Jamu: Traditional Healing Medicine of Indonesia

Jamu (Jah-moo) is the ancient Indonesian system of internal and external health. Encompassing a combination of powerful herbal concoctions made into digestive tonics, elixirs for body scrub lotions, massage treatments and aspects of traditional folklore, Jamu remains largely unknown in the West.

I first came across Jamu in the early 1990’s when living in Jakarta. We were living in a house rather than an apartment. This entailed a degree of interaction with the neighbours, nearby villagers and trades people as they passed through. Rather than consider this invasive, we learned sufficient Indonesian to converse with the Jamu sellers. These were usually mature women, skilled in identifying and preparing natural materials - roots, leaves, bark and fruit used to treat many forms of bad health. An important aspect
of their ‘treatment’ includes physical massage to stimulate blood flow, induce lymph flow, exercise weak muscles, improve the condition of the skin and determine where in the body any health-inhibiting conditions are located.

In Jakarta and other major cities, Jamu drinks are prepared and sold on the streets often from wheeled carts or wicker baskets. There are hundreds of recipes for different purposes. They vary for men, women and children as well as the different ages in life. Children are given appropriate tonics for growing, men are given tonics to increase stamina and strength; women take tonics for “tightening, whitening and brightening”. My favourite, the Jamu Kunyit Asem (turmeric and tamarind jamu) is for general health. A mild antiseptic wash, the slightly bitter taste is offset with honey or palm sugar.

Ancient Background

Although the origins undoubtedly go way back in time, pinpointing the beginnings of Jamu is difficult. The use of herbs in a preventive and curative capacity is as old as the Indonesian civilisation, undoubtedly reflecting influences from the trade routes to China and India. Hard evidence of Jamu’s origins can be found in the Neolithic stone implements now housed in Jakarta’s National Museum as well as the stone reliefs on Borobudur, the well-known Buddhist temple near Yogyakarta, work on which
commenced in 750AD. Gaining access to any written records is nigh impossible. Although they exist in a variety of forms such as the Ancient Lontar books of Bali (see image above), their existence is closely protected by the healers and families who are reluctant to let anyone see them, let alone scan the many recipes. Because of their inherent religious content, manuscripts written on palm leaves are considered sacred and only made available to the chosen few. Family recipes are passed from grandmothers to mothers to daughters through repeated endeavour in the kitchen rather than by written word.

The Sum of the Parts

Of the 40,000 species of tropical plants in the world, 30,000 of them grow in Indonesia. Although 1,000 plants within this cornucopia are used in the preparation of Indonesia’s traditional medicine, only some 290 have been registered with the *Materia Medica Indonesia*.

With the availability of over 1,000 medicinal plants, the most common spices used in a Jamu preparation include basil, caraway seeds, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, coriander, cumin, fennel, ginger, nutmeg, mace, peppers (black and white), tamarind, turmeric (red and white) and honey or sugars (usually from palm). The range and combination of these is reputed to cure most maladies from depression to diabetes.

But it’s not just herbs that play a healing role; tropical fruits such as papaya, bananas and the local snake fruit all contribute to the end result. Papaya in particular offers a variety of benefits: the flesh contains generous amounts of vitamin A and C, boiling the leaves in water purifies the blood; the roots are also prepared in such a way as to eliminate tumours in the uterus, to control excess bleeding and increase the flow of urine thus removing kidney stones. Important to the end result is the correct point in the fruit’s ripening process as unripe fruits contain somewhat different properties to those that have already ripened.
Jamu Gendong (Jamu street sellers)

Fresh ingredients are found in abundance throughout Indonesia and the Jamu Gendong can be found in all cities and most towns. A respected vocation, the sellers are predominantly female as female customers would not divulge information about their menstrual conditions to men.

As energy and stamina is required to grind and prepare Jamu, the men in many families help with the preparation work. The success of a skilled Jamu gendong can make a significant difference to the income of a small family household.

Other gendongs work in small co-operatives to share the daily preparation required to maintain their business with the freshest ingredients.

The Way Ahead

Today Jamu also comes in powder form, is available in most shopping centres and on the internet. Luxury spa’s around Indonesia offer a variety of Jamu treatments.

Jogjakarta and Solo in Central Java are considered the real home of Jamu; the preparations and ingredients vary from region to region, largely as result of being handed down by word of mouth, especially amongst the poorer or remoter areas of the country.

Nyonya Meneer is an Indonesian company specialising in traditional herbal medicine and beauty care products, especially Jamu. One of Indonesia’s most successful Traditional Medicine companies, the founder herself Nyonya Meneer (1895 - 1978) struggled to raise a family, build a herbal business, manage a growing company and then successfully pass on command to second and third generations without losing momentum.
How to make Jamu

Here's a short video (3:15) to guide you in the kitchen.

A powerful anti-inflammatory, Turmeric is a root plant with tough brown skin and a deep orange flesh containing valuable curcumin. Amongst its many anti-inflammatory properties curcumin provides an oxidising enzyme that scours the bloodstream to eliminate plaque buildup.

Tamarind is used as a mild laxative to treat bile disorders and lower cholesterol.

Kaempferia Galanga (aromatic ginger) has been used for centuries in Indian and Chinese medicine for so many health benefits, including the treatment of indigestion, colds, abdominal pains, headaches and toothache.

Even a whiff of Cinnamon can boost brain function. Ingesting it helps memory, attention and focus. Cinnamon is used in a variety of recipes to regulate blood sugars, prevent the clotting of blood platelets and eliminate yeast infections.

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Recommended Reading

Jamu: The Ancient Indonesian Art of Herbal Healing by Susan-Jane Beers