

ing in the territory between the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tarahumans of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles. Little is known of their origin, although tradition states that they came from the East. . . .

"Each family has a shrine. The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest which is built into the wall. In this chest are kept the many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he could live. These preparations are secured from a variety of specialized practitioners. The most powerful of these are the medicine men, whose assistance must be rewarded with substantial gifts. However, the medicine men do not provide the curative potions for their clients, but decide what the ingredients should be and then write them down in an ancient and secret language. This writing is understood only by the medicine men and by the herbalists who, for another gift, provide the required charm."

In the American health care system the medicine man is not actually the highest authority on healing. After he has poked, prodded, and stuck needles into the tribesman, he must go to the herbalist, then confer with a ceremonial leader. This leader knows absolutely nothing about healing, but from him the medicine man must get approval for the healing, in a paper ritual dance, in order not to violate tribal taboo. The natives give gifts several times a year to these ceremonial leaders, who then transfer these gifts in part to the medicine men.

The poorest of the American tribespeople are not required to give to the same ceremonial leaders, but a special leader allots gifts to the medicine men working with them. Both types of ceremonial leaders exert incredible control over the medicine men, telling them what herbs and potions they can dispense and how long it should take them to cure a particular patient. If the medicine man does not comply completely with the ceremonial leader, especially the leader involved with the poor, the medicine man will receive no gift at all.

Much like the healers of Bali, who pierce their arms with arrows, the American medicine man must undergo a long, grueling apprenticeship, with brutal rites and rituals, under other medicine men. During his initiation the apprentice is shamed and humiliated repeatedly for many years. Part of the training is not unlike the Vision Quest of the Cherokee, who go into the desert or forest alone for days and days until they have a vision. Usually they do not eat or sleep until they have their vision. That vision gives guidance about what they are to do in life and what their totem animal is. The Vision Quest of the American medicine man, however, goes on for years, with extended periods of sleeplessness only briefly interrupted with sleep. The medicine-man-in-training lives in a state of almost complete mental and physical exhaustion. Some medicine men have told me