

Herbal and Symbolic Medicines of the Lowland Mixe (Oaxaca, Mexico)

Disease Concepts, Healer's Roles, and Plant Use

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Abstract. – In this article the medical system of the lowland Mixe (Oaxaca, Mexico) is described. Special emphasis is given to the sociocultural basis of the indigenous plant use as part of this medical system. There are four major elements that are addressed in detail: the role of the healers within the community and their forms of treatment, the concepts of diseases prevalent, the treatment strategies, and the importance of plants in the treatment of common illnesses within the medical system. The central position of medicinal plants is discussed using the Lowland Mixe as an example. This ethnobotanical and ethnomedical research also shows where the Mixe see the limit of such a phytotherapeutic approach. Any illness associated with heavy pain which is debilitating or long-lasting requires contact to and help by the supernatural and symbolic forms of treatment. [Mexico, Mixe Indians, traditional medicine, medicinal plants, healers, disease concepts, ethnomedicine, ethnobotany]

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Introduction

One of the central aspects of any culture is the medical system. In non-Western cultures "indigenous," "traditional," or "non-Western" forms of treatment are still of enormous importance. There are estimates that "perhaps 80% of the ... inhabitants of the world rely on traditional medicines for their primary health care, and it can safely be presumed that a major part of traditional therapy involves the use of plant extracts or their active principles" (Farnsworth et al. 1985: 965 f.).

While in Mexico there are numerous studies that document medicinal plants from a botanical point of view (e.g., Amo 1979) or studies that describe and analyze the indigenous medical systems (e.g., Rubel 1960, Young 1981 for two examples of specific aspects of medical systems in Mexico, Aguirre Beltran 1986, Foster 1976, Greifeld

1982, Logan 1977), the integration of these two approaches is still scarce (Ramirez 1978). But this ought to be one of the principal focuses of anthropologically oriented ethnopharmacological research (cf. Etkin 1988, 1993). The goal thus should be twofold: to comprehend the sociocultural basis for indigenous therapies and to evaluate these therapies for their medical and pharmaceutical potentials and risks. The approach to the latter goal will then be interdisciplinary in itself, requiring collaboration between pharmaceutical biologists, pharmacologists, botanists, phytochemists, and anthropologists.

In this article I analyze the sociocultural basis of the indigenous plant use as part of the medical system of the lowland Mixe of Oaxaca (Mexico), especially as it relates to the roles of the healers. The discussion is subdivided into 4 sections: (a) the role of the healers within the community and their forms of treatment, (b) the concept of diseases prevalent (see also appendix and Heinrich 1985, 1989), (c) treatment strategies, and (d) the importance of plants within the medical system.

1. Ethnographic Background and Methods

a) Ethnographic Background

The land of the Mixe extends mostly through the cool and humid mountains of the Sierra de Juárez in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, San Juan Guichivoci being the only Mixe-speaking community belonging to the subtropical Istmo de Tehuantepec. San Juan is the principal community (cabecera) of a subdistrict (municipio) of the same name. In 1980, 20,000 persons were living in the municipio, approximately 5,500 to 6,500 of them in the cabecera (Censo General 1980: 145 f. and unpublished data). Seventy-five percent of the population in the cabecera are considered to be bilingual. A minute fraction of the population speaks only Spanish. The economy is based on subsistence