

Curanderismo: An Emic Theoretical Perspective of Mexican-American Folk Medicine¹

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ABSTRACT: In this article *curandcrismo*, Mexican-American folk medicine, is treated as a systematic body of healing theories rather than a mass cultural phenomenon. Using professional healers as informants for a period of over four years, the authors define and describe *curanderismo* from the emic theoretical perspective, not only providing explanations for the ties between the "Mexican Folk Illnesses" previously reported in the literature, but also showing the evolution and future of *curanderismo* as a holistic health care system.

The classical anthropological works on Mexican-American folk medicine, published primarily in the 1960s, have several common features. Clark (1959a), Currier (1966), Kiev (1968), Madsen (1961, 1964), Rubel (1960, 1964, 1966), and Romano (1965) each produced descriptive documents on prominent folk medical practices existing in Hispanic communities in the southwestern United States.² They, and the vast majority of the authors in the appended list of references, provide a highly repetitious perspective of *curanderismo*, especially of descriptions of the (by now) well-known Mexican-American "cultural illnesses": *susto*, *empacho*, *mal de ojo*, *caida de mo//era*, *bills*, and *espanto* (see Nail 1967:302 for definitions). This repetition is caused, at least in part, by the orientation taken by these researchers towards curandersmo.

It is clear from reading the available texts that *curanderismo* has been viewed and analyzed primarily as a mass cultural phenomenon, not as a coherent theoretical system. That is, it has been treated as a body of knowledge that is widely distributed throughout the culture and is available to and utilized by a significant segment of the existing Mexican-American population. This view of *curanderismo* tends to make any discussion of the phenomenon atheoretical, in whole or in part, at least in terms of an emic theory of *curanderismo*. This condition exists because very few mass cultural phenomena are thought of as having a theoretical orientation. Systems (e.g., medical, educational, scientific systems) are easily recognized as having theoretical components. But mass cultural phenomena are generally thought of as having themes or unifying elements on a higher but non-theoretical level of organization. In fact, mass cultural phenomena are something one has theories about rather than being theoretical systems themselves. This viewpoint is well represented in the articles about *curanderismo* that reflect its form and function within Mexican-American communities (e.g., Clark 1959b; Edgerton et al. 1970; Foster 1953; Martinez and Martin 1966; Torrey 1969; etc.). No effort seems to have been made by previous authors to demonstrate linkages between the described folk illnesses and their treatments other than through documenting their coexistence within a specified cultural group. As a result, the existing literature lacks a basic starting point from which the different components of *curanderismo* can be analyzed. These earlier epidemiological approaches to folk illnesses give us an idea of the geographical spread and variation in beliefs, illnesses, and healing rituals, but these studies fail to identify or discuss the common denominator that makes *curanderos* members of the same healing group: their underlying unity of perception of illness. Thus, the existing situation is analogous to making an anthropological analysis of surgery which focuses on the perceptions of the surgery patient. Such a project would produce valid descriptions of a mass cultural phenomenon,

but would miss the theoretical elements of surgery available from the specialist performing the surgery. Such an analysis would probably produce a wide degree of experiential agreement among the subjects, but would tend to emphasize disparate elements of surgery, elements that would not appear to be bound together by an overriding theory, just as *mat de ojo*, *empacho*, etc. have been presented as disparate elements in the literature. The remedy for the weakness in this approach is to attempt to elicit the theoretical organization of the phenomena by a) treating the phenomena as a system and b) emphasizing the linkages between the treatments and diagnoses made by specialists (e. g. surgeons or *curanderos*). The following data clearly demonstrate the systemic nature of *curanderismo* and indicates that it indeed does possess a theoretical component that links its elements and that there is significant agreement amongst the *curanderos* of south Texas as to the nature and the validity of the theoretical component of the healing system.

THE RESEARCH SITE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The research for this article was conducted by the authors in the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas through more than four years of relatively continuous research effort.³ For the purpose of this paper, the lower Rio Grande Valley is composed of the Texas counties of Cameron, Hidalgo, and Willacy,⁴ plus the border region of Northern Tamaulipas, Mexico.

The Valley, actually a flat area formed by the flood plain of the Rio Grande, has a somewhat unusual habitation pattern on the United States side where the majority of the research was conducted. A habitation strip no more than fifteen miles wide at the widest has been formed by a nearly continuous series of small towns (population 2,000 to 40,000) running from Brownsville at the mouth of the Rio Grande to Mission, approximately sixty-five miles upstream. This strip is bordered by, and often liberally interspersed with, citrus groves

and agricultural fields. This makes the entire region an inextricable rural-urban mixture. Agriculture is the main industry, but the approximately half-million people in the area (79.11 percent Mexican-American: 1970 Census of Population) live in a basically urban environment. Even most of the farmers and farmworkers live in town.

This environment has certainly affected the practice of *curanderismo*, but perhaps not in the directions that might have been predicted from other studies. Alger (1974) has described one possible outcome of urbanized *curanderismo* where mimicry of the medical system becomes a dominant theme within the folk healing system. This type of mimicry does not exist to any significant extent in south Texas. Yet both *curanderos* and their clients have extensive knowledge of the medical system. Unlike the attitudes reported in earlier studies of the area (e.g., Madsen 1961; Rubel 1966), the *curanderos* and their patients accept the utility of modern medicine.

This finding does not call into question the validity of the earlier research in regard to this particular point; instead it marks an important area of sociocultural change in the lower Rio Grande Valley. Many general social, political, and economic changes have occurred in the lower Rio Grande Valley in the last twenty years. Not only is the Mexican-American population more educated and more secure in its self-identity, but also Anglo-dominated institutions such as medical services are more accessible to the general population. At the time the earlier research was done, the late 1950s, modern medicine was inaccessible to, or of recent introduction to, significant segments of the Mexican-American population; a situation somewhat analogous to the introduction of modern medicine to a number of developing areas at approximately the same time. In the interim, the efficacy of modern medicine has been empirically demonstrated numerous times, so it has fulfilled the prerequisites for a successful innovation and is now an integrated part of the cultural system. At the same time, modern medicine has not totally

replaced *curanderismo*, for some of the same reasons that the holistic health movement and the charismatic healing movements have recently shown significant growth. All of the *curanderos* dealt with in the study used the medical system themselves when they saw the need to do so, and many of the healers referred their patients to doctors under various circumstances.

The *curanderos'* medical referral occurred when the healers felt the medical system could do the job better than they could, as in the case of broken bones or infectious diseases and sometimes as a general precaution. The authors heard one *curandera* tell a patient to go to a doctor for a checkup. She said that she had taken care of the cause of the patient's problems but that the patient had let herself become run down while she was having the problems. A visit to the doctor would assure a speedy recovery of her former physical condition. From this and similar occurrences, the authors formed the impression that *curanderismo* and modern medicine assume complementary roles at the present time in South Texas, at least in the minds of the *curanderos* and their patients, although not necessarily in the minds of the medical professionals of the area.

For the purposes of this study, the border itself can be thought of as a mild irritant that has no substantive effect on people either seeking or utilizing the services of folk healers on both sides of the river. Mexican-Americans regularly travel into the major population centers of Reynosa and Matamoros (as well as to the smaller *municipios*) to seek out not only *curanderos* but also physicians, dentists, pharmacists, and midwives. *Curanderos* from Mexico regularly cross the border to allow patients to consult with them on the United States side, and some Mexican nationals seek out well-known healers on the United States side of the border. This interchange may produce a dynamism in the *curanderismo* of the valley that makes it substantially more widespread and accepted than it is in Mexican-American communities that are further removed from the border area.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Traditional anthropological research techniques were used to gather the data for the current study, primarily participant observation and key informant interviewing over prolonged periods of time. The authors utilized personal networks and those of friends and students to identify individuals who were known locally as healers. Emphasis was placed on finding individuals who were full-time healers rather than talking to those individuals who treated only family members and neighbors. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper a *curandero* will be defined as an individual who is recognized in his community as having the ability to heal, who sees an average of five or more patients a day, and who has knowledge of and utilizes the theoretical structure described in this paper. These people can be viewed as both specialists and professionals and are distinguishable from other individuals who use some of the same treatment techniques by the above criteria.

Since the research has been an ongoing process, this technique of identifying healers has been extremely successful. More than sixty healers have been contacted and interviewed. These healers include *parteras* (midwives), *yerberos* (herbalists), *sobadores* (people who treat sprains and strained muscles), and the group we are calling *curanderos*, who manipulate the supernatural world as well as the physical world.

The data contained in this paper were initially elicited through participant observation combined with key informant interviewing. Two individuals provided the initial structuring of the theoretical orientation presented here. These individuals were chosen as key informants on the dual basis of their willingness to work with the authors on a long-term basis and on their apparent success as healers according to their reputations within their community. One was male, the other female; both had been healing for more than ten years when they were initially contacted. One lived in Reynosa but travelled at least one day weekly to a United States town to

consult with patients there. The other lived in Edinburg only a few blocks from the university where the authors were employed. They each saw from ten to fifty patients a day, and as far as could be discerned by the authors, they had no contact with one another prior to and during much of the research project.

After a certain level of confidence was established, the authors were allowed to observe and eventually to record and photograph healing sessions. Both of the authors were invited to act as apprentices to one or the other of the two key informants. This opportunity may have been largely responsible for discovering the theoretical components of *curanderismo*, since an apprentice is not only allowed to learn what he has to do; he or she is also expected to learn why he does it (and why he does it one way and not another).

All of the data collected from the key informants were checked with the other healers that have been interviewed. Approximately sixteen healers other than the key informants have been interviewed⁵ who fit the authors' definition of *curandero*. Again, the criteria for selection were their willingness to share knowledge and experience with the authors.

One unexpected condition encountered was that the literature led us to expect that entry into the healing system would be difficult and that informants would probably not tolerate tape recordings and certainly not tolerate photographs or motion picture (or videotape) footage to be taken. Our experience was just the opposite. In fact, we were denied an interview by only one healer. We got this surprising warm welcome because, as one informant told us, the *curanderos* had a number of things that they wanted the medical establishment to know. We were encouraged to record sessions and admonished not to forget our tape recorders for future sessions. Even with the rigors of obtaining release forms, photographs were permitted far more frequently than might have been expected, although some patients who would let us observe did not want to be photographed. Motion picture photography (and videotape) presented the most serious problems. The problem with film was

not extraordinary reluctance on the part of the *curanderos*; it was the physical characteristics of the equipment and the need for rather uncomfortable light levels when shooting indoors where most of the healing takes place.

Another key element in our success was in our initial approach to the healers. We rarely directly approached a *curandero*; we were nearly always introduced by a third party who was in the *curandero's* confidence. We also made a very straightforward declaration of our reasons for wanting to talk to the *curanderos* in our first interview with them (and earlier with our go-betweens). These reasons can be summarized as follows:

1. We wanted to document and preserve an important characteristic of Mexican-American culture.
2. We were working on a project that would disseminate information to public health and medical personnel, so that they would be better able to understand Mexican-American concepts of health and illness, and perhaps be better able to provide services for Mexican-Americans.
3. We wanted to learn as much (both professionally and personally) as the *curandero* would teach us.
4. We wanted to know what the *curandero* considered to be important as far as health and illness were concerned.
5. We wanted to know the level of need that exists for the *curandero's* services.
6. We wanted to know why people seek the services of a *curandero*.

We want to emphasize that our approach was direct, because at least one project (Edgerton et al. 1970) utilized an approach that appears to be both of doubtful ethical merit and potentially methodologically unsound, based upon our research experience. In the Edgerton study, a research assistant presented herself to *curanderos* as a polyneurotic patient. This technique is sometimes called a pseudopatient approach or design where someone presents a series of neurotic symptoms and emotional conflicts to the *curanderos* to trigger and document their reactions to supposed patient situations. Aside from the issue of using a technique that has been the focus of strong ethical debate, this approach raises the question of whether or not the healers detected that the patient

was "faking it." While this technique has demonstrated some utility in studies of individuals who do not see a significant number of clients who may be presenting a pseudopatient situation, it is not at all uncommon, according to our informants, for people to come to a *curandero* in a similar guise, "just to test them to see if they really know what they are doing." The ways the *curanderos* deal with such people, if they detect the fakery, varies from *curandero* to *curandero*. Some simply refuse to give the "faker" any substantive information, some ask them to leave, and some fakers, we suspect, are given information that is just as false as the information that they gave to the *curandero*. Whatever the outcome of such an encounter, our experience suggests that any data collected by that method should be considered to be highly suspect, where *curanderos* are concerned.

BACKGROUND DATA

Much of the data from previous studies was reconfirmed by the authors. This data includes the existence and treatment of the so-called folk illnesses of Mexican-Americans (*empacho*, *susto*, etc.); however, the emphasis that was placed on these illnesses changed. From being a prominent part of the healing system, these illnesses shifted to relatively minor importance. The *curanderos* seldom treat these diseases because, as one informant put it, "anyone can take care of these things. We only see the ones that other people, the mother, the grandmother, the neighbor cannot cure." Instead, the *curanderos* are sought out to deal with problems of a much more serious nature.

The study reconfirmed that the healer's perspective of the nature of health and illness contains a dual element of "natural" illnesses and "supernatural" ones. This duality forms the base upon which *curanderismo* is structured.

The natural source of illness overlaps with the medical model of illness. The basic premises of modern medicine, such as the germ theory of disease, are basically accepted,

and the natural illnesses are seen as being amenable to treatment by physicians, by herbal remedies, and occasionally through supernatural intervention, although the latter is not the preferred mode since it takes time and energy that could be better spent on other cures.

A supernatural source of illness is also recognized. These illnesses are not seen as being amenable to treatment by the medical establishment, only to supernatural manipulations by the *curanderos*. The *curanderos* realize that the scientific medical system does not recognize the existence of magic or of supernatural causation. In fact, they fault the system for that very reason. One *curandero* went so far as to say that many of the people in mental institutions (he estimated ten percent) were there because they were *embrujados* (hexed or bewitched), but the doctors could not recognize it, so the condition went untreated. Supernaturally caused illnesses were most commonly said to be initiated by either evil spirits (*espiritos malos*) or by *brujos* (individuals practicing antisocial magic), and they form a significant part of the *curanderos'* work on the United States side of the border.⁷

The *curanderos* indicated that any particular illness experienced by a patient could theoretically be caused by either natural or supernatural processes. This means that there is a natural form of diabetes, and a form caused by a supernatural agent, such as a *brujo*. The same is true for alcoholism, cancer, and so on. One of the key problems that the *curandero* deals with is in identifying the nature of the causal agent for a particular illness. Some appear to identify more supernatural causes for illnesses than others who take a more balanced approach. One good example of a *curandero* passing up an opportunity to claim supernatural intervention in a problem was provided by a student who asked one of the authors to take him to one of the key informants. The student very strongly felt he was *embrujado* (hexed) by a former girl friend whom he had treated poorly and then broken up with ("dumped" was the term he used). The student was feeling in poor health generally; he was flunking his courses and was always tired. He presented these symptoms to the *curandero*

and asked that the *trabajo* (magical work of hex) be removed. The *curandero* "checked him out," using his magical training, and then asked the student a series of questions about his current habits and lifestyle (do you party a lot, how much are you drinking, how much are you studying, etc.). The *curandero's* diagnosis, which he very bluntly related to the student, was that he could find absolutely no supernatural cause for his troubles. He said that the student's problems were directly the effect of too much partying and drinking, not enough studying and sleep. If he were to reverse those things, the student would be able to enormously improve his present condition.

This latter example also illustrates that the authors were able to reconfirm that there is far less dichotomizing of physical and social problems within *curanderismo* as reported by Kiev (1968) and Holland (1963), than is true of the medical care system. The *curanderos* very clearly deal with problems that are of a social, psychological and/or spiritual nature, as well as physical ailments. In many cases the problems overlap into two or more categories. Bad luck in business was a common problem presented to the *curanderos*. Other problems encountered were marital disruptions, alcoholism or alcohol abuse, infidelity, being bothered by supernatural manifestations, cancer, diabetes, and infertility. One of our key informants organized the information she gave the authors by making distinction between the problems presented by females and males. According to this informant, the central focus for the problems which women bring to her involves the husband—the husband drinks too much, does not work, does not give them money, or is going out with other women. Men brought problems that were more physical such as stomach problems, headaches, weakness, bladder and so forth. Men also bring problems that deal directly with work—need to find a job, inability to get along with people at work, and with business—a failing business, a new business, the need for more customers. The wife is only rarely the focal point of their problems. The total list of problems presented to the *curanderos* is nearly inexhaustible and includes every

situation that can be thought of as an uncomfortable human condition. Unfortunately, our research methods and resources did not allow us to quantify these problems, although such an attempt is now under way, in a modified form, by one of the authors. Obviously, Calvin (1961), Kline (1969), Torrcy (1972), and many others are correct in their assessment that *curanderismo* plays an important, culturally appropriate psychotherapeutic role in some Mexican-American communities.

Another element of *curanderismo* that was reconfirmed by the present study was the concept of "a gift of healing" (*el don*) that was reported by Hudson (1951) and Romano (1964) for an extremely important, famous south Texas folk healer, Don Pedrito Jaramillo (1829-1907). It is also reported in a more general way by Rubel (1966), Madsen (1965), and others. The *don* is the basic element of difference between the healer and the nonhealer that allows the healer to practice his or her work, especially in the supernatural area. It is clear that the *don* for healing in the past was felt to be a gift from God. However, a secular interpretation of the presence of the *don* is now competing with the more traditional explanation. Many healers still refer to the *don* as a gift from God and support this premise by reference to Biblical passages (e.g., Corinthians 12:7 and James 5:14). Other healers explain the *don* as an inborn trait that is common to and present in all human beings. They consider it to have the same basis as singing, running, or talking. Almost any human being can do these things, but some obviously can do them better than others, and a few can do them extremely well. *Curanderos*, according to these healers, are simply the individuals with a better ability to heal than is normative for the population as a whole. The healers refer to this condition as having "developed abilities."

One element common to hispanic-based folk medicine that is present in most areas, the hot-cold syndrome (see Ingham 1940; Foster 1953; and Currier 1966) is missing in South Texas. This condition was first noted by Madsen (1961:23-24) and was reconfirmed by the authors. No healers

who were raised in the area utilized the hot-cold dichotomy to explain illness, although it was used in organizing herbal cures by one informant, a curandera, who was born in central Mexico and later immigrated to the valley. This informant is unusual in that she not only uses a hot-cold (*caliente-frio*) dichotomy to classify herbs but also uses bitter-sweet (*amarga-dulce*), drying-refreshing (*secante-refrescante*) and rough-smooth (*rasposa-suave*). She also states that although the medicinal properties of an herb may be obvious to the healer, patients will not use an herb if it does not taste well. The only indications of the prior existence of a hot-cold syndrome found amongst the patients were some scattered folk belief such as not eating citrus during menses, not ironing barefooted on a cement floor, or taking a cold shower after prolonged exposure to the sun, and the like. None of these beliefs were organized in a systematic fashion, nor were they extensively shared within the Mexican-American population. Probing provided little or no additional information on this subject. The reasons for at least a partial absence of the hot-cold syndrome in the valley are pure conjecture at this time and must be left to later research for resolution.

THE THEORETICAL STRUCTURE OF CURANDERISMO

The informants articulated a theoretical structure for *curanderismo* which has three primary units of organization. These units are called levels (*niveles*) by the healers. They are the material level (*nivel material*), the spiritual level (*nivel espiritual*) and the mental level (*nivel mental*).

The material level is the most commonly used. Apparently more people have the *don* for working on this level than either of the other two. This level is organized around the manipulation of physical objects to affect the patient's health environment. Heuristically, this level can be subdivided into a physical and a supernatural area. In the one, simple physical manipulations are performed with no supernatural manipulations being necessary for the successful outcome of the

treatment. The *parteras* (midwives), *hueseros* (bone setters), *yerberos* (herbalists), *sobadores* (people who treat sprains and tense muscles) are all a part of this level of healing. This level includes all of the *remedios caseros* (home remedies) that people use. On the other hand, the supernatural part of this level involves the cures for *susto*, *empacho*, *caida de mollera*, etc. It also includes all of the spells and incantations that are derived out of medieval European witchcraft and earlier forms of magic, such as the *kabala*. Manipulations on this level utilize verbal incantations in conjunction with such objects as candles, ribbons, water, fire, crucifixes, tree branches, herbs, oils, eggs, live animals, and many other things. In actual practice, the *curanderos* never divided up the various manipulations within the material level. Healers, such as *sobadores*, who worked extensively with simple physical manipulations, might also resort to magical incantations if the patient's condition warranted it and if the *sobador* knew how to proceed in that area so that the physical and the supernatural become inextricably woven together.

The spiritual level (*nivel espiritual*) has gone through a recent florescence in the lower Rio Grande valley and elsewhere (also see Macklin 1967, 1974a, 1974b, 1974c, 1978; and Macklin and Crumrine 1973). Publications by anthropologists who worked in the Valley some twenty years ago (Romano, Rubel, Madsen, etc.) make little mention of this type of healing. Now nearly every town in the Valley has an existing or a developing spiritual group. In many of its aspects, this level involves the practice of nearly classical shamanism. Individuals enter an altered state of consciousness and, according to the *curanderos*, either make contact with the spirit world by opening their minds to spirit voices, send their spirits out of the body to gain knowledge at a distance, allow spirits the use of the body to communicate with this world, or all three. That spiritualism is currently going through both growth and transition in south Texas-northern Tarnaulipas is evidenced by the fact that there are two terms (*espiritista* and *espiritualista*) that are used to label spiritualists. These two words do not yet have either clearly defined nor mutually

exclusive meanings, although each of the *curanderos* who worked on this level normally used one or the other of the terms to label what they (and others with whom they were compatible) did and used the other term to label spiritualists who did things differently. In some cases the connotations of the "other" label appeared negative. Sometimes what the "others" did was considered evil, working with evil spirits or causing harm; sometimes one term indicated individuals in communication with the spirit world without trance or possession, and in at least one case, one term indicated traditional style of spiritualism and the other creativity, exploration, innovation. It seems quite likely that the terms will settle into labels for agreed-upon differences in spiritualism in the near future if the practices on this level are varied enough to necessitate the maintenance of two labels for the practitioners. The evidence the authors currently have would cause us to speculate that one of the terms (probably *espiritualista*), will come to be equated with working only with "good spirits" (*espiritus de la luz*) and working in a church or temple-like setting. The other term will probably come to mean someone who can work with all types of spirits, works alone, and is attempting to gain new knowledge and power in this realm, not to simply heal patients or help distressed spirits.

The mental level (*nivel mental*) was the least commonly encountered of the three levels. The authors had only one primary informant about this level, with two subsidiary informants who actively worked on this level. The other healers recognized the existence of this level, a fact the authors confirmed with them, but they could not extensively describe its performance. The relative rarity of this *don*, combined with the need for extensive training and discipline, greatly limits the healers who use it.

One informant described the working of the mental level as the ability to transmit, channel, and focus mental vibrations (*vibraciones mentales*) in a way that would directly affect the patient's mental or physical condition. That particular healer sometimes uses this technique to cure cancer. He stated that he channeled the vibrations to the afflicted

spot, retarded the growth of the "damaged cells" and accelerated the growth of the normal cells to eliminate the problem. The same healer used the mental level to "dominate" a patient, at his wife's request, and to stop that individual's excessive use of alcohol along with his extramarital affairs. Both patient and healer were confident that the *curandero* had effected a cure at a distance.

The three levels act as coherent units of knowledge and behavior. Each necessitates the presence of separate gifts (*don*). They involve different types of training, different methods of dealing with both the natural and the supernatural world. The material level involves the manipulations of traditional magical forces found in the literature about Western witchcraft (see Hudson 1970 or Givrey 1971, for examples). Spiritualism involves the manipulation of a complex spirit world that exists in parallel with our own, and the manipulation of *corrientes espirituales*, spiritual currents that can both heal and provide information or diagnosis of problems at a distance. The mental level necessitates the control and use of the previously mentioned *vibraciones mentales*. Thus, the levels are mutually exclusive in terms of being separate methods of diagnosing and treating human problems. At the same time, they are often blended together in a single cure because any individual *curandero* may possess the *don* for working on any one, any two, or all three levels simultaneously.

A little caution should be exercised, however, in thinking that the levels are merely three different ways of doing the same thing. Not all problems can be successfully dealt with, using each level. An example of this is serious alcohol abuse (which formed a topic of analysis by the authors; see Trotter and Chavira 1978; Trotter 1979). Alcohol abuse and alcoholism can be and are treated by *curanderos*. The techniques of both the material and the mental level can be used in pursuing a cure for this problem. However, for reasons not yet fully developed, the techniques of the spiritual level were considered ineffective in dealing with alcohol-related problems. So if one has the *don* for working with the spiritual level

alone, he/she is excluded from the process of curing alcohol problems. Unfortunately for this work, the boundaries of this condition of exclusivity will have to be developed further in subsequent research efforts, since the authors encountered this phenomenon only recently. Therefore, the final boundaries of the three levels remain to be clarified on this issue.

One theme that is common to all three levels is the use of energy to change the health status of the client. On the material level, this energy is often discussed in relation to the major ritual of that level, the *barrida* or *limpia* (a sweeping or a cleansing). In that ritual a person is "swept" from head to foot with an object that is thought to be able to either remove "bad vibrations" (*vibraciones malos*) or to give positive energy (*vibraciones positivas*) to the patient. The type of object used (egg, lemon, garlic, crucifix, broom, etc.) depends on the nature of the patient's problem and whether it is necessary to remove or to replace energy. On the spiritual level, the energy that is used (for both some diagnosis and some healing) is the previously mentioned *corrientes espirituales*. The mental level is nearly totally oriented around generating and channeling *vibraciones mentales*. Thus, there is a general energy theme that ties together the practices of the three levels. The following sections provide more detail on the actual practices of the *curandero's* work on each of the levels.

Before launching into the more detailed account of the *curandero's* model of the theoretical structure of their practices, it is important, first, to establish that there is a certain amount of variation in those practices. This variation is to be expected. It occurs whenever a physician has two or more drugs or therapeutic procedures to choose from (e.g., surgery vs. chemotherapy for cancer), and it occurs whenever a *curandero* has two or more herbs, prayers or rituals available to treat a specific condition. Although there appears to be a wider latitude for idiosyncratic, innovative behavior amongst *curanderos* than among physicians, the same statement can be made for mental health therapists vis-a-vis physicians and may derive from the same source. The broader

range and more ambiguous nature of the presenting complaints in some area of healing may either trigger or necessitate a broader range of responses in the therapeutic system. None of this negates the very tight level of agreement that is found on the theoretical structure of *curanderismo* amongst our informants. This agreement comes about, analogous to the agreement amongst physicians on a theoretical level, exactly because there *is* an underlying structure that the *curanderos* (or physicians) can use to guide their choice amongst the various alternatives available to them.

THE MATERIAL LEVEL

The material level is the easiest of the three levels to describe; it is the most extensively practiced and the most widely reported. At this level, the *curandero* manipulates physical objects and performs rituals. These combinations of objects and rituals (sometimes called *trabajos*, spells or works) are widely recognized by Mexican-Americans as having curative powers; however, the power and significance of the objects and rituals is not widely understood by the mass public beyond simple recognition, and this allows room in the field for unscrupulous practices and can cause misunderstandings about *curanderos* on the part of the public.

Practitioners of the material level employ common herbs (e.g., oregano, camomile, anis); fruits (oranges, lemons, and papaya); nuts such as pecans; flowers (roses and geraniums); animals and animal products (chickens, doves, and eggs); and spices (cinnamon, garlic, and black pepper). Religious symbols are also widely used (e.g., the crucifix, pictures of saints, incense, candles, holy water, oils, and sweet fragrances (perfumes). Secular items are also used such as cards, alum, and ribbons. The *curandero* allows his patients to rely extensively on their own resources by prescribing items that either are familiar or have strong cultural significance; thus, a significant characteristic of the objects used at the material

level is that they are common items used for everyday activities such as cooking and worship.

NATURAL ILLNESSES AND HERBAL CURES

Curanderos recognize that some illnesses are brought about by natural causes, such as improper function of the body, carelessness, or the inability of a person to take proper care of himself or herself, and they often talk openly about infectious and contagious diseases.

Medicinal herbs (*plantas medicinales*) are a prominent resource employed by *curanderos* at the material level and are utilized in large numbers to treat natural ailments. Some traditional *curanderos* classify herbs as having the dichotomous properties considered essential for humoral medicine (see Foster 1953). These properties can be described as: hot-cold and wet-dry. Using these dual properties, they prescribe an herb or combination of herbs depending on the characteristics of the illness. If a person's illness is supposedly caused by excessive "heat/' an herb with "cold" properties is given. Conversely, if a person's illness is believed to be caused by excessive "coldness and dryness," a combination of herbs having "hot and wet" properties is given. As stated earlier, this humoral concept of medicine is not very prevalent among the general population, although a few *curanderos* still depend on this theory to classify illness in order to prescribe herbal treatment.

Other *curanderos* recognize herbs for their chemical properties, such as poisons (yerba *del coyote*: *Karwinskia humboldtuna* Roem. et Sch.);⁸ hallucinogens (peyote: *Lophophora williams* Lem.); sedatives (*flor de tila*: *Talia mexicana* Schl.); stimulants (yerba *del frueno*); and purgatives (cascara sagrada). Most of these individuals do not refer to the hot-cold classification of illness; rather, they indicate the beneficial chemical properties of the herbs that allow them to treat natural illnesses.

The herbs that are recommended by the *curanderos* are

most frequently prescribed as teas, baths or poultices. The teas can be considered as a sort of primitive chemotherapy. *Boraja* (borage: *Borago officinalis* L.), for example, is taken to cut a fever; *flor de ilia*, a mild sedative, is taken for insomnia; *yerba de la golondrina* (*Euphorbia prostrata* Ait.) is used as a douche for vaginal discharges; and *estilos de belote* are used for kidney problems. Herbal baths are usually prescribed to deal with skin diseases, for example, *fresno* (ash tree: *Fraxinus* Sp.) is used to treat scalp problems such as eczema, dandruff, and psoriasis; and *linaza* is prescribed for "sores" which come out all over the body. For specific sores such as boils, *ma/va* (probably a *Malvastrum*) leaves are boiled until soft and then applied to the sore as a poultice. Another employment of herbs includes their use as decongestants. A handful of oregano (oregano: *Oregenum vulgare* L.) is placed in a humidifier to help someone with a bad cold.

The following are examples of herbal remedies used to treat natural illnesses, translated directly from a tape of one of the authors' informants as she was explaining the use of various herbs.

The rose (rosa de castilla; Rosa centifolia C.) treats hemorrhages, infections, and sores. Whenever a person has a hemorrhage, place three roses in water, boil them, and make the person drink the tea. *The geranium (Geronio: Pelargonium graveoleus* L'Her.) also cures menstruating women of excessive bleeding. A tea is made either of five geranium leaves or one flower. The afflicted person drinks this tea for nine consecutive days, preferably before breakfast.

Some *vaginal infections* are caused in women who do not abstain from intercourse for the required number of days after giving birth. These vaginal infections are yellow or white. These infections are treated by giving the patient a tea made from herbs called "*la cachanaye/cachano*." The tea is made from two leaves and is taken twice daily in the morning and in the evening. The person also takes a warm bath made from the following herbs: *yerba anis* (*Pinpinella an/sum* L.), *yerba buena* (mint: *Minta specata* L.), *rut/a* (rue: *Ruta graveolens* L.), *rnejorana* (probably *Brickellia veronicaefolia* H. B. K.), and *yerba de San Nicolas* (*Pigueria trineruia* Cav.); these herbs are boiled together. After the bath, the person is heavily clothed in order to perspire. The person has to perspire in order for the illness to come out.

Cactus tea (te de nopal: Opuntia; species not specified) is recommended for gall stones. The biggest part of the cactus is cut and the pulp removed. This pulp is boiled and the tea is used by the patient as drinking water. If the stones are too big and an operation is required, then cactus tea will not help. However, if stones are not too big and the illness is not too serious, cactus tea helps to get rid of the stones. Cactus is also good to cure infections.

Fever can be cured by either using herbs or poultices. *Boraja* and *huachichile* (*Locselia scariosa* Mart, et Gal.) cure fevers because both have cold properties. The tea of either plant can be given to the patient in order to cut his fever. Poultices to cut fever are also made from raw meat mixed with vinegar and onions. If meat is not available, then dough can be substituted. The dough is mixed with vinegar to make the poultice. This poultice is placed on the patient's forehead, stomach, back, and the soles of his feet. The sick person has to perspire very much in order for the sickness to come out.

The *fresno* treats skin infections such as itches, sores, white spots, or scalings. Branches of the *fresno* are boiled in a pail and added to the patient's bathing water. The patient takes as many baths as necessary to cure the infection. *Fresno* can also be used to tighten loose skin by persons who lose weight in short periods of time.

Not all herbal lore is passed on as an oral tradition. Books from Mexico are now being widely circulated among both *curanderos* and the public (e.g., Arias [N.D.]; Wagner [N.D.]) which give a description and classification of numerous herbs. However, even though these books are readily accessible in the Valley, many people still rely on the *curandero* for advice on what herbs to use. The books and less well-informed persons often leave out a very important aspect of the treatment procedure: the dosage. How much of the herb do you use per unit of water? How many times a day is the tea drunk, and when, and for how many days? These important pieces of information are *often* missing from descriptions of the use of medicinal herbs collected from the public which points to the importance of the professional *curandero* as an informant able to dictate exact dosages.

There is also a belief on the part of the *curanderos* that the herbal treatments can be made more effective if you take certain magical precautions when preparing the herbs for use. There are a series of preparation rites that should be

followed. The healer should ask the plant permission to cut its branches and inform it of the reason why these branches are needed. This rite establishes a spiritual bond between the healer, the plant, and the patient and enhances the healing process. Healers who do not comply with these preparation rites are said to be involved in rote behavior and fail to satisfy the proper procedures of the healing process, thereby diminishing the level of success of the treatments.

Herbs are important enough in Mexican-American folk medicine that the use of herbs is often confused with the art of *curanderismo* itself by the mass culture. Indeed, *curanderismo* depends on the use of herbs to such an extent that some *curanderos* specialize in herbs. These *curanderos* are usually known as *yerberos* or *yerberas*. But their knowledge and skill go beyond the mere connection of one disease to one herbal formula. According to our informants, in order for a *curandero* to be genuine, even at the material level, an element of mysticism must be involved.

Some herbs are also used for their spiritual or supernatural properties. Spiritual cleansings (the *barridas* described earlier) are often given with ruda (*Ruta graveolens* L), romero (rosemary: *Rosmarinus officinalis* L.), and *albacar* (sweet basil: *Ocimum basilicum* L.), among others. Herbs are also used as amulets. For example, *verbena* (verbena: *Verbena officinalis* L), worn as an amulet, is used to help open a person's mind so that he or she may be better able to learn and retain knowledge. Yet even with the importance of herbs, some *curanderos* have successful practices on the material level without resorting to their use. Some of the nonherbal treatments are described below.

SUPERNATURAL ILLNESSES AND RITUAL CURES

As mentioned earlier, supernatural illnesses (caused by impelling negative forces to damage a person's health) can sometimes be confused with natural illnesses. One informant stated that these supernatural illnesses may be diagnosed as

ulcers, tuberculosis, rheumatism, or migraine headaches, but in reality they are believed to be *danos* (harm) placed on the person by an enemy. One difference between a natural and a supernatural illness is that physicians cannot cure a supernatural illness. *Curanderos* say that some patients, after spending time and money consulting physicians, realize that physicians cannot help them and then turn to the *curandero* for help.

Supernatural influences can also disrupt a person's mental health and his or her living environment. The *curandero* commonly deals with social disruption, personality complexes, and sometimes with what appear to be serious psychological disturbances. One informant gave the following description of a case that contained several of these elements:

This is a specific mental case—very difficult. This patient worked for the street maintenance department of (a small city in south Texas). Every day after work a voice would lead him out into the brush and sometimes keep him there until 2:00 a.m. This activity was wearing out the man and his family and he was going crazy. A bad spirit was following this man and would not leave him alone. The man was cured, but it took three people to cure him: myself, a friend, and a master (*maestro*) from Mexico. This man was given three *barridas* each day for seven days, one by each of us. The tools used were eggs, lemons, herbs, garlic, and black chickens. The man was also prescribed herbal baths and some teas to drink. He was also given a charm made from the *haba marina* designed to ward off any more negative influences which might be directed at him. This patient regained his sanity.

On the material level the *curanderos* resort to the use of one of several types of rituals to effect supernatural cures. As indicated by the above passage, the *barrida* is one of the most frequently used. The purpose of these cleansings is to remove the negative forces that are harming the patient, while simultaneously giving the patient the spiritual strength necessary to enhance his or her recovery. While being swept, the person may be either standing or lying down and should be concentrating on his Maker or any other benevolent spirit or influence. Some *curanderos* perform the *barrida* while the patient is sitting, but other healers told the authors that this

latter style is incorrect procedure, although no one could specifically state why it was incorrect.

Patients are always and only 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 who is being swept. The person is swept in front, in back, and on the sides. If a particular part of his body is in pain (e.g., head, back, joints), special emphasis is given to these affected areas. While sweeping the patient, the *curandero* usually recites specific prayers and/or invocations which appeal to God, saints, or other supernatural beings to restore health to the patient. The *curandero* may recite these prayers and invocations out loud or silently. The 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).

The following description of a *barrida* given by one of our informants 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 designed for a specific patient and a specific illness.

This was a case in which the condition or illness was provoked. In other words, using these means (supernatural forces), 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 *trial pueslo* (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 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 (*conjuros*) and invocations (*rechazos*). The lemon is used to dominate the *trabajo* (magical harm) which has been placed on the patient, thereby facilitating the healing process.

The patient is also swept once with *albacar* (sweet basil) which has been rinsed in *agua preparada* (magically 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 preparado* (specifically prepared oil) on the principal joints of the patients (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 have been transferred from the patient.

Another common ritual is the *sahumerio* or incensing. The *sahumerio* is a purification rite and is used primarily for treating businesses, households, farms, and other places of work or habitation. 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 commercially prepared incense 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 filled with smoke. While the healer is incensing a house, he or someone else reads or recites an appropriate prayer. If the *sahumerio maravilloso* is used, the prayer is often one to Santa Marta

and asks that peace and harmony be restored to the household. After the *sahumerio*, the healer may sprinkle holy water on the floor of every room in the house then light a white candle which stays lit for seven days.

The *sahumerio* is an instance where the curandero treats the general social environment, seeking to bring about a change in the conditions of the persons who live and/or work there. Incensing of a house is thought to do away with negative influences such as bad luck (*salaciones*), marital disruptions, illness or disharmony. For business and farms, incensing helps assure success and growth and gives protection against jealous competitors. These rituals tend to be more generalized than ones used to help individuals, since they are designed to affect everyone in the environment that has been treated.

Another type of ritual, called a *sortilegio* (conjure) uses material objects such as ribbons to tie up the negative influences that harm the *curandero's* patients. These negative influences are frequently personal shortcomings such as excessive drinking, infidelity, rebellious children, unemployment, or any other problem believed to be imposed by antisocial magic (*un trabajo*). One *sortilegio* that the authors observed required four ribbons: one red, one green, one white and one black, each about one yard in length. The color of each ribbon stands for a type of magic (i.e., black magic, red magic, green and white magic). The colors represent both symbolic and functional areas of magic on the material level that the *curanderos* can activate to deal with specific problems. Red magic involves domination, green healing, white general positive forces, and black negative or debilitating forces (a drawing out of power). When working with one of these specific areas of magic, one uses material objects that naturally are that color or that have artificially been made that color. In this case, the *curandera* placed the four ribbons side by side on the floor in a straight line. The petitioner was then asked to walk over them, forward and backward, three times. While walking over the ribbons, the petitioner and the healer said the following incantation (*conjuro y rechazo*), rejecting

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all malevolent forces which might be intended for the petitioner.

In the name of the Holy Trinity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, I conjure and I reject the red works, the black works; I conjure them to the seven red seas, the seven black seas. In the name of God, I conjure and reject all the evil that has been done to me. I conjure my enemies in the flesh and without the flesh. In the name of God, I lock up my enemies here.

The petitioner continues the invocation by knotting all four ribbons at the same time. While knotting, the petitioner and the healer invoke the following conjure:

In the name of God, here I lock up my enemies. I ask for my happiness, good luck, health and money. By all the dominating spirits, may the evil doings depart to the seven red seas and the seven black seas. By all the dominating beings, I here lock up my enemies. I here tie and conjure all my enemies in the flesh and without the flesh. In the name of all powerful God).

The completely knotted ribbons are then placed in an empty jar, and the petitioner is instructed to repeat the following invocation as he/she is screwing the lid down tight:

Now I here lock my enemies, and they will leave me in peace.

The jar is then buried or hidden in a safe place, and according to the healers, so are the petitioner's problems.

The color-based division of magic is also carried over into another type of ritual system used on the material levels called *ve/ac/ones* (burning candles to produce supernatural results).⁹ The *ve/ac/ones* and the colored material objects used in the *sortilegios* tie into the earlier discussion of the energy theme that runs throughout *curanderismo*, because the colors and objects are thought of as having specific "vibratory" power or energy that can affect the person they are directed at when they are activated by the incantations used in conjunction with the objects. The authors collected some, but by no means all, of the color-mood-behavior combinations. Blue candles are burned for serenity or tranquility. Red candles are burned for health, power, or domination. Pink candles are burned for good will. Green candles

are burned to remove a harm or a negative influence, and purple candles are burned to repel and attack bad spirits (*espíritus oscuros*) or strong magic. Within the context of the *velaciones*, once the proper color of candle has been chosen to produce the proper mental atmosphere, the candles must then be arranged in the correct physical formation and activated by the *conjuros y rechazos*. For example, if a petitioner asks for protection, the candles may be burned in a triangle. The triangle is considered to be the strongest formation, one whose influence cannot be broken easily. If the petitioner wants to dominate someone—a spouse, a lover, an adversary—the candles may be burned in circles. Other formations include crosses, rectangles, and squares (see Buckland 1970 for other examples), depending on the results desired.

Another relatively common use of candles is in the diagnosis of problems by studying the flame of the candle or the ridges and figures which appear on the melted wax. A patient may be swept with a candle while the healer recites an invocation asking the spirit of the patient to allow its material being to be investigated for any problems, physical or spiritual, which may be affecting the person. This same ritual can be performed by burning many of the other objects used in a *barrida*. Lighting the candle or burning the object after the *barrida* aids the *curandero* in revealing the cause and extent of the patient's problems. Similarly, if a petitioner asks for candling, the wax of the candles burned for the *velacion* may be examined for figures or other messages which point to the source of a patient's problems.

The following is an account of how one of the informants treats supernaturally caused migraine headaches. This treatment ties together both the diagnostic and the curative elements of the material level with descriptions of the materials actually used.

Migraine headaches can be given to a person by giving that person certain powders in his food or drink. They can also be caused by burning candles whose purpose is to make that person ill. The afflicted person is swept with an egg, the healer (*el que cura*) usually reciting the Apostles' Creed or the Twelve Truths of the World. The egg is broken and placed

in a glass of water to make a diagnosis. If the white of the egg forms points with bubbles, then the person is being harmed by a *velacion* (candle burning). If the egg also has red spots, then the *velacion* is made of red candles in a circle. If the egg has black spots, the powders are being used to harm the patient. Once the diagnosis is made, the patient is given nine *barridas* (cleansings) for nine consecutive days. The first three *barridas* are all done with an egg; the second three with lemons; and the third three with purple onions. An incision in the form of the cross is made on each purple onion and three peppers are placed in the incision.

In all cases the objects are burned in live coals after each *barrida*. During the same nine days, the *curandero* burns a green *velacion* (green candle burning) in the form of a triangle. The triangle protects the patient from further harm and destroys the harm already being done. When the candles are lit, an invocation is usually said to a saint or benevolent spirit to aid the candles in restoring the patient back to health.

The patient is prescribed a *cocimiento* (tea); this tea is usually made of *ruda* (rue) and *yerba del Cristo* (herb of Christ), which must be taken in the morning before breakfast. If the patient was given something to eat or to drink, the healer recommends a laxative to be taken with *chocolate mexicano* (Mexican hot chocolate flavored with cinnamon).

It is clear from the above example (and others that the authors have collected) that one of the organizing principles of the material level of *curanderismo* is an extensive parallelism with Christianity in general and the Catholic Church in particular. Special invocations are commonly directed at saints or spirits to bring about desired results. For example, San Martin de Porres is asked to relieve poverty; San Martin Caballero is asked to help in business; San Judas Tadeo is asked to help in impossible situations; and Santa Marta is asked to bring harmony to a household. Ritual materials used by the Church, such as water, incense, oils, candles, etc., are also extensively used by the folk healers. Equally important, the ritual ways these religious objects are used and the theories for their efficacy also closely the concepts found within the healing ministry of the Church.¹⁰ Since these concepts are not incompatible with European-based witchcraft from which *curanderismo* in part derives, the result when combined with those practices is a systematic organization of the behavior of *curanderos* practicing on the material level.

THE SPIRITUAL LEVEL

Curanderos who have the gift (*e/ don*) for working on the spiritual level (*nivel espiritual*) of *curanderismo* are less numerous than those who work on the material level. The gift is somewhat less common in the population, and the practitioner must go through a developmental period (*desarrollo*) that can be somewhat traumatic or at least unsettling. Nevertheless, there is a growing movement of spiritualism in South Texas. This movement, and the practice of the *curanderos* on this level, revolve around a belief in spirit beings who inhabit another plane of existence, but who are interested in making periodic contacts with the physical world. The *curandero* learns to become a link, a direct line of communication between this and that other world. In some cases, the *curanderos* claim to have direct control over these spirit beings, and in other cases, they merely act as a channel through which messages pass, much like a living telephone connection.

The major thrust of the spiritual movement in Mexican-American communities in South Texas focuses on the activities of spiritual centers (*centros espiritistas*) that are staffed by trance mediums and other individuals with occult abilities.

These centers frequently, but not always, work through the spiritual presence of two prominent folk saints of the area: El Nino Fidencio from Northern Mexico (Espinazo) and Don Pedrito Jaramillo from South Texas (the Falfurrias area) (see Macklin 1974a, 1974b, 1974c).¹¹ This trend in visiting spiritualist centers appears to be relatively recent. It is not reported from the 1950s by Madsen (1964), Rubel (1960, 1966), Clark (1959), and others who have done research on Mexican-American folk medicine. In addition, most of the older informants the authors contacted could remember when there were very few spiritualists practicing in the area.

The practice of spiritualism rests on a belief called the "soul concept." The soul concept entails a belief in the existence of spirit beings—entities derived from once-living humans. The soul is thought to be the immortal and immaterial compo-

nent, the life and personality force of human beings; an entity which continues in existence after physical death but continues on a plane of reality separated from the physical world. This concept is important not only to *curanderismo* but also to the religious and mystical beliefs found in all western cultures.

The soul is variously described by *curanderos* as a force field, an ectoplasm, concentrated vibrations, or a group of electrical charges that can exist separate from the physical body of human beings. It is thought to retain the personality, knowledge, and motivations of the individual even after the death of the corporal body. Under proper conditions the soul is believed to have the ability to contact and affect persons living in the physical world. While souls can occasionally be seen as ghosts or apparitions by ordinary human beings, they are more commonly thought by the *curanderos* to exist in the special spiritual realm mentioned above. For some people, this realm has various divisions that have positive or negative connotations associated with them (i.e., heaven, limbo, purgatory, hell). Other people see the spiritual realm as a parallel to the physical world. They state that the spiritual is a more pleasant plane on which to live, but few attempt any suicidal test of this belief. One informant made the following observations while discussing the spiritual level of *curanderismo*.

Those of us who have developed our abilities through the World Spiritual Doctrine call these [entities] "spirits" [*espiritos*], but actually "spirits" and "souls" [*almas*] are the same thing. In the past, they were called souls, as our grandparents taught us, and now we call them spirits.

These spirits' activities closely parallel their former activities in this world. Since the personality, knowledge, and motivation of the spirits are much the same as they were for the living being, there are both good and evil spirits, spirits who heal and spirits who harm, wise spirits and fools.

Many of these spirits are thought to want to communicate with or act upon the physical plane. Some have left tasks undone in their physical lives which they wish to complete; others want to help or harm; many wish to communicate

messages to friends and relatives, telling them of their happiness or discontent with their new existence. Curanderos with the ability to work on the spiritual realm, therefore, become the communication link between these two worlds. The impression that some *curanderos* give is that there are multitudes of spirits who want to communicate with the physical world, and they tend to hover around those who have the gift (*el don*) to become a medium, waiting for an opportunity to enter their bodies and possess them. *Curanderos* use this latter circumstance to explain some of the cases of spirit possession in Western cultures by pointing out that the individuals who become possessed are people with a strong potential to be trance mediums, but who have not had the opportunity to learn how to control this condition.

The ability to become a medium is centered in the *cerebro*, that portion of the brain found at the posterior base of the skull. Those with the gift are said to have a more fully developed *cerebro*, while those who do not are said to have *cerebros* which are weak (*un cerebro debil*). This "weakness" has no relationship to either the intelligence or the moral nature of the individual, only the ability to communicate with the spiritual realm. Weak *cerebros* represent a danger for anyone who wishes to become a medium. One informant was warned about this problem when he indicated that he would like to pursue his interest in *curanderismo* and learn how to practice it.

I: My mother talked to her (a *curandera* working on the spiritual level) and all she said was that I didn't have the potential, or that if I did learn a few things, how to cure this and that, and I tried to perform it on someone that was ill, it (the illness) might rebound on me.

Q: She told you you could not do this? That it would rebound on you?

I: Yeah, I never asked why. Whatever she says goes. She said that if I ever get to the point where I did learn something pertaining to *curanderismo*, and I tried to practice it on somebody else or tried to cure somebody, that it would rebound on me. So the best thing to do would be just to keep out of it.

Only rare individuals demonstrate mediumistic potential spontaneously and can practice as mediums without further

training. So, *curanderos* frequently "test" their clients and friends for this gift of healing, and those with the gift are generally encouraged to develop their ability. The development of the ability, called **desarrollo**, is a fairly lengthy process lasting from two or six or more months initially with periodic "refresher" encounters often available from the *maestro* (teacher).

Desarrollo is a gradual process of increasing an apprentice's contact with the spirit world, giving him more and more experiences in controlled trances and possessions and giving him the knowledge necessary to develop and protect himself as a spiritualist. The teacher is also responsible for not giving the apprentice knowledge too fast, to keep him from harming himself. For example, one apprentice came across a "voodoo doll" that had been shown to a friend, so he asked the *curandero* what he should do if he found such objects.

CURANDERO: When you come up with something like that, the best thing to do would be to tear it apart. There is a formula that you use as you tear the thing apart that will stop the harm from being done. Then, you should burn it after you tear it apart. You do several conjurings (*conjuros*) on it and it starts disintegrating until everything is burned.

APPRENTICE: Can you be harmed by handling it?

CURANDERO: No, not if the harm is directed at another person.

APPRENTICE: Can you tell me the words?

CURANDERO: Later on I can, but not right now. I could tell you the words that you use and you could say them, but the person who is doing the evil would find out and would attack you if you didn't know how to protect yourself.

APPRENTICE: OK, so how do I learn to protect myself?

CURANDERO: You need to develop yourself completely (i.e., finish the *desarrollo*), so you can deal in other things (other forms of psychic energy and magic). That way you will learn to protect yourself in every case, what to do in each instance. After you develop yourself, the spirits will give you a formula on how to protect yourself. Then, later on you will be able to use this knowledge along with different materials to defend yourself. Many people think these things are unimportant, but they are important. You have to be prepared.

Thus, the apprentice is encouraged to learn, but in the proper order and under the control of the *curandero*. After one step of the process has been mastered, he can move on to the next, learn new skills, and develop his powers in a logical manner.

The *desarrollo* sessions are held one, two, or more times a week depending on the availability of the *curandero* and the apprentice. Each session lasts from one to two hours, only a portion of which is devoted to the trance state. As in all other events within the Mexican-American folk medical system, a high premium is placed on the social aspects of human relationships during the *desarrollo* sessions. The apprentice goes to the *curandero*'s house or workroom, and they sit and visit. There is no rigid formality at these sessions, and to begin immediately without social discourse would be considered rude and abrupt. Therefore, the topics of conversation in these initial visits (*platicas*) range from current events, politics, art, and hobbies, to events in the lives of friends and family. The actual development begins only after the principals have sat, relaxed, and talked as friends.

When the visiting has reached a certain point, the *curandero* indicates it is time to begin the actual *desarrollo*. To protect the apprentice from hitting his head should he fall during the trance, the *curandero* moves a wooden chair into the center of the room away from all other furniture. A wooden chair is used because the *curandero* guides the *desarrollo* by utilizing two psychic forces, spiritual currents (*corrientes espirituales*) and mental vibrations (*vibraciones mentales*). The *curanderos* said that a metal chair or any metal object in contact with the individual in trance could cause mild electrical shocks when the *curandero* concentrates these forces on the apprentice. Therefore, mediums always should sit on wooden chairs which are nonconducting and remove watches, rings, glasses, and any other metal objects in contact with their bodies. The glasses are removed even if they are not metal because it is believed that the psychic energy can potentially shatter them or they can be broken if the apprentice falls.

To prepare himself for the trance, the apprentice dips his hands in a crystal bowl of prepared water (*agua preparada*), sitting on the *curandero*'s desk or altar, and rubs this water on his forehead (*la frente*) and his *cerebro*. This necessary step was explained in the following way during an early research session.

RESEARCHER: Why do you have him put the water on his forehead (*la frente*) and the *cerebro*?

CURANDERO: That is to protect him and to help him develop.

RESEARCHER: Do you put it on in a certain manner or do you simply put it on?

CURANDERO: You simply put it on.

RESEARCHER: You don't put it on in the form of a cross or something like that?

CURANDERO: No, you just put it on. Anyone who is developing or developed puts it on for protection.

After putting on the *agua preparada*, the apprentice sits on the chair in a comfortable position. His feet rest on the floor, and his forearms rest on his lap. His hands rest on top of his knees with palms upward and the fingers gently curling. In this position, the apprentice is able to relax and begin to go into trance.

As the apprentice is going into trance the *curandero* stands in front of him, feet slightly spread and arms held out from his sides at nearly a forty-five degree angle and in the same plane as his body. He holds his palms facing toward the apprentice and speaks invocations (either silently or aloud) to the spirit realm. These invocations are said to protect the apprentice during trance and to call down or invite benevolent spirits to possess him.

To the observer, the apprentice goes into trance by closing his eyes and relaxing. His breathing becomes regular and deep. He tends to sag forward, bowing his head and bending at the waist, perhaps even bobbing or swaying slightly. He suddenly sits bolt upright, assuming a posture and facial expression noticeably different from the ones he normally has. When the apprentice sits up, the *curandero* states it is

because the first spirit has descended upon him and the development session has fully begun. The *curanderos* also state that at this time there are a number of spirits clustered around the apprentice waiting for a turn of possession.

The *curandero* takes water from his bowl (copa) with his left hand and sprinkles a circle of prepared water (*agua preparada*) completely around the apprentice. This forms a protective circle, forming a barrier which prevents an excess number of additional spirits from reaching the developing medium. This limits the number of spirits that can "descend on him" and provides him with some protection against malevolent spirits during a particularly vulnerable time. The spirits can, reportedly, cross the barrier to leave the area but cannot reenter once they are beyond it.

From the apprentice's perspective, he begins the trance by sitting and relaxing. (The *curandero* has previously told him to concentrate on God or his concept of a supreme being.) He closes his eyes and begins to breathe deeply. Colors, muted purples mixed with greens and occasional sky blues, often swirl in front of his eyes. Focusing on these colors helps his concentration, and within a few seconds a slight feeling of remoteness descends upon him. This feeling creates conflicting sensations. On the one hand, he feels as if he can stand slightly back from himself and observe his own actions as an outsider. On the other hand, he begins to feel sensations in his body that suggest he should shift his posture, should make certain gestures, should move. The "spirit" that is presenting itself controls the body much like a puppet is controlled. This gives the apprentice the dual sensation of being able to observe and feel what is happening; sensations which go beyond simple kinetic perceptions. Two sensations generally present themselves first to the apprentice, a combination of sex and age. Weight is the next perception that intrudes, combined with particular physical features. Yet, writing them as a sequence is misleading, since these sensations present themselves more rapidly than the sequence could be read nearly simultaneously. These sensations can be heightened by concentration accomplished by the appren-

tice blanking his mind to intruding, extraneous thoughts. With proper concentration, the apprentice has the sensation of being inhabited by someone else, while a small part of his mind remains as an observer over this process. According to the *curanderos*, if the apprentice wishes to achieve a complete trance state, he must learn to send this "watchdog" portion of his mind out of his body. Only then will the trance and possession be complete.

These sensations of an inhabiting personality can persist for a long or a short time. During these "contacts" the developing medium feels himself move, smile, write, gesture, or go through a number of other actions even while feeling disassociated from them. Then, it is as if someone cut the strings on the puppet, and he sags and breathes deeply once again. The feeling of remoteness remains, but the sensation of another personality goes away almost as if it were pulled out of him by an unknown hand. After this, the process begins again with new sensations, gestures, and activities as a second "spirit" presents itself to the *curandero* and descends on the apprentice.

Early in his *desarrollo*, the apprentice cannot talk while in trance, but he frequently gestures or even writes (with either hand). The writing, although different from his own, remains similar from session to session according to which "spirit" is making the writing. Some spirits tend to repeat visits from session to session, especially those who have, according to the informants, decided to aid the development of the apprentice or to become his protectors. Each new spirit that "comes down" on the apprentice during the trance session can be recognized by its particular posture, facial expressions, gestures, writing, and later voice and speech patterns.

From the perspective of the observer, all of this activity looks even more like a puppet adopting different characters, each with his own postures, gestures, sex, weight and age. One character may be proud, another prim, another crippled, another fat. A steady progression of mute personalities is presented to the observer's view. Occasionally, an earlier character presents itself for a second time, and from session

to session, there are both repeating characters and new ones. Some present themselves for a very short time. Others remain and try to communicate. It is not unusual for a spirit to try to speak; however, these early attempts are normally unsuccessful. The speech is generally inaudible or "mumbly" because the apprentice becomes interested in what is going to be said, loses concentration, and in the process makes it impossible for the spirit to speak. Often the apprentice feels as if his jaw were being massaged during these attempts. According to the curandero, these sensations indicate that the spirits are preparing the body for the ability to speak, as is stated by the following informant:

APPRENTICE: My jaws hurt.

OBSERVER: He is preoccupied with not being able to talk.

CURANDERO: The time will come when he will begin to speak. There are mediums who on the fourth or fifth development begin to speak, and there are others who will not speak until the twentieth or twenty-fifth development. Those are good indications which he is getting. The sore jaw means that he is being given massages so that he will be able to speak soon.

It is not uncommon for the spirits to write messages long before they can speak. To the apprentice, this writing feels as if his hand is moving of its own accord. In fact, if he concentrates on the writing, it often becomes illegible or he intrudes his own words or nonsense syllables on the messages. If he relaxes the hand as much as possible, identifiable words and messages come out. One interesting feature about this writing is that each spirit writes consistently with either its right or left hand. Therefore, in the course of one *desarrollo* session, the apprentice may write messages with both hands, regardless of which hand he normally uses for writing. As the development of the new medium progresses, his ability to write and speak improves. The *curanderos* explain that the spirits must open new channels in the body and brain, so it is to be expected that practice and exposure would enhance the spirit's ability to use the body and the body's ability to respond.

To the curanc/ero, this process is one in which he encourages and aids the apprentice's spirit to disassociate itself from his material body. Spirits present themselves to him, clustering around the apprentice. Some simply stand by, some descend on and begin developing the apprentice. The curanc/ero perceives all of these spirits and can, and often does, describe their appearance to the apprentice. The healer can even receive the sensation whether or not they are related to the apprentice.

If the developing medium appears tired during the *desarrollo*, the curanc/ero can light a candle and use an incantation to give him or her more strength. After a series of spirits have presented themselves, the apprentice's ability to remain disassociated from his body diminishes rapidly, and he comes out of trance. The dual sensations go away; he opens his eyes and feels "normal" once again. To the observer, the last personality disappears; the apprentice sags one more time, then sits up with his normal posture, opens his eyes and gets up from the chair. The curanc/ero states that he deliberately brings about this state of normality by recalling the apprentice's spirit and causing the other spirits to leave.

The session does not end there, however. The curanc/ero takes the time to probe the sensations of the apprentice during the trance to assess how his *desarrollo* is progressing and to answer some of the apprentice's questions and doubts. This analysis proceeds with the apprentice relating what each spirit and each sensation felt like when it happened to him, as recorded in this partial transcript of a session.

APPRENTICE: At the beginning, just before the first one presented herself, I felt a very bright light. It was pure white, like flash. Then, I felt a lot of heat on one side of my face and a smell, something between candles and skin.

CURANDERO: Well, the heat could be the respiration of the spirits. That is natural. The smell things natural, too. When you are developed you have all of those faculties.

However, the *curandero* does not always explain what each sensation means, saying that each person, as he develops, becomes more sensitive to his environment and that the apprentice must expect to encounter odd sensations such as bright light, noises, changes in pressure in a room, and other sensations associated with his developing powers.

At the end of these *desarrollo* sessions, the conversation reverts back once again to social conversation for a time before the apprentice takes his leave. This developmental process continues, with variations, until the apprentice is a fully developed medium.

Fully developed mediums have control over how, where and when they work, and there are several options available to them. Some mediums work alone. These healers may work only for family problems; others may work only for their own knowledge and gratification. Some mediums work in groups, with other mediums and/or with other persons who supposedly have spiritual or psychic powers. Some mediums work in elaborate spiritual centers (*centros espiritistas*) that are formal spiritual churches, often dedicated to a particular spirit (Nino Fidencio, Francisco Rojas, etc.). The spiritual centers and the activities surrounding them take on all of the major aspects of a formalized religion.

Many *curanderos* with abilities to work on the spiritual level of healing prefer to work at home alone. Their practices tend to be less uniform than the practices of mediums working at spiritual centers, since they do not have to conform to a calenderic and ritual structure of the formalized temples. However, there is enough uniformity in their actions that the following account provides an accurate description of the actions of a lone medium. The healer is described by a college student in his early twenties who was one of her clients. This particular *curandera* had been handling problems for him, his parents, and the rest of his family for several years.

RESEARCHER: Can you describe how this curandera works, in as great detail as you can?

STUDENT: We drive up into the driveway of a fairly decent-looking place. She walks out and greets us, shakes our hands, asks how we are

doing and how we have been. Then we go inside. She's got a small room from about here to the wall, perhaps eight by ten feet. She has an altar with saints and candles and flowers on it. She has a small vase shaped like a crystal ball sitting on a table. Sometimes it has water on it and sometimes it's turned upside down.

You walk in there and sit down and she's talking with you. She's not in her trance; it's just social talk. Then she sits and puts her hand on that crystal deal. She taps it, closes her eyes, and she starts asking you what kind of problem you have or whatever you want to ask her.

RESEARCHER: Her voice changes?

STUDENT: Yes, it does. It's a lot lower. All of a sudden her voice becomes soft, sort of like whispering. Really mild.

RESEARCHER: Does she keep her hands on the glass all of the time?

STUDENT: No. Sometimes she grabs a folder with papers in it and starts writing down things on it, using her finger.

RESEARCHER: Can she read what she has written?

STUDENT: I'm pretty sure she can.

RESEARCHER: How does she cure people?

STUDENT: She does it in a number of ways. Some time ago my mother had pains on both of her heels. She went to the doctor and the doctor didn't find anything wrong. So she went over to this lady again who said it was something (a *trabajo* or hex) that [a woman across the alley from his house] had put in the yard. When my mother's out hanging up clothes, she's barefooted and she stepped on it. And that's what was hurting her. So [the curandera] gave her a "shot" on her arm like a regular shot. And that cured her.

RESEARCHER: How did she give her the shot?

STUDENT: (simulated the action of giving an injection without a syringe or hypodermic).

RESEARCHER: Could your mother feel it?

STUDENT: She told me she didn't. But it cured her.

The informant went on to tell of several other cures this *curandera* had performed for his family. She had prescribed herbs, suggested the use of perfumes to ward off *envidia* (envy) against the family from their neighbors, and suggested that the mother perform a series of *barridas* on her son-in-law to remove a hex against him that was making him ill and

keeping him from work. Each of these cures could just as easily have been suggested or performed by a *curandero* working on the material level of *curanderismo*, but this *curandera* did it from a trance state. Therefore, what sets this *curandera* apart from those working strictly on the material level is not the tools she uses or the rituals she suggests to her clients, but the source of her diagnosis and cures, her contact with the spirit world.

Another very different type of mediumship occurs where the trance session is open to more than one person at the same time. This is a form of group session that is sometimes carried out by a lone *curandero* but is more often found at spiritual centers.

One of the fortunate occurrences of the research project was the authors' opportunity for participant observation from the very beginning in the establishment of a new spiritual center in the Valley. The process of this development is described elsewhere (Trotter and Chavira 1975). The incipient center was forming around a medium who normally worked alone, but who was in the process of putting several of the people involved in the center through *desarrollo*. His goal was to set up the temple and leave it in the hands of his students, while he continued to practice on his own. Some of the key elements of the establishment of the new center were explanations by "spirits" of the proper method for setting up the temple, a spiritual baptism and naming of protectors for each member and an assignment of roles within the structure of the temple itself, all performed by the spirits who presented themselves through the medium while he was in trance. The translated transcript of the session where people were given their spiritual baptism provides a graphic description of the philosophical orientation of some of the spiritual centers, as well as providing an example of some of the interaction that occurs between the participants and the spirit that is presenting itself through the medium.

The name of the spirit who was to do the baptism was Padre Elias. This spirit had lectured on the establishment of the temple in previous spiritual sessions.

Padre Elias: I want to explain some things before I baptize you. The road for helping our Father is very steep and very narrow. At your sides, many doors will open offering you anything you want. But you have to know which door to open. Seven doors will be placed in front of you, but you will find truth behind only one. Behind the others, you will find suffering, shame, and tears. The long narrow road is the only true way. You can find riches and many beautiful things, but you will have to pay for them in the end.

Response: But God will put goodness in our hearts, so we will know how to choose so that we will know the truth and understand it.

Padre Elias: The door to our Father is very small and very narrow and very few will be able to fit through it. No matter how narrow it is, you will be able to fit through it if you make the right choice. Depending on the road you have chosen, you will know how to choose between the door of pleasure, between the door of vice, the door of knowledge, all in front of the door of truth.

Your choice depends on you alone. In this ideal time of grace you will be given things according to the will of the Father. And that which you give Him will be received. Look well at what you are going to give Him. Money is not acceptable. You do not give Him gifts, but truth. That is all. And as it is given, so it will be received. At the same time, your acts will be considered and according to this you will keep on receiving. Remember one thing, no one reaches the Father without purifying the spirit. The material things you will leave here. The spiritual things are the only ones that reach our Father. You can wash a dress and get the stains out. The soul and spirit cannot be washed. They will be presented to the Father as they are. It is up to you whether they get there stained or clean.

Meditate on what I have told you. I am going to retire for a few minutes so you can do so.

(At this point, the spirit left for a few minutes, then returned.)

Padre Elias: I have presented these roads so you might understand them. Are you disposed to receive this spiritual mark? If you have any questions, ask them.

Response: What is there that awaits us after all of this?

Padre Elias: A question will be answered with another question. In what way can our Father serve you?

Response: In all ways.

Padre Elias: Your answer was the answer I wanted.

He then proceeded to the baptism. Beginning on the right side of the medium, as he faced inward into the circle, he had each person that was willing come forward and with the water made available earlier, baptized each into the spiritual realm, giving each a spiritual name and protector. An example follows:

Padre Elias: Give me your hands. Blessed are you who are lending your services and brain so that God's will will be accomplished. With Joshue's (Joshua's) name you will be received into our spiritual world. You invoke his spirit to protect you from whatever worries you have or whatever worries you have or whatever difficulty you meet. He will answer your plea as your guide and protector. Because in his name, you have been baptized in a state of Grace.

Each participant was then asked to dip fingers into agua preparada and to make a cross on his forehead and his cerebro. After each volunteer passed by the medium being baptized, blessed, and given a new name, each was given a duty in the temple.

Once a temple like the one above is fully established, certain activities are held on specific days of the week. One such temple set aside Tuesdays and Fridays for curing; Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays were devoted to the *desarrollos* of new mediums and clairvoyants (*videntes*); on Saturday sermons (*caceras*) were given explaining the scope, purpose, and philosophy of these centers; and Sundays were left free to allow people to go to mass or other church services. This temple also held occasional *días de la luz* (days of light) during which malevolent spirits are invited to come down and possess mediums in the temples, at which time members of the temple would try to convert them from working in the bad or dark realm to working in the good or in the light.

There are many positions that exist in these temples in addition to that of the medium. While the medium is working in trance, a clairvoyant (*vidente*) observes him. The *vidente* is a person who, the *curanderos* say, is capable of seeing into the spiritual world and reporting all that he has observed to

the client. Each temple also has a "rock," a "guide," and "columns." The rock is supposed to be a guardian of the temple and to protect the mediums from supernatural harm. If they are attacked by bad spirits, the rock is supposed to bring them out of trance and to protect them. One informant said, "He comes to be, symbolically, what Saint Peter represents in the Bible, guarding the gates of heaven." The guide gives the opening invocation and closing prayer for the spiritual session and is responsible for the smooth functioning of the temple, primarily from a bureaucratic perspective. The guide decides on what days the cures or sermons will be held and decides how to schedule various activities in the temple. The columns stand in the temple and help the mediums if they have requests. They are the only members, except the guide, who are allowed to move around to any large extent during the spiritual session.

Once a temple has been established, it may have from one to twenty mediums working. The more mediums working, the better; otherwise, a medium may have to let his or her body be used by too many different spirits, exhausting the medium. The larger *templos* may have four or five *videntes*, as well as the mediums, and may be putting several apprentices through *desarrollo* at the same time.

Many of the informants contacted by the authors had had experiences with spiritual temples in Mexico. Some were located in *Espinazo*, the home of El Nino Fidencio and a center of pilgrimage for mediums practicing in his name, and others in urban centers, such as Tampico and Mexico City. Most of the temples in the Valley appear to be modeled after those already established in Mexico and are often staffed by mediums who got their training there. Thus, the description of the following experience, even though it occurred in Tampico, is valid for the Valley.

In Tampico [Mexico], there are several places where spiritualism is practiced with official permission. There is a spiritual association in Mexico that draws up a document that states that the persons in charge of such places have permission to help anyone who comes to see them. On various occasions, I went to different temples and saw that this

[phenomenon] is something that people should know about. If you go to these places and ask for help, they don't demand any set amount of money; they ask you to give according to your means.

The persons who do the curing are dressed in white robes, and they work in rooms adorned with blue and white, which is the symbol of the spiritual center. These persons are called mediums. A dead person's spirit is able to penetrate the medium while he is in trance, and communicate with the people coming to the center.

In this center the patient enters the room where the medium is working and is swept (*una barrida*) with sweet basil (*albacar*) or with water prepared with lotion and ether. A *vidente* is also present to describe the spirit who comes to communicate through the medium and to identify some of the things associated with its visit to the client. The patient is allowed to speak with the spirits and either be healed or be given messages from the spirit world. The informant continued her description, saying:

One center is called Roca Blanca because the spirit that predominates is called Roca Blanca. This center is about twenty-five years old. The owner's name is Lupita. She founded it after discovering she could cure after working in another center. She asked a spiritual association for permission to practice, and it was granted.

I went to this place simply because I was curious. I was swept with *albacar* and the medium was at my side. While I was being swept, the medium went into trance. The sister who was sweeping me asked the spirit who he wanted to talk to. He said, "with the one you are sweeping." Then, the sister finished sweeping me and directed me to talk with the person who was addressing me. When she (the medium in trance) talked to me, she sounded like a man. He asked me, "Do you know who I am?" I have a cousin who got killed in a place in Tampico. "You must be my cousin," I said. "Yes, exactly, I am your cousin." "Look," he said, "You have come here with your husband." On other occasions I really had been there with my husband, mother and different relatives. "You have come here with your husband because you think he is hexed and that is why he is sick. But that's not true. He has a physical illness that the doctor can cure. Don't believe it's anything bad."

He said, "I'm going to prove who I am by coming to your house. Tell my cousin I'm going to see her." You see, I have a sister who's not nervous at all and who isn't afraid of anything. On Tuesday, as my sister was leaning by the window watching a television show, she felt someone embrace her. She turned and saw no one.

On another occasion, at 3 o'clock in the morning, I was awake and worried because my husband was not home. I was afraid something had happened to him. So I asked that spirit to bring my husband home, whatever he was doing. At the moment I called the spirit, the rocker on the porch started rocking real fast, as if someone were in it. After awhile it stopped. Ten minutes later my husband was home.

On another occasion, we went to another center. As my mother went up front to get cured, he (the informant's cousin's spirit) presented himself to her. He told her just because he was dead didn't mean he didn't do anything. He said everyone was assigned different work. Everyone had a job to work on. There were many spirits who wanted to communicate with this world, and he had presented himself because he had beaten the others to it. They fight one another to come talk with persons they love or their relatives that are living. My mother asked him about my father, who is also dead; why didn't he present himself at these centers. The spirit said the reason was that "we're so many here that he doesn't have the chance to speak to anyone. Only ones who were mediums have the chance to come down."

Of course, not all of the centers are identical with the ones described above. They vary according to their size, the people developing them, and the spirits who associate with them. However, there is considerable regularity in the types of services they perform, vis-a-vis healing. On some occasions the spirits prescribe simple herbal remedies for the physical problems of their patients. These recipes (*remedios*) are normally similar to the ones presented in the previous section on the material level, although occasionally a spirit will recommend a new use for an herb. These new remedies may then become common knowledge and continue to be used on the material level. On other occasions, the spirits may suggest that the patient perform the already familiar rituals of *curanderismo* (such as the *barrida*). As an example, the following cure was suggested by a medium in trance:

INFORMANT: My brother-in-law was working at ... [a motel] ... in Weslaco. When he started working they laid off this other guy who had been working there for several years. This guy didn't like it, and he's been known to be messing around with black magic. I don't know what he did to my brother-in-law, but every other day he'd have to be taken home because he was sick. He started throwing up, had shaky knees, and weak joints. So my mother and I went over to see this lady in

Reynosa, and she told my mother just what to do. My sister rubbed her husband with a lemon every night for three days. She also gave him some kind of tea, but I don't remember what kind. On the third day, a big black spot appeared on the lemon, so we threw it away, and he's been fine ever since.

The spirits are also thought to be able to directly influence people's lives in addition to having knowledge about material remedies. They control spiritual currents (*corrientes espirituales*) and mental vibrations (*vibraciones mentales*) that are capable of affecting the patient's health directly. Thus, spirits are thought to be able to manipulate the patient's fortune by directing positive or negative forces at them from the spiritual realm. During spiritual sessions held at the developing center described earlier, a spirit repeatedly presented himself (over the course of several weeks) and treated several patients. One of these patients was a man in his early thirties who was suffering from lower back pains. One week he presented his back problem to the spirit and was told to buy an Ace bandage and bring it to the next session. The man did so, but upon presenting this bandage to the spirit, the spirit chided him for not following his instructions correctly. The spirit stated that the bandage was too narrow and not long enough. The man was instructed to buy a new bandage and place it on the window ledge to catch the morning dew (thought to have healing properties). Further, he was to place a glass of water under the head of his bed and a jar with alcohol at the side. He was to take the bandage, wrap himself with it in the instructed manner, and lie quietly on his bed for no less than two hours, during which time the spirit promised to visit him and complete the cure. The man followed these instructions and stated that he did gain relief from his back pain.

The same spirit treated another patient, a young college girl, who periodically suffered asthma attacks. The girl's mother, a regular member of the group, brought her to the session since she was suffering from the onset of an attack. The spirit stood and clasped her head with one hand on her cerebro and the other on her forehead, sending *corrientes*

espirituales through her brain. The spirit then told her to take a sip of *agua preparada* and sit back down in the circle. This treatment was successful in overcoming this particular attack, and the mother mentioned that these cures often gave her relief for several weeks or months.

Another patient asked this spirit for help for a social and emotional, rather than a physical problem. Her husband had gotten into witchcraft (*brujería*), and she was frightened that he or his friends might attack her or attack members of her family. A considerable amount of tension existed between the families, and she was under continual stress. She had been nervous for some time and had gone to a doctor for help. The doctor prescribed a mild sedative, which she had been taking for about three weeks without apparent relief. The spirit probed her mind, then told her to take three sips of *agua preparada* (presumably to break any spells against her). The spirit promised to provide her with protection and help from the spiritual realm, to counteract anything that her husband might do. She appeared to be content with the spirit's activities in this case.

Five to eight different spirits normally presented themselves through the medium at the spiritual sessions in the incipient temple. Some were "instructors," like Padre Elias, some were "announcers," preparing the way for others, much like the process of announcing nobility at a court function. Some appeared to merely be interested in visiting with the participants to banter and match wits with them, providing comic relief in an otherwise serious atmosphere. In a number of sessions, a witty, comic spirit appeared just after the brief appearance of a very threatening spirit who frightened the members of the group into almost rigid inactivity. The comic spirit jeered at them for being so poorly prepared for dealing with such as he, and then left.

At the end of each spiritual session, which often lasted two to three hours, the final spirit would indicate the termination of the session and the imminent return of the medium's spirit. A closing prayer was read by participants at that point, thanking the spirits for their aid and attention. After the

medium came out of trance during the reading of the final prayer, the lights were turned back on, and people began social conversations, interspersed with discussion of all of the events that occurred during the spiritual session. Someone would always take time to relate the events of the evening to the medium who said he had no memory of the events that occurred in the room while his spirit was out of his body. Within a half hour or so, the participants would take leave of the *curandero* and other members of the group and depart for home.

There are several aspects of the spiritual level that have not been covered in this brief description but are described in more detail elsewhere (Trotter and Chavira 1975). These include the actual techniques of testing for *el don*, the physical and supernatural dangers of trance mediumship, the acquisition of spiritual protectors to overcome those dangers, detailed descriptions of the trance state from the subjective perspective of the developing medium and the objective perspective of the observer, and the existence and purpose of mediums' associations. Some of these will be covered in subsequent works by the authors. Throughout these aspects of the spiritual level and the ones described above run the dual concepts of the Christian theology of the soul and the energy concepts of *corrientes espirituales* and *vibraciones mentales*. The latter lead into a discussion of the mental level of *curanderismo*.

THE MENTAL LEVEL

The authors found the mental level the most difficult of the three to research, and it is consequently the least well documented. It has the fewest rituals and the least complex (outward) behavior associated with it. And, as mentioned earlier, it has the fewest practitioners (which severely limited the number of informants who could be approached for explanations).

All of the cases the authors observed being dealt with on the mental level followed a similar pattern. After the *curan-*

dero had chatted with the patient and asked them what their basic problem was, he or she would ask the patient to state his or her complete name (*el nombre completo*). The *curandero* would then write the name on a piece of paper and use it to concentrate. The primary informant who used this technique would sit behind the desk he used for consultations, lean his arms on the desk, bending slightly forward, close his eyes, and concentrate. After a few minutes he would open his eyes, tell the patient more about his or her problem, and state that it was being taken care of.

The informant stated that through a developmental process (*desarrollo*) he had learned to use his mind as a transmitter. He could then channel, focus, and direct *vibraciones mentales* at the patient. These mental vibrations worked in two ways: one physical, one behavioral. If he was working with a physical illness, such as cancer, then he channeled the vibrations to the afflicted area, which he had already pinpointed, and used the vibrations to retard the growth of the "damaged" cells and accelerate the growth of normal cells around them to cause the cancer to go away. In the case of desired behavioral changes he sent the vibrations into the person's mind and "dominated them" in a way that modified the person's behavior. The *curandero* gave an example of one such case where the husband had begun drinking excessively, was running around on his wife, was being a poor father to his children and was in danger of losing his job. The *curandero* stated that he dominated the man's thought processes and shifted them in the direction so the husband stopped drinking to excess, and was a model husband and father.

Some other of the "mental sciences" are also a part of the mental level. For example, *curanderos* claim to be able to perceive "auras" around people and to be able to use these auras to diagnose problems that patients are encountering by the color or shape (or a combination of the two) of the patient's aura.

The developmental process for the mental level is different from that of the spiritual. Instead of a guided process, with interaction or even direct magical manipulation by the

teacher, the *desarrollo* for the mental level is one of personal exploration and discovery, only minimally guided and explained by the teacher. What the teacher does is provide the student with exercises which must be mastered. Once an exercise is successfully performed, another is given, sometimes without the benefit of explanation of the utility of the earlier exercise. In fact, on the mental level one is normally expected to figure out the utility and wider ramifications of each exercise on one's own.

The actual exercises are quite numerous, but only two were mentioned to the authors. One exercise is to fill a clear smooth glass with water and hold it with both hands, thumbs on one side and fingers interlaced but flat on the glass on the other side. The palms of the hand do not touch the glass. One then sits in a totally dark room and concentrates on "seeing" the glass and water. Partial success is achieved when one sees the rim of the glass as a bright blue line. More complete success is achieved when one clearly sees the glass and the water and, even better, when one also sees millions of bright blue, infinitely small, points of light flying out of the water. Another exercise is to sit in front of a mirror and then to "wipe one's image" off the mirror with one's eyes open. The mirror image, according to one informant, is replaced by a dense gray fog or nothingness that indicates one has achieved the proper level of concentration.

This level and the spiritual level overlap somewhat in that the term *vibraciones mentales* is used in conjunction with both. However, on the mental level there is a reliance on the power available to the individual mind, rather than on any relationship to spiritual entities. Also missing is any obvious tie to Christianity. None of the explanatory models of the Church were invoked to explain the mental level, although there was a tendency on the part of one informant to refer to the mental disciplines found in some of the eastern religions, primarily Buddhism.

The condition that each individual experience and interpret his or her own process of development without significant reinterpretation from the "teacher" in part guarantees variation in the behavior of healers in this area of treatment.

In addition, the mental level is most often practiced in isolation, not in groups, and without a clear body of ritual to act as unifying forces on behavior. Even the ethics of the system are not, at least to the extent the authors probed, developed beyond the ethics of the individual practitioner in this most secular of the three levels. Much more than the other levels, the techniques of the mental level are treated as profane, analogous to the treatment of tools in surgery or the laboratory. This, too, may lead to more idiosyncratic behavior on this level than the others, since some of the social control devices extant on the other levels appear to be missing.

Beyond this, the mental level simply awaits more thorough documentation, since the authors have placed by far the least of their research efforts on this area. About all that can be currently verified is the basic explanatory model of the perceived human ability to transmit and focus mental energies that are felt to be capable of modifying a person's physical or mental condition at a distance without that person's knowledge of the occurrence.

SUMMARY

The authors have deliberately avoided bringing interpretive models other than the *curanderos'* own to bear on this ethnographic data. To have done so would have been to step outside the scope of the current paper, although such an approach is scheduled for future works. It is quite clear from our evidence, however, that some of the "myths" of our literature about *curanderismo* are not accurate. The biggest of these for South Texas is that *curanderismo* is dying out (see Crawford 1961, for example). If anything, it is going through a period of considerable florescence and is gaining public respectability where it earlier had only private acceptance. There is no doubt that *curanderismo* is changing. Some practices no longer exist (e.g., the use of *hueseros* to set bones) and new ones have come into existence (the use of auras for diagnosis). Perhaps the changes have caused some scholars to mistake evolution for death.

The three levels of *curanderismo* described above unify the theories of disease and illness and form a framework for determining the therapeutic approaches of *curanderos* in South Texas. The nature of the system emphasizes a holistic approach to the individual's treatment both by containing more than a simple mind-body system and by the intimate nature of the referral system and the extensive personal knowledge of the patient's social environment that is normally held by the *curandero*. Christian symbols and theology provide both tools (candles, incense, water) and organization models (rituals, prayers, animistic concepts) for the material and the spiritual levels, but apparently not to a similar degree, at least for the present, for the mental level. Instead, an energy concept seems to be the central unifying idea for each of the three levels and for the systematic interrelationship between them. This energy concept derives from belief in forces, vibrations, and currents that center in the brain or mind of those who have the gift for healing and which can be transmitted to cause healing at a distance by their effect on the patient's social, physical, spiritual, or psychological environment.

All three levels of healing are in a state of evolution in the lower Rio Grande Valley, although the least rapid change appears to be in the material level, perhaps due to its greater antiquity and more widespread practice along with the greater frequency of the gift for its practice. The spiritualist temples now being established in the Valley should have an eventual stabilizing effect on the practices of the spiritual level. The mental level will probably remain more idiosyncratic in its application due not only to its recent advent, but also to the way in which its training is accomplished.

The variations in the practices of *curanderismo*, noted in the body of the paper, can be partly explained by differences in the *curanderos'* personality, differences in their treatment preferences or abilities, and differences in their emphasis on theoretical or experiential approaches. Some *curanderos* are outgoing and gregarious, others are reserved and more mystical. Some grew up in Central Mexico and emphasize herbs different from those emphasized by *curanderos* who grew

up in South Texas. Some believe that there is one "universal mind" in charge of all humanity, while others are avowed Christians. Some believe that a spirit can possess only one body, while others believe that a spirit can possess several bodies at one time and speak through several mediums' mouths simultaneously. The variations in the practice of *curanderismo* are not unlike the variations in the practice of Christianity or modern medicine. They are variations produced by individual interpretations of an underlying body of theory that generates alternatives in its application. A study of these variations would be useful and productive now that the underlying theoretical system provides a common starting point and common objectives for such a study.

It is clear from the data presented herein that future research into *curanderismo* must take into account its systemic nature. Treating *curanderismo* as a mass cultural phenomenon, as has been done in the past, may be valuable for showing the depth and spread of what can be considered technical knowledge throughout the culture, just as similar studies on the spread of technical information from medical systems are valuable. But to continue to ignore the systemic attributes of *curanderismo* detailed in this study would be to continue an inappropriate approach to the data and to produce incorrect or incomplete analyses of this phenomenon.

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NOTES

1. The initial phase of this research was supported by a grant from the Regional Medical Program of Texas (RMPT Grant No. 75-108G). Further efforts at data collection were supported by the Texas Commission on Alcoholism, Pan American University and the authors themselves.

2. These articles and books are by no means an exhaustive list, as can be seen by the appended bibliography. However, they are the articles most frequently cited and used as reference materials. The others vary widely in historical relevance and in scholarship. The one thing that time has not seemed to diminish is the enthusiasm for both imperfect and repetitious descriptions of *curanderismo* in reputedly scholarly journals, as can be seen by comparing Bourke (1896) with Davis (1979).

3. Since the authors were living "in the field" for this entire time period, it was possible to conduct research on a continuous (at least one contact per week) basis. This condition may have materially aided in achieving the goals of the research project.

4. Starr County is sometimes considered a part of the Valley, sometimes not. In this case so little research bearing on this article was conducted in Starr County that it has been omitted.

5. *Curanderos* with whom we had only one contact are not counted in this figure, although they did provide us with supporting data. It should also be noted that the authors deliberately did not contact *bru/os* (sorcerers or witches), who are known for doing antisocial magic. The effects of the *brujo's* work forms a part of the *curandero's* practice, but actual interviews have not been conducted with them.

6. *Projecto Comprender* (RMPT Grant #75-108G, etc.) funded by the Regional Medical Program of Texas. The authors and several other project personnel produced a monograph (Trotter and Chavira 1975), a film "Los Que Curan," and a seven-part slide series with synchronous sound, "Curanderismo: An Alternative Health Care System."

7. An interesting sidelight of this point is the fact that the *curanderos* who worked both sides of the border stated that there was far more *brujeria* (witchcraft) practiced on the United States side than in Mexico. One of the authors feels this could form the central topic of research to look at *brujeria* from the perspective of conflict theory, as a measure of social dissonance within a community both in terms of a) perceived or real inequality and b) cultural (ethnic) conflict—both inter- and intra-group ramifications.

8. The authors have specimen samples of many of the herbs that are mentioned in the paper. However, not all of them have as yet been identified either by scientific nomenclature or by common English names

due to the difficulty of identifying certain plants by their parts. Where possible, without the risk of providing incorrect information, the English common name and binomial for herbs are presented. Otherwise, the local Spanish designation given by an informant is presented alone. This condition is felt to be justified, since the focus of the work is to give examples of how the herbs are classified emicly, not a comparison of this with other systems. Such a project would be valuable but is outside the scope of this paper.

9. The use of candles and colors to represent different types of magical efforts within an overall system of magic is a common tradition in European-based occult practices. See Buckland (1970) and Huson (1970) for examples from the Anglo-American system of witchcraft. This ties in with the endless discussion of energy in that each color and area of magic is thought of as having a particular "vibrating power" or energy.

10. The charismatic movement of relatively recent advent produces some very close parallels, in ritual practices, to those of some of the more religiously oriented *curanderos*.

11. Some Puerto Rican spiritualists can now be found working among Mexican-Americans as far south as San Antonio (250 miles north of the Valley). They are introducing some different saints, such as San Candelero. However, the authors did not identify any Puerto Rican mediums in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. A comparative analysis of the two systems is impossible to present in this work; however, June Macklin has made a beginning for comparative works on spiritualism in two instances (see Macklin and Crumrine 1975 and Macklin 1978).

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