera**
- **Investigated by U.S. Post Office**
- **Prescribed water, baths, and mud**
- **One of the most powerful men in the Southwest during his lifetime**



# Andrew Weil

# Don Pedrito



Modern “Integrative Medicine” specialist  
-- emphasizes holistic, common-sense  
approach to treatment and healing

Nineteenth Century Mexican Folk Healer –  
emphasized holistic, common-sense  
approach to treatment and healing



DON. PEDRITO JARAMILLO

A folk saint, considered the most famous curandero in Texas and northern Mexico.

Rumor holds that someone he cured gave Don Pedrito his own son in gratitude. The rumor has not been substantiated, but Don Pedrito, who never married, did adopt Severiano Barrera, who is now considered his descendant.





## **Don Pedrito Jaramillo**

Born in 1829 in Mexico and died in 1907 at Los Olmos Ranch, north of Falfurrias Texas. His tombstone reads "The Benefactor of Humanity."

Rafters at the Don Pedrito Chapel in Falfurrias, Texas,  
containing current testimonials of people healed by  
the spirit of Don Pedrito (or *Curanderos/as*  
channeling his spirit)



**Also at Don Pedrito Chapel in Falfurrias, Texas – photos, testimonials of people cured by Don Pedrito’s spirit, as well as petitions for Don Pedrito to intercede in their spiritual healing**



# Teresita (1873-1906)

- **Illegitimate daughter of poor Indian peasant and wealthy aristocratic farmer**
- **Apprenticed under *Huila***
- **Powers of hypnosis and prophecy**
- **Fled to Nogales and El Paso**
- **Buried in Clifton, Arizona**

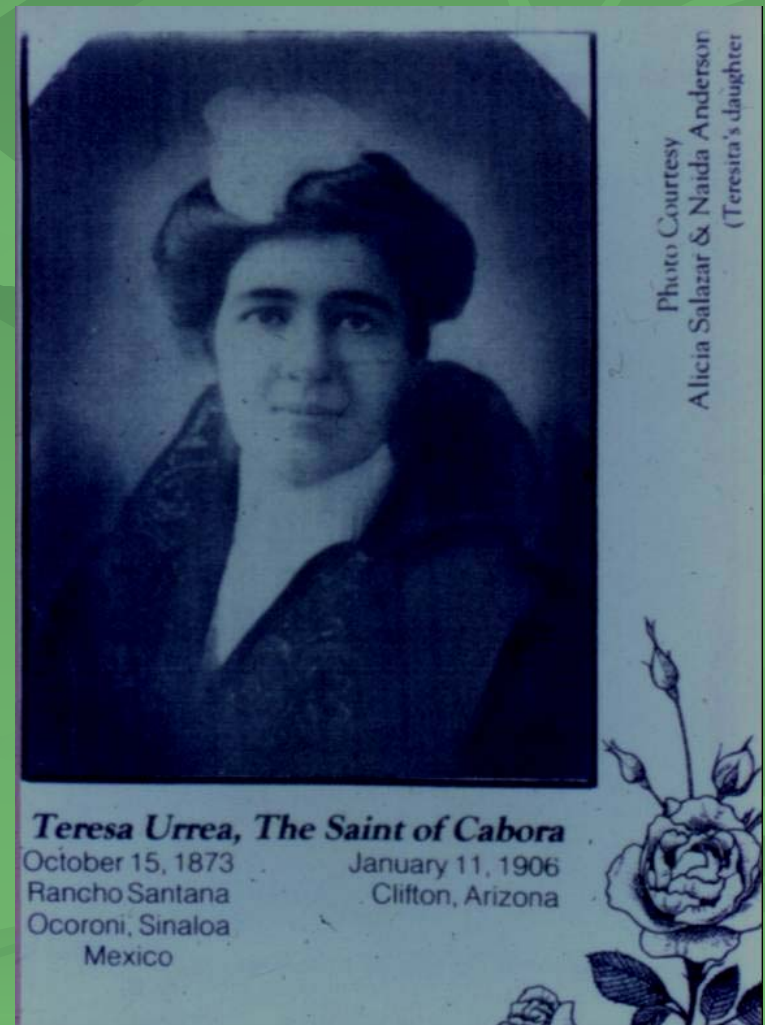


Santa Teresa "Teresita" took this photo in New York City at 29 years of age.



# Teresita (Teresa Urrea) – *La Santa de Cabora*

- Could hypnotize patients with her eyes alone
- Could cure them of pain and illness
- Married John Van Order in New York City
- Worked for a medical company
- Toured throughout the U.S., from San Francisco to New York City, healing people



**Teresita went into seizures, then a coma, after a man attempted to rape her. She was thought dead, and was prepared for burial. She awakened during funeral preparations and sat upright, fully recovered. Three days later, her *curandera*-mentor *Huila* died, and was buried in the coffin built for Teresita, who then assumed her teacher's role as healer.**



When she was 19, the president of Mexico banished Teresita to Nogales, Arizona, calling her a “dangerous agitator,” and sent 500 armed men to enforce the exile. She moved to El Paso, Texas, where she healed 200 patients a day. Rebels attacking Mexico from New Mexico called themselves *Teresistas* in her honor, and wore pictures of her pinned to their shirts.



- **Teresita was buried next to her father, Don Tomás, in Clifton, Arizona, in 1906.**
- **Teresita never saw her father again after she left Arizona for California, following a rift over her “shotgun” marriage to one “Lupe,” who tried to kill her after the wedding. Lupe may have been in the employ of President Diaz, the dictator who had ordered her exiled.**



At 17 years old, Teresita appears with her father, Don Tomás Urrea.

# Niño Fidencio (1898-1938)

1. Niño – innocent and childlike
2. Always happy and laughing
3. Cured President Plutarco Elias Calles and daughter
4. Linked to Jesus Christ – died at 33 (according to folk belief), disciples, cures, tunic, barefoot
5. Prescribed laughter
6. Two celebrations – birth (Christmas); death (Easter)



- Niño gained nationwide popularity in Mexico when he cured the daughter of President Plutarco Elias Calles. Niño also cured the president himself of a terrible illness.
- He performed cures and miracles but ran a hospital-like facility, combining conventional and traditional medicine.



## *El Niño* as Christ-like figure

- Died at age 33 (according to folklore)
- Had disciples
- Wore a tunic
- Went barefoot
- Meditated on a mountain



In 1930, El Niño embraces a cross as a sign of his faith in Christianity.

# *El Niño's Legacy*

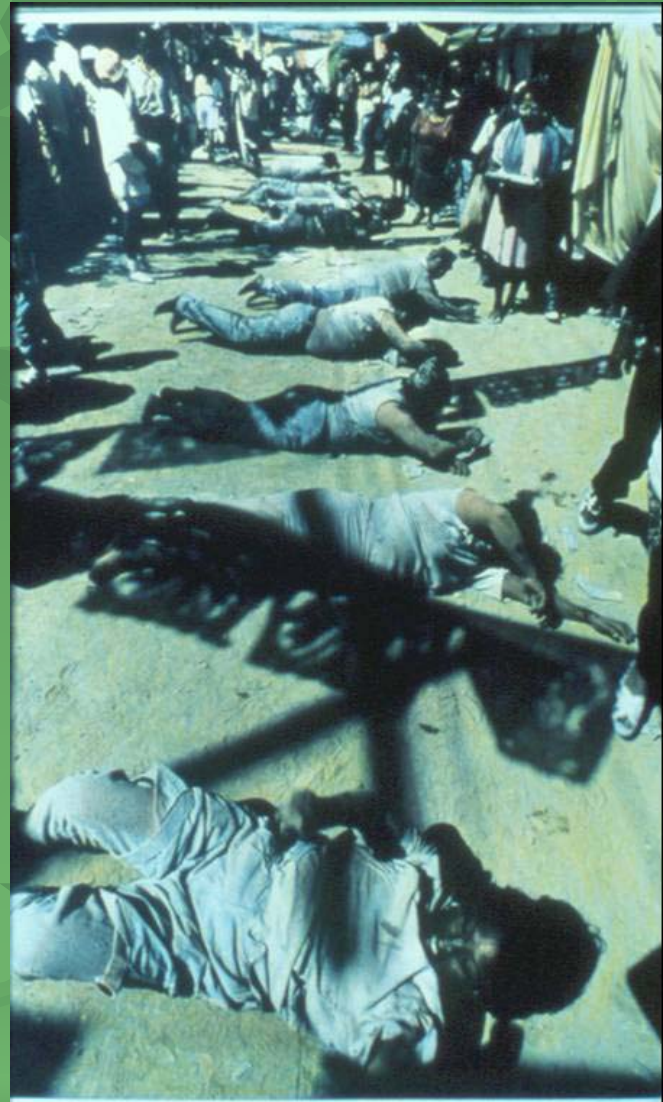
- Today, there are two annual celebrations which attract 20,000 people to Espinazo, Mexico, to celebrate the birth and death of *El Niño* – analogous to Easter and Christmas.
- *Fidencistas*, followers of *El Niño*, circle under the healing tree (*El Pirulito*) he used to sit under when he was alive.
- The healing tree, a Pirul tree in Espinazo, has its own caretaker. It is the first place that petitioners to *El Niño's* spirit go during the celebrations





# *El Nino's Legacy* -- Continued

- Penitents walk, crawl, or roll down The Road of Penance, *El Camino de Penitencia*.



These people are walking up to *El Serro de la Campana* (Bell's Mountain), like the garden of Gethsemane, to pray for healing power, petition for cures, and to meditate there as *El Niño* did when he was alive.



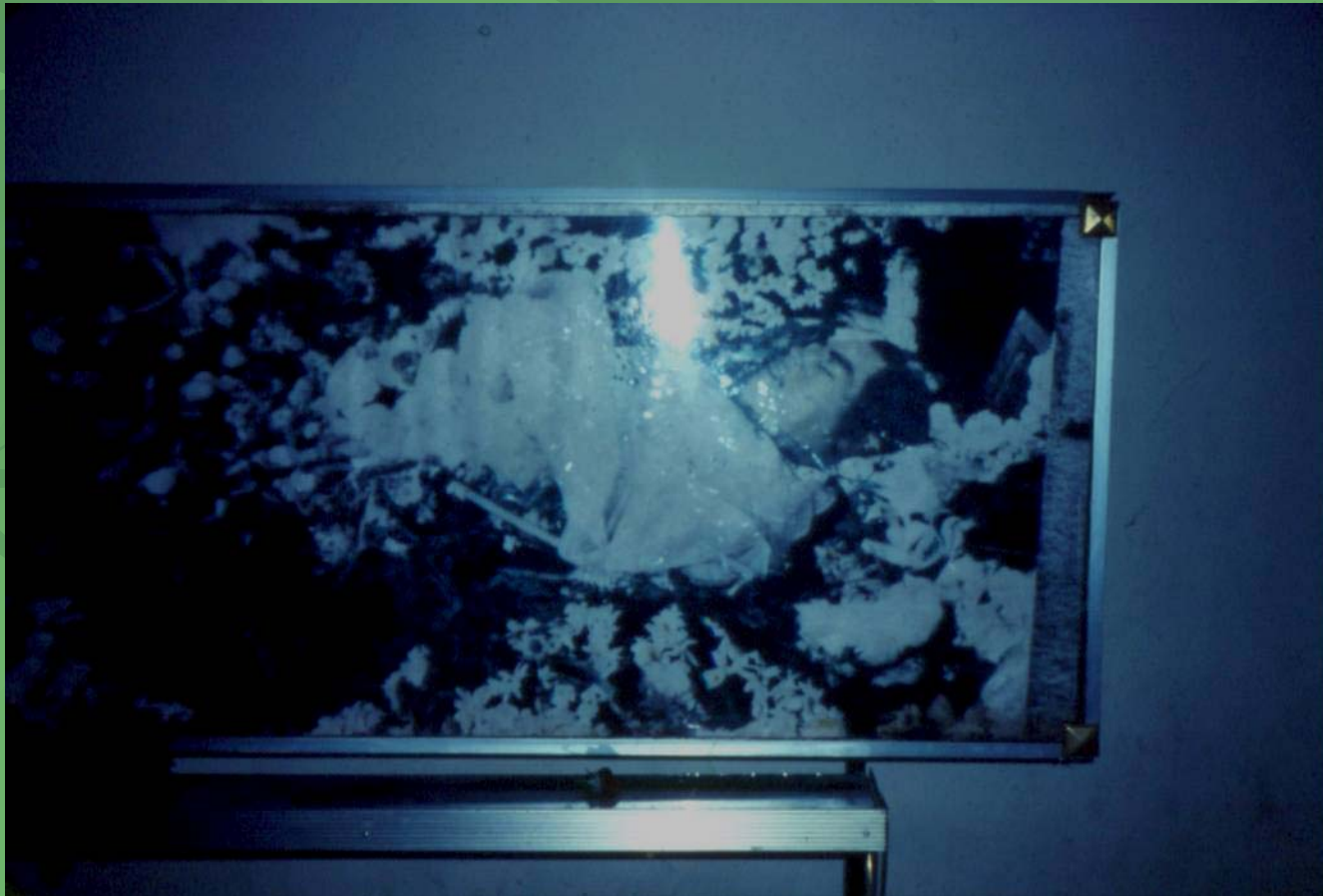
Many climb into a small pond, called *El Charquito*, to partake of its miraculous waters. *El Niño* is said to have bathed lepers here.



Crecensio Alvarado (*Chenchito*) [at left below], a well-known *Curandero*, functions as a *materia*, or medium. Also known as *Cajitas*, or “little boxes,” such mediums channel the spirit of *El Niño* to perform healings. *Cajitas* may also channel other healing spirits, among them Don Pedrito, Teresita, and Aurorita, a little girl who was a healer.



*El Niño* in photo taken during his funeral. His death was shrouded in rumor and mystery. Was his throat slit while he was in a trance? Or did he die of exhaustion? (He slept only 3 hours per night because of his intensive healing activities.)



# Commonalities of *Los Tres Grandes*

- 1.) Gift, *don*, from God to heal
- 2.) Considered somewhat odd or crazy
- 3.) Never charged a fee, but accepted donations
- 4.) Noble, sincere and humble
- 5.) Charismatic leaders
- 6.) Considered folk saints while still alive
- 7.) El Niño (according to folk belief) and Teresita were 33 when they died

# Commonalities of *Los Tres Grandes*

(Continued)

- 8.) Power of prophecy
- 9.) Don Pedrito healed through faith – the Oral Roberts of his time
- 10.) Teresita healed through hypnosis and prophecy – the Jean Dixon of her time
- 11.) El Niño healed through laughter – the Norman Cousins of his time
- 12.) All requested coffins be opened in three days

## V. Modern Curanderos(as)

- 1.) Maria (Houston) – uses plants to heal and psychic healing
- 2.) Cirilo Sanchez (San Antonio) -- exorcisms
- 3.) Jewel Babb (Valentine) – massage therapy and herbs
- 4.) Elena Avila (Albuquerque) – spiritual cleansing rituals



Maria, *Curandera* and psychic from  
Houston, Texas; uses plant rituals



Maria's clients represent a cross-section of society – here there are insurance salesmen, dressmakers, maids, etc.



Psychic healing: Clients bring plants to Maria, who keeps them for a week; she then tells clients how to take care of them, and the plants “absorb” the clients’ illnesses – a transfer of disease from person to plant through ritual.



Cirilo Sanchez of San Antonio came from Mexico in 1913; apprenticed under a relative; uses rituals involving candles, smoking incense, swords, religious icons; induces curative trances. His patients are sometimes referred by physicians.



Misfortune, illness both caused by evil spirits – Cirilo Sanchez invents exorcisms, speaks to evil spirits through himself as medium and performs hypnosis therapy to chase evil spirits away, at his invisible Hospital of St. John's.



The Power of Belief: If the patient believes, Cirilo Sanchez knows he can help him or her because the power of faith is an integral factor in the healing process.



Jewel Babb of Valentine, Texas; “Goat Woman of West Texas”; was the only doctor in Valentine

- **Used massage therapy, prayer**
- **Discovered growing power at age 56**
- **Kept Aloe Vera in her home**
- **Talked to God**
- **Did not charge for services**



“The Goat Woman of West Texas”: Lived in Sierra Blanca in a cabin on a ridge; husband was a champion rodeo rider; lost land, moved to Valentine; clients visited her home at all hours; she had a special way with the goats she kept (hence her unusual nickname).





Jewel Babb performing massage therapy on a young child.



Jewell Babb massaging baby.



# Elena Avila of Albuquerque, NM; a registered nurse-turned-curandera who cleanses the spirit through ritual.

- In addition to the egg ritual, employs eagle feathers for spiritual cleansings
- Considers herself an heir to ancient Aztec healing traditions
- Particularly powerful and effective in her treatment of women's traumas



## **VI. *Curanderismo* Classes**

Courses have been taking place in Mexico and/or at the University of New Mexico for the past three years. Two of the annual courses have been collaborations between the University of New Mexico and La Tranca Institute of Healing in Cuernavaca. Another, held in Oaxaca, is sponsored by the UNM School of Medicine.

# *Curanderismo* Class, Summer 2002, UNM Campus



This photo depicts an Albuquerque-area healer, Lydia Vandiver, D.O.M. (Doctor of Oriental Medicine), working with a patient. She is using “cupping,” or *ventosos*, to help diagnose illnesses, improve circulation, and alleviate muscle tension.

# 2002 UNM Class, Continued



Dr. Torres receives therapy from Paula Terero, a Reiki Master who incorporates Reiki into *curanderismo*.

# 2002 UNM Class, continued



Teresa Crosier, D.O.M., an Albuquerque-area healer, demonstrates preparation of herbs and tinctures for students.

# Cuernavaca, Summer 2003



From left, Arturo Ornelas Lizardi, Director of La Tranca Institute of Healing in Cuernavaca, Mexico, a teaching center for doctors, nurses, and lay healers in *curanderismo* techniques; Doña Vicenta, a venerated *curandera* of the Central Mexico region; and a translator.



# Cuernavaca 2003, continued



A Mexican *curandero*, Don Ricardo, a well-known healer from a village near Cuernavaca, demonstrates an egg ritual for American students from the University of New Mexico.

# Cuernavaca 2003, continued



Don Ricardo “reading” a broken egg in a glass for the class.

# Cuernavaca 2003, continued



The assembled Summer 2003 University of New Mexico folk healing class in Cuernavaca, near La Tranca clinic.

# Curanderismo Class, Summer 2004



**Morning Ritual led by Mexican Curanderos at Summer 2004  
Course in Traditional Medicine at University of New Mexico**

# Curanderismo Class, Summer 2004



**Mexican Curandero Blowing Conch Shell to Invoke Spirits of Nature**

# Curanderismo Class, Summer 2004



Curandera Performing Cleansing Ceremony Using Incense

# Curanderismo Class, Summer 2004



Curandera Performing Healing Ritual on Class Participant

# Curanderismo Class, Summer 2004



**Father and Daughter Curanderos from Amatlan, Mexico –  
Representing Passage of Ancient Knowledge from Generation to  
Generation**



# Curanderismo Class, Summer 2004



Group Head Massage Exercise Prior to Class

# Curanderismo Class, Summer 2004



**Dr. Arturo Ornelas Lizardi, Founder, La Tranca Institute of Healing, Cuernavaca, Mexico**

# Curanderismo Class, Summer 2004



**Tonita, a Master Curandera, from a Family Featuring Generations of Traditional Healers**

# Curanderismo Class, Summer 2004



**Demonstration of Traditional Massage Therapy Techniques**

# ¡Gracias!

Thank you for your interest in the great and ancient art of *Curanderismo*. If you would like to learn more, please contact Dr. Eliseo Torres at 505-277-0952, or e-mail at [cheo@unm.edu](mailto:cheo@unm.edu). Or visit his web page at:

**[www.unm.edu/~cheo/Cheo's folk healing page.htm](http://www.unm.edu/~cheo/Cheo's_folk_healing_page.htm)**

Or to contact him by mail please write to: Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs, the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131.