

Lesson 1

Herbal History of the Tribe



Fig 1.1 Blackfoot Indian Tipi tribe

A TRIBAL SPECIES

No one really knows how long us two legged people (a name often used by North American indigenous people) have been around. Current estimates say that we have populated the Earth for anywhere from 1.25 to 4 million years. If we use the more conservative estimate of 1 million years, and allow for 5,000 years of agrarian civilization, we see that we have been hunter-gatherers living in tribal societies for more than 99.5% ($5,000/1,000,000=0.5\%$) of our human past. (This is not to discount peoples that are tribal to this day). In terms of time, our hunter/gatherer, tribal experience has contributed massively to our genetic code.

Everything from our physiological fight or flight response to our social desire to feel part of a special group may be seen as an aspect of old tribal behavior. The drive to belong and be apart of the blue gang, the red gang, the Lion's club, Rotary club or a small cliché of friends, seems to be a throwback to this large part of our history. We are still a Tribal species. If you have any doubt, look

through a fashion magazine or visit The Gap with this in mind. What is fashion but a sign and symbol for the tribe we belong to? Most people want to feel that they are part of a special group; to have a set of friends, or colleagues, that are similar to them.

While biologically we may still share many of the same genetic traits as our ancestors, from a sociological perspective we have never had so many choices of “tribes” to join as we do today. We have lifestyle choices that cross all traditional boundaries of age, gender, race, class, religion and sexuality. For example, a female corporate CEO in downtown Toronto will adopt a completely different lifestyle (and therefore fashion sign) than a male hip hop rapper in downtown Toronto, although both may have emerged from the identical working class family background. For most of our human history, sociological differences mirrored biological differences. Women, for instance, rarely lead tribes prior to the introduction of birth control and the women’s movement. They remained in domestic roles and biology was called upon to justify that status quo. Today, in postmodern society, biology no longer dictates our social roles. Anything is possible (or is it?). And that choice, in itself, creates more stress for many “tribes.”

THE NEANDERTHAL GRAVE

In a cave in Iraq, archeologists found the grave of an unknown caveman who lived some 60,000 years ago. Among the bones was a thick scattering of flower pollens. It appeared that family and/or friends of the dead man placed these flowers and twigs as part of the funeral process. Paleo-botanists have determined that the pollen comes from eight different plants, which still flourish in the region to this day. Of the eight species, seven have known medicinal properties and continue to be used by the local people to this day. Among these plants are Marshmallow (*Althaea spp.*), Yarrow (*Achillea spp.*) and *Ephedra* species. This gives us strong evidence that our ancient Paleo-ancestors used botanicals as part of their rituals, and most likely as medicinal substances, too. It can be argued that perhaps they used these plants simply as beautiful ‘ornaments’ to relieve the sadness of the passing of someone dear to them. However, archeologists and anthropologists have never found a society, no matter how remote or seemingly ‘primitive’, that did not use plants in healing and/or ritualistic ways.

Another related incident is that in which a Neanderthal was found completely preserved and buried alive in a peat bog. The contents of his stomach were examined and there were several species of medicinal herbs found in it, including the yarrow found in the



Neanderthal Man
 Fig 1.2

above situation. For millenniums, humans have been using medicinal herbs.

HOW DID CAVE DWELLERS FIND THEIR MEDICINE?

THE TRIBAL MIND

Who really knows what these early peoples were like? Popular accounts represent tribal people as having instincts closer to the animal kingdom. The notion of a collective or 'tribal mind', similar to a 'hive mind' found in many insects, or 'school mind' in fish, or 'flock mind' in birds has been theorized. How did early humans communicate to each other the information on healing plants and other survival information? How was this information and knowledge transmitted over time in an oral, illiterate society?

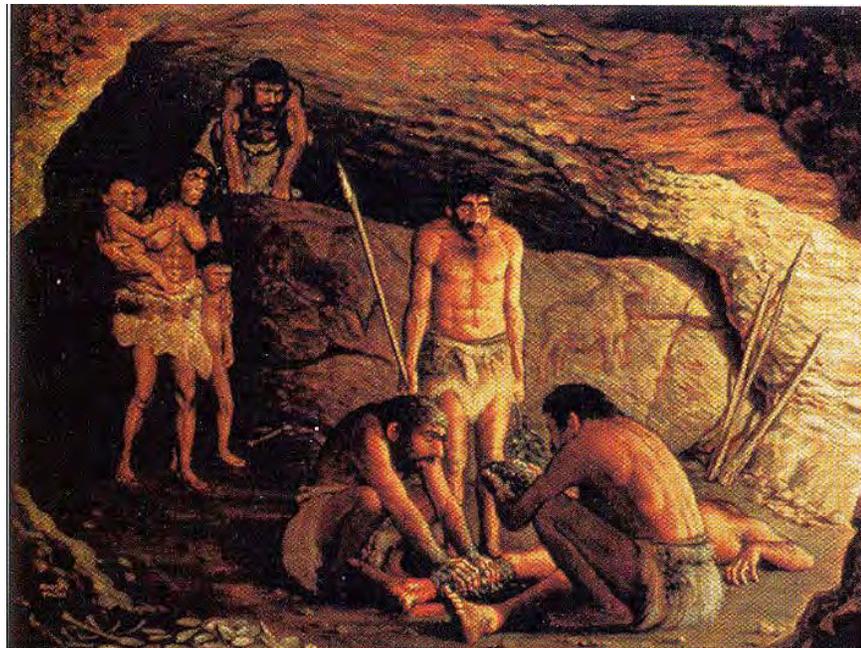


Fig 1.3 Early Cave Man

The idea that information might be genetically transmitted over time can be found in different forms. The biologist Rupert Sheldrake in his largely unknown works coined the term morphogenetic resonance for this phenomena. As a biologist he was interested in researching the possibility that learned behaviours might eventually become part of our genetic make-up. The Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan asserted that new forms of media actually become an extension of our nervous system! Fictional works have also popularized the explanation

that knowledge may be biologically communicated and passed on.

The following passage is about Iza, a medicine woman from Jean Auel's *Clan of the Cave Bear* 1:

– Stored in her brain at birth was the knowledge acquired by her ancestors, the ancient line of medicine women of which she was a direct descendant. She could remember what they knew. It was not much different from recalling her own experience; and once stimulated, the process was automatic. She knew her own memories primarily because she could also remember the circumstances associated with them – she never forgot anything – and she could recall the knowledge in her memory bank, not how it was learned. And although Iza and her siblings had the same parents, neither Creb, nor Brun had her medical knowledge.

It has been postulated by several anthropologists, that this ancestral mind phenomena was present in early people of certain lineages and is evident in some of today's tribal people (ancestral, tribal mind). Health problems were often less dramatic, in the case of chronic conditions, as the life span was only 25 - 40 years. There is some evidence that at least a few individuals lived to a very old age though. Most of their health issues had to do with trauma, accidents and injuries. Infectious diseases were not as evident in early peoples. Most infectious disease came about after we became an agrarian society. As time passed and disease itself became more complex, the healing role was often given to specific peoples within the tribal group. The role of the medicine woman or medicine man emerged as a specialized position and rank designated by early tribal societies.



A CHEROKEE STORY

Once there was a council of the Bear people. They had gathered to discuss the two legged people. It seemed that many of the two-legged people were getting arrogant and killing the four legged, winged and swimming people when they didn't need them for food or shelter. The Bear council had gathered to discuss how to deal with these two-legged people. After a long debate, one of the old bears at the back raised his paw and said he knew why the two legged people had so much power and had become drunk with this power. It was the bow. They had the bow and arrow to hunt and kill the four legged and winged peoples. Only if the bow could be obtained, would the Bear people be on equal footing with the two-legged people.

Cree doing a Bear dance in honor of the Bear
Fig 1.4

The next day several of the young braves set out to get the pieces to make a great Bear Bow. They got some strong alder to make the bow, choke cherry to make the arrow shaft, and sharpened stones to make the arrowheads. Some winged people donated feathers so the arrows could fly. Things were moving along quickly.

Then it came to the bowstring. After asking around the young braves could not find out what the bow string was made of, so they decided to hold council again and see if any of the wise bears knew the answer to the bow string question. After asking the question the same old Bear said, "I know. They use our guts. They kill us and make the bow strings from our guts, because it gives much power to their arrows". At this news, everyone looked away. They could not imagine who was willing to give up their guts to have power over the two-legged people.

The old Bear raised his paw again and said, "You can use mine. I'm old, worn out and will not make it through this next winter. I would be honored if you would use my guts to gain power over the two legged people." So the deed was done and they had enough to make six strong bows, with fine bowstrings and straight arrows.

The next day several of the bear braves lined up to have their turn at target practice. The first brave stepped up, took the arrow and pulled back the bowstring with all his power. With great anticipation he aimed for the target a hundred feet away. Releasing the arrow, it went head over heels, tumbling several times to land on the ground just a few feet ahead. Feeling somewhat embarrassed, he looked back at several of the other braves to find them snickering at him. Another bigger brave bear pushed his way to the front and picked up a bow and arrow. He would show them how it worked. He pulled the bowstring back; sure he would hit his target. The arrow left the bow and he did the same dance, falling head over heels, landing in the same spot as the first bear.

At this point the other bears weren't so anxious to try, but try they did, all with similar results. How did the two-legged people do it? Their aim was so accurate. One of the Elders stepped forward and said, "I know. It is our paws. We have claws. They get caught up in the bowstring. If we didn't have claws, we could shoot as accurately as any two legged people." So one of the braves yelled out, "I will cut off my claws to become the best Bow Bear of the clan." Others joined in saying they would cut theirs off too. The elder yelled over the crowd, "WAIT! If you cut off your claws, how will you dig roots? How will you hold onto your prey? If you cut off your claws, you will stop being bears and you will have to



live by the bow alone. You will become like the two-legged people. Do you want that?" They all agreed that was not what they wanted. They just wanted to teach the two-legged people a lesson, not become like them.

So they gave up the bow project. They held a large council, asking all of the four legged people, winged people, swimming people, slithering people and insect people to come. They talked late into the night, giving everyone who desired a chance to talk. Then one of the smallest of the insect people, the mosquito, took her turn. Buzzing around all the peoples at the gathering, she said, "I know what to do. I know what to do. I know what to do. I will bite the two-legged people and I will spread disease. I can make large numbers of them sick, so they won't bother us anymore." They all agreed that it would work, but they couldn't agree whether or not it was too drastic?

They decided they should go talk to the wise one, Old Grandfather Owl, to get his advice on this. When they told their idea to Grandfather Owl, he said that it would take time for his decision. This was a very important question, with deep consequences, so he asked for the traditional four days to come up with his answer. Well, you can imagine the patience level of a mosquito! She was back in ten minutes buzzing: "What did you decide? What did you decide? Can I do it now? Can I do it now?" The old owl just looked at the mosquito and said, "Be patient my little one, I will have your answer in four days." Well that settled the mosquito down for about ten minutes and she was back asking: "What did you decide? What did you decide? Can I do it now? Can I do it now?" After this happened several times, a few of the four legged people tried to keep the mosquito people back, and not bother Grandfather Owl, so he could make his decision. They could only keep the mosquitoes busy for about another day. They let them go on their way with a solemn promise not the bother Grandfather Owl.

By the fourth day Grandfather Owl came to the council to tell of his decision. He had decided that this solution was too drastic; another solution should be found. It was spoken. The mosquito people came out in mass for the meeting. Upon hearing the news they flew around and said: "It is too late, we already did it. It is too late, we already did it." From that time on the mosquito people were banned from the council, becoming enemies of all of the peoples. So the mosquito people took revenge, by biting all of the peoples, not just the two-legged people.

Now they had to solve the problem of disease in the two-legged peoples and for that matter themselves? Old Grandfather Ginseng



said, "I have a solution. I will instruct all of the plant people to produce medicines, to heal all of the peoples. The four legged people and winged people can communicate with us, so they will have our knowledge. But only the most sensitive of the two-legged people, who prepare themselves in special ways will be able to communicate with us. To these strong ones, we will give our medicine, so they can treat other two-legged people, who are too busy with other things to listen to our council." It was decided, and done.

To this day, only certain of the two-legged people have been able to take the time and create the space to talk to the plant people and learn their ways of healing their people.

EARTH CENTERED SOCIETIES

Indigenous peoples usually have a sacred relationship with the spirit of Earth Mother as part of their everyday lives. This is reflected in the belief that Earth itself is a place of worship and that all things possess a soul; every tree, stone and root. This means that each part of the Earth is a manifestation of the sacred; a creation of Spirit. Within Earth centered cultures, the stones, plants, animals, and the whole of existence become sacred. From this perspective comes the desire to communicate with the sacred – the natural environment. We find that in Earth centered cultures, individuals spent many years or even a lifetime developing a strong relationship with this sacred aspect of reality. This way of interpreting the world provided deep meaning for individuals and groups. Within this lineage of Earth centered spirituality, the individual does not usually choose the aspect of the sacred they will focus on. Often they receive a sign from their environment, maybe through visions, a dramatic event, or are directed by an Elder. Communication with the plant kingdom often becomes the central focus of healing for Earth centered tribal medicine. We can find this practice of communication with the medicinal or sacred substance in many different tribal groups around the world.

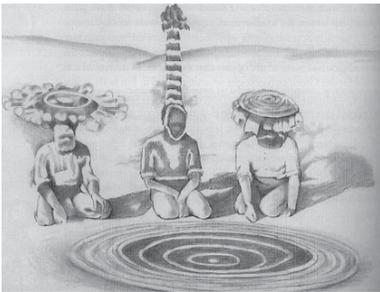


Fig 1.5 Australian aboriginal Earth Centered ceremony

Among the Sioux:

The ability to make objects 'sacred', thus divining them mysterious power, was said to belong to men who had the ability to talk with such objects and to understand what they said.

And the Mitlenos in Mexico:

The herbs and flowers also talk to her and she to them, a rapport with the natural world, which is not visibly part of the life ways of other Mitlenos.³

And the Zuni:

The Zuni live with their plants – the latter are part of them. The initiated can talk with their plants, and the plants can talk with them.⁴

The Papago:

It was customary to ‘talk to the plants or tree’ when gathering a medicinal substance and also when administering it.⁵

MY FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH TRIBAL EARTH CENTERED MEDICINE

After finishing my first degree (a BSc in environmental biology, in the early 1970’s), and prodded on by one of my professors, I decided to write a book about the edible and medicinal properties of the local plants of my area. How to do this? Well become one with it, of course. So I gathered together what small resources I had, bought myself a tipi and moved up into the mountains. This was the only way to experience the material for this book. I was a vegetarian at the time and I decided I was only going to eat what I could pick within walking distance of my tipi. You can well imagine that I was much skinnier back then.



Fig 1.6
Prairie Indian Tipi or
Lodge

I quickly learned that the responsibilities of the gatherer in a Hunter/Gatherer society were extremely time consuming. I basically grazed from sunrise to sunset, but I did learn a lot about the plants in my area. I learned that there were many plants said to be edible, but palatable, that was another question. Who could possibly eat such bitter plants? But, I experimented with various ways to prepare the plants to make them acceptable and on occasion even gourmet delights. I also learned that some of the plants several books described as not edible were quite good in my local area and became some of my favorite foods. Hmm, you couldn’t always believe what you found in books.

I enjoyed that summer so much so that I decided I wanted to get daring and try it year round. Could I actually make it through the winter living in a tipi? After all, in these locations it could easily get down to - 45°C. Well, if people had done that for thousands of years, I could do it too. I wasn't stupid enough to think I could do it on my own, so I started looking for a group of people of like mind to winter with. I was lucky enough to find a group that included some Indian medicine men. I joined them with the idea of furthering my knowledge of herbal medicines. That winter I started my apprenticeship in the First Nation tradition. (Indigenous people in Canada refer to themselves as First Nation peoples).

I remember one of my first days sitting in front of Buffalo Child, one of my new mentors. I asked, "If all these herbs had such strong medicinal properties and could cure so many diseases, where was the book about it? Where could I read the data?" You see I was still clinging to my academic hat. Where was the literature to assure me I was on the right trail?



Fig 1.7 Buffalo Child 1974

He looked at me and said, "Well it is written down, boy. It is written in the way the wind blows through the pines; the way the creek flows, the coyote howls and the rocks lays, and when you can learn to read, you'll be a herbalist."

Whoo! I didn't know I was going to get in that deep. I sure did learn a lot in those years. I learned that all things are alive, including the planet we live on, and the energies that flow through it. The job of this group of Amerindian healers was to match up energies. If a person had a deficiency in a certain energy, you tried to find that missing energy in their environment, may it be herbal, exercise, a story, or a ritual. Trickery was a perfectly acceptable means of changing a person's energies. Many Indian languages don't really have a word for medicine man. It translates more closely to the idea of a 'trickster.' To be able to match up energies, you first had to learn how to 'read'. That meant understanding the energies of the plant or what I would describe as its personality. Once you understood the personality of a medicine, you 'owned' it and were allowed to use it. If you met a person with an illness who needed the assistance of that medicinal plant, you could offer it to them. This process meant it was necessary to form a type of communication with the plant kingdom to understand the energies of its personality. Some of this was taught in the form of stories, but most often it was the time put in with the plant, and a relationship was formed.

Often in a tribal situation, different people had the medicine for different issues. You would go to one person for sprains and a

different person if you had indigestion. Most often the ‘medicine people’ in the Americas and Europe were women. These women learned many of the herbal remedies as part of their culture and tradition. By the 1500’s and 1600’s when Protestantism and printed bibles began to circulate throughout Europe and the New World, this historical role of women as healers was eroded by the advent of specialized medical training delegated to males. The so-called witches of this time were probably women who insisted on continuing these rituals and practices with plants. The wiccan and pagan subculture traditions we see today are an offshoot or revival of these older ways.

THE VISION

Vision Quests are often much a part of Tribal Medicine. It was customary to prepare for a Vision Quest, but they also happened spontaneously at times. The group I lived with did sweat lodges every four days for a year in preparation for a Vision Quest. You would then fast with no food, or water until your vision came. Usually it took an Elder to interpret the vision, thus guiding you on your path.



Fig 1.8
The Vision Quest

Many groups ingested hallucinogenic substances to aid them to having visions from the ‘other worlds.’ In some of the present day Amazonian Shamanic traditions, visions are very much a part of their way. Many substances are consumed so they can learn to communicate with the plants. Don Antonio, a Peruvian Shaman I have worked with, had hundreds of songs for the various plants. He said he learned these songs from the plants themselves. He would use these songs while he was healing someone with the specific plant substance. The song was as much for respect of the plant, as for inducing the plant material to do its best, to work in a sacred way to heal the person. He often used vision producing plant material to ‘diagnose’ a person’s condition. He said that by taking in these substances, he could communicate with the person’s spirit, sometimes fixing what was wrong, or at least ‘coming back’ with information to help the person on a path to recovery.

As Manuel Cordova Rios reflected to Bruce Lamb in *Wizard of the Upper Amazon*: *You must realize my friend, that the deeper we go into this, both written and spoken words of formal language become less and less adequate as a medium of expression. If I could arrange it, we would have a session of visions ourselves and then you would understand. But that would take time. Meanwhile we will continue with indifferent words and inflexible modes of expression.*⁶



Fig 1.9
Deva form the Fairy Tarot

DEVIC KINGDOM

Most cultures of the world pass along at least a myth or fairy tale describing how people communicated with gnomes, fairies and nature spirits, not to mention dragons. Many cultures used Devic interaction as part of their day-to-day communication in matters of healing, advice and decision making. Not only did this communication help in understanding the uses of plants, it enhanced the spiritual relationship with nature. Offerings and sacrifices were often given to these various nature spirits in the hope they would be pleased, so that society would in turn receive awards of good health, crops, children and many other aspects of the mundane world. We find that some of these rituals remain in place even up to this day in various cultures and religions around the world; the burning of incense and the offering of fruit to the various spirits, deities, or saints.

IMAGINE

Imagine yourself walking from a meadow into an inviting forest. You look around and all you can see is trees, shrubs and smaller plants. Out through the clearing you see some snow on nearby mountains, the head waters of the creek that is flowing by you. You breathe in deeply and smell the fresh air, perfumed with the sweet smell of some flowers and the deep smell of the rich humus making up the earth. You hear the birds singing and the chatter of chipmunks. The gentle sun is warming your face. You feel nature all around you. It encompasses you so fully, that you can almost feel it flowing through your veins. You relax, like you never have before, because the Earth mother herself seems to be holding you up. She is protecting you as one of her sacred beings. Now imagine that all cities, towns and the trappings of modern civilization are gone. You are a thousand years in the past. There is just you and a small band from your tribe back at the village, which is a one-day walk back down the trail. Yes, once in a while you come across another tribe like yourselves and every four years you gather together at special sacred spots with many other tribes to trade, share stories, and so the eligible's can find someone to marry. But for the most part, you have to rely on yourself, your tribe and, of course, the strong force of Mother Earth.

Many of your group can see the spirit kingdom; those devious fairies that have lots of information, but are not above playing tricks. You are just starting to feel their energies and have had some communication with them yourself.

As you are walking along in awe of all the abundance around you, you trip on a low branch that has fallen on the trail. You catch



Fig 1.10 Willow (*Salix* sp.)

yourself so as not to cause serious injury, but you sprain your wrist in the process. You look around in this abundance and wonder what you can use to reduce the swelling and the mild pain that is already coming on. You remember a bush that can help, so you go down near the creek and chew on the leaves of some willow. You ask yourself, somewhat aloud, if there is anything stronger? You hear a little voice say that the inner bark of the willow, boiled in a tea is stronger. You boil up the bark, drink it, thank the nature spirits, and go on your way. The Mother and her assistants have helped you again. When you get back to your village you will have the medicine woman look at it, as she has a clearer vision into the nature of healing and communicates with the Mother more fully.

You thank the spirits that it was not a more serious injury.

THE GODS MUST BE CRAZY

As seen in the 1980's movie, *The Gods Must be Crazy*, traditional sharing and communication in an African tribe is disrupted by the introduction of a Coke bottle. The interdependence of the people in the tribe was most important for the survival of the whole. It wasn't until this unique, foreign object (a Coke bottle) was introduced that problems arose. It must be a gift from the Gods, as it had so many different uses. But since there was only one, sharing became a problem.



Fig 1.12 Poster for the 1980's movie: The Gods Must be Crazy

This not wanting to share became the source of much conflict. One of the elders realized that the Coke bottle was the source of the conflict, so he decided to give this evil thing back to the Gods. Not wanting to inflict this evil on others, the elder took a long journey to give the bottle back to the God by throwing it off the edge of the Earth into the Great Ocean.

FOUR BASIC ASPECTS OF TRIBAL HEALING

There are four basic components of cure set up in the tribal tradition. These four components are similar to allopathic (orthodox, Western medicine) traditions, as well as most healing traditions throughout the cultures of the world. They include:

1. The naming process: By giving a name or cause to the ailment the patient is often put at ease. One of the most frightening things in human experience is the Unknown. Naming lets the patient know that the practitioner has come across their situation before and recognizes it. Of course the names in Native

American lore are not like those of allopaths (e.g. cancer of the prostate, is more like “spirit of the bear is biting your behind”).

2. The personal characteristics of the healer: The charisma of the healer/doctor is very important. The patient has to feel that the practitioner is caring, convincing, and genuine.

3. The patient’s expectations: It is common practice for doctor/healers all over the world to use much the same method of raising their patient’s expectations. Physical stimulus like rattles, amulets, stethoscopes and diplomas are common ways to increase patient expectation. It has been commonly observed that the farther a patient has to travel to see a healer, the greater the chances of cure.

4. The doctor/healers training: All sincere healers go through a training period that takes several years of rigorous work. The insincere usually drop out in the process.

* * * *

We tend to think of things done in a medical center as scientific, whereas something done in a tipi is magical. But the methodology seems to be very similar. Many of the herbs that Tribal Healers use in their healing processes have been shown to have active pharmaceutical actions, with biochemical rationale.

The old Indian who had a backache never looked at bearberry leaves and said, “That plant has arbutin in it. That arbutin will undergo hydrolysis in my body and change to hydroquinone betaglycoside in my kidneys to act as a local antibiotic, thus relieving the inflammation in my kidney, to stop the pain in my back”. He just knew that a certain type of pain in the back could be overcome by the strong spirit in bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*).



Fig 1.13
Bearberry
(*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*)

The Indian medical tradition was mostly oral, with several societies within the tribe responsible for different remedies. This helped build up a mystique about the healer, much as medical terminology does today. Plants transferred in an oral tradition had many stories attached to them. The knowledge of the herbs came from the ancestors. This usually meant powerful medicine people had a specific plant(s) as their ally or totem. By fully understanding the ‘spirit’ of the plant they could tell how it could heal the body. This information, once learned and tested, was passed on to future generations. The process was not unlike the way European herbalists shared information up to the present day. Even though scientific rationale has been assigned to many of these plants, and synthetic and more economical drugs have been

created as copies of the botanical, much of the original information for the botanical's use comes from folklore.

MEDICINE WHEEL

Seven Arrows by Hyemeyohsts Storm.⁷

"You are about to begin an adventure of the People, the Plains Indian People. You probably have known them by their whiteman names, as the Cheyenne, the Crow and the Sioux. Here you will learn to know of them as they were truly known among the People, as the Painted Arrow, the Little Black Eagle and the Brother People.

The story of these People has at its center the Medicine Wheel. The Medicine Wheel is the very Way of Life of the People. It is Understanding of the Universe. It is the Way given to the Peace Chiefs, our Teachers, and by them to us. The Medicine Wheel is everything of the People.

The Medicine Wheel is the Living Flame of the Lodges, and the Great Shield of Truth written in the Sign of the Water. It is the Heart and Mind. It is the Song of the Earth. It is the Star-Fire and the Painted Drum seen only in the Eye of Children. It is the Red Pipe of the Buffalo Gift smoked in the Sacred Mountains, and it is the Four Arrows of the Peoples' Lodge. It is the Sun Dance.

The Medicine Wheel Way begins with the Touching of our Brother and Sisters. Next it speaks to us of Touching of the world around us, the animals, trees, grasses and all living things. Finally it Teaches us to Sing the Song of the World, and in this Way to become Whole People.

Come sit with me, and let us smoke the Pipe of Peace in Understanding. Let us Touch. Let us, each to the other, be a Gift as is the Buffalo. Let us be Meat to Nourish each other, that we all may Grow. Sit here with me, each of you as you are in your own Perceiving of yourself, as Mouse, Wolf, Coyote, Weasel, Fox or Prairie Bird. Let me See through your Eyes. Let us Teach each other here in this Great Lodge of the People, this Sun Dance, of each of the Ways on this Great Medicine Wheel, our Earth."

. . . In many ways this Circle, the Medicine Wheel, can best be understood if you think of it as a mirror in which everything is reflected. "The Universe is the Mirror of the People," the old Teachers tell us, "and each person is a Mirror to every other person."



Fig 1.14 Medicine

TRIBAL DIVERSITY

We don't want to give the impression that all tribal people were the same, and that it was a utopian age of healing. On the contrary, there were great variations in cultural, education and medicinal knowledge from area to area. Perhaps groups with better knowledge of healing, especially for injuries that might come about from skirmishes to outright wars, survived longer. That information would be subsequently passed on to the next generations. Most likely within any culture some know their art well, while others may be complete fakes.



Fig 1.15 Indian Medicine Shield

Although some of the medicine people could do great things, it should be noted at this point that not all medicine men were, or are, sincere – as is the case in modern Western society. They were not always above trickery in making their patients believe they had been released from certain animal/spirit intrusions. This approach might have positive psychological effects, but it should also be remembered that a shaman usually demanded payment in advance, and that the trickery was not always in the patient's best interest. When a medicine man decided that an evil spirit had entered the body of a patient, he would try to scare it out. Through the shaking of rattles, by dancing, by wearing masks, and by chanting for hours or even days, the shaman was eventually sure that the evil spirit had left the body.

Another method was to suck the spirit out. This was done by sucking on a hollow stick or bone inserted into the wound or into an incision made by the medicine man. This usually resulted in the recovery of some foreign object. Sucking or extraction obviously helped in some cases, (e.g. if the person had a sliver) but in other cases the medicine man was not above sleight-of-hand tricks. For example, a medicine man might suck an eagle claw from a sick man – this was the spirit inside the patient – even though the patient had not been anywhere near an eagle before his sickness.

There were different types of medicine men. For example, in the Ojibwa tribes there were four ranks:

1. **Priest** and highest rank, to which membership was gained by initiations.
2. **"Dawning Men"**, practitioners of medicinal magic, hunting medicine and love powers.
3. **Seers and prophets**, revealers of hidden truths, possessors of the gift of clairvoyance.

4. **Herbalists**, who knew about mysterious properties of a variety of plants, herbs, roots and berries. The powers were revealed upon the payment of a fee.



Fig 1.16 Native Medicine

The herbalists were often women. It was not unusual for a person to be found in more than one rank. Often those of the priestly rank also were herbalists. In some tribes, one person would have the medicine for certain ailments, while another person held the medicine for others. The specific information was passed on to a new generation after a payment was given to the previous owner of the knowledge. The knowledge of the natural world could offer a Native American both social and financial benefits.

There are similarities to this social structure in European history when priests or monks held special rank or duty in their work as scribes and custodians of academic knowledge. This included the knowledge and transmission of herbal medicines of the day.

DIFFERENT TECHNIQUES

Besides the actual use of botanicals, may it be for pharmacological use, or ritual, many other techniques were used. These ranged from external manipulation to stimulation and surgery. There is suitable evidence that surgery, especially trephining (sawing a proportion of the skull out) was used. Some of the known techniques, from the least to the most invasive, are as follows:

Bathing: This was common to many parts of the world, especially salt-water or mineral bathing. Use of hot springs was very popular among some groups. Bathing seems so obvious that it may not be considered a healing technique. Yet, it can be seen in some high primates that both grooming and bathing are used in various 'sick' conditions. On the other side of the cultural coin, we see that in medieval times many felt bathing would cause disease.

Sweat-Bathing: Hot rocks or steam were used to heat an environment to produce sweat in the patient. There are both dry and wet forms. Many cultures, certainly the Northern Plains Indians used this technique to a large extent. Other cultures from African to Hawaiian also have ancient traditions of sweat-bathing.

Sweating: The patient was wrapped in leaves, fur or other material to produce a sweat.

Shampooing: Used in Southeast Asia, Africa and the American Southwest, botanicals high in saponins, such as Yucca (soap plant) roots, were shampooed into the skin for medicinal purposes.



Fig 1.17
 First Nation Sweat

Massage: This is another obvious technique; rubbing the sore area. It appeared to go much deeper though with an ancient form of shiatsu and manipulation to set bones, and put bone and ligaments back in their original place. These techniques were used throughout the world.

Cupping: placing hot cups, or even cups with a flame in it, over the area to suck out poisons, toxins or even bad spirits. Of course this brings blood to the surface and can help in that way.

Emetics: Forcing a person to vomit by using strong herbs that induce the emetic action.

Enemas: There is suitable evidence that many tribal people used gourds to inject water, or herbal teas, into the rectum or as douches for the vagina. This practice can again be found in Africa, Hawaii and the Americas.

Burning: Hot rocks or iron were used to burn the disease out of the patient. This can be found in Bali, Africa and the Americas

Incision: From thin scratches to deep, painful grooves, incisions were a common and wide spread practice among tribal peoples. We see this in the American Indians, Fijians, Africans, and Australians.

Bloodletting: This concept was to let out the bad blood. Many groups used this up to the turn of the 20th century. It is presumed that they would let out only the bad blood. In fact in Tibetan medicine, they had specific processes where they would separate the good blood from the bad blood, before they let it out. It was said you could not use blood letting unless you used *Hbras-bu-gsum-than*, which separated the impure from the pure, so only the impure would escape.

Trephining: The technique was used in many parts of the world, according to archaeological data. Maybe one of the precursors to acupuncture, this method involved sawing or drilling small pieces of the skull, or sometimes other parts of the skeletal system, as part of the healing. Some feel this was the origin of early acupuncture.



Fig 1.18
Archaeological evidence of

THE DIVIDED LEGACY BEGINS

As we move out of Tribal period, we find an interesting phenomena occurring. Tribal medicine had very much to do with the energy flow through things, may it be the body of the patient, the botanical, or other medicinal substances. We call this a Vitalistic point of view, referring to the vital energy that runs from our Mother, the Earth. We will see in future lessons how some philosophies turned the other way. They looked at trying to find out how things worked from a mechanical point of view.

The mechanical point of view suggests that there is a physical reason for everything. If you know all the pieces you can build one. In this model the human body is just a big machine (a meat computer), existing in a mechanical universe. This is a point of view held for the most part by modern science and modern medicine.

The Vitalist system believes that there is a force of a non-physical nature that animates the physical. This more esoteric point of view was, and is to this day, more widely held in the world.

Notes

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