

Mayan and Chinese health systems compared



The editors of the *Compas* newsletter came across a study in which traditional Maya medicine was compared with the Chinese medical system. This fascinating study is published in Spanish. Here we present a summary.



Hernan Garcia, Antonio Sierra and Gilberto Balam are a group of medical doctors who have worked for many years with rural health programmes in the Southern part of Mexico. Over time it became obvious to them that rural people in Mexico had very different notions about the cause and treatment of disease than the medical doctors trained in the Western tradition. Initially they felt that these traditional concepts were obstacles to community based health education programmes.

Unfamiliar logic

In the course of their practical work these doctors consistently encountered comments, such as: "My sister was struck by a 'wind' and her face became swollen. As this is not a disease of you doctors, I did not talk about it, and brought her to a traditional healer. There she was cured in a few hours". "My wife is pregnant. She cannot eat the foods recommended by the doctors as they are cold foods". "I can not wash my hands, because I have just come from my work and they are now hot".

On the basis of these and many other statements the doctors realised that there was a consistency in the perception on health and disease among the Mayan rural population. When compared to the West-

ern knowledge system these ideas, which originated in pre-hispanic times, are based on an entirely different logic and structure.

The doctors were interested and decided to take a closer look. They started to work closely with some local healers in the provinces of Yucatan and Campeche. Slowly they discovered that the notions and concepts in the traditional Mayan medical knowledge system formed an integrated and logical whole. It is perceived as fragmented and diffuse by outsiders because of the way individuals present it.

'Camino Real'

Initially the study was very difficult. The doctors used Western bio-medical categories in their attempt to observe and understand the Mayan perception of health. This proved a very difficult exercise. Fortunately, two of the team members were familiar with the Chinese medical tradition. This background gave rise to the idea to base the study on Chinese medical concepts and not on Western ones. Though Chinese and Mayan health concepts are not equivalent, they do show striking similarities. Once they were on this track, the doctors became very enthusiastic. They found that many of the Mayan concepts

could be understood by comparing them Chinese concepts.

Over the course of three years some 40 workshops were held to deepen the understanding of Mayan concepts and practices. The workshops were attended by healers such as herbalists, bonesetters, and midwives. A group of traditional healers who came from the Campeche region and who called themselves *Camino Real*, or 'The Right Way', started to work with the medical doctors. Camino Real has been closely involved in systematising traditional health procedures. In fact, they are the ones who deserve the credit for this work.

As their work developed, the team began to abandon many of its prejudices. They were able to seriously look at concepts that could not be explained by Western bio-medicine, such as 'hot' and 'cold' diseases, and illness due to 'fear', 'shame', 'evil eye', or 'wind'. They also concluded that many of the traditional remedies were indeed effective.

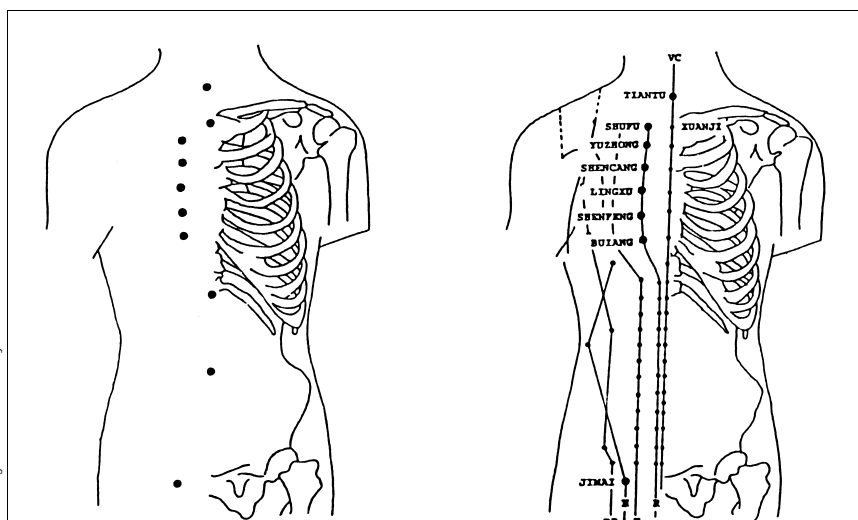
Mayan health perception

In the Maya cosmovision mankind is considered to be a part of a whole. Therefore health is considered to be the result of living in harmony with the laws of society, nature, and the divine world. Disease is considered to be the result of a disturbed balance related to elements such as diet, climate, infection, constitution, emotion, and energies. Many of these factors can make a patient either 'hot' or 'cold'.

The most important external factor that can cause imbalance is 'wind'. This can be caused by natural phenomena or by persons, animals, plants or even supernatural forces. Diagnostic and curative measure are consistent with this concept and include natural, spiritual and social remedies. A central element in these treatments is *ool*, the word for energy or life force in local language.

Traditional specialists

There is no clear demarcation line between the traditional healers and domestic medication. Moreover, most Mayan traditional healers belong to the same social group as their patients. Treatments



Comparison between Mayan (left) and Chinese (right) points for acupuncture on the front of the body

Drawing: Book Medicina Maya Tradicional

are usually carried out within the family, in the community, or with other patients. The traditional healers do not understand disease by focussing on specific organs, nor do they have knowledge of microbiology. They rather interpret diseases as a response of the total body on some constraint in the natural, climatic, social or spiritual domain.

Mayan traditional healers are often specialised in a particular area of health. They can be specialised in spiritual matters, emotional affairs, the use of herbs, bone setting, massage or birth attendance. There are also specialists in 'fear' or in 'greed'. Most traditional healers combine medical, psychological and spiritual activities in some way. There are no schools or formal training centres where traditional healing practices can be learned. Often healers combine their activities with another profession, such as housewife, carpenter, or farmer.

The *J'meen* is the traditional Mayan priest, in charge of maintaining traditions and cohesion within the community. He is especially in charge of agricultural matters. He ensures that the supernatural forces do not affect the *milpas*, the maize fields. In this way he protects the health of the communities that depend on these fields. He performs rituals to ask for rain, to thank the earth, or to clean the fields from bad spirits.

Chinese healing methods

Chinese traditional health emphasises concepts such as the balance between the two basic opposite energies *yin* and *yang*. Another concept is that the human body consists of five internal elements: marrow, or *jing*, blood or *xue*, body fluid, or *jin*, energy, or *qin*, and the mind, or *shen*. Moreover, one part of body can reflect the whole system. Different points on the ear, for example, represent all the organs of body. Diseases manifest themselves as either 'cold', 'hot', 'weak' or 'heavy'.

Chinese medicine has particular function to balance between yin and yang, cold and hot, and weak and heavy. The most important elements of Chinese therapies are the use of herbs, massage, acupuncture, acupressure, and the application of certain warm substances on the skin. Around 1000 medicinal plant species are used by the Chinese doctors.

Acupuncture and acupressure revitalise the energy points and channels in the body. There are zones where the vital energies concentrate, like the navel, the heart, and the head. Chinese massage functions to stimulate the circulation of the blood and lymphatic liquids, to eliminate toxins, and to stimulate the energy points. This results in more relaxed muscle tension, a restored balance between yin and yang, and increased vital energy.

Since the 1950's, traditional Chinese health practices have been institutionalised into the formal education system.

Traditional Mayan healer treats a patient in her home.



Photo: Book: Medicina Maya Tradicional

Becoming a specialist healer may take four to five years of full time study in a college or university.

Mayan practices and Chinese insights

In spite of these differences in formal status, many parallels can be observed between the Mayan and Chinese health systems. In the Chinese concepts, like in Mayan ones, nature is placed above human society. Both systems suggest a profound interconnection between mankind, the spiritual and the natural world. Both believe that if man behaves in conformity with the universal laws of nature, there will be a balance that brings harmony and health. Moreover, both systems attach great importance to the concept of basic life energy: the Mayan vital life force *ool* has its counterpart in the Chinese concept of *chi*.

Though there are many similarities between the two systems, they are not the same. Comparing both systems, it seems that the Chinese system is more pragmatic and objective than the Mayan. Mayan traditional health practices contain more metaphysical elements, combined with rational explanations about the way the natural world functions.

There is, however, a large degree of similarity in aspects relating to philosophy, mythology, religion, astronomy, the basic energy points, the calendar, and the concept of duality, like ying-yang and hot-cold. Both cultures have sacred staple crops: maize for the Maya and rice for the Chinese. In both systems the diagnosis includes climatic, seasonal, geographic, social and emotional factors, while the mere biological and microbiological concepts are unknown. In both systems herbs, massages, medical bandages and punctures are applied. Also procedures are followed to evict 'bad winds' in the Mayan context, or 'perverse energy' in Chinese healing methods.

The energy channels that are ad-

ressed during Chinese massage and acupuncture can be compared with the concept of 'wind' that plays a major role in the Maya tradition of massage and punctures. These winds pass similar channels in the body, and massage and punctures can provide important treatment. Comparing the points for punctures in Mayan traditional therapies has resulted in striking similarities with the Chinese points and energy channels.

The way ahead?

Traditional Mayan medical practices are actually fragmented, often combined with elements of Western medicine. The traditional practices are implemented with many limitations, under ideological pressure and with severe scarcity of resources. They depend on oral culture and lack a homogeneous theory.

The doctors who wrote this book were surprised, however, about the therapeutic richness of the Mayan traditional health practices. In the course of several years of working and studying in the area, they have been able to detect many effective therapies. In some cases local treatments proved more effective than Western remedies. But, in other cases, important mistakes and failures could be observed.

The researchers believe that studies of traditional practices can provide a broad vision of the history and culture of people, can help to understand the rural population and improve communication. A study like this can help to reconstruct the traditional medical concepts and treatments, to build up good co-operation with traditional healers, to learn from them, learn with them, and to confront their knowledge with other positions and approaches.

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