

RELIGIOUS FEATURES OF *CURANDERISMO* TRAINING AND PRACTICECindy Lynn Salazar, BA,<sup>1</sup> and Jeff Levin, PhD, MPH<sup>1#</sup>

The purpose of this study is to investigate religious features of *curanderismo*, specifically the role of ostensibly Roman Catholic beliefs and practices in the training and work of *curandero/as*. The integration of religious beliefs and practices within the rituals of *curanderismo* and how this potential clash of worldviews negatively and positively impacts clients and practitioners are examined. Interviews were conducted with practicing *curandero/as* and clients who had sought their services. Factors observed to have potential to facilitate healing include psychological reassurance gained through incorporating familiar religious beliefs and paraphernalia and the therapeutic healing property

of features of *curanderismo* practice, such as herbs used in many remedies. Negative effects may result from feelings of distrust, fear, and embarrassment engendered by seeking care from a *curandero/a*. Future research targeting the complexities of the relationship between Roman Catholicism and *curanderismo* might focus specifically on how negotiating this conflict of worldviews may affect health.

**Key words:** *Curanderismo*, Roman Catholicism, integrative medicine, Mexican Americans

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## INTRODUCTION

*Curanderismo* is an integral part of Mexican-American culture, encompassing religious, spiritual, and health-related beliefs and rituals. This indigenous healing practice invokes feelings of faith, hope, confidence, and happiness for some and of fear, distrust, embarrassment, and confusion for others. Because of conflicting perspectives between participants in *curanderismo* and nonpracticing Mexican Americans, such as Roman Catholic clergy, the present study was conceived as an effort to document how these religious elements are incorporated into the work of *curanderos/as* and the experiences of their clients. It is hoped that through identification of these features, scholars and healthcare professionals—and clergy, for that matter—may gain a better understanding of a major system of healing, care-giving, and spiritual advice that exists parallel to respective mainstream systems within Mexican-American culture.

The *desarrollo* (training) of a *curandero/a* is an arduous process through which candidates become attuned with *el don*, the gift to heal, believed to come from God. The *desarrollo* prepares a person to properly use prayer and religious paraphernalia in prescribed rituals to bring about healing among respective clients.

This study documents religious elements within *curanderismo*, emphasizing the influence of Catholicism in the training and practice of *curanderos/as*. First, background is provided on the concept of *curanderismo* within Mexican-American culture. Second, a detailed look at *desarrollo* is provided, including discussion of the “calling” to enter training. Third, a nosology of diseases treated by *curanderismo* is offered, as well as a partly corresponding classification of specialties which exist among practicing *curandero/as*. Fourth, documentation is provided of

ritual practices and symbols intrinsic to *curanderismo*. Finally, positive and negative outcomes attributed to elements of the practice as well as their effect on practitioners and clients are explored. Conclusions from this study were drawn from data obtained through personal interviews (n = 8) with practitioners of *curanderismo* (n = 4), clients of *curanderismo* (n = 3), and members of the Roman Catholic clergy (n = 1). Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for common themes among respondents.

## BACKGROUND

***Curanderismo* and Mexican-American Culture**

In a study of Mexican Americans living in border and nonborder towns, 22% of the sample indicated using traditional folk medicine in the previous year.<sup>1</sup> Most traditional complementary and alternative medical (CAM) therapy performed in Mexican culture, delivered separately or in conjunction with conventional medicine, is carried out by a *curandero/a*.<sup>2</sup> Although *curandero/as* undergo training, strong emphasis is placed on the individual's natural ability to heal.<sup>3</sup> This ability cannot be learned and is seen as a gift from God (*el don*). Other innate, but possibly learned, attributes are a strong spirituality and harmony with nature. Because *curandero/as* believe their healing gift comes from God, many *curandero/as* incorporate religious paraphernalia into the healing process.<sup>4</sup> The religious element of the practice is alluring to participants. In a previous study, religiosity was found to be positively related to both mainstream and traditional CAM use among foreign-born Hispanics living in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

The use of *curandero/as* is not universally accepted among Mexican Americans because it is seen by some to be contrary to Roman Catholic belief and/or a scam (R. Trevino, personal communication, 2010). Although *curanderismo* is deeply rooted in Roman Catholicism, the practice is often equated with *brujeria* (black magic), and many outsiders view the practice through the lens of cultural stereotyping.<sup>6</sup> Because people typically use *curanderismo* treatments in lieu of visiting a healthcare profes-

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sional, critics view the practice as dangerous. The promise of a miracle cure, which may not occur, potentially causes participants a loss of money and time and is another cited danger of the practice.<sup>7</sup>

### **Curanderismo's Appeal to Participants**

Despite *curanderismo's* strong opposition, many individuals still actively seek the help of its practitioners because it is viewed as an easily accessible form of medicine delivered in a culturally appropriate manner.<sup>8</sup> *Curandero/as* are seen as more trustworthy because many do not charge for their services but instead accept donations. In some cases, the *curandero/a* may not even accept payment.<sup>9</sup> The absence of barriers, waiting lists, and other specifications also serves to attract clients.<sup>10</sup> As one person put it, "At the very least you feel better. That's why you go. You walk out and you feel better."<sup>11</sup> Others feel reassurance that the *curandero/a* prays to God or to the saints. Another individual reported, "The *curandera* had all types of saints all over her house so I thought at the time I was doing right by God in visiting her" (J. Garcia, personal communication, 2010).

Prayer to a saint for the healing of a particular ailment is a commonly performed practice within *curanderismo*. In a previous study of older Mexican Americans, authors found a positive association between praying to the saints and stronger God-mediated control beliefs, which in turn were related to better optimism and self-rated health.<sup>12</sup> Looking at this study, we can infer that the psychological reassurance that may be gained by participating in *curanderismo* may exert a positive impact on the health of participants.

Trotter and Chavira<sup>13</sup> identified three reasons why *curanderismo* is seen as appealing and effective: accessibility, the fact that the *curandero/a* takes time to listen to a client's personal problems, and the religious symbols and spiritual practices used to bring about healing. One *curandero* described the various roles that a *curandero/a* may fill, what methods are employed, and how these benefit clients:

The role of a *curandero* or *curandera* can also incorporate the roles of psychiatrist along with that of doctor and healer. Many *curanderos* use Catholic elements, such as holy water and saint pictures. The use of Catholic prayers and other borrowings and lendings are often found alongside native religious elements. I also assist my clients when they ask recommendations for a candle or picture to satisfy their needs. For example if I have a client that is sick of X thing and she wants "spiritual healing" I'll recommend her to get something with St. Rafael, for example a candle. St. Rafael Archangel is considered to be the "God of medicine" so if St. Rafael is a healer then what better way than to pray to him in hard times? (J. Salinas, personal communication, 2011).

Moreover, *curanderos/as* are easily accessible because they are often known in the community, experience the same kind of life as their clients, speak the same language, and are usually in the same economic stratum as their clients.<sup>13</sup> The *curandero/a* is familiar, not exotic, and culturally intrinsic to the client.<sup>14</sup> Listening to a client's personal problems creates a support system that may help to bring about well-being. Further, *curanderismo*

uses clients' faith and belief systems, making them feel more assured that healing will take place.<sup>13</sup>

### **DESARROLLO: TRAINING TO BECOME A CURANDERO/A "Calling"**

As a result of organized opposition, much of *curanderismo's* wisdom has been passed down through the generations from teacher to apprentice in channels outside of oversight by mainstream medicine.<sup>15</sup> Although books on the subject available to the general public describe the many maladies that can be cured and the herbs and rituals used to bring about healing, elements of the practice are said to be incapable of being learned and others are said to be best learned directly from a trained *curandero/a*.<sup>16</sup>

As noted, the ability to practice *curanderismo* is seen to be a gift from God. People may determine whether they have the gift or feel a calling to the practice in a variety of ways. Individuals may be called by being told by a practicing *curandero/a* that they too have the gift, advised by spirits through dreams, or may feel called after engaging in the practice of *curanderismo*.

In an interview with a practicing *curandero* of more than 30 years, Alfonso (name changed) shared that he was told at age 7 by a *curandera* that he possessed a healing gift. As he felt no yearning to become a *curandero*, he thought nothing of the comment at the time. In his twenties he visited another *curandera*, who read tarot cards for him. Upon viewing the first card she as well eagerly told him that he had the gift to heal and urged him to develop and sharpen his skills. However, he wanted nothing to do with the practice other than to get his problem fixed. Once again at the age of 27 and after losing his job, he visited a spirit medium, where he again felt a calling to become a *curandero*:

There was this young girl, 16 years old from Mexico, who started swinging back and forth and going into a deep trance and going to sleep. She swung like a butterfly and waved her arms like angel wings. She was like floating. It was beautiful. She walked toward me, the spirit in her spoke to me, but I couldn't hear her because of the chanting. After five times of repeating I understood what she said. She said I needed to do a lot of prayer. But a holy spirit came into me and I felt changed. It was a beautiful and overwhelming peace. I kept wanting it. The session ended that day and we left. I wanted more. I felt I had a calling. I asked who this spirit was and it said it was Niño Fidencio (A. Gracia, personal communication, 2010).

*El Niño* (Niño Fidencio), as his followers the Fidencistas amiably call him, is a highly revered *curandero*, who is channeled by practicing *curanderos* today.<sup>17</sup> Many *curanderos* will say that their calling into practice came about in a similar manner as the aforementioned one, in which a channeled spirit will speak to them and tell them they have a gift.

A very popular *curandera* in the 1930s who went by the name "Mother Lane" revealed that she was told she had *el don* after the death of her sister. Soon after the death, she began to hear her name called out in the middle of the night by a female voice. She was later instructed through a dream to leave a sheet of paper and

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a pencil on the table before going to bed. Upon awaking she discovered a message written on the note from her deceased sister telling her not to worry for she had a gift from God to heal. Mother Lane said that from that day, she began to fall into trances guiding her healing rituals. When removing a needle from the knee of a friend, she fully discovered she had *el don*, and felt her calling to practice *curanderismo* was reaffirmed.<sup>18</sup>

Miguel Flores, a practicing *curandero* in California, stated he felt called to the practice of *curanderismo* after being cured of a stomach malady as a small child. With encouragement from his parents, he enrolled in a month-long course in physiotherapy, where he was taught about massage. He then returned to New Mexico, where he was an apprentice under several older Mexican-American folk healers.<sup>19</sup>

### Training

No matter what the inspiration is to become a *curandero/a*, there is a framework of training that most apprentices follow to become a trained folk healer. The training of a *curandero/a* is known as *desarrollo* (development/growth). Training varies according to the specialization of the *curandero/as*, who may specialize in more than one area and thus may work on more than one "level." The three main levels under which *curandero/as* work are the material, mental, and spiritual.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding the spiritual level, it is said that an individual may be prone to work on this level if they are born in the months of February or August or if a *curandero/a* lays hands on them and senses their spirits. If the *curandero/a* senses "tight" vibrations in the individual's spirit, the person is deemed qualified to work in the spiritual realm. Another test is to have the apprentice engage in direct contact with the spiritual realm, and determine their capability from the strength of that interaction.<sup>13</sup>

Once it has been determined that the individual is able to work in the spiritual realm, it is time to begin the *desarrollo*. Possessing *el don* and not using it is very dangerous, as the individual is believed to have a brain that is vulnerable to spirit communication and possession yet does not have the knowledge of how to protect it. For this reason, it is important for the trainee to be under the guidance of a fully trained spiritualist because he or she is capable of safely opening up new spiritual channels into the trainee's brain. The trained spiritualist serves as a gatekeeper to the person's body, taking guard over it when the individual leaves his or her body and regulates which spirits can enter.<sup>13</sup>

The individual's training involves making more and more contact with the spiritual world by engaging in controlled trances and possessions. More importantly, the individual also gains the knowledge necessary to protect himself or herself while practicing these rituals. No two individuals' *desarrollo* will be the same, however, as each person's experiences affect their perceptions and evoke different states of consciousness. When the apprentice has reached a certain point, they will invoke their first spirit. As the apprentice progresses in their *desarrollo* they will be able to interact and talk with others more easily while in their trance.<sup>13</sup>

The *desarrollo* will differ for individuals working on different levels. The training is said to be the easiest for the material level as it entails manipulating everyday items to produce an atmosphere conducive to treatment. These actions alter the client's

awareness of the situation to bring about healing. The hardest and rarest level to be worked in is the mental because training is said to be the most extensive and rigorous. Although the work of *curandero/as* working on this level is said to include the least rituals and is the least visible, their work is said to be the most extensive. The mental and spiritual levels are said to be similar as both levels use what are called "mental vibrations," but the mental level relies solely on the power of the individual's mind rather than on its relationship to any discarnate entities. A person working on this level is said to be able to diagnose an illness by observing the size, shape, and color of the person's aura or by using mental telepathy or mental readings.<sup>13</sup> Alfonso, a *curandero* who claims to work on all three levels, when asked if it was true that the mental level was the hardest to learn and operate replied that all three are equally hard to him (A. Gracia, personal communication, 2010).

### Modern-Day Curanderos

New avenues of training are presently offered for those individuals who would like to pursue a "career" in *curanderismo*. For example, Eliseo "Cheo" Torres has taught a two-week informational course on *curanderismo* entitled "Traditional Medicine Without Borders: *Curanderismo* in the Southwest and Mexico," serving more than 200 students at the University of New Mexico. The course invites local healers and health practitioners as well as healers from Mexican cities and communities to share their knowledge and experiences with students. The course has encouraged discussions surrounding the concept of integrating traditional and conventional medicine to better serve the needs of the patient.<sup>20</sup>

Another institution offering training to students is El Centro de Desarrollo Humano, located in Cuernavaca, Mexico, and directed by Dr Arturo Ornelas. As part of the curriculum, students are not taught *curanderismo* practices through lectures but rather by treating themselves and others to gain a better understanding and mastery of the healing art.<sup>21</sup> Kalpulli Teocalli Ollin, an organization that promotes traditional ancestral healing practices, also offers courses such as "Curanderismo Around the World: Celtic, Jewish, and Native American" and "Healing Touch Class: Using Our Senses in Curanderismo" at the University of New Mexico and incorporates hands-on teaching exercises.<sup>22</sup>

Besides such structured programs seeking to train future *curanderos*, the practice is gaining greater acceptance within conventional medicine. Molina Healthcare of New Mexico is a regional health plan that covers traditional healing services for Native Americans.<sup>23</sup> *Curanderismo* has also been incorporated into multispecialty academic medical clinics, exemplified by the University of New Mexico's Center for Life, which describes itself as an "Integrative and Inter-Cultural Center for Prevention and Wellness" that features both ancient and modern techniques of healing.<sup>24</sup>

### ESPECIALIZACIÓN: PRACTICE SPECIALTIES AMONG CURANDEROS/AS

#### Nosology

According to *curanderismo*, some illnesses are caused by an imbalance of the humors of the body. Some believe illness can come from an imbalance of the *calidades* (qualities) of the body

**Table 1.** Nosology of Diseases in *Curanderismo*

Disease	English Translation	Origin of Illness	Cause	Description
<i>Bilis</i>	Bile	Psychological	Suppressed anger	Headaches, stomach ills, loss of appetite
<i>Empacho</i>	Intestinal obstruction	Natural	Food lodged in intestinal tract	Bloating, constipation, loss of appetite
<i>Encono</i>	Festering wounds	Supernatural	Unintentionally caused by another person	Infection of an open wound
<i>Latido</i>	Nervous stomach	Psychological	Prolonged amount of time without eating	Anorexia, inability to hold food, nausea
<i>Mal aire</i>	Bad air	Natural	Exposure to drafts or night air	Fever and other cold and flu-like symptoms
<i>Mal ojo</i>	Evil eye	Supernatural	Admiration of person with strong eyes	Fever and other cold and flu-like symptoms
<i>Maleficio</i>	Witchcraft	Supernatural	Hex put on by a witch	Bad luck, bad health
<i>Melarchico</i>	Melancholy	Psychological	Being separated from a loved one	Extreme depression, insomnia, and loss of appetite
<i>Mollera caida</i>	Fallen fontanel	Natural	Fontanel caving in on the soft palate	Colic, loss of appetite, loss of ability to suck
<i>Muina</i>	Nerves	Psychological	Outward display of anger	Headache, stomach ills
<i>Susto</i>	Fright	Psychological	Emotional shock	Insomnia, irritability, depression, and nightmares

in which foods and medicines classified as “hot” or “cold” are used to restore balance.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, most *curandero/as* believe illnesses derive from physical, emotional, or soul dysfunction.<sup>15</sup> That is, *curandero/as* believe that there needs to be balance and harmony in the emotional, physical, and social aspects of a person’s life.<sup>25</sup> Although *curandero/as* generally favor a holistic view of medicine, many recognize conventional categories of illness and will refer an individual whom they believe to be in need of medical attention to a physician.<sup>26</sup>

One of the major premises of *curanderismo* is that body and soul are inseparable. Thus, within *curanderismo* it is believed that if the soul is “lost” from the body, this will result in great illness.<sup>25</sup> This concept is fundamental to the understanding of health and illness among *curandero/as* and particularly to their understanding of mental health and psychiatric disorders. It is believed that a person’s spirit acts as a guardian of the individual’s mental health, and if the spirit fails to do so, the individual’s soul is greatly affected. Most commonly the dysfunction is perceived to be an excess of emotions such as envy, rage, or sadness.<sup>27</sup>

Another major premise of *curanderismo* is that mind and body are inseparable, as well. Accordingly, there is no dichotomy between emotional or somatic illnesses. In treating illnesses, *curandero/as* do not treat the mind and body separately but rather simultaneously treat both in their healing practice. A further premise of *curanderismo* is that the client is always innocent of malevolent forces in the environment. An individual is not blamed for being ill; moreover, the illness is seen to be a disruption of internal or external forces, which may be spoken of as an “attack.” One variation of this belief is that illness may come from an internal disruption due to an individual’s transgressions. In such cases, social support is needed, as well as help from the saints or God and from a *curandero/a*.<sup>25</sup>

*Curandero/as* believe that health and illness contain a duality of naturally and supernaturally caused illnesses. Natural causes

include the germ theory, genetic disorders, psychological conditions, and dietary causes for medical problems. These maladies are best treated by visiting a physician or using herbs. Supernatural causes for diseases include soul disorders or etiologies of a magical or unexplained nature.<sup>4</sup> A third category used to categorize illness in *curanderismo* is the psychological or interpersonal origin of disease.<sup>28</sup> A comprehensive nosology of diseases recognized within *curanderismo* is presented in Table 1.

Physical diseases that are thought to be of natural origin include *mal aire* (“bad air”), which is caused by exposures to drafts or night air. *Empacho* (“intestinal obstruction”) is bloating, constipation, and loss of appetite due to food being lodged in the intestinal wall. *Mollera caida* (“fallen fontanel”) is colic, loss of appetite, and loss of the ability to suck due to the fontanel caving in on the soft palate.<sup>28</sup>

Illnesses under the psychological category include *melarchico* (“melancholy”), brought about by being separated from a loved one. It is accompanied by extreme depression, insomnia, and loss of appetite. *Susto* (“fright”) is insomnia, irritability, depression, and nightmares caused by emotional shock.<sup>28</sup> *Latido* is an illness we would equate with anorexia, as it is defined as an individual going a prolonged amount of time without eating. Illnesses brought on by anger include *bilis* and *muina*. *Bilis* is believed to result from suppressed anger causing a bile to form and flow through the person’s inner system causing headaches, stomach ills, and loss of appetite. *Muina* is thought to be more serious and is caused by an outward display of rage rather than suppressed anger.<sup>29</sup>

Diseases that fall under the supernatural category include illnesses such as *encono* (“festering wounds”), an infection of an open wound caused by a person who has, more commonly, unintentionally caused the wound to fester. Another malady is *mal ojo* (“evil eye”), a sudden illness brought on to a child due to the admiration of a person with “strong eyes.” Lastly, *maleficio*

**Table 2.** Classification of *Curandero/as*

Specialty	English Translation	Description
<i>Yerbero/a</i>	Herbalist	Uses herbs to bring about healing
<i>Sobador/a</i>	Masseuse	Treats sore muscles, sprains, tension, etc.
<i>Espiritualisto/a</i>	Psychic medium	Utilizes talking with or possession by spirits to bring about healing
<i>Señor/a</i>	Tarot card reader	Uses tarot cards to predict future and advise
<i>Partera</i>	Midwife	Assists in the delivery of a child

("witchcraft") is the physical or mental disorder of an individual brought on by the work of a witch.<sup>28</sup>

These are just some of the most common illnesses presented to *curandero/as* for treatment; however, any type of problem may be brought to a *curandero/a*. When asked what most people sought help for from him, Alfonso replied that most people wanted help with intangible problems. They wanted help with problems of life, and found comfort in talking to someone and receiving attention for their problem (A. Gracia, personal communication, 2010). In a survey of 100 Mexican-born individuals living in Santa Ana, of a total of 50 *curandero/a* consultations among the group, 21 were for *mal puesto*, 8 for *susto*, 4 for *empacho*, 2 for chest pain, 2 for help in finding a missing relative, and the remaining 13 for problems such as alcoholism, infertility, and marital problems. It is evident from this study that people perceive *curandero/as* to have a wide range of powers.<sup>19</sup> Another study explored 300 consultations with a practicing *curandero*, who cited problems ranging from colds and flu to seeking help for troubled family members, finding a job, help with winning a court case, and getting rid of bad luck.<sup>30</sup>

### Specialization

Most *curandero/as* are able to treat a large variety of illnesses because they may specialize in more than one area (Table 2). The main specialist categories among *curandero/as* include, as noted, *yerbero/a* (herbalist), *sobador/a* (massager), *espiritualisto/a* (psychic medium), and *señor/a* (tarot card reader). Other specialties include *huesero/a*, a specialist in bones, and *partera* (midwife). Each of these specialties includes individuals who may work on one or more of the levels (material, mental, spiritual) within their specialty.<sup>13</sup>

## PRÁCTICAS RITUALES: SYMBOLS AND RITUALS OF CURANDEROS/AS

### Common Rituals

For each ailment that a client may present, *curanderismo* specifies a specialized manner of curing the illness. In many instances, formal Roman Catholic elements inform or define the ritual. For example, in the case of *mal ojo*, the sick person is laid on his or her back with the arms extended at the side. The individual is

then covered with a white bed sheet or blanket (white to signify purity) and the *curandero* sweeps over the body using an egg three times while praying the Apostles' Creed. The egg is then broken and put into a glass of water while a cross made out of a palm leaf is placed in front of the glass. It is said that if the client is suffering from the evil eye and is cured, then an eye will form on the egg.<sup>31</sup> It has been the experience of one of the present authors that the Apostles' Creed is not always prayed, but rather the individual will pray their own prayer or another prayer. Nevertheless, an egg is always used in this ritual and it is always placed in a cup to determine whether the individual has been healed. Other modifications may be that the *curandero* prays over the individual using holy water.

*Empacho* is cured with the use of holy water, but it has also been observed by one of the authors that *curandero/as* may use olive oil. The person's stomach is rubbed using the holy water in order to find the obstruction in their intestine. The person is then laid on their stomach in order to pull the skin on their back until a popping sound is heard. The popping sound signifies that the object has been dislodged, and the individual is then given a teaspoon of olive oil with salt and a tea, which helps regulate their digestive system. During the ritual, the Apostles' Creed, the Our Father, and the Hail Mary are all prayed.<sup>31</sup>

Instructions to pray to a particular saint are typically received from a *curandero/a* in order to help bring about healing or alleviate a specific problem. In addition, herbs are prescribed to cure respective ailments or to help alleviate tension. For example, when one woman asked for advice on how to cope with the death of her mother, the response was to pray to the La Virgen de Guadalupe and to St Joseph, the patron saint of the dead, dying, and those seeking a happy death. The woman was also instructed to sprinkle her mother's room with holy water, to keep fresh roses on hand, and to have her mother receive Last Rites from the Catholic Church.<sup>30</sup>

### Incorporation of Religious Symbols

Religious paraphernalia, herbs, and other symbolic items are used in conjunction with prayer to bring about healing within *curanderismo* rituals. When asked if these items were necessary, all of the interviewed *curanderos/as* stated that they felt that prayer was sufficient. Nevertheless, they saw a benefit in having these other items present, specifically to reinforce the faith of clients:

People like you and me know that you only need to pray to God to get your prayer answered, but these people don't believe that. Our society has been idolaters since the beginning of time. People need to see something in front of them to believe. All these candles and powders and saints are all a form of therapy. Like when I give people the perfume for Bingo they come back later and tell me that they won because of that perfume. I know that this is not true, and I tell them that they won because they had a positive attitude and they prayed to God. They argue and insist that I sell them the perfume so I sell it to them. I believe God is the only person that you need to pray to (D. Maria, personal communication, 2011).

I feel that everyone is entitled to their own faith and beliefs. I certainly agree that prayer is very strong in my personal

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opinion and that God will hear them, but sometimes we as people feel that we may need something else beside prayer—something that can give us a little push (J. Salinas, personal communication, 2011).

### Other Roman Catholic Syncretisms

The complexity of comingling Roman Catholic and native influences in *curanderismo* is not without precedent in other Me-soamerican traditions. Indeed, some of the same concepts and themes can be observed. The practice of Santería, a syncretic religion of West African and Caribbean origin popular in Cuba, also makes use of Roman Catholic concepts by incorporating the use of saints into their practice. During ceremonies, an altar with an image of Christ and pictures of various saints is placed in a central place. The Yoruba slaves believed that beyond the supreme god there were the Siete Potencias (The Seven Powers). These spirits were believed to be archangels of their god Oludomare, and were called Orishas. Many of the Orishas were identified with several Christian saints or angels. The prayers and modes of address used by the *santeros* (Santería priests) are quite similar to those used in Roman Catholicism. One example reads as follows:

Hail to Oya, our Orisha, with her crown of light. Here is Oya, lady of the wind and rain. Hail to her as she travels over the forests and hills. All praise to her for she is the mother of nine. Earthly winds, bring us health. Heavenly winds, bring us great fortune. Our lady of the winds is wonderful. Amen so let it be amen. Our lady of the sunset, you paint for us the leaves of autumn. We hear your song at dusk and dawn.<sup>32</sup>

The symbolic use of candles is also present in Santería, which also incorporates Catholic saints.<sup>32</sup> In Christianity, the candle is used to remind believers that Jesus Christ is the light of the world and that Jesus is present among his worshipers. In Santería, the candle is used in spells and enchantments because it gives the wizard indications of good or bad things during the ritual.<sup>32</sup>

Healing rituals in Santería compare with those of *curanderismo*: for example, the saints, Orishas, are called on to help bring healing to the patient. Santería rituals as well make use of music, dancing, and hypnosis. One Orisha in particular, Orsain, is seen as the Orishan doctor, who is associated with Saint John and Saint Ambrose. He is thought to have all the medicinal plants and herbs under his power. Santería rituals also make use of herbal remedies. An important herb used in Santería is vervain, which is extremely important in the Christian tradition because it is said to have been found growing on Calvary Hill and was used to staunch the wounds of Christ. Another similarity between Santería and *curanderismo* is that the rituals do not only address health but other problems such as wealth, prosperity, and luck.<sup>32</sup>

In Haiti, Roman Catholicism is a potent influence on the practice of *vodún* (voodoo), which, too, is derived from African traditions. Similarly to *curanderismo*, the line between physical and spiritual illness is not drawn, and disease is often seen as caused by supernatural factors and possessions by spirits.<sup>33</sup> Saints also are incorporated into the practice of *vodún*. In Haitian *vodún* there is a supreme god called Le Bon Dieu, but all

worship is given to the *laos*, which are spirits or divinities. Some of the *laos* were Catholic saints. On a *vodún* altar there is an array of Catholic paraphernalia including crucifixes, rosaries, holy water, candles, and pictures of Catholic saints. Prayers in *vodún* are also very similar to those of Roman Catholicism. An excerpt of a prayer commonly read in this practice is as follows:

Oh, Mary, Mother of Mercy, take pity on these poor, abandoned souls. Mary Apolita, Mother of God, Mother of mothers, Mother of Grace, pray for all these converted souls, these souls of purgatory. All the saints, all the angels, angels of the heavens . . . come and deliver this poor brother from tribulation.<sup>34</sup>

As with *curanderismo*, most *vodún* practitioners are also members of the Catholic Church. *Vodún* makes use of sacrifices, Catholic hymns such as “There is a King of the Angels,” holy water, and Catholic prayers such as the Magnificat during its ceremonies. The purpose of the *vodún* ceremony is similar to that of *curanderismo*, whereby the gods are called upon for the worshipers to make requests.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, besides the *vodún* of Haiti and the Santería of Cuba, other Roman Catholic syncretisms with traditional native religious belief and practice coexist with normative Christianity throughout the Caribbean. These include Cumina-Pukkumina in Jamaica and Shango in Trinidad.<sup>36</sup>

## KEY ELEMENTS OF CURANDERISMO PRACTICE

### Faith

Although faith in God is considered an instrumental part of the healing process in *curanderismo*, some say that healing can be brought about without the faith of the patient. Others believe that faith is the most important element of the practice of *curanderismo*, and some practitioners fault clients for their disbelief if healing does not result.<sup>37</sup> Some *curanderos/as* affirm that the most important element of the practice is the complete faith of the client toward the *curandero/a* practitioner:

The faith of the person is not the most important thing but it is one of the most important. One usually tries to instill faith. If you know the person doesn't have faith and that they are being forced to come, then you make it a point to make them have faith. Sometimes you will have people who have nothing but negative thoughts about *curanderos*. I remember this one man that was very negative. He was a very hard man until his daughter was demon-possessed. He would cry like a baby. He would tell me that he would give me anything to cure his daughter. He suddenly believed that I could heal her. Now he believed after this affected him personally. When it happens to you then you believe it (A. Gracia, personal communication, 2010).

### Therapeutic Touching

Another important element of the healing process is the therapeutic property of touch, a concept that has been adopted in recent years by the nursing profession, although controversially.<sup>38</sup> Alfonso shared his belief in the power of laying-on-of-hands in gaining trust and a higher level of comfort for the

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individual. He believed that there was power in the act of touching that could not be explained just by the level of physical closeness (A. Gracia, personal communication, 2010). Furthermore, rituals incorporating the whole family into the practice serve to better habilitate healing, as family may be invited to participate by use of their hands, as well.

Most rituals are practiced in the home of the patient or *curandero/a*, which is typically in the client's neighborhood and thus offers the client a deep sense of belonging, which may be conducive to healing. The status of the *curandero/a* is also considered an important element in successful healing. The *curandero/a* must be confident in his/her diagnosis and treatment of the ailment. A practicing *curandera* stated, "First of all the faith of God is the most important thing in my practice. They also have to have faith in me that I can carry out God's work, and have faith in the practice of *curanderismo*" (D. Maria, personal communication, 2011). The *curandero/a* gains this faith in their own practice by believing in the healing power of God.<sup>29</sup>

### Conjuring Spirits

Another key element of *curanderismo* practice, particularly for practitioners who work on the spiritual level, is the conjuring of spirits. *Curandero/as* may conjure the spirits of celebrities, deceased relatives, or the spirits of famous *curandero/as*. In an interview conducted with Mary (name changed), a 19-year-old student, she shared that when visiting a *curandero* he called on the spirit of Niño Fidencio to carry out the healing process:

The *curandero* began to pray to God and he recited the Our Father followed by the Hail Mary. He then lowered his head, and when he raised it once again his eyes were closed, and he began to speak in a child-like voice. He told me that he was Niño Fidencio, and he asked if I believed in the healing power of God. . . . He used holy water to anoint me and pray over me. He then acted as if he was taking something out of his pocket but he had nothing in his hand. He said he had a needle and he pretended to pierce his skin. He said he was going to put spiritual blood on my skin. After he pretended to pierce his own skin he pretended to pierce my skin and mix his blood with mine. After he completed the ritual he wished me the best then lowered his head. When he raised his head his eyes were open and his voice was back to normal (M. Gomez, personal communication, 2010).

In another interview, Juan (name changed), a 60-year-old retired immigration officer, shared his experience with a *curandero* and a *curandera* who worked together. The *curandera* seemed to work on the material level while the *curandero*, who conjured spirits, appeared to work on the spiritual level:

The *curandera* showed me a room before she was to pray for me using the piece of lamb chop she had asked me to bring. In that room there appeared to be a shrine to the Virgin Mary and there were many candles on tables and on the floor in that room. In the center of the room there was a man sitting Indian style on the floor dressed in a light blue robe. The *curandera* told me that this man was Niño Fidencio and that he would also be praying for me so that I would win my court case. The man appeared to be in a trance,

because he was rocking back and forth and he was muttering what seemed like a prayer under his breath (J. Garcia, personal communication, 2010).

## NEGOTIATING THE WORLDVIEW OF CURANDERISMO

### Barriers to Client Participation

Many of the rituals of *curanderismo* may seem quite unorthodox to individuals with limited exposure to beliefs and practices outside of the norms of Roman Catholic religion and of Western medicine. Examples include rubbing eggs over the body, sweeping the body with branches of leaves, burying items in the ground, and bathing with special herbs all as ways to cleanse the body of evil spirits. Another unusual type of cure was described whereby a *curandero* told a young woman to burn incense for seven days to cleanse her house of evil spirits, and to sprinkle rice, wheat, and black mustard seed around her house on the first day of the month to protect her from evil.<sup>30</sup> Within *curanderismo*, everyday objects such as eggs or lemons are perceived to hold special powers in that they can detract evil spirits from you and your surroundings.<sup>31</sup> Although not all potential clients necessarily recoil from performing such rituals or actions, as they may have been exposed to them while growing up and may even witnessed perceived benefits, some clients do report that these practices seem a bit silly. At the same time, this does not necessarily prevent seeking out contact with a *curandero/a*.

One client, for example, reported mixed feelings over the ritual he participated in and the items he was asked to bring along:

I felt so silly standing there while she slapped my body with a pork chop, and I felt even worse knowing that I had gone to all these ranches looking for the goose egg she had wanted I didn't want to go, but I didn't want to risk not having my prayer answered (A. Gracia, personal communication, 2010).

### Why Clients Continue to Participate

There are various reasons why a client may continue to seek contact with a *curanderismo* practitioner, even despite unsettling feelings or other reservations about participating in such practices. One may experience tangible benefits that have not been received from attending church, from praying, or even from medical practice. One may leave in a better state of mind after visiting a *curandero/a*, or may believe that he or she has received a "miracle" cure as a result of *curanderismo*. Other clients may feel reassured by a perception that the beliefs and rituals that they experienced are at least connected to the Roman Catholic religion, and may be comforted by the use of traditional religious objects during sessions. Two reasons in particular stand out.

**Practice Seems Effective.** Although some clients may not feel completely comfortable participating in *curanderismo*, they may return to the practice because of a perception that it is effective in some cases. This perception may be heightened by several factors: many of the rituals of *curanderismo* aim at relieving an individual's stress, a *curandero/a* sits and listens to an individual's

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problem and provides reassurance, and the service being provided is in a comfortable setting and in the client's native language. All of the elements may encourage a client to continue seeking care. Moreover, it has been shown that some of the herbs used by *curanderos/as* are indeed efficacious and contain antibacterial properties,<sup>39</sup> so clinical success (and thus satisfaction with care) may be attributable to more than psychosomatic mechanisms.

One interviewed client returned to the *curandero* because of his accuracy despite the fact that the client felt strongly that something may be wrong:

I went because everything he said came true, and all his prayers were working. Like one time I got into a car accident and my wife called him right after. It was like ten minutes after and he just answered the phone and immediately said he already knew about the accident. This scared me. I kind of knew then that something was wrong (R. Trevino, personal communication, 2010).

This duality of questioning whether *curanderismo* is silly or evil—while at the same time trusting that it will work—may contribute to an inner struggle participants face when deciding whether to participate in the practice. It also exemplifies what may be a common dilemma of clients and patients who have experienced any manner of unorthodox complementary or alternative medical therapies.

**Psychological Well-Being.** Participants may return for subsequent visits because of a heightened sense of psychological well-being that they receive from treatment by a *curandero/a* or from being in their presence. This is exemplified by a *curanderismo* ritual known as a *limpiada espiritual*, done to clean a person's aura of negative energy and which has become opaque in color due to carrying a heavy load from the troubles of life. A main reason for retaining this energy is said to be doubt, which is hard to get rid of and which keeps an individual holding onto feelings of jealousy, anger, and frustration. Harboring such feelings prevents one from attaining tranquility and makes it hard to prepare for life's required tasks. Receiving a *limpiada espiritual*, a "spiritual cleansing," enables one to return to life, reawakening the colors of the aura, and is a means to destroy the negative thoughts that inhibit normal functioning (J. Salinas, personal communication, 2011). In participating in this ritual, the client is led to envision all negative thoughts being swept away, enabling one to feel as if he or she can start life anew.

One *curandero* underscored clearly how a *limpiada* can be beneficial:

Most people come to me because they are not happy with their life. They want a *limpia* for all the bad luck that they have. Basically in everything they do nothing comes out right. Life is eating away at them. They are sad. A *barrida* or a *limpia* usually helps them. Aroma therapy and prayer helps with that too. This takes away the negative energy. I use the power of prayer, the power of faith, religious articles, invocation of spirits, and healing power of cleanse (A. Gracia, personal communication, 2010).

## DISCUSSION

The psychological reassurance that may be gained from tangible religious paraphernalia incorporated into *curanderismo* practice, the therapeutic property of touch present in many rituals, and the herbs used in many remedies all have the potential to facilitate healing for the participant. At the very least, a better state of mind for healing may result. Multiple roles of doctor, psychiatrist, and religious guide employed by *curandero/as* may fulfill physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the client.

On the other hand, when these practices are used independently of modern medicine adverse consequences may occur. Negative effects may result from distrust, fear, and embarrassment associated with negative perspectives on participation in the practice. For these reasons, it is imperative that healthcare professionals and caregivers gain an awareness of these practices. It would also be useful for professionals to inquire about these practices from among their clients in order to preemptively identify any contraindications or risks that might complicate care but that would be otherwise hidden.

Future research might consider examining in-depth the complexities of the relationship between Roman Catholicism and *curanderismo*, and how this conflicted relationship specifically may impact on the mental health of participants, both practitioners and clients. An especially contentious subject, and one with some taboo elements among both *curanderos/as* and clergy, is the subset of *curanderismo* that involves the *Santísima Muerte* ("Saint Death"). Practices associated with this form of *curanderismo* are considered to define a dangerous cult; disapproval from the Roman Catholic Church is so great that these practices are paralleled with Satanism.<sup>40</sup>

Recent literature suggests that *curanderismo* is evolving toward incorporation of biomedical principles within its practice—principles that thus exist alongside of Roman-Catholic-influenced ideas as well as folk medical concepts. *Curandero/as* are, by nature, eclectic and adept at making use of concepts and practices drawn from various disciplines and sources, including conventional medicine.<sup>41,42</sup> Over time, perhaps this will widen the appeal of *curanderismo*, although it is premature to expect that the medical world will not remain highly opposed. It is difficult to ascertain whether *curanderismo* will ever be embraced, much as some forms of CAM have been in recent years. But identification of physical, mental, and spiritual etiologies within *curanderismo*—and the concomitant treatment modalities—are not inconsistent with current psychosocial theory and research and would thus recommend this as a subject for clinical and population health research.

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