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## Culture, Healing, and Medicine in Amazonian Ecuador

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## **Abstract**

The intention of this paper is to shed light on the cultural practices utilized by Napo Kichwa people of Amazonian Ecuador, and how these practices contribute to their overall views of health. As I will show, Kichwa speakers view their cultural practices as integral to leading a healthy life that is achieved by combining Western medicine, Kichwa values and healing practices. Napo Kichwa people, as I will show, follow a pragmatic approach to maintaining health and well-being.

**THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY**

**COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES**

**CULTURE, HEALING, AND MEDICINE IN AMAZONIAN ECUADOR**

**By**

**PUNAM GOPAL**

**A Thesis submitted to the**

**Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics**

**In partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with**

**Honors in the Major**

**Degree Awarded:**

**Spring 2014**

The members of the Defense Committee approve the thesis of Punam Gopal defended on  
Wednesday, April 16 at 11:00am in Room 362E of Diffenbaugh.

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank those who supported me and my research endeavors, such as my professor, Dr. Michael Uzendoski, the community of Sapo Rumi in Napo Runa, Ecuador, and my friends and family. I especially want to show my appreciation to the host families of the Sapo Rumi community for opening up their homes to me and sharing their experiences and thoughts. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Joseph Hellweg and Dr. Mark Kearley for participating in my Honors Thesis project and offering their criticism and guidance to conduct my research and this paper.

I would also like to give thanks to the students who attended the Study Abroad Program to Napo Runa, Ecuador. I enjoyed every experience, and I thank you all for sharing it with me.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to understand health and medicine in Ecuador from an indigenous Amazonian-perspective, as well as to describe the indigenous healing practices that involve rituals and medicinal plants. As I will show, the indigenous culture that I am focusing on approaches health and healing more holistically. What we see as “medical” can be found in many different aspects of their culture; in the environmental relationships they maintain, the kin relations they uphold, and the daily practices they follow to sustain for “living well” (*sumak kawsana*).

First, I will describe how Napo Kichwa people define the person and body through the animistic concept of the *samay*. Next, I will discuss how Napo Kichwa people view health as defined by movement and circulation of *samay* in society and the environment. These processes keep people focused on the social idea of “strength” in keeping the body fit. Lastly, I will show how Napo Kichwa people complement these cultural practices with the use of modern medicine and the local health clinic, called *subcentro* in Spanish. The examples will show that the Napo Kichwa view and practice health as part of daily life in which the body, mind, and environment are culturally patterned by a coherent system of thought and practice, one that is complemented by their use of western medicine.

My purpose behind these examples is to learn how Amazonian peoples, and specifically the Napo Runa, approach health and well-being as part of their daily cultural and ritual lives. Through the study of Napo Runa medical and healing practices, I argue contemporary North Americans might see their own culture of medicine and health in a different light. One major finding of my study is that the Amazonian approach to well being is very successful at keeping

the body in movement. This movement and active lifestyle helps the Napo Runa avoid many of the ills associated with America's sedentary lifestyle, ills featured in many documentaries such as *Supersize Me* and *The Weight of the Nation* (HBO). In living with the Napo Runa during the summer of 2013, I experienced the psychological benefits of Amazonian medicine like ameliorating individual alienation, loneliness, and providing people with a feeling of connectedness to nature. These are all aspects of their Napo Runa wisdom that we can take to heart and think about.

**Methods and Field Experiences:**

In the summer of 2013, I went to Napo Runa, Ecuador as a participant in a student program, and lived in a small community called Sapo Rumi. My fellow students and I stayed in a wooden house called a *cabana*. During our stay, we had the opportunity to spend time with a local host family, observing and participating in their way of life and interactions. I also worked closely with Federico Calapucha, who was a local healer within in the community. More so, Federico is the president of the Sapo Rumi community, where he oversees the management of community events and ensures that they run smoothly. He is married with 4 children who also live in the community. Frederico is 52 years old, but has attended every hike and camping excursion that we have participated in. He is a prime example of an individual who is strong and healthy.

The techniques I used to document the health practices were participant observation, active listening, interviews, and simply spending time with local families and engaging in conversation with them as well as in their daily routines. I used these methods in the specific context of the 2013 FSU International Program in Napo Province under the direction of anthropologist Michael Uzendoski. Through this program, I lived with the Napo Runa for a total of six weeks and conducted research for this thesis while keeping a field journal. After the program ended, I spent additional two weeks working in the *subcentro* or “local health clinic” in order to see the influence and use of biomedicine in the community.

**A Vignette:**

While in Ecuador, we went on a camping trip to Yawa Urku, a community in the mountains. After hiking for about forty-five minutes, we were greeted by the community with a drink, *chicha*. *Chicha* is a traditional, fermented beverage that is given to guests as a sign of welcoming. Unfortunately, one student named Josh became ill from the *chicha*. Napo Runa says that when one falls ill, it means that one has caught *mal aire*, which means “bad air” or “evil wind.” Once we returned to our cabanas, Federico performed a shamanistic treatment in an effort to heal the student. Federico took the extract of an aromatic plant and placed it into his own mouth. After swishing it in his mouth, he spit it out and rubbed it over Josh’s chest and stomach along with menthol Federico had bought from a store in town, so even within Napo Runa medicine, we see a mixture of materials. Federico was trying to cleanse Josh’s body by removing the evil wind. Shortly afterward, Federico asked Josh to drink a tea made from a staple plant in Ecuador, *guayusa*. The *guayusa* tea is said to have inherent abilities to heal, containing an energy that revitalizes the body when ill. He also instructed Josh to take some of the tea in his hands and rub it onto his face and hands. This motion of rubbing *guayusa* tea over the body transferred the plant’s energy from one physical body to another, from the plant itself to the human body.

After this treatment, unfortunately, Josh did not get better. However, the ritual gave him some comfort, as he reported, and inspired him to fight his illness. Some days later, Josh went to the local clinic, *subcentro*, to obtain antibiotics for his condition, which was an intestinal infection.

Although Josh did not fully heal from Federico’s techniques, these two treatments were not contradictory in the Napo Kichwa medical context. In fact, they complemented each other,

because together, they promoted well-being in different ways. The antibiotics eliminated the parasites, the root of the problem, but the shamanistic treatment allowed Josh to share his pain and experience of illness with others, and specifically with a shaman. The Napo Kichwa believes that health comes from the assistance of others and has a very social approach to dealing with illness and healing. The shaman, in this sense, can sometimes heal people with medicinal plants, but he also fosters well being by taking on and empathizing with people's pain. As Josh commented during his stay in Ecuador, "It was too bad I needed antibiotics. But I think the shamanic treatment also helped me to stay focused on getting better and to maintain a positive outlook. I felt somehow that I was cleansed."

## Ancestral Knowledge

### *Samay Life Force*

For Amazonians, every human being possesses a “life force,” a kind of energy. Our bodies are simply physical manifestations of it. This energy, called *samay*, contains our soul, our thoughts, our character, and our values. There are multiple terms in the Kichwa language that explain the concept of “life force,” because it’s not a singular entity; it encompasses a mass of phenomena. The notion of “life force” can also be represented by the term *kawsana*. *Kawsana*, like *samay*, refers to our soul and inner life force. In his book, *The Napo Runa of Amazonian Ecuador*, Uzendoski (2005: 36) states that the term *samay* literally translates as “breath.” The breath of the human body is consubstantial with its state of being. The air one breathes, replenishes one’s body with the oxygen needed to sustain life. In this analogy, the breath *is* life. Although *samay* refers to a number of different concepts, it also refers to a source of energy that exists within our bodies. The energy helps protect the body and keeps it in motion, hence its role in maintaining health. To keep the body mobile is to be active, to constantly move, because a sedentary lifestyle is denounced as sluggish and unproductive, making the body more susceptible to infection and disease.

The Napo Kichwa culture uses *samay* to gain deeper insight into their surroundings. For example, *samay* is a figurative term with many meanings that overlap with other concepts, but all things share *samay*. This concept explains much of the experiential richness of Amazonian life. The root metaphor of life as *samay* allows Napo Runa to feel intimacy with all living things and the landscape, so it’s more than just symbolic, it’s practical – it shapes practice. Although *samay*, in our terms, is a “spiritual” concept, it is also their idiom for explaining why illness occurs and

why people heal, in contrast to our Western notion of a “virus,” which only explains why people fall ill. For the Napo Runa, all illnesses have a spiritual or cosmic explanation as well as a scientific one.

### *Mal Aire*

For example, *samay* also has its negative “twin.” The Napo Kichwa people believe that when one falls ill, it is because they’ve caught “mal aire” or “evil air.” Mal aire saps an individual’s *samay* (their energy), making them vulnerable to disease. As a result, mal aire is usually thought of as the primary cause of illness; the illness itself is a secondary manifestation of that mal aire. Often a diagnosis of stomach or intestinal infection, for example, is described as mal aire, in which case, the mal aire is the root of the problem that allows microbes and bacteria to attack the body.

In the Kichwa order, *samay* must be restored as well as symptoms treated, in order for people to regain health. As a result, Napo Kichwa people actively seek methods by which to obtain *samay* and look towards the environment and shamans to do so, but all such means involve the process of “cleansing” or “purification.”

All living things are said to possess a *samay*, a soul. Therefore, the Napo Runa engage in rituals to find *samay* from shamans, animals, plants, and even other means like drinking tea and bathing in cold rivers. By trying to regain their *samay* from other sources, Napo Runa gains an intimate understanding of their surroundings, because they work so closely with it. They feel connected to the world because they see it through the metaphor of *samay*’s flow through all things (Yáñez Del Pozo 2005: 14).

In Ecuador, Federico explained to me that there is a flow of energy that exists in both the natural environment and the human body. *Samay* especially flows between humans and the environment in a gaining and losing of motion, hence the concept of being healthy with *samay* and falling ill without it. There is a constant movement back and forth of *samay*. The purpose of this flow of energy is to restore imbalances. Every living organism has a *samay*, because it is believed all organism harness energy.

The energy of *samay*, Federico explained, not only symbolizes the soul, but also signifies strength and knowledge. If one refers to your *samay*, he or she is referring to *all* of you: your strength, your thoughts, your actions, and your spirit. The energy is more than theoretical; it is a way of perceiving people and their well-being.

I enjoyed learning about *samay* from Federico because it opened a vista on the cultural differences between groups in explaining illness and healing. But what most interested me was that such symbolic categories complemented rather than contradicted the science behind biomedicine.

### ***Matapalo***

A shaman is an individual who has mastered certain knowledge to understand “the human condition and the human body” (Uzendoski 2005: 57). There are many different types of shamans, all of whom have mastered the ability to heal and cure mentally, physically and spiritually. For instance, comedians, musicians, and artists could be considered as practicing some form of shamanism in their own respect (Uzendoski 2005: 58), since these are people who work with transforming or evoking a bodily or emotional state. Shamans are knowledgeable particularly in physical and spiritual healing and in the use of medicinal plants. Shamans

approach healing in a spiritual sense, they value the importance of cleansing the body, not just physically, but also spiritually.

Some shamans are viewed as individuals who engage in witchcraft and sorcery and tend to have negative reputations as a result, but these shamans are not representative. Most shamans focus on doing “good” and try to cure and heal. However, all shamans tap into a “supernatural realm” that allows them to remove negative energy from patients, and return positive energy to restore their spiritual health; and they do so by engaging in physical activities. Hence, the patient is healed both spiritually and physically.

The power of the mind is immense, and perception is the medium by which one creates their reality and how it is experienced. Although perception may shape one’s beliefs, perception becomes practice when those beliefs physically manifest. When Napo Runa practices rituals and medicinal techniques, it is because they perceive it to be true. Perception becomes more deeply rooted and internalized as a theory of practice, rather than just a belief. To achieve a healthy state of being is an ongoing process. In Napo Runa culture, a cure should not be perceived as an all-or-nothing achievement with permanent results. Health fluctuates and requires time and effort to achieve (Csordas 2002: 48). In the same manner, shamans work on their patients’ perceptions to encourage them to engage in physical activities that lead to health and the processes of healing, the central goal of *samay* restoration.

During one of our excursions into the Amazonian rainforest, we visited the Matapalo Tree. This tree is known for its mythical powers and historical significance in Napo Runa culture. Federico, the healer, had brought us to the tree to perform a shamanistic ritual. He explained that it was a cleansing ritual, to rid our bodies of any impurities or negativity. As we

stood next the Matapalo towering over us, Federico held a cigarette in one hand and tobacco leaves in the other. With one student at a time, he began inhaling the cigarette and exhaling its smoke on top of our heads. As Federico explained, this was symbolic of the *samay* that he was figuratively breathing into our bodies. *Samay*, in Napo Runa thought, displaces the negative energy, and fills up the body with positive energy. Federico invoked this notion by placing his palm over our heads to feel the state of our *samay*. He stated that if our heads were cool, it signified a calm, peaceful energy, while a burning head signified a dark energy and feelings of frustration and worry. Then, he took the tobacco leaves and brushed them softly over our arms, backs and heads. Finally, he blew onto the leaves out into their surroundings, signifying that our bodies were rid of impurities.

The tobacco leaves, as Federico explained, captured the bad energy within our bodies and Federico symbolically removed it by blowing into the leaves facing away from the students and into our surroundings. Afterward, he placed his palm again over our heads to ensure that they had cooled down, in other words, to ensure that our *samay* was purified and strong. The cyclic nature of gaining, losing, and regaining *samay* reveals an active, ongoing search for “clean” *samay* acquired through various physical activities. The movement and flow of *samay* is consistent with the nature of the body: both *samay* and the human body are constantly in motion, moving from one area to another. The movement is what keeps the body healthy overall, because it allows people to stay fit, alleviate stress, and reduce a number of conditions like heart problems. So, psychologically and symbolically, Napo Runa focuses on keeping the body pure and in motion.

### *The Influence of Guayusa Healing Tea*

The plant, *guayusa* (*Ilex guayusa*), a relative of the maté tea drunk commonly in Argentina, is a staple in Amazonia and is prepared by placing the leaves into boiling water. After a few minutes of boiling, the water can be consumed as a tea. People customarily wake up at five in the morning and drink *guayusa* tea by the fire. While consuming the tea people tell stories, sing songs, and plan their activities for the day. The tea and the ritual open up a space of social communication and reflection about how to be productive and healthy for the day.

According to Napo Runa, *guayusa* has been used for thousands of years by their ancestors. The purpose of the plant is to energize the body and reinvigorate the *samay*. Because the tea is typically consumed in the mornings, at the start of the day, it is symbolic of beginning the day with an energized *samay*, and hence a purified body. In fact, *guayusa* contains caffeine. So not only does *guayusa* waken the body spiritually; it also does so biochemically. The idea is to consume the tea to become alert and focused. During the program, other students and I drank *guayusa* tea almost every day, because it was picked directly from behind the homes where we lived. This is a good example of not only how Napo Runa effectively interacts with their environment but also of how they are in constant movement. They practice their tea rituals not just to sustain meaningful concepts but also because it allows them to engage actively with the environment. They must plant, grow and then pick *guayusa* leaves in order to make and drink the tea. They are always moving physically keeping the body fit and strong. Their environment almost pushes them to retain an active lifestyle.

Lastly, *guayusa* also has ties to the indigenous Amazonian culture. Typically, *guayusa* tea is consumed in groups. This arrangement fosters social interaction enhancing ties with loved

ones. The notion of drinking tea together illustrates the value of keeping relationships intact. Social support from loved ones gives individuals a sense of strength and therefore, sustains a positive mentality.

### ***The Medicinal Vapor Treatment***

During my stay in Napo Runa, Ecuador, the community leader and healer, Federico Calapucha, prepared a medicinal vapor bath (*kushnirina*) for the students. He created the bath by selecting certain plants from the Amazonian rainforest to place in boiling water. Once all of the plants were thoroughly boiled, he asked that we sit in a circle around the pot to inhale the vapor. Two blankets were placed over our heads to prevent the vapor from escaping. The vapor is said to cure the body of illness and provide energy (Uzendoksi 2012: 25). The vapor bath is composed of several plants that are considered very powerful because of the energy they emit. Federico stated that once inhaled, this energy enters the body to rid individuals of their illnesses.

I think the vapor bath is linked to healing as *sensory* experience. The bath appeals to one's sense of sight, through the steam that one sees rising from the pot embodies the energy that the plants emit, one's sense of touch, when the heat from the boiling water overwhelms the entire body and one's sense of smell, when the aromatic plants open up the nose and sinus cavities. Together, these senses build up a greater awareness of self-actualization and reflection on health.

In Napo Kichwa order, the energy from plants nourishes *samay*, because the inhalation allows a person to gain *samay* when his or her body is ill. When people can see, touch, and smell their treatment, conceptual "symbols" like *samay* become real and tangible (Levi-Strauss 1963: 195). With sweat pouring from one's body, and aromatic steam circulating, one *feels samay*

entering and pollutants exiting the body, realizing the symbolic order Napo Runa concepts enable.

## **Socio-Environmental Connection**

### *Providing Care*

Kichwa speakers understand the human body and how it works by understanding their surroundings and environment. They use abundant, accessible resources in their environment to promote wellness; many home remedies are medicinal plants that have beneficial, biochemical effects. In their eyes, nature is an extension of the self's relatedness to others and nature is social rather than a different "ontological" state of being. In Napo Runa culture, nature and culture are not opposed but intermeshed as the theory of life, as the formula for good health.

These philosophical beliefs translate into pragmatic outcomes. For example, the environment provides Kichwa people with advantages like food, housing, and even medicines (many of which have been adopted by biomedicine, such as curare which used to be utilized in open-heart surgery). Kichwa people see the rainforest as a "mother" who provides and nourishes its people. The forest holds maternal characteristics that promote human life. Because so many of these resources come from the rainforest, nature is highly respected. They believe that in order to use nature's resources, they must acknowledge and take care of the environment. It's a circular relationship, similar to the balance mentioned earlier. In Kichwa culture, things seem "right" when there is a balance or dialectical relationship. In other words, the equilibrium between the environment and humans suggests that culture plays a major role in how one perceives and acts in the environment. The environment will continue to take care of them, but over-exploitation will lead to certain death. They believe that to abuse nature is to abuse their own bodies.

In living with Napo Runa community, I was amazed at how aware they were of their environment, plants, trees, creatures, and other life processes going on around them. Napo Runa people make an effort to actively engage with their environment, by not just using its resources, but also by being consciously aware of it (Ingold 2011: 52). People noticed, for example, when new leaves sprouted in trees, what plants were called, and even children could identify hundreds of species. To be aware of one's surroundings allows one to exercise a greater use for it as well as appreciate it.

These environmental influences focus on coexisting with nature, rather than controlling it; Western countries still hold this idea that nature can be conquered and controlled. We have created such a technology-driven society that computer screens seem to be the only way to study health, when this is not the case (Lock 2002: 195). Globally modernized societies have the tendency to look only toward science to provide the remedies that promote health, but many of the illnesses are caused by modernization. Dr. Leon Kass, a famous medical philosopher who worked for George W. Bush on many issues, mentions in his book how societies are taking advantage of the natural environment and abusing it with an obsession for science (1985: 28) that is overall, harmful to human health and well-being. The lesson from Kass' book is that health is more than just a science. It has to do with keeping ourselves in line with human nature and the limits of the human condition.

### *Transcending to Spiritual Beings*

Amazonian philosophy is difficult to understand when they talk about animals as "people" and use animals to express spiritual notions like shape-shifting and transformation. As Federico explained to me, animals are life forms, just like humans. As a result, they too are seen

to possess a spiritual energy, *samay*. Because of this shared “soul substance,” Amazonians believe that they can almost transcend into a spiritual reality, where they possess characteristics of an animal. Animals portray certain qualities that are not possible to achieve in the physical world, and in order to tap into these qualities, a human must transcend through dreams or ritual state. This transition into animals or animalistic behaviors typically occurs in dreams and is a result of heightened emotion. Dreams provide the grounds for a spiritual reality, and emotions trigger these desires. Spiritual transformation is seen as a coping mechanism that allows people to express their emotion in a healthy manner, through the unconscious mind. Humans can experience an intense sense of feeling, either anger or euphoria, where emotions are often communicated through metaphors or analogies to an animalistic state. When the body is not in movement, the body is engaging in sleep. Sleep is the platform for dreams, and therefore the creation of spiritual beings. Sleep should not be confused as an act of weakness, because the body is not in motion. It simply is the grounds for relieving and acting out emotions.

For example, Michael Uzendoski theorizes that the experience of transcending can be viewed as a kind of shape-shifting (2005: 54); a way of explaining the interconnectedness of all life forms. A body of water, such as a river or lake, is seen as an anaconda, because it moves quickly and effortlessly. The water also holds a certain degree of strength and power, just like an anaconda. The motions of fast-moving waters and strong currents are seen as very resilient. The water and the anaconda both symbolize power.

Furthermore, animal symbolism is often used to communicate transformations of death and life. Through active listening, I heard a woman say that when a human soul passes, family and friends say that “the anaconda took their soul away in the water.” Linked to the emotion of

sorrow and grief, the poetics of death is expressed through symbols of human-animal predation and life-death transformations.

Animal symbolism is also important in expressing social relationships and personalities of individual people. During my stay I discovered that every member in the Sapo Rumi community had coined an animal nickname that represented their individual character. For example, Federico's brother, Esteban Calapucha, went by the name "siku", which signifies the animal, agouti. He received this name because of his agile and sharp skills when hunting and his athletic abilities to move quickly and deftly. Esteban possessed the spiritual essence of an agouti. The symbolic and poetic way that Napo Runa people express the "human" via aspects of the natural environment; portraying oneself as an animalistic character is the way of expressing bodily and mental strength.

## Social Relationships

### *Social Sustainability*

Napo Runa culture values kinship tremendously and all the values of Kichwa culture practices are refracted through kinship relations (Uzendoski 2005). During my stay in Napo Runa community, I discovered that people view kinship as a model for good living; these principles are extended into relationships with nature. For Kichwa people, social wellness signifies the idea of having kin that promote your well-being through emotional and social support.

For instance, I observed that even Western doctors from the mestizo class adapted their treatment plan to match the cultural values of Napo Runa. I saw these doctors travel to indigenous communities to perform medical check-ups in the homes of patients. This is a pattern of care analogous to the social support that shamans give to patients by becoming and interacting with the sick socially. The patient remains in a comfortable environment with family and friends, making treatment relaxed and socially connected with the healer. The purpose of this type of treatment is to maintain a healthy mentality, to surround the patient with positive influences that will promote an optimistic attitude and trust the healer during the treatment.

For Napo Kichwa, kinship is much more than an artificial relationship with someone; it's the cultural way that all social relationships itself are organized and conceptualized. People act as a network of tightly woven strands that together creates a larger purpose. Kinship fosters energy and nourishes the *samay*. Not only do Napo Kichwa people actively search for *samay* in plants and animals, but they also can gain *samay* from people. *Samay* can be shared among people, establishing a relationship and gaining positive energy from it. During my stay in Ecuador, I was

able to speak with Federico Calapucha again, and he mentioned stories of his grandfather and his wise philosophies of *sumak kawsana*. He went on to say that his grandfather did not have much of an education, money, or resources. Rather, his grandfather built lasting relationships that supported him throughout his life. This notion is not to say that his grandfather made a living with kinship only, but with the social support he received from family and friends, it created a fulfilling life, and one that included gratitude, acknowledgment, and appreciation.

During my time in the program, we learned a Kichwa song written by a community member, Camilo Calapucha. Both Camilo and Dr. Uzendoski played the violin and we sang the song multiple times to perfect the pronunciation of the Kichwa words. As we sang, we also analyzed the significance behind the song. As Camilo explained, the song is about a mother who is about to die and she asks the community to take care of her children. Later that night, I had dinner with Federico, and he explained how the song was about the community coming together to look after her children. When someone passes, the people come together, and unify, so that the sorrow is shared equally among others. He stated how there never is a sense of loneliness; connectedness and unity are the central themes to their social culture.

In fact, I was able to experience and learn these themes, myself. After the program ended, I, along with another student, chose to stay a few extra days in Ecuador. I stayed an additional two weeks, while the student only stayed about 5 more days. On her last day, as we stated our goodbyes, I couldn't help but feel sad not only because I was the last student remaining, but also because she became a close friend. Immediately after she left, I returned to our cabana and I could feel the emptiness of the wooden house. Later, I decided to go down to the river, because I needed to wash my clothes. As I cleaned my clothes, Federico walked up to me. He stated that whenever I'd like to, I can swing by his house and have lunch or dinner. He mentioned that

although I am the last student from the program, he didn't want me to feel alone and that would love for me to come over.

I was more than grateful for this small act of kindness. After that student left, I was quite sad, because I felt alone. Just like the Kichwa song, my sadness was understood by the community and Federico, in particular, extended his hand to relieve my sadness. Federico made an effort to establish and then, maintain a close friendship with me. These relationships give security, a sense of belonging and comfort. The idea of kinship is not seen as a social privilege or luxury, it's an absolute necessity.

### ***Music and Dance:***

Music and dance are both practices by which the Napo Runa interact and communicate their philosophy of life, one that stresses creativity, communal life, and active lifestyles. These elements are parts of expression that facilitates a rich and complex human experience. For instance, music and dance are ways of integrating people into the community and for making people into kinship members. In the first days of our arrival, the children in the community performed a traditional Kichwa dance for me and my fellow students. As we all watched in awe of the soft, rhythmic motions of the dance, they suddenly stopped and each child grabbed one student to ask to join them. These actions made us feel like part of the family and for the rest of the night, we all danced to the melodious Kichwa music.

Furthermore, music is tied to healing. Music controls moods by being linked to electrical activity in the brain (Kleinman 1995: 215). Music adds significance to the healing process, because it fosters comfort and pleasure. During medicinal treatments, shamans may use music, particularly through singing. Singing during treatments can provide calmness, but what's more

powerful is that the voice used for singing is essentially the shaman's *samay*. Using *samay* for music allows individuals to exercise their voice and feed their energy. As mentioned earlier, *samay* can also mean breath, and in this particular case, using *samay* can heal.

## El Subcentro del Pano

I have now discussed Napo Kichwa healing culture and the symbols and practices that they use to conceptualize and promote health. However, Napo Kichwa also take advantage of a modern health system, called *subcentros*, that does not contradict but rather complements their ancestral approach to life. These free clinics have been able to incorporate both a very advanced form of medical care into the community, but the *subcentro* respects the cultural values of the Napo Runa. The clinic shows a different approach to health than those found in modern, Western societies. The *subcentro*, like the Kichwa, focuses on curing the health ailment at the root of the problem by emphasizing active lifestyles (Baer 1997: 10). Instead of focusing on how to treat the ailment, the doctors emphasize practices to prevent it from occurring at all. Their practice of patient care is constructed on a case by case basis and is articulated in relations to culture rather than as being opposed to it. Healing is not as much a “business” as it is a service provided to the community and those in need. It’s subordinate to the value of culture and traditional wisdom.

The *subcentro* provides basic over-the-counter medication, such as antibiotics, creams for rashes, as well as orthodontic services. They also offer primary patient care, including minor tissue wounds and bandaging. However, for other services involving surgeries and life support, patients would get a transfer or referral to the city to visit the main hospital.

I found it interesting that the *subcentro* didn’t take appointments; they would anticipate walk-ins. I had the opportunity to volunteer at the local *subcentro*, during that last two weeks of my stay, as I mentioned. I shadowed Dr. Jenny Fuentes, while there, where she explained the community only had a total of three *subcentros*, and many people couldn’t even afford the transportation to visit one. For the most part, women came in with their children, looking to

either get a regular check-up or addressing an infection or other ailment. Dr. Fuentes mentioned that some common conditions were respiratory infections and rashes, usually due to a lack of clean water; and stomach ailments like infections, parasites, and amoebas, which were typically caused by uncooked food. The treatment for these conditions is more often than not antibiotics.

On average, a typical day in the clinic involved mothers and their children. The *subcentro* would measure the children's weight, height, and head circumference to make sure the child was growing healthily. Afterwards, the mothers' vital signs would be assessed, and after waiting for a few minutes, they would see the doctor. After the consultation, the patient would pick up any medications the doctor instructed. Furthermore, the employees of the clinic are all from the community, so they have a better understanding of providing quality patient care, because they're familiar with the social culture and norms.

I observed that Napo Kichwa people effectively use western medicine to act as a complement to their cultural values. For example, it was mentioned earlier how a student during the trip became ill and underwent a shamanistic treatment by Federico. Unfortunately, when the treatment didn't work, he went to the clinic to obtain antibiotics. Although the shamanistic treatment didn't cure the student fully, it did establish a stronger relationship with Federico and help improve his mood. The student and Federico built a father-son friendship where Federico even mentored the student about health tips and medicinal plants. For example, Federico mentioned to the student that using hot plantains can help eliminate blisters on the skin. One day, we spent the afternoon hiking up the mountain to an area where guayusa plants were located and removed the weeds and other debris surrounding it with machetes. Several of the students, myself included, got a blister on our hands from using the machete so forcefully. So, when we reached back to the house, Federico heated a plantain and placed it gently on our blisters to help

eliminate it completely. He stated the skin grows back stronger and more durable after doing so. Although simple, the treatment worked and our blisters healed.

Napo Kichwa people are fully modern in that their culture utilizes western medicine and advanced technologies to promote health, but they do so in a way that does not contradict the values and symbolic categories of their culture, such as the *samay* and the subsequent result of keeping the body in movement.

I think their culture also enhances Western medical approaches. For example, their emphasis on movement and positive moods keep the body strong. When the body is in movement, it is active and that in and of itself is like an exercise. Hence, the body remains fit, reducing many problems that a sedentary lifestyle may cause. Common conditions in Western countries include heart problems, obesity, and even high sugar and sodium levels in the blood. Napo Kichwa people practice a healthy lifestyle by using natural, home remedies from the environment, by constantly remaining active, and by using a clinic of socially-minded health workers. They emphasize the idea of good living and understand the human form and condition. In a generation driven by technology, we have the tendency to rely on scientific products to solve our everyday health issues (Kass 1985: 35). The Kichwa people have found a way to use that technology but also to be mindful in understanding the human condition and taking preventative actions to stop health ailments at the start.

## Conclusion

The Amazonian indigenous culture studied here views health holistically. I was able to demonstrate that they express health and illness through the symbolic categories and poetics of their culture to achieve a healthy state of being. Health is not simply the absence of a disease; it comprises of emotional health, social health, and mental health. Instead of pinpointing the biological cause for a given ailment, their culture emphasizes the symbolic categories of samay, mal aire, and shamanic treatments and practices of using medicinal plants and ritual actions of purification and cleansing.

The Amazonian culture I studied allowed me to learn about a different way to define the idea of wellness and healing. I was especially surprised at how well their cultural practices were integrated with Western medicine through the subcentro system. The true question of health is: What does it really mean to be healthy? To be well? I learned from my experiences that Amazonian people stress the interrelationship of the social, the environmental, and the spiritual components of life as the keys to good health. They take these components and turn them into experiences that build a meshwork of knowledge, and achieve an understanding of the self and their surroundings to maintain this equilibrium of health and well-being.

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