



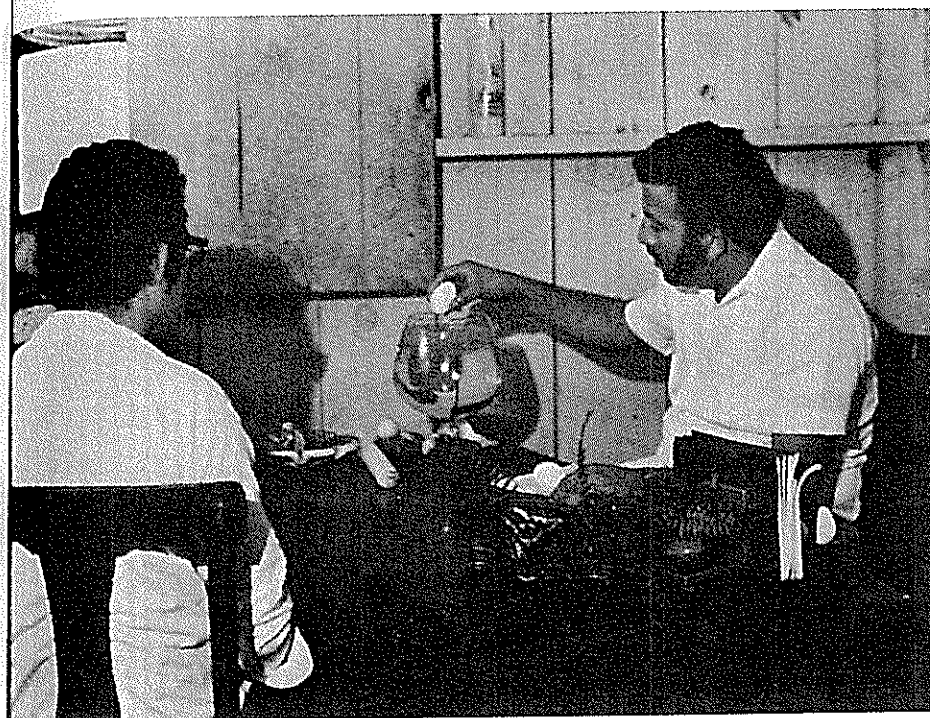
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Egg "cleansing" in  
Texas

Lemons, garlic, and purple onions are some of the vegetable objects used by *curanderos* in their work. These objects are used because they are thought to have an intrinsic supernatural or spiritual power (classified as "mana" by anthropologists) to absorb or destroy negative vibrations and to strengthen positive vibrations. The lemon, for example, can be used to represent a person and absorb all his negative influences, and it can also be used to give strength, or positive influences, to a sick person. The lemon also serves as a source of strength whenever a person is in difficult circumstances. Some *curanderos* recommend squeezing a lemon with the left hand whenever a person is undertaking a difficult business meeting, an examination, a legal encounter, or any other uncertain circumstance.

Purple onions and garlic are used to give the patient protection from harm. These objects are believed to have the power to repel negative influences. The patient is cleansed (swept) with garlic or purple onions for protection; it is a sort of spiritual or psychological inoculation. The patient can then return to his environment with some assurance of protection, even if someone wants to harm him.

The animal object most commonly used by south Texas *curanderos* is the egg, although black chickens and doves are also used. In *curanderismo*, some ritual treatments, especially those dealing with supernatural illness, demand that a sacrificial object be used, and the egg qualifies as an animal cell. These objects are believed to have the power to absorb the negative influences or harm (sickness) being done to the patient. After the ritual these objects, and the harm they have absorbed, are usually destroyed by fire, and the patient recovers.

According to Turner (1969:19) a ritual is "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers." Many rituals involve the manipulation of physical objects together with prayers or invocations, and thus they are common at the material level of *curanderismo*.



*Curandero preparing an egg to be used in a cure (Photograph by Aida Hurtado)*

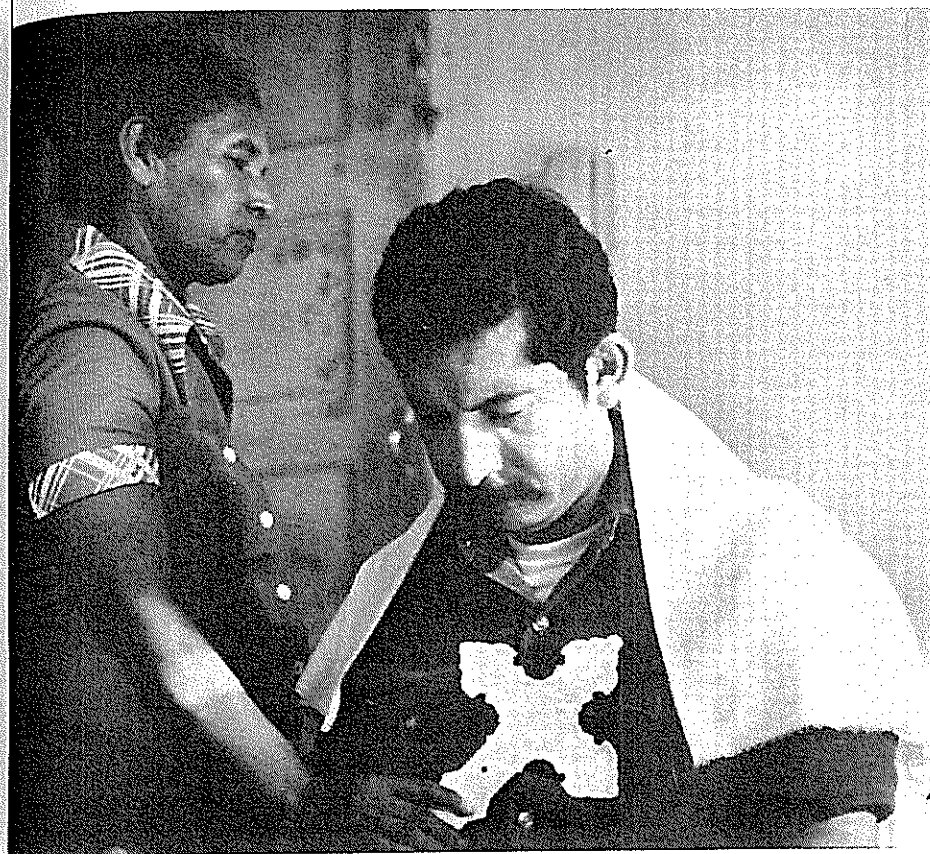
The basic ritual at the material level is the *barrida* or spiritual cleansing. The purpose of these cleansings is to eliminate the negative forces or vibrations influencing a patient by transferring them to another object. This is classified as transference magic. A second purpose is to give the patient spiritual strength and thereby enhance his recovery. The objects most commonly used in *barridas* are eggs, lemons, garlic, purple onions, doves, and black chickens, along with *piedra alumbre* (alum), candles, oils, perfumes, incense, and the stalks or branches of certain herbs such as *albacar*, *ruda* and *romero*.

A *barrida* literally means "a sweeping." While being swept, the client may either be standing or lying down and

must be concentrating on his Maker, or any other benevolent influence or spirit. Some *curanderos* perform the sweeping ritual while the patient is sitting, but we are told by some *curanderos* that this is not the correct procedure.

Patients are swept from their head to their feet, with the *curandero* making sweeping or brushing motions with an egg, a lemon, an herb, or whatever appropriate object is deemed necessary. According to some informants the object must be held in the *curandero's* left hand and must touch the person being swept. The person is swept in front, in back, and on the sides. If a particular part of the body is in pain special attention is given to the affected area. While sweeping the patient, the *curandero* usually recites specific prayers that appeal to God, saints, or other spiritual beings to restore health to the patient. The *curandero* may recite these prayers out loud or silently. In either case, the presence of the *curandero*, the soothing effect of the sweepings (touching), and the low-keyed monotone chant of the prayers produce in the patient a light trance state that is comforting and reassuring. Standard prayers used in this ritual include the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, and *Las doce verdades del mundo* ("The Twelve Truths of the World"; see appendix).

Turner (1967:27-35) identifies three properties of a ritual symbol. One is condensation, which means that many things and actions are represented by one symbol. Another is unification, which means that disparate significances "are interconnected by virtue of their common possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought." For example, what does a lemon or an egg have to do with health? The third property, polarization, has to do with the mystical and material properties of the ritual symbol. The material properties of the egg include its ordinary use as food; its mystical properties, however, include its ability to absorb negative influences (sickness) from a patient. The following description of a *barrida* given by one of our infor-



Patient being given a *barrida* with a crucifix

mants illustrates how the material objects, the mystical power of these objects, the invocations, the *curandero*, and the patient come together and form a healing ritual:

This was a case in which the condition or illness was provoked. In other words, using these means [*curanderismo*] persons can be either helped or harmed; that is,

persons who are healthy can become ill with any given illness. This is what people call *mal puesto* [provoked harm].

In this case five eggs, four lemons, some branches of *albacar* [sweet basil] and oil will be used. In some cases it is necessary to use animals to execute the cure. These animals would have to be sacrificed, but in this case the eggs come to represent the living animals, being in themselves living cells which will give the formation of an animal. The use of the lemons is due to the fact that they are often used to harm persons as well as being used to cure them. Lemons possess certain power within the conjuring and enchantment procedures of the occult sciences.

To begin the healing process the lemons and eggs are washed with alcohol or water; it is desirable that they be clean [ritually purified] in order to execute the healing ritual. Before beginning the ritual, the participants must take off their rings, watches, and other jewelry. Once the healing process begins, high-frequency spiritual and mental vibrations come into effect, which can produce electrical discharges on the metal, causing disturbances which can disrupt the healing process.

The sweeping itself is done by interchanging an egg and a lemon successively until the ritual is completed. Sweeping with the egg is intended to transfer the problem from the patient to the egg by means of conjures and invocations. The lemon is used to dominate the *trabajo* which has been placed on the patient, thereby facilitating the healing process.

The patient is also swept once with *albacar* which has been rinsed in *agua preparada* [specially prepared water]. This sweeping serves as a purification for the patient, intended to give strength and comfort to his spiritual being. The ritual ends by making crosses with *aceite pre-*

*parado* [specially prepared oil] on the principal joints of the patient, e.g. neck, under the knees, and above the elbow. This oil is especially prepared and serves to cut the negative currents and vibrations which surround the patient, which have been placed there by whoever is provoking the harm. The crosses also serve as protection against the continued effect of these negative vibrations. *Agua preparada* is then rubbed on the patient's forehead and cerebellum [*cerebro*] to tranquilize him and to give him mental strength.

All the objects used in the *barrida* are then burned in order to destroy the negative influences or harm which has been transferred from the patient.

This informant refused to reveal the prayers he uses in his healing rituals. He says that he usually works alone and does not want his enemies to find out his special and private invocations. He does explain that both water and oil are prepared with mental vibrations, which give these objects *propiedades magneticas* (magnetic properties). These properties give strength to whatever objects come in contact with the water or with the oil.

Another ritual is the *sahumerio* or incensing. The *sahumerio* is strictly a purification rite and is used for treating businesses, households, farms, and sometimes patients. This ritual is executed by first preparing hot coals, then placing an appropriate incense on the coals. The *curandero* may prepare his own incense, or he may prescribe some commercial incense which is already prepared, such as *el sahumerio maravilloso* [marvelous or miraculous incense]. Every room or living space in the house is incensed thoroughly by carrying a pan with the smoking incense through the building, making sure that all corners, closets, and hidden spaces, such as under the beds, are properly incensed (filled with smoke).

Continue w/ Torres, "modern  
Curanderos"

Torres, Eliseo "Chico"  
Modern Curanderos in Herbs and Rituals:  
A Mexican Tradition  
U of New Mexico Press.

## Chapter Nine

### Modern Curanderos

This book has emphasized the rituals of curanderismo and the folk ailments they can cure. It should not be forgotten, however, that this is a distorted emphasis. Curanderos can, and usually do, treat organic ailments such as migraine, flu, even cancer. In fact, many of the folk ailments mentioned here can be treated by a family member. It is common to call in a curandero if the ailment persists or if it is a particularly severe case.

It is by virtue of this that an *El Proyecto Comprender* script is able to refer to the practice of curanderismo as "an optional health care system." The description of the curandero, as it appears there, is worth quoting, summarizing, as it does, the reasons for the marked efficacy of curanderismo:

The strength of the curandero's success lies in the establishment of a personal relationship with his patient. He shares with his patient the same culture, language, and many of the same health beliefs and practices. Many Mexican-American

families have a long-standing relation with one particular curandero, much the same as they might have with a family physician. A curandero may be compared to a small town physician: he serves a relatively small number of patients, he knows the families intimately, and therefore is well-prepared to treat his patient's physical, psychological, and spiritual needs.

And, as Professor Robert Trotter from Pan American University pointed out in an interview with the *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, the modern curandero is not by any means uncivilized or barbaric. "People try to make curanderos different," Trotter says. "They equate them with what can be found in New Guinea. But curanderos are a part of an urban, industrialized society. They watch television, they know about Anacin and Bufferin and the modern health care system. They're not primitive."

Still, even a factual and pro-curanderismo article, quoted out of context, can make the practices sound very peculiar indeed. The following is from Jennifer Bloch, writing in the *Dallas Times Herald*:

[W]ithout a thought for the professors and physicians who write them off as superstitious, these simple, humble men and women go right on lighting candles, saying prayers, sweeping people with eggs and incense and lemons, anointing them with specially prepared oils and waters, brewing up herb teas, invoking spirits. Healing. Healing bodies, minds and spirits, tummy aches and terrors.

In capsule form, the practice of curanderismo cannot be adequately portrayed.

Robert Trotter is wise to enjoin us not to forget that the contemporary curandero is no stranger to the so-called miracle drugs and

methods of modern science. "In Mexico," Trotter says, "curanderos prescribe antibiotics as well as *te de manzanilla* (chamomile tea) because such medicine is sold across the counter there without a necessary doctor's prescription. Here in the United States, the curanderos are restricted with what they can tell the patient to take. They know the value of penicillin, so they also know when it's time to refer their patients to a medical doctor."

Methods differ; time alters some practices (for example, aerosol sprays are sometimes substituted for incense). On the other hand, consider the striking similarity between Teresita's mode of healing as she explained it in a 1900 *San Francisco Examiner* interview with Helen Dare, and that of a modern curandero or, for that matter, a contemporary holistic practitioner:

"When I cure with my hands I do like this," and she took my hands in hers—hands of singular slenderness and fineness, cool, smooth, supple, firm, delicately made, charming to touch—and placed her thumbs against mine, holding with a close nervous grasp.

"Sometimes," she said, "I rub, sometimes I give also medicines or lotions that I make from herbs I gather. I pray, too, not with the lips, but I lift up my spirit to God for help to do His will on earth."

That Teresita's method would be soothing cannot be denied. One can almost feel her touch, hear her voice, as one reads! Conversely, Don Pedrito would give prescriptions or *recetas*—a method much more similar to contemporary medical practice. One such prescription—and it can be considered typical—was: "Don Feliciano, in the name of God, your wife and your mother should each take a cup of cold water for seven nights at bedtime."

Most of Don Pedrito's cures were transmitted this way, perhaps because so many of his clients approached him through messengers or by using the mail.

Is curanderismo legal? In Mexico, of course, there is no problem, and this is why in border towns, where patients can cross the border at will, curanderismo is so strong. Even a famous healer like Don Pedrito, however, had difficulties with the law. This occurred in San Antonio, where Don Pedrito drew quite a crowd and therefore the attention of police. When they found he charged nothing for his services, they stopped harassing him.

Most curanderos can work openly and freely today. An article in the *San Antonio Light* explains, "In Texas, curanderos operate with the tacit approval of the Catholic Church, whose religious symbolism the healers often appropriate, and of the State Board of Medical Examiners. (The board focuses on licensing doctors and investigating complaints against individual MDs and other providers of health care. So far, no complaints have been filed against curanderos.)" This observation by reporters Patrick Boulay and Allan Turner was made in 1981.

Just as Teresita and Don Pedrito—both curing during roughly the same time period—were markedly different, so are curanderos today. A television presentation by KPRC-TV News in Houston made this very clear. María, for example, a young curandera mentioned earlier in this book, wore no special garb. She used, if you remember, plants to absorb the patient's negative forces. And, contradicting what is usually the case, María charged a set fee. Her male counterpart on the television program, however, was a man perhaps in his sixties. He wore satin robes and a peaked satin cap of the sort one might associate with wizardry. He used a sword, too, and threatened the evil from the body of the woman who had come to him as a patient.

Not surprisingly, the patient with whom he was shown was an older woman. Again, not surprisingly, many of María's patients were young professionals, and a number were Anglo—that is, not Mexican-Americans.

There are even Anglo healers who have been awarded the title of curandera. Jewel Babb is particularly well-known, in part because of the publicity generated by Pat Ellis Taylor's book, *Border Healing Woman*.

Jewel Babb's story is not unlike that of many other folk healers: it wasn't until relatively late in her life that Jewel Babb discovered she had the ability to heal. Once she did, she set about doing it full time. She lives in what we would call poverty, charging nothing for her services. For the most part, she uses a combination of baths and massage. She sometimes talks about "healing with the mind," which Taylor says Mrs. Babb "visualizes as radiating from the palms of her hands when she raises them in the air, pointed in the direction of the patient."

There are many—even Mexicans and Mexican-Americans—who refer to Jewel Babb as a curandera. She, Taylor says, "satisfies the more specific expectations of her Mexican clientele, while at the same time providing a model for folk healing to which the Anglo counterculture can relate." In fact, Taylor sees Jewel Babb as "a true representative of a border culture which has provided a climate for bringing traditions together." Perhaps this is so because Jewel Babb practices, as Taylor so aptly summarizes, "a healing method which will treat the whole person."

A New Mexican friend of mine who is a modern practitioner of this ancient art is Elena Avila. She is a psychiatric nurse practitioner, writer, actor, and playwright, but most of all, she is a curandera who has been practicing for more than twenty years. Elena has garnered an international reputation as a highly competent curandera who has treated thousands for conditions of all kinds, including spiritual

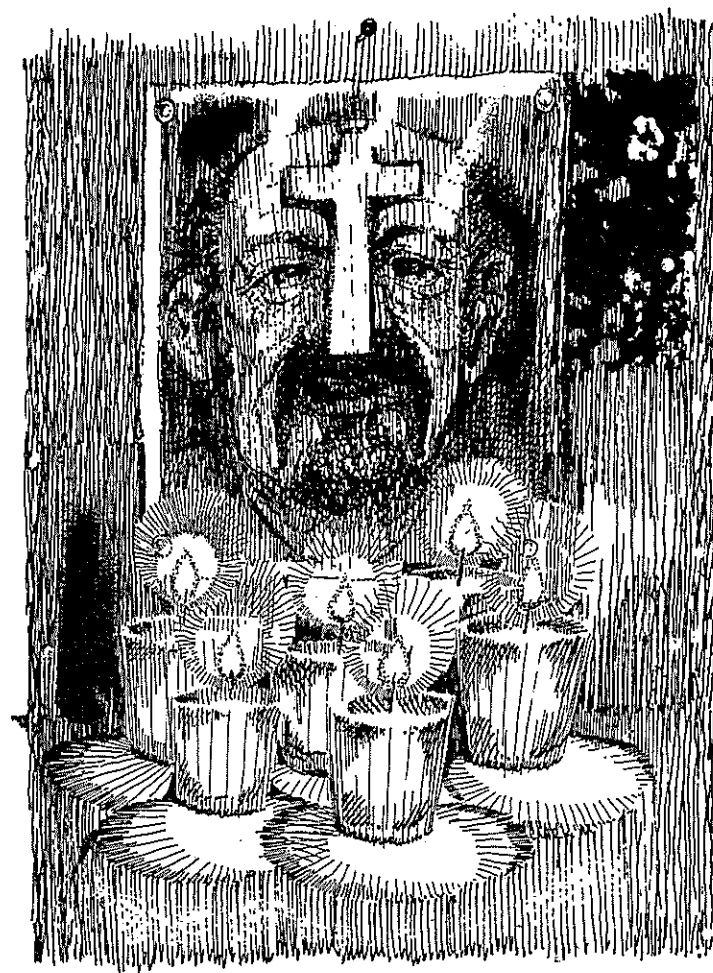


Figure 11: Modern curanderos practice many of the same techniques used by Don Pedrito, El Niño, and Teresita. They are prepared to treat their patients' physical, psychological, and spiritual needs.

illnesses such as susto and mal de ojo, as well as empacho, bilis, and muña, to name just a few. She uses an egg in her spiritual cleansing, as well as the herb *romero*. Elena has a group of followers who are apprenticing under her to learn the arts of curanderismo. I hold Elena in the greatest admiration for keeping many of the arts of Mexican folk healing alive. Like Jewel Babb, Elena works to treat the whole person, not simply the physical aspect of a patient.

This is the important thing to keep in mind about curanderismo. It does not isolate as modern science tends to; rather, it embraces. And, like an embrace, it shelters and it warms.