

Response to Cabeza de Vaca's Narratives in Regard to Healing Methods and His Role as a Folk Healer as Compared with Three Curanderos (A Position Paper)

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Before Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca's initial expedition of 1527, the first Spaniards had already arrived in Mexico in the year 1519 and were amazed that the Aztecs had acquired such a vast knowledge of medicinal plants. Unfortunately, six year before Cabeza de Vaca's arrival on August 13, 1521, the Spaniards destroyed the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan, also destroying some three thousand distinct medicinal plants utilized by the natives.

Before discussing Cabeza de Vaca's role as a Hispanic curandero, we should first understand who is a curandero. He or she is a folk healer who heals in the material level with herbs, amulets, etc. and/or in the spiritual level using religion, God, saints, prayers, and petitions to heal a patient. The word curandero comes from the word curar which means to heal. The curandero practices the art of folk healing and uses religion and the supernatural. The belief that all healing comes from God makes it religious as does the concept that a curandero can only bring God's will. The belief that certain rituals and practices can effect a certain outcome makes it supernatural. A person can receive a God-given gift or don to become a curandero or the gift can be accomplished through an apprenticeship.

Modern curanderos and well known traditional curanderos of the early 1900's such as Don Pedrito Jaramillo (1829-1907), Teresita (1873-1906), and Niño Fidencio (1898-1938) appear to possess many of the qualities described in Cabeza de Vaca's experiences as a healer. Cabeza de Vaca narrates as follows:

Our method, however was to bless the sick, breathe upon them, recite a Pater Noster and Ave Maria and pray earnestly to God our Lord for recovery . . . We conclude with the sign of the cross. What did the three well-known curanderos, Don Pedrito Jaramillo, Teresita, and Niño Fidencio have in common with Cabeza de Vaca? First, all three curanderos were considered folk saints recognized by the common people but not accepted nor canonized by the Catholic Church. Cabeza de Vaca was considered a folk saint by the Indians since they considered him and his companions "truly children of the sun...a belief that none could die while we remained among them... We all became healers because so many people insisted." Being a folk saint is a rare phenomenon, especially when that person is still alive as in the case of the three curanderos and possibly Cabeza de Vaca. Second, all three traditional curanderos used a series of rituals in order to heal the sick. Don Pedrito would pray, massage the body, and prescribe simple herbal plants, the drinking of water, and the use of mud to rub on the ailment. Niño Fidencio would prescribe herbs, baths, and prayer. Teresita would also prescribe

herbs, baths, prayer, and would use hypnosis. The three curanderos believed that healing occurred through God and that religion played an important role.

Cabeza de Vaca also believed that God would restore the Indian's health as he wrote:

. . . and we all asked God as best as we could to restore their health...and God was so merciful that the following morning they all awakened well and healthy. Religion and faith play an important role in curanderismo or the folk healing process and is based on the patient's faith. Not being of Christian faith, the Indians may not have believed in Cabeza de Vaca's God but they believed in a spiritual being; therefore, the praying and sign of the cross was part of the healing process as it has been for years in curanderismo.

Third, all three curanderos, Don Pedrito Jaramillo, Niño Fidencio, and Teresita were charismatic leaders and healers. Don Pedrito was appointed by the State of Texas to serve as a welfare agent for the people of South Texas during the great drought of 1893 and had hundreds of followers. Niño Fidencio also had a great following and became famous when he healed the President of Mexico, Plutarco Elias Calles and his daughter. Even nowadays, thousands throughout Mexico and the Southwest follow his Fidencista movement. Teresita had a large following of Mayos and Yaquis tribes and her influence in Mexico was so strong that it scared the President of Mexico, Porfirio Diaz, who sent five hundred armed men to exile her. She fled to El Paso, Texas, and her charisma continued in the United States until she died in Clifton, Arizona.

This charisma is also evident in Cabeza de Vaca. His appointment as Narvaez', royal treasurer, by his role in the expedition, and by his powers as a leader and healer amongst the Indians. His charisma was evident in his healings and cures. Fourth, the three famous curanderos believed they had a gift or don from God to heal. They all gave credit to God for their healing gift and prayed including "laying of the hands" on their patients. Cabeza de Vaca also believed he had a don or gift from God to heal the sick and always asked God to restore the Indians' health.

Fifth, the three curanderos performed miracles and possessed extraordinary powers. It is said that Don Pedrito had psychic powers and the ability to detect the unbelievers; there are many stories that he could "read minds". Teresita also had great powers. In one instance, she was traumatized by an attempted rape and began to have seizures; one resulted in a coma appearing that she had withdrawn into death. She was dressed for burial, her hands bound across her chest, candles were lit, and a coffin built. Suddenly, Teresita sat upright as if resuscitating from death.

There are hundreds of accounts of El Niño Fidencio's cures including the ability to make mute men speak and paralytic patients walk.

Cabeza de Vaca also revived a dean man. His account states:

. . . the man who was dead and whom I had healed in their presence had gotten up well and walked and eaten and spoken to them . . . It appears that all three curanderos as well as Cabeza de Vaca cured psychosomatic illnesses considered miracles during their times.

In summary, Cabeza de Vaca could be considered the first curandero or shaman from the old world who healed in the Southwest. This conclusion is based on a comparison of Cabeza de Vaca's healing experience with those of three of the most famous Hispanic curanderos who influenced Mexico and the Southwest. All three traditional folk healers lived and had followers throughout Northern Mexico, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona which covered some of Cabeza de Vaca's route.

The commonalities in the three curanderos and Cabeza de Vaca were that:

- * they all were considered folk saints or saints of the people while they were alive;
- * they all used rituals in healing the sick;
- * they all believed that religion and faith played an important role in their healing;
- * they all were charismatic leaders;
- * they all believed that they had a gift or don from God to heal;
- * they all possessed extraordinary powers and performed miracles.

In order to emphasize the importance of folk or herbal medicine which is part of the curanderismo practice, we should note the historical events after Cabeza de Vaca's expedition.

Sixteen years after Cabeza de Vaca left Mexico City, Martin de la Cruz, an Aztec Indian doctor who was assistant to the head of the School of Santa Cruz Tlaltelolco wrote the first book about medicinal plants in all of the Americas. A student, Juan Badiano, translated the book into Latin.

Martin de la Cruz included two hundred and fifty-one medicinal herbs in his book but no mention was made of three most publicized Mexican drugs which were Peyote, Morning Glory seed *ololiuhque*, and the sacred mushroom *tconanctle*. It does not appear that Cabeza de Vaca used these plants but some of the Indians were using them during Cabeza de Vaca's ten year expedition. This Aztec herbal book impressed the Spaniards by the number of plants classified by the Indians as remedies, since at the time, many Indians were considered uncivilized and backward.

In summary, after comparing Cabeza de Vaca to three of the most influential curanderos who lived and had an influence in Mexico, Texas, and the Southwest, we can conclude that he practiced the rituals of a traditional curandero.

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