



Oaxaca Times

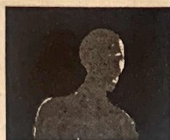
VOLUME XVIII No 195 THE INNER LIFE OF OAXACA • MARCH 2005 www.oaxacatimes.com

Alternate Views



Art by: Victor Hugo Garza

Arts



Beauty in Gloom
Manuel De Cisneros'
Paradise Page 12

Feature



Traditional Medicine
Healing practices old
and new Page 8

Film



THE BIG ONE

Page 13

News



Water Blues
Whats up with the water
Page 7

ENTERTAINMENT * CULTURE * DINING * FINE ARTS * TRAVEL

LEARN SPANISH AT THE ICC: OAXACA'S BEST LANGUAGE SCHOOL

Water Blues ∞∞∞ Why the taps are running dry

By Elizabeth Wu

Susan has just moved into her dream apartment in San Felipe del Agua, a small house with a view and all the trimmings. After an exhausting day of moving boxes in the heat, the only thing on her mind is a cool shower. Unfortunately, the faucet produces nothing but a few futile squeaks. Furious, she seeks out her landlord to demand an explanation. He regards her with a mixture of bewilderment and embarrassment. "But didn't you know," he finally stammers, "this isn't a problem with the house. There are water problems in the entire region." Susan sighs, wondering how she is going to flush her toilet.

Somewhere nearby, Ted, a vacationer who has just endured a 12-hour flight, is checking into his luxury hotel. The first thing he wants to do is freshen-up. As soon as he gets to his room, he begins ... 30 minutes of showering, teeth-brushing and styling later, he feels like a new man. It's amazing what 100 liters of water can do for one.

What these two people have in common is that they have both experienced the disparity of water availability in Oaxaca. In some places, water seems to flow freely, just like in the most modern of countries, while others go days without a single drop. Anyone who stays in town long enough will eventually come to experience the effects of this phenomenon firsthand.

"The big problem with the water isn't that there is no water," explains Miguel Gutierrez, director of ADOSAPACO, the local state-level water agency. "The problem is that we do not have a culture of water-awareness. People are used to having free water - and what they don't pay for, they don't value."

Where does the water come from before it mysteriously appears running through the tap? In Oaxaca city and its municipalities, water is drawn from deep wells, from San Augustin Etla and from the Atoyac River. It is processed and purified, then pumped directly into the city three times a week. *Piperos*, city-funded trucks filled with water, also make rounds, providing water to those needing more for 63 centavos/liter. Places that use a lot of water, such as hotels, sometimes supplement the water they receive from the city with water bought from independent piperos, who bring water from other regions at lower prices.

Certain government projects, such as the 1994 *Libramiento Norte* (see February issue), have put a strain on local water resources. Leaks in city pipes, which date back to 1940, contribute to even more water loss. Most often, however, water shortage has more to do with a lack of storage than a lack of water. Buildings with underground cisterns (which can hold up to 15,000 liters) generally don't have trouble. Many buildings, however, are equipped only with *tinacos*, units that store from 300-3000 liters. The average person uses 150-250 liters a day; two people could easily drain a single, small *tinaco* before the day was out. In an apartment building with many tenants, the tank might need refilling several times a day.

Another factor in the dry-faucet syndrome is that the demand for water has sky-rocketed. When the historic center and many other beautiful old buildings were first built, the architects never imagined how many people would eventually occupy the area. The city has grown tremendously, but the infrastructure has not. Even so, as late as 1990, there was enough water to go around. It has only been during the last decade, as the population grew from around 240,000 to 500,000, that water availability has been stretched thin. According to Gutierrez, the daily demand for water in Oaxaca, (including neighboring municipalities and commuters who work in the center), is now that of approximately 700,000 people.

During the summer as well as in March and December, Oaxaca also hosts an average of 5,000 tourists each month. July is particularly difficult water-wise, because it is a popular time for vacationers, and immediately follows the dry season. Some worry that the climate is changing, causing less rainfall. In the case of a dry rainy season (July-Oct.), the city will be forced to drill new, deeper wells. The only problem with this, Gutierrez says, is that one never knows what kind of water will fill it. Once they dug a deep well, only to find salt water.

The water dilemma leads some locals to resent tourists for their liberal use of water and their ignorance about the issue. Gutierrez says that this is a misunderstanding. "The reason tourists use so much water is because they're used to it. The reason they are used to it is because in their countries, the water they showered with today is the same water they used yesterday. It's recycled." He strongly urges us to follow their example, not in the care-free use of water, but in finding a way to recycle it.

At present, Oaxaca's waste water, including sewage, goes straight back into the river. This carries ecological (and sanitary) implications far beyond the issue of water shortage. To address this, ADOSAPACO has proposed a three-year plan to begin building a water recycling plant, which would include facilities both for storing waste water and for purifying it. Gutierrez feels this is an essential step towards remedying the "water problem." He hopes the public will be supportive of

the plan; the first stage of the project will cost around \$8 million pesos.

Meanwhile, ADOSAPACO is prepar-



ing a campaign to help *Oaxaqueños* become more water-conscious. Besides common-sense conservation measures, such as turning off the tap while brushing one's teeth, the agency recommends a couple of inexpensive products on the market that help to save water.

The "Dual Flush" (\$190) is a device that is easily installed in any toilet, and allows the user to decide whether to dispense a small (three-liter) or a medium (six-liter) flush. *Regaderas* (\$100-200) are fixtures one can install in a tap or shower. They reduce the amount of water flowing through while increasing the pressure.

Gutierrez also has a few tips for those looking for a residence with good access to water. 1. Look for a building with a cistern. 2. Look for a house, if possible, as buildings with many tenants tend to have difficulty providing water for all of them. 3. Look in Colonial Reforma and the very center of town (near the Zocalo); these areas have fewer water problems.

In the end, though, Gutierrez believes everyone is responsible for the water, both the government and the citizens. The reason there is a charge for water, he explains, is to fund maintenance of the system and new developments. He says that because many people have neglected to pay their bills and don't support plans for improvements, the system has deteriorated from lack of maintenance and strain from over-use. He likens the present situation to that of buying a new car. "Say you buy the latest model ... a Jaguar. You drive it for miles and miles, but you never change its oil, check its tires, nor pay for its servicing. There will come a time when the vehicle doesn't run anymore, and when it will be even more expensive to fix."

Ultimately, Gutierrez hopes Oaxaca can develop "una cultura del agua: de pagar, cuidar y recuperar el agua" (a culture of water-awareness: to pay for, conserve and recycle the water). Any delay is likely to be even more costly in the long

Water Quiz

1. True or False? There is the same amount of water on Earth today as there was three billion years ago.
2. ___ percent of the Earth's water is suitable for human use.
A: 50% B: 25% C: 10% D: 1%
3. ___ percent of a human being is water. A: 80% B: 66% C: 44% D: 22%
4. ___ percent of the human brain is water. A: 75% B: 50% C: 35% D: 10%

5. How long could you survive without water?
6. Taking a bath.
7. Taking a shower.
8. Washing a load of clothes.
9. Flushing a toilet.
10. Watering the garden (liters/minute)

Answers: 1. T 2. D 3. B 4. A 5. A week
liters 9. 5-15 liters 10. 15 liters per min
6. 100-200 liters 7. 30-100 liters 8. 107

Traditional Indigenous Medicine

Healing practices old and new

By Rafel Bucio

Rolando Vásquez Olivera is a curandero, a healer. He practices the traditional Zapotec Uechicha'a (Weh-chee-shah), which means massage or Ueyooxa'a (Weh-shoo-shah), which means to restore. It is a specific technique, based on massaging certain parts of the body to heal bones, tendons and muscles. Rolando also uses this technique to heal other forms of suffering, especially those related to emotional imbalances. He learned these practices from his mother and from other healers.

Olivera discovered his path as a healer late in life and now regrets not having taken full advantage of his mother's knowledge. He

remembers much of what he saw as a child, but as a youngster he never thought he would also become a healer. Although the ability to heal may be inherited, the practice requires (as in many spiritual traditions) a feeling of having been chosen to serve in this manner. Sometimes the sign comes after recovering from a serious disease or accident. Other times spirits tell the person to devote his or her life to healing. In Rolando's case, although his mother

was a healer, he found his calling after returning from the USA, due to an accident at work. When he finally recovered, he found he had not only regained his health, but had also rediscovered his roots as a healer: he knew it was time to serve.

Olivera treats physical and emotional illness with his hands, herbal remedies, massages, *temascal* (a steam treatment) and energetic harmonization. In order to diagnose, he performs a physical examination and initiates spiritual communication. He explains, "It is not the healer who cures; a healer can't be that pretentious. He's just the liaison between the Supreme Being and the patient, who, indeed, cures himself." Olivera believes that the spirit resides in the backbone. He attempts to communicate with this spirit to discover the origin of the patient's condition.

For many, this practice might seem superstitious, charlatanic, or simply a major con; many would call it impossible to equate such methods with modern medicine. However, Olivera's ways of healing, so long as they are sincere, do qualify as legitimate in the strict definition of the word. Medicine, as defined by the dictionary, is the science of preservation of health and the treatment of disease for the purpose of cure. It is also defined as a healing art. There is not one single science nor one single medicine; different practices aimed at preserving health, curing disease and improving life have existed since the beginning of time.

To the eye of an observer who was completely unfamiliar with any medical practice, (an alien, for instance, or a child),

al, white-coat, allopathic medicine, commonly referred to as "scientific" or "modern" medicine. The latter two terms are imprecise and misleading: first, there are different forms of science based on distinct rationalities; second, the idea of modernity implying evolution or development is applicable to many forms of practice. Through different roads, at different paces, all forms of knowledge evolve. "Modern" is a word that implies exclusivity: cutting-edge technologies which bury all other practices in the dust of time. The term traditional is more inclusive; it preserves the idea of ancient wisdom without seeming to debunk all other forms of healing.

The difference in tone between these words originates in the different attitudes towards health,

illness, healing and life in general. Allopathic medicine focuses on the symptoms of illness, of the effects, without having consideration for emotional, spiritual and social influences as an integral part of the source of sickness and therefore the process of recovering. The psychological side has been reduced, in allopathic medicine, to the study and treatment of behavioral and cognitive disorders routinely treated with chemicals as if it were a purely physical imbalance. Traditional medicine, on the other hand, seeks holistic remedies, and considers human beings as completely as possible, in their biological, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. It generally regards "disease" as a blockage or disharmony at one of these levels, and holds that in order to heal or cure, all sides must be considered.

The mystical frame from which traditional medicine normally approaches its practice conflicts with the rational arguments of institutional medicine. The rejection of any information that comes from unseen sources and the disbelief of divine intervention in allopathic procedures seem to make the two approaches impossible to reconcile. In the complex context of a multicultural country such as Mexico, conflicts between the indigenous traditions versus the western methods promoted by the state are evident in the political sphere, in the education system, in the



all the different forms of medicine would likely seem quite similar. Most medical practices diagnose the ailment using different methods and tools- and proceed in consequence -in different ways and with different instruments. A session common to both modern and traditional medicines would include talking, physical examination and administration of various medicines. Despite the general similarities, however, there seems to be an astronomical distance separating the different ideas of what medicine is and ought to be.

Traditional forms of medicine around the world struggle against the institution of what has become in recent times the only "valid" form of medicine. The assumption that there is a "modern, scientific" medicine automatically discredits all other options, labeling them as "old-fashioned and out-dated." The dominant form of medical practice today is the institution-

judicial ambit and of course in the public health system. It is as difficult for an urban dweller who is used to hospitals, blood tests and x-rays to accept that his suffering might be cured with a simple massage as it is for a native of an indigenous community to understand how a pill might cure *susto* (fright.)

The Spanish Conquest tried to erase all cultural traditions that caused interference with the western ways, but the centuries-old knowledge remained alive. Forbidden ceremonies, rituals and other expressions of the indigenous culture were transmitted in secret. When the cultural conquest appeared to have attained complete success, these customs were performed more openly because they were no longer considered a threat to the new culture. The lack of health facilities in the remote areas where many indigenous communities settled also contributed to keeping the ancient traditions of what is now called "Indigenous Medicine" alive. As a matter of fact, that medicine is the only type known and trusted in many of the indigenous communities, because medicine is a part of the way in which their world is understood. The indigenous mind considers human beings a part of the Earth and the universe and thereby considers any kind of suffering, whether physical or emotional, as also connected to the Earth and the universe. For them, the art of healing must involve an awareness of this relationship.

The belief of illness in connection to emotion, spirit and the whole universe leads to treatment on all levels. In this system, solely considering a physical affliction forgets the person, since a person is more than just a collection of organs held together with skin. While institutional medicine generally discards all non-physical aspects of illness, traditional medicine seeks to know as much as possible about the sufferer. It regards physical pain as a symptom of something beyond the sickness, and looks for the real cause behind "dis-ease." For instance, stomach troubles can be caused by anxiety, and breathing difficulties can relate to sorrow. A few pills may alleviate the symptoms temporarily, but if the real cause is not addressed, they are likely to return or

worsen.

Allopathic medicine is not completely unfamiliar with these ideas; psychosomatic illness is an accepted concept - but again the treatment often involves drugs. Even in psychotherapy, a sterile and professional distance must be maintained, which may not allow for the deep release of emotion needed or the personal context (such as may be found in religion) required to facilitate healing. Traditional medicine understands itself as being part of a greater knowledge and accepts other methods when all else seems to fail.

For many, the million-dollar question is whether or not traditional medicine is really effective. Skepticism tells people to believe in what they can perceive. A typical skeptical person might argue that specific symptoms are perceived while spirits are not, but a true skeptic would find his evidence in the recovery of a patient. Traditional forms of medicine have been successfully used for thousands of years. It is true that they are not 100% effective, but neither is allopathic medicine.

Slowly, allopathic medicine is changing its point of view. More than one hundred years ago, psychoanalysis showed that physical pain could be cured through what we now call symbolic treatment rather than by physical intervention. More recently, techniques regarded as "alternative" have gained greater acceptance among white-coat professionals and their clients. The prescription of plants or massage has become more common. Many techniques used by traditional healers have proved "scientific" effectiveness and are considered today part of the allopathic repertoire. Universities and colleges offer degrees in "Naturopathy," which is a long-winded way of referring to traditional methods understood through the logic of institutional medicine. Maybe the spirits have been left



out of those programs, but the idea of the body's capacity to heal itself, when adequate conditions are provided, is completely harmonic with the Human-Nature-Cosmos triad in which indigenous medicine is based.

This rapprochement has had an effect on Mexico's official health policies. As a part of the National Development Plan, a federal guideline for long-term health strategies, traditional healing concepts have been introduced to common practice in the public health institutions, especially those located in indigenous communities. The aim is to offer better attention by understanding each patient's medical needs in context of his culture, background and frame of mind, while preserving old-time traditions.

By accepting the indigenous concepts of health and healing, public health professionals show respect for their patients' different beliefs and are more able to create an empathic link and therefore provide better assistance. Moreover, the introduction of traditional concepts into modern medicine is a consequence of the recognition of their validity and effectiveness. As distant as traditional and institutional practices seem to be, they can perfectly complement each other, and work together to treat each patient as a whole.

As with all healing, the final outcome depends on the person's desire to be healed and the belief he can be healed - in a word, faith. Just as a great amount of faith is required to believe that spirits residing in our spines are responsible for the loss and recovery of health, an equal amount of faith is required to accept surgical treatment for a problem one's doctors are not even sure how to solve.

