

Traditional medicines still strong in Samoa

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The practice of using plants for treating diseases is truly an enduring Samoan tradition a legacy that is still continue today by our traditional healers called “taulasea”. Samoan “taulasea” are almost always women who learned their craft from their mothers or grandmothers or others in their families. There are very few of their kind remaining today, most of whom are old folks with largely no apprentices to learn and pass on their knowledge of plants and their medicinal values.

In Samoan culture, an individual is a part of a highly defined and important social context. The relationship of an individual to his or her family and village can if strained, be a potential source of disease. Hence, prior to the advent of Europeans into Samoa, most of the healing was by massage, incantations and consultations with the gods believed to be responsible for the illness. Medicinal plants were not a major component of healing, at least not for internal remedies. The medicines taken internally may have been purgatives, or served to repel the *aitu* (evil spirit) that were thought to be causing sickness or impeding recovery.

When a healer or *taulasea* diagnoses a disease requiring a herbal treatment, she will immediately collect the necessary plant materials since only the fresh plants are used. The only major exceptions are the use of coconut oil, turmeric powder (*lega*), ashes and smoke. There is only the occasional use of other things, such as sea cucumbers, raw fish or breast milk. Also holy water that has been blessed by a priest is sometimes used in healing, at least by a few Catholic healers. Most Samoan remedies are formulated from angiosperms, particularly from species belonging to the families Verbenaceae, Meliaceae, Loganiaceae, Rubiaceae, Euphorbiaceae and Leguminosae.



Plants are usually gathered by the healer or by his or her apprentices because they are best qualified to know what is needed. Healers who are old and infirm will often rely on their apprentices or other members of the family. Because of the loss of native lowland forests, some plants formerly used in remedies are no longer employed, and although remedies using these hard-to-find plants are still known by the healer, they are seldom used. Sometimes, however, a relative of the sick person may live near the source of a hard to find plant usually on Savaii and is asked to collect and sent it to Upolu (or overseas).

Most of the plants utilised by the healers are gathered from around their houses (either as weeds or plants that were purposefully cultivated) or can readily be obtained in the village or adjacent plantations. Other than *lega*, medicinal plants are rarely if ever obtained in the open market, unless the plant is being sold for other reasons e.g. for food.



Few rules govern the collection of plant materials. Plants may be collected at any time of the day by anyone. However, the plant material must be healthy. One interesting exception of the absence of collecting rules is the harvesting of a coconut used in treating *la'ofia* (the fetus swallowing the meconium in the amniotic fluid before birth. In this case, the coconut is cut from the tree and carried down rather than being dropped.

Another interesting practice is the collection of matching pairs (*faisoa*) used in many medicines. The

reasons for this are unclear, but maybe based on ancient superstitions. There is much variation in this in Samoa, with some healers, restricting pairing to certain plants and others using it for all plants. When only certain plants are used in pairs, these are usually plants, most commonly matalafi and fue sina, that are thought to be repellent to spirits.

The plant material is believed to lose its strength if preparation is delayed too long, which accounts for the use of fresh rather than dried material, under normal circumstances few plants are used more than a day after collection. However, nowadays, plastic bags and refrigerators are used to prolong the viability of the plant material and its active chemicals, which is especially important if the plants are to be shipped to another island or overseas.



Leaves are typically pinched or cut off with a knife rather than torn off. Mature leaves are usually used, but some remedies call for leaf buds or immature leaves (moemoe), or less commonly, the terminal bud of the plant (muamua). Some remedies call for a specific part of the leaf, e.g. the petiole of a breadfruit leaf for treating eye ailments or mata paia.

Tree trunks are scraped with anything handy that works, most commonly a kitchen knife, a spoon or a shell. Some remedies specifically call for the bark from a branch. The outer bark is first removed, and the inner bark collected. Roots, either aerial as in the case of aoa and fasa, or underground are sometimes used. Underground roots, such as breadfruit are dug up, washed, the outer layer scraped off, the inner layer collected. Rhizomes (i'o) are also used, especially from plant such as ginger (fiu), wild ginger (avapui) and the fern lauauta also called lau magamaga. However, the distinction between i'o (rhizome) and a'a (root) is not always clear, and the names are sometimes used interchangeably.

Less commonly, the sap, fruits, or if immature, flowers and seeds are used. Confusion can sometimes occur especially when outsiders try to record the information on usage, as both the flower and the seed are called fua in Samoa. The most commonly used plant saps come from aloe and laau fai lafa (*Senna alata*), both of which are recent introductions to Samoa, the former was used to treat burns and the latter to treat ringworms. Vapour from a broken leaf of the nonu is used in treating sty or what we commonly know as matafa or fuafua.

The most commonly used flower is that of nonu as part of the remedy for treating a sty, and the most frequently used seed is that of lama (candlenut) which is chewed or crushed and is used in the treatment of warts (lafitoga) and yaws (tona).



The leaves and bark or rhizomes scrapings are collected in a receptacle such as leaf, e.g. nonu, fai or fuafua, cup, plastic bag and carried to the preparation site. Leaves used in medicine are cut or crushed on a wooden cutting board or mortar made of a flattened rock or a clam shell.

If the medicine is to be administered as an infusion, the crushed or scraped plant material is gathered and placed into a small piece of mesh or fabric. Originally, the fabric-like material (lau a'a) found at the base of a coconut leaf was used for this purpose, but nowadays, it is often a piece of fine cloth gauze instead. The piece of cloth or gauze is

fashioned into a bag, which is then dipped and squeezed into a cup or glass of water to make an infusion of the medicine. The water is usually fresh and may be taken from a clean source or is sometimes boiled before being used to make an infusion.

With some infant ailments, particularly, stomatitis (pala), the medicinal plant material may be chewed and then dripped (pipisi) into the mouth of the infant. If eye drops are called for, the moistened bag is squeezed directly over the eyes.

If the medicine is drunk, it is believed to be absorbed into the body to effect its cure. However, in some cases of respiratory congestion, some medicines act as emetics to cause vomiting (puai) and force the mucus out of the mouth and throat, in cases where food poisoning is suspected, the medicine is known to have a purgative effect.

If the leaves are applied directly to the skin, they are either crushed in the hands and rubbed or massaged onto the skin as a lotion, applied as a poultice to be covered with a bandage or piece of cloth, or squeezed or rolled in the hands until the juice drips onto the skin as is done with the leaves of fue saina for treating bleeding wounds. Nonu leaves are usually used in preparations where the medicines are wrapped up and roasted on charcoals or are heated in a pan over a flame. Most medicines are used immediately after preparation, but some are made to be used over a period of several days. Medicines made from grated bark are



often boiled to sterilize them, or more frequently, the water is first boiled and the medicinal ingredients added afterwards. These sterilized medicines may be used for up to a week, particularly if they are also refrigerated. Boiling is typically used when the patient lives far from the healer, and daily visits are impractical. Other medicines are boiled and the steam from them is utilized. In these cases, the patient puts his head under a piece of material or a sheet covering a bowl or pan of the steaming medicine and inhales the vapor.

Most Samoan remedies are composed of material from only one plant species, but sometimes two or more species are involved. Compound medicines with more than two elements are a distinct minority.

What is the future of our traditional medicine?

Western medicine has much to learn from the study of indigenous medical systems of other parts of the world. This applies to the practices of the healers themselves, as well as to the medicinal plants used. Western medicine has tended to discredit the native medical systems it has largely replaced, but there is wisdom of centuries of experimentation in most native medical practices.

It is apparent that much of the current traditional medicinal practice is not like what it was prior to 1830, when there was much less emphasis on medicinal plants. However, by trial and error, the pharmacopoeia has developed to such a degree that even after a long competition with Western medicine it is still the system of choice for many Samoans.

It is not likely that any miracle drugs will come out of Samoa, although recently one plant (**mamala**, *Omalanthus nutans*) has shown promise in killing the AIDS virus in a test tube. Other studies have also shown pharmacological activity in many Samoan plants, neither has shown correlations to how the plants are used medicinally, nor is it easy to translate their effective use in Samoa to a pharmacological product that can benefit the rest of the world. The promise of Samoan medicinal plants in no way can be compared with that of China or the ancient American cultures, where the pharmacopoeia has developed over a thousand of years. Also since many of the medicinal plants are poisonous to some degree, Samoa with a few poisonous plants is at a disadvantage. Another disadvantage is that Samoa has a much smaller selection of plants to choose from, because of its smaller flora. However, further research is needed in this field.

Because western medicine has not proven superiority over Samoan medicine and because Samoa is a conservative country that values its traditions, Samoan medicine is likely to retain continued support that will coexist with Western medicine for the foreseeable future. The biggest threat seems to be the

loss of native forest, which makes it difficult to find some of the plants needed to make some medicines. This points up the need for strong conservation measures so that medicinal plants, as well as other plant species will not disappear.

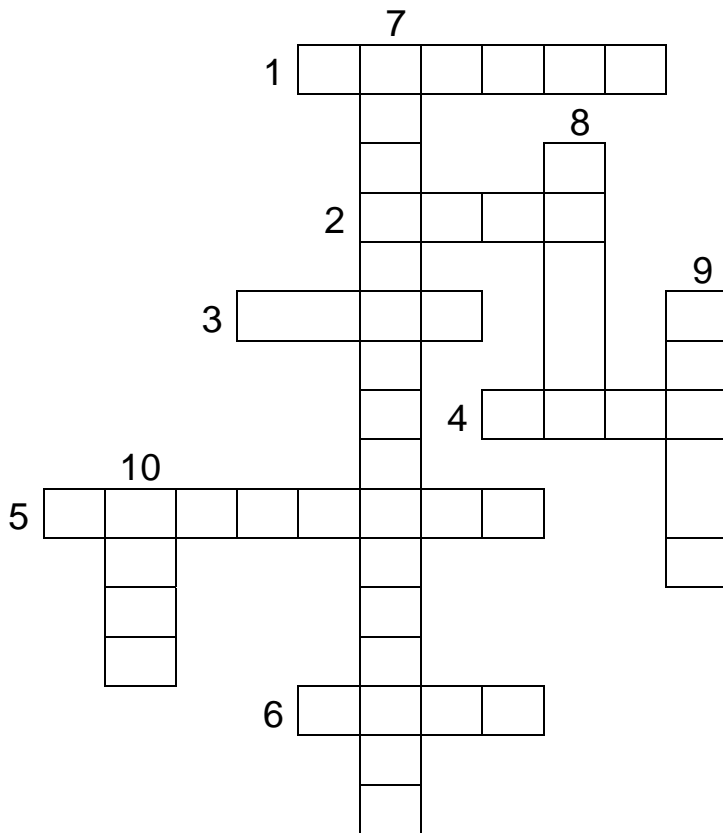
Childrens Corner



ANSWER TRUE OR FALSE

1. The most commonly used plant part are the leaves and bark.
2. The practice of using plants for treating diseases has a long tradition in Samoa and is carried on by anybody.
3. Samoan “taulasea” are only women.
4. Most Samoan remedies are not formulated from angiosperms.
5. Most of the plants utilised by the healers are gathered from around their houses.
6. Other than *lega*, medicinal plants are rarely if ever obtained in the open market, unless the plant is being sold for other reasons e.g. for food.
7. The plant material is believed to gain its strength if preparation is delayed.
8. Western medicine has much to learn from the study of indigenous medical systems of other parts of the world.
9. Mamala or *Omalanthus nutans* does not a cure for AIDS.
10. The biggest threat to medicinal plants is the loss of native forest, which makes it difficult to find some of the plants needed to make some medicines.

Crossword Puzzle



Across

1. Samoan word for immature leaves or leaf bud
2. Turmeric powder which is used for medicine, can also be obtained from the market
3. Vapour from a broken leaf of this tree is used in treating sty or mata'fa
4. Samoan name for the seed of the Candlenut tree
5. Samoan healer
6. Part of a plant and is also a name for an animal sound.

Down

7. Scientific name for mamala
8. Samoan name for pairing of leaves for medicinal purposes
9. Apart from 6 across, it is one of the most commonly used part of a plant for medicinal uses
10. The most commonly used plant sap apart from the laau fai lafa (*Senna alata*)