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**CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS
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Bonesetters from Tecpán Guatemala. Who are they and where to find them

Byron Fernando García Astorga

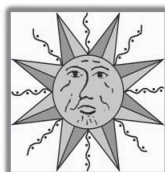
We present to our readers the new name of the Center for Folklore Studies -CEFOL- now called the Center for Cultural Studies in Guatemala.

The Center for Cultural Studies in Guatemala was established on July 8th, 1967, by a resolution of the Honorable University Council of the Universidad San Carlos de Guatemala under the name “Center for Folklore Studies”. Over time, and in accordance with the social context of various historical events, it became necessary to make different changes. Therefore, after a collaborative effort among researchers, directors of the Center, and other units of USAC, with the support of Rector Ing. Murphy Olympo Paíz Recinos, the University Council, reviewed and approved, on July 24th, 2019, the new designation of CEFOL as the Center for Cultural Studies in Guatemala – CECEG-.

In the newsletter you are holding in your hands, you will still find the name Center for Folklore Studies. This is because the article presented here is the result of research conducted by the authors in 2018. However, the entire team is pleased to share the news that our research unit is now called the CENTER FOR CULTURAL STUDIES IN GUATEMALA.



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Resumen

Los hueseros por mucho tiempo han sido personas que se han dedicado a ayudar a pacientes con afecciones musculares, torceduras y quebraduras. Su práctica se ha visto diluida por el paso del tiempo y en la mayoría de los casos se confunde con el quehacer de un curandero u otro médico tradicional. Las regiones donde pueden ser ubicados y claramente separados de sus homólogos son muy escasas, por lo que es necesario reivindicar el que hacer e importancia de estas personas. Más importante es entender cómo se inicia un médico tradicional y cómo este fenómeno puede ser abordado desde distintas orientaciones. Cómo se forma un médico tradicional es vital para su actuar y posicionamiento dentro de los líderes comunitarios en las aldeas y centros urbanos de los municipios, por lo que es imperante el reconocimiento y ubicación de estas personas para poder establecer quiénes son y dónde encontrarlos. De la misma forma, en Tecpán se separa y distingue un huesero de un sobador, por lo que su ubicación geográfica es de gran importancia para los estudios de la medicina tradicional en Guatemala dentro de las investigaciones del Centro de Estudios Folklóricos de la Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala.

Palabras clave: Guatemala, Tecpán, Hueseros, sobadores, medicina, tradicional

Abstract

Bonesetters for a long time have been people who have dedicated themselves to helping patients with muscle disorders, strains, and breaks. Its practice has been diluted by time and in most cases is confused with what to do as a traditional healer or doctor. The regions where they can be located and separated from their counterparts are very scarce, so it is necessary to vindicate what they do and the importance of these people. More importantly to understand how a traditional healer starts and how this phenomenon can be approached from different orientations. As a traditional healer is trained, it is vital for their actions and positioning within the community leaders in the villages and urban centers of the municipalities, so the recognition and location of these people are imperative to establish who they are and where to find them. In the same way, Tecpán separates and distinguishes a bonesetter from a massage therapist, so its geographical location is of great importance for the study of traditional medicine in Guatemala within the research of the Folkloric Studies Center of the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala.

Keywords: Guatemala, *Tecpán*, Bonesetter, Massage therapists, medicine, traditional

Bonesetters from Tecpán Guatemala. Who are they and where to find them

Those interested in delving deeper into the generalized beliefs about traditional healers in Guatemala can find information regarding the history and practices of the bonesetters and massage therapists from *Tecpán* Guatemala in the magazine *Tradiciones de Guatemala* of the Folkloric Studies Center (CEFOL) of the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala.

It is important that readers comprehend and understand that traditional healer arise and develop in a space, although similar to that of many current or modern doctors, it is different since the spiritual and traditional component contains elements of persistence that, in synergy with modern practices and methods, cultivates and elevates the prominent role of these figures in rural communities.

The case of the bonesetters of *Tecpán* involves the Mes Montalván family, Fernando Cumes, and the massage therapist Leticia Alba, who are the traditional healers that can be found, among others, in the urban center of the municipality of *Tecpán* in the department of Chimaltenango.

The family Mes Montalván, composed of grandfather, children, and grandchildren, is one of the most recommended and referred to, as it has the experience of three generations that continues to the present days.

At the moment of developing the methodology and tools used, grounded theory was employed to comprehend the universe where their social actors operate.

The Individuals interviewed were selected for their significant relevance within the community of *Tecpán* Guatemala, and their significance regarding the popular phenomenon of the “awakening”.

The “awakening” or “initiation” each one experienced at their time is recorded in the following pages to attempt to provide value or tribute to the traditional and popular practices of traditional medicine within the space of traditional healers.

Results: initiation or awakening of a traditional healer

When phenomena and elements of traditional medicine are described, particularly in relation to traditional healers, It often begins with the initiation of a healer.

These traditional healers obtain their “initiation” through illness that reveals to them the path and orientation they must follow, as comprehend the mysticism and symbolism of their illness.

Often, illness presents its meanings through fevers or fainting that bring dreams that “initiate” the path to healing and “show” the role the individual will play within the universe of traditional healers.

The theory regarding this event dates to the annals of anthropology and history. As Lagarrica (2000) mentions, traditional medicine is the one transmitted through oral knowledge from generation to generation. It is precisely dynamic that remains

within the bonesetters from *Tecpán*.

To complement this paradigm on the generational dynamic of traditional medicine, Chifa (2010) states that sociologists have concluded that traditional medical practices have been relegated by Latin American governments, at the time have been exploited by indigenous cultures that have prioritized a worldview centered on nature and, through transmitted skills, have learned to understand and heal diseases.

Similarly, the WHO (2001) mentions that the therapeutic activity of traditional healers primarily involves the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of physical and mental diseases.

These assertions can transmit to the reader that traditional medicine develops in rural areas or typically among Indigenous descendants, where empiricism and the learning of caregiving patterns based on oral traditions perpetuate these activities.

In the following sections, the testimonies of bonesetters and traditional massage therapists from *Tecpán* Guatemala, are shared. The Folkloric Center of Studies of the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala expresses its gratitude to these social actors of traditional medicine, for their support in the conducted research. Their information is safeguarded below for the understanding of the interested readers.

Family Mes Socop; interviews

Alejandro Mes Socop, 67 years old, and his children Noé Mes Montalván, 18 years old; Gerson Alejandro Mes, 35 years old and Víctor Manuel Mes, 18 years old.

In the following section, they comment on their “awakening”: the interviews have been transcribed in the original way the consulted individuals speak and express themselves. Their colloquial terms are respected, and the reader will have an idea of the linguistic dynamic of the rural area.

My awakening of mine, since I was little, people used to seek me out through practice. I used to go down with my siblings; sometimes they played, and they slipped away. People seek me out. I told myself, “Should I keep doing this or not? I thought about two things. I started playing in the stadium with those who came to play, but shortly after that, like a week, I got pain from my waist to the rest of my body and I wasn’t able to walk anymore. As we believe in God, as the bible says, there are prophets, when two or three gather in my name, they come to pray for me. They said: you’re going through this; “promise God you will continue, and you will recover”.

God sent me the illness as a punishment... for not serving.

It disappeared, that was my case when I was about to demolish my house. It was a Straw house, and as we were very poor, we managed to move forward. We had clothes handling; I lit a candle. It caught on fire, and only a few things could be saved, but I almost got burned, through that, a great experience, I should continue..., since then we’ve been working.

Noé Mes relates his experience:

The truth is, I've dreamed a lot; those things are antiques, relics, and stones, that is what I dream about, it is too much, and it hasn't finished till today.

Jades, little things on the necklaces, so I don't know, I don't understand the reason.

It's related to the fact that I must continue...

Gerson Mes continues:

I hadn't experienced a disease, but according to my dad, I don't remember how old I was when I got sick... around twelve years old... my mom says that I was a baby, maybe three years old... They often mention it, but I don't remember. They tell me that I was bad, probably that was when I began with this.

But the truth is that I can't see myself working anywhere. I had worked in other places, but I didn't have a great experience with the boss; I'm stubborn, but They would ask me to leave, and they didn't give me a chance, till my dad asked me to come... here God send us work.

We pray before treating a person, we start early in the morning. As the Christians that we are, we ask God for his blessings.

Some people express their gratitude or treat their family members, and their children, a lot of people pray for us, and there comes more blessings.

Currently, two new bonesetters have joined the Mess family. The grandchildren, Víctor Manuel Pablo Mes (18 years old) had begun with his "awakening" and currently is being though, and his uncles and grandfather.

Relates his initiation:

Honestly, I've been here with my grandfather since I was a little boy of 8 years old. We would begin by handing in the material needed for a massage, He would explain to us how to do it along with my uncles, and he would explain to us the state of tendons and muscles.

I had dreamed of the job, but I had had a revelation, not yet.

I had dreamed, but not like that, I started working because I was already there, and it began to interest me. Helping others to feel better, and helping the community caught my attention.

As for materials, I've seen that they use essential oils, compounds, and instruments. The compound and essential oil that we use is made by our grandfather, but we hadn't noticed how he does the, but He is the one who does it.

As for medicine, we recommend diclofenac if the pain is too intense, or Doloneurobion, which we have in injection form. If the patient presents additional symptoms or pain, we administer the injection.

We use a mixture of piroxicam and methamphetamine, which is used to reduce inflammation and help to reduce pain, like diclofenac, which also helps a lot with pain.

Sometimes, injections are given twice when the pain is too much. For example, a man who came in a wheelchair yesterday, with the purpose of awakening his nerves, he suffered an accident and fractured his spine.

The nerves in his spine and tendons were injured, which left him disabled. His feet has no strength. The purpose of the massages is to awaken his tendons and nerves so he can walk again.

The process will be long; we've only released 3 massages, but he mentioned that he already felt some relief, the difference, the process that we must make with him is long, and we also need to be patient and always entrust ourselves to God.

This type of massage, when is done by two people as we did yesterday, takes about 30 minutes. When only one person does it, it takes an hour. The cost for each session is 75 quetzales.

Usually, some people ask us to pray. This only occurs when the person is devoted and requests that we begin with a prayer before starting the work. In one way or another everyone entrusts themselves.

Regarding the beginnings of the Mes family, it is mentioned:

The grandfather started with the job; he mentioned to us that his grandmother was a midwife. Sometimes we talk with him, and he mentions that his grandmother was a midwife, so this practice practically started with her.

More than anything, he began the work that we continue to this day. It's him, my uncles and my cousin.

Regarding other bonesetters here in *Tecpán*, we used to participate, but I don't remember in which association. But yes, we participated

In something like a discussion on the Maya, where they talked about midwives and bonesetters, Practically, only we are in *Tecpán*.

There is also a woman identified as a traditional massage therapist. It is a tradition in this particular practice, within the universe of traditional medicine to be primarily performed by men. The belief is that men possess the necessary strength to relocate dislocations or return broken bones to their place.

Women, on the other side, possess a more sensitive touch for muscular ailments, which is why they are referred to as "traditional massage therapists". Regarding other regions of Guatemala, in *Tecpán* this distinction between men and women remains.

According to the mystical belief that every traditional healer must be "chosen" or "selected" by God to be an instrument and serve their community, Elba Leticia Lucas Matzul mentions her initiation into traditional medicine:

I started around 2012... I used to dream [about] massaging someone's ribs. Then I went to see a sister (religious Sister). She told me "You have a calling, you must fulfill it, don't let it pass. Otherwise, you'll keep dreaming and never fulfill your work". I said, "How am I supposed to do it?". While I was studying at a school, someone dislocated three small bones, and now where are we supposed to begging to search in this establishment, but all the way to *Tecpán*, but we are going to *Tecpán*. But I told them, I was able to do it, I told my teachers "I can do it", but "What do you need?" my teacher asked, here, there's only Cofal. So, I began massaging, and with that, I began the work, I pulled, and the bones returned to their place, and

I feel when It's not at their place. That was when I began with this work.

To provide the readers with a concrete idea about the belief in initiation into traditional medicine, Fernando Cumes, another traditional healer, dedicated to curing breaks and dislocations, also commented about his initiation:

God gave me the power to do it and dedicate it to some nahual because I feel that it came from God, and not from any person, but he did not tell me how to do it. Since I was a kid, I developed the idea of how to do it. I was 15 years old when I saw a man with a dislocation, and I ran to see him. He asked me, "You know how to do it, don't you? Look kid" and pride treated me. "Come then". I went under his armpits. "¿Do you know how to do it?", he asked. That was my first experience, that's how I gained my courage. Nowadays, I am not impressed by the sight of protruding bones or any dislocated, I have already seen everything someone can. Of course, there are also diseases of the sciatic nerve and lumbagos in the back. People are stressed from the back.

These are the bonesetters and massage therapists from the municipal city of *Tecpán* Guatemala, which provided us relevant information to the investigations of CEFOL.

Discussion

The references found in relation to different authors on the "awakening" of a traditional physician, are consistent with other topics related to the phenomenon within popular and traditional medicine. Midwives, Mayan priests, shamans, and healers.

The academy that possesses its scientific base must modify its approach to this phenomenon that arises from the understanding and comprehension of the characteristics of these phenomena.

Observing the deficiency in communication between Western physicians and traditional healers, the need to sensitize emerging promotions of experts who will be initiating their professional training in rural communities is evident.

When you get to understand these practices and their origins, the sensibility to respect their customs, and parenting patterns will allow a better communication to achieve objectives that would benefit the communities and the wreaked health system.

Of the information above can arise approachable proposals to include in an official way bonesetters and massage therapists in hospitals and health centers as a first line of care of attention to people in the most remote regions.

The investigations realized can be consulted in the magazine in the magazine *Tradiciones de Guatemala*. These pages are provided to the public with a comprehensive overview of ancient and modern practices, opinions of doctors and users of this practice, and theoretical references about investigations from other institutions that share the likeness of information within the universe of traditional and popular medicine in other parts of the world and Guatemala.

Comment

From the information above, we can comment that bonesetters and massage therapists from *Tecpán* are part of a complex system, as alternative available elements to people who live in rural areas.

The health care system that the community in *Tecpán* count, is as deficient as that of others, mostly in Guatemala. By being available to serve that neighbor of this region, in addition to the fact that they share the customs, traditions, and beliefs of the atavistic elements of the Indigenous cosmovision.

Bonesetters and massage therapists provide a viable, albeit debatable alternative for people's health as a first attempt to deal with immediate cases.

Among the observations that can be appreciated as part of the help that these traditional healers provide can be mentioned: the low cost of assistance and intervention for sprains, bruises, and massages necessary to alleviate physical ailments.

The attention to Cakchiquel and Spanish languages represents an advantage over private physicians. At the same time, the harmony and friendship between neighbors make the use and recommendation of traditional services more feasible than modern ones.

Conclusion

It is necessary to have the correct dissemination about any traditional healer, due to the current threat of popular and traditional topics, which is

The incorrect assimilation regarding traditional healer's work, who they are, and where to find them.

Likewise, is necessary to enlarge the information about the physical condition, the ones they're qualified to treat, as well as the procedures and attention that provide for a correct dignification of their work as part of the popular culture in Guatemala.

Within a more specific medical setting (orthopedics), it is necessary to mention without underestimating the abilities and testimonies of the social actors. These activities should be evaluated and guided. Since they won't be discontinued, therefore, it would be beneficial for users if traditional healers were professionalized and trained to reach better care in the health system.

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Picture 1. Alejandro Mes with his two sons, Gerson y Noé. Bonesetters from *Tecpán*.



Picture 2. Víctor Mes. Bonesetter from *Tecpán*.



Picture 3. Elba Lucas, massage therapists from *Tecpán* Guatemala, Currently working at the Health Center.



Picture 4. Bonesetter, Fernando Cumes. Photograph by the author.



Picture 5, Knee strike, Alejandro Mes. Photograph by the author.

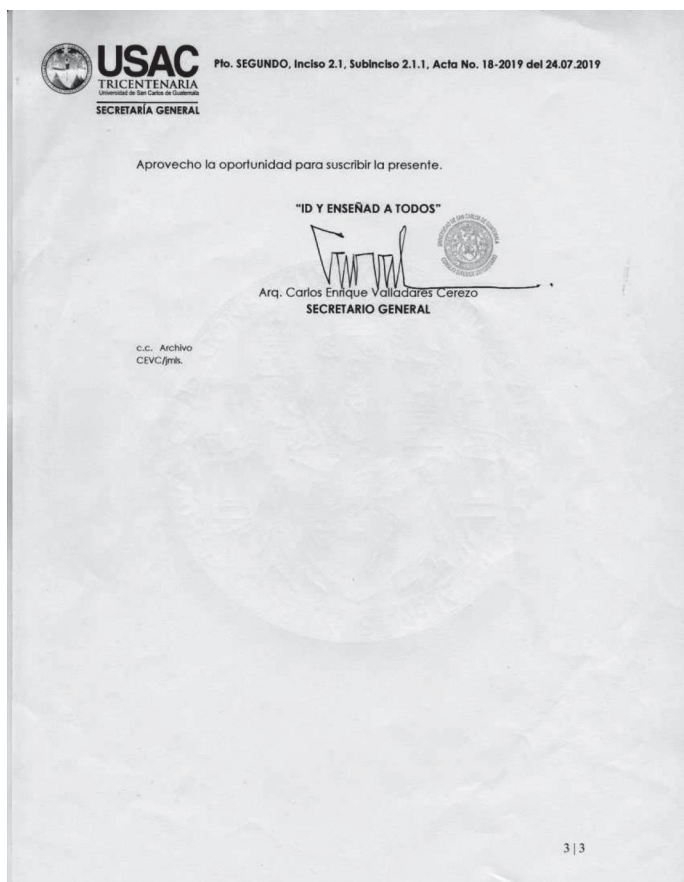
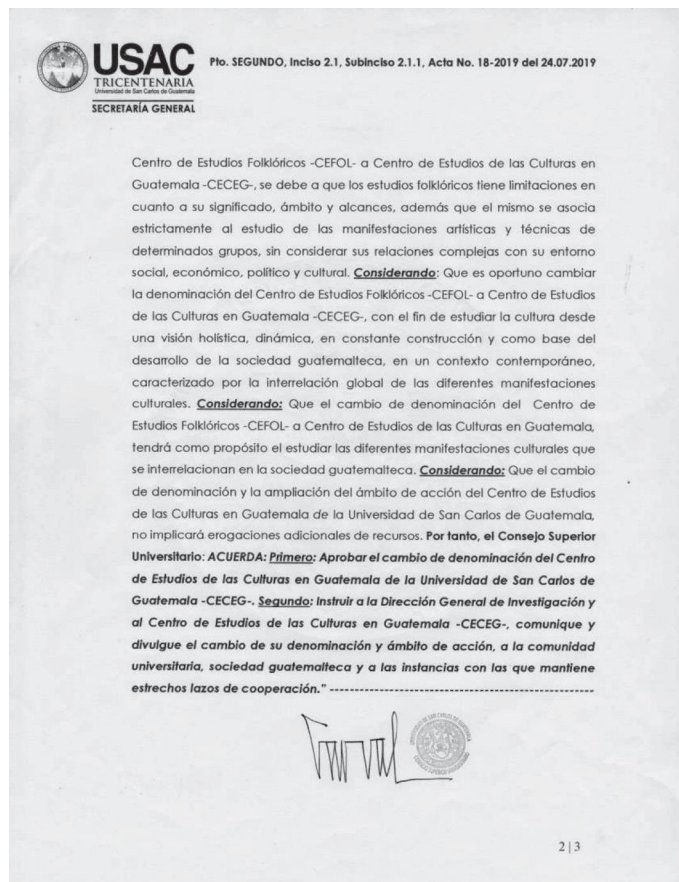
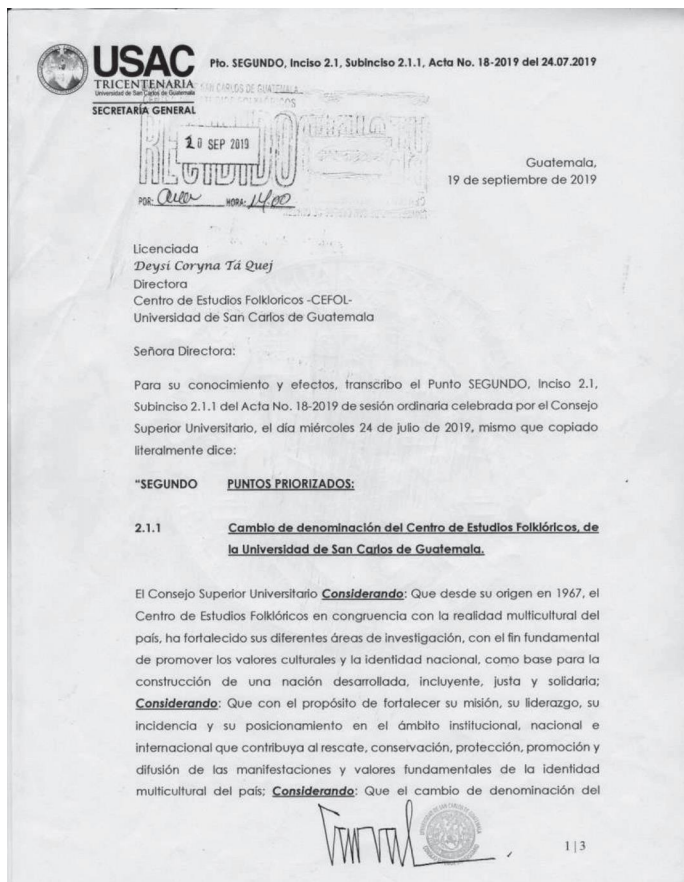


Picture 6, Back massages, Family Mes. Photograph by the author.



Picture 7, Ankle massages, Family Mes. Photograph by the author.

Agreement of the University Superior Council Approving the Change of Denomination



This publication was printed in the graphic workshop of *Serviprensa, S.A.* in December 2019.
The edition consists of 500 copies in bond paper 80 grams



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Interior layout

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Bonesetters are people who provides some type of massage as therapy to hear bones.

Byron Fernando García Astorga

Avenida La Reforma 0-09, Zona 10

Cellphone: 2231-9171 / 2361-9260 / 2360-3952

g-mail: cefol@usac.edu.gt

Web: <http://cefol.usac.edu.gt/>

Facebook: Centro de Estudios Folklóricos USAC