

CATEGORY: PERU: NOW

CONCEPTS: RELIGION, folklore, urban vs. rural, social class

ACTIVITIES: TWO READINGS ABOUT FOLK MEDICINE IN PERU.
The first gives general information, and the second, an excerpt from National Geographic (vol. 161, March, 1982) entitled "The Two Souls of Peru" by Harvey Arden, gives us a closer look at the practice of folk medicine.

OBJECTIVES: Students will understand the practice of folk medicine in Peru and will be able to relate where and why it is prevalent and the types of "treatments" that are employed.

MATERIALS: The two readings that follow.

PROCEDURE: Before reading the two hand-outs, a general discussion about folk medicine, as it is perceived in the United States, is recommended. The following questions might be asked:

1. What role do faith healers play in our culture?
2. Why do some people in the U.S. reject traditional medicine?
3. Why do you suppose health food stores have become so popular in recent years?
4. Can you think of any advantages to using herbal treatments for certain illnesses?

After reading both hand-outs, another discussion should follow. The students should give their opinion about the credibility of folk medicine by citing examples from the National Geographic article to support their claims.

VOCABULARY: Curandero, Indigenous, Mestizo, Assimilation (process by which an indigenous culture is abandoned for a dominant, urban culture).

LEVEL: MIDDLE GRADES

Source: Gibbs, Virginia G. *Latin America: Curriculum Materials for the Middle Grades*. Center for Latin America, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. 1985. |1989.

FOLK MEDICINE

Before the turn of the last century, a substantial tradition of folk remedies was widespread in much of rural North America. Medical doctors were few, and many people had to rely on folk medicine as their only resort. Herbal remedies were known and passed on from mother to daughter. Teas from a variety of plants were in common use. During the 1900s, however, the vast majority of such beliefs and practices vanished from the North American scene and were replaced with modern medical practitioners. Most U.S. doctors reject treatment connected with folk medicine. There is, however, a growing minority relying as little as possible on surgery and drugs, and using instead the traditional herbal remedies.

In Peru, folk medicine is still valued among a large segment of the older indigenous population both in urban and rural areas. Among the traditional medical beliefs which survive is the belief that foods are either "caliente" (hot) or "frio" (cold) [apart from either temperature or seasoning] and that the consuming of a proper balance of the two is essential for optimum health. Hot and cold wines are thought to be harmful to health, as are "susto" (fright), "mal de ojo" (evil eye), and loss of one's soul - each of which Indians try to avoid. If afflicted, they seek cures which involve both the pre-Columbian and Christian traditions.

Native herbalists or "curanderos" can and have long effected successful treatments of certain ills, an achievement that many consider impressive. It is well known, for example, that Indians were using quinine as a treatment for malaria when Pizarro first came to Peru. Some Indians claim herbal remedies for such common maladies as asthma, bronchitis, indigestion, nervous disorders, liver trouble, snakebite, and even cancer. The practice of employing "brujos" (people believed to have supernatural powers) for such ills as "mal de ojo" - a "disorder" whose victims (mostly children) become listless and gradually waste away - is still relatively common. Remedies for it include taking the dried fetuses of several animals, notably the llama, as medicine.

Because the highland Indians tend to mistrust modern medical practices, the government has tried several ploys to win them over to modern medicine. One is to pair medical doctors as working assistants to "curanderos" to gradually persuade them to add at least some modern medical procedures to their own portfolios of cures.

Indigenous Peruvians, especially the young, are slowly tending to rely less and less on "curanderos" as their sole source of assistance in case of illness, and are beginning to employ a variety of common pharmaceutical remedies as well as to seek the services of Western-style physicians.

It is wrong to think of the whole South American continent believing in and using folk medicines. Urban dwellers (at least 65% of South America) would reject such cures, and probably never see a "curandero." Yet folk remedies persist, especially in parts of Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay, Ecuador, Columbia and Brazil. Wherever the rural Indian and "mestizo" population is large and trained doctors are non-existent herbs, teas, and local plants form the basis for medical treatment. Many South Americans will first consult a medical doctor and, if improvement or cure is not immediate, the "curandero" will be called in.

"THE TWO SOULS OF PERU"

By Harvey Arden

Around Iquitos itself, the jungle has been logged over for hundreds of miles. (Iquitos: The only city of any size (population 173,600) in the midst of the Amazonian jungle of Peru.) Indians who dwell in that green vastness are being rapidly assimilated. Many come from deep in the jungle to Iquitos, bringing old ways with them.

I asked around, hoping to find a sorcerer. I was told they use the bark of a jungle vine to brew a hallucinogenic drink called ayahuasca, under whose influence they cast powerful spells.

Two kinds of magicians use this brew. There is the brujo, caster of powerful spells, capable of causing almost unimaginable evil. No one I talked to knew of any brujos--though everyone seemed to know people who suffered from their evil spells, which are said to cause melancholy, blindness, sickness, even death. A brujo's victims, I was told, must seek out a curandero, or curer, who cannot create spells but can, with the help of the ayahuasca, break the power of a brujo's spell.

Could I find a curandero in Iquitos?

Oh, no, people said, even the curanderos are gone. But one taxi driver finally suggested someone.

"There is a man who works at the slaughterhouse. Perhaps he can help you."

And that's how I met the maestro.

Taken to a small home near the slaughterhouse, I was introduced to Cristóbal Solín.

He brought out a corked bottle filled with a brownish, bubbly fluid.

"Ayahuasca," he said. "With this one can cure the victim of a brujo--but only if the brujo was not too powerful."

He pointed to his right eye; the pupil seemed broken, like the yolk of an egg.

"A brujo did that to me when I was a young man," he said. "The eye went blind, there was terrible pain. The doctors couldn't help, so I went to a curandero. For months he tried to cure me. The pain went away, but still the eye was blind. Finally the curandero said he could do no more; the brujo who had cast the spell was too powerful."

"From that time I studied the ways of curanderos. I learned the old knowledge and how to make the ayahuasca. Now I try to help others. We have meetings every Sunday where people come to be cured."

Could I attend?

He measured me with his one good eye. "Yes, but you must buy the cigarettes."

The cigarettes?

"We need them for the ceremony. Two packs. You will see."

That Sunday night we drove out to an old abandoned tanning factory on the outskirts of Iquitos. We sat in a circle on the dirt floor. In the pitch-darkness a single candle was lit. The maestro and four "patients" each drank a small tumbler of ayahuasca, then sat back.

Now the maestro took out the cigarettes. He would smoke them incessantly for the next four hours, taking in deep gulps of smoke, then blowing it onto the heads and into the nostrils of the men.

Each patient in turn lay on the ground. The maestro took out a fist-size rock he called the sucking stone. Chanting hypnotically, he leaned over each of the men, applied the stone to the parts of their bodies where they felt pain, then made a loud sucking sound as he drew the "poison" through the stone and spat it out on the ground.

For hours the chanting, the smoking, the sucking, and the spitting went on. The men moaned and shook as the maestro hovered over them. Finally, he got up.

That was it?

"Yes," he said. "It takes many sessions to work a cure. This man, for instance, has had pain in his stomach for many months. This is his fourth session."

Was he feeling better?

The man rubbed his navel, where the sucking stone had been applied.

"I feel pain, but not so bad now."

But why would a brujo cast such a spell on him? He shook his head.

I'd heard that many so-called curanderos are the worst sort of fakes. But what exactly is a fake? Unless I'd stumbled on a company of gifted actors, these men fully believed in what they were doing.

Was this religion? Magic? Primitive folk medicine? Sheer tomfoolery?

I leave it to wiser heads to decide.