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# LANDSCAPES OF MEDICAL CULTURE FROM THE AMAZONIA OF ECUADOR

Savannah Sorensen

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Honors Thesis

LANDSCAPES OF MEDICAL CULTURE FROM THE AMAZONIA OF ECUADOR

By

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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation  
requirements for University Honors

Anthropology Department

Brigham Young University

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## ABSTRACT

### Landscapes of Medical Culture from the Amazonia of Ecuador

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Anthropology Department

Bachelor of Arts

This thesis examines the relationships between humans and plants in the Ecuadorian Amazon and the role relationships and nature play in the affliction and healing of illnesses and diseases. Through animism, spirituality, and rituals, the Quechua and Canelos groups foster a deep connection with the land and each other which plays an important role in traditional medicine and healing; this important connection with each other and the land constitutes the main premise of this paper, the sociality of healing. Many other cultures such as the Kalahari Kang, Samoans suffering from cardiovascular problems, and Evangelical Christians take on a similar approach to illness transcending the biological body. There is much to learn from socialized rather than individualistic beliefs and healing practices when treating diseases and illnesses.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## Existing Scholarship

In recent discussions of traditional healing, a widely debated topic has been whether or not animism, or the attribution of a soul to plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena, which gives them power and sway to carry out subjective healing, plays a part in the paradigm of ritualistic traditional healing (Lock, 2007). On one hand, some argue that it does not and that traditional healing exists independent of animism. Some even argue that there is no animism, to begin with. From this perspective, one sees more emphasis being placed on biological treatment, rather than animistic social healing. The distinction is made between treatment and healing by chronicling treatment in the context of South American *runa* as a physical remedy of illness or affliction either by consumption or the application of natural medicine to treat illness or affliction. On the other hand, some argue that healing is a ritualistic method of resolving illness or affliction oftentimes through socially constructed means. The academics who support this argument state that animism plays a crucial role in the healing of illness and affliction. Dr. Istvan Praet, one of the main advocates for the second view observes that the influential ritual model for Amazonia chronicles animism (Praet, 2015).

My view corroborates that of Praet. Though I recognize the validity in the arguments of the opposition, in that treatment does in fact detail the consumption and applications of herbs to treat illness and affliction to some biomedical or naturalistic extent, I believe the role these herbs and medicines play in treatment is connected much more complexly to traditional healing, and thus animism, when looked at through a traditional lens. Animism *and* the cultural significance of certain herbs and or natural medicines cannot be overlooked when examining their relevance in traditional and ritual

healing practices. Thus, my view on the topic draws together some views from both perspectives on the matter: yes, the herbs, etc. have a biological effect, but from an emic (or internal to the culture) point of view that effect is conditionally based on the soul or the intentions of the plant.

This issue of healing and the sociality of nature is important because as the Quichua culture in rural Ecuador becomes more and more modernized, it looks to incorporate both traditional healings as well as biomedical treatment in its Public Health Sectors so as not to deny medical treatment to more traditional peoples. Therefore, the significance of both traditional healing and natural remedied treatment, and the distinction between the two is important to understand for the formal infrastructure (government and health bodies) to blend the two ethically and meaningfully as they are incorporated throughout the country's rural population. By no means does this paper claim to resolve the debate in its entirety; the purpose of my paper is to share the topic with specific knowledge and clarity I gained from my research in and about a group residing in Tena, Ecuador.

Much scholarship exists on the topics of animism, pluralistic beliefs, and healing, as these topics relate to my central premise; Quichua relationships between the land and *runa* people determine and define much of traditional healing in the Ecuadorian Amazon. *Runa* is an ethnonym, in other words, a term Quichua people use to describe themselves.

Most notable of this existing scholarship is the ethnography *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* by Eduardo Kohn (2015). The ideas behind this book call into question our central assumptions about what it means to be human, and distinct from other forms of life. Through the observation of the interactions of creatures

who inhabit arguably the world's most complex ecosystem, Kohn comes to suggest the possibility of the existence of "other kinds of beings" (Kohn, 2015). This principle of existence and profound external understanding is most surely detected in the ways of life in the Amazon basin where nature is accredited with spirits, emotion, power, and the ability to react and act.

A central idea of Kohn's argument is that "when we turn our ethnographic attention to how we relate to other kinds of beings... [social] tools (which have the effect of divorcing us from the rest of the world) break down" (2015). Kohn shows the importance of understanding that what we (as outsiders) deem credible and plausible prohibits our understanding of a culture whose understanding of the complex ecosystem in question delves far beyond basic social understanding to spiritual connection and interrelatedness. To implement simple methods and attempts of understanding are not sufficient to grapple with a subject of this complexity and magnitude, and to do so is a flawed attempt at interacting with the ambiguous world. Kohn puts forward that one cannot and must not form reductionistic solutions to attempt to understand the unexplained world. To interact with this subject, one must lose sight of how our lives differ from the "strange and unexpected properties" of the living world itself (Kohn, 2015). Our lack of understanding of the connectedness and interaction between our world and unexpected properties directly opposes that of the Quichua understanding of nature. So, to fully comprehend this interaction we must distance ourselves from preconceived ideas of the normal and the abnormal.

To take on Kohn's recommended method for understanding the complex paradigm in question (which is distancing ourselves from our preconceived assumptions

of the world), one must first attempt to understand something common to us, social relationships. In the book *Volver a Nuestras Raíces: The Reemergence and Adaption of Traditional Forms of Andean Reciprocity* (2017), Henry F. Lyle adds context and understanding to the importance of human relationships in Amazonian culture. Lyle's ethnographic research focuses on the maintenance of common property institutions and social support networks among a small Quechua "agropastoralist" community in the *altiplano* (the high tableland) of southern Peru (2017). *Campesinos* or peasant farmers must come together often to institute breeding programs for their cattle. This collective action is coupled with the individual gardens and herds of certain families which rely on other households for survival. Lyle uses symbolic capitalist theory and models of indirect punishment to explain the deeply embedded social nature of reciprocity and relationships in the rural Andean region. Thus, Social dependence is a cultural tradition in many rural communities in the region.

In this narrative, Lyle presents compelling observations from this small community that show group and dyadic cooperation. These cooperative elements of society emphasize collective action, support networks, social relations, and traditional Andean reciprocity. These important elements of human social relationships extend even further to the reciprocity between land and nature, beyond the human, as Kohn explained. This idea of animism and the existence of relationships between the human and seemingly inanimate are ideas that Kohn described as outside of our understanding. We should not attribute reductionistic explanations for these ideas, but rather attempt to understand elements of cultural significance far beyond our understanding of the functions of the world around us.

Libbet Crandon presents further research which solidifies the bond between social process and healing in this region of the world. In the ethnography *Medical Dialogue and the Political Economy of Medical Pluralism: a case from rural highland Bolivia*, Crandon explains that in environments that are both ethnically and medically pluralistic, medical dialogue is an arena in which political and economic processes take place (1986). Through medical dialogue, the content of ethnic identity is constructed and negotiated. This complexity makes medical dialogue a window through which one can view social processes. Although Libbet's ethnography focuses almost completely on the dichotomy in medical anthropology which divides medical systems into "traditional" and "modern," her unique approach to the sociality of traditional healing provides interesting ideas as to how sociality fits into the bigger paradigm of healing on both a modern and traditional medical scale (1986). Ultimately, Crandon presents social process as essential in the carrying out and understanding of the culture of traditional healing.

The above-listed academics present cases for understanding social relationships in rural Ecuadorian culture, the existence of animism and functions of the world outside of an outsider's initial realm of understanding, as well as the plausibility of the social being detrimentally present in the idea of traditional medicine and healing. These ideas work together to form the precis of my argument; by exemplifying elements of the sociality of traditional medicine that others have recorded and documented, I hope to present a framework by which sociality, animism, and healing work together in a complex system of belief and even reciprocity.

### **Introduction**

I am interested in chronicling a Quichua approach to the treatment of illness and/or affliction. The interactions in this paper exemplify an important aspect of healing

or medical culture and the complex understanding of illness and affliction amongst a specific Quichuan Napo community. The *runa* (a term which refers to the indigenous tribes of the region collectively) community (located approximately 13 kilometers from the nearest town, Tena), explains these happenings to be a result of socially or naturally caused contention or disruption. The Quichua people who constitute the subjects of this study ascribe a connection between social feelings, relationships, and nature of the surrounding environment in the causation of illness or sickness and its resolution. This paper specifically looks to present evidence and observations about the domain of Quichua traditional healing culture; this is a holistic system of social, spiritual, and nature-driven healing. In order to do this, I will make and explore the following claim: the source of much affliction in Quichua culture is social, therefore the solutions are social, and the healing of these is carried out through cultivating positive relationships with the land. It is important to note from the beginning that the terms “healing” and “illness” constitute different meanings to the way western culture defines these terms. Furthermore, there is a possible lack of distinction between inter-person relationships and relationships between a person and nature. In attempting to understand traditional healing amongst the Quichua, it is significant to recognize the possibility of social, spiritual, or physical/biological origin of illness or affliction.

My research will work with documentation (mainly videos of stories) from the Andes and Amazon Field School by Dr. Tod Dillon Swanson, an Associate Professor at Arizona State University. He is the Director of the Andes and Amazon Field School and is responsible for much of the primary content this paper will interact with. He is a specialist in Amazonian culture and environment (2021).

## Context

This research focuses on a group of people who reside in the small rural town of Tena, Ecuador. This town is located in the Napo Province or tropical rainforest section of Ecuador, just east of the Andes Mountains. This small town is home to a number of the Amazonian Quichua and Canelos communities. When coming to understand these communities, one must look at their cultural systems since the people in these communities place great emphasis on knowledge of their environment, a knowledge based on the belief that birds, animals, spirits, ancestors, plants, and water also have their spirits and speech (Nuckolls and Swanson, 2020). The Quichua people represent a diverse cultural and ethnic group whose memories, myths, and ancestor's tales trace their origins in the direction in which their major river flows (eastward). Some people refer to their eastward origin with the term *sapi*, this can be translated as 'root,' 'beginning,' and metaphorically implies 'origin' (Nuckolls and Swanson, 2020). The interconnectedness of origin and nature exemplifies a great emphasis placed on the Ecuadorian landscape and how it intertwines with Quichua identity and culture.

## Argument Construction

### *The Sociality of Affliction and Healing*

In Quichua culture, affliction and healing can often be accredited to social circumstances. Illness or sickness is, often, a product of social contention or social upheaval whether this is between people or the land. In conversation with a professor, I came across a story of a woman who had been hit by "magical flying darts." The woman sought out the advice of a *yachak* or shaman because her family became sick. As the only person in her family not afflicted by this flu-like illness, it became clear to the woman

that her family had been targeted by the “flying darts” of another. When I inquired as to the relevance of these “darts,” it turned out that these are not physical darts, but darts of a sort of bewitchment (I use this term loosely) or bad energy which causes misfortune to the person on the receiving end of them. The reasons one would inflict these darts on another person result from one of two things, the first is jealousy and the second is as a means of revenge.

In this paper I am going to concentrate on the ways by which socially derived illness, often health-oriented is healed. In this case, one seeks out a healer or shaman for their power and broader understanding of the happenings of the world, and mastery of elemental and societal manipulation which enables one to rid themselves of these purported darts. The shaman exercises power over the extenuating circumstances which somewhat touch on the magical. This can happen in several ways.

Shamans hold a significant place in society in that this profession provides a valuable contribution to society (Praet, 2009). Ayahuasca, a psychoactive brew, is consumed by a shaman in order for it to take him on a spiritual journey in which he receives revelation of a sort, on a given topic in question. Often the driving force behind taking the Ayahuasca is in search of resolution. Shamans use this drink to seek the origin of the illness or affliction, including searching to know who had stolen other’s possessions, or how to heal an ill child. Ayahuasca can be taken by an individual in an attempt to cure more serious physical illnesses and suppress pain (Praet, 2009). The main purpose one would use this herb or seek out a shaman’s expertise would be to resolve illnesses, problems, or imbalance in one’s life which can have a social origin.

*Case Study 1: “A Wild Cacao Tree Kills a Man”*

The following is a Pastaza Quichua narrative of how a *puka kamibiaj* or wild cacao tree kills a man for taking its fruit without asking permission. This video was recorded in June 2010 and translated by Tod Swanson. The video interview is 3 minutes and 11 seconds long. This interview takes place at Iyarina, a field school about 13 kilometers from the town of Tena.

[Eulodia Dagua's description of the narrative in Quichua]

The following is a transcript of the interaction between the video's participants (Tod and Eulodia). It has been translated into English by Tod Swanson:

Eulodia: At first, he went to his wife. As he finished with his wife, he caught many fish with *barbasco*. When he said, "now you go ahead and clean fish." When he said that...when he said that...his wife went to be at home cleaning the fish. Then he said I am going to go looking for game. Circling around looking for the game like this [Eulodia moving as if searching]. Having said that he went killed a *peccary* and then he killed a *currasau*. As he was going home after killing, he looked up and saw a *puka kamibiaj* tree bearing fruit that was not just here (low down). Since it was bearing like that he would climb up and just eat. He put the *peccary* down like this and the *currasau* like this [acting out placing something aside], so he climbed up, way up and began taking the fruit. While he was gathering, the tree spirit came then knocked him down and killed him. Being killed he did not show up, did not show up. He did not show up, he did not arrive home. Why doesn't he come? He should have come home quickly. In the afternoon when the sun was low, she went to look but when his wife went to look, he had already long been killed. Her husband lay there having been dead for quite some time. The dead game is still there along with her dead husband. Seeing this his wife ran to tell people that whoever takes this *kambi* fruit dies. It is the *kambi* tree *supai* that killed my husband. He kills because he doesn't want to share his *kambi* fruit. This is how they say the story goes. [Tod asks something in Pastaza Quichua]

Eulodia: Yes, he killed that man because he didn't want to share the fruit. That's why people should be careful when eating the *kambi* fruit when there is a lot of it, that's what our elders... say, this is how the *kambi* fruit kills. That is what my father used to tell us.

[Tod asks something more]

Eulodia: No. This is it, there only this story. Mhmm this is how they have told it.

This is how our elders have told us this story.

[Tod asks about the *supai*]

Eulodia: umm, well, it goes like this: I am drinking your *kambita*, I'm only taking a little bit, I am not drinking a lot. Saying that is how one should drink this *kambi*. That's how one should drink this. Then he can't do any harm. He kills saying it is like gathering leaves.

[Tod speaks again]

Eulodia: you should speak with him like this. I am not taking a lot of *kambi* fruit. Saying, I am only taking a small amount [she speaks directly to the tree with her hand places on the bark]. One should climb saying don't do anything to me. While saying one should also caress the tree like so [strokes the bark with her hand]. Doing and saying this he told us, saying that we must do this to be safe. (iyarinapamba, "Eulodia Dagua, 'A Wild Cacao Tree Kills a Man.'" 00:00-03:11)

Eulodia's interaction with this tree details a series of events in which a person performs a specific interaction with a tree in order to bring about the desired outcome of physical safety. I think it is interesting here to understand the emphasis placed on the abilities of the tree according to your interaction with it. I found it fascinating that the ritual was described as reciprocal. The tree interacts just as much as the human in the given circumstance. I found here a link between elements of the social and spiritual and well-being, in that this ritual looks toward a source of death outside of a mundane realm of understanding.

In the account *Boiling Energy: Community Healing among the Kalahari Kung* (1982) by Richard Katz, we see this common idea that the health of a body is reflective of social health again. Kung healers perform ritual healing dances which exemplify the broad applicability of this idea that it is common for a group to focus on the social health of the individual. The example of this group shows that the *runa* of Ecuador are not alone in their belief of the sociality of illness, but rather, many groups including the Kung of the Kalahari Desert in Africa embrace this same outlook on illness. One can then be led to

conclude that a lot of other groups contrast with our very individualized outlook on health.

Another interaction that exemplifies the sociality of nature, but this case in its ability to heal (dependent on your interaction with it), is the case of the “tumor tree.”

### *Case Study 2: The Tumor Tree*

This narrative was documented by Tod Swanson in 2011 and Eloudia is the Quichua narrator again here:

Tamia Yura or Chawata Lulun is a caulicolous tree whose trunk becomes covered with round fruits. These fruits are compared to boils or tumors covering human skin. Because of this similarity, it is believed that tumors can be passed from the tree’s body to the human body or visa-versa through emotional intimacy. On the one hand, a person can be cured of tumors by causing the tree to feel an emotional bond toward them (llakichina) such that it takes the human tumor into itself. Conversely, the tree can pass its tumors to a human being it resents. In general, the tumors are passed from tree to human in a cross-gender fashion. If a male tree senses that an attractive human woman is repulsed by his tumor-covered bark, he may resent her. The resentful attraction creates a negative bond through which the tree’s tumors can be transferred to the woman. In order to prevent tumors from being transferred women treat the tree as a resentful man who wants to dance. Each time they come across such a tree they untie their hair as though they were preparing for a dance. Swishing their hair back and forth they say, “Come and dance brother!

(Then) That is all I am going to dance brother.

(First) You say “Come and dance brother.”

After that (you say) That is as much as I am going to dance

Our bodies become covered with boils

If we dance like that the boils do not emerge

Therefore, we ask that Chawata turtle egg tree dance

So that the boils will not come out

We danced to him every time we met him

Saying “come and dance brother.”

After that, we go to the chakra or wherever.

If you do have a tumor you dance in order to not have it ever again.

That is what that medicine is good for.

It is the turtle egg fruit

Whenever/where ever we meet him

Saying come and dance brother  
We ask him to dance  
Then we don't get tumors  
If we don't ask him to dance  
Anything might grow on our skin  
Lump after lump because of this tree  
That is why we go to our chakras  
Laughing (teasing, flirting)  
Dancing with an ashanga (basket on our backs).” (Swanson, 2011)

In Quichua culture, healing is oftentimes considered a social or spiritual practice rather than a biologically accredited one. I argue that ritual healing among the Amazonian Quichua extends even further than animism to encompass an imperative level of spirituality, which in turn affects the social structure of the people. We see this with the *supai* in the killing tree story and now again with the tumor tree's ability to interact with a person. In Quichua culture, there is reciprocity or communicative acts which lack identification with a static self. This Tumor Tree ritual is an exchange. The *Runa* impart this idea of reciprocity for themselves as health is part of reciprocity in this exchange. Exchange system. All institutions have a mentality that everything moves back and forth as if a constant spiritual exchange. People exchange each other and themselves.

It is significant to note here that the spirituality encompassed in healing is not exclusive to the *runa* people. The book *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (2004) by R. Marie Griffith provides evidence to support the idea that in some evangelical forms of Christianity in America the body spiritually transcends nature as well. The beliefs of Evangelical Christians (like to the *runa*) are compared to Pentecostal Christians who harbor a more Western view of health which allows the reader to see that there is an inescapable link between the “flesh” and the “spirit” which

ultimately surfaces from the “roots” of that which is around you—the external circumstances which contribute to your health and wellness. Therefore, the *runa* are not alone in placing importance on the harmony between nature and a person in that even Evangelical Christians in America held many similar beliefs on the topic.

When describing *runa* religion and belief systems there is spiritual dualism in the presence of mainstream religion, often Christianity, and then an embedded belief in nature and the land. Thus, this explains the nature of the trust put into the tree (in the ritual above) to treat and heal something man often cannot, an affliction such as cancer. Something man often cannot. These two belief systems (mainstream religion, and the belief in the land) co-exist without widespread conflict or confusion. While I spent some time in Ecuador, I learnt that shamans or traditional healers were figures who also watched over Anglican church proceedings at times. While not delving into the comprehensive subject of this, I mention this to exemplify the plural nature of religion and the mystical or spiritual. The idea of this spiritual dualism encourages belief in the process of tangible traditional healing as described in the story of the tumor tree above. The faith or belief in the powers of nature is plausibly the driving motive for the widespread trust in traditional healing.

In this tumor tree story, we note that people recognize gender in elements of nature and ascribe faith in the elements they deem worthy of it. The tumor tree is ascribed this faith because it presents a threat in its ability to infect you with tumors or boils, but also denotes a sense of respect because according to your adherence to the ritual described above, you can also have your affliction taken from you. Whether this healing process is effective or not is not considered by the *runa*. In this case, merely performing the ritual is

considered the significant element of this interaction because it facilitates or strengthens your bond to the land. This is effective regardless of the healing involved because it builds upon your connection to the land and is determined by your connection to the land is the way it treats you. This is a fascinating idea because as we have seen through the tumor contraction story the land can transfer misfortunes and illness upon you. Similar to interactions between humans, the way you treat them is in turn how you can expect them to treat you. This is an unspoken social law amongst the Ecuadorian *runa*. This brings to mind the closely cultivated relationships which allow this spiritual bond with nature to occur. Thus, relationships with the land play a huge part in traditional healing modalities.

#### *Relationships with the Land and Their Effect on Healing*

All the above categories of healing or misfortune amongst the Quichua people detail an invaluable connection with the *runa* land. Thus, it is not a stretch to say that carefully cultivated, positive relationships between individuals and the land are of utmost importance to the success of traditional healing modalities. It is a common Quichua belief that the relationship one cultivates with the land, in turn, dictates the way the land will treat (in some cases, heal) you. For example, the success of this ritual healing practice of the tumor tree is dependent on the nature of the bond you form with the tree, either when passing it (in fear of infection) or when looking to unload your affliction onto the tree. This tree is said to have the ability to ascribe or remove/transfer boils or growths of any kind depending entirely on the relationship you cultivate with it. Thus, the bond referenced here is more specifically a relationship between the healer and healed, of which both sides participate equally. The interaction of one individual with the other is confronted here as one whereby the tree is ascribed human or even divine-like

characteristics. Like one praying to a God for healing, one physically interacts with the tree to secure desired results. This interaction or connection is one I found in my analysis of many aspects of Quichua healing mentioned in this paper.

Thus, the *runa* relationships with plants and elements of nature are an imperative and irreplaceable part of the *runa* healing culture. During my time in Ecuador, it was made evident to me that the way the land treats you can easily be seen as directly indicative of the way you treat it.

One such example of this is Eulodia Dagua explaining how she wakes up a tree out of respect before harvesting its' bark for medicine. The video interview is both filmed and translated by Tod Swanson.

*Case Study 3: "Why I Wake Up the Tree to Harvest Its Medicine"*

The video is 1 minute and 12 seconds long. The transcription of the English translation and reads as follows:

Tod: You knocked on the tree a little. Why did you knock on the tree a little?

Eulodia: Well, he... I wake him up to take (his bark) because the owner is sleeping. I woke him up thinking that if I take (his bark) while he is sleeping it won't heal me. I wake him up to take it. In order to ask (him) to give it to me. Then he will. Just like they politely ask healers to blow their breath (on the medicine they give) that is just how I am taking (this medicine). Yes. That is why I knock (on the tree). He is a doctor. He is like a doctor. In the dream, he is like a regular city doctor. That is why. He is a person, so I wake him up to take it. Since he is like a doctor.

Tod: If you wake him up, he blows?

Eulodia: yes. He blows. Yes. And he will give you a shot. He will give you medicine pills. He will treat you. Or otherwise, if blowing is what is needed, he will blow.

Tod: So, as you see it, he sleeps in the day?

Eulodia: Yes, they are asleep of course. All trees sleep in the day. It is at night that they will wake up. (Swanson, 2019)

We must recognize the relationship or bond between Eulodia and this tree. In this interview, she treats the tree with the utmost respect. She wakes it up, politely asks to be

healed and the tree delivers her desire according to her treatment of it. The principle of positive cultivation of the land being indicative of its flourishing for you extends to both nourishment (as one would reap produce to eat from a *Chagra*) or in healing as exemplified in the ritual of waking up the tree. Runa relations to plants in the Ecuadorian Amazon and the importance and reality of these relationships (that between nature and a human) are exemplified by the belief that plant species evolve from a previously human state in which the plants were (in one case) lovers or children who became estranged. This suggests that plant species have a past which explains their human attributes and need for connection now. The human element ascribed to plants then allows for the cultivation of understanding that their significance in healing is directly resultant of the ritual bond one forms with the elements in question.

There is a certain element of ritual healing that places importance on being in homeostasis with nature. Instead of health and nature being two separate spheres of thought, the *runa* intertwine them. The book *Beyond the Body Proper: Reading the Anthropology of Material Life* by Margaret Lock and Judith Farguhar examples this further by showing that there is no singular, discrete biological organism with an individual psyche. The embodiment of nature is instead, dynamic, not static, meaning that it is shaped by experiences, discourses, and practices in an evolving cycle. So instead of being a singular simple organism, we have a multiplicity of bodies that change according to different modes of embodiment. Similar to the *runa*, Lock and Farguhar detail the body to be multiple “porus,” a part of nature and a part of the social body as well. This again looks to break down any simple explanations we may have for illness because it shows a much bigger paradigm at play.

Having said this, one cannot ignore the fact that in the ritual of the medicine tree Eulodia refers to the tree as a doctor and its bark as medicine. She says, “I am taking (this medicine),” “he is a doctor...in the dream, he is like a regular city doctor,” “he blows...and will give you a shot. He will give you medicine pills. He will treat you. Or otherwise, if blowing is what is needed, he will blow” (Swanson, 2019). Amongst the Quichua, nature has the ability to heal. This tree is a doctor to Eulodia. It encompasses the qualities of healing like pills, shots (injections), and medicine. The tree also possesses the power to heal which parallels a city physician. The presence of medical duality is made evident in these statements by Eulodia.

The question which is then begged here is most likely, why not go to a city physician or rely exclusively on nature as medicine. The answer is this: the relationship factor in traditional healing encompasses a spiritual element and provides an important connection with *runa* land that biomedical treatment does not. The element of trust in practices such as the tumor tree ritual or waking up of the tree supersede newer biomedical treatments because of their nature of connection and cultural importance. There is a huge amount of emphasis on rituals such as this place on tying together a people and their greater landscape and tradition. These rituals are not about the effectiveness as such, they are about spiritual and social connection and harmony with the land. There is an element of the spiritual included in Quichua healing modalities, and this could plausibly explain its steadfastness in the developing nature of healthcare treatment in rural Ecuador; the idea of a plural medical system is present instead of one system replacing the last.

During my time in Ecuador, I was able to observe the inclusion of Quichua traditional healing modalities in the Public Health sector of the area surrounding Tena, and in the

Chunta Punta region. Here I accompanied medics and traditional healers on community visits for high-risk patients in the area. The patients' illnesses ranged from a variety of fungal diseases, pre-mature pregnancies, to paralyzed individuals, and even those with tumors and growths. In at least six of the eight home visits made each on a single day, the patient would request herbal remedies in corroboration with the use of prescription meds, which the former is not considered to be. These come in the form of teas made from specific plants such as the *Tehatina* plant, which is a trusted herb that is said to soothe pain or the *Sasila* which is put on open wounds as a disinfectant.

These observations showed me that health practices even in clinics associated with Quichuan people draw on trust towards spiritual or land-based healing. I got the feeling that this prioritization derives from three main sources: Distrust or incomplete belief in political healthcare frameworks. A lack of adequate access to health care facilities. And generationally embedded trust in certain hereditary practices. These hereditary practices include the tumor tree ritual, as this information is taught by kin.

Like the tumor tree, other trees play a role in the greater picture of healing. While in Ecuador, I was told a story about a connection to trees coming into play during the birth of a child. At first, I was surprised by what vertical births had to do with trees and how this connection was made, however, further in the story I understood the relevance of it. This woman argued with her extended family and husband the day she was meant to give birth, and because she was angry with them when her labor started, she retreated outside to deliver her child. She did so on her own, by throwing a piece of material over the branch of a tree which she clung to both ends of and hung onto while her child was delivered. The purpose of this story was not to emphasize the Quichua practice of vertical

births but to exemplify to me that because of a carefully cultivated relationship with the land in her independent birth, the tree was able to provide the support and structure needed to deliver the child. The idea of this interdependent relationship between nature and a person is something I have pondered on countless times as I reread my data. There is a definite give and take associated with cultivating relationships with the land.

The significance of these rituals is emphasized in them being incorporated with biomedical treatment in the medical pluralism of rural Ecuadorian Public Health clinics. After I was taught the significance of this birthing technique (although not in the context of clinical use), I discovered that in Quichua culture vertical births are prioritized due to the practice being passed down through generations. It, like the tumor tree ritual, is a hereditary practice. I was able to direct my research to the passing down of ritual knowledge and healing based on this conclusion and feel as if it redirected my approach to my fieldwork.

During my visit to a Public Health clinic in the Chunta Punta area, I discovered that it now looks to implement this vertical birth practice into its wider system. The clinic distributes vertical birth apparatus and speakers of the Quichua language to its more rural clinics to encourage Quichua participation in the formal sector of healthcare treatment (Fig. 2). This most exemplifies the idea that when seeking medical treatment, the elements of spirituality and tradition which Quichua health practices entail are not easily parted with. This is incentive enough for the government to distribute traditionally inspired apparatus to government-run clinics around the country. In the healing process of Quichua births, there are many herbs, teas, and props which these health centers further look to implement cross-country.

### *The Role of Herbs, Props, and Ornaments*

Quichua traditional healing practices encompass the use of ornaments, herbs, and/or props, which are considered essential in the carrying out of ritual healing. The tumor tree ritual described above ascribes the central focus of the ritual to be the *ruya* or tree (see Fig.1). Quichua ritual healing categorically chronicles the presence of a naturally derived prop such as this tree to be representative of a larger macrocosm, for example, spirits of the forest or earth from which they draw their power.

The most notable example of this would be that the *supai* killing the man in the story of his greed concerning the fruit. The tree is a powerful entity due to its possession of a powerful spirit. The tree has influence. This story outlines both animistic and physical respect that is further exemplified by the use of leaves in sweeping practices in which the power of the leaves is said to literally “sweep away” affliction, or the use of *runa* tobacco where tobacco smoke is used to blow away sickness or cleanse someone of illness in a wind-like motion (iyarinapamba, “Eulodia Sweeping Taili” 0:00-1:10). There is an understanding present in the capabilities of nature to rid you of your illness, for example, the tree from the “Waking Up the Tree” interview being able to cure you if a specific ritual protocol is adhered to. This protocol relies on the props used whether it be specific leaves used for sweeping or “A face painted with water animals to resist sickness” described by Eulodia Dagua. She states that in order to become resistant to sickness, she paints her face with water animals that resist barbasco fish poison (Swanson, 2013).

Similarly, in the tumor tree ritual, there is an obligation of the interactant to establish a relationship or bond with the central character of the ritual, in this case, the tumor tree, through dancing or “the playing of drums.” This takes place in order for the person in question to prevent themselves from getting infected with these boils or growths from the

tree. Not only is a sense of respect established at the giving end of the person involved in the interactive ritual described above. This tree is said to have the ability to give or remove/transfer boils or growths of any kind, according to the relationship this performance induces. The focus of the ritual described in the tumor tree case study, as well as the use of leaves for sweeping being interactions with seemingly inanimate objects, supports the view that the use of nature-related props is commonplace in Quichua traditional healing.

This relationship between nature-related props and healing led me to believe that the influential ritual model for the Amazonia chronicles animism, or the attribution of a soul to plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena, which gives them power and sway to carry out subjective healing. The objective of the tumor tree liturgy is to impress the almost human *Sacha Ruya* or forest spirit. This spirit is accredited a gender, a soul, and respect, and is said to inhabit certain trees of significance which they choose according to their past life experiences. For example, the *Sacha Ruya* spirit was once a man, who because of his greed turned into a spirit. He was a physically strong man in his youth and so the trees it inhabits are also substantial in stature. Spirits such as the *Sacha Ruya* maintain unrivaled power and influence amongst the Quichua people. This spiritual element adds a transcendent nature to the Quechuan traditional mode of socially influenced healing through combining animism with higher belief. It is important to note here that I am not the only one to claim this. In *Singing to the Plants: A Guide to Mestizo Shamanism in the Upper Amazon* (2010), Stephan V. Beyer gives further evidence for my claim as he describes the *runa* practices of placing people in trees and healing people through nature. This thesis shows how spiritual elements work with nature and our bodies

to reach a sense of harmony between kin, body, and nature, which allows healing to take place.

To end I will use a concrete example of the ideas I have put forward in this paper. Type II Diabetes can be caused by social circumstances. Stress, a lack of sleep, and poor food choices can be almost entirely related to the social circumstances of one's family. Similarly, in *Faith and the Pursuit of Health: Cardiometabolic Disorders in Samoa* by Jessica Hardin we are taught that cardiovascular issues in Samoa are intimately related to stress. Oftentimes, we feel stress socially. Again, this evidence only adds to my belief in the idea that we cannot ignore the social impacts on diseases because they are dire. We have also seen this just recently in the social perpetuation of COVID-19, a close-to-home embodiment of this sociality of disease. From the Kung to the Samoans, to the *runa*, people deal with and own each other's health; this is something the rest of the world can learn from. These cultures can contribute to and enlighten our understanding of medicine and health if only we are open-minded enough to learn.

### **Conclusion**

The arguments pressed in this paper demand a certain degree of open-mindedness which is necessary for the onlooker to understand the context and nature of ritual healing and traditional medicine in Quichua culture (Heuvel). Perspectivism in the sense that our knowledge of the subject as a whole is inevitably partial and limited by the individual perspective from which it is viewed, and thus our lens is incapable of fully grasping the concept at hand. It is with this knowledge that I understand my research is limited. This is not a means to say that Quichua ritual healing is in any way limited, only that the effectiveness and cultivation of this animism are reliant on the spiritual understanding of

the capability of the land and belief in its power. This is a concept quite different in Quichua culture when compared to the partial understanding of this in varying external trains of thought.

In Quichua culture, illness or sickness is, more often than not, a product of social contention or social upheaval. Thus, because the source of illness or affliction is social, the solutions are social. Healing is oftentimes then considered a social or spiritual practice rather than simply a biological one. This connection between the spiritual and healing is made through the development of social relationships, often with the land. Relationships with the land then play a huge part in Quichuan traditional healing modalities. These traditional healing modalities encompass a spiritual element and provide an important connection with *runa* land which my observations show is plausibly lacking in the biological treatment alone.

Furthermore, this paper suggests the necessity of a social and spiritual element in healing, as an essential aspect of culture amongst this specific group of Quichua people. [As a clarification point, I use the term “spiritual” as synonymous with Quichua speakers’ indigenous animism]. This form of (traditional) healing requires a bond or connection with the land; the traditional healing practices described in this paper encompass the use of ornaments, herbs, and/or props, which are considered essential in the carrying out of ritual healing. This is to exemplify the bond with, and respect for nature, in this culture, as nature is accredited to the power of healing. One’s cultivated relationship with the land then determines the significance of the healing practice as they affect or influence the patient. So the patient’s active role in healing is emphasized just as much as the “treatment” which is administered or performed by the patient, or a third party.

The objective of this research is to present evidence and observations that address and accurately present a domain of the culture of Quichuan traditional healing. Although I understand my research is limited in that it does not present Quichua traditional healing culture in its entirety, I believe this paper details briefly, significant aspects of this healing culture which can be simply understood through my experience with them. Traditional healing in Quichua culture is a holistic system of social, spiritual, and nature-driven effects. The general ideas behind the claims I presented merely detail important aspects of Quichua medical culture, which is unilaterally driven by respect for the land and its power over us as human entities. Throughout my research, this elevation of the land and its effect on us is something I came to greatly admire. I appreciated the emphasis placed on its importance and the idea that the way you treat the world around you affects your health, mental state, and social circumstances. This most notably references the interconnectedness of our actions on our circumstances both internal and external, I believe there is a great cause to link this idea in Quichua culture to many similar ideas seen across a broad spectrum of other cultures, such as unspoken social rules in British upper-class culture, or *Karma* as seen in many Indian societies. For example, the concept of *Karma* (put most simply) is a sort of destiny or fate which follows as effect from cause. This relates to Quichua thought, because how you treat the land determines how the land treats you, *Karma* of a sort. This brief thought was something I came to consider repeatedly during my research on Ecuador.

The concluding thought I would like to make in this paper focuses on the interrelatedness of the aspects of Quichua traditional healing described above. These important elements of healing culture cannot exist without each other, and not only are

they interrelated, but dependent on one another. Social relationships are the source of a need for healing, these are also how one can resolve their illnesses or afflictions, the land determines the “worthiness” of your actions taken in an attempt to be healed. Traditional healing then encompasses both a spiritual and social element and provides an important connection with *runa* land, because social relationships are formed with the land for healing to take place. These relationships with the land serve a social function.

### **Personal Significance**

While writing this thesis I got terribly sick and was diagnosed with an illness that required me to have several surgeries and spend many nights in the hospital and the emergency room. Through the two years (plus) that I was exceptionally sick, I came to recognize the significance of the social circumstances of health which either added to or lessened the burden of my sickness. I find this research relevant because I recognized a strong presence of this sociality of health in my own life. Sometimes I was sick but also felt alone and isolated, which not only worsened the state of my bodily illness but had a further adverse effect on my mind and mental health. Therefore, I have come to understand mental health and social health as integral parts of my overall health. I discovered that my health is not just my body or my illness, it is also the social relationships I have that contribute to the state of my illness. Similar to the *runa*, who look at illness as a community concern and see health through a holistic lens (as in how trees, people, kin, and community contribute to health), so should we. I feel the *runa* are more in tune with the social and environmental aspects of health than I am, and perhaps modern medicine is as the whole. The *runa* are deeply invested in their health and the

health of those in their communities. These are qualities and knowledge I hope to prioritize in my own life and health going forward.

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## Appendix A: Photo Gallery

Leonia crassas (Violaceae); Quichua: tamia yura



*Figure 1. The Tumor Tree Showing a “Boil” or Fruit—Resembling a Growth (Swanson, 2011)*



*Figure 2. Quichua Vertical Birth Apparatus in the Chontapunta Public Health Center (Sorensen, 2019)*