REMEDIES, RITUALS & WISDOM
Respecting the blend of plant tradition and science in end-of-life cultural practice
This booklet is part of the Southwest Folklife Alliance Continuum Program – an ethnographic documentation of expressive practices in Southern Arizona communities as they relate to end of life.

Prepared by a cohort of citizen folklorists who researched everyday life in local multicultural communities during 2014-2015, this booklet outlines the role of plants, folk remedies and elder wisdom in ritual aspects of mourning and death.

Editor: Maribel Alvarez, Ph.D.
Managing Editor: Monica Surfaro Spigelman
Continuum Contributors: Anne Mayer Dalton, Rose Laborin Madrid, Dr. Dianna Repp

SouthwestFolklife.org

The SFA Continuum/End of Life project is supported by a grant from the Shaaron Kent Endowment Fund held at the Community Foundation for Southern Arizona. Additional support received from the Surdna Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Tucson Pima Arts Council and the Arizona Commission on the Arts.

ABOUT SOUTHWEST FOLKLIFE ALLIANCE
The Southwest Folklife Alliance (SFA) is an affiliate non-profit organization of the University of Arizona’s College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. The SFA is housed in the College’s Southwest Center, and the Public Folklorist at the Center serves as the SFA Executive Director. Our programs serve communities throughout the Border region corridor to maintain and preserve folklife practices in the southwest, support the economic development of heritage and folk artists and artisans, and build awareness of diverse folk and heritage practices

© 2016, Southwest Folklife Alliance. Continuum is a program of the Southwest Folklife Alliance (SFA). Please contact SFA before copying or disseminating any content, as copying may be in violation of copyright laws.

The study and documentation of folklife involves the accurate representation of people’s viewpoints in their own terms; quotes and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the sentiments and opinions of the Southwest Folklife Alliance or any specific person or entity at the University of Arizona.
On grey days, we instinctively reach for a grandmother’s comforting remedy: A dash of pepper to relieve congestion; mint to boost the spirit; comfrey, creosote or lavender tea, to soothe. There is a complex interplay of plants with everyday culture. And there is a place in both elder wisdom and modern medicine for plants to play an important role in keeping the body-mind-spirit-earth connection in balance. Native American death ceremonies celebrate the continuum between life on earth and the Spirit World, and include plant materials in rituals that give death travelers safe passage in the transition. For the Hopi, the yucca is an important part of ceremonies honoring the afterlife journey:
The Hopi did not wash or prepare the body in any way other than to wash the hair with yucca suds and tie the hair with yucca fiber. They placed the body in a sitting position with the knees and arms flexed and tied with yucca to hold them in place if necessary (Beaglehole and Beaglehole 1976). After the death, the father of the dead person or a man in the clan of the dead person immediately made prayer feathers and tied one to the body’s hair, one to each foot for the journey to the next world, one over the navel where the breath of a man lives, and one under each hand (Beaglehole and Beaglehole 1976). The face was covered with raw cotton to signify the future existence of the deceased as a cloud. Piki bread and a small gourd of water were placed in the pockets of the dead person to provide lunch for their journey to the next world (Titiev 1972).¹

Herbs of Remembrance

It’s most clear in Southern Arizona indigenous tribes and Mexican-American communities – how traditional knowledge blends with science. It’s here that individuals gifted with unique abilities, like the yerbero and curandera, use the spiritual and healing qualities of plants to help restore a community member’s proper connection with the earth.

Herbs – used to treat maladies, calm grief or anoint a body in death – are among the most cherished botanical vehicles intrinsic to native wisdom. “An herbalist does not pick herbs indiscriminately, but sees all plants are sacred, and will always make some kind of offering to the spirit of the plant he is harvesting...”

As explained in the recetario (collection of traditional family knowledge recipes and glossary of plants/uses) compiled by Dr. Patrisia Gonzales University of Arizona Mexican American Studies 435 class, “People can build a deep relationship with the land after years of living from and with it...After so many generations, this knowledge – and the land along with it – became literally part of the people...”

The Tucson Herb Store notes two examples of these non-woody, stemmed, seed-bearing plants that are used in end of life traditional ceremony:

• **ROSEMARY:** This aromatic herb, symbolic of remembrance, was used by Australian mourners who wore sprigs in Remembrance Day ceremonies. In medieval Britain, “rofemary” was the ancient herb carried at funerals and worn at weddings: *The Rfemarie Branch. Grow for two ends, it matters not at all, Be’t for my Bridall, or my Buriall.*

• **PARSLEY:** This herb is part of both ancient ritual and modern day rites that involve good luck at the gravesite: *The Greeks used wreaths to decorate tombs. De’eis thai selinon, “to need only parsley,” was an expression equivalent to “one foot in the grave.” From former University of Illinois Entomology Department chair Dr. May Berenbaum: “Parsley’s long association with death led naturally to an association with evil, a fact that did not increase its popularity among medieval home gardeners. Dire consequences awaited those who were not fully aware of its powers...”

---

3 Gonzales, Dr. Patrisia, UA Mexican American Studies 435, Introduction, recetario, p. 6
4 Tucson Herb Store, 228 N 4th Avenue, Tucson, tucsonherbstore.com
5 Australian War Memorial: awm.gov.au/commemoration/customs/rosemary/
7 S Andrews, Parsing the Benefits of Parsley, May 2, 2013, humanelivingnet.net/2013/05/03/parsing-the-benefits-of-parsley/
There are many stories about powerful local tradition keepers whose trusted sources of knowledge help the community weather disease, life transitions or nature’s imbalances. The curandera or curandero use plants as part of a blended spiritual, natural toolkit – and they demonstrate a cultural and scientific vision of how modern and ancient medicines converge in holistic health care that ensures well being.

Curanderismo draws on many influences. The practice emerged when ancient Aztec knowledge collided with 15th century medico-botanical systems, during the Spanish conquest of the New World. As the Spanish colonized Mexico, Spanish medical knowledge converged with indigenous wisdom, and local people who held the gift of healing evolved as practitioners of curanderismo (from the Spanish word, cura, to heal).8

The curandereros are specialists of local ways that are part of a community’s local comfort circles, as hospice workers in a South Tucson community commented:
“...Curanderos or folk healers still command great respect within this culture. They know how to use herbs, prayers and ceremonies with candles to resolve some health problems. This is sometimes used in conjunction with more traditional American medicine. This is true regardless of educational level. This can work if the herbal treatments are shared with the physician(s) in order to insure there is no conflict with other medications being used.”

Another resident in a Tucson senior home recollected memories of dead family members, and began a conversation about a curandera, who would recite prayers and use local remedies for the family needing treatment:

“The discussion ended up being about remedies (she) used on her children, especially when they were infants. Remedies were learned from her grandmother and mother and in all probability were handed down by curanderos or healers through the ages. She elaborated on the remedies she practiced, including using warm olive oil with ruda to cure an earache. (*The stems and leaves of the rue plant, Ruta graveolens, are used by many ethnic groups, through incense and tinctures, as an ear curative.*)... She never attributed these maladies to any curses or evil spirits. She practiced these remedies because they worked. For more serious ailments she always sought the expertise of a medical doctor.”
Sometimes, however, rebalancing a body with nature is not possible, and belief in death as part of an inevitable transition is part of a curandera’s faith and cultural knowledge: “...God does not make us sick, we get sick because we do not take care of ourselves, or because we inherit an illness, or because of aging, or because the atmosphere is carrying an energy our body cannot resist (viruses, bacteria). Our bodies can only take us so far...”

RITUALS
HONORING DEATH

In Southern Arizona, new approaches to green and home burials reflect an understanding about the body-earth connection, as well as the importance of ritual as part of the grieving process. A hospice nurse shared thoughts on the importance of honoring a deceased loved one through care of the body: “…for me at the end of life and especially after someone has made this transition, it’s...such an honor to provide something for this physical body, that I think it’s the truest sense of the word, respect, for me...”

The ritual of body washing and use of essential oils is reflected in many cultures and spiritual beliefs with ancient origins, including the Muslim and Jewish faiths. For example, in Jewish communities, including in Tucson, there is a sacred fellowship called Chevra Kadisha, a society of volunteers who perform preparations to ensure proper funerals. The organization also helps prepare the body for burial with ritual cleansing and covering with a simple shroud.

---

TUCSON PRACTICUM
HONORS NATURAL BURIALS

In addition, an experiential Practicum called “Another Way Home” was held in Tucson in October 2014, facilitated by local community members to explore and document the growing movement of home funeral care and “natural” burial, as it is occurring in the metropolitan area and desert environment. The intensive meeting brought together a variety of individuals of different cultures and faiths, and included a discussion of herb use in preparing and washing of the body: “One or more people may conduct the washing of the body. Simple actions of body care, like preparing water for the bath, can take on new beauty and meaning. People often add essential oils such as frankincense, sandal wood, creosote, desert lavender, or chamomile, to the water. Care is often taken especially around the face, to ‘...wash the forehead cause people want to kiss and touch...’.” 14 Caring for the body of the deceased becomes a time of reflection, it was learned in the Practicum, with botanical scents and oils used to assist in rebalancing all with the earth.

We can’t look at death exclusively through a scientific lens. It is necessary to pay attention to traditional ways that often cross social or political boundaries in our communities. As beliefs about death blend with a desire for balance in our world, plants assume a rightful place in the end-of-life process, and become a hallmark of healing all on their own.

***

Iroquois Prayer

We return thanks to our mother, the earth, which sustains us.
We return thanks to the rivers and streams, which supply us with water.
We return thanks to all herbs, which furnish medicines for the cure of our diseases.
We return thanks to the moon and stars, which have given to us their light when the sun was gone…15
Did your family practice any form of folk healing traditions using herbs or other natural remedies?

Write below any recollections, expressions or ideas....