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Supplement: Egg Rituals

Chapter Four

The Rituals

While many of these ailments require that the patient eat, drink, or otherwise use a specific substance—such as an herb—their cure also involves ritual and the use of what an anthropologist would call “symbolic objects.” To define the latter, think of the stereotypical view of the jungle “witch doctor” as presented in movies or even comic books. In all likelihood, he wears a mask and carries bones or a rattle. Well, the mask, the bones, and the rattle are clearly “symbolic objects.” They are supposed to have a certain power in whatever ceremony the “witch doctor” performs.

A curandero uses symbolic objects, too, but because he feels his power comes from God, the symbols are those that are shared by many religious people who are not healers: the cross, pictures of saints, votive candles, and the like.

The curandero also uses everyday materials: olive oil, water, or, most commonly, an egg. The modern curandera, María, who was interviewed on KPRC-TV in Houston, said that she uses growing plants “These plants . . . are very sensitive to their surroundings,”

María said. "When I tell a person that I am going to work on a particular problem for them . . . if they have an illness of some sort, then what I do is I tell them to buy me a plant. When they buy me a plant, they have automatically put their own vibrations . . . their own thoughts, feelings . . . negative and positive . . . into the plant. The reason a plant works is that, once a ritual has been performed, where the plant takes on the identity of that person, a spiritual link is formed between that plant and that person. No other person can take on the identity of the plant and vice versa."

Don Pedrito often used mere water, instructing patients to drink, for example, a glass at bedtime each night for a certain number of nights.

But the egg figures in most rituals of curanderismo, past and present. Earl Thompson, a novelist of astonishing talent, described one such ritual in *Caldo Largo*:

(The curandera) straightened Lupe's body so she lay face up like a corpse, even crossing her hands on her breasts. As she crossed her hands, she slipped something into Lupe's palms, closed her hands into fists, and told her to hold what she had put in them very tight.

"What is it?" Lupe asked.

"Herbs. Now don't talk again until I tell you."

The curandera placed candles on the table at Lupe's head and feet. She then poured some fragrant oil from a bottle that had once held tequila into her own large hands, warmed it between her palms and began to work it back through Lupe's hair until her thick reddish tresses were fanned around her face and down over her breasts and body until Lupe gleamed with the oil, all the while chanting some sort of prayer which I could not understand except for the occasional mention of the mother of Jesus. It was in a dialect I

had never heard before. It was hypnotic. I thought Lupe had gone to sleep or fallen into a trance. She seemed hardly to breathe. The smell of the oil was that of jasmine mixed with fresh herbs. The room was very warm and close . . .

She massaged Lupe front and back and front again, chanting all the while. The last time she had Lupe hold the egg in her clasped hands on her breast.

Then she took the egg from her and began gently rubbing it over her forehead, face, neck, and shoulders and then over the rest of her body. She traced the perimeters of Lupe with the egg as if drawing a pattern of her . . .

She then described a cross on her with the egg . . . she brought the egg to rest finally on Lupe's navel.

Compare the ritual undergone by Lupe to those described by Trotter and Chavira in their book on curanderismo, written to provide health care professionals with a better understanding of the subject. While rituals vary in detail from healer to healer, they have a common theme.

Mal ojo, the two say,

is treated by having the child lie down and sweeping him three times with an egg. The sweeping is done by forming crosses with the egg, on the child's body, starting at the head and going to the feet. While sweeping, the healer recites the Apostles' Creed three times, making sure that he sweeps both the front and the back. The egg is cracked and dropped into a glass or jar filled with water. The jar may then be placed on the child's head, and another Creed recited. The jar is then placed under the child's bed, usually under the place where the child rests his head. The next morning at sunrise the egg may either be burned or cast away in the form of a cross.

In a book intended for school children titled *Discovering Folklore Through Community Resources*, the ritual described to cure ojo is very similar, though less solemn in that, in the morning, the egg can either be buried or flushed down the toilet. The egg, once it is broken into the water, too, is used for diagnosis: "If the white becomes solid and forms an oval (an eye-shaped ring), people believe that the patient has indeed been suffering from a case of ojo and that he has been cured."

A curandero whom Ari Kiev interviewed said: "You have to break an egg and say a prayer. You break your egg, put it in the glass, and then put some little piece from the broom, you know, on top like a cross, and then the egg starts bubbling. You have to brush (the victim) with the egg first—make like a cross. The egg takes out the evil from the child and makes the person causing it stop . . . When the egg starts boiling, that is when you know he had ojo. When the egg goes down, if it does not boil, it means that he doesn't have the ojo."

Remember the woman whom Evelyn Winter interviewed? When her husband was rubbed with the egg, first it was hard-boiled afterwards, then coddled, and finally raw. It was only when the egg emerged raw that the curandero considered the man cured.

The ritual for curing susto involves a broom. As Trotter and Chavira describe it:

The sick person lies down and is completely covered with a sheet. The healer sweeps the patient with the broom, saying the Apostles' Creed three times. At the end of each Creed, the healer whispers in the patient's ear, "Come, don't stay there." The patient responds, "I am coming." The sick person must perspire and is then given some tea of *yerba anís* [aniseed] to drink. The healer then places a cross of holy palm on the patient's head and asks Almighty God, in the name of the Holy Trinity, to restore the patient's spiritual strength.

The cure for susto, which Dolores Latorre describes, involves both the broom and the egg:

The cure must be done on three consecutive nights: Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, the last day being the most effective. The patient lies on the bed with arms extended in the form of a cross while his entire body is cleansed with an alum rock or a whole egg and he is swept with a bundle or broom of herbs, preferably horehound, rosemary, California peppertree, redbrush, or naked-seed weed, tied together or separately. Each evening, fresh herbs are used.

Both rituals involve an invocation to the patient's spirit to return, and the patient's reply. In Trotter and Chavira, the appropriate response is said to be "*Aquí vengo*," while Latorre reports that "*Hay voy*" is used. Both may be interpreted as an affirmative response suggesting that the spirit is indeed returning.

Discovering Folklore Through Community Resources reports, as did Latorre, that the cure takes place over a Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, but shows a curandera first blessing the susto victim's bed with a knife. The healer then sweeps the patient with *cenizo* (a sage-like plant) and blesses him with holy water. The Apostles' Creed is used in this ritual as well, but in addition to it, the curandera recites from her own personal prayer book. Only then does she call the spirit, enjoining it to return. After the ritual, the herbs used to sweep the patient are taken home to be placed under the patient's pillow in the form of a cross.

Ari Kiev describes sweeping, too, but the curanderos he interviewed suggested that *granada* (pomegranate) leaves be used. One of Kiev's healer informants reported that occasionally massage with an egg was also used for susto.

Don Pedrito, whose cures were often unconventional, is said to

have cured a susto by divining what had caused it (the victim had witnessed a murder) and prescribing that a draught of beer be drunk on three successive nights. Still another legend about Don Pedrito is that he once cured one susto by subjecting the victim to another fright, in fact, appearing to the victim in the guise of a bandit to provide the scare! Both of these stories were gathered by Ruth Dodson in *The Healer of Los Olmos*.

The treatment for caída de mollera is more standard. As Kiev reports, "It involves turning the baby over on his heels, pushing up with the thumb against the roof of the child's mouth, packing the fontanelle area with moist salt, and/or binding the area."

"Binding" the area is smearing it with a sticky substance—either soap or egg white. It is not uncommon to see babies who have had this treatment out in public.

The thumb is usually used to push against the roof of the baby's mouth.

An egg can be used to pinpoint the site of the blockage causing empacho. A Mexican-American mother whom Kiev interviewed, for instance, tells of her method of diagnosis: "To treat it, you rub their stomach real good and rub them with an egg at room temperature, not from the fridge, and then you rub their stomach real good with it. Wherever that egg burst, that is where the *empacho* is in the stomach."

More often, a massage, followed by the administration of a laxative, is used. The same woman concludes the description of treatment thusly: "Then they tie a piece of linen around to hold it there. After they do all the rubbing and applying of the egg, they give them a good dose of castor oil or something to make them move their bowels."

Trotter and Chavira found this combination: "In some cases the healer massages that part of the back behind the stomach with warm olive oil and pulls on the skin. The skin is said to make a snapping noise when the trapped food particles are loosened. In either case, a tea is given to treat the damaged stomach."

One home remedy is to rub the patient's stomach with shortening and—again, this conveys the notion of loosening something that is stuck—pulling the skin on the patient's back until it pops.

Mal aire is treated like a cold—with tea, lemon juice, even whiskey. Liniments and poultices are used, too.

The treatment for desasombro is much more elaborate, for it is a much more serious ill. One popular curing method is outlined in *Discovering Folklore Through Community Resources*. The treatment is to be done outdoors at eleven in the morning. It begins when the curandero digs four holes in the ground in the shape of a diamond. One hole is for the head, one for the feet, and two are for the hands. The area is covered with a white sheet, and the patient stretches out, face down, in the form of a cross atop it, with his limbs in the appropriate spots. Another white sheet is placed atop him. The curandero, reciting the Apostles' Creed, then sweeps the patient from top to bottom.

It is interesting to note that in various recorded remedies for susto, curanderos have been quite specific about what should be used for the sweeping. In one case it was granada and in another cenizo, for instance. The ritual outlined above says that an ordinary household broom can be used.

This illustrates how these rituals are adapted according to what is available.

In any case, the curandero sweeps the patient and recites the Apostles' Creed three times as he does so. The patient rolls over, face up, hands still outstretched in the form of a cross. The sweeping ritual is repeated.

Now the patient is uncovered and stands. The curandero strikes the patient's shadow. Then the curandero drags a piece of clothing that the patient has worn into the patient's house, calling the spirit as he does so. He continues to call until he reaches the patient's bed. The patient comes in, sits on the bed, and drinks a cup of anís tea. The patient finishes drinking, leaving a bit of the tea in the cup.

Next the curandero takes some of the dirt that was removed from the four holes he dug when the ritual began. This dirt is mixed with the tea that the patient left. With the resulting mud, the curandero marks the sign of the cross on each of the patient's joints.

The patient then gets under as many covers as it will take to make him sweat. The curandero sweeps the patient now with cenizo and completes the ritual by reciting the Apostles' Creed three more times.

Treatment for bilis is far less exotic. Epsom salts or some other laxative would be given once each week for three weeks. On the other hand, the treatment for muíña—the other illness caused by anger—is very formulaic. As Dolores Latorre reports: "The affected person is swept with three red flowers on three consecutive days, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, and afterward is given a decoction made with flowers and leaves of the orange tree or other citrus. This will calm the patient. If it does not, the person is struck, shaken, or addressed with unkind words in order to break the fit of anger." Interestingly, the symptoms that Latorre attributes to muíña (given earlier in this book) are much like those of someone we would call hysterical. Even today, an hysterical person is slapped or shaken, much the way the victim of muíña would be if he didn't respond to the ritual of the flowers.

Latido is usually treated by administering nourishment. Some suggest that a patient take, for nine consecutive days, a mixture of raw egg, salt, pepper, and lemon juice. A more appetizing cure requires that the patient eat bean soup with onion, coriander, and garlic. Latorre describes a *comfortativo* made of a hard roll called a bolillo, which is split, sprinkled with alcohol, and filled with peppermint leaves, nasturtiums, some cinnamon, cloves, and onions. After this is done, the roll is closed, wrapped in white cloth, and bandaged over the pit of the patient's stomach.

The fact is, as far-fetched as some of these rituals may sound to those of us accustomed to the cold, sterile administration of

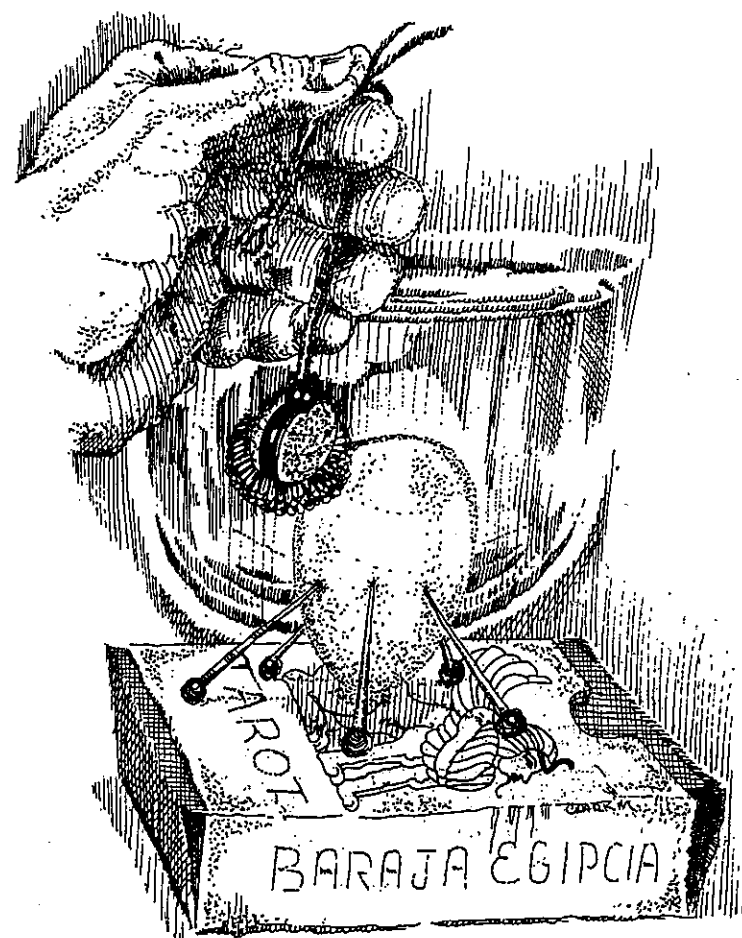


Figure 5: The seed-adorned amulet, ojo de venado, is used to ward off mal do ojo while the tarot cards are used by a señora to predict health, home life, and social conditions.

medical aid, they work! And as the story from Evelyne Winter's book demonstrated, one does not have to believe in the cures in order for them to work.

Perhaps most importantly, the curandero focuses his attention one hundred percent on his patient. This must be a significant component of the healing process.

Then, too, touch figures largely in the healing rituals. Only recently has the medical establishment come to acknowledge the therapeutic importance of touch.

The rituals often involve other members of the patient's family, too, and many are done in the patient's own home. The person who is ill thus has a very deep sense of belonging while the rituals are performed.

The status of the curandero also figures in his success. As Ari Kiev points out: "The curandero is never in doubt as to the diagnosis or treatment and does not undermine confidence in himself among nontechnically oriented patients by ordering laboratory tests and X-rays. He turns to meaningful sources of strength such as the saints and God."