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Abstract

Authors of this article, professors at the University of New Mexico Eliseo Cheo Torres and Mario Del Angel-Guevara, currently teach English and Spanish courses on traditional medicine from Mexico, the southwest and other countries. The authors propose that the Latinx community reclaim and learn more about this traditional medicine that has been part of Hispanic/Latinx culture for hundreds of years. They propose that traditional medicine be merged with modern allopathic medicine in order to meet the needs of the uninsured and become an integral part of the Latinx culture in the United States. *Curanderismo* traditional medicine can be integrated into modern medicine in a number of professions such as psychology, nursing, physical therapy, midwifery, and general medical practice. The article starts by providing a description of the roles and backgrounds of traditional healers and how they support classes for the community followed by national and international pioneers in merging both medicines and the creation of a new health model.

Introduction

In earlier years, there were few modern medical physicians, counselors, priests and ministers, especially in rural and marginalized communities. The traditional healer *curandero* played the role of providing service to the medical, emotional and spiritual needs of impoverished communities such as immigrants and others without access to health insurance. In the following sections, we will discuss the need for a new health model that is responsive to the cultural, linguistic and economic needs of vulnerable populations in the United States.

Current Efforts to Provide Traditional Treatments for the Community

As part of the Summer intensive two-week course, we offer a traditional health fair to the community of Albuquerque, New Mexico and surrounding areas. This traditional health fair has been offered in different parts of the Albuquerque community such as the National Hispanic Cultural Center, the Plaza in Old Town, community centers and two of the New Mexico Native American Pueblos, Tesuque and Laguna. Recently, the health fair has been offered in the outdoor shady grounds of the University of New Mexico, main campus. This traditional health fair is similar to many offered in villages and communities throughout Mexico. In fact, the traditional health fair, at times, called *Fiesta de salud* (see figure 1), a health festival, since there is music, food, and other entertainment

during the traditional treatments for community members. The health treatments in outdoor areas offer energetic/spiritual cleansing *limpias*, by a number of local and international healers from Mexico, Cuba, and Guatemala. A second treatment area offers Mexican fire cupping *ventosas* which are similar to Chinese cupping using a thick glass tumbler, or special Chinese cupping glasses of many sizes which is adapted to different parts of the body. A lighter is used to heat the glass and place in parts of the body to create a suction that pulls the skin and alleviates pain such as that of sciatica or muscle strains. This treatment is very effective in Chinese medicine and is also a remedy the *curanderos/as* use in treating their patients throughout Mexico, Central and South American. A third healing area involves hands-on healing called *sobadas* by trained healers that can be considered traditional chiropractors for body adjustments and alignments. A fourth area is one where a number of herbalists advise patients about preparing medicinal plants in an alcohol-based tincture or water-based microdoses. These preparations, as well as the other treatments are offered to the community at no cost or for a small donation.



Figure 1. *Curandero/Herbalist Laurencio López Núñez Providing Treatment to a Young Girl at the University of New Mexico's Traditional Health Fair (Courtesy of Curanderismo Program)*

Learning Traditional Medicine from Mexican Mentors

In all of the class discussions, we mention the influences of the traditional healer *curandero/a*. The first online class offered in the Fall semester begins with “*El ultimo: Chenchito, The Last of the Fidencista Healers*”. Chenchito (see figure 2) was Professor Torres’ mentor and teacher for more than 30 years and was able to join the summer class in Albuquerque before his death at the age of ninety in 2018. The title *El ultimo Chenchito* does not reflect that this healer was the last of the Fidencista healing movement but that Chenchito was the last living healer that met the famous “healer of healers” Niño Fidencio in the 1930’s. Chenchito’s mother was one of Niño Fidencio’s disciples in the 1920’s and 30’s in the small village of Espinazo, Nuevo Leon, Mexico. Currently, a number of followers of *El Niño* Fidencio’s healings congregate and form what they call *misiones* or missions throughout Mexico and parts of the U.S., (Torres, 2019). Chenchito was a *curandero* all of his life and a *materia*, or medium, since he was able to channel the spirit of Niño Fidencio under a trance during many of his healings.

The role of Chenchito in the Fidencista movement was that of a spiritual leader, similar to a bishop in the catholic church. Today, Chenchito is remembered by many people in northern Mexico, the southwest of the U.S., and students at the University of New Mexico who met him during the summer class. The legacy of the Fidencista movement goes beyond borders as many people from throughout Mexico and the United States visit the Niño's hometown of Espinazo, Nuevo Leon, twice a year to celebrate his birth and commemorate his death during two festivals, in March and October. During these events, many spiritual leaders, like Chenchito, and other healers *curanderos/as* and *misiones* arrive in Espinazo to conduct mass healings like El Niño Fidencio did in the beginning of the 20th century.



Figure 2. *Curandero* Fidencista Chenchito Alvarado Talking to Student Sandra Torres at The Traditional Health Fair (Courtesy of Curanderismo Program).

A second healer from Mexico City that has been part of the summer class for more than 20 years is Rita Navarrete. She specializes in a number of healing methods such as *sobadas*, hands-on healing; *hierbera* herbalist; *quiopráctica* traditional chiropractor; as well as a motivational speaker. She also specializes in *ventosas* fire cupping and *manteadas* shawl alignment. A few years ago, Rita was invited to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C. at their annual Folklife Festival where she did a demonstration to a large audience on traditional laugh therapy *Risoterapia*. Laughter was a therapy that Niño Fidencio constantly used in the early 1900's. Nowadays, we have discovered that laughter produces endorphins, the natural body's pain killer and reduces the stress hormone epinephrine and cortisol. Rita Navarrete has been recognized and invited by multiple organizations in the United States to perform demonstrations of Mexican traditional healing modalities. California, New Mexico, New York, Minnesota, and Missouri are just a few of the many places where Rita has presented and demonstrated the traditional medicine of Mexico and the Southwest. She has an extensive knowledge on Mexican herbal medicine *Herbolaria Mexicana* that she uses to treat patients that suffer from a number of ailments. In her Mexico City clinic, Rita offers herbal remedies, grows her own medicinal plants, prepares alcohol-based medicinal tinctures and water-based microdoses. She performs hands-on healing such as cupping *ventosas*, shawl alignment *manteadas* and traditional massage *sobadas* and she has built a Mexican sweat lodge called *Temazcal* in Spanish. Rita Navarrete emphasizes the role of love and culture as healing elements in a person's life where

emotions play a big role in the healing and recovery process. One of her famous phrases she uses is “*La cultura cura*”, “Culture heals” (see figure 3).



Figure 3. *Curandera* Rita Navarrete Performing an Opening Ceremony at the Traditional Medicine Course at the University of New Mexico. (Courtesy of Curanderismo Program)

Another *curandero* that teaches at the summer classes lives in Oaxaca, Mexico. He is Laurencio Lopez Núñez who learned the profession of *curanderismo* from his grandmother at the age of six. He discusses his visions that happened at an early age and prepared him to become a *curandero*. As a child, Laurencio felt a calling from the plants that grew in the forest near his home. Laurencio mentions that as a young boy he felt that the forest was showing him all the treasures hidden in herbs. His grandmother knew he had been given the gift to practice the traditional medicine of his ancestors. Laurencio moved with his grandmother to the city of Oaxaca, Mexico, and was initiated into the *curanderismo* tradition. Later in life, he went to the university and received his formal training as a botanist and started working for a non-profit in several marginalized communities of Oaxaca. Laurencio specializes in energetic/spiritual cleansings *limpias* and uses a number of elements to perform them such as sweeping the body with certain plants including Rue, Basil, Rosemary and Lavender. He also uses an egg, to absorb the negative vibrations of the body, and sprays the body with an indigenous distilled alcoholic beverage called *mezcal* that derives from the maguey plant. This practice is called “breath of life”. In the stages of his *limpia*, he uses the incense of the copal tree resin to smudge the person and cleanse the body of unwanted energy. The last step is giving the person a candle and asking that it be burned to destroy any fear or sickness that is not wanted. Like Rita, Laurencio has been invited to Europe and other parts of the U.S. to do his healings, especially, energetic/spiritual cleansings or *limpias*.

The three Mexican mentors and healers; Chenchito, Rita and Laurencio, have dedicated their lives to serving and providing health treatments to marginalized communities and teaching their skills and knowledge to American followers. All three have donated to the poor and needy financial support and servicers unselfishly expecting nothing in return. They believe that we, in the United States, are ready to offer an integrative medical clinic that merges both traditional and modern medicine. This is a lesson that the medical profession in the United States can learn from traditional healers such as Rita, Laurencio and the late Chenchito.

National and International Pioneers in Integrated and Traditional Medicine

Dr. Andrew Weil is a graduate medical doctor from Harvard University and received his medical degree in 1968. Dr. Weil is an internationally recognized pioneer in integrative medicine who founded the Andrew Weil Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona. His writings and research have led him to be featured in the front page of Time magazine three times. His videos on integrated medicine and publications have been disseminated worldwide. He discusses many of the traditional medicine treatments that we mention in the university's *curanderismo* classes and shares a holistic approach to healing the mind, body and spirit, (The Andrew Weil Center for Integrative Medicine, n.d.). Some of his basic recommendations on staying healthy is that we prevent illnesses by maintaining a healthy diet. Other simple suggestions to lead a healthy lifestyle are to manage and control stress, limit the drinking of alcohol and coffee and eliminate the smoking of cigarettes. He recommends taking herbs for minor illnesses and using them for cooking. His basic philosophy of living a healthy life is similar to what traditional Latinx healers have been practicing for many years. Because of Dr. Weil's philosophy of healing, *curanderismo* has been appreciated and understood by many.

Just like Dr. Andrew Weil's promotion of integrated medicine, Dr. Arturo Ornelas from Mexico is a internationally renowned promoter of integrated and traditional medicine. He studied in Europe where he obtained his doctorate at the University of Geneva and later did field work with the Latin American World Health Organization. Dr. Ornelas is the founder of *El Centro de Desarrollo hacia la Comunidad (CEDEHC)*, a community school of traditional medicine in Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico that offers a modest tuition and scholarships to meet the needs of community learners in Mexico and other countries, (Torres & Miranda, 2017) . His school was started more than thirty years ago and has graduated hundreds of traditional healers from Mexico, Central America and South America. Many of his teaching modalities are similar to a medical school curriculum emphasizing the body's digestive system, nervous system, and skeletal system. He also teaches many of the topics addressed in this article such as medicinal plants, sweat lodges *temazcal*, hands-on healing *sobadas*, Mayan acupuncture and acupressure, hydrotherapy (healing with water), shawl alignments *manetadas*, intestinal blockage *empacho*, and spiritual/energetic cleansings *limpias*, (Curanderismo Santa Fe, n.d.).

Dr. Ornelas has been one of the greatest advocates and preservers of Mexican traditional medicine. In 1982, the Mexican government tried to criminalize the use of *curanderismo*, and for this reason, Dr. Ornelas saw the need to legitimize the teaching and practice of traditional medicine through the recognition from the state university of Morelos, Mexico, *Universidad Autonoma del Estado de Morelos*, an effort that started to become reality in 1983. Dr. Ornelas has contributed to legitimizing and professionalizing the techniques and methods used in the different healing modalities in *curanderismo* while at the same time protecting it from its prohibition. Like Rita Navarrete, Dr. Ornelas has been invited by different individuals in the United States to lecture in traditional medicine. To date, CEDEHC has graduated thousands of healers with knowledge in traditional methods as well as specialists in herbal medicine of Mexico. Together with his students, Dr. Ornelas visits marginalized and impoverished communities in Mexico and Central America to help people in need of low-cost, accessible and natural medical treatment.

Both Dr. Andrew Weil from the United States and Dr. Arturo Ornelas from Mexico have been promoting the teaching and research of traditional medicine and integrated medicine. Because of their commitment and dedication to this medicine, we have been able to offer some university courses on the revival of the medicine of our ancestors. Dr. Ornelas has attended our summer traditional medicine classes and has lectured on the innovations he is offering at his school, CEDEHC. He has been able to develop branches of his school throughout Mexico and offers courses on traditional medicine at private and public Mexican universities. His success has allowed his teachings and courses to be recognized by the Mexican national Secretary of Health.

Merging Latinx Traditional Medicine *Curanderismo* with Modern Allopathic Practice

For the past few years, we have been promoting the possible merging of traditional medicine of our Latinx culture with that of allopathic modern medicine. There are a number of students of medicine, nurses, physicians and other allied health professionals that have attended our summer “*Curanderismo: Traditional Medicine without Borders*” intensive class. This group of professionals agree that it is time to blend both traditional and modern medicine practices as much as possible. As educators, we recognize the importance of culturally responsive structures in the health care system as well as in the education system. Such mechanism can be achieved by the fusing of modern with traditional concepts of healing (Torres & Sawyer, 2017). One of our instructors in the summer class is a recently retired physician, Dr. Selma Sroka, a native of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Dr. Sroka attended medical school at the University of Minnesota and completed three years in the family medicine specialty. She also has done a number of workshops on integrative traditional medicine and believes that a physician should address emotional as well as spiritual healing that is connected to many illnesses. She has apprenticed with a number of *curanderas* such as the late Elena Ávila who was a registered nurse and *curandera* from Albuquerque, New Mexico. She has also worked with Rita Navarrete, *curandera* from Mexico City, whose biography has already been mentioned. Currently, she works with the Latinx organization *El Centro* in Minneapolis where she has initiated a tutorial called “Fundamentals of Traditional Medicine”. Dr. Sroka is one of an increasing number of physicians who believes in integrating allopathic with traditional medicine.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Latinx individuals were interested in traditional ways of dealing with the symptoms of this virus. In conversations with *curandera* Rita Navarrete in Mexico City, we discovered that she was also using traditional medicine on COVID family patients and seeing excellent results. Although, there were no clinical studies done with these treatments, future research can prove the effectiveness of these treatments. The courses on traditional medicine that are offered at the University of New Mexico as well as the Coursera platform enrolled a large number of students as evident by the more than 40,000 students currently registered worldwide in the five Coursera online courses. This indicates that many people throughout the world are seeking alternative treatments to meet their health needs and to reclaim part of their lost culture.

There is much publicity on the immigrant population in the United States and other countries, especially Mexico. Unfortunately, many of these immigrants are uninsured or underinsured and the only time they receive medical attention is when they are admitted to an emergency room. The emergency clinics and urgent care facilities are oftentimes overcrowded and understaffed and cannot meet the needs of the immigrant population. There are times

when these clinics are not adequately prepared for patients that are Spanish-speaking and communication is difficult. Many of these individuals, especially those from Mexico, are used to seeing a *curandero/a* or they receive free medical treatments from the hospital system in Mexico called IMMS *Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social*. They are surprised, when in the United States, they discover that without insurance they receive a large medical bill. Many Mexican physicians may even suggest that the patient visit a local healer *curandero/a* if it appears to be a minor illness. Prescriptions are affordable since the health care system in Mexico also has a pharmacy. The process of receiving medical services in Mexico is simple and affordable and the name that is used in the Mexican health system is “*popular*” and “*universal*” to meet the needs of the population.

If a patient decides to see a local *curandero/a*, there is a small fee or donation and the patient may receive a medicinal plant that can be consumed as a tea, alcohol-based tincture, a water-based microdoses, and/or a hands-on body treatment. The *curandero/a* also serves the rural areas of the country where there are no medical clinics. The healer could serve as a midwife *partero/a* delivering infants at childbirth. Traditional medicine is accepted throughout the country and in large urban areas like Mexico City, one can see businessmen and professionals seeking the advice of a traditional healer and purchasing medicinal plants at the local herb store, *yerbería*.

There is a need for additional research on the effectiveness of traditional medicine, especially on the use of plants. Research in plants like Tree Spinach (*Cnidocolus chayamansa*), also known as Chaya found in South Texas, California, Arizona and parts of Mexico, has shown effectiveness in the control of type II diabetes due to its nutritional benefits and antidiabetic effects in the body, (Kuti & Torres, 1996). With studies on traditional plants such as the one conducted at the Texas A&M University in Kingsville, the benefits of plants like Chaya can be demonstrated scientifically. Universities in Mexico such as the *Universidad de Chapingo*, a federally funded public university that specializes in agriculture, in Texcoco, Estado de Mexico, have conducted a number of scientific studies to demonstrate the effectiveness of many of the medicinal plants used by *curanderos/as* in Mexico. A famous resource where these studies can be found is the encyclopedia of medicinal plants in the markets of Mexico, *Plantas Medicinales en los Mercados de Mexico*, by the department of phytotechnics at the University of Chapingo, published in 2011.

In the United States, Chinese traditional medicine and the Ayurveda medicine of India are often recognized as ancient traditional medicines that are still practiced today. These two kinds of complimentary/integrated medicines are recognized and practiced in many countries. Oftentimes, patients try traditional/complimentary/intergrated medicine for many of the same reasons mentioned in this paper that make conventional modern medicine an option that is not accessible to many. Like Mexican traditional medicine *Curanderismo*, Chinese and the Ayurveda medicine of India use indigenous remedies and herbs as natural medicine, (Patwardhan, Warude, Pushpangadan, & Bhatt, 2005). Governments of both countries, China and India, have recognized the importance of training and research on their traditional medicine and incorporate modern allopathic with traditional medicine under one single hospital or health center. For example, in China, 95% of general hospitals include traditional medicine as a specialization that the patients can choose, while in India, the government has established laboratories for drug testing using herbal medicine. In India, they have established a separate system of medicine that deals with Ayurveda medicine and oversees the teaching, training, and research that promotes ancestral medicine. In New

Mexico, United States, as part of the university health system, the Center for Life offers integrated medicine services to the community including acupuncture, massage therapy, etc... (UNM health system, n.d.)

A recent visit that Drs. Torres and Del Angel-Guevara and others made to the *Universidad Intercultural*, a tribal college in the town of San Felipe del Progreso, Estado de Mexico, in Mexico, has shown a health clinic that has integrated both modern allopathic medicine with traditional medicine. In this clinic we observed a birthing center that offered multiple ways of birthing including the traditional child birth inside the sweat lodge *temazcal* as well as other alternative options such as under water, natural birth, c-section and other options. We were impressed to learn that the clinic had a laboratory for the preparation of herbal medicine such as alcohol-based tinctures or water-based microdoses using local medicinal plants. The clinic also offered patients energetic cleansings *limpias*, acupuncture, acupressure, and the sweat lodge therapy which they refer to as ozonotherapy with ancestral wisdom. This clinic is managed by allopathic modern physicians who work in collaboration with traditional healers *curanderos/as*. We believe, that like in China and India, the implementation of the Mexican model can be replicated in the United States especially in communities with a large minority and marginalized population.

What we are proposing is a merging of traditional medicine with conventional modern medicine as observed in our visit to Mexico and the institutionalization of this model in China and India. We believe that the healers can work together with physicians, nurses and other allied health professions. We realize that modern allopathic medicine in the United States is important and saves many lives. However, the health system is costly and not affordable to many of the Latinx population. Accepting the ancient knowledge and wisdom of traditional medicine of Mexico and other Latin American countries can benefit millions of Latinx in the United States. We are also proposing that schools be established such as CEDEHC, mentioned in this article in order to train healers or incorporate this traditional medicine into other professions that can provide a quality health service with a holistic approach to those in need. We have seen this model operate in the CEDEHC school where the healers receive a certificate after three years of training and they work cooperatively with physicians and nurses. The healers treat simple illnesses and are able to refer major health concerns to physicians and vice-versa, physicians may refer patients to the *curanderos/as*. A major benefit to the patient is that the healer will most likely be of the same cultural background and speak the same language; therefore, communicating more effectively with the patient. Being able to relate to the patient is part of the healing process and can speed up recovery.

Conclusion


In conclusion, clinics similar to our proposal are The Center for Life, part of the University of New Mexico's health care system, and the Andrew Weil Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona. These two centers can be universal throughout the United States, especially, where there are large numbers of Latinx populations. We recommend that the Latinx culture in traditional medicine be incorporated into similar clinics in order to meet the growing needs of the Hispanic/Latinx population and the immigrant influx of uninsured individuals. This proposal may take time to develop but the first step is to discuss it and learn about the contributions from our ancestors through classes such as the ones previously mentioned. We have observed students feeling a pride and acceptance of the traditional medicine of earlier generations and eager to reclaim this part of their culture.

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