

PSYCHIATRISTS AND HEALERS: UNWITTING PARTNERS A CHALLENGE FOR TRANSCULTURAL PSYCHIATRY IN TIMES OF GLOBALIZATION

Runajambi - Institute for the Study of Quichua Culture and Health



The 2005 Transcultural Psychiatry Section symposium held May 18-21 in Quito, Ecuador, was an outstanding success. It was hosted by Runajambi; the Institute for the Study of Quichua Culture and Health, the first health research institution in South America of the indigenous peoples of the Andes. The purpose of the

meeting was twofold: first, to encourage scholarly discussions about the unanticipated partnership of psychiatrists and traditional healers in countries around the world; and second, to facilitate a congenial encounter of transcultural psychiatrists with *yachactaitas* (Quichua-Inca healers) of the Andes, that could be a good learning experience for all involved.

Recently the World Health Organization reported that 75-85 percent of the world's population relies on local healers when in need of medical care. The participants at the Quito meeting consistently highlighted the useful role of traditional healers in alleviating the suffering of patients in diverse clinical and socio-cultural settings. At the same time, participants clearly noted the limitations of Western psychiatry in solving the mental health problems of poor nations and non-Western populations around the world, as well as lack of access to mental health service centers in many developing countries.

The scientific program of the Quito conference covered five overarching themes:

- knowledge and clinical skills of traditional healers (Asia, America, Europe, Africa, Australasia)
- exploring shared approaches to diagnosis by psychiatrists and traditional healers
- challenges of involving traditional healers in national mental health programs
- Western folk healers, spiritual healers, and the 'alternative medicine' movement
- issues of safety and efficacy of traditional healers' interventions



Presentations at the conference were given by sixteen participants from Africa, the Americas, Europe, and Australasia. Three additional presentations were accepted from colleagues in Russia who were, unfortunately, unable to come to Quito.

The conference in Quito started with welcoming comments by Dr. Mario Incayawar, Director of Runajambi, the host institution, and an opening address by Dr. Ron Wintrob, co-chair of the TP Section. This was followed by a "cleansing ceremony" performed by José Manuel Córdoba, a renowned Quichua healer; and the co-founder of Runajambi.

Dan Mkize, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa, discussed the University of KwaZulu-Natal's approach to bringing together traditional and Western healing practices, while respecting the integrity of both systems and their practitioners. Prof Mkize described the formulation of a ground-breaking University of KwaZulu-Natal formal document of collaboration that guaranteed the intellectual property rights of all participants. Today, both the African Health Care System (AHCS) and the Western Health Care System (WHCS) exist side by side and are utilized by the region's population, in accordance with their individual wishes and needs.

Dr. Leslie Snider is an expert on the psychological impact of war, at the Department of International Health and Development, Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. Her presentation on the role of traditional healers in a number of African countries severely impacted by war was intensely moving. She explained how indigenous healers are able to play an important role in trauma victims' recovery, utilizing approaches that respect cultural values, beliefs and particular meanings of those who have survived the horrific experiences of war. They have effectively assisted in burial rituals, cleansing ceremonies for rape victims and enabling former 'child soldiers' re-entry into the communities they grew up in. Involvement of indigenous healers has also proved useful in the treatment of persons with addictions.

Dr. Jeffrey A. Henderson, President & CEO of the Black Hills Center for American Indian Health in Rapid City, South Dakota, presented his findings on the use of traditional healers in American Indian and

Alaska Native communities. The overall prevalence of traditional healer use was 4.9%. English as a second language, education beyond 12th grade, participation in native social occasions, chronic disease count, and disability bed-days were positively related to traditional healer use.

Professor Mario Incayawar, Director of Runajambi, presented his research findings on the psychiatric diagnostic skills of *yachactaita* (Quichua healers) practicing in indigenous Quichua communities in the Andes. The clinical evaluation (physical and psychiatric), including the administration of Zung's depression scale, indicated that among 50 patients labeled by healers with *llaqui*, all were suffering from mental disorders as well as physical diseases, including depression, anxiety and somatoform disorders. Dr Incayawar's data indicated that *yachactaitas* could be competent diagnosticians, skillful in identifying psychiatric cases in the community.



In this meeting we had, for the first time, a student-attended poster presentation. Sioui Maldonado Bouchard, a third-year student in the Department of Psychology at McGill University, Montreal, Canada, discussed her research on traditional healers' knowledge base, intellectual property, and the need for a culturally adapted patent system to protect traditional healers' intellectual property rights.

The other presentations, not summarized here, were original and compelling. A full list of presenters and abstracts can be found at the conference web page:

www.runajambi.net/TPS-Meeting2005/index.html

In addition to the scientific program, the organizing committee arranged a much-appreciated tour of the historic San Lázaro psychiatric hospital in the colonial center of Quito, led by a senior staff

psychiatrist, as well as a visit to the nearby Museum of Medicine, with its unique exhibits of indigenous and Western medical items.

A quite unique activity complemented the program in Quito. It was the visit to Ilumán, an Andean village of *yachactaitas* (Quichua healers). The healing ceremony the visitors witnessed that day was fascinating. And the visit of our group of international psychiatrists to Ilumán was probably the first mutually respectful encounter of psychiatrists and Quichua healers that has occurred in the Andes.

The closing ceremonies of this conference included a Zapara healing ritual conducted by José Joaquín Ushiuia, a Zapara healer from the Amazonian region of Ecuador. Closing comments were offered by Profs Joan Obiols-Llandrich and Vijoy K. Varma; present and former members of the TP Section's executive committee; including a heartfelt tribute to the organizing committee, and in particular Mario Incayawar, Lise Bouchard, their daughter Sioui, Mario's sister Gina and his mother. All of them made the participants feel welcome and wonderfully embodied the warmth and generosity of Quicha people and Quicha culture.

The organization of the conference was outstanding. And it was certainly clear from the comments of the people who attended that; "the ambience was warm, friendly and enjoyable; a great atmosphere for the scientific components of the conference," as Ron Wintrob remarked.

Greetings, and our very best wishes for the coming TP Section meeting in Vienna in April, from the Runajambi organizing team: Luz Maria Ruiz, José Manuel Córdova, Gina Maldonado, Lise Bouchard, Sioui Maldonado Bouchard, Mario Incayawar, Samia Maldonado, José Joaquín Ushiuia.



From left to right, first row: Dr. Patricia Nez, Dr. Lise Bouchard, Miss Gina Maldonado, Mrs. Luz Maria Ruiz, Miss Sioui Maldonado Bouchard, Dr. Mario Incayawar, Dr. Leslie Snider, Dr. Micol Ascoli, Dr. Letticia Daniels, Dr. Vijoy Varma, and Mr. Jose Joaquin Ushiuia (Zapara healer). Second row: Dr. Kathreen Gimbrere, Dr. Paul Boutin, Dr. Joan Obiols-Llandrich, Dr. Ron Wintrob, Dr. Jeffrey Henderson, Dr. David Bettany, Dr. Hung-Tat Lo, and Dr. Lorin Gardiner.