

## Rotuman Traditional Medicine

## Power of Plant Medicines

- Medicinal traditions involving usage of plants **may not** recognize the plants as having specific powers to heal.
- When pharmacological actions are recognized, they are still secondary to spiritual, social, dietary, and other **experiential** actions carried out by healers, patients, and others involved.

## Types of Healers

- Two kinds of medicinal practitioners (healers) are generally found in communities:
  - **Shaman**, who are often male, self taught, heavily dependent upon spiritual aspects of healing (sometimes to the exclusion of all other matters), having only limited uses for plants.
  - **Herbalists** (leaf doctors) who are often female, trained by a relative, heavily dependent upon plant medicines and/or physical therapy, using spiritual components but not to the exclusion of all else.

## Polynesian Herbalists

- Polynesian herbalists represent the most culturally conservative elements of their societies. They are most likely to be bastions of traditional knowledge of many kinds including plant based remedies.
- A hallmark of Polynesian herbalists is their genuine concern for other people and their willingness to share and give of all that they have.

## Rotuma Islands

- Geographical background
  - Western Pacific/ Western Polynesia
  - Isolated islands 400 miles north of Fiji
  - Seven smaller and one larger island



## Rotumans

- Cultural background
  - Polynesian (related to Tongans/Samoans/'Uveans)
    - Chiefly Structure with Clan Authority
    - Matri- and Patri-Lineal Land Tenure
    - Root Crop Agriculture and Reef/Open Ocean Fishing
  - Melanesian and Micronesian Connections
    - Use many Atoll Crops
    - History of Contacts with Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Marshall Islands, and Kusrae



## Rotuman Plants

- Botanical background
  - Isolated Flora
  - Tropical South Pacific Rain Forests
  - More Diverse than Hawai'i



## Healers

1990-92 Survey

- Part 1.
- Survey of entire population
  - Conducted around island.
- Identified and “ranked” healers.
  - Contributing to community health
  - Identified by community

## Healers

1990-92 Survey

- Part 2.
- Survey of healers
  - Interviewed major healers first.
    - Diseases Treated
    - Treatment Methods
    - Remedies
  - Used participant observation methods.
  - Prepared voucher specimens representing each plant remedy discussed.



## Diseases

1990-92 Survey

- Identified All diseases
- Those treated with home remedies
- Those treated by healer specialists
- Causes of disease
  - Natural events
  - Spiritual disruptions/inequities
  - Familial disputes
  - Weather
  - Sorcerers/enemies
  - Un-clean living and foods
  - Longing or malaise/depression

## Treatment Methods

1990-92 Survey

- Majau “Obstetrics”
- Mase Primary Spiritual Illness
- Sarao “Massage”

## Using Remedies

1990-92 Survey

- Characteristics of an effective treatment
  - Social/spiritual matters are settled first
  - Massage or “physical therapy” is often used
  - Botanical products applied externally and taken internally
  - Accompanied by dietary and movement restrictions
- Delivery of an effective treatment
  - Conducted by culturally accepted healer
  - Conducted on neutral or familial lands
  - Accomplished in a predetermined time sequence
  - Concluded with a ceremonial offering

## Treatment Applications

1990-92 Survey

- Mostly Topical (including massage)
  - Simple application
  - Massage
  - Moxibustion
- Ingested
- Spiritual
  - present
  - disassociated
- Combination
- Botanical/non-botanical

## Treatment Specialties

1990-92 Survey

- Most Specialties involve Topical treatments
- Primary Healing Specialties other than Topical
- Majau la`ek lelea' one who helps promote conception
- Majau a`su te one who aids in childbirth (midwife)
- Majau la`ak lelea one who prevents or aborts pregnancy
- Sarao `Atua mur one who treats spiritual illness
- Sarao `efe one who treats internal ailments
- Sarao hiaj one who sets broken bones
- Sarao lao `e sui one who removes fish bones

## Treatment Specialties / Healer

1990-92 Survey

- Specialists vs. Generalists
- Number of Treatments      Number of Healers
- (1)                                    (forty nine)
- (2)                                    (fourteen)
- (3)                                    (three)
- (4)                                    (one)
- (8+)                                   (one)
- (12)                                   (one)
- (16)                                   (one)
- (33)                                   (one)

## Age Distribution of Healers

1990-92 Survey

- Number of healers = 70 total in ~2500
- 49 female (82%) / 21 male (18%)
- Age of healers
  - 20-29 = 4                    60-69 =22
  - 30-39 = 8                    70-79 = 5
  - 40-49 =13                    80+ = 1
  - 50-59 =16
- Average age = 53.7
- Average life expectancy = 51

## Becoming a Healer

1990-92 Survey

- Lineage, empathy, and desire
- Training
- Soro : passing on of healing power
- Origins of treatments
  - ancestors/ other islanders
  - dreams
  - experimentation
- Loss of treatment efficacy
  - inappropriate usage
  - greed/deception
  - ancestors
  - transference of power

## Top Ten

1990-92 Survey

• <u>Indication</u>	<u>Treatments cited</u>
• infection(bacterial)	32
• inflammation	20
• fever	16
• depression/malaise	13
• infection(viral)	12
• seizures	12
• dysmenorrhea	9
• cough	8
• infection(fungal)	7
• topical irritation	7

## Rotuman Pharmacopoeia

1990-92 Survey

- Common treatments:
  - Plant used = *Mikania micrantha*, 'Ai raurau, leaves
  - Indication = minor cut



## Rotuman Pharmacopoeia

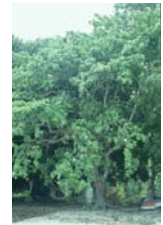
1990-92 Survey

- Specialist treatments: Simple
  - Plant used = *Chamaesyce atoto*, **Majila**, sap/latex
  - Indication = stonefish poison
  -
- Specialist treatments: Simple extraction
  - Plant used = *Cerbera manghas*, **Giagia**, oil extract of leaves
  - Indication = skin irritations/reactions

## Rotuman Pharmacopoeia

1990-92 Survey

- Specialist treatments:
  - Compound extraction/ multiple plants
- Plants used =
  - *Erythrina variegata*, **Ratua**, inner bark & leaves
  - *Musa acuminata* X *balbisiiana*, **Par mea**, leaf juice
  - *Citrus aurantium*, **Mori**, bark
  - *Thespesia populnea*, **Pinau**, inner bark & fruit sap
- Indication = promotion of menstruation



## Other Information Learned

- Disease classification system
- Flora of Rotuma and adjacent atolls



## STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. What are some characteristics of Polynesian health care systems as exemplified by Rotuman Traditional Medicine?
2. Shaman are characterized as:
3. Herbalists are characterized as:
4. The most common kinds of diseases treated by Rotuman healers are:
5. In order to become a Rotuman healer an individual must:

1. What are some characteristics of Polynesian health care systems as exemplified by Rotuman Traditional Medicine?
2. Shaman are characterized as:
3. Herbalists are characterized as:
4. The most common kinds of diseases treated by Rotuman healers are:
5. In order to become a Rotuman healer an individual must: