

Indigenous Approaches to Conflict: From Conquest to COVID-19

Courtney Callahan

With more than 25.7 million people that identify as indigenous, Mexico has the largest indigenous population on the American continent (Banco Mundial 2020). Seventy-eight indigenous groups with eighty-nine languages are officially recognized in Mexico (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía). Despite the enormous diversity that exists between the groups' cultural behaviors, rituals, and languages, many basic similarities exist among their fundamental belief system. Since the Spanish conquest of Mexico, indigenous groups have faced many unique challenges and disadvantages. For many years, indigenous groups have fought to preserve their culture and way of life. With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, indigenous groups have yet again faced a life-threatening invader. The indigenous approach to conflict is holistic and rooted in a complex belief system. It is this belief system that has helped them persevere from conquest to COVID-19.

The Indigenous Worldview

Before analyzing how these beliefs have shaped indigenous responses to crises, it is important to understand the foundational differences between indigenous and Western schools of thought. Unlike Western societies that view time as linear and finite, indigenous communities view time as cyclical and unfelt (Zuckerhut). In cyclical time, the past and the future are interchangeable. Nothing is truly "new." The past lies ahead of us to guide us, and the future lies behind us. While Western societies frequently view life events as either good or bad, indigenous societies do not use the same categorization. Instead, everything in life has a necessary counterpart. Similar to the Daoist concept of yin and yang, a balance of counterparts are needed to keep the universe in equilibrium. According to indigenous Mexican belief systems, if one counterpart dominates the other, the universe will end. This is known as dualidad; life and death, day and night, sickness and health, cleanliness and filth, and every complement that exists in life is necessary (Marcos 33). Events such as the European invasion and the emergence of pandemics are not seen as inherently "bad", even if seemingly negative consequences arise from them. Similar to this idea is the indigenous belief that everything in the universe is connected. All is one, and all is alive; this is known as monism. According to monist thought, all things stem from

the same source and are physically, mentally and spiritually related as components of a greater whole (Schaffer). While Western doctors attribute illness to purely scientific reasons, indigenous healers look at illness as something physical, psychological and spiritual. Nothing is simply physical in symptom or cause. Illness can arise from supernatural causes (for example, as a result of sin), preternatural causes (black magic), and natural causes (Lipp 160). In stark contrast to the United States and other Western societies that focus on individualism, indigenous communities are rooted in collectivism. Individuals are not just part of the community; they *are* the community. While Western societies such as the United States view nature as separate and something to be dominated, indigenous societies acknowledge that they are a part of nature. Thus, nature and all beings in it have all of the rights of a person. According to most Mexican indigenous belief systems, healers are born with special healing abilities; they are trained from birth to use these abilities. If they do not use these abilities to help their community, they risk dying and being punished in the afterlife. Many do not even accept money payment for their services, as healing is their responsibility (Tafur et al. 84).

Consequences of the European Invasion Onward

Ever since the European invasion, there has been a lack of understanding surrounding indigenous customs and ways of life. With the fall of the Aztec kingdom to the Spanish empire in the 16th century, folk practitioners were forced to practice in obscurity; according to historical records, forty different kinds of Aztec physicians and priests were eradicated (Lipp 110). Since then, indigenous curers have been the target of persecution and ridicule. Because indigenous medicine was closely linked to native religions, indigenous curers were considered as agents of the devil; even the use and administration of medicinal plants were legally prosecuted during the colonial period. Unsurprisingly, the criminalization of traditional practices contributed to the spread of disease and epidemic infections among indigenous communities, largely decimating the population. In the 1930s, village curers were portrayed in national campaigns as impediments to the life-saving work of government healthcare employees (Lipp 112). In many regions, campaigns of harassment against traditional medical practitioners continue to this day. “All indigenous healing practices are based on the interconnectedness between spirituality, humanness, culture and community; all were and still are subjected to historical and political influences and restrictions. All have been, at best, underestimated in their efficacy or, at worst,

dismissed by the western-based scientific biomedical model.” Unsurprisingly, this has resulted in severe distrust between the urban westernized State and rural ancestral communities.

The persistence of colonialized viewpoints surrounding indigenous ways of life and the language barriers that impede accurate understanding have fixed negative stereotypes of indigenous traditions and healing practices. In many instances, indigenous communities are seen as backward, superstitious, ignorant and pagan. The false narratives imposed by colonialization that were meant to instill fear and division within indigenous communities have yet to be erased. In some instances, this colonial prejudice has seeped into indigenous communities themselves. The municipality of Ca'nydu'am is notorious for killing and robbing native curers who are lured there to work; in one case, a shaman was murdered there while listening to a patient who had taken hallucinogenic mushrooms (Lipp 149). Decolonization of thought surrounding indigenous medicine has not yet been achieved inside or outside of indigenous communities.

Challenges to the Indigenous Community in the Face of COVID-19

Due to widespread poverty, unequal access to potable water, educational inequality and disparities in rural healthcare access, it was expected that indigenous rural communities in Mexico would be the most hard-hit. Approximately fifty-seven percent of rural indigenous peoples and forty percent of urban indigenous peoples have not completed primary school. Only five percent of rural indigenous peoples and seventeen percent of urban indigenous peoples have completed secondary education (Banco Mundial). Lack of education leads to lack of information about COVID-19 and its prevention, making the indigenous population vulnerable to spread. Socio-economic and cultural differences also undermine access to healthcare; one obvious example is the clear language barrier that exists between many indigenous Mexicans and Spanish-speaking physicians. Language allows patients to express symptoms or feelings, communicate with care givers or health practitioners, and understand important health information such as preventative education (Murphy 105). Without proper communication, quality healthcare is impossible. While it is feasible for many Mexicans in urban and suburban areas to stay socially isolated if they become infected to prevent contamination of their community members, such measures are nearly impossible in collectivist indigenous communities in which everything is shared. Furthermore, lack of infrastructure limits access to potable water, and the “structural disengagement” of the federal government surrounding the

issue of rural poverty leads to an automatic disadvantage for indigenous groups (Cohen). Insufficient clean water has exacerbated the spread of COVID-19; when families don't have running water, they have to travel far to get water, exposing themselves unnecessarily to the virus (Johnston).

The Role of Indigenous Cosmovision in the Fight Against COVID-19

Despite the numerous challenges and disadvantages that the indigenous populations have faced in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, some communities have effectively warded off the virus and continued to thrive. Many researchers have attributed this phenomenon to the unique indigenous world view and its corresponding lifestyle, the same lifestyle that helped the indigenous persevere in the midst of conquest and warfare. During the European invasion, two main strategies were used to by indigenous groups to avoid slaughter: isolation and assimilation. Many small groups that inhabited mountain regions such as the Sierra Madre were able to evade Spanish soldiers by staying within their terrain, which was seen as dangerous and not worth the risk for Spanish invasion. Larger groups that were more spread out were not able to remain isolated; instead, these groups survived by assimilating to Spanish culture (Spores and Balkansky 141-142). These same two strategies have been used by indigenous groups to fight COVID-19. Experts at social distancing and isolating since colonial times, small indigenous groups in mountainous tourist regions have completely shut down incoming tourism. Even larger indigenous groups have stopped allowing outsiders into their territory. Restricting or closing the borders of their territories has been one of their main measures to prevent transmission of the virus (ECLAC 2021). As Claudia Schurr, owner of the ecotourism company Tierraventura explains, "where abandonment is historical, prevention is key."

Many indigenous groups have also incorporated Western scientific strategies into their prevention measures. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, these initiatives have involved generating data on infections and deaths in indigenous communities, implementing information and awareness campaigns on prevention of the virus, adopting containment and mitigation measures such as health cordons, prohibiting access to communities, surveillance, community supervision, establishing protocols on movement, using and promoting traditional medicine, and adopting measures to ensure food security. In order to overcome the language barrier between indigenous communities and important health

information published in Spanish, members of the community that speak Spanish have translated important health announcements and protocols into the native languages of their community. According to Arcenio Lopez, founder of the nonprofit organization Proyecto Mixteco Indígena, some radio stations in both Mexico and the United States rotate announcements about COVID-19 in common indigenous languages such as Mixteco, Zapoteco, Náhuatl, Mazateco, and Maya. Some of these announcements explain COVID-19, others instruct citizens how to receive emergency medical assistance, and some teach the importance of isolation and social distancing. When questioned about their strategies in fighting the pandemic, a volunteer from the Matico COVID-19 Command responded that “the most important thing is solidarity. The people help the people” (ECLAC 53). Jeffrey Cohen, a researcher that has conducted field research on COVID-19 in Oaxaca, saw that “when people have become sick with COVID or other diseases, community members will take care of their food crops, and share their water and food. No one is left to fend for themselves.”

When asked about the pandemic, a member of the Navajo nation responded that “we’re taught not to think of nature as separate and that includes COVID-19. The coronavirus is a being and we have to respect that being in an ‘awe state’ and a ‘wonder state’ because it has come to us as a medicine to treat spiritual ills.” Indigenous groups in Mexico view the virus in the same way. Many members of indigenous communities have returned to traditional healers as they fear Western hospitals will contaminate them. The demand for indigenous parteras, or midwives, has doubled in the span of the pandemic (ECLAC 2021). Traditional methods of indigenous farming and cooking have also reemerged in popularity as shopping at local markets has become risky, overpriced and overcrowded. According to Cohen, villagers are collecting wild honey; many have returned to eating “chapulines,” grasshoppers that are harvested from the fields and toasted over a fire. Those that are indigenous are becoming even more connected to their roots, and those that are not are realizing the effectiveness of indigenous ways of life.

The Future of Indigenous Cosmovision and Traditional Medicine

As time goes on, non-indigenous members of society are increasingly becoming accustomed to indigenous beliefs and ways of knowing. While negative stereotypes surrounding indigenous practices still exist, awareness about the scientific validity of traditional medicine is spreading. In an interview with Dr. Kerri Blumenthal, an expert in alternative spirituality and

lifestyle in Latin America, Dr. Blumenthal explains that “more and more Americans and Europeans are seeking alternative forms of spirituality as they realize that the religions they grew up with are not giving them the results that they had hoped for. In some cases, Westerners with mental illness travel to Latin America for alternative forms of treatment when they are unresponsive to their usual medications.” With the emergence of New Age spirituality, many Westerners are more open than ever to adopting beliefs that resemble indigenous cosmovision. At the very least, there has been an increase in people that prefer natural ointments and elixirs over synthetic medications when the choice is available. Successful complementary medical centers that combine traditional indigenous medicine with modern medicine have been established in Mexico and Peru. In the midst of Mexico’s unnecessarily high rate of Cesarean sections (30 percent above the rate recommended by the World Health Organization), some upper and middle class Mexicans are returning to traditional births and hiring indigenous midwives (Huckeba). In 2015, the world market for herbal medicines based on traditional knowledge was estimated at US \$90 billion (Global Industry Analysts Inc.).

It is clear that the potential for medical treatments inspired by traditional practices in the near future is high. As the push towards alternative medicine and therapies grows stronger, medical science and healthcare systems all over the world can finally move forward in the process of decolonialization.

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