

Nadine Syed Jefri

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The Medical Cultures of Latin America and Philippines

In today's world, Latinos and Filipinos are considered "cousins" due to their respective historical backgrounds. Despite the differences that separate the two groups, both tend to find similarities from things ranging from food to language and even to medicine. Due to practices and exchanges that took place during the era of the Spanish Empire, particularly during the 1500s to the 1800s, the intermingling of Latin American, Spanish, and Filipino cultures became rather inevitable. Many Filipinos and Latin Americans tend to find at least one member of their family who seems to have been married into the family as a means of cross-cultural purposes (a common technique for colonization). This led to familiar experiences in terms of growing up when it comes to both groups of people. In particular, both Latin American and Filipino children have experienced the whole "homemade" remedies situation as a means of avoiding the medical bill and the doctor overall. In the words of a Filipino-American comedian, Jo Koy, "you had to die to go to the hospital" in reference to his Filipino mother's means of treating illnesses as he was growing up. Dating back to the indigenous tribes of both Spanish, herbal medicine was a large part of the culture and much of the "homemade" remedies families of both cultures use descend from the medical practices of their ancestors. Whether it is a cultural coincidence or a cultural exchange is to be explored.

Indigenous Healthcare before Colonization

When looking at Latin America and the Philippines in terms of herbal medicines, indigenous tribes are often brought up. In the Latin American perspective, a lot of modern day

people of Hispanic descent who use homemade remedies tend to come from places such as Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, etc. These places are where the Aztecs, Mayans, and Olmecs were located.



These groups were close enough to each other geographically that both empires were included when speaking about Latin American herbal remedies. Indigenous groups often used herbal remedies to heal problems such as syphilis, diarrhea, and other similar

diagnoses. These remedies date back far before the Spanish first set foot in 1492. Indigenous people had ways to consume herbs or a mixture of herbs that supposedly helped with certain illnesses such as dysentery. It was far better than the concoctions that Europeans had often whipped up to clear their illnesses.

In addition, religion and medicine often went together in these indigenous groups. For example, Mayans were known to mix these two as they perceived sickness as “captivity of the soul by supernatural beings, angered by some perceived misbehaviour”(“Mayan Medicine”) as



well as seeing sickness as an imbalance to health (a bit like a spiritual version of the “four humors theory”). Like doctors, the Mayans would have specialized people to perform these healing rituals called shamans (pictured) and ah-men(translated into “disease throwers”) except for the fact that these individuals (particularly shaman) were the connection between the spiritual and physical worlds. In a sense, shamans are essentially a combination of a doctor and a priest; highly regarded in the Mayan perspective. The rituals performed were in order to “cure” various diseases. While shamans do exist in the modern world,

they are more for preserving culture and for religious purposes rather than medical purposes, leaving surgery and other medical procedures to modern medicine; a more sensible thing to do in this day and age.

Like the Indigenous groups of Latin America, the Philippines also had regions of indigenous groups that still exist today, dating back from the pre-colonial area. In pre-colonial Philippines, indigenous groups were spread around the islands and composed of people of Austronesian descent. When it comes to healing, Cebuano people have stood out particularly due to their folk healing. The indigenous folk in the Visaya region have an equivalent of a shaman called a *mananambal* which is a “local medicinal doctor who resorts to indigenous means of treating patients who are in pain or have been long suffering from various forms of illness caused by supernatural factors”(Berdon 51). In Tagalog (the indigenous group where Manila is located), there is more than one role when it comes to healing unlike having one *mananambal*. The outstanding similarity between Cebuanos and Mayans, two indigenous groups on different sides of the globe, is their reliance on spiritual healers that manage to survive thanks to preservation of culture. The use of herbal medicine was extremely necessary and still being used as “homemade” remedies by modern Cebuanos (some individuals today even going as far as relying completely on these remedies as a replacement for going to the doctor).

Spanish Colonization of Latin America

In 1521, Hernan Cortes had colonized what is now modern day Mexico on behalf of the Spanish Empire which continued to rule for the next 300 years or so. This unfortunate event brought the downfall of the Aztec and Mayan empires as well as the borderline erasure of their existence as Spain essentially enforced their culture onto the indigenous folk. Spanish colonization inevitably affected the indigenous folk as well as their medical practices,

considering indigenous medicine often involved religion on a more physical level than Europeans.



Upon discovery of the land in Latin America, Spanish doctors would agree that “the New World was a wonder-drug gold mine”(Saldana, 52). While the Spanish would spend the next hundreds of years collecting and experimenting with the native plants of the land, the indigenous people would spend their years adapting their culture to Spanish culture while others would die from the diseases introduced by the European settlers (which was an unfortunate yet inevitable side effect of “discovery”). Adapting to culture meant that religion would change as the Spanish would want it. Over the years, Aztec and Mayan gods would fade into obscurity as Catholicism was introduced by the Spanish colonizers. The image attached depicts the Evangelization of indigenous people which was a means of adapting the people to European lifestyle. Colonization of these lands have led to much loss of indigenous culture, only to have some remains be discovered centuries later. Of course, Spain was not the only European country in the Americas but they claimed much land as a means of competition. The colonization of the Americas would only benefit the Spanish Crown in terms of trade and land ownership amongst other large countries at the time and this would only continue until the Spanish Crown was defeated in a series of losses.

Spanish Colonization in the Philippines

In the same year that Spain colonized Mexico, Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan had colonized the Philippines on behalf of the Spanish Empire. The Philippines has been the only colony of Spain that is located in Asia and much of Spain’s influence is still very present in

many parts of the country, including the names, food, and even medical practices. Magellan landed in what is modern day Cebu, a city in the south of Philippines (Visaya region). At the time of Magellan's arrival, there were no European settlements in the Philippines. Magellan, unfortunately for him, underestimated the Cebuanos and had lost to Lapu Lapu in the Battle of Mactan on April 27th of 1521. This was the first occurrence of resistance to Spanish Rule and would not be the last. Eventually, Magellan would lose his life to a poisoned arrow, showing how the Cebuanos were actually quite advanced in terms of weaponry. Soon after, Luis de Velasco of Nueva España had sent Miguel López de Legazpi who continued to further colonize the country, establishing the first Spanish settlement in Cebu. From there on, Legazpi had become the first governor of the Philippines as well as leading on expeditions towards places such as Luzon as well as Manila, in which he removed a Muslim ruler and established Manila, a city that is now the capital of modern day Philippines. Much of what the world sees today when looking at the Philippines comes primarily from Legazpi's time of governing.

Like the indigenous groups in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, etc., the Philippines (particularly those who lived near or in established Spanish colonies) had also suffered the same fate, much of its indigenous culture taken away hence why many Filipinos today are not necessarily in touch with their indigenous roots; some don't even recognize their roots. Just like the Aztecs and Mayans, The Spanish were determined to "liberate" the indigenous tribes from their own religions by forcing Roman Catholicism on them, resulting in modern Philippines having a population that's over 86% Roman Catholic. If it were not for Spanish colonization, the Philippines today would have likely been under Islamic influence considering how many indigenous tribes migrated from areas like Borneo which are Islamic states.

Like Spanish America, the Philippines was a source for trading materials in terms of their natural resources as well as a means for competition for territory, especially against China and the Islamic Empire in the case of this country. In a short amount of time, the infiltration of Roman Catholicism from colonization would begin to manifest itself in traditional healing rituals like the ones conducted by mananambal. Like “Our Lady of Guadalupe” in Spanish America, the Philippines would have their version of the Virgin Mary who was titled “Our Lady of Manaoag”. This manifestation of Spanish colonization, while establishing the basis for the progress of modern science amongst Filipinos, would put traditional medicines to the side. Like the shamans of the Mayan Empire, Cebu’s mananambals would become a more cultural thing in which only locals would partake in. In fact, rarely anyone in the Philippines, especially cities like Manila, would turn to the witch doctor for health issues. In the modern world, witch doctors like mananambals and shamans have become cultural wonders and only help in situations of spiritual healing.



Spanish Trade in 1571 to 1815

The result of colonization in both Latin America and the Philippines resulted in cultural mixture, hence why many people in both Latin America and the Philippines are often mestizo. In particular, the trade was between Mexico and Manila, in which Spain managed to exploit both lands. The ship, known as the Manila Galleons, included items such as precious metals, luxury, goods, spices, as well as herbal plants. This large vessel “sailed between Acapulco and Manila for two and a half centuries” (Bjork 25) as it would bring goods particularly from China to trade

for the silver that existed in the New World (most likely the silver from the mines of Cerro Rico near Potosi, Bolivia).

In addition to these goods, people were also brought aboard to marry into other cultures which explains why Latin America and the Philippines today tend to have a lot of unique identities in the modern day. Today, Mexico and the Philippines celebrate cultural similarities and even uphold a friendship that is over 400 years old. In particular, the state of Jalisco, which was discovered by Lopez de Lezgapí, has a celebration that brings both communities together. Jalisco's connections with the Philippines is still very much embraced today. The two countries would even gain independence in the 1800s, Hidalgo y Costilla inciting action in Mexico while Emilio Aguinaldo would do the same in the Philippines,

When it comes to culture, it is a bit difficult to tell where one culture stops and the other starts because the two cultures are very intertwined due to colonization and Spanish influence. In modern day homemade remedies, our “lolas” and “abuelas” are very much experts in that field but the origins of these “magical” cures are often blurry enough that we don't think about where it truly came from; we just assume it's apart of our culture considering many of these cures have been passed down through generations since the age of the Spanish Empire in the 1500s-1800s. Included below is a list of modern herbal remedies used today in Filipino and Latin American families (particularly those located in the former virreinato of New Spain).

The following are the 10 Medicinal Plants in the Philippines endorsed by DOH:

- **Akapulko (Cassia alata)** a medicinal plant called “ringworm bush or schrub” and “acapulco” in English, this Philippine herbal medicine is used to treat tinea infections, insect bites, ringworms, eczema, scabies and itchiness.
- **Ampalaya (Momordica charantia)** Common names include “bitter melon ” or “bitter gourd ” in English. This Philippine herbal medicine has been found to be effective in the treatment of diabetes (diabetes mellitus), hemorrhoids, coughs, burns and scalds, and being studied for anti-cancer properties.
- **Bawang (Allium sativum)** Common name in english is “Garlic”. Bawang is a used in Philippine herbal medicine to treat infection with antibacterial, antiinflammatory, anti-cancer and anti-hypertensive properties. It is widely used to reduce cholesterol level in blood.
- **Bayabas (Psidium guajava)** – “Guava” in English. A Philippine herbal medicine used as antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, anti-spasmodic, antioxidant hepatoprotective, anti-allergy, antimicrobial, anti-plasmodial, anti-cough, antidiabetic, and antigenotoxic in folkloric medicine.
- **Lagundi (Vitex negundo)** – known as “5-leaved chaste tree” in english is used in Philippine herbal medicine to treat cough, colds and fever. It is also used as a relief for asthma & pharyngitis, rheumatism, dyspepsia, boils, and diarrhea.
- **Niyog-niyogan (Quisqualis indica L.)** – is a vine known as “Chinese honey suckle”. This Philippine herbal medicine is used to eliminate intestinal parasites.
- **Sambong (Blumea balsamifera)**– English name: “Ngai camphor or Blumea camphor” is a Philippine herbal medicine used to treat kidney stones, wounds and cuts, rheumatism, anti-diarrhea, anti spasms, colds and coughs and hypertension
- **Tsaang Gubat (Ehretia microphylla Lam.)** – English: “Wild tea” is a Philippine herbal medicine taken as tea to treat skin allergies including eczema, scabies and itchiness wounds in child birth
- **Ulasimang Bato | Pansit-Pansitan (Peperomia pellucida)** is a Philippine herbal medicine known for its effectivity in treating arthritis and gout.
- **Yerba Buena (Clinopodium douglasii)** – commonly known as Peppermint, is used in Philippine herbal medicine as analgesic to relieve body aches and pain due to rheumatism and gout. It is also used to treat coughs, colds and insect bites

(Obtained from Kilusang
Bagong Lipunan)

Herb Latin Binomial Spanish Term	Uses	Potential Interactions	Adverse Reactions
Aloe <i>Aloe vera</i> Sábila, zavila	laxative, amenorrhea, antiinflammatory, diabetes, peptic ulcers, asthma, colds, wound healing	antidiabetics, diuretics, laxatives, digoxin, corticosteroids	diarrhea, abdominal pain and cramps, electrolyte imbalance, increased menstrual bleeding
Brook mint <i>Mentha canadensis</i> Menta poleo	dyspepsia, anxiety/insomnia	none reported	contact dermatitis or allergic reactions, asthma exacerbations
Chamomile <i>Matricaria recutita</i> Manzanilla	insomnia, GI disturbances, oral mucositis, cough, antispasmodic, skin conditions, hemorrhoids, antiinflammatory	sedatives, CNS depressants, statins, warfarin, oral antifungals, and other CYP3A4 substrates	allergic, anaphylactic reactions; highly concentrated infusions induce vomiting
Clove <i>Syzygium aromaticum</i> Clavo	toothache	anticoagulants, antiplatelets, antidiabetics	mucosal tissue irritation, electrolyte imbalance, hepatic dysfunction, GI irritation
Cod liver oil Aceite de hígado de bacalao	asthma, expectorant	anticoagulants, antihypertensives	fishy taste, eructation, GI irritation
Eucalyptus <i>Eucalyptus globulus</i> Eucalipto	cough, asthma, bronchitis	antidiabetics, cytochrome P450 substrates	GI irritation, allergic reactions, severe toxicity and death
Garlic <i>Allium sativum</i> Ajo	hypertension, cough, infections, hyperlipidemia	anticoagulants, oral contraceptives, antifungals, antiretrovirals, chemotherapeutic agents and other CYP3A4 substrates	GI irritation, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, bleeding, platelet dysfunction, asthma, allergic reactions, contact dermatitis
Ginger <i>Zingiber officinale</i> Jengibre	nausea, rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis, flatulence, anorexia, toothache, migraine	antacids, histamine ₂ blockers, proton pump inhibitors, anticoagulants, antiplatelets, barbiturates, antidiabetics, and antihypertensive drugs	heartburn, diarrhea, GI irritation; overdoses can cause arrhythmias and CNS depression; skin irritations and dermatitis with topical use
Ginseng <i>Panax ginseng</i> Ginseng	stimulant, diuretic, digestive aid, stress, improve athletic stamina, hot flashes, depression, asthma, cancer	anticoagulants, antidiabetics, antipsychotics, MAO inhibitors, caffeine	insomnia, vaginal bleeding, mastalgia, tachycardia, hypertension, palpitations, headache, edema, Stevens-Johnson syndrome
Honey/royal jelly <i>Apis mellifera</i> Miel o jalea real	asthma	anticoagulants	allergic reactions
Lavender <i>Lavandula angustifolia</i> Alhucema (Flor de lavanda)	anxiety, insomnia, health maintenance	CNS depressants, anticoagulants	CNS depression, GI irritation
Linden <i>Tilia europa</i> Tilo	insomnia, hypertension, headaches, pruritus, nervous tension, cold and cough, nervous palpitations, diuretic	none reported	contact urticaria, cardiac damage
Oregano <i>Origanum vulgare</i> Orégano	colic, muscle pain, menstrual cramps, expectorant	antidiabetics, anticoagulants	GI irritation
Passion flower <i>Passiflora incarnata</i> Pasionara	anxiety, hypertension	anticoagulants, sedatives	sedation
Peppermint <i>Mentha piperita</i> Yerba buena	flatulence, dyspepsia, colic, indigestion	cytochrome P450 substrates, histamine ₂ blockers, proton pump inhibitors, antacids	GI irritation, allergic reactions, burning mouth
Sage <i>Salvia officinalis</i> Salvia	diabetes	CNS depressants, antidiabetics, anticonvulsants, sedatives	seizures, GI irritation, dizziness
Sapodilla <i>Manilkara zapota</i> Zapote Blanco	hypertension, anxiety	none reported	allergic reactions
Star anise <i>Illicium verum</i> Anís estrella	GI disturbances, respiratory tract infections, increase milk secretion, promote menstruation, colic	none reported	neurologic effects reported in infants 2 wk to 3 mo old (irritability, seizures); dermatitis
Valerian <i>Valeriana candens</i> Valeriana	sedative-hypnotic, stress, migraines, anxiolytic, GI disorders, depression, hot flashes, menstrual cramps	alcohol, CNS depressants, statins, oral antifungals, and other CYP3A4 substrates	headache, insomnia, cardiac disturbances, vivid dreams, morning drowsiness

CNS = central nervous system; GI = gastrointestinal; MAO = monoamine oxidase.

*Adapted with permission of APhA. Copyright American Pharmacists Association.¹³⁻⁵⁷

(Obtained from “[Complementary and Alternative Medicine Use Among Hispanics in the United States](#)”)

When analyzing these two charts and their respective medicines, they are quite similar due to colonization and trade. A lot of these cures appear to come from what is available on one's land, but in many cases, Philippines and Latin America will tend to trade herbs amongst other goods which explains some of the common cures that may seem out of place. These two charts are not from pre-colonial times, but from modern day herbal cures that are often prepared by parents and grandparents. While it is not limited to these plants, these are by far, the more commonly used herbs in Latino and Filipino families. There are plenty of examples that exhibit how one country can positively influence the other in the field of herbal medicine as a result of a negative history with colonization.

A well known remedy amongst many people, especially those of Latinx and Filipino descent, is aloe vera. According to the chart, Spain uses aloe vera for plenty of reasons such as laxatives, anti-inflammatory, diabetes, colds, healing wounds, etc.. These are just some of the various uses in which aloe vera has been helpful. This plant is actually well known in the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico due to the conditions provided by the land. It is now naturalized and widely found and used in that area as opposed to the Philippines. In the Philippines, aloe vera is used as an anti-inflammatory but more widely used as a beauty product, particularly for the hair and skin. While Filipinos today are acclimated to use aloe vera (specifically aloe barbadensis aka large aloe vera), it is rarely found in the wild. There, aloe vera is either grown in small pots or imported despite how the Philippines and the Yucatan peninsula are relatively near the equator, meaning that they grow in relatively warm climates.

When it comes to the influence of Filipino herbal medicine in the former New Spain, garlic is a common one. This herb, often used for cooking nowadays, has many purposes beyond culinary. Garlic is believed to have originated somewhere in West China and eventually made its

way to Borneo, where many indigenous Filipinos are believed to arrive from (which makes sense considering a portion of the population in the South of Philippines today speaks some sort of Malaysian dialect). Garlic is called “bawang” (a word that originates in the Malaysian language) and it has been used for generations as an antibiotic amongst many other reasons including but not limited to: antibiotic, anti-inflammatory, and hypertension. Similarly, Latinos today also use garlic as a treatment for similar reasons. In the chart, there are a few uses for garlic for example: hypertension and cough. In addition, Latinos also frequently use garlic to cook just as Filipinos do.

These two examples of herbal medicines show how intertwined these cultures. In the eyes of a child, they might assume that the herb they’re given is a medicine that comes from the roots of their family, but those roots become rather obscure due to colonization. Colonization has messed with the origins of many plants due to the amount of trade that happened during the peak of the Spanish empire which explains how garlic ended up in Mexico and aloe vera became frequently used in the Philippines.

In some cases, there is a clear distinction of what came from a different country, especially when it comes to herbal medicine. In the Philippines, mint is common for use; especially when one is sick or in pain from conditions like gout or rheumatism. There, it is called “yerba buena” which is clearly Spanish. This also applies to the yerba buena cure that exists amongst Hispanics in America today. Although they are named the same, the uses are quite different amongst the two groups of people. Yerba buena, commonly known as peppermint, is said to be a native plant in Europe which means that this cure was brought to both New Spain and the Philippines. It is only much clearer that it wasn’t native to the Philippines due to the fact that many Filipinos, despite long-term Spanish rule, do not speak full Spanish but rather, speak

tagalog, which is the common tongue in cities like Manila, where the Spanish were more present. In contrast, yerba buena blends in better in countries that were formerly New Spain because their official language is Spanish, making yerba buena indiscernible when it comes to distinguishing what was from the Spanish Empire and what was from their Native ancestors.

Colonization's impact on Latino and Filipino lives have affected people even to the generations today which can be seen by their inability to find much about their ancestors before colonization. For centuries, since the colonization of Latin America (New Spain) and the Philippines, there is almost no line drawn between what is originally from one's own culture versus what was brought to them by the Spanish empire. Latin Americans and Filipinos only have crumbs of their original native cultures due to the practical erasure of indigenous practices, especially religious. These gods would become considered idolatry in the eyes of the Spanish who would enforce Catholicism onto these people, affecting everything they have ever known and Roman Catholicism would become prevalent in both countries as indigenous religious practices would be diminished to cultural wonders in the modern day. This religious takeover, although setting the basis for a progress towards modern science, would affect the medical practices of the indigenous people. Shamans and mananambals still exist but they are primarily recognized as a means of culture preservation as herbal cures would soon become homemade remedies as the medical field continually advances.

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