

# The Life of a Community Curandera: Doña Olga Ruíz Cañez

John Slattery

**D**riving along I-19 through the upper Sonoran desert grassland landscape, I'm thinking in Spanish, running over the variety of questions I plan to ask Doña Olga during another short visit. Her home in Imuris, Sonora, Mexico, is about 2.5 hours' drive from where I live in Tucson, Arizona. I met Doña Olga at

her home many years ago through a liaison at the local orphanage. Serendipity had brought me to the small town of Imuris in search of a young woman who lived at the orphanage. She had suffered several bouts of epileptic seizures over the previous months and the whole community was deeply concerned for her. Through a chance meeting with friends of hers, I offered to attend to her with some



John Slattery's work with the plants and wild places of the Sonoran desert has been widely influenced by indigenous plant healers and herbalist Michael Moore. He founded Desert Tortoise Botanicals in Tucson, AZ in 2005 in order to bring his wild-harvested plant medicines to the people of the Southwest. John is a practicing herbalist, educator, author, and forager. His first book, *Southwest Foraging*, was released in 2016. Some of John's current passions include delving into the various traditions of acorn processing and consumption, bringing the concepts and principles of bioregional herbalism to a wider audience, and integrating skilled and balanced movement into wilderness



Doña Olga at home with yerba mansa (*Anemopsis californica*) drying in the background.

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craniosacral therapy. I hoped that I could be of service. Little did I know that I would never meet the young woman at the orphanage, but would instead be taken directly to the house of Doña Olga. We were destined to meet.

We became like family shortly after our first meeting, and I have been to her home countless times over the past 12 years. We've been on sojourns into the mountains and deserts of Sonora and Arizona. We've camped at the sea with our Seri friends and other herbal explorers. I've hosted Doña Olga for the presentation of herb classes in Tucson and I've brought dozens of people to visit her home for a delicious meal of comida Sonorense tradicional (traditional Sonoran food). She has always freely shared her wealth of knowledge of the healing plants and other natural substances of the great Sonoran bioregion. Despite years of teachings, I don't think I could ever take in all that Doña Olga has to share. Her life has been rich beyond the imaginings of most modern Westerners, with countless adventures in the natural realm, and accompanied by all the unpredictability, magic, and hardship that comes with that territory.

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### The Culture of Los Pajareros

From my perspective, Doña Olga is a singularly unique and wonderful amalgamation of la cultura Sonorense (Sonoran culture), particularly in relation to her incomparable plant knowledge. Growing up as a member of an itinerant farmer/hunter-gatherer group known as Los Pajareros (the bird people), she witnessed and experienced a wide array of cultures in her travels. The state of Sonora, Mexico, is home to approximately nine different indigenous groups. She herself descends from two of them – Tohono O'odham and Comcáac (Seri) – and the meanderings of Los Pajareros brought her in direct contact with nearly all of these indigenous groups from the age of nine when she began traveling alongside her elder sister and father.

Among the Pajareros, she began observing the elder women who gathered herbs that were used within their group or sold to villagers at a number of fiestas or mercados throughout the state. These travels would take her to high elevation pine forests where she would first meet chuchupate (*Ligusticum porteri*, oshá) and yerba negrita (*Heuchera sanguinea*, coral bells), or down to the sandy shores of the Sea of Cortéz where she learned to gather erizo del mar (*Echinoidea*, sea urchin) from the tidal pools, or scavenge for tripas de Judas (“Judas casings,” *Clypeasteroidea*, sand dollars) along the beach at low tide. [Editor's Note: With respect for Doña Olga's tradition, we will use the regionally appropriate common names for herbs throughout the article, followed by species and English common name where available.]

Her knowledge of tribal customs – particularly, common ailments and preferred herbs for such ailments, along with their traditional names – regional ethnobotany, specific recipes and applications for herbs, spiritual healing, geology, cultural nuances, and general knowledge of the landscape and its peoples is perhaps unsurpassed amongst anyone living in Sonora today. While there may be others who know more about any particular subset of her regional knowledge, there is no one I have met or heard of who holds such a broad and general knowledge about the people, places, and plants (and minerals and animals!) of Sonora as does Doña Olga.

### An Unconventional Life

Born in the colonial village of Heróica de Caborca amidst “saguars, pitayas, vaqueros, y mineros” (saguars, organ pipe cactus, cowboys, and miners) as the second daughter of Isabel Cañez, Olga Ruíz Cañez has always lived in the heart of the Sonoran desert. She never knew her mother very well. Although she can recall piscando algodón (picking cotton) alongside her mother and 13 other family members near the town of Pitiquito, Sonora, there are few such memories. Most of the youthful memories that she has recounted to me involve her father, Lázaro Ruíz, a Tohono

O'odham, or Papago, who developed post-polio syndrome when Olga was a young girl. Her parents separated when she was just one year old, and Olga was subsequently forced to become a grown woman from a very young age.

Olga's life is not ordinary by any conventional 19th- or 20th-Century American standards. She has even become an anomaly within her own rapidly changing cultural landscape. As she traveled the open countryside with her Pajareros, the state of Sonora was beginning to shift its focus towards industrial-scale agriculture and gradually began plowing under the fertile bottomlands of the southern coastline. Tucked away in some of the most remote areas of North America, these Pajareros were living in a manner not too different in 1950 as their ancestors had in 1850.

### The People Reflect the Landscape

Doña Olga has often recounted tales of their camps, simultaneously conjuring up images in my mind of the highly mobile Apaches of the 19th Century, bands of pioneer wagons venturing out West from St. Louis through the middle to late 19th century, or perhaps even Turkish herders of the Middle Ages roaming the steppes in search of verdant pastures or untapped markets for their stock and woolen textiles. These Pajareros authentically reflect their landscape and continuously work with it. Although they do drink coffee, use sugar, and have access to chocolate, their food derives almost entirely from the local terrain. Large, handmade wheat tortillas; omnipresent beans (“ni tengo un frijol” [I don't even have one bean left] Doña Olga expressed to me upon arriving at her home one day, to communicate to me how low their food supply had gotten); chiles (*Capsicum* spp., peppers), tomatoes (*Solanum lycopersicum*), and onions (*Allium sepa*) for salsa; bellotas (*Quercus* spp., acorns); chiltepinas (*Capsicum annuum* var. *glabriusculum*, wild chiles); chicken (*Gallus* spp.), duck (*Anatidae*), or quail (*Callipepla gambelii*) eggs; jackrabbit (*Lepus timidus*); desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*); javelina (*Tayassuidae*, peccary); venison (*Cervidae*, deer); or occasionally beef (*Bos taurus*); and a



wide variety of seasonal wild greens including verdolagas (*Portulaca oleracea*, purslane), choales (*Chenopodium* spp., lamb's quarters), or capita (*Atriplex wrightii* or *A. elegans*, saltbush). The seasonal array of fruits, nuts, and seeds that they enjoyed, both wild harvested and gleaned from agricultural operations as they passed through villages or finished work in the fields, is staggering in its variety. Some examples include pitaya (*Stenocereus thurberi*, organ pipe cactus fruit), peanuts (*Arachis hypogaea*), pomegranate (*Punica granatum*), tejocote (*Crataegus mexicana*, Mexican hawthorn, a treat for the children during Christmas season), bebelama (*Sideroxylon occidentale*), wild grape (*Vitis* spp.), nuez (*Carya illinoensis*, pecan), papache (*Randia echinocarpa*), habas (*Vicia faba*, fava bean), and membrillo (*Cydonia oblonga*, quince), to name only a small number of the species that were used.

While the men would go out hunting deer or jackrabbits, the young Doña Olga would follow and observe the elder Pajareros as they traversed “el monte” (the wilds, the mountains) gathering up medicinal plants such as yerba colorada (*Rumex hymenosepalus*, red dock) or yerba del Índio (*Aristolochia watsonii*, Watson's Dutchman's pipe), two of the first herbs she gathered as a young girl. As she and her elder sister acquired the skills necessary to gather herbs, they began carrying their freshly gathered selections into the villages in baskets, hoping to earn some money for a new blouse or a pair of

Bellotas (*Quercus* spp., acorns) in the hand of Doña Olga's son, Óscar.

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shoes. Their father had commissioned a friend to make two wide baskets (probably made of *Yucca* spp. or *Nolina microcarpa*, sacahuista or beargrass) so his daughters could respectably showcase their herbs upon entering the village.

### A Wealth of Knowledge

Over many decades Doña Olga's knowledge grew tremendously as she traveled the entire state on one journey after another, often by foot or by cart and burro. Her children were born in several locations around the state, depending on where they happened to be when she went into labor (one of them was born in a desert wash beneath a mesquite tree). Her eldest children recall many adventures, such as gathering herbs in the Sierra Madre in August, traveling to the sea in the spring to gather various creatures from the beaches and tidal pools, or visiting the oak groves of the border region to gather bellotas during the hottest, driest time of the year through the months of June and July. Here they camped with several other families for about six weeks in something of a makeshift village and cultural festival. Their scarcity of belongings throughout these adventures contrasts beautifully with the wealth of knowledge and experience they collected over time. This wealth is reflected in the beauty and humility beaming from their eyes as they recount these times, which now seem so long ago amidst the whirl and hum of the current electronic age.

"Yo nunca tuve escuela" (I never went to school) is a common refrain I've heard from Doña Olga over our many years together. At times, I thought she was telling me that I didn't know much despite all my schooling (or because of it), but I came to realize she needed to tell me she had worked hard for what she knew, and she had few to credit for it aside from Diós (God) or La Virgen (Virgin Mary). Whenever we have discussed plans for future visits or ideas for trips into the mountains she always finishes with "con el favor de Diós," meaning that "it will happen, God willing." She is always conveying to me her

belief in something greater than herself. Yet she works at everything as if it demands her very best, as if she is in control. At the same time, her ability to let go of control is often remarkable. If she can't make a trip to the mountains to harvest herbs for the autumn and winter markets, then that's okay – "Diós que manda" . . . she's willing to accept whatever God sends her way.

There are numerous practical uses for the plants that are familiar to her. Jarrilla (*Baccharis salicifolia*, seep willow) was used to build bird cages for the young birds they captured and later sold at markets across the region. The related romerillo (*Baccharis sarothrae*, desert broom) was made into a broom to sweep their home. While traveling the landscape through the dry season, uva silvestre (*Vitis* spp., wild grape) vine cut fresh in a riparian habitat was used to garner a drink of clean water, as water from beneath the surface and would be secreted from the cut stem into a collection vessel.

The large tubers of yerba del oso (*Mirabilis longiflora*, sweet four o'clock) are gathered in the late summer. Doña Olga chops it fresh into chunks about an inch square and sets them out to dry. It's used for a variety of pains in the lungs, musculoskeletal system, or stomach. The dry root pieces are prepared as a decoction to drink three times a day (or at least before bed), or a piece of the fresh root is eaten for pain. This plant produces prodigious amounts of plain, white, storage tubers with a thin, dark skin. Therefore, it's quite simple to gather several half-pounders from a single plant and still leave more than half the storage tubers to keep the plant in good health for the coming year. Interestingly, this plant inhabits relatively cool, humid gallery forests beneath cottonwood, ash, sycamore, walnut, and elder, but can also be found on high elevation slopes in south-facing pine forest clearings.

Each time I visit with Doña Olga she shares new herbal information that I have never encountered before, things which have never come up in our previous conversations. It's as if this information is nestled within the intricate fabric of her experience, meant to be evoked at the proper time, under the proper conditions.



Siempre viva (*Pleopeltis polypodioides*, resurrection fern) is used as a charm and medicinal herb by Doña Olga.

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### Doña Olga's Recipes and Roots

Doña Olga's life as a traveling Pajarera has allowed her to accumulate knowledge from various peoples across the landscapes of Sonora. The numerous ways in which people have used plants across the various bioregions of Sonora could fill volumes. Doña Olga has shared specific "recipes" with me that involve invocations, or incantations, requiring specific gestures with particular plants under certain conditions. These "recipes" may be employed to generate greater health and fortune for one's family or when starting a new business, to successfully attract a lover, or to quit drinking. Most importantly, they are used to evoke spiritual protection for one's person, family, or home. Elements of nature are often used, such as water, fire, and particular types of earth. She may also employ parts of the bodies of birds, reptiles, or animals. For example, the wing (or a feather) of a hummingbird is used in the preparation of a medicine pouch and invocation to call back a lost lover. A fern known as siempre viva (*Pleopeltis polypodioides*, resurrection fern: "always alive" because it will come back to life once rehydrated even after years of being completely desiccated) in combination with water and a crystal vessel is used to bring prosperity to a new business venture. Additionally, she prescribes the cold infusion of the fern internally to alleviate kidney pain.

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The root of yerba del oso (*Mirabilis longiflora*) is chopped and dried for medicinal use by Doña Olga.

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It's a rhythm and timing to which she is attuned, but cannot define or explain – she simply lives by it. It is akin to how Mother Earth gradually reveals her mysteries of the desert, forest, and sea to those who remain present, listening in observation. Doña Olga has received much of her knowledge in this way, and she reveals it to those who spend time with her in the same gradual unfolding. She is an active, willing participant, but also a messenger; an agent for the dispersal of healing substances from across her homeland delivered to the people in need of physical, emotional, and spiritual healing.

When one of my students first asked her to name her favorite plant, she answered, “el chuchupate” (*Ligusticum porteri*, oshá). I have been in the high elevation Sierra Madre with Doña Olga as she tirelessly unearths the powerful roots from the cool, moist ground. As

a human being, she blends into the landscape as she quietly and deliberately works at the ground to reveal the pungent, rippled rootstock. Watching her, I recognize the depth of commitment she has made to this life path. It is in her every mannerism, it is etched into her skin, her organs, in the rise and fall of her speech. I can read it in her eyes. “Many people come to buy this root from me... Yaqui, Papago...aye, many different people, Juanito. The Yaqui, they call it páwis, and the Papago call it óhcha. It can cure so many things.”

Doña Olga considers chuchupate to be a spicy (“chilosa”) herb, thus it brings warmth, moves the blood, and helps relieve pain used internally, or applied externally as a fresh root poultice, or as an oil infusion of the root. I recall many years ago when her son, Óscar, injured his shoulder while repairing the house. As they

Doña Olga's Hierberia at her home in Imuris, Sonora, Mexico.

CREDIT: John Slattery





Chuchupate (*Ligusticum porteri*, oshá) is Doña Olga's favorite herb. The root is the part used medicinally.

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had just returned from gathering chuchupate, Olga made an olive oil infusion of the root to rub into his shoulder, of which she was very confident it would quickly relieve his pain.

### Remedies in Time

To witness her reveal one unique remedy after another over time, I wonder if there is any end to it. I came to expect that Doña Olga would always be there, expounding knowledge, revealing secrets of the desert and mountains, and always serving up bowls of hot beans, fresh tortillas, and fire roasted salsas.

The last time I saw Doña Olga, she was having a difficult time. She had suddenly appeared in Tucson with her daughter, Barbaneda. They called me upon arriving and Barbaneda tried to explain to me the difficulties Doña Olga had recently been through. I needed to pick them up and bring them to my home. I had been hearing Doña Olga complain about her memory for several years. I had witnessed her shy away from sharing any stories or information about the plants when I brought a group to her home,

As a human being, she blends into the landscape as she quietly and deliberately works at the ground to reveal the pungent, rippled rootstock of chuchupate.

as if she felt she had nothing left to share. I had intentionally ignored this at times, feeling the pain of having to admit her mortality. I hadn't allowed myself to imagine the day I would show up to her home with the smell of mesquite smoke absent. There would be no beans on the fire, no tortillas to warm up, and no more stories from Doña Olga about her childhood, adventures, or unique plant knowledge being shared so generously and patiently. Her future absence seemed too great to comprehend. Yet, perhaps, she will never feel entirely absent - no matter what happens to her physical body. This thought gives me consolation.

Several years ago we were able to buy Doña Olga and her family a used Ford truck with the kind donations from friends, students,

and supporters in the US. Having reliable transportation is essential to the family's livelihood, as they must travel to gather herbs, sell their wares at fiestas, or gather other items such as cow skulls, which are bleached and sold to tourist shops on the border. I've just received the very unfortunate news that the truck's motor has blown, so they are stuck without transportation once again. I wish there was more I could do at this time, a feeling I often contend

with. But one thing is certain, Los Pajareros are resourceful and know how to make do with very little. As Doña Olga often says, "Díos es muy grande, Juanito" - "God is great, Johnny." Her faith transcends the material world and she often surrenders to what may come, recognizing that she controls very little in this world. She simply rises each day to give her best and to tend to the needs of all those around her. ■

Doña Olga at home with images of la Virgen de Guadalupe, symbolic of her deep faith.

CREDIT: John Slattery

