

Syrups, Pomadas, Cataplasmas and El Rio Health Fair

MAS 435 Midterm

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Introduction

The body, in its mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical parts, integrates all four directions of the Ollin (Gonzales). These four “niveles” (De La Portilla 2008, 52), or directions as discussed by Dr. Gonzales in lecture on January 31, must all be addressed in order for one to be healed. Syrups, pomadas and cataplasmas are only a small part of the physical, or material, nivel of traditional medicine. They involve objects that carry energy (De La Portilla 2008, 53) that is used in the overall healing process but is just one part alongside addressing ones mental, spiritual and emotional well being. Through the understanding of how the four directions of the Ollin are present in our bodies, traditional medicine can be used to create a balance in all these aspects.

I. Syrups *by Martita Jimenez*

In this section, the use of plants as medicine will be explained because syrups and a vast array of other traditional medicines are composed of plants. The properties and uses of syrup will be explained as well as how the basic understanding of certain herbs is necessary to learn how to make different syrups for specific ailments. Making syrups can be an easy and fun experience. By combing the right herbs we can make medicine that is completely natural and just as effective, if not as effective as store bought syrups.

Plants offer the gift of healing and if we know how to use them properly they become great aids for medicinal purposes. In understanding how to make certain syrups, we must first understand some of the uses that a plant has to offer. First and foremost, we should take into consideration that before we make a syrup or any medicine is that plants must be treated with

respect because "plants are more than substances with curative properties; plants have a metaphysical aspect to them as well" (De La Portilla 2008, 99). We should never take too much of a particular plant as we have to be conscious of the plant's environment. Certain plants are specific to certain regions of an environment and by depleting the supply we can cause adverse effects. Certain plants as a whole can be used medicinally. Depending on what part of the plant is used, the potency can be measured. Roots, bark, leaves, flowers, seed, and sap provide the strongest medicines, while stems, branches, and core wood produce less benefit (Kane 2009, 26). According to Kane (2009), plants are multi-directional, which means that they rarely affect only one area in the body, and it is not the plant that is the remedy for an ailment or discomfort, but rather it is what the plant does to the body, organ system, or group of tissue that affects the manifested problem (25-26). We should always take these things into consideration when making a medicine. Another important thing to keep in mind is for whom the medicine is intended, because medicines for adults, children, and pregnant women, for example, will each have to meet different requirements and take different considerations into account.

Syrups are typically used for a variety of things such as coughs, colds, flu symptoms, and chest and stomach ailments. Syrups combine herbs that, with sweetness, give a soothing effect. Syrups can be made in a few different ways either specifically as a cough syrup or as simple syrup. According to Kane (2009), any tea as well as some tinctures can be converted to make a simple syrup just by adding sugar in the proper ratio (44). Usually this is achieved by using a one-to-one ratio. Kane (2009) also writes of three common methods. The first method is a honey steep. Through this process the herbs are chopped up finely and then placed in jar and fill with honey. This mixture is set aside for several weeks and then the honey is squeezed or pressed out from the herb. The ratio for this method is one part herb to two parts honey. The second method is tincture in honey with a glycerin base. These two are mixed and bottled; the ratio is two parts

herbs, to one part honey, to one part glycerin. The third method is a tincture with simple syrup. In this method you mix together 8 oz of tincture and simple syrup respectively. The ratio should be one part tincture to one part simple syrup. As Kane (2009) notes, the last two syrups are more diluted and are stronger than the first method (34).

In class, we made a cough syrup that could also be used in the ailments mentioned above. To make the syrup, we added about half a gallon of water in a large *olla* to which we then added two cinnamon sticks. We then start adding all the herbs that our classmates had brought to share, herbs such as garlic, eucalyptus, mullein, rosemary, fresh oregano, garlic, avocado pits, creosote, mint, apples and yerba mansa. Lastly, honey and vodka were added, honey as a microbial ingredient and vodka as preservative. As it turned out, the syrup was surprisingly sweet and despite the complete mixture of herbs it did not taste bad at all. To this recipe bougainvillea, ocotillo, and osha could be added as well, we did not add them in class because we did not have any readily available.

Some of the herbs used for this cough syrup are known to be helpful in the ailments mentioned above and for that reason they are specifically used. For example, mullein, which is *gordolobo* in Spanish, is more of a European plant, but in Mexico and southwestern U.S. it is often known as cudweed. Mullein, a bush with velvety leaves and stalks of small yellow flowers, is known to treat all sorts of respiratory tract problems and is also used to treat bronchitis, asthma, and diarrhea. Bougainvillea is a well-known herb that is good in the healing of bronchitis and asthma as well as for suppressing coughs (Davidow 1999, 86). Eucalyptus, although an Australian native, is a tree widely dispersed all over Mexico. For the purposes of this cough syrup, it was used as a bronchial opener and also to help clear the nose in flu-like symptoms. Another important component in the syrup was garlic. Garlic has many healing attributes as well; although it is typically associated only in the preparation of food it is very useful in

medicine as well. Garlic is a natural antibiotic that also helps with hypertension and arteriosclerosis when taken internally. Yerba mansa, also known as swamp root, is an aromatic creeper with white fragrant flowers which works very well as an anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, and antifungal. It is often used in the ailment of urinary tract infections, inflammation, inflamed gums, arthritis, and for aches and pains (Davidow 1999, 199). Even just the explanations of these few herbs can give an idea of what we could mix together. We should become knowledgeable on what the specific herbs do in order to make medicines that will have help towards the ailment at hand. Plants should be used depending on illness and severity (De La Portilla 2009, 98).

Overall, this topic relates to much of what we have learned in class. Dr. Gonzales stated in lecture on February 7, "A way to reconnect with plants is through the use of traditional medicine." Plants are nature and we depend on nature to survive, we must respect and honor and cherish what helps to keep us alive. Throughout the course we have been reading about how *curanderismo* and natural healing interact with all the forces of nature to go beyond our physical ailments, but also our spiritual ailments. "La planta es la vida" (De La Portilla 2009, 100).

II. Pomadas by Michelle Aguilera

Salves are an important aspect of traditional healing medicine. Salves, along with syrups and plasters make up some of the tools used by traditional healing. To understand the importance of salves one has to look first at exactly what a salve is, how it is used, some of the other healing aspects salves are involved with, and what exactly the difference between western and Indigenous healing is.

Technically speaking, salves are a kind of herb-infused balm that one is able to spread over an afflicted area. The salves allow for a protective barrier to be formed on the area as well

as being able to be absorbed easily where it is most needed. Western medicine often obsesses over ingesting pills and taking medicines internally but skin is the largest organ a person has. Using the skin as a kind of delivery system for medicinal properties is important to always remember. One of the benefits of salves is how anyone at any age can use them, since nothing is being ingested. There is not the same doubt as with internally taken medicines that you may be unintentionally swallowing something toxic. Parents may find this type of medicine much more appealing in the sense that it is only a topical application. Salves also have the benefit of being able to be tailor made to whatever ailment one may have. Knowledge of the types of plants and instructions on how to make a salve is all one needs to be able to help heal oneself.

The salve we made and gave to the public at El Rio to sample was a creosote and aloe vera salve. This is a very simple salve to make but at the same time very effective and potent. The creosote, a local bush plant also known as gobernadora, chaparral and greasewood, is good for curing fever, influenza, colds, upset stomach, gas, arthritis, sinusitis and fungus infections. Creosote also has anti-microbial properties, making it a useful first aid for cuts and scrapes (Elgersma & Nevarez 2000). Aloe vera is also very beneficial plant. The succulent leaves are used as a soothing, astringent, and healing poultice for skin diseases, wounds, burns and eye afflictions, and as a potion for various internal ailments (Morton 1961, 311). We combined creosote with aloe vera and mixed it with our solidifying element, petroleum jelly. After infusing the herbal mixture with the petroleum jelly we added a couple of drops of vitamin E for preservation. The salves we made took a couple of times to actually get right. Once we got it right though it was easy to actually spot the difference between the blended salve mixture and the unblended salve mixture. The consistency of the blended salve was much more different and had a thicker and consistent color within it. What is important to note of the entire saga of trying to make salves is that one must always take note of the ratios of liquid and petroleum jelly and also

that it takes time but when you get it right you actually are able to see the difference. Many people at El Rio seemed as though they liked the idea of making their own salve and reacted positively to sampling it. People seemed to enjoy the moisturizing feeling and the idea that it would actually help for some of their pains. The people also showed an enthusiasm for going home and trying to make some for themselves.

One may sometimes overlook the other aspect of salves that has an equally important part of healing, this being touch and massage. Curanderos all have different specialty and ways of healing. The kind of curanderos that specializes in touch and massage are called *Sobadoras* (Avila 2000, 71). Avila (2000) explains that all human beings require intimate contact to both relax and sooth but most importantly to touch the soul. This touch helps draw forth the soul to begin the healing process both emotionally and physically (71). Indigenous medicine being holistic, takes into account the mind, body and spirit. These three components have a very important part in healing. Massage and touch allows for closeness between the healer and the afflicted person. The touch allows the mind to open up and release some of the stress and worry within a person's psyche. Then the soul, with the help of touch and massage, is drawn forth and helps with the overall healing of a person's body. When all three things, mind, body, soul, are working in accord with one another this allows for a total overall healing of a person. Salves allow for this touch to take place. Whether it is ones own self doing the massaging or a healer using salves to massage, this touch and comfort is important. It is also allowing the afflicted to be a part of their own healing process, which is very empowering and something of a core belief in Indigenous medicine. That is one of the differences between Indigenous and western medicine.

Salves are a mainstay in Indigenous medicine but they are also somewhat present in western medicine as well. Looking at medicine nowadays the kind of salves that are mostly used

are things that mostly help with aches and pains such as icy hot or other salves that have a cooling or heating effect. But is that really seen as medicine by mainstream western society?

David Peat states that the problem is that medicine is an English word, not a word in Native language. Indigenous science and worldview are “enfolded” within the language spoken by the people. Medicine is an attempt to convey within a single word a whole spectrum of concepts that belong to a profoundly different vision of reality and the human body (Peat 1994, 128).

Western medicine believes in cures and fixes while Indigenous medicines have a much more holistic approach. It is not necessarily a quick fix but a healing that takes time, patience and an understanding of ones body. Capturing the essence of Indigenous medicine is impossible if we only look at it through our comfortable logic of “either/or” (Peat 1994, 128). This means that Western medicine believes you are either fixed or you are not, there is no in-between.

Western medicine often seeks to create a dichotomy out of medicine, characterizing medical systems as either biomedical scientific medicine or “alternative” medicine. In Sowell’s (2004) article *Quacks and Doctors: The Construction of Biomedical Authority in Mexico* he states that physicians associated with the emerging biomedical paradigm created professional communities that desired the exclusive privilege of practicing medicine, as well as the legal authority and power associated with state and federal institutions (25). What this essentially did was marginalize healers who used traditional medicine. Physicians of a biomedical paradigm used rules, sanitary codes, standardization and medical institutions to accomplish this. Since then, traditional medicine has been deemed irrelevant or “folksy.” Often times, when traditional medicine is utilized in western medicine it is called “alternative” medicine. This alternative medicine is often times not practiced by actual healers who have been taught the practice by elders but by people who want to profit off of people’s desire for new medicine. These healers often times do not understand some of the components of healing. In class on February 28, Dr.

Gonzales mentioned that a lot of traditional herbs, medicines and practices are commercialized and essentially taken away from the community. Barsh (2001) explains that traditional healers are custodians of local knowledge. They believe that knowledge is socially created, through interaction among humans and non humans; that individuals are obliged to put their knowledge to use unselfishly; and that teachers of knowledge possess an inalienable responsibility to ensure its proper use (153). This differs dramatically from western medicine that may at times seem much more interested in profit and patents. It is important to note though, that people are seeking out this type of alternative healing and are sometimes willing to pay these extraordinary prices. It is important to learn the precious knowledge of healing and herbs and share it amongst the community. This essentially will give people the power to control their own health and own bodies in a way western medicine does not allow. That is the difference between Indigenous and western medicine and it is as easy as learning how to make a simple salve.

III. Cataplasmas *by Amy Mellor*

Cataplasmas are a category of traditional remedies that denote a direct external application of a medicinal material. Translated directly as cataplasm in English, or nepotoniloni in Nahuatl (Simeon 1977, 333), cataplasma can describe either a poultice or plaster. “In Mayan medicine poultices and plasters are used to warm and stimulate points on the body and treat surface pain” (Garcia, Sierra and Pereira 1999, 129). They can be made using plants, animal fats, or clays, making them a category of *remedios* being of “animal, vegetable, or mineral origin” (Garcia, Sierra and Pereira 1999, 129.). In researching different cataplasmas, the most common ingredients described were vegetables, fruits, herbs, and clays. In regards to the hot-cold principles of traditional medicine discussed in class, depending on the preparation, the plants use, and the ailment to be treated, poultices and plasters can be used as either hot or cold medicines.

There are countless specific preparations for poultices and plasters that come from variations of a handful of basic recipes. For example, Michael Moore (1999) describes just three general poultice recipes in his guide to southwest herbs, *Los Remedios*, that can be applied to the 172 herbs in the book. The first method is very simple: a fresh herb is moistened, chopped and crushed with a mortar and pestle or a food processor, then applied to the skin and covered with a moist cloth. In the second method, the ground herb is mixed in a 1:1 ratio with flour, comfrey root powder, or cornmeal. Then, it is mixed with hot water “to give it the consistency of prepared mustard” and sandwiched between two layers of gauze or muslin cloth which is applied to the affected area and covered with a warmly moistened towel (which can be reheated repeatedly as it cools). The third method is similar to the second method except instead of using water and dry herbs, a strong herbal tea or a previously prepared tincture is added to the flour, comfrey root powder, or cornmeal medium (Moore 1990, 8). These are written as universal recipes to be used when a poultice preparation is mentioned for an herb in the text.

In *Infusions of Healing*, the instructions for poultices are fairly similar to those in *Los Remedios* but vary slightly. Joie Davidow (1999) writes that poultices can be made by adding salt or vinegar to the mashed fresh leaves of a medicinal plant (226). This method, and Moore’s (1990) corresponding first method, do not add any external heat, allowing cool plants to retain their cool properties and be used to remove heat from the body as needed. Moore’s second method also corresponds to one described by Davidow (1999) but does not use a flour medium; instead, it is just a paste of dry herbs, ground or powdered, and with warm water. She mentions that the paste can be spread on cloth and applied directly to the skin, in addition to the gauze sandwich method (226). Other common poultices are warmed not by water but the recipe will call for heating the plant in olive oil before placing on the skin, sometimes with gauze or cloth. In some cases, foods and succulents (i.e. *sávilá*) are neither mashed nor heated but just cut and

put directly on the body.

Different plants can be chosen carefully to make specific poultices, several of which Davidow (1999) mentions throughout her text. A yerba mansa leaf poultice promotes healing of wounds (289), whereas a poultice of the root can be put on mouth sores (269) or the root simmered in olive oil can be applied warm to relieve hemorrhoids (282). Ground *pirul* (pepper tree) leaves are mixed with warm cooking oil and made into a poultice for backache (279). Plantain, or *lantén*, leaves can be mashed and put on sore feet (283). Skin irritations or rashes can be soothed by the poultices made from the mashed ripe fruit of avocado or papaya, directly applied to the skin to decrease inflammation (287).

Clearly, foods make up a large category of cataplasma ingredients. Several websites have reproduced these simple recipes for home use. One describes how boiled potatoes can be mashed and wrapped in linen and applied for ten to fifteen minutes to the chest for cough, the abdomen for cysts, or to sore neck, shoulders or back, and how boiled flaxseeds placed into a cloth bag can be applied for five minutes to mature sties and boils, and areas affected by bronchitis and sinus inflammation (Remedios Populares 2006).

Davidow (1999) also describes the use of southwest succulents. There are instances where the inside part of cacti can be applied directly to different ailments; for example, nopal can relieve inflammation of gums, canker or cold sores, sooth burns, or can take the infection out of abscesses (293). *Sávila* (aloe vera) can also be used to address sore areas.

Sávila is a dynamic plant in regards to the hot-cold characterization. A cool watery plant by nature, a freshly cut piece is “soothing, promotes healing, and is mildly antibacterial” (Davidow 1999, 289) and can be applied to wounds, abrasions, cuts, scratches, skin irritations and rashes. *Sávila* speeds healing of burns and the watery qualities help prevent drying of the burned area; similarly, it can soothe and improve healing of sunburn (Davidow 1999, 294).

Although it is a cool plant, Dr. Gonzales explained in class on February 21 that when it is heated, *sávila* becomes neutral and thus can take the cold out of the afflicted area it is applied to. We experienced how a cut piece of *sávila* can be cooked in olive oil and when it has cooled down enough to touch, the heated pulp can sooth sore areas of the body, such as the neck, shoulders, back, or injured legs .

Although many of the poultice recipes call for heating of the water or herbs to be used, many other poultices can be make use of a plant's cold properties. At the temples, "poultices of cool-natured plants are often applied to refresh the head and ease the pain of some types of headache" (Garcia, Sierra and Pereira 1999, 129), like one of geranium leaves mashed with vinegar and salt (Davidow 1999, 273). Headaches can be addressed with sliced potatoes sprinkled with vinegar placed to the forehead (Davidow 1999, 263); half of a lemon or lime can do the same (Gonzales 2007b). Also, according to Davidow (1999), a lemon cut in half can stop bleeding as it is astringent and antiseptic (289) or can be an astringent to bee stings (292). She also recalls a "classic remedy" which involves mashed, boiled tomatoes held to the soles of the feet to draw out a fever (262).

The subtle difference between poultice and plaster under the category of cataplasma is that a plaster implies that the prepared medicine is plastered on the skin. Moore's (1990) herb-flour-water poultice or Davidow's (1999) ground herb-water paste are good examples. At times it has been difficult to distinguish whether a recipe is describing a poultice or a plaster; oftentimes plasters are grouped under poultices. Either way, they are very similar and both involve the topical contact with medicinal material.

Clay is a common plaster that can either be hot or cold. Clay is briefly referenced in the *Wind in the Blood* reading, saying that red clay is used for hot conditions of the skin and insect bites in Mayan medicine (Garcia, Sierra and Pereira 1999, 95). There is a lot of information

praising use of clay medicinally, widely available outside of the context of a “particular culturally relevant system” (Arizaga 2004, 211). Lipschutz-Robinson’s (n.d.) article on medicinal clay draws on a wide variety of books, websites, and articles, including scientific basis and personal accounts as well as cultural ties and experience, and overall notes dozens of internal and external medicinal clay uses (Lipschutz-Robinson n.d.). In its most basic form, dry clay is mixed with water in equal parts until it takes on a smooth paste consistency, adding more clay or water if needed. An herbal tea can be used to hydrate the clay, or herbs can be mixed in to the clay (Mena n.d.). While any herbs used will have additional medicinal purposes, clay itself is noted by many sources to have anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, absorbent/adsorbant, cleansing, antiseptic, calming, and/or healing qualities. It is an inherently beneficial substance that some people even advocate taking internally for long term treatment of more severe ailments and improvement of chronic pains or illnesses.

As a plaster, clay can be applied to acne, ulcers, burns, athlete’s foot, shingles and cold sores as well as insect bites and stings, poison oak, poison ivy and rashes (Dr. Gonzales in conversation; Mena n.d.; Remedios Populares 2006; Lipschutz-Robinson 2011). Using hot water, the warm clay can help relieve sore or inflamed areas. During a conversation, Dr. Gonzales explained that cold clay can be used alternating with warm clay applications for areas inflicted with chronic pain. For cold conditions like the postpartum period, menstruation, menopause and miscarriage, the uterus area should be kept warm (Gonzales 2007a). A cold womb could make it difficult for a mother to get pregnant again (Davidow 1999, 306) and one way to keep the area warm is with a plaster of warm clay, covered to retain the warmth and bring heat back to the womb area. Clay could also be applied to watery cysts or lumps on the breasts. I found that covering the warm clay with a warm, moist towel helped retain the heat and kept the clay from

drying out as quickly. For acne, I enjoyed leaving the warm clay on a pimple to dry completely and then washing it off.

We chose to demonstrate medicinal clay plasters at El Rio because we guessed it would be fun for adults and children to touch and try. Although apparently simple (nothing more than mixing relative quantities of earth and water), the many healing qualities of this clay, the hot and cold principle, and the need for a close relationship to the plants, begin to demonstrate the complexity of these traditional medicines. The hot-cold polarity connects back to the related opposing parts of the Ollin; an physical imbalance of the hot-cold in the body addressed by remedios is parallel to addressing imbalances in our lives using the four directions, the four elements. The clay and the other cataplasmas, along with the simple syrups and pomadas, are basic but the apparent simplicity of these physical medicines, as removed from their original cultural context, mask the dynamic nature of *curanderismo* and the intricate connections of holistic traditional medicine.

Conclusion

At El Rio, it would have been near impossible to convey the complexities of traditional medicine in the brief time span we had. We had to capture and maintain the attention of any given passerby within those brief moments. The situation almost forced us to compromise that which we learned throughout the course about the complex nature of local medicinal knowledge, deep understanding and connection with plants, and cultural context of holistic healing, in order to make basic knowledge accessible to the public . However, in those brief moments, it was enough for us to open the door to the idea that people can trust plants in the healing pains and illnesses. We were able to say "here is an example which you can touch and feel or taste and experience, and it's simple enough that you can try at home."

The visitors to our table had different reactions to the remedies we offered them to sample. Many people were amazed at how simple of a thing, such as clay, can help in combating pain and illness. Others were more apprehensive to try some concoction of plants and roots that a bunch of amateurs turned into a syrup. Some, when they realized that it was as simple as knowing what plants are best to take for any given illness, tried the syrup and were surprised. Other people were quite taken aback by how simple it is to make a salve on their own, that it was just a matter of finding the ingredients and mixing them in the right way. Some people even shared with us that their mothers or their grandmothers had used some type of traditional medicine to cure certain ailments. Like De La Portilla (2008) notes, “Transmittal of plant knowledge by non-healers is often intergenerational and traditional” (98). Surely most of people who shared this with us remembered a special moment in their past during which some form of traditional medicine was involved. Many of the people who came by our table expressed great interest in trying to make the recipes we had made on their own, and eagerly accepted a small recipe packet. It was wonderful to see such a positive reaction and converse with many people who were eager to hear what we had learned.

Perhaps the few words exchanged and the simple recipes we provided was the push that someone needed to plant that garden they have always wanted and fill it with plants that are, indeed, medicine. Perhaps what we did was help a few more people take a critical eye to what mainstream society is calling medicine, and instead let them decide for themselves what medicine is. Traditional medicine allows a person to be a part of their own healing process and that in turn helps empower them. This will undoubtedly help people understand better what it means to heal oneself and give the encouragement to start to truly take care of oneself.

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