

Native cures for body and spirit

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In the rural communities of the Bolivian Andes local knowledge about health and disease has deep spiritual connotations. The following article shares some experiences from the community of Chorojo, in the Jatun Mayu basin, Cochabamba, Bolivia and comes from Compas-Agruco.

After more than a decade of working with local agroecology knowledge, Agruco concluded that it would not be possible to support sustainable agricultural production without taking the communities' concepts of health and disease into account. In the Andes agriculture, food, health, and cosmovision are parts of a diversified whole. This diversity is based on spirituality, with its roots in the relationship between social and material life.

United with everyone

The World Health Organisation defines health as 'a state of physical, mental and social wellbeing, not simply the absence of a sickness or disease'. In the Andes, however, the concept of health is even broader: there can be no health without culture, food and biodiversity.

Agruco's experiences with local knowledge have allowed us to get a better understanding of the way these concepts of health and disease materialise in the daily lives of the people. Health is based on the principle of 'being united with everyone to live well and better'. This implies being in harmony with the family, the community, the *Pachamama*, or Mother Earth, and all supernatural beings.

As a result good health can be understood as 'the state of harmony between the individual, family, community, society, and nature'. Illness is caused by imbalances in this interrelationship. The health of every member of the community is, therefore, everyone's concern. Because of this the believe exists that 'there can only be healing if everybody helps,

taking into account the three kingdoms: vegetable, animal and mineral'.

Restore the balance

In the local concept 'good and evil', as well as 'health and disease', are seen as opposite elements of the same face. Sickness occurs when these opposites are fractured in their dynamic equilibrium. This can happen due to natural causes or by improper human action. This brings about a change in the attitude of the supernatural energies. Therefore, to regain health one must restore this balance through ceremonies performed for the mountains and hills in the high Andes, which are the sources of vital energy.

In most cases, according to this concept, illness announces itself through dreams before it attacks. That is why people dream that they are walking through muddy waters, in caves, dark places, with a woman -who is the Pachamama herself- or with an aggressive bull. Some birds are also thought to herald disease, such as the sparrow, which shows up with a sad appearance. If ornamental plants, like geraniums, dry up, it means that someone in the house will get sick.

Disease as a person

Disease is considered as a person, for it feeds, accompanies, and makes its home. The disease is familiar, it knows how to catch, get up, and climb, as well as how to get out and escape. The disease can hear like a human person, it sees, passes by, returns or goes away forever. It makes people stay and share the day; it has feelings, emotions and sensitivity. Sometimes

its presence is even considered necessary.

In terms of spiritual kinship, disease is considered as a *compadre*, a godfather or friend, which can visit families at any time. For that reason, when for example a child is sick with anaemia and loses weight, it is wrapped in the intestines of a black sheep and the parents address the disease in the following way: "Compadre, it was you all along, how could you make this little angel sick, compadre?"

Among rural families it is also considered that many illnesses 'walk with company', usually with fevers. In these cases more care is needed during treatment, as well as good general care and love. The illness will leave only when it is asked lovingly to do so. However, there are also cases when it is needed to shout to or insult the illness. Only by feeling the strength and willpower of the healer the illness will let go and escape.

Supernatural causes

Three types of supernatural diseases are identified by the indigenous inhabitants of the Andes. First there are 'diseases due to supernatural punishment'. These diseases are caused by the accumulation of 'sins', for not obeying the norms of the community. It can also be the result of committing incest, murder or adultery. These diseases are brought upon by the autonomous intervention of superhuman entities. They are seen as 'diseases sent by God', that can be healed through offerings and therapeutic rites.

In these communities, guilt is not felt as a personal matter, nor as something



Popular cure for colds includes collecting and crushing a plant, called *Puchun qhora*



The plant mass is mixed with lukewarm boiled water, until it turns green



The child is washed with the green water

between the sinner and the supernatural forces. It also involves the whole community. Therefore, the healing process includes the 'sinner's' confession in the presence of all of the members of the community. If one of the members does not comply with this, the community may be exposed to the consequences like droughts, hail or other plagues. Ritual baths are among the therapies then used to free the community. These take place in locations where two rivers meet, since moving water is necessary in order to purify.

The second type of supernatural diseases are those caused by 'unbalanced' people. This especially refers to negative practices in love life, such as envy or desire for revenge. These diseases are 'sicknesses put upon someone', 'sicknesses due to hurt' or 'diseases sent by humans'.

Loss of spirit

The third type of supernatural disease is known as 'spirit loss'. This soul illness is considered very important by the inhabitants of Chorojo community. Its usual symptoms are headaches, stomach aches, and rashes and itching all over the body. Among children it is manifested through permanent crying during the night.

The villagers attribute this illness to emotions of fear, for example due to stepping on an anthill or the sudden appearance of a snake. Babies or children can also get this disease due to fear, or if they have slept among 'selfish' or 'bad' rocks and trees. They can also catch it if they sleep in a strange place for the first time or if they drink from an unknown water source.

Traditional healers

The one who treats the 'loss of spirit' is the traditional healer, or *coca khawador*, 'he who foretells the future and cures with coca leaves'. He boils the coca leaves, cigars and lye, and bathes the patient with it. The affected person can also be cured with *k'oa*, the burning of native aromatic plants. In order to be cured, the

sick person must go to the place where he was frightened and contracted the disease. Then, with a white handkerchief, or another item that belongs to the sick person, the healer insistently calls upon his soul: 'come back, come back', while mentioning the name of the affected one. Healing takes place once the spirit returns to the sick person.

The healing of diseases is also carried out by another traditional healer, known as *Jampiri*, or 'he who knows the virtues of the native plants'. The healing includes all members of the natural community, in other words, human society and its environment: the mountains, clouds, plants, water and animals.

Not everyone can cure everything. According to the farming families, this 'depends on the hand' of each traditional healer. Andean doctors themselves say that they are not the ones who heal, but that the cure comes from something sacred deep within them. If someone asks them, "how do you heal?", the healer answers: "only the hand knows". For that reason, the best healers never ask to be paid. When the patient asks how much they owe to the healer, the answer is "whatever you feel appropriate".

Medicinal plants

In the Chorojo community more than half of the wild plants have a local medical use. A total of 112 species with medicinal properties have been found. Few plants are used to cure a single illness or disease. The preparation of a mixture of many plants is very common. Some mixtures can strengthen the whole body and are taken as infusions during breakfast. Therefore, they are not only used as medicine but also as a regular drink to prevent disease.

Medicinal plants cannot be gathered at any moment; they have their proper time. The spirits of the plants can only be found in their bodies at certain moments. Moreover they must never be pulled or torn violently; first, one must pray to the guardians of the plants. There are also certain places with particular strength of

its medicinal plants. In Bolivia, for example, the Kallaway region is well known for its abundant biodiversity and its strong healing powers. It is the home of the famous traditional Kallaway physicians.

Working with local knowledge

Jatun Mayu is located 35 kilometres away from the urban centre of the city of Cochabamba. Due to this proximity, there is a great influence from the occidental science besides the traditional practices.

Agruco first developed a participatory methodology in order to rescue and re-value local knowledge related to agroecology. This implied the social interactions between all actors involved. In this process Agruco came to realise that it is extremely important to understand the cosmovision of the communities.

Therefore in 1992 Agruco began its search for an alternative approach based on local knowledge from a cosmovision perspective. Thanks to this initiative an encounter between the knowledge of the farmers and the university trained people working with Agruco has been established. This process has stimulated both the local knowledge systems, which had been eroding, as well as the training programs of the Faculty of Agronomy of the San Simón State University.



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Afterwards the body is rubbed with leaves and wrapped up in warm clothes



The child after the treatment



The ritual of 'cutting the first hair' is performed on the child