

# MAYA MEDICINE

Traditional Healing in Yucatán

**MARIANNA  
APPEL KUNOW**



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**TRADITIONAL HEALING IN YUCATAN**

Marianna Appel Kunow



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ALBUQUERQUE

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# Introduction and Setting

## Introduction

A surprising number of practitioners of traditional Maya medicine are consulted by the townspeople of Pisté, a small town located in the center of the northern half of Mexico's Yucatan peninsula. The curers I have come to know use a variety of indigenous and introduced plants in their practices. They utilize these abundant natural resources along with Western medicine and traditional rituals that include magical elements. My goal in this book is to examine the process of curing from the time the curers begin to acquire their skills, through the administration of treatments. These treatments will be examined in depth. I link the ethnographic present to the past by examining the relationship between current curing practices and their colonial antecedents.

Pisté is not an extraordinarily traditional town. As the town nearest the ruins of Chichén Itzá, it is neither isolated nor removed from acculturative influences. However, the curers practicing in the area share a tradition of plant use and ethnomedicine that is remarkably homogeneous given that not all the curers and not all their teachers are natives of Pisté. There is a body of information on useful and medicinal plants that is known to curing specialists in the region and has been transmitted from one generation to the next since the colonial period. For the purposes of my research, this region not only includes the northern half of the peninsula, centered on the state of Yucatan, but also includes the adjoining states of Campeche and Quintana Roo.

Collecting plants with traditional healers provided me with unusual opportunities to become acquainted with them on a personal level. Contrary to popular notions and scholarly writing on the subject, I found that the traditional healers are quite open in regard to their treatments, practices, and life experiences. Their willingness to share this information with a stranger made this book possible. The curers share a number of personal attributes: natural curiosity, the desire to help others, patience, a good memory, a measure of independence, and religious conviction.

None of the curers I have come to know has become wealthy or famous from their skills. Although the role of the curer may once have been prestigious, this is no longer the case. The attitudes expressed by laymen and the self-perceptions of the curers suggest a high degree of ambiguity concerning the role of the traditional healer. Their medical skills may be acknowledged by some local people, but they are disparaged by others as rustics. Curers may

be suspected of witchcraft and are often vilified by evangelical groups (and some Catholics). Curing in Yucatan is at once deeply spiritual and empirically oriented, addressing problems of the body, spirit, and mind.

In exploring the ways in which curers learn their craft, two basic patterns have emerged: curers either learn voluntarily from elders or they are recruited through revelatory dreams. The men who learned their skills through dreams also established a connection to supernatural beings called *Balams*. These supernaturals communicate with curers through the medium of the *sastuns* (divining stones or crystals) that are their gifts. *Sastuns* and their multiple uses are discussed in depth in chapters 4 and 5.

My data on curing specialties, or components of curing practices, mirror those recorded in various ethnographic studies of the area undertaken with the support of the Carnegie Institute in the 1930s and 1940s (Redfield 1941; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934; Steggerda 1941, 1943). The works of Mary Elmendorf (1976) and Rosita Arvigo (1994) provide more recent points of comparison. Although curers tended to describe an idealized model with different specialists treating different ailments, the reality I encountered was a different matter. There is a tremendous amount of overlap. Individual practices freely combine a number of different components, such as prayer, massage, plant medicine, magical practices, and Western medicine. Plant medicine is the common denominator; however, there is no distinction made between it and plant magic, or between empirical and magical treatments. The curer may act as a doctor, priest, witch, and psychiatrist.

It is difficult to contemplate common treatments without addressing traditional concepts of disease and its cause. The diagnosis and treatment of “culture-bound” diseases such as evil eye, evil winds, *bilis*, and *pasmo* are discussed in chapter 6. I hypothesize that an ideal of mental, physical, and spiritual balance underlies the conceptions of these illnesses and guides their treatment. Imbalances may be rectified by ritual actions or a variety of therapies.

The relationship between the present-day plant names and plant uses I recorded and those found in colonial-period sources demonstrates that the same set of plants has been utilized for at least several centuries by those with specialized knowledge of the local flora. The survival of traditional Yucatecan plant use may be due to the seemingly contradictory cultural conservatism and flexibility of its practitioners. The curers manage simultaneously to maintain their traditions, while incorporating new treatments, practices, and ideas into them. Contemporary Yucatecan curing reflects a unified regional oral tradition that continues to evolve with the passing of time. The past remains closely connected to the present in Yucatan, and my research into the present-day situation of curers and curing provided me with an intriguing backward glimpse into that past.

## The Setting

Had the decision been mine to make, I probably would not have chosen Pisté as my research base. In some respects the town is marginal to both the modern and the traditional worlds of Yucatan. The proximity to the ruins of Chichén Itzá, one of the most visited archaeological sites in Mexico, has been mentioned. Tourists arrive daily in buses and rental cars. However, few of them come to Pisté itself, except to look for cheaper lodgings or food, which may be found on the main road, along with a liquor store that serves as the unofficial bank for the local populace and the tourists, a pharmacy, a post office, and a new public telephone station.

Many roads and paths lead from the scruffy main road into more rural neighborhoods. The houses along the main road and surrounding the plaza are mostly squat concrete structures. The farther one gets from this central zone, the more likely it is for such houses to be replaced by those of the traditional, thatched variety. The poorer of the traditional houses have walls of poles, whereas the more prosperous dwellings have concrete or stacked stone bases.

Much of the population still supports itself to some extent by farming. Pisté is located in the breadbasket, or more accurately, the corn belt, of the peninsula. The majority of older women wear traditional clothing, but many younger women do not. Very few people have European features; many could have served as models for Classic-era sculptors. The present population of Pisté is about 3,500.

The ruins provide service jobs for some of the townspeople, along with a first-hand look at the material culture of wealthy visitors. Televisions are not uncommon. They bring soap operas from Miami into homes and businesses, portraying lifestyles and selling products that are equally seductive and unattainable for most of Pisté's viewers. Many objects I consider mundane, such as metal cooking utensils, must be purchased in Valladolid or Mérida. Beef is available in the small meat market twice a week. School supplies, such as pencils, are scarce and expensive. There are so many children in town that the school maintains a schedule of two shifts per day. A government clinic in Valladolid provides free medical care, but often local people cannot afford to fill the prescriptions they receive there. A satellite clinic in town seems to be open rarely.

Chichén Itzá's massive ruins serve as an inescapable reminder of a vanished past, and people in Pisté are proud of their ancestors. Unexcavated structures and pottery shards appear unexpectedly in the surrounding fields and woods. The old church in the main plaza, whose lintel bears the date 1734, contains ancient carved blocks of stone from pre-Hispanic times and sits across an expanse of concrete from the new, generic concrete church. Everybody loves the new church because it is bigger, although it cannot accommodate all who

wish to attend on important holy days. As in all Mexican towns, the plaza is a gathering place for young and old alike. It is the setting for traditional dances and rituals, which, although unknown in Rome, are seamlessly linked to the Catholic calendar and the activities of the church in Pisté.

The people of Pisté live between the Maya past and the national Mexican present: culturally, symbolically, and geographically. A new highway, a very expensive toll road, passes within a few kilometers of the town, enabling tourists to travel between the capital city of Mérida in the northwestern corner of the peninsula and the sprawling resort of Cancún in the northeast without having to slow down for the countless intervening small towns on the old road. Many younger people commute to jobs in Cancún, traveling the old road in second-class buses. They return to Pisté, and the more traditional lifestyle it offers, on weekends.

My chance meeting with one of these commuters led me to Pisté. Don Tomás, my first Maya friend, works as a custodian of a small Postclassic site in Quintana Roo, but his home is in Pisté. I came to the town after Don Tomás invited me to visit there and learn more about plants. The invitation was made after my first research trip to the state of Quintana Roo to study Yucatecan plant uses with him. At first I found it odd that this very modern commuting trend played such a vital part in my introduction to traditional medicine in Yucatan, but an analogy can be drawn: commuting allows a modified version of traditional life to continue in the small towns and villages of Yucatan, just as the incorporation of nontraditional elements has contributed to the survival of traditional medicine in places like Pisté. In time, Pisté has become beautiful to me.

### **A Methodological Note**

I have established a good working relationship with several traditional healers living in and around Pisté and have conducted six brief research trips there to record information about the ways in which they use local plants. I have changed the names of the curers who made this book possible. Each trip lasted one month or less. I interviewed the curers and recorded information about each plant that was shown to me, including applicable plant names in Maya and Spanish, a description of its habit and blooming season, and its uses, including the method of use and the quantities used in prescriptions. Translations of the interviews are my own (as are all errors in translation). Too few studies include information on how to use a plant for a given complaint. Several curers have suggested to me that a compendium of this information would be of interest to many Yucatecans as a practical guide to self-care. These data appear in appendix A. I collected voucher specimens according to standard herbarium practices, and my collection (178 numbers)

is on deposit at Tulane University's Herbarium. To date, I have executed field sketches of about half of the collection, as the flora of Yucatan has not been thoroughly surveyed and has rarely been illustrated. Thirty-six botanical illustrations are included here. The illustrations are arranged alphabetically according to scientific binomial.

## CHAPTER TWO

## The Yucatecan Sources

Ethnobotany is by nature an interdisciplinary field, and several different kinds of sources provide a context for my research. The sources include ethnographies and ethnohistorical works, as well as ethnobotanical and botanical studies. I have been very fortunate to have at my disposal a number of ethnographic works written about Yucatecan towns that are geographically and culturally close to my research base in Pisté. These works have provided me with a relatively recent reference point for studying traditional plant use in the area.

Robert Redfield and Alfonso Villa Rojas' (1962) work, *Chan Kom: A Maya Village*, is a thorough account of the "mode of life" of a peasant village located some fifteen kilometers from Pisté. The Chan Kom study was one component of a larger research design undertaken by the Carnegie Institution of Washington, the goal of which was to explore ethnological and sociological topics in Yucatan. Chan Kom was selected as an example, or archetype, of a Yucatecan peasant village.

In 1941, Redfield published *Folk Culture of Yucatán*, which includes comparative material gathered in separate studies conducted in four communities on the peninsula: Tusik, Chan Kom, Dzitás, and Mérida. Redfield saw these communities as points lying along a continuum from folk to urban societies. Tusik, an isolated village in Quintana Roo state, was seen as the most culturally homogeneous community, whereas the capital city, Mérida, was the least homogeneous, or most "disorganized," society of the four studied. Chan Kom and Dzitás were the intermediate points. Dzitás, as a larger town located along a railroad line by which influences from the capital arrived, had a society that was more urban, individualized, and secularized than that of Chan Kom. Chan Kom was at that time linked to the main road that passes by the ruins of Chichén Itzá (about two kilometers from Pisté), but only by a rough, unpaved road.

As Irwin Press (1975:12) pointed out in the introduction to his monograph on the town of Pustunich in the Puuc zone of Yucatan, *Tradition and Adaptation: Life in a Modern Yucatan Maya Village*, Chan Kom was a somewhat atypical community in that it had been founded not so many years before the arrival of Redfield and Villa Rojas, and its population was composed of refugees from older villages destroyed during the Caste War.

The same could be said of Pisté, a fact that makes the similarities between

the information recorded by Redfield and Villa Rojas on Chan Kom and my information from Pisté all the more striking. The presence of Americans and other foreigners nearby at Chichén Itzá has also been a factor influencing both communities, perhaps making them even less perfect examples of Redfield's elusive archetypal village. Chan Kom has subsequently been studied to an unusual degree; it is the subject of Redfield's (1950) follow-up study, *A Village that Chose Progress: Chan Kom Revisited*, and the site of Mary Elmendorf's research on the role of peasant women in Yucatec society, which resulted in the publication of *Nine Mayan Women* (Elmendorf 1976).

Theoretical criticisms aside, the broad scope and thorough scholarship of *Chan Kom: A Maya Village* make it a most important resource for me, providing a "snap-shot" of Pisté's neighbors as they lived sixty-two years ago. Redfield and Villa Rojas' information concerning the division of labor, agricultural rituals and ceremonies, and the medicine of the village have been particularly helpful. Their study provided me with the linguistic leads that guided my insight into the range of curing specialties and specialists practicing in and around Pisté.

At times, the "ethnographic present" described in *Chan Kom* seems enviably rich in Maya traditions compared to the data I recorded in Pisté, although I subscribe to Press' theory that Yucatecan society is capable of adjusting to change and progress and will continue to retain traditional elements that contribute to modern life.

Redfield's (1941) analysis of similarities and differences among the communities of Tusik, Chan Kom, Dzitás, and Mérida in *The Folk Culture of Yucatan* gives a broader perspective on the traditions of the peninsula and an understanding of its different zones. The chapters concerning the decline of the Maya gods and interrelationships between medicine and magic were most helpful to this research. Villa Rojas' fieldwork in Tusik, synthesized by Redfield in *The Folk Culture of Yucatan*, is also the basis of his later monograph, *The Maya of East Central Quintana Roo* (Villa Rojas 1945), which concerns the village of Tusik and the Santa Cruz Maya subtribe of X-Cacal.

Morris Steggerda, another Carnegie Institution scholar, worked in northeastern Yucatan at roughly the same time as Redfield and Villa Rojas. His original research interest was in the anthropometry of the Yucatecan Maya, but he subsequently published *Maya Indians of Yucatan*, an ethnography of the town of Pisté. Pisté was selected because of its proximity to the Carnegie Institution's facilities at Chichén Itzá. The historical background and demographics of the town are useful to understanding the social context of Pisté. Steggerda's description of the seasonal round of *milpa* (slash-and-burn agricultural field used for growing corn, beans, and other crops) farming, which remains the economic backbone of the community, provides an ecological context. He also includes data concerning nonutilitarian



plant use and conceptions of disease.

Originally written as one of six appendices to *Maya Indians of Yucatan*, Steggerda published “Some Ethnological Data Concerning One Hundred Yucatecan Plants” in 1943. That study was based on a collection of voucher specimens made primarily in Pisté. His concern is botanical, rather than cultural, and he writes rather disparagingly about traditional medicine.

Robert Redfield’s wife, Margaret Park Redfield, accompanied Redfield to Yucatan. During her stay in the town of Dzitás, she and her husband collaborated on a monograph called *Disease and its Cure in Dzitás* (Redfield and Redfield 1940), which includes case histories tracing the course of several incidents of disease through the stages of diagnosis, treatment, and resolution. This brief volume describes the practices of several curers in Dzitás and their clientele.

Elmendorf’s (1976) work, *Nine Mayan Women*, attempts an in-depth look at the lives of a small number of Maya women through vignettes based upon interviews and personal interpretations of the women’s interrelationships. Elmendorf’s research was guided by Redfield’s theoretical framework. Progress is seen as an inevitable process that offers the women new possibilities at the same time as it erodes traditional society. The author mentions that she chose Chan Kom for her study, after speaking with Villa Rojas, in order to add a feminine dimension to previous anthropological studies of the village. Although the interviews are rather impressionistic, they provide glimpses of the worldview and personal expectations of the women of Chan Kom. One key woman, Luz, is a curer, but Elmendorf does not fully explore her role as such. Elmendorf’s humanistic approach and inclusion of interview materials were helpful to the preparation of my own research.

Rosita Arvigo’s (1994) book, *Sastun*, is more an autobiography than an ethnography, and it is set in Belize rather than in Yucatan. However, *Sastun* recounts the author’s personal experiences as an apprentice to a traditional Maya curer, and as such it provides a valuable point of comparison on several levels. Arvigo obviously loves and respects Don Eligio Pantí, the curer to whom she becomes apprenticed, and her writing about him is refreshing after reading impersonal accounts of what curers do. Arvigo’s attitude toward traditional medicine is worlds away from that of Morris Steggerda; she is somewhat mystical but also has a pragmatic approach toward medicinal plants as effective therapies, and she also explores ways in which the renewable resources of the rainforest may be salvaged.

One more ethnography, set even farther afield in a small town near San Luis Potosí, also influenced my work. Ruth Behar’s (1993) *Translated Woman* is a detailed life history of one woman, Esperanza. It is also a meditation upon the difficulties of understanding and writing about someone from another

culture in a way that does not reduce them to a caricature of themselves. The author reflects on the inequalities between her own life and that of Esperanza, which allow her the luxury of “translating” another person’s life. In this sense, the book is a double portrait of the author and the woman whose life history she writes. Behar’s excellent book addresses many of the concerns I had during the course of my fieldwork and succeeds in allowing the voice of her subject to speak for herself.

Yucatan is a unique place, geographically and culturally apart from the rest of Mexico. Information concerning Yucatecan plants and their uses differs from information about the ethnoflora of other parts of Mexico in terms of both quantity and quality. Perhaps because the Spanish conquest went on for so long in Yucatan, there are few early Spanish colonial works on local plants and their uses compared to existing sources from central Mexico.

From the first days of the colonial era, Spanish writers were fascinated by the advanced medical knowledge of the Aztecs. Books 10 and 11 of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s (1975) famous *General History of the Things of New Spain* is a compilation of medical information described by local doctors and contains many illustrations of plants. Many scholars consider Sahagún to be the first ethnographer in New Spain.

The Badianus manuscript, or *Libellus de Medicinalibus Indorum Herbis* (Emmart 1940; Guerra 1952), is another early colonial-period medical work with botanical illustrations. It was probably written and illustrated by native doctors at the College of Tlatelolco. This hypothesis is borne out by the style of the illustrations, which incorporate Aztec pictographs and so provide visual information about the habitat of the plants described.

King Phillip the Second dispatched Francisco Hernández, a Spanish physician, to Mexico specifically to write about the natural history of the country. Hernández’ *Rerum Medicarum Nova Hispania Thesaurus* (Hernández 1959) was the result of this assignment.

There are no comparable works from Yucatan. Bishop Diego de Landa’s encyclopedic *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* (Landa 1941) contains information about curers and plants but strangely contains no plant illustrations. One edition of Landa’s (1938) *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* includes an appendix with ten *relaciones* written by *encomenderos* of Yucatan between the years 1579–85, and contains plant descriptions.

There are, however, a number of extant Maya texts that contain information about local plants and their uses. The Chilam Balam books, named for towns in which they were found, deal with a range of subjects: medicine, astronomy, calendrics, and history. The Ixil (Latin American Library at Tulane University, Ixil, Chilam Balam de. Ms.), Kaua (Latin American Library at

Tulane University, Kaua, Chilam Balam de. Ms.), Tekax, and Nah (*Manuscritos de Tekax y Nah* 1981) are the most medically oriented of these.<sup>1</sup> The town of Kaua is located only forty kilometers east of Pisté. During the course of my research I was able to compare Maya plant names and plant uses recorded in the Kaua manuscript to those in my collection. I have been able to do so thanks to Dr. Victoria Bricker, who has generously allowed me to work with then unpublished translation of the second volume of the manuscript.

The late-colonial Mena and Sotuta manuscripts (Latin American Library at Tulane University, Mena Ms. and Sotuta Ms.) are written in Maya and are purely medical in content. They contain medical prescriptions for a variety of illnesses. Both works were translated by Ralph Roys, and copies of his translations are in the Latin American Library of Tulane University.

*Yerbas y hechicerías del Yucatán* (Latin American Library at Tulane University) is another colonial-period manuscript in Tulane University's Latin American Library. It is most probably the work of an Italian physician, Ricardo Ossado, alias "el Judío" (The Jew), who lived and worked in Valladolid in the middle of the eighteenth century. Ossado wrote about local plants and their uses, recording most plant names in Maya.

*Yerbas y hechicerías*, the Chilam Balam books, and the Maya medical works may all be seen as compendiums or editions of earlier information. *Yerbas y hechicerías* seems to have been the basis for a whole complex of later books on the subject of Yucatecan medicine and plant use, including Benjamin Cuevas' (1913) *Plantas medicinales de Yucatán y guía médica práctica doméstica* and Joaquín and Juan Dondé's (1907) *Apuntes sobre las plantas de Yucatán*. The most recent work relating to *Yerbas y hechicerías* is Maximino Martínez' (1933) *Las plantas medicinales de México*. This work is composed of four separate parts. The first section of the book deals with scientifically identified plants whose properties have been tested, the second deals with scientifically identified plants with untested properties, the third contains unidentified plants, and the fourth is a version of Ossado's work.

Ralph Roys' (1931) work, *The Ethno-Botany of the Maya*, is a compilation of colonial Maya and Spanish works, including the Mena and Sotuta manuscripts (Latin American Library at Tulane University, Mena Ms. and Sotuta Ms.), as well as the Chilam Balam books from Ixil (Latin American Library at Tulane University, Ixil, Chilam Balam de. Ms.), Tekax, Nah (*Manuscritos de*

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1. For a discussion of the Chilam Balam books as a group see Edmonson and Bricker's (1985) "Yucatecan Literature" in the *Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians* and Barrera Vásquez and Rendón's (1948) *El libro de los libros de Chilam Balam*.

*Tekax y Nah* 1981), and the first part of the Kaua manuscript (Latin American Library at Tulane University, Kaua, Chilam Balam de. Ms.). Roys asked his colleague, the famous botanist Paul Standley, to identify the plants mentioned in the colonial manuscripts. Steggerda's (1943) study, "Some Ethnological Data Concerning One Hundred Yucatecan Plants," compares twentieth-century plant uses to those in Roys' *The Ethno-Botany of the Maya*, and so initiated a research strategy that I have continued here.

Standley's work on the flora of Mexico includes *Trees and Shrubs of Mexico* (1920–26) and *Flora of Yucatan* (1930). The last-mentioned book was the result of Standley's reorganization of a number of different early collections of Yucatecan flora, including the specimens of Millspaugh, Gaumer, Valdez, and Greenman.

Rosa Mendieta and Silvia del Amo's (1981) *Plantas medicinales del estado de Yucatán* is a catalog of regional flora. The plants mentioned are those that appear in a number of different sources, including Martínez (1933), *Yerbas y hechicerías* (ca. 1750), Roys (1931), and Standley (1930). The catalog provides common names and uses for the plants and is arranged according to scientific name. It also has some illustrations.

Beatrice Roeder's (1988) work, *Chicano Folk Medicine from Los Angeles*, is oriented toward improving the medical care of that city's Hispanic population by examining culturally salient beliefs concerning illness and disease causation. Interviews with Mexican Americans reveal the use of plants as both medicine and preventive agents. An excellent appendix provides historical and modern information on medicinals.

Finally, Dennis Breedlove and Robert Laughlin's (1993) work, *The Flowering of Man: A Tzotzil Botany of Zinacantán*, expands the field of ethnobotany to include cultural materials such as stories and poems that demonstrate the range of human-plant interaction in this highland community. The book contains excellent botanical illustrations, as well as drawings of articles of Zinacantán's material culture.

In general, the focus of these sources is on the plants rather than on the curers. I hope that the present work will expand that focus to include the people who continue the oral traditions of Yucatecan curing and who know the most about the medicinal and useful plants in their environment. Examined as a whole, the manuscripts and books discussed here demonstrate a sustained interest in the plants of the peninsula since the beginning of the colonial period and the renewal of that interest today.

## CHAPTER THREE

## Portraits of the Curers

I thought it would be easy to write about the curers of Yucatan, some of whom I have known and worked with for a period of five years. This group of individuals welcomed me into their culture, lives, and in some cases, into their families. They have trusted me to “do it right” with this “book” about traditional curing in Yucatan and a few of the people who practice it, and I have struggled with the burden of this honor. Although a comparatively large amount of data has been compiled describing the behavior of Maya curers within ritual contexts in various parts of the Maya world, very little has been written about the curers themselves. Was there any common thread, some shared personality traits or life experiences that tied these individuals to each other? Or set them apart from the other members of their society? Perhaps the most interesting aspect of my research experience has been the nonissue of my entrance into friendships with these traditional practitioners.

Throughout the course of this research, I have continued to reflect on just why I have been accepted into what has been generally thought of as exclusive or restricted cultural territory. I feel both fortunate and grateful, although I cannot say exactly why I have been allowed into this garden. Maya friends shrug and say it was my destiny to come to them in Yucatan. Perhaps it had something to do with my being an artist. People in Yucatan seemed to respect this skill and instantly related to and approved of my plan to use it to illustrate “their” plants. But having been the recipient of so much hospitality over the years, I am more inclined to say that the larger answer more likely lies within the collective “personality” or “temperament” of Yucatecan Maya people themselves, rather than with me. I believe that the people I have gotten to know would have been as accepting and generous with anyone who approached them with a genuine interest in their culture, a bit of language skill, and a nonaggressive attitude.

One could interject into this Apollonian interpretation that associating with a rich foreigner would probably be seen by those within the society as an opportunity for potential rewards in terms of both status and money. This is undeniably true, although I believe that they were supplementary, rather than primary, reasons for my acceptance. Whatever the reasons, I have gained as much emotionally as intellectually from the experience. In *Translated Woman*, Behar (1993:271) pointed out that “any ethnographic representation . . . includes a self-representation.” I would add that this activity also implies a self-examination.

The experience of reading *Translated Woman* was an epiphany for me for several reasons. I knew many things that I did not want my work to be modeled after, pitfalls that I wanted to avoid, but this was a long way from having a positive course plotted for my research. I was encouraged to read something where I felt that the author had sensitively examined and grappled with many of the same issues that have intrigued me during the course of my research. Specifically, Behar's work addressed the ways in which issues of class and race can intercept cross-cultural understanding and also the position of privilege from which writers of ethnographies/life histories speak. Although not rich by the standards of my own country, I struggled with the role of Rich Gringa Student in which I found myself cast over and over in Yucatan. I was uncomfortable but fully aware that the research presented here began serendipitously precisely because I had had the luxury of taking a vacation to snorkel and dive in the warm waters of the Caribbean. Just how unimaginable these circumstances were to most Yucatecan Mayas became as clear and crystalline as the sea I had come to visit.

I hope that this book, which is the result of an interdisciplinary graduate experience, will reflect the various methods and techniques of both the sciences and the humanities, from which I have drawn freely during the course of the field research and have hoped to integrate herein. It is easier to deal empirically with plants than people. These "portraits," then, will be the most narrative section of this work. While writing them, the sensation of being a betrayer of confidences, an abuser of friendships, has descended upon me at intervals. I try to balance my guilt with the positive hope expressed by many of the following people that it would be good for non-Mayas to know more about Maya curing and the people who do it. I hope to live up to their expectations of me. And I hope that their voices, although "translated" across borders of both language and culture, will be audible throughout this work over the "interference" of the author's voice. I will have the responsibility of (re)translating these words when reading this to the people portrayed here.

### **Don Tomás**

Don Tomás was my first Maya friend. I met him the summer before I started graduate school at his place of work, a small, leafy, Postclassic archaeological site in Quintana Roo state filled with crumbly ruins and birdsong where he works for Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) as a *guardian* (custodian). He is an unusually open person (by the standards of any culture that I can imagine), and I owe my subsequent entry into the world of curing in Yucatan, and indeed into the Maya world, to him.

During that first visit, as he showed my husband and me around the archaeological site the day after a tropical storm, Don Tomás rattled off information

on seemingly every plant we passed. He must have approved of my interest, because at the end of the day he invited me to return to learn more about plants from him. My mind had caught fire, with Don Tomás' knowledge of local plants and the sight of a charred bundle left in a tree (an offering to the spirits of the wild game animals left by some hopeful hunter) making me feel a living connection to traditional ways about which I knew nothing. I only knew that I had to learn more about them.

Whether Don Tomás really thought I would come back or not I do not know. He never received the letter announcing my impending arrival during the following summer (of 1991). I remember standing alone in the middle of the plants he was watering on the first day of that second trip, foolishly reading aloud a copy of the missing letter stating my earnest desire to take him up on his most gracious offer to teach me and hoping that he had meant it after all and had not changed his mind.

Don Tomás did not initially seem to remember me until I identified myself as the gringa who had showed up after the *chubasco* Diana (tropical rainstorm Diana). I knew that I felt and looked ridiculous standing there reading from my letter, but he did not laugh. My lessons about the plants of Yucatan started that day. He did not want to accept the small salary that my advisors had suggested would be appropriate. By the end of this trip, Don Tomás had invited me to visit "next time" at his village, Pisté, in Yucatan state, so that I could meet other, older people who, he insisted, knew more about traditional plant use than he did. Over the next few visits Don Tomás introduced me to other curers, and Pisté became the main site for my research.

So, how to describe this most important gatekeeper? Don Tomás is in his early forties, is rather short by Maya standards (*un chaparrito* [a person short in stature, "runt"]), and is almost always smiling. He is straightforward and patient and has always been willing to try to answer my most difficult or ignorant questions on the most arcane subjects. His attitude that "one learns by asking questions" made me feel more comfortable about always asking him endless (and sometimes foolishly repetitive) questions. He has always taken me and my research seriously, but this is not to say that anyone is exempt from Don Tomás' sense of humor.

Don Tomás comes from a long line of curers, or better said, of *h-mens* (Maya curers or shamans). One reason he has put up with me and my questions is that he hopes that our working together will result in making the accomplishments and skills of the Mayas of Yucatan better known to a wider world. I have not deluded him about my doubts about my ability to do so, nor about my own rather marginal position in that world. Notwithstanding, Don Tomás has been both ambassador for his culture and friend during the course of my subsequent trips to Yucatan. This research would not have occurred without



him. He has not only introduced us to his world, but welcomed my husband and me into his family.

There is an especially close tie between Don Tomás and his wife, Mariela, and my husband, Kim, and me. We are age-mates in his large extended family, of which we have essentially become fictive kin. If we could have arranged to be in Yucatan for the baptism of Don Tomás and Mariela's daughter, Marina, I suspect that this link would have been made official by our becoming godparents to the baby. It is with Mariela that I correspond, sending news about our families back and forth across the Gulf of Mexico.

Don Tomás and Mariela also have a son, Juan, who is now a shy but curious teenager who enjoys accompanying his father to the *milpa* and on plant-hunting expeditions. Don Tomás travels back and forth between Pisté and his job in the state of Quintana Roo and so is only able to spend weekends at home with his family. Don Tomás and Mariela's marriage is strong despite this stressful, but not very unusual, arrangement. Indeed, their affectionate relationship, characterized by much joking banter, is perhaps far more unusual than the schedule on which it exists, as many Yucatecans (not just men) find themselves commuting between jobs (often in cities) and home villages.

Perhaps it is unfair to begin Don Tomás' *historia* ("history," "tale," or "story") with a description of my relationship to him, but he is the inspiration and starting point for this work. The story of our meeting is the framing device, à la Scheherazade, that describes the context in which I began this research. It seems logical to my linear Western mind to proceed chronologically. In this way, I will also be writing about the people I have spent the most time with, and know best, first.

Don Tomás might not even call himself a curer, because he treats only members of his own family and friends (and is very modest), but he is extremely knowledgeable about plant medicine, different curing techniques, and Yucatecan agricultural rituals. He dreams of visiting and learning from different curers of the peninsula after his retirement in another fifteen years. Whether this would be for purely personal enrichment or perhaps professional study I am not sure, but his interest in the just-named topics has been lifelong.

Don Tomás was born on a *rancho* (isolated homestead) eight kilometers from Old Chichén Itzá. His family spoke Maya at home, and he learned Spanish when he attended grammar school in the village of Pisté (about a twenty-two-kilometer round-trip journey). Don Tomás stressed the practical advantages of attempting to learn medical skills while living on a *rancho*, but his natural inclination toward the subject also played a part in his decision. Don Tomás, like his mother and father, may have learned about curing out of necessity, but they could also draw on the experience of family members, particularly on his mother's side.



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