

# The Museum Of Mayan Medicine

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**E**l Museo de la Medicina Maya (Museum of Mayan Medicine) in San Cristóbal de las Casas is a magnificent opportunity to look into the theoretical-practical details of Tzotzil and Tzeltal indigenous medicine in museographical surroundings deserving of the 1997 Miguel Covarrubias National Prize for Museography awarded by the National Institute of Anthropology and History and the National Council for Culture and the Arts.

The museum is part of the Regional Center for the Development of Mayan Medicine (CR), designed and operated by the Indigenous Doctors Organization of the State of Chiapas (OMIECH) which for the last 20 years has sought to recover, defend and develop ancient Mayan medicine.<sup>1</sup> The importance of such a task is clear if we take into account that 80 percent of the illnesses in communities that belong to the OMIECH are treated by indigenous doctors.

*The ancient Mayan doctor-priests,  
our grandfathers, wanted  
their knowledge not to be lost.  
They left it to us.  
They taught us to heal through dreams.*

\* Advisor to the Indigenous Doctors Organization of the State of Chiapas (OMIECH) who has worked 23 years in Chiapas indigenous communities on primary health care, health and inter-culturalism and traditional indigenous medicine projects.



Deborah Diemont

The museum is extraordinary: its seven museographical environments (photo-murals, panels, objects on display, sounds and life-sized human representations) allow visitors to situate themselves geographically, become familiarized with traditional doctors' different specialties and place themselves in the very site where therapeutic rites and activities are held. The complexity of health-illness processes and their undeniable link to nature are perfectly presented in each environment. Two of the spaces, the church and the garden *temazcal* or steam bath, are used daily by the organization's indigenous doctors to treat and heal patients who seek them out for help.

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ENVIRONMENT 1  
PUBLIC PLAZA IN A CHIAPAS TOWN

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The first display represents the central plaza of a town in the Chiapas Highlands, with its church, two photo-murals with a view of the Chiapas mountains and the sounds of a marketplace (the voices of the merchants, dogs, fireworks, bells). In addition, two panels with drawings and photos of the Chamula and Chenalhó plazas explain traditional doctors' different specialties, the illnesses they treat and their therapeutic resources: the *I'lol* or

he-who-prays; the midwives; the bone doctor; he-who-prays of the hills; and the herb doctor (see box).

Maps of Mexico, the state of Chiapas, the Mayan region and the area where the OMIECH communities are located situate the visitor geographically. They also pinpoint the physiographic regions, areas of vegetation and general data about the medicinal plants used in the world, Mexico and Chiapas. On the upper part written quotes from Mayan doctors illustrate details of their activities.

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ENVIRONMENT 2  
CHURCH OF SAN JUAN CHAMULA

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The church, in addition to being a place for religious activity, is a therapeutic space where traditional doctors perform many of their treatments. The museum boasts five altars, each one with a wooden saint, a cross, flowers, candles and an incense burner. At one end of the room is the main altar with its wooden Christ and three life-sized mannequins in front of it dressed in traditional Chamula garb. The mannequins represent a traditional doctor praying, a sick little girl and her mother kneeling next to her. The sound system reproduces the indigenous doctor's prayers. Next to the altar



Elsie Montiel

is a door to the outside with a view of the Chiapas mountains. The church is attended to by its own I'lol, a member of OMIECH, and anyone can come to him for treatment.

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### ENVIRONMENT 3: THE I'LOL'S GARDEN

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This room represents the highland mountains, with drawings of fauna and the minerals used in indigenous medicine, in addition to 10 slides of medicinal plants being continually shown, giving ethno-botanical information. The most interesting item in this space is the altar of the hills placed in the center of the room, with the three customary crosses with stones around it. At the foot of the altar, a mannequin represents he-who-prays of the hills, kneeling and praying for illness not to enter his town.



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The environmental sounds are those of the mountains: a waterfall, the wind, the birds chirping, the sounds of animals in the hills and the prayers of the healer. This, together with the dim lighting make the scene very realistic.

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#### THE HOUSE OF MAYAN MEDICINE

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This representation is outfitted like a real house, with earthen walls and a four-sided, slanted roof made of straw brought from the municipality of Chenalhó, and is divided into three more environments.

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#### ENVIRONMENT 4: THE MIDWIFE'S HOUSE

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This room is set up with the original objects from a Tzotzil house from the municipality of Chenalhó (kitchen utensils, machetes, gourds, a rifle, traditional clothing and a hearth at the center), donated by organization members. Four life-sized mannequins are posed to represent a birthing Chiapas-Highland style. The woman gives birth kneeling, with her husband in front of her seated on a chair and the midwife behind her in a crouch to catch the baby. Next to the midwife are the plants com-

monly used in birthing. The advantages of giving birth like this are explained in short paragraphs: the vertical position allows the baby to descend more easily; the husband, who embraces his wife around the waist, pressures the baby downward so it is born more quickly; and the husband's active participation creates an act of communion for the couple. The sound track reproduces the dialogue in Tzotzil among the three participants.

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#### ENVIRONMENT 5 THE HOUSE OF THE HERB DOCTOR

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This environment shows the visitor how *pilico* is made, a sacred compound made of wild tobacco, a pinch of lime and cane alcohol, used to protect people from envy and bad air, and so nothing happens to them on the roads when they go out at night or walk great distances. It should be carried with the person in his/her bag or hung around the neck to be used whenever necessary. It also helps for stomach pains and dizziness. The mannequin, dressed in the traditional clothing of Tenejapa, sits on a bench preparing the plant in a wooden mortar and pestle, with lime in a gourd and tobacco leaves to one side. On the floor are some agricultural tools and on the wall are the healer's hat, dry wild tobacco leaves and earthen pots to hold the *pilico*.

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#### ENVIRONMENT 6 TRADITIONAL FACTORY OF VOTIVE CANDLES IN SAN JUAN CHAMULA

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Divided from the herb doctor just by a passageway but in the same room is the mannequin of a standing woman, dressed in the customary clothing of San Juan Chamula. She is standing in front of a wooden wheel-shaped frame (called a *rueca*) where the wicks for making the candles are hanging. Candles are indispensable in all prayers because they are the food the *I'ols* offer God during the treatments. Under the *rueca* is a tray, placed on the fire, for melting wax which is then poured over the wicks to make the candles. Bunches of

different sized and colored candles hang from the walls. The sounds include traditional music from Tenejapa municipality, a background for the rhythmic pulsing of the herb doctor's wooden mallet beating the mortar.

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#### ENVIRONMENT 7: THE ALL-PURPOSE ROOM

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This room is used for talks, lectures, film showings and temporary exhibits of indigenous medicine from other states (Oaxaca, Nayarit, Yucatán, etc.). Temporary exhibits and videos that form part of the "Itinerant Museum" are also shown here: mobile museographical exhibits on cultural themes and indigenous medicine that are shown in the region's communities, schools and local museums, including the Itinerant Herbal Photographic Exhibit; a video and photo exhibition about Mixe medicine; the photo exhibition Li Poshil, on Mayan medicine; a video about Catemaco healers; a video on the Mayan Medicine Center; another on the Power of the I'lol; and another on He-Who-Prays in Santa Tierra.

The Itinerant Herbal Photographic Exhibit is a training exhibition featuring color photographs of medicinal plants used in the Chiapas Highlands. It includes 50 photographs accompanied by ethnobotanical information; the names in Tzotzil and the scientific names; the local name; their botanical description; if they are used to cure "hot" or "cold" diseases; their medicinal uses; how they are used and counter-indications. Today, the exhibit is temporary shown in cultural centers, schools and anywhere else it is requested.

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#### GARDEN-SHOWPLACE OF MEDICINAL PLANTS AND TEMAZCAL

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After leaving environment 7, the visitor walks into a garden where the plants most used by the region's indigenous doctors are cultivated. The garden is 1,500 square meters, divided into two parts, one with pre-Hispanic plants and the other with plants imported from Europe by the Spaniards that

are used regularly by Chiapas indigenous doctors. Each plant is tagged with a little stick on which its medicinal and botanical characteristics are written.

Another attraction in the garden is the *temazcal* or pre-Hispanic bath used by the midwives to alleviate the condition of post-birthing mothers. It is also used for therapeutically cleansing the body, and visitors can use it if they so desire.

Yet another attraction is the pharmacy of medicinal herbal products that is part of the comprehensive CR project. It has a room for chopping, drying and bagging the medicinal plants and a cubicle for making medicines naturally (syrups, salves, tinctures, soaps and shampoos). The herb doctor is available for consultation and to recommend the appropriate treatment for the most frequent acute and chronic conditions: diarrhea, the sniffles, diabetes, gastritis, excessive uric acid and diseases of the urinary tract, among others. This pharmacy, open to the general public, benefits from the vast knowledge of the use of medicinal plants, a knowledge that is preserved and defended by OMECH members so it is not appropriated or patented by the large multinational pharmaceutical companies. **MM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The CR has a complete team of bilingual technicians, advisors and indigenous doctors who participate in seven operational areas: women and midwives; the Museum of Mayan Medicine (including the garden-showplace of medicinal plants); the use of medicinal herbs (including the herb pharmacy and greenhouse); management; advisory services; institutional liaison; and communications.

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THE MUSEUM SHOP OFFERS VISITORS BOOKS, PAMPHLETS,  
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# SPECIALTIES IN TRADITIONAL INDIGENOUS MEDICINE

## I'LOL OR PULSE-TAKER

"I can open myself up to the invisible world and face it to rescue the patient's lost and imprisoned soul. I make my diagnosis using the pulse: when I take the pulse, I feel a flow of blood that goes from the heart to the thoughts; everything is made known through the blood, and I hear its voice, which tells me what is wrong with the patient."

## K'OPONEJ WITZ OR HE-WHO-PRAYS OF THE HILLS

"I am the indigenous doctor who prays to the spirit of the earth on the four points of the compass. When I am in the mountains, the spirit of the hills tells me, 'If you do not speak to me, if you do not ask me, I cannot give you your food; although you have fields, I will send the wind to push over the plants, and you will not have food. If you do not pray to me, there will be disease and problems. If, on the other hand, you pray to me and leave something at my door, I will happily give you what you ask!'"

## TZAK'BAK OR BONE DOCTOR

"I treat the illnesses of the bones; I correct displacements, fractures and all the ills of the skele-

ton. I know how to touch the injured place to find the illness and cure it with whistles, herbs, bandages and prayers."

## AC'VOMOL OR HERB DOCTOR

"I cut medicinal plants, herbs or trees, in the mountains to cure people. I use different kinds of plants depending on the disease. Cold or hot, strong or weak, for children and women, for a short or a long time. I know when to use the entire plant or part of it. There are plants that are boiled or crushed raw; others are heated on the grill or only used fresh to cleanse the person. I also can tell when a plant is poisonous and must not be ingested. As the herb doctor, I have all the secrets of plants in my head."

## JVE'TOME OR MIDWIFE

"I am the indigenous midwife. I can make birthing easier. I know how to cure women's diseases; problems with urination; spasms during pregnancy; the danger of miscarriage; painful or irregular menstruation; swelling when women cannot have children or when their milk does not come after labor; when a baby is not in the right position, I can fix it; a fallen uterus and hemorrhaging after labor."

**Important to note:** These specialties are not mutually exclusive. That is, a traditional doctor can have more than one specialty: he or she can be an herb doctor, he-who-prays and a bone doctor, or an i'lol and an herb doctor; a midwife can also be an i'lol, an herb doctor and a bone doctor, etc.



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