

Yachaks, Curanderos and Parteras

Introduction

There were a total of ten traditional healers in the overall sample of 82 respondents from all communities in the survey and these included people referred to as 'yachaks' (shamans), curandero/as (healers) and parteras (midwives). However, only eight of these actually supplied useful enough answers to be included in the tabulated responses and these were from Salasaka (1-5) and Zuleta (6-8).

				Greater Salasaka Count	Greater Zuleta Count	Total Count
Employment/Occupation	Curandero	Gender	Female	0	0	0
			Male	0	2	2
			Total	0	2	2
	Partera	Gender	Female	2	2	4
			Male	0	0	0
			Total	2	2	4
	Yachak	Gender	Female	0	0	0
			Male	3	1	4
			Total	3	1	4
	Total	Gender	Female	2	2	4
			Male	3	3	6
			Total	5	5	10

Distribution of Healers by Community

The term 'traditional religious specialist' is commonly employed as a generic for people who specialise in belief systems and practices that encompass what we today call 'shamanism'. There are many definitions of what shamanism is, from that narrowly employed to mean spiritual specialists from Northern, Arctic and Sub-Arctic cultures, to those sharing a broadly similar set of beliefs and practices occurring pan-globally and across time and existing before the spread of organised dogmatic religions such as Islam, Buddhism and Christianity. Shamanism may be understood as the expression of a peoples' spiritual beliefs and experiences and their understanding of metaphysical reality, centring upon the employment of states of altered consciousness. Shamanistic beliefs and practices, sometimes better understood as folkloric traditions, still persist in many parts of the world now, continuing as

a sub-stratum beneath organised religion and modern culture. We know from the archaeological record and depictions of shamans, often undergoing trance states of transformation into their animal tutelary spirits, and kindred themes, that shamanistic religion was the common basis of spiritual experience in autochthonous Amerindian societies up to the impact of the conquest by the Spanish imperium in the New World in the 16th century and the imposition of an alien religious/spiritual creed based upon Christianity. From this time onwards, any other expression of spiritual beliefs and related ontology and the ritual practices associated with them, was ruthlessly suppressed through the organised ecclesiastical campaigns referred to as the '*Extirpación de las Idolatrías*' (the uprooting of idolatries).

We know much about shamanistic traditions and practices from many ethnographic and ethnohistorical studies, but although there are very many studies about Amazonian shamanism in particular, rather less is known about Andean traditional religious specialists.

Sections 6, 7 and 8 of the questionnaire therefore questioned traditional healers directly about how they had come to be healers, the nature of their powers and the methodologies they employed for diagnosis and healing.

ABOUT BEING A HEALER

Kinds of healers

We know from ethnohistorical accounts dating from the time of the early colonial period, that traditional religious specialists and healers encountered were a very heterogeneous group and included a wide array of specialist abilities (Brosseder 2014). This might in some ways equate to the way we understand modern medicine and clinical practitioners now, with a broad generalist group of clinicians – general practice – through to the different specialities. In the northern Andes there are practitioners known as '*yachaks*' (visionaries/shamans), *curandero/as* (general healers), *fregadores* (manipulators/physiotherapists), *partera/os* (midwives) as those most commonly found.

Yachaks and curanderos may work with a range of different diagnostic and therapeutic intermediaries, i.e. ritual objects that allow them to 'see' into the body of the patient and visualise their illness and then effect the required therapeutic intervention for healing, which generally centres upon some level of spiritual and bodily 'cleansing' process. The intermediary item commonly employed in these regions is the Andean cuy (guinea pig) which is applied alive and vigorously rubbed over the body of the patient and 'adsorbs' signs of the illness which the specialist can then 'read' through examination of the pattern of internal injury in the animal's body. Other healers employ eggs, and after rubbing a whole

fresh egg across the patient's body, will then break it into water and observe the nature of discolouration to the yolk and the albumen. Still others employ candles, which are rubbed over the patient's body, then lit, and the nature of the way the candles burns – gutters, or extinguishes – is the way they diagnose flaws in the patient's bodily energy channels.

Of the ten healers interviewed across three communities in the survey, five were practising yachaks (one was also a partera), three curanderos (although one was also a partera) and three were parteras (of whom one was also a yachak and another a curandera).

Question 6.1 therefore asked healers: "What kinds of healers do you know about?"

Responses confirmed a variation in the kinds of traditional healers, as perceived by healers themselves:

"There are several kinds, they are not all the same (3);

"They are not all the same, they can be quite different" (4).

"Yes, they have different ways of diagnosing and treating" (7).

"Yes, there are different sorts; according to the equipment and treatments/diagnosis they use" (8).

A lady who was a partera and yachak from Salasaka¹ elaborated:

"[There are] those who cleanse malaires; those who cleanse evils; those who treat or cleanse witchcraft. I have heard about these, but because they've never treated me I don't believe in them"

Reasons for becoming a healer

Cross cultural studies of shamanism demonstrate that people who become spiritual specialists and healers do so for two basic reasons: they are either 'called' by the ancestral spirits via initiatory dreams, or are inducted via a close relative, such as a grandparent, who teaches them.

So this question asked respondents "Why did you become a healer?"

Of the yachaks, three male respondents, two from Salasaka and one from Zuleta, reported being inducted through classic initiatory dreams or visions. Respondent 2 dreamt that the 'spirit' of the local sacred landform and 'wak'a' Taita Punta Rumi appeared to him in female human form in a dream and instructed him to serve her; respondent 4 who actually came from a line of yachaks – father and grandfather – before him, as a boy of 11/12 years had

¹ Respondent #15 in the general sections of the survey

what seemed to be a hypnogogic experience whilst sleeping on a nearby hillside, when he saw two white sheep passing by him² and experienced his calling through this. Respondent 6 from Zuleta was auto-initiated through a visionary experience when he was returning to Zuleta late one night and had a vision of being accompanied by a large black dog, which then disappeared when a strong white light appeared before him on the road, like a lantern, that contained an image of sorts. He interpreted this as a vision of the Virgin of Quinche and he felt that he was communicated to (via his heart) that he should become a healer. She has been his spiritual guide and teacher ever since. Respondent 3 cited the influence of another yachak living some distance away in another geographic region (Santo Domingo in Western Pichincha province) as having been the reason he became a yachak.

Of the remaining curanderos and parteras (who offered intelligible responses), respondent 1 from Salasaka did not explain why she became a yachak, but gave the reason why she decided to become a partera as being because she had given birth to her children alone, and therefore wanted to help other women. Respondent 7 from Zuleta became a curandero aged 18-20 years by observation of other curanderos which gave him the desire or the feeling that he could also cure, whereas respondent 9 from Zuleta said he was advised by another curandero how to be one. The partera 8 from Zuleta (who began her healing career as a curandera) explained that her grandmother was also a curandera and partera but lived a long way away. She had wanted to be a midwife as she perceived a need for this in the community, so she sought training from a married couple who practised as community midwives.

Method of becoming a healer

The means through which a healer is inducted to their healing practice is also variable. Many shamans report a long period of apprenticeship being taught by the mentor; others explain that they learned alone through observation and the guidance of their tutelary spirit. Question 6.3 therefore sought to understand *how* people became healers and respondents were therefore asked: "How did you become a healer?" Some misunderstood this question and simply repeated their answer to 6.2 above, recounting the same dream or experience.

Of the auto-initiated yachaks, 2 and 4 described being guided and taught by their inner tutelary spirit. Respondent 6 once again cited his dream, but offered no description of how he actually learned, other than through formal reading materials and information about the healing properties of local medicinal plants. The Salasaka yachak and partera, respondent 1 said:

² this is another 'classic' the white sheep would have been wak'as in pre-Colombian beliefs

“Actually, nobody taught me, knowledge came by necessity. When I was young I listened to my ancestors³ who used to cut the [cord from the] placenta only with the sharp leaf of the *sigsi* (a type of plant). This is how I came up with the idea of cutting the [cord from the] placenta by about 35 centimetres”. Interestingly, she is one of the very few practising indigenous midwives who went on to get a formal medical accreditation and who is therefore now permitted to practice in modern medical facilities.

Respondent 8, as indicated above, learned from the married couple who were midwives when she was 28-35 years old. She was later encouraged to go and do a formal course to learn (as respondent 1 did), but given she was barely literate, she lacked the confidence to undertake formal training.

The origin of power

All traditional healers and particularly those who are shamans, understand that they heal through connection to and channelling of ‘power’ from a higher spiritual source. For example, those shamans who work using plants believe that the spirit of the plant itself guides them how to use it and the power that it contains. Commonly shamans cite their spiritual guide and teacher, whatever this is, as being the origin of their powers. Question 6.4 asked respondents: “What is the origin of your powers?”

The influence of the Christian evangelisation was evident in that respondents 3, 4, and 7 cited ‘God’ as the origin of their powers and 6 the Virgin of Quinche⁴. However, although a professed Catholic, the Salasaka yachak 2 reported that his powers came from the regional apus (mountain spirits) such as Taita Chimborazo (the local volcano) or Kinlli Urku.

Respondent 4 from Salasaka said that he was self-taught via his spirit, which he does not experience in any exogenous manner, but as being a part of himself and his own inquiry and insight taught him how to be a healer. This man has no formal Christian faith and does not believe in the power of saints or images.⁵ He does, however, believe that all power comes from one God, of which we are all a part.

Respondent 1 said that her “wisdom was born from the ancestral knowledge”. The other curanderos/partera offered no explanation.

³ She seems to be referring to the ancestral practice of how to cut the umbilical cord

⁴ Following a vision of this sacred personage in the township of Quiche around the turn of 20th century, there has been a large annual pilgrimage centred upon her veneration ever since. In many ways the Christianised ‘Virgin’ figure exactly serves the same function as a pre-Columbian wak’a.

⁵ nor does he believe in witchcraft or ‘evil spirits’ of any kind, although he nevertheless seems to have some belief in the world of wa’ka-like spirits and also his mountain.

Professional rivalry

It is known that some degree of competition and rivalry is experienced between healers in traditional medicine in these regions. For example, those practising with cuys will commonly denounce those practicing with eggs or candles as being inferior in some way, and so on. During the course of conducting the interviews, one yachak openly criticised another survey respondent for not being sufficiently knowledgeable or reliable, given that he was still considered a novice at his craft.

The final question in this section therefore asked respondents: “Do you see other healers as if they were in competition with you?” No respondents from Zuleta offered adequate responses, although one curandero expressed outright mistrust and even fear of the practising yachak (6), who was generally considered to be very powerful and potentially harmful. Only respondent 3 In Salasaka said that some of them might see themselves as being in competition with one another, whereas 2 disagreed altogether. Respondent 1 answered more generally, saying “I know the yachak[s] and midwives of Salasaka, they are very independent and almost none of them shares their knowledge. I also know the midwives and yachak[s] of Otavalo⁶, on the other hand, they support and teach with advice to try or acquire more knowledge.”

UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSE OF ILLNESS

Section 7 progresses to how specialists actually understand illness itself – one of the fundamental objectives of the study and this centres upon how diagnosis are made. As indicated above, there are three key means employed for affecting a diagnosis: using cuyes, eggs or candles, although it should be noted here that those practising as midwives (partera) use very different means for gauging the different stages of labour.

Making a diagnosis

The first question in this section asked respondents: “How do you undertake a diagnosis?”. Excluding the parteras (for the reason explained above), of the yachaks and curanderos, respondents 3, 4 and 8 used only cuyes; respondent 6 used cuyes and sometimes eggs, and respondent 7 used cuyes and sometimes candles. Respondents 6 and 8 also employed the additional method of taking a patient’s pulse. Respondent 2 used candles exclusively.

⁶ Otavalo is in the northern Ecuadorian province of Imbabura and here the traditional religious specialists are called simply ‘chamanes’ ie shamans, not yachaks.

‘Seeing’ illness

Ethnographically it is known that shamans can actually ‘visualise’ illness in a patient’s body. Studies of early colonial accounts of the experiences of traditional religious specialists also confirm this (Griffiths 1996). This is described as though the specialist sees the illness in their mind’s eye as if the patient’s body were open before them with the illness clearly displayed, or as if it can be seen in a mirror.

Question 7.2. asked respondents: “How do you 'see' the disease? (for example, the ability to see the nature of afflictions, as clearly as the mirror, or as if the body were open to the eye?)”

Of the offered and relevant responses, the yachak 2 confirmed that he “Sees in his mind the nature of the illness through the candles burning”. Respondent yachak 6 by looking at the egg or body of the cuy and the curandera 8 from the marks on/in the cuy’s body.

Other means

To double check their diagnostic practice, respondents were asked: “Are there means employed, for example, such as candles, guinea pigs, egg yolks, special equipment such as stones or the use of plants that allow them to "see" a disease in a patient and its causes of illness?”. This mainly produced the same answers as given above, however, respondent 1 in her capacity as a yachak expanded on her answer given in 7.2 as a partera:

“In order to see the seriousness of the problem / illness in the person I usually use egg yolks, candles and always accompanied by medicinal plants are prepared in infusion and naturally.”

The Zuleta yachak 6 said he was guided by his spirit (the Virgin of Quinche); the curandero 7 said he also used candles occasionally, but didn’t explain how he saw an illness and respondent 8 similarly confirmed that they saw illness through using the cuy, but didn’t elaborate how.

Spiritual intermediaries

Shamans commonly access the metaphysical ‘world of spirits’ to affect their divinatory and therapeutic activities and, as indicated above, normally employ a spirit guide, usually their personal tutelary spirit, to assist them. This question therefore asked respondents: “Are these intermediaries experienced or understood as spirits? (for example, as with the spirits of plants)”.

Only four respondents offered helpful replies to this:

Respondent 1, the yachak and partera said: "I also always invoke the spirits of nature to give me wisdom in the healing process". Respondent 2, the Salasaka yachak said that the mountain spirits (apus) gave him the power and the Zuleta yachak 6 confirmed that it was the Virgin of Quinche that assisted him with his insights. The curandero 7 from Zuleta said he didn't work via spirits but through using the body as a kind of map.

Positive and negative forces

It is commonly understood that traditional religious specialists, and shamans in particular, are able to use the power they claim to have access to for both positive and negative ends. For example, Amazonian shamans are generally understood to be able to employ 'dark arts' to harm their enemies and have acquired a formidable reputation for this. The final question in this section therefore asked respondents "Can you direct and control good and bad forces?"

Not all responded intelligibly and it was clear that the question made some respondents uncomfortable, perhaps in admitting that they might be able to harm people. Respondents 2 and 6 simply confirmed that they could. The yachak and partera respondent 1 from Salasaka didn't suggest she used power for positive or negative purposes, but rather implies that she was able to confront and prevail in the face of evil spirits, saying: "Yes, I can control my power and my wisdom when I am doing the process of cleansing and healing, be in front of good and evil spirits. I can say that having control is that [why] I am still alive, but a while ago I would have been in other worlds⁷."

The curandero 7 from Zuleta counselled: "You need to be careful if there are bad forces or results", but like respondent 1, he doesn't want to say if he can control them for any end or purpose.

HEALING

From making a diagnosis, the final section addressed the therapeutic interventions employed by healers to treat their patients. In shamanistic healing pan globally, we know that shamans commonly employ rituals and practices aimed at sweeping out embedded

⁷ An enigmatic statement which suggests that she considered herself to be at mortal risk by confronting evil at times: "Puedo decir que teniendo control es que aún mantengo viva sino hace rato ya hubiese estado en otros mundos".

'evil' in a patient's body. With the affective and psychosocial disorders this may be a full body cleansing involving agents such as the application of the ubiquitous cuy, blowing tobacco smoke, holy water or aguardiente and/or beating with 'magical' herbs such as those from the Solanaceae family (*Brugmansia* sp. i.e., Angels' Trumpets), or with Urticaceae species (stinging nettles) with sometimes all these combined. In other cultures, (such as the Arctic) a shaman's saliva is considered to have powerful healing properties and therefore shaman's will commonly 'spit' into a wound to effect healing.

Healing agents and rituals

This question asked respondents: "What forms of healing and / or rituals do you use for diseases? (for example, magic herbs, tobacco smoke from cigars, etc.)".

Respondent 1 said: "I can treat malaire, espantos, frights, evils of any kind. I use herbs (medicinal and magical plants), eggs, candles, stones, *puro*⁸ and so on. The cleansing process is one and the ritual process is another. The first is the use of medicinal plants with other elements (egg, puntas, candles and so on). The ritual uses the invocation of the four elements (earth, air, water and fire) and incense, flowers, fruits, candles, grains, etc. are used instead".

Respondent 2, the Salasaka yachak, used *puntas* (blown over the patient), bunches of 'magical' herbs and flowers and stones which he explained were imbued with the power of the mountains. He also made (spiritual) journeys (via a trance state) with his whip, which he used to beat off bad spirits. Respondent 3, a yachak from Salasaka, used herbs, holy water and *puntas*; the other Salasaka yachak 4 employed herbs; the yachak 6 from Zuleta remarked that it depended upon the illness, though he mainly used herbs or *puntas*. The curandero 7 employed country herbs like chilca, nettles and flowers other than those of the *Brugmansia* species. The Zuleta curandera 8 healed with plants; backed up with repeat diagnosis using cuyes to check the progress of a cure. Sometimes she used an herbal tea, at other times a cleansing. She occasionally used holy water too, blowing it over the patient (like yachaks do with *puntas*).

Spiritual assistants

Given that the yachaks in particular draw their power to diagnose and heal from their spiritual source of power (see 6.4 above) usually via their spiritual guide or assistant, this

⁸ 'Puro' or 'Puntas' are the names given locally to the strong home distilled sugar cane spirit or aguardiente.

question asked respondents: “Are your rituals / therapies carried out by an assistant / spiritual guide?”

Following a description of her healing rituals, the yachak and partera 1 from Salasaka responded that “... It’s important to indicate that despite the criticism, I invoke the spirits of nature to help me with the wisdom for healing.” Respondent 2 said he carried out the healing alone (although he draws his power from the local mountain spirits and his spiritual guide is the spirit of the wak’a Taita Punta Rumi, which is the location where he carries out his healing rituals. Respondent 3 cited Taita Inti (ie the sun), but he has also asserted elsewhere that only God has powers. No answer was recorded for respondent 4, but he had nevertheless made it clear throughout his interview that the source of his powers were ‘God’ via his own spirit. The Zuleta yachak respondent 6 cited the Virgin of Quiche as his assistant; the curandero 7 said that only God assisted him, as his guide. The partera and curandera 8 said she had no assistance, although made it clear that she is a practising Christian believer.

Using a ‘mesa’

Shamans and sometimes also healers, commonly employ what is referred to as a ‘mesa’ – an altar upon which they arrange their personal accoutrements used in healing rituals. These may often contain a heterogeneous mix of artefacts, ecofacts, dried animal body parts and/or bones and often include Christian ritual objects such as a crucifix, a ‘holy’ statue or image. Respondents were therefore asked: “Do you have an altar or a ‘mesa’?” Respondent 1 replied “I have a small ‘mesa’.” Respondent 2 “Yes, it consists mainly of a collection of rounded stones and he also uses masks and a whip”. Respondent 3 has a mesa equipped with what he referred to as ‘armas’ ie ritual objects employed as ‘weapons’ or tools to effect healing. Respondent 4 did not have a formal ‘mesa’ as such, but nevertheless employed stones and an axe in his healing rituals. Respondent 6 simply affirmed that he did have a mesa, as did respondent 8. Respondent 7 did not have one, nor offered any information about ritual objects that he might have instead of using one (see below).

Equipment used for healing

Use of a mesa apart, the following question asked respondents: “What special artefacts or equipment do you use for your healing rituals?”

Respondent 1 said she used medicinal plants and eggs. In addition: “I have two ancestral stones, candles, *puntas*, etc. And I do not use any modern equipment”.

Respondent 2, the Salsaka yachak used his stones from the mountains, *puntas* and plants.

Respondent 3 used only plants. Respondent 4 used stones and an axe [which he had inherited from his parents and grandparents. Respondent 6 from Zuleta employed stones, together with his spiritual guide (the Virgin of Quinche). Respondent 7 confirmed that he only used cuyes, flowers, herbs and eggs, and he doesn't use stones or other artefacts. Respondent 8 used images of both male and female saints, and also stones.

Story telling

The final question in the section dealing with the processes of healing addresses story telling as part of the ritual used in healing therapies. We know from other traditional Andean communities that story telling can form a core component of the context of healing wherein the healer engages usually the whole family in a healing process that includes complicated stories about the community and 'parables' that are thought to effect an important attitude and psychological change required to make a patient more amenable to healing (Greenway 2003). So the last question asked respondents: "Do you use story telling for any part of this therapy?"

The partera and yachak from Salasaka, respondent 1 replied: "During the process I do use ancestral narratives with the intention of giving advice or as an example and / or comparison."⁹ The yachak respondent 2 said he did sometimes, but it was only related to the therapy required. Respondent 3 said he tells stories about the hills and sacred places, or with reference to them. Respondent 6 from Zuleta said that he started with a story of his own experience; 4 and 8 were non responders and 7 responded negatively.

References

Greenway, G. 2003. "Healing Soul Loss: The Negotiation of Identity in Peru." *In Medical Pluralism in the Andes*, edited by J. D. Koss-Chioino, T. Leatherman, and C. Greenway, 92–106. London: Routledge.

⁹ I.e., exactly as the Greenway reference describes for the central Peruvian Andes.