

Calling Our Spirits Back: Indigenous ways of diagnosing and treating soul sickness

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Susto: An Introduction

The bones will change, the blood will speak and jump, the winds may stir within us. These are all symptoms of *susto*, a soul loss or displacement of an animating force in the Indigenous bodies of Mesoamerica. The egg can cure it, a broom of plants. So can the earthen womb of the *temezkal*, the Nahuatl word for the Mexican Indian sweat bath. Sometimes a part of us is left in that place, the place where a disturbance occurred. Across time and place, we return to retrieve it, some disconnected part of ourselves. We may fit in a gourd, may accompany a fist of earth, or a glass of water, so that we can come back to ourselves. These are the teachings of my elders, Macehual Indigenous doctors.

Ancient Mayan symbols depict the gourd that retrieves the soul from *susto* in a pre-Columbian vase. Symbols, enlivened by ceremony, prayers and respectful acts, become medicine. They reflect memory, accumulated acts, and knowledge. I transmit across different knowledges of the Indigenous Americas to connect this pre-Columbian Indigenous framework for understanding trauma with literature on unresolved trauma among American Indians.

...[When the Europeans arrived] They taught fear, they came to wilt the flowers. So that their flower would live, they harmed and sucked in our flower....



Fig. 1. "Persecution of Indigenous medicine." Displacement of Indigenous medicine scene from *La Medicina Maya: Pasado y Presente*, produced by Médicos Indígenas de Chiapas

(Yucatec Mayan Book of the Chilam Balam of the 1700s. See Florescano 1994, p. 105-106)

The contemporary painted book (based on the pre-Columbian symbol system) by present day "médicos Indígenas," or traditional Indigenous doctors, of Chiapas depicts how traditional Indigenous medicine has endured various attempts by other knowledge systems to supplant Indigenous knowledges of plants, ceremony, and spiritual medicines. Much like the pre-Columbian symbolic language of the painted books, which serve as "visual testimonies" (Ojeda Díaz, 2003), the contemporary book is a painted script that details conflicting knowledge systems.

The visual narrative depicts more than shelves of pharmaceutical medicines and other

signs of authority related to biomedicine. The Christian pulpits and radio shows are sites of power where authorities preach(ed)* against traditional practices and ways of understanding and treating the causes of imbalance and illness. At the same time the educational system has emphasized the relinquishing of traditional markers of Indigenous identity for particular Mayan communities, such as discarding traditional clothing as part of modernization.

History repeats itself in the very fabric of Indigenous peoples. Another Native book in a series of Mayan colonial books, the *Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimin*, decries similar constrictions in the 1700s (in Carrasco 1990, p. 45).

Your older brothers are arriving
To change your pants,
To change your clothes,
To whiten your dress,
To whiten your pants...

As signified by two healers of other Indigenous traditions, who are imprisoned for use of the sacred mushroom and peyote, this image is a visual testimony of the trauma of de-Indigenization and imposed belief systems that have impacted Indigenous medicinal knowledge all across the Americas. Earlier Mayan peoples chronicled this process in the 1700s: "They Christianized us, but they pass us around from one to another like animals. God is offended by the suckers" (in Florescano, 1994, p. 105).

And yet, the ability to endure as conveyed through the signs and symbols of Tzeltal and Tzotzil Mayan peoples in the Indigenous doctors' painted book reflects how Indigenous

healing systems have persisted to the point that they now they speak back.

Traumatic histories of Native peoples results from the loss of relationships "with their daily world (Duran and Duran 1995, p. 32)." The depiction of usurping paradigms and its effect on Mayan traditional medicine are specific examples that reflect what Duran and Duran describe as an acute response to colonization.

... a postcolonial paradigm would accept knowledge from different cosmology as valid in their own right, without their having to adhere to a separate cultural body for legitimacy.... the past 500 years have been devastating to our communities; the effects of this systematic genocide are quickly personalized and pathologized by our profession via the diagnosing and labeling tools for this purpose. If the labeling and diagnosing process is to have any historical truth, it should incorporate a diagnostic tool that reflects the effects of genocide. Such a diagnosis would be 'acute and/or chronic reaction to colonialism.' (Duran and Duran, 1995, p. 6)

Native American scholars have termed this process of cumulative, complex, and collective wounding across generations, resulting from colonization, as "Historical Trauma" (Brave Heart-Jordan, 1995). Symptoms of historical trauma can include depression, unresolved grief, trauma replicating behaviors such as violence against oneself or others close to you, and psychological numbing (1999 interview with Eduardo Duran). A growing body of research has shown that the survivors of trauma experience physiological changes in their brain messaging systems

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(van der Kolk, 1994). Much of the literature on the relationships between this complicated trauma and illness in American Indian and other Indigenous peoples have used concepts of illness and disease that largely derive from the biomedical model. While these studies are useful in understanding the impact of trauma, recent studies on American Indian populations are connecting trauma to Indigenous ways of understanding unresolved grief and sentiments related to loss of land, and loss of relationships and values that provided a healthy cohesiveness in the daily lives of Indigenous peoples (Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt, and Chen, 2004). “Acculturative stress,” with the accompanying depression and sense of marginalization, foments the continuing effects of Historical Trauma, note Duran, Duran, and Brave Heart (1998): “While historical trauma includes acculturation stress, it goes much deeper and encompasses the aftereffects* of racism, oppression and genocide” (p.65). Depending on the specific historical context of Indigenous peoples, the process of historical trauma has often occurred during numerous stages of drastic changes in which Indigenous peoples often lost the social structures and the traditions that provided the stability to cope with the rapacious effects of colonization.

One surviving framework still in existence within certain systems of Traditional Indigenous Medicine (TIM) offers an Indigenous-informed coherence for understanding the impact of trauma—the concept of *susto* or soul loss, fright or trauma (Gonzales, 2012). While the literal translation of *susto* means fright, the term refers to a variety of responses that reflect the experience of soul displacement, a strongly experienced event that stirs emotional or mental distress, and trauma. I employ a trans-disciplinary approach across time and space,

connecting American Indian scholarship on Historical Trauma with the scholarly archive and case histories about *susto* among Indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica. I also incorporate oral tradition with lived practices and my own experience as a practitioner/community health promoter of traditional medicine. The inclusion of *susto* in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) as a “culture bound syndrome” now means that this classification is referred to by clinicians, researchers, policy makers, and health insurance companies in the United States. While the concept of a culture bound syndrome is arguable because many illnesses from mainstream U.S. society are also bounded by cultural frameworks, its inclusion in the DSM-IV-TR provides an opportunity to examine *susto*—and its traditional treatments—as a framework that may advance an understanding of various imbalances relevant to trauma among Indigenous peoples. I explore how TIM makes sense of the impact of traumatic events on the human body through the Mesoamerican framework of soul sickness, or *susto*.¹

My work intersects with medical semiotics, which uses signs and symptoms to interpret and diagnose illness and states of wellness. Medical semiotics may include the “vital signs” that medical doctors agree upon in assessing a particular health condition; semiotic analysis may also include how symbols are employed to communicate authority, such as doctor’s white lab coat. Symbols in Indigenous knowledge systems not only help to create meaning but also are part of an

¹ Other ancient cultures from Europe and Africa also have concepts similar to *susto* but my concern is how soul loss is expressed in Indigenous healing systems. These concepts often synchronized with each other during the colonization process into numerous manifestations of curanderismo or curing philosophies.

Indigenous science that includes TIM (Cajete, 2000). An Indigenous semiotics recognizes that symbols, when situated within the context of ceremony and sacred relationships with life giving forces, reflect and transmit the aliveness, agency and intelligence of life. Such symbol systems result in transforming the human condition not only because they serve to create meaning in peoples' lives. From the vantage point of many Indigenous cosmologies, they become imbued with the sacred powers that transform life. I conduct a semiotic analysis of the Indigenous symptoms and signs of illness associated with *susto* and its treatments, examining signs that are embedded in events and a series of acts that create units of experience. However, rather than use the medical gaze to interpret signs that "tells something about health and disease to somebody" (Maiterud, 2000, p. 603), I employ the framework of TIM of contemporary Mesoamerica to provide another reading of signs of distress of the human spirit. Many concepts and diagnoses are signs in and of themselves as they are part of a system of symbols that constitute agreed upon actions and meanings. For instance, "stress" is a recent conceptual framework that carries with it various associations, symptoms or signs that provide an agreed upon way to describe human experience. Depression is also a category of illness that is determined by a wide range of symptoms that may include a sense of hopelessness and worthlessness to fatigue and poor concentration and sleep disorders, all related to how people view life or how they view themselves.

In working with intergenerational-trauma among Native American populations, Duran and Duran (1995) and E. Duran (2006) apply the term soul wound. The concept of *susto*, based on enduring pre-Columbian frameworks, can include soul wounding, soul loss, and soul

displacement resulting in a profound trauma or *susto profundo* (Rodríguez, 2008) that can settle in the body. Traditional healers hold that this deep untreated trauma may "mature" into chronic illnesses, such as diabetes and depression. Such concepts are part of knowledge systems that may conceive of the Indigenous body in ways that are distinct from that of allopathic meaning systems, providing different etiologies to "dis-ease" and imbalance among Indigenous-origin peoples. Various American Indian concepts of the "soul," also recognize various manifestations of dynamic "vital principal" with a different kind of agency from what is currently acknowledged in the biomedical model of physiology (Hultkrantz, 1997).

Indigenous peoples from the Americas continue to rely upon cultural resources and healing knowledges to address "ethno-stress," traumatic occurrences, soul wounds and their implications for intergenerational wellbeing (Cajete, 1994; 2000). While these approaches are distinguished by their ecosystems, cultural patterns, languages and life ways, there are shared values and approaches which allow me to provide examples of how *susto*, as an etiological framework, can advance an understanding of traumatic responses—and traditional treatments—based on Indigenous ways of knowing, diagnostics and treatments as expressed in these healing systems.

Mexican Scholar Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1996) argued that "Mexico Profundo" or a profound Mexico emanating from the depths of Indigenous being and knowing has persisted even among people without acknowledged Indigenous markers. Many scholars concur that these Indigenous ways of knowing have been maintained through traditional medicine. As we shall see from the lens of TIM, the pro-

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cesses of genocide, de-Indigenization, gender oppression, poverty and the loss of land, culture and identity, present a complex syndrome of loss in the depths of the Indigenous being. Exploration of Mexico Profundo across time and space illustrates the possible implications of *susto profundo*.

The historical record shows how Indigenous peoples articulated and conceptualized different kinds and causes of soul loss, including the various levels of violence wrought by colonization. Mayan prophets have left a record in their own words in the *Book of Chilam Balam* (in Florescano 1994, p. 100): “Castrate the Sun, that is what the foreigners have come to do.” The book (which dates from at least the early 1700s) reflects Mayan knowledge keepers’ assessment of colonization’s impact on their times: They lamented the bringing of sickness, when there was “no smallpox.”

Indigenous healing systems from these cultures maintain methods for diagnosing and treating soul loss, or the displacement of part of the human spirit or vital force from the body as a result of a traumatic event or a strongly felt experience. Known as “*susto*” in Spanish, or fright or soul loss in English, this soul wound has been diagnosed and treated by Indigenous peoples with knowledge and methods that predate colonization of the Americas. From Mexico to the Southern Cone, Indigenous peoples who spoke unrelated Native languages believe in some concept of *susto* (Rubel, 1964) in which part of the human spirit may become disassociated from the body because of a trauma or a strongly experienced event. Since pre-Columbian times, Indigenous peoples from these ancient civilizations have held that the soul or various aspects of the spirit could wander, become detached or be

captured as part of soul loss or soul intrusion. This “soul,” variously known as the *tonal* in Nahuatl or the *chu’lel* among some Maya, is fundamental to understanding how a disturbance of the soul affects the health of Indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica. This soul is not necessarily the Occidental or Judeo Christian concept of the soul and can include concepts of vital forces that detach from the body and may be associated with cosmologies that influence human nature.

Though documenting Indigenous knowledge for the purposes of conversion and persecution, colonial records indicate how medicine people exercised ways of treating and addressing soul sicknesses. *Susto* among pre-Columbian Nahuas was referred to as *nematili* while its cure entailed calling the spirit back—*tonalzatziia* (Aguirre Beltrán, 1963; López Austin, 1988). Colonial records contain prayers calling upon the assistance of tobacco to find and attract the wandering *tonal* or vital force of a child, showing the treatment’s pre-Columbian origins. Such prayers were conducted by the *tetonaltique* to restore the *tonal* or *tonalli*, an irradiating vital force or internal sun. Colonial recordings of prayers (de Sahagún, 1950; de Sahagún & Garibay 1958; Ruíz de Alarcón, 1629) document invocations in which the healers look for the *tonalli* to “reconcile” the human spirit.

I have come to seek his tonal, his fortune, fate, star whatever may be: where can it have gone, where is it detained...I must bring it (de Sahagún, 1629, p. 172 in Foster, 1951.)

The pre-Columbian *tetonalmacani* was the title given to someone who restored the *tonalli* or what today is referred to in Spanish

as *soplo*/enspirited breath or *alma* /soul but which originally referred to a life-force that resided in the head among the pre-Columbian Nahua. This understanding of the *tonal* persists among Indigenous peoples. For the Huastec, it is *ehetal* and for the Zoque, *kojama*. While among the Chinatecos, *susto* is evident when the vital substance *bi* leaves the body (Zolla & Pinzón, 1994). While there is great variation to how Indigenous peoples conceive of this idea, Timothy Knab (2004) in his documentation of dream medicine among the Nahua of San Martin in the Sierra of Puebla, Mexico, argues that the *itonal* is more complex than being the soul-breath, as it has also been described. It is a life force that can be displaced from the body, needs heat and the sun to survive, and survives after death. Among the Nahua of San Martin, the *itonal* requires living both with a good heart and in accordance with the ancestral teachings, thus raising implications for Indigenous people who have become disconnected from their ancestral ways or whose hearts are wounded and imbalanced by the violence resulting from inequality, internalized oppression and self-hate. Among some traditional Nahuas the *tonalli* may be strengthened with food imbued with the Sun and by establishing a good and direct relationship with the Sun (oral tradition). How might the disconnection of Indigenous people from their land base and the growing of their own food affect this life force?

Susto as an expression of various cultural healing systems has been well documented by scholars: Whether studying Zapotecs in Oaxaca or Mixteco farm workers who attributed their *susto* to the exposure to pesticides in the United States or Latino's concepts of *susto* or that of Nahuas in various stages of "acculturation," most of the studies found that respondents from these populations understood or employed the concept of *susto* (Baer & Penzell,

1993; Murguía Peterson, & Zea, 2003; O'Neill & Rubel, 1980; Rubel, 1960; 1964; Weller et al., 2002). Despite variations in the symptoms of *susto* or distinctive treatments, many scholars concurred that these populations shared a general notion of *susto* (Gonzales, 2012). My concerns here are the Indigenous expressions of this framework.

The numerous Indigenous words for the treatment of *susto* with what is known in Spanish as a *limpia* or *barrida*, a therapeutic cleansing or sweeping ceremony, also reflects the robustness of this practice. For instance, the *limpia* rite is called *ochpantli* or *tleuchpantle* in some Nahuatl languages; *hoku* among the Otomí, *kutsúrhentani* (Purépecha); *lak-pati* (Totonac); *metzel* (Tzeltal) and *naksugaba* (Zoque) to name a few (Zolla & Pinzón, 1994).

Susto Profundo and Contemporary Diagnostics

There are various diagnoses in Mexican traditional medicine (MTM) that can be part of *susto* or can stand alone as an ailment.² Symptoms of *susto*, which may vary with the people's cultural teachings, can include anxiety, *nervios* or nervousness, listlessness, fatigue or loss of vitality, loss of appetite, diarrhea, acute intestinal imbalances and apathy. Additionally, strong sentiments, such as mortification, embarrassment and shame are considered cultural diagnoses, are treated with prayers that may specifically address these maladies. These diagnoses have been the traditional ways that

² People can become sick from venting too much anger (*muina*) and get stomachaches and headaches or become sick from their nerves (*nervios*, *ansiedad*). When one becomes very angry or has a strong "impression" or "sentiment," the person may become physically "open" to, or subject to, the airs or *aires* that can attach or inhabit the human body through energetic points in the body and create internal wind.

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Mexicans described symptoms now categorized under the label of depression. Even today, depression is not necessarily a term that many traditional Indigenous Mexican peoples use to describe deep grief, sadness or a sense of unsettledness, saying simply, “No me siento bien.” I do not feel good. Or they will refer to a traditional concept of imbalance, such as having *susto* or *nervios*.

A Nahua prayer for treating *pipinahuistli* or embarrassment as well as feelings of “turbulence” are documented at the *Museo de Medicina Tradicional* operated by the state of Morelos, Mexico. In Nahua traditional medicine, *pipinahuistli* can produce symptoms that include diarrhea, vomiting, rashes or pain in a part of the body that becomes afflicted with the embarrassment that has concentrated itself in a particular location. The traditional healer addresses the *vergüenza* or embarrassment, asking where and how it was begotten, in a cantina/bar? Because of “a big nose?” The traditional healer prays in either Nahuatl or Spanish, using salt that is applied to the afflicted part of the body. The use of salt is associated with the pre-Columbian female power of transformation known by various names, including Ixcuina, which transforms what is no longer useful and can be depicted with cleansing brooms used in *limpias* or purification rites.

Mirroring the assessment of many traditional healers, Rubel (1964) acknowledged a form of *susto* caused by the distress over the loss of expected social roles. Numerous scholars have analyzed the underpinnings of *susto* as physiological responses to stress and how symptoms associated with *susto* can be understood by temperature changes, stress hormones, and biological functions (McKeever Furst, 1995). However, it is important to note

that the notion of stress is a relatively new one among Indigenous peoples in much of the continent and not necessarily a generalized concept outside of Canada and the United States.

While Indigenous people have nuanced words for the various dimensions and categories of *susto*, in Spanish it is also described by various sources of infliction. Various called *susto*, *susto meco*, *espanto* (including *espanto de chaneque*, a deep fright caused by air spirits or malevolent/overpowering spirits), *espanto de sueño* (deep sleep fright from being awakened abruptly), *espanto de agua* (fright caused near bodies of water or by water spirits) many of these cultural diagnoses reflect the pre-Columbian patterns that recognized the impact of fright or trauma on the human body spirit, as well as on a living universe and spirit beings that can be offended or that are so powerful that they can overtake a human being's vulnerable life force. A living force that leaves the body can be captured by spirits or places of great power because of a vulnerable state of life that may be caused by sickness, a weak life force or a troubled state of mind. However, while the potential ultimate consequence of an extreme *susto* may result in death, many cases of *susto* refer to a range of experiences in which a part of the human spirit is separated from its structural whole without a fatality, but resulting in other serious consequences.

The diagnosis of “*susto pasado*” reflects the concept of the extended or prolonged impact of trauma. This knowledge from oral tradition has been recorded in the literature (Avila, 1999; Trotter & Chavira, 1997). In one study, Mexican Americans attributed their diabetes to past *susto* from two to twenty years earlier (Poss & Jezewski, 2002). Many *curanderas* and

curanderos or traditional healers from Mexico hold that diabetes can be the result of some earlier form of *susto* that went untreated. One example of how *susto* is a distinct etiology is its comparison with the diagnosis of depression. From the logic of MTM, *susto* is not depression but can cause symptoms associated with allopathic definitions of depression if left untreated. Elders say that *susto* can become lodged in a particular body part, causing breast cancer, heart disease or spur the onset of diabetes (oral tradition with Indigenous doctors and midwives such as Don Aurelio Ramírez Cazarez, 2005; Doña Enriqueta Contreras, 2002). *Tonalhuicac* is a Nahuatl word that can describe a recent strong *susto* or a *susto pasado*, one that happened in the distant past, such as in childhood, requiring a ceremony (2010 oral tradition with Macehual knowledge keeper Paula Domingo García.) When this occurs, it is said, “te fue tu espíritu. Te alejó.” Your little spirit left, it got away from you.

Susto: Pre-Columbian Treatments in the Present

Susto is often treated with a conjunction of elements that can include a ceremonial sweeping or rubbings with the four elements of life that are based on hot and cold as well as the plants from a particular ecosystem and in ceremonial positions and configurations such as the four directions. Because people are interconnected, they transfer energy to each other, in an exchange of both positive and negative aspects. The interchange of energy among human beings can be affected by bad thoughts or negative projections against another.

Additionally, people may be prescribed the sweat bath or in the Nahuatl language, the *temezkal*, to be heated with rocks to sweat



Fig. 2. Image of traditional Indigenous limpia employing a lizard: “In Tapahtiani - La Curadora de Gentes” Illustrations copyright © 2009 by Martha Ramírez-Oropreza

out the infirmities. Teas are used to calm the spirit, move the airs, and to settle the stomach and nerves in conjunction with massage or plasters that feed the body-spirit. (The lodge is a persisting Indigenous approach to address emotional disturbances with numerous American Indian programs employing the sweat lodge as an intervention in drug rehabilitation or as an Indigenous component of counseling). Sahagún recorded the pre-Columbian practice of conducting the *temezkal* for people who had been in physical fights or suffered an affront. At the Atekokolli clinic run by Nahuatl traditional doctors in the state of Morelos, Mexico,

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the *temezkal* is administered for people who have a strong *susto* or who need to be deeply rebalanced emotionally (2011 interview with Aurelio Ramírez Campos). Certain plants are also administered based on their ability to treat *susto* that is lodged in a particular place in the body, such as in the spine, or in the eyes, which is called *susto de vista* or fright in the eyesight (2005 interview with Don Aurelio Ramírez Cazarez). The practices to rectify *susto* can include medicinal baths and teas, sweat baths, ceremonial sweepings and rites involving the four elements of life (constituted from air, water, earth and fire) and relationships to place. One ceremony that has a multiple variations involves “calling the spirit back” from the place of the traumatic occurrence.

Susto: Ceremonial Curings

Various purification ceremonies are conducted to address soul loss, soul intrusion, or soul displacement and they vary greatly in their ceremonial layering. The treatment tells us as much about the cause as the causal sources of *susto*. Prior to many *limpias*, a *plática* or conversation may transpire as the health seekers explain to traditional healers why they have not been feeling well. This aspect of traditional healing can be understood as a form of narrative medicine in Indigenous healing systems. The ability to talk out the problem is sometimes part of the healing and may be considered as a reflection of the element of “air,” for as the words leave the person’s body, the illness is carried in their breath out into the air. The concept of having winds or “*aires*” also reflects how emotions foment internal “winds” or strong sentiments. The practice of having the people respond to being called back into their bodies can also be considered a traditional understanding of the power of

cognitive medicine in which the patient should be an active participant in their own recovery. Additionally, as they speak, they employ the property of air/breath as part of the traditional therapeutics. There is a sense of “reconciliation” with his or her own spirit or making peace with an event or another being that may be in keeping with the pre-Columbian concept of reconciling the spirit.

Numerous Indigenous peoples in Mexico and the United States practice variations of the ceremonial *limpia* called *levantando la sombra*, or the raising the shadow/calling the spirit back. I have learned dozens of variations of this *limpia* through oral tradition as part of my instruction as a *promotora* of Indigenous medicine. In these protocols, the spirit is called back from the place of a traumatic occurrence. When a person cannot return to the site, the traditional healer or family elder may return to the place of the event and gather the *tonalli*, or the spiritual aspect that has detached from the person, in a jar or gourd. Offerings may be left in exchange for the release of the spirit from the place. In a further nuance of soul loss, ceremonies to protect a child’s spirit from being overpowered and thus taken or dislodged while in a home, near a spring, a sweat lodge or strong environment are forms of preventative medicine to guard against soul displacement, which portend deadly consequences for newborns and babies (Mak, 1959; Zolla & Pinzón, 1994). The ultimate consequence of a severe *susto* left untreated may be death for adult or child.

When *susto* is released, pungent sulphuric fumes, reminiscent of the pre-Columbian characteristics of the *ihiyotl* or inspirited aspect of the liver that emits a gaseous property, may fill the healing space as the body releases *susto*.

Some healers attribute this smell to the release of dense negative powers that have attached to the body. The body may be filled with chills and coldness and tremble, similar to the pre-Columbian response of “shuddering” as a sign that the *tonalli* had returned. In these healings, we have called the spirit back and person has responded, “*Estoy aqui, ay vengo.*” I am here, here I come. The ceremonial, ritualized rubbing and sweeping allows for the stress, negative thoughts and energies to be swept off and open the way for restoring equilibrium.

Susto: Some Case Studies of Curing Traditions

The spirit is released from a living earth and the site of traumatic occurrence.

In the 1960s, a Chinanteco child contracted *susto* after being punished at school. His mother conducted a *limpia* at the schoolhouse where a teacher hit her son on the hands. The child contracted *susto*. His mother took the clothes he wore to school that day and went to the place where he sat and spoke to the earth to release his spirit:

I come in the name of curer Garcia who at this time is unable to come. I come this time and this time only. It surely was not your intention to dispossess him of his spirit. Goodbye, I will return in four days to advise you as to his condition and to do whatever is necessary (Rubel, 1964, p. 276).

She swept her son’s clothing on the earth to retrieve his spirit and then took a fistful of earth to conduct other prayers at home. A traditional healer then conducted a ceremony



Fig. 3 Post-conquest image of Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina, presiding force of regeneration and *limpia* purification rites. She holds a broom of herbs and such brooms are often employed today in *limpias*. Florentine Codex Vol. 1, figure 12. University of Utah Press.

with his clothing, including wrapping the child in blankets and laying him on a cot where a brazier of hot coals were placed underneath. The healer, after the child’s recovery, went to the schoolhouse to give thanks to the earth for releasing the child’s spirit and in ceremony bid farewell to the spirit of the place (Rubel, 1964).

Signs important in the treatment include: inflammation in the body, clothing and personal articles, furniture, the earth and site of the occurrence.

The method of treatment includes key steps and interrelated processes:

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1. Relying on framework that allowed the parents to understand the impact of stress on their child: this framework included an understanding of a living place; that the clothes held the sickness and could be used to undo the illness.
2. A relationship with a traditional healer.
3. Access to the school or place where the imbalance or event occurred.
4. The agency and power of the parent/mother to conduct the ceremony.
5. Recognition of the aliveness of the place as active participant in the healing and container for the imbalance.
6. Recognition that an aspect of the human body-spirit remains in clothing and material and immaterial items that come into contact with a human being.
7. An understanding of nature and spirit as inter-related.

Retrieving the spirit in a receptacle.

In another example from the Mixtec people of Oaxaca, a boy was diagnosed with *susto* that resulted from a fight at school (Mak, 1959, pp. 128-129) resulting in the inflammation of his right eye (a strong sentiment can open one up to wind-related ailments or *aires* and this inflammation is of a cold nature associated with *aires*). The mother went to the spot where the fight occurred and made an offering to the

earth for his spirit to be released. The boy's mother formed a cross on the schoolroom's dirt floor and poured pulque on the cross and made it into mud. She sprayed the boy's shirt with the pulque, speaking to the boy's spirit: "Arise enter into your chest [shirt]." She moved the shirt around to different spots where the boy might have been and said, "Arise, let's return to our house, Temu [the boys' name], don't stay here. You got angry with your pal and you fought together. Perhaps you suffered badly inside, both of you, fighting in a fierce place. Don't stay here because this isn't where you live." She then addressed the spirit of the place and said, "Don't be angry and kill my child." She returned home and continued the ceremony. The child's spirit was returned and reintegrated from the bowl of pulque containing the child's spirit.

Key signs: inflammation as an expression of a strong sentiment lodged in the eye as a result of "*aire*," clothing that carries the child's spirit and the trauma of the event, the narrated prayer of calling the spirit back; the making of the sign of the cross in the mud.

Key events in the curing process:

1. The spirit has been displaced.
2. The parent is empowered to act.
3. The parent has access to the space to do ceremony and cultural curing rites.
4. The clothes and the earth/place are treated as alive.
5. For rebalancing of the human being with a vital aspect of the self that has

become disconnected, the earth is spoken to and addressed.

6. The ceremony involves a process of reintegration.

Susto: Group trauma

The following account from a Huichol elder from San Andres Cohamiata, Jalisco, suggests how an entire group became at risk when a group of children died (Vargas Becerra, 1999, p. 213). Huichol children became sick and died after they were ordered by certain elders to ignore ritual protocols and overturn ceremonial tables because of strong rains. One elder recounted to Vargas Becerra how she, her child, and their animals fell ill as a result. Despite allopathic measures to cure them, their maladies were only relieved after offering songs, paying respect to caves and offering waters from outside sources, which restored the health of the community.

Key signs: sickness and even death of community members, including animals as part of the community, songs, paying respect to places of power.

1. The trauma is triggered by an imbalance with the environment created by ignoring ceremonial accords.
2. The trauma affects various groupings of a community, both those distant and those people with close involvement to the event.
3. Animals are also part of the community that is affected.

4. The local ecology also carries the *susto* and may be an agent in emitting the *susto*.
5. Human and community balance is restored with offerings and acts that initiate a new harmony with the environment/natural world.

These accounts, spanning forty years, demonstrate how the ceremonial curings are persistent cultural resources, enabling Indigenous peoples to interact with places in accordance with their traditions. Parents are agents in their children's healings as are individuals who, in their health seeking behaviors, turn to resources within their social network and local ecologies. *Susto* is recognized as having an elliptical effect on the person's social and physical environment and the power of place has agency in creating imbalance or restoring it. The environment is impacted by illness and is part of the rebalancing of human health. It can be an important sign in both diagnosis and treatment of *susto*. Nor are these interventions a thing of the past, since many Indigenous communities continue to perform ceremonies for their physical spaces to avert negative influences. In the 2007 documentary *Way of the Warrior*, scholar Tom Holm noted that part of the post traumatic stress of some Native veterans of the Vietnam war was their remorse over having desecrated the Vietnamese landbase. The previous accounts from other Indigenous peoples suggests Indigenous understandings of how the environment holds trauma, and its potential role in releasing trauma from human-land relationships.

Susto: Adaptations of Enduring Knowledge

This framework of bringing balance to a human being is applied to more than the trauma of a car crash. The literature shows *limpias* used in cases of domestic violence, or witnessing violence. In fact, the first detailed treatment of *susto* recorded by anthropologists involved a Pokoman woman of Guatemala who was hit with a rock from a philandering husband (Gillin, 1948; Lincoln, 2001). In this article, Gillin termed *susto* “magical fright,” a definition that many scholars apply today in their analysis of *susto*.

Indigenous midwives have shared numerous treatments with me as an apprentice midwife to address *susto* among pregnant women, where *susto* affects the mother-baby as a unit. While they do not use the term disassociation, many of the *curanderas* and midwives speak of *susto* inhabiting Mexican migrants, with their beings split. As the midwife Doña Enriqueta Contreras instructs: Their bodies are North of the border, while their spirits remains South of the United States. So Indigenous healing systems continue adapting the theories surrounding *susto* to the conditions of today.

Accumulation of the Intolerable

When N. Scott Momaday offered the idea that American Indian people held a “blood memory,” he provided an Indigenized way to speak of a memory contained at the cellular level. Examples of TIM help to explain how such a blood memory goes beyond constructs of biological determinism. Among the Quichua, the idea of *pena* or an “accumulation of intolerable sorrow” resonates with both the concept of *susto* in Mexico (Tousignant, 1984, p. 383) and new literature on historical

trauma. In *pena* or *llaqui*, a strong suffering is experienced in the heart, “the blood jumps in the veins of the heart and reaches the head, the feet and the hands to produced much emotional sadness and crying” and causes numerous symptoms (Tousignant, 1984, p. 386.)

When elders have explained the physical signs of *susto*, they have instructed me on how the blood changes, as do the position of the bones, as a result of a *susto*. In fact, not only does blood carry memory, the blood also “speaks,” according to the Mayan *pulsadores* (pulse readers) of Tenejapa, Chiapas, who can detect the deeds of the ancestors through their subtle readings of the blood. The expert *pulsador* is a traditional healer who diagnosis and cures through working with various pulses or energetic channels in the body, similar to meridians in Asian acupuncture. Thus, the body is imprinted with various signs of soul wounding, demonstrating another variation of “blood memory” that has been evoked as a sort of inter-generational source of memory (Struthers & Lowe, 2003) among Native Americans north of the U.S.-Mexico border.

I have been part of *limpias* with great ceremonial complexity that addressed soul loss from violent encounters and murder as a result of Nahua peoples defending their natural resources. *Limpias* are a cultural resource used to treat *susto* wrought by land takeovers, massacres, rape, murders, and beatings. Mayan elders include *limpias* as some of the ceremonial processes by which Indigenous people in Guatemala have coped with the *susto* of recent genocide. But Don Alejandro Cirilo Perez Ox-laj (1998 interview) also attributes violence and poverty as key structural sources of *susto*. The following account from a Guatemalan human

rights observer describes the role of *susto* in the death of a boy.

His mother and neighbors calmly explained that he had died of sadness. His father had left the day before to the United States out of economic desperation, and his departure had been absolutely devastating for the boy – to the extent that he never woke up...Death by emotion is not uncommon here. In listening to friends' recounting the genocide "susto" – fright—is often given as an explanation of loved ones' deaths following the actual army-led measures...(Buckley, 2007).

Just as some Quichua factor in colonization as part of the accumulating sorrow (Tousignant, 1984), *susto* provides a distinct framework for understanding the impact of trauma and other disturbances of the spirit. *Susto* and related aforementioned Indigenous etiologies are more than somatic occurrences (Marcos, 2006; Tousignant, 1979). They are not “magical” illnesses and carry their own internal logic as part of coherent meaning systems with expansive concepts of the body, nature, spirit and place. They help to explain how Indigenous peoples understand their vulnerabilities to illnesses and diseases. These frameworks are often invisible or hidden from providers of allopathic medicine. Many Indigenous peoples migrating to the United States are re-infusing these Indigenous theories into the burgeoning communities that are viewed as either Indigenous or Latino and who have maintained, to varying degrees, Indigenous forms of healing in what is termed *curanderismo*, or curing philosophy. Additionally, *limpias* provide not only an Indigenous method for rectifying various imbalances, but also are a cer-

emonial and energetic framework for restoring wellness based on Indigenous ways of knowing and experiencing the cosmos within and near human bodies. Both the Indigenous etiology of *susto* and the treatments for this soul illness may lead to innovative interventions based on enduring ways of knowing the Indigenous body. As researchers continue to document the effects of inter-generational trauma on Indigenous populations, measures should include Indigenous frameworks, such as *susto*, which are centered on concepts that are distinct from concepts of stress and depression.

Conclusion

Employing etiologies that emanate from Indigenous healing systems can produce new ways of thinking about the effects of stressful occurrences on the Indigenous body based on cultural tradition. The body is viewed as having more than one vital force. An aspect of the vital force can become detached from the body, creating various imbalances in mind, body, spirit and the environment. A vivifying force not recognized in Western anatomy has agency and can become separated from the body without necessarily causing death and is part of an Indigenous sign system that helps makes sense of trauma. Untreated *susto* rather than stress can be attributed as the underlying source of depression, fatigue and chronic diseases, such as diabetes. Similarly, inequality and cultural losses can also be the cause of this soul illness. As I have shown, the etiology of *susto* is expanding to accommodate the contemporary experiences of Indigenous peoples. Additionally, the treatment of *susto* is dynamic and entails more than typical counseling interventions prescribed for trauma. Traditional treatments may entail an intricate and/or intimate relationship to place as part of the

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therapeutic intervention that involves restoring balance and reintegrating various aspects of human existence with the physical and social environment. These healing systems operate with diagnostic tools and treatments that may respond to the effects of colonization, providing culturally grounded strategies to treat the effects of intergenerational trauma, soul loss, and the soul wound of historical and contemporary trauma. Further research is needed that examines the effects of trauma with culturally specific conceptual measures based on Indigenous knowledges that frame trauma from the distinct lens of each Indigenous people. While *susto* operates within different contexts and healing systems, a growing number of mental health practitioners are incorporating MTM as part of their treatments. *Susto* can help conceptualize how even recent trauma, reinforced by the inter-generational traumas experienced by Indigenous peoples, impacts them in individual and collective ways, including their ecologies.

If the Indigenous spirit is to be called back, how far does the call go? To which sites of trauma do people return? What pieces of earth or gourds of water might be brought to them, what spirit medicine and ceremonies might be offered so that their spirits will recognize these victims of the many Wounded Knees, Long Walks, mass graves and massacres? And how might Indigenous peoples experience life differently as a result?



About the Author

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