

Interviews

Pascuala Arebayo, Rosario Mendoza, Gregoria Catuire, and Santos Arebayo



PASCUALA AREBAYO

Pascuala, Rosario, and Gregoria are elderly curanderas [healers]. Their interview reveals the remarkable strength of traditional healing practices today, despite the long process of erosion that Guaraní culture has suffered.

Because they speak very little Spanish, Pascuala's son Santos, a healer himself, interpreted for the women when necessary. In this revealing interview, the curanderas permit the uninitiated outsider an unusual glimpse into their secret world of cures, prayers, and spirits. Fascinating for the insights their comments offer on the traditional Guaraní

world view and on the sometimes uneasy relationship between traditional healers and representatives of modern medicine, the observations of these wise women constitute a living history of Guaraní beliefs and practices. In addition, one cannot help being struck by the poverty of these women and their families, for, as Santos points out, food is scarce.

PASCUALA: I am about 75 years old; I am from right here in Ñaurenda. My *abuelita* [grandmother] taught me prayers, the *oración de puerta* [door prayer] to say when an illness first arises. Another is the *oración de pescadito* [little fish prayer], which, 15 minutes after you say it, the child is well. My *abuelita* knew how to cure headache, stomach ache, and *asustadura* [shock] for babies. Sometimes she would carry the baby to the ravine if it was *susto del agua* [water fright], and there she would purify him with the smoke from her cornhusk cigar [*se sahuma con tabaquito de chala*]. She would also spit on the baby. The combination of smoke, saliva, and prayers is what cures. You see the prayer comes from the mouth and the saliva, too; it is sanctified by the prayer.

Today there are still curanderas but most of them don't know anything about anything [*no saben nada, no saben nada*]. You can't just have anybody become a curandera. You have to be special; you have to be chosen and taught. I haven't taught my wisdom to anyone. I hate to see everything disappear. My son, Santos, knows the basic things, but I, like my grandmother, cure for many different things: *asustadura*, childbirth, and headache. There are many specialties because there are so many different kinds of spells [*malhechos*].