



The Journey of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca (Events described: 1528-1536)

Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca was a Spanish noble who took part in an expedition to colonize what is now the US Gulf Coast. The expedition was a disaster: the only survivors were Cabeza de Vaca and three other men who ended up shipwrecked in present-day Texas. One of those men, called Estevanico, was of African origin and had been brought on the expedition as a slave. The four survivors spent the next few years living with indigenous hunter-gatherers, who put them to work under conditions that Cabeza de Vaca later characterized as abusive slavery. Eventually the four fled, making their way on foot through what are now the US-Mexico borderlands until they reached Mexico's Pacific coast, where they re-established contact with other Spanish colonists. In these selections from a memoir he wrote about his eight-year journey, Cabeza de Vaca shows how he and his companions engaged, as Catholics, with indigenous beliefs and practices involving healing and supernatural beings.

On the island I have spoken of, they wanted to make medicine men of us, without any examination or asking for our diplomas, because they cure disease by breathing on the sick, and with that breath and their hands, they drive the ailment away. So they summoned us to do the same in order to be at least of some use. We laughed, taking it for a jest, and said that we did not understand how to cure.

Thereupon they withheld our food to compel us to do what they wanted. Seeing our obstinacy, an Indian told me that I did not know what I said, by claiming that what he knew was useless, because stones and things growing out in the field have their virtues, and he, with a heated stone, placing it on the stomach, could cure and take away pain, so that we, who were wiser men, surely had greater power and virtue.

At last we found ourselves in such stress as to have to do it [...] Their manner of curing is as follows: When one is ill, they call in a medicine man, and after they are well again, not only do they give him all they have, but even things they strive to obtain from their relatives. All the medicine man does is to make a few cuts where the pain is located and then suck the skin around the incisions. They cauterize with fire, thinking it very effective, and I found it to be so by my own experience. Then they breathe on the spot where the pain is and believe that with this the disease goes away.

The way we treated the sick was to make over them the sign of the cross while breathing on them, recite a Paternoster and Ave Maria, and pray to God, Our Lord, as best we could, to give them good health and inspire them to do us some favors. Thanks to His will and the mercy He had upon us, all those for whom we prayed, as soon as we crossed them, told the others that they were cured and felt well again. For this, they gave us good cheer, and would rather be without food themselves so as to give it to us, and they gave us hides and other small things. [...]

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Two days after moving, we recommended ourselves to God, Our Lord, and fled [...] As we proceeded that day, in great fear lest the Indians would follow us, we descried smoke and, going

towards it, reached the place after sundown, where we found an Indian who, when he saw us coming, did not wait but ran away. We sent the negro after him, and as the Indian saw him approach alone, he waited. The negro told him that we were going in search of the people that had raised the smoke. He answered that the dwellings were nearby and that he would guide us, and we followed. He hurried ahead to tell of our coming. At sunset, we came in sight of the lodges and, two crossbow-shots before reaching them, met four Indians waiting for us, and they received us well. We told them, in the language of the Mariames, that we had come to see them. They appeared to be pleased with our company and took us to their homes. They lodged Dorantes and the negro at the house of a medicine man, and me and Castillo at that of another.

These Indians speak another language and are called Avavares. They were those who used to fetch bows to ours and barter with them, and, although of another nation and speech, they understand the idiom of those with whom we formerly were and had arrived there on that very day with their lodges. Forthwith they offered us many tunas,^a because they had heard of us and of how we cured and of the miracles Our Lord worked through us. [...]

On the night we arrived there, some Indians came to Castillo complaining that their heads felt very sore and begging him relief. As soon as he had made the sign of the cross over them and recommended them to God, at that very moment the Indians said that all the pain was gone. They went back to their abodes and brought us many tunas and a piece of venison, something we did not know any more what it was, and as the news spread that same night, there came many other sick people for him to cure, and each brought a piece of venison, and so many there were that we did not know where to store the meat. [...]

Early the next day, many Indians came and brought five people who were paralyzed and very ill, and they came for Castillo to cure them. Every one of the patients offered him his bow and arrows, which he accepted, and by sunset he made the sign of the cross over each of the sick, recommending them to God, Our Lord, and we all prayed to Him, as well as we could, to restore them to health. And He, seeing there was no other way of getting these people to help us, so that we might be saved from our miserable existence, had mercy upon us; and in the morning, all woke up well and hearty and went away in such good health as if they never had any ailment whatever. This caused them great admiration, and moved us to thanks to Our Lord and to greater faith in His goodness and the hope that He would save us, guiding us to where we could serve Him. For myself, I may say that I always had full faith in His mercy and in that He would liberate me from captivity, and always told my companions so. [...]

Nothing was talked about in this whole country but of the wonderful cures which God, Our Lord, performed through us, and so they came from many places to be cured, and after having been with us two days, some Indians of the Susolas begged Castillo to go and attend to a man who had been wounded, as well as to others that were sick and among whom, they said, was one on the point of death. Castillo was very timid, especially in difficult and dangerous cases, and always afraid that his sins might interfere and prevent the cures from being effective. Therefore the Indians told me to go and perform the cure. [...] So I had to go, and Dorantes and Estevanico went with me.

^a *tunas = prickly pears*

When I came close to their ranches, I saw that the dying man we had been called to cure was dead, for there were many people around him weeping, and his lodge was torn down, which is a sign that the owner has died. I found the Indian with eyes upturned, without pulse and with all the marks of lifelessness. At least so it seemed to me, and Dorantes said the same. I removed a mat with which he was covered and, as best I could, prayed to Our Lord to restore his health, as well as that of all the others who might be in need of it, and after having made the sign of the cross and breathed on him many times, they brought his bow and presented it to me, and a basket of ground tunas, and took me to many others, who were suffering from vertigo. They gave me two more baskets of tunas, which I left to the Indians that had come with us. Then we returned to our quarters.

Our Indians, to whom I had given the tunas, remained there and at night returned, telling that the dead man whom I attended to in their presence had resuscitated, rising from his bed, had walked about, eaten, and talked to them, and that all those treated by me were well and in very good spirits. This caused great surprise and awe, and all over the land nothing else was spoken of. [...]

We remained with the Avavares Indians for eight months, according to our reckoning of the moons. During that time, they came for us from many places and said that verily we were children of the sun. Until then, Dorantes and the negro had not made any cures, but we found ourselves so pressed by the Indians, coming from all sides, that all of us had to become medicine men. I was the most daring and reckless of all in undertaking cures. We never treated anyone that did not afterwards say he was well, and they had such confidence in our skill as to believe that none of them would die as long as we were among them.

These Indians, and the ones we left behind, told us a very strange tale. From their account, it may have occurred fifteen or sixteen years ago. They said there wandered then about the country a man, whom they called "Bad Thing," of small stature and with a beard, although they never could see his features clearly, and whenever he would approach their dwellings, their hair would stand on end and they began to tremble. In the doorway of the lodge, there would then appear a firebrand. That man thereupon came in and took hold of anyone he chose, and with a sharp knife of flint, as broad as a hand and two palms in length, he cut their side and, thrusting his hand through the gash, took out the entrails, cutting off a piece one palm long, which he threw into the fire. Afterwards he made three cuts in one of the arms, the second one at the place where people are usually bled, and twisted the arm but reset it soon afterwards. Then he placed his hands on the wounds, and they told us that they closed at once. Many times he appeared among them while they were dancing, sometimes in the dress of a woman and again as a man, and whenever he took a notion to do it, he would seize the hut or lodge, take it up into the air, and come down with it again with a great crash. They also told us how, many a time, they set food before him, but he never would partake of it, and when they asked him where he came from and where he had his home, he pointed to a rent in the earth and said his house was down below.

We laughed very much at those stories, making fun of them, and then, seeing our incredulity, they brought to us many of those whom, they said, he had taken, and we saw the scars of his slashes in the places and as they told. We told them he was a demon and explained, as best we could, that if they would believe in God, Our Lord, and be Christians like ourselves, they would not have to fear that man, nor would he come and do such things unto them, and they might be

sure that as long as we were in this country, he would not dare to appear again. At this they were greatly pleased and lost much of their apprehension.

Source: Fanny Bandelier, trans., *The Journey of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca* [...], ed. Ad. F. Bandelier (New York: Allerton Book Co., 1922), 68-70, 98-110, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31210002820023>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

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These edited excerpts from Cabeza de Vaca's memoir are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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