



The Flower Body¹

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The *hitebi*, or “traditional healer” in the Yoeme language,² is the person who heals, who has received from God and other protecting entities like virgins and saints the gift of healing. This gift can manifest itself through dreams or experiences in which those entities or the *hitebi*’s relatives confer on him/her the status of healer.

The universe of Yoeme traditional healing is preserved mostly by women, that is, inhabitants of the towns of Cócorit, Tajimaroa, Vicam Estación, and Loma de Guamúchil in Mexico’s northern state of Sonora.

In Yaqui communities at least three different healing traditions co-exist: allopathic medicine, Trinity-based Marianist spiritualism, and traditional healing. However, the latter constitutes a stock of knowledge about the human body, conception, and the cycle of life, passed down for generations, from the pre-Hispanic Yaqui past, the Jesuit Catholic evangelization, and, in some cases, Western biomedical system.

Yaqui theory about the body involves an entire set of notions, concepts, and representations revolving around the person’s image and attributes, gifts from God, from the deer, and from ancestors and relatives, as well as the recompense the individual must offer, expressed in rites.

It is said that in ancient times, bamboo spoke and said, “There will be men and women healers and I am going to help them; I am, so you know me, bamboo; I am going to help the people who have hemorrhages with my work.” This is why they say medicine was born when bamboo spoke.



Yaqui girl.
The deer is the master
of the flower.

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Photos by Cristina Aguilar Rivas.



Yaqui healers have the ability to leave their bodies and cure from afar.

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The same thing happens with certain animals and the products made from them. When God made the world, he also made roosters and hens to sing to the Christ Child. They were all there: basil, common rue, the rooster, the hen, and the healer. That is why when the Christ Child was born, so was the egg.

The body of a Yoeme has a physical foundation, *takaa*, and two God-given properties that animate him/her: one common to all beings called *güepul jiapsi*, or “soul” or “spirit,” and another that is possessed only by certain individuals, the *sea takaa*, or “flower body.” The person’s life and health depend on the characteristics of each of these, and the balance between them and the *takaa*.

In this sense, the *takaa* is the material part; it is the organic, visible and tangible entity with skeletal, nervous, and muscular systems from which fluids and secretions, sounds, smells, and humors emanate, and by definition, is sexualized. Being sexualized is not exclusive to the *takaa*: the sun, *taa’a*, is a man, and behind him is God. The sun is a man and the moon, a woman, that is *jamut*, “mother moon” or *mala mecha* in Yaqui. The sun is the father of all men, and the moon is the mother of all women. The moon is Holy Mary, and the sun is Apo Señor, the Lord.

Man and the sun are strongly connected; even when a man is going to fight, he says with wrath, with hatred, “Tomorrow the sun will come up stronger, blazing strong.” This is what men say when they have problems with other men to show they are stronger than their foes.

The soul or spirit, *güepul jiapsi*, is the air God gave to Man. When he created the world, he made a pair of monkeys out of clay, one white and the other brown; he blew into them and gave them life; in this way, he gave men the spirit that is the Holy Spirit. We have this spirit on the left, in the heart. The *güepul jiapsi* is the strength of the heart; it gives understanding and reason; it can exit during sleep, leaving the body at rest, but when it abandons it definitively, the *takaa* (physical body) dies because it is only a temporary abode for the *güepul jiapsi*. The spirit then continues in an existence that depends to a large extent on the activities and behavior the person had in life: it can go to the glory of God or do penance.

The *sea takaa*, or “flower body” is the dual spirit that only certain individuals such as healers, dancers, and musicians have. When a Yoeme has *sea takaa*, it is said that he/she has two spirits and a gift from God. Whoever does not have this is considered *kia polobe*, a “poor little thing.” This property is manifested corporeally in different ways: it can be through white blotches on the nails,



Pascola mask. Pascola mediates between Jesus and the devil.



Pascola and deer dancer and his wife.

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called *sutum sewa* or "flowers of the spirit"; or it can be when the individual, instead of just having one cowlick on his/her scalp, has two or more, usually on either side of the nape of the neck.

At the same time, the healer find their link to the ancestors who gave them the gift and with their patron saint, Saint Ramos. One of these healers says, "At the age of seven, I started with my nana; she had sores and was lying on a straw mat. I said to her, 'I'm going to cure you.' [She answered] 'No; you're just a little girl. How are you going to cure me?' [Then] she lay down; she covered herself with a little cloth and went to sleep. I went up to her and I could see that a worm that was eating her flesh was sticking out of her sore. I grabbed the worm. She woke up and I said to her, 'Look, nana, what was inside you!' Then I took it to my mama and told her, 'Look, mama, what I took out of nana.' 'Oh, you're making it up!' She didn't believe me, and I said to her, 'You go over there and look at her and you'll see.' She went over to nana and saw that I wasn't lying, so she said to me, 'Maybe you're going to be a healer.'"

Being a healer is something the Creator himself chooses. There is an angel who helps healers. When they see a sick person, suddenly they say, "Take this," and the person gets well. It is as though they received a message about what they have to do. They look at plants in a special way, not like everyone else. Their gift can come through a dream or in the midst of strange events, and that is when these people realize they can heal.

Healers and plants come into contact through a genealogical chain that in most cases is expressed in dreams, and, less frequently, through visions when they are awake (this mostly happens to the elderly). One of them commented once, "I dreamed about seeds with little legs that completely covered my face; they didn't frighten me because I knew they were medicinal plants revealing themselves to me. I almost always had this dream. This also happened to my *mamá grande* [grandmother]; she also had the same dream. After the dream I began healing my children because God had already given me this gift."

Healers also have the ability, and in a certain sense, the obligation, of transmitting that same gift through the act of healing. "I cannot stop being a healer," said one interviewee, "because if I stop, I will die. God has given me this gift, this work of curing people, and if I leave it, then my God will take me. 'If you're not going to work, then, let's go,' he'll say to me, and I don't want to go because I'm very happy with my patients."

They enter into communication both with God and with the plants, like the case of the stone flower, a messenger from God who, they say, aids in deciding to treat or refuse a patient. The Yoeme

healer manipulates the polarities of the body through physical contact, her management of space, prayer, and the invocation of her supernatural helpers, the saints and the Virgin. For her, the human body is inscribed in a hierarchical polarity that creates two axes, one vertical and the other horizontal. Using the navel, *siiku*, as a reference, differentiated values are located: right (*batataza*), up (*jikat*), forward (*bat*), related to the east, or life; on the other side, the left (*micoi*), down (*betukuni*) and behind (*amau*), related to the west, or death. Thus, a healer's altar must face the place where the sun rises because that is where light is born and there is life. It must not face the west because that means death. These positions are related to the way in which people are buried: the head must be facing east, and the feet, west, "because they must walk with the sun, from the time they are born until they die."

When a person recognizes him- or herself as a healer, the saints and virgins, prayers, medicinal plants, incense burner, water, the egg, and the candle light can be replaced by his/her hands. Everything that constitutes the shrine and the altar is found in the body of the healer: the healer is the temple, the center. And for that reason, they say, we must follow the paths of God, regardless of whether we go to mass or not. The important thing is to do things right. The body is the church; every part has a task; the healer protects it with medicinal plants, and with the protector who is Jesus Christ. ■■

NOTES

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² The term *yoeme* is the generic ethnic name for Yaquis and Mayos; the Yaqui language variant uses *yoeme* for the singular and *yoemem* for the plural. In this text, we use the terms Yaqui and Yoeme synonymously.



Chapayeca mask, used during Lent and Holy Week.