

Note: over the years “cultural appropriation” questions arise among our practitioners and the general public, since these techniques bear the name “Maya” as part of the title. This was discussed at Convention among the practitioners to better understand how we can address this. Rosita has given much thought and prayer to her response. This is not a debate of what is right, fair and just in the eyes of a person, it is Rosita’s response from her heart, her commitment to Don Elijio and doing well for the world we live in.

APPROPRIATION OR APPROPRIATE USE?

Ever since I met Don Elijio Panti in 1982 the subject of cultural appropriation has arisen from time to time. There is a knee jerk reaction to a white person studying with a Native American traditional healer, in my case, with a Maya healer. It comes up in Belize and the USA but interestingly never in Mexico or other Central American countries where I have lectured. It is a thorny issue I have lived with for more than forty years.

What is “cultural appropriation”? One definition is “the adoption of certain elements of one culture by those from a different culture”. By that broad definition, we are all guilty of appropriating recipes, dress, music, dance, festivals, and social mores. Can we say that those who study Chinese acupuncture, Lomi Lomi , Ayurvedic Medicine or even belly dancing are guilty of cultural appropriation?

The issue emerges when there is a perception that “mis-appropriation” has occurred between two parties who are not on an equal politico-economic status. Cultural mis-appropriation has a strong negative connotation that conjures up oppression, lack of respect, false posturing and theft. We should all be diligent to assure that cultural mis-appropriation does not occur, but those that raise the issue are ignorant of certain facts. Namely, Don Elijio was an extremely intelligent and astute person who would not have allowed anyone to exploit him. For twenty years I labored to bring a combination of his ancient techniques and my own modern natural healing skills to the world. Thousands have been helped, healed and transformed through the Arvigo Techniques of Maya Abdominal Therapy®. We are a force for good.

Susan Scafidi, Fordham University Law Professor and the author of *Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law*, defined cultural mis-

appropriation "Taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission."

Without permission. When I met Don Elijo in Belize, he first came to find me because he heard there was an American herbalist in San Ignacio. He hoped to find some Linden Flower tea to help him sleep. He was thrilled that I had the tea as it is also one of my favorites. We agreed to meet again in his village of San Antonio the following week. In spite of numerous warnings from local residents that Don Elijo was a lecher, a womanizer and a drunk, I made weekly five-mile treks on foot from my farm over a river crossing, jungle trails and dangerous logging roads to arrive on his doorstep. Each time, I gave him a naprapthic treatment that greatly relieved his aches and pains. I helped him chop medicine. I swept his floor, cleaned his house, translated for his patients who did not speak Spanish or Maya and even gave enemas, brought firewood for his hearth and collected his healing plants that grew around the village. Often I asked him to teach me about the medicinal plants of Belize and he refused saying he could not teach a "gringa." I accepted that and was pleased just to spend time with him.

One day, after a year of these weekly visits, I arrived on his doorstep at dawn. He gave me a sour look and said "I don't have time for you this morning. I have to go harvest my corn. The season is late and I have been too busy with patients to do my harvest." That look stunned me. I thought to myself that this would be the last time I would visit him as I wanted to be a help to him, not a bother.

"I can help you harvest corn," I answered. He scoffed but allowed me to tag along. By ten o'clock that morning, wiping sweat from our brows, we met in the middle of a row of corn. He looked at my basket overflowing with corn cobs and asked, "Are you married?"

"Yes," I answered. "I am married and have three children." He was crestfallen but later atop a hill while we shared an orange; he asked me "What is it that you want?"

"Don Elijo, if you teach me about the healing plants, I promise to work hard and be a good student." He stood up. Rays of morning sunshine encircled him. "Will you promise to take care of my people after I am gone?" Gulp! "Yes, I promise."

For the next thirteen years, I spent four nights and three days of every week with my maestro. Daily, I was infested with ticks, spider bites and did hard labor

digging up roots, pulling down vines and then carried loads on my back to his village. In the afternoon, we chopped medicine and administered to his patients, sometimes up to twenty in one day. When I needed to bathe, he handed me a cup of water. Ours evolved into more than a student-teacher relationship. I believe a devoted friend helped him live longer and that my attention to his old-age ailments made his last years easier. One day, I asked Don Elijio why he agreed to teach me about the medicinal plants. He answered, "Because, Rosita, I saw that you have a pure heart."

Once I realized that Don Elijio was not only a great herbalist but also one of the last living Maya shamans, I felt overwhelmed by the enormity of the responsibility toward my maestro, the Maya people and the world. I was moved to make a pilgrimage to the temples of Palenque in Mexico. My goal was to seek an answer to this question: "How can I best serve God and humanity with what Don Elijio is teaching me?" After praying atop the ancient Observatory for two days a dream vision came. In the middle of the night, a naked Lacandon Indian man walked into my hotel room, sat down on the bed next to me, leaned over me and said, "Teach."

When I met Don Elijio Panti in 1983, I was already a practicing herbalist and a doctor of Naprapathy. When I left Chicago with my family to homestead 32 acres of un-cleared, high-bush jungle, I also left behind a very busy clinic. Then, to keep the promise I made to Don Elijio in the cornfield, I conducted a natural healing clinic in San Ignacio for thirty-five years. Like him, I never turned anyone away who could not pay and always had a sliding scale for those with few resources. After ten years of practice combining my own healing modalities and Don Elijio's Maya Medicine, I was greatly impressed with how my patients overcame menstrual cramps, digestive complaints and even emotional ailments using the Maya spiritual baths and prayers.

What Don Elijio taught me, took my practice to a whole new level. Soon, foreigners heard about my little practice in San Ignacio and came seeking my aid. One day a visitor on the Rainforest Medicine Trail (dedicated to Don Elijio) and asked me if I would teach a group of massage therapists. Thinking this would be something wonderful and powerful to give the world, I agreed never imagining that it would blossom into what it is today, a world-wide network of practitioners of The Arvigo Techniques of Maya Abdominal Therapy®. It took root and grew to what it is today because it is safe, effective and dramatic acting for a broad range

of ailments for which modern medicine has few or no answers. The Arvigo® Techniques combine Maya Medicine with modern alternative healing modalities that I developed over four decades of clinical practice. To withhold this from the world would have been a criminal neglect.

On the very day that Don Elijio passed away in 1996, he appeared in a dream to say, "Take the children as though they were your own. Train them and teach them to help each other." My husband, Greg, and I have hosted and raised funds for an annual Summer Bush Medicine Camp in Belize to teach children about traditional healing and medicinal plants. We have sponsored and conducted twenty such summer camps for more than four hundred Belizean children. We held six Useful Plants of Belize Exhibits that each time were visited by two thousand school children; My Backyard Garden Plants book-making contest was a great way to invite children to interact with their elders; Ethnobotany in the Classroom is now in two schools and on-going; we conducted six Traditional Healers' Conferences in all districts of Belize . I have done numerous gratis workshops for indigenous healers in Belize, Mexico and Guatemala and continue to do so to this day.

In 1986 I contacted Dr. Michael Balick of The New York Botanical Garden to ask for guidance. How does one do justice to an ancient medical system whose last great representative is now over 90 years old? With my husband, Greg and Dr. Balick, we founded the Belize Ethnobotany Project to collect and record the uses of three thousand medicinal plants of Belize. Don Elijio contributed 500. Those herbarium specimens are in the Belize Forestry Department where anyone for generations to come will be able to research medicinal plants long after the healers who used them are gone.

I appropriated nothing from Don Elijio. What he shared with me was freely; even gratefully, given. He told me that he feared taking his knowledge to the grave before he could teach someone. There were one or two other people that he trained short term, but no one else spent thirteen years with him. No one else combined his massage, herbology and spiritual healing into a meaningful course that could be grasped by healers of all nations to benefit all humanity. I am not a Wannabe and I have never tried to represent myself as a Mayan person nor do I dress in indigenous clothing. Before I started teaching these techniques the indigenous massage therapists of Mexico and Guatemala were scorned, now they, too, have a thriving cottage industry because, thanks to our work, Maya

medicine and the abdominal massage have gained much deserved, renewed respect around the world.

What Don Elijio and I have brought to the world through the Arvigo Institute is a gift to humanity. We alleviate suffering. By now thousands of women are free of uterine disorders and countless babies have been born into families who were unable to conceive until they received this blessed therapy from one of our trained practitioners now in twenty-two countries.

Through my books, lectures and programs, Don Elijio has been made immortal. Rainforest Remedies: One Hundred Healing Herbs of Belize is now a household standard. I dedicated twenty years of my life to deciphering the anatomy and physiology of what Don Elijio, a man who could not read or write, taught me about his ancient massage and spiritual healing. Instead of a dying or dead art, it is vibrant and actively growing around the world because the combination of our life's work is a blessing to the world.

As he said, "No quiero llevar mi lampara al panteon." "I do not want to take my lamp to the grave."

Our practitioners weigh in:

Christine Lee, LAC; Mass; having said that, individual Intellectual property is the creations of one's mind through invention, literary &/or artistic bodies of work and symbols/ images. It represents creativity, imagination, passion, wisdom from your heart and soul. This also is the result of Rosita's efforts to embody, articulate, and deliver the essence of the body of work that Don Elijio taught and gifted to her. Rosita has upheld and acknowledged its history.

Intellectual property, when formally recognized marks the methods, creativity, standards and defines a body of knowledge. Thank you Rosita for your efforts; championing on so eloquently.

Carolina Miranda, Massage Therapist

As a Mexican-American I am aware of the impact that Cultural Appropriation can have. However, I believe that regardless of culture, creed or race, when anyone is given the opportunity to learn and help others it comes with the responsibility of shearing that knowledge with anyone who is willing to learn. Healing touch and plant medicine is universal and should not be lost or denied to anyone. I am extremely grateful to Rosita for documenting and honoring her experience with Don Elijio and shearing it with the world.