

Wichasha Wakan: Medicine Man (Lakota Sioux) Native American Medicine and the Role of the Medicine Man

Amerika Yerlilerinde Tıp ve "Bilge" Adam

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Abstract: "We were and are a peaceful people. We even welcomed the *wasichu* [white man]. Only when we saw them building roads, forts, killing off the game, committing buffalo genocide, when we saw them ripping off our land for gold, only then did we realize that what they wanted was our land. They took away our pride, our customs, our MEDICINE. Then we began to fight. For our earth, for our children. That started what the whites call the Great Indian Wars of the West. I call it the Great Indian Holocaust" (2).

— Leonard Crow Dog (Medicine Man) —

Key Words: American Indians, concepts of medicine, treatment, wise man

Özet: Amerika Yerlilerine yüzyıllar boyunca savaşan vahşiler gözüyle bakılmıştır. Ancak, beyazlar tarafından bilinmeyen mistik dünya ve hayat felsefeleri, sağlık ve hastalıklara yaklaşımları onları tarih içerisinde Batılı meslekdaşlarından çok daha ileri bir seviyeye getirmiştir. Bu çalışmada Amerika Yerlilerinin hastalık tanımları, hastalıklara yaklaşımı ve tedavi yöntemleri özetlenmeye çalışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Amerika yerlileri, bilge adam, hastalık kavramları, tedavi

INTRODUCTION

The term "medicine" does not have quite the same meaning for a Native American Indian as it does in white society. In Indian culture, the word medicine is not necessarily synonymous with curative. It also encompasses an array of ideas and concepts. For example whisky was called "medicine water"—water that acts in a way that cannot be understood—and gun was called "medicine iron." The term was also incorporated into many Indian place names, such as "medicine bow" (Wyoming), "medicine lake" (Montana),

"medicine park" (Oklahoma). In Northern Plains tribes, the word medicine connotes the mysterious, that is, things that are beyond powers of human understanding. With this wider definition of medicine, the medicine man was not only the doctor, but also the diviner, the rainmaker, the soothsayer, the prophet, the priest, and, in some instances, the chief or king (8). So great was the influence of the medicine man upon his people that he became obstacle number one for the Europeans who tried to impose their culture. In most cases, whatever the medicine man refused, the people also refused to accept. (Fig 1), (Fig. 2).



Figure 1: Medicine man Leonard Crow Dog (Taken from Crow Dog) (2).

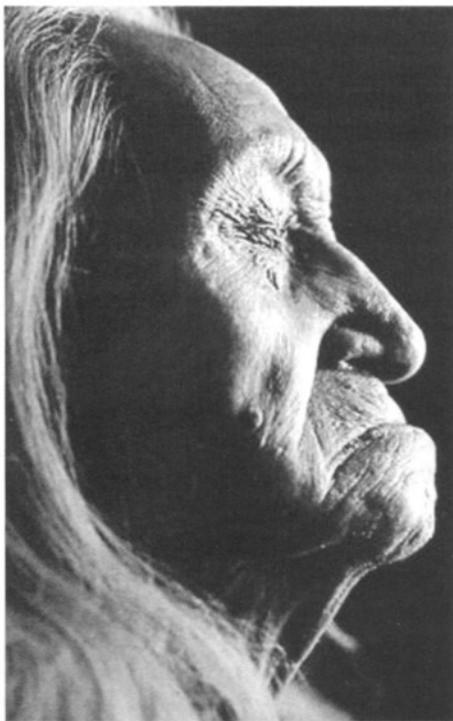


Figure 2: Medicine man James Holy Eagle (Oglala Sioux) at the age of 102, 1992 (Taken from *The Native Americans-An Illustrated History*) (7).

Today, it is common to choose alternative medicine, even in the most affluent and scientifically advanced communities (1). When modern medicine fails, people seek sources that are unconventional and often far from scientifically proven. How scientific was Native American medicine? How much did

shamanistic beliefs and rituals contribute to this practice? On closer view, it becomes clear that the large amount of attention paid to the ceremonial and religious aspects of healing practiced by these people has caused the scientific aspects to be disregarded or looked down upon. With the scientific methods currently used in the west our definition of medicine does not match the Native American meaning. However, the Indian practices were no more superstitious or primitive than those used in early European medicine. In fact by methods of trial and error, Indian medicine men learned many effective ways to treat disease, and were more advanced in many ways than their European counterparts. There are many striking examples. Indians used an American variety of foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*) as a cardiac stimulant for hundreds of years before Withering discovered the medicinal uses of this plant in England. Indians also successfully treated scurvy in the 16th century, when Europeans still believed this disease was caused by bad air. It was more than 200 years later that James Lind, a British Naval surgeon who had read about the native practices, started the experiments that proved the dietary basis of scurvy (8).

One of the main differences between Western and Native American medicine is that most Indian concepts of health and daily living are centered on wellness, not illness. In fact, the emphasis of most Indian practices was to prevent illness and misfortune. Preventive medicine is a very prominent aspect of medicine in the modern societies of today's world. In many Indian communities, healers were sought in times of illness, but they were also called upon for protection, to bless happy occasions (weddings, the birth of a child, and others), or to ensure the success of an expedition or hunt (8).

Medicine men and women tried to treat illnesses caused by both natural and supernatural causes. Their medicine was focused more upon *why* the illness occurred, and the healer would resort to herbs, religious ceremonies, and various devices, such as drums, flutes, and rattles. These were all used to evoke spiritual forces that would either heal the patient directly, empower them to be able to heal, or chase away the evil spirit. In cases where the origin of the trouble was obvious, such as fractures, dislocations, wounds, or snake and insect bites, the treatments were rational and effective. In such

instances, the methods of cure used by the medicine man were straight to the point, and were far removed from ceremonies and rituals. When the problem was internal, although the medicine man had an extensive knowledge of herbs, he would still resort to religious ceremonies, and would use rattles, drums, and any other devices he saw fit to impress the sick person or his relatives (8). Through these rituals, which had dramatic positive effects on patient, the medicine man accidentally stumbled upon an early psychological approach to treatment. He was well aware that a sick person benefited from psychological back-up to help begin healing, even if he did not call it "psychological" in the scientific sense of the word. Maximillian (8), describing practices in the Blackfeet tribe (Sioux), reported, "In all cases they have recourse to the drum and rattle, and have great confidence in the intolerable noise caused by these instruments" (Fig. 3). Similarly, herbs employed by



Figure 3: Healing ritual performed by a Blackfeet medicine man using drums and rattles. (Taken from *The Art of Howard Terpning*) (6).

medicine men and women were believed to derive their strength from ceremonies that were performed to make them powerful (8).

As emphasized above, the word medicine encompassed many concepts for Native Americans. Medicine power was often attributed to a fetish or charm that was adopted to typify a demon or mystery guardian, and the superior performance of one juggler over another was often attributed to the fact that his medicine was superior. Medicine was also associated with magic numbers, similar to some superstitions held by whites today. The most common sacred number used by the Indians was four, which signifies the cardinal directions. However, the number six was also used, adding the up and down directions to the four cardinal ones (8). Such special numbers were used in medical prescriptions that specified a certain number of remedies for so many days, or that called for remedies to be gathered in so many places. These symbols are still currently used.

Another significant example of the broader Indian definition of medicine is the ceremonies that are still performed by the Navajos today. These ceremonies include the creation of complex sandpaintings, works that are called "mandalas" due to their strange resemblance to the Indo-Tibetan mandala. The main purpose of the Navajo sandpaintings is not to orient the patient to the Navajo cosmos (macro or micro) or to communicate its history. Rather, it is to identify the person with the images of power that are represented in the paintings. Every sandpainting contains the power of psychic energy. The painting focuses this power, and the medicine man or woman transfers it to the patient through the physical medium of sand. The patient not only makes use of the power of the figures in the painting, he *becomes* that power. The images in these mandalic paintings are of supernatural people who represent the forces of the natural world. In many cases, the sandpaintings consist mainly of four Holy People standing in a row (Fig. 4). In others, the figures may be multiplied many times, always in multiples of four, to represent augmented power (Fig. 5). More often, the Holy People are arranged in true mandalic (circular) form. Around this central point, the Holy powers to be evoked are placed in the cardinal directions: north, south, east, and west (5).

fulfilled to cure sickness. Whenever a Cherokee medicine man was called in, he generally began by asking the sick person about their dreams to uncover the cause of the trouble.

4- Disease-Object Intrusiwaon: It is also believed that a worm, insect, snake, or small animal could enter the body and cause disease. The disease-causing object was eliminated from the body by drumming, singing, sucking and sometimes bitter medicines were used to make the patient's body an uncomfortable place for the invader to reside.

5- Witchcraft: Belief as a disease-causing factor was especially prevalent among the Zunis (a tribe from southeast North America).

6- Other: Other possible causes of disease or death included the showing of disrespect to the souls of hunted animals, being ungrateful to nature, and being wasteful.

Some of these causes were more important than others, depending on tribe and location (8).

EQUIPMENT USED BY THE MEDICINE MAN

The medicine man's various devices included special costumes, a medicine bundle containing charms and fetishes, medicine sticks (which could serve as an invitation, warning, or offering), and sometimes a bag of herbs. He or she might also have a drum, a rattle, a hollow bone for sucking, equipment for mixing medicines, and syringes for administering enemas or injecting wounds. Of these items, the medicine bundle was the most important. The medicine bag was usually made of animal skin, and contained fetishes such as deer tails and often the maw stone of a buffalo (calculus of the stomach). These bags were handed from father to son or daughter, or from an instructor to a newly initiated medicine man or woman (8). Medicine shields were used for the same purpose, especially in the Blackfoot tribe (6). (Fig. 6). (Medicine shields are shields adorned with symbols, which the medicine men carry and which are considered to have healing powers).

DRUGS AND TREATMENTS

Indian drugs were considered bogus until the white man discovered and approved of them (Fig. 7). However, many of these drugs were ultimately adapted to European and American pharmacopias.

In addition to so-called shamanistic approaches to disease and healing, it is clear that medicine men and women had extensive knowledge about herbs and their curative properties. Indians cultivated herb gardens to guarantee a ready supply of plant remedies, and such gardens were often found at their abandoned town sites. The Indians also seemed to have some knowledge about contagious diseases. If a sick person was suspected of carrying an illness that could be transmitted to others, the individual was carried to a location outside the village. The medicine man accompanied him or her, prevented anyone from contacting the sick patient, and would practice his medical work until the person recovered. The idea that impurities in the body should be expelled from the mouth via emetics and from the rectum via cathartics was very common among Indians, and most of the drugs they developed are in these classes. Of the hundreds of herbal medications that Indians used, the following are some of the most interesting:

Anesthetics: Use of coca leaves as a stimulant was very popular among the Incas. Coca was also used as an anesthetic for trephination or other types of skull surgery. The local anesthetic properties of cocaine were not discovered by modern medicine until 1884.

Alcohol: Mexican Indians used alcoholic drinks to treat nervous conditions. Tequila, which is made from the juice of the mescal plant, remains popular today.

Anti-malarial Drugs: The anti-malarial cinchona bark, from which quinine was extracted, was discovered by the Indians and used effectively to reduce fever.

Poisons: Indians knew how to use poisons for fighting against enemies, and for committing suicide. The most famous poison used by South American Indians was curare, which is fatal when it enters the blood via a wound (8).

TREATMENT OF INTERNAL CONDITIONS

Digestive Disorders: It was not always possible to identify separate illnesses, but the general disorder "dysentery" was common among Indians. Different tribes used different curative methods. Agave leaves,



Figure 6: Transfer of the Medicine Shield to a newly initiated medicine man (Taken from The Art of Howard Terpning) (6).

extracts of bladderwort, or fresh ground maize were dissolved in warm water and injected into the anus. Copal, a tree sap collected from the leaves or branches of cedar, was also a very effective cure for these conditions.

Epilepsy: Although this disorder is known to have been rare among Native American Indians, it has been reported that they successfully cured whites with remedies that they would not reveal.

Fever: The Indian treatments for fever included rest, sweating, purgation, liquid diets (no solid food at all), and anti-fever (anti-pyretic) medicine. Sweat baths were very popular, and their purpose was not only medical, but also religious. Sweat baths were performed in sweat lodges, in which vapor was made by pouring water over hot stones mixed with all sorts of medicinal and sweet-smelling herbs (Fig. 8). Here,

New-Englands RARITIES

Discovered:

I N

Birds, Beasts, Fishes, Serpents,
and *Plants* of that Country.

Together with

The *Physical* and *Cbyrurgical* REMEDIES wherewith the *Natives* constantly use to Cure their DISTEMPERS, WOUNDS, and SORES.

ALSO

A perfect *Description* of an *Indian SQUA*, in all her Bravery; with a POEM not improperly conferr'd upon her.

LASTLY

A *CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE* of the most remarkable Passages in that Country amongst the *ENGLISH*.

Illustrated with CUTS.

By *JOHN JOSSELYN, Gent.*

London, Printed for *G. Widdowes* at the *Green Dragon* in *St. Pauls Church yard*, 1672.

Figure 7: Title page of John Josselyn's "New England's Rarities Discovered" first published in 1672. A title page showing the interest of the white man in Indian cures and remedies (Taken from American Indian Medicine)(8).



Figure 8: Sweat Lodge- An Indian resting before entering a sweat lodge (Taken from The Encyclopaedia of Native America) (4).

the sweating person was believed to purge both his body and soul, and this was carried out in the form of a special religious ritual. The practice was followed by a cold dip in a river or lake. The sweat bath was a panacea for almost all diseases, and achieved complete cure in most cases. Sweat lodges are small cabins made of twigs covered with clay or fabric. Heated stones are put in the lodge and vapour is produced by pouring water over the hot stones. The Native Americans lie in it and perspire until they believe they are purged.

Snakebite: Native American Indians were able to treat even the most lethal snakebites effectively. Fern roots, seneca snakeroot, and several other plants were used for this purpose. In one intriguing method, the offending snake was killed, cut up, and the animal's flesh was applied to the person's wound. White doctors supported this practice, maintaining that the antidote was in the snake's fat tissue.

Fractures and Dislocations: The Indians were extremely skillful at treating bone injuries. The men

were usually lone hunters, and they even developed the ability to handle this type of problem on their own. Medicine men and women were very adept at reducing bone injuries. Special medicines were used to rub and help straighten the affected limb, and to reduce pain. After the fracture was reduced, the limb was bandaged and splints were applied to immobilize it (8).

These drug and treatment examples represent just a small portion of the wide range of medical knowledge that was possessed by Native American Indians. Research indicates that surgical interventions were more developed in the more settled communities, such as those of the Central and South American Indians. Surgical techniques will be the subject of a future paper. The above is merely a fraction of a vast story that remains largely untold. The story of the Indians is one of a people who cared deeply about nature and well-being, but who were regarded as savages by others who had no stories to tell. (Fig. 9) (Fig. 10).



Figure 9: Famous tribal Chief who was also a medicine man. Tatanka Iyotaka(Sitting Bull).Chief of the Hunkpapa. The Sioux of the Sioux (Taken from Everyday Life of the Northern American Indian) (9).



Figure 10: Famous Chiricahua Apache Chief Geronimo who was a fierce warrior and medicine man (Taken from The Art of Howard Terpning) (6).

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