

LESSON 5

Mga Talang Pangkultura: Katutubong Paggamot sa Pilipinas Indigenous/Traditional Healing Practices in the Philippines

As a child, I remember that guava leaves were boiled and applied to my scratches and wounds from playing outdoors. When I sprained an ankle, a **hilot** was called to massage it. There was also a list of do's and don'ts—don't fall asleep with wet hair (this will lead to insanity); don't take a bath or wash hands when you are tired (not good for one's muscles); when passing through a hill, say “**tabi-tabi po**” (excuse me) to the spirits around, otherwise run the risk of **ma-enkanto** (to be the victim of the anger or joke of spirits).

I learned from my experience and writings on traditional medicine that Filipino traditional healing practices include the following beliefs: the use of plants for healing; the relation of time, weather, and temperature to healing; and the supernatural world's relationship to illnesses and healing. Dr. Jaime Galvez Tan's interviews with Filipino traditional healers and his review of literature on the subject led him to suggest four theories of Filipino traditional medicine: **theory of macrocosm and microcosm** (*kalawakan at sangkatauhan* [literally, space, and all human beings]), a belief that the universe are interlinked and intertwined; **theory of elements** (*kalikasan* [literally, nature]), a belief that all things in the universe are composed of earth, fire, wind, and water; **theory of humours**—hot and cold (*init at lamig*), a belief that balance and harmony should be achieved between hot and cold elements, and is similar to the Chinese yin/yang theory; and the **theory of energy and balance** (*kisig at patas*), a belief that energy is created by the interaction of opposite forces but that these forces must achieve a state of balance and harmony.¹

Illnesses, according to Tan's study, had several possible causes: **concept of hangin** (wind) whether present in food, environment or the body (note: when I was a child complaining of stomach ache, someone in the family would say, “**baka hangin**” [it could be wind]); **concept of bara** (energy block), **concept of pilay** (misalignment of energy channels), **concept of pasma** (musculo-skeletal syndrome due to imbalance of hot and cold), **concept of hilo** (poison [but literally, to feel dizzy]); and the effects of seasons, habitat, diet, way of life, days of the week. One could also get sick because of the following: **nabalis**, **nabayugan**, **nabati** (the transfer of energy from one person to the other), for example, one is advised not to greet babies too much because “**baka ma-usog**” (the baby might get sick); **nakulam** or **nabarang** (negative energies) had been transferred from one person to another; **nagayuma** (the increase of sexual attraction/energy), for example, if one cannot explain the attraction to another, he/she can say “**nagayuma ako**”; **nasapian** (was possessed by a spirit); **nanuno** was

¹ Tan, Jaime Galvez. “The Merging of Filipino Traditional Healing.” PhilWell.org. http://www.philwell.org/the_merging_of_filipino_traditional_healing.html

“punished” by nature spirits or nature guardians (hence the anecdote in the first paragraph showing how children are trained to say “**tabi-tabi po**” so as not to offend the spirits); **nagalit ang mga ninuno** (the ancestors/ancestral spirits were angry); **binangungot** (sudden nocturnal death syndrome); and **nabinat** (a term used for someone who goes back to work immediately after being sick and thus provokes a return to his previous pathologic state.²)

How do we cure illnesses? The use of medicinal plants in indigenous healing practices had been documented as early as the Spanish colonial period (1560–1898) through the following: Father Blas de la Madre de Dios’s unpublished treatise on indigenous medicinal plants, ca. 1611; Father Jose de Valencia’s unpublished *Flora Filipina*, 1669; Fr. Murillo-Velarde’s account of a Jesuit, Fr. Tomas de Montoya who apparently gained knowledge of herbs and indigenous medicine, published in his book *Historia de la Provincia de la Philipinas de la Compana de Jesus*, 1749; Fr. Blanco’s *Flora de Filipinas* (published 1737, 1845 and 1877), which discussed medicinal plants; and Dr. Pardo de Tavera’s *Plantas Medicinales de Filipinas*, 1892.³

Among the medicinal plants endorsed by the Department of Health are: **akapulko** (ringworm bush or shrub or *acapulco*) for the treatment of tinea infections, insect bites, ringworms, eczema, itchiness, and scabies; **ampalaya** (bitter melon), for diabetes, hemorrhoids, coughs, burns and scalds; **bawang** (garlic), which has anti-bacterial, anti-inflammatory, anti-cancer, and anti-hypertensive properties; **bayabas** (guava), used as antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, anti-spasmodic, antioxidant hepatoprotective, anti-allergy, antimicrobial, anti-plasmodial, anti-cough, antidiabetic, and antigenotoxic; **lagundi** (5-leaved chaste tree) to treat cough, colds and fever, and as a relief for asthma and pharyngitis, rheumatism, dyspepsia, boils, and diarrhea; **niyog-niyogan** (Chinese honeysuckle) used to eliminate intestinal parasites; **sambong** (*ngai camphor* or *blumea camphor*), used to treat kidney stones, wounds and cuts, rheumatism, diarrhea, spasms, colds, coughs and hypertension; **tsaang gubat** (wild tea), taken as tea to treat skin allergies including eczema, scabies, itchiness and wounds in child birth; **pansit-pansitan** or **ulasimang bato** (scientific name *Peperomia pellucida*), used in treating arthritis and gout; and **yerba buena** (peppermint), used as analgesic to relieve body aches and pain due to rheumatism and gout, and to treat coughs, colds and insect bites.

However, medicinal plants are not the only things used in healing nor is the **albularyo** (from the Spanish term *herbolario* [herbalist]), the only healer in Filipino communities. Traditional healers include the **hilot** or **manghihilot**, who specializes in sprains, dislocated joints and pinched nerves; the **magpapaanak** or local midwives

² Tan, Jaime Galvez, “Filipino Indigenous Medicine: From Tradition to Mainstream Practice,” Slideshow in PDF. <http://www.althealthfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Filipino-Indigenous-Medicine-From-Tradition-to-Mainstream-Practice.pdf>.

³ Quisumbing, Eduardo, *Medicinal Plants of the Philippines* (Quezon City, Katha Publishing 1978). Cited in “Indigenous Health Knowledge Systems of the Philippines: A Literature Survey,” by Pedrito de la Cruz and Alana Gorospe Ramos. Paper presented at the XIIIth CONSAL Conference, Manila, Philippines 2006. <http://aboutphilippines.ph/filer/toledo-cebu/Indigenous-Health-Information-and-Knowledge-Systems.pdf> Accessed August 2012.

(also called the **hilot**, on some occasions); the **magluluop** or **magtatawas** or specialists in diagnosing illness; the **babaylan** or **baylan**, who functions as a medium (and who in precolonial times was considered to be a spiritual leader); and the **espiritista** or “faith healer” who supposedly has the capacity to perform psychic bare-handed surgery.

For those who would like to read more on this subject, among the materials which may be useful are: Michael Tan’s *Philippine Medicinal Plants in Common Use: Their Phytochemistry & Pharmacology* (Manila: Alay Kapwa Kilusang Pangkalusugan 1979); Leonardo Co’s *Common Medicinal Plants of the Cordillera Region, Northern Luzon, Philippines* (Baguio City: Community Health Education Services and Training in the Cordillera Region 1989); Felipe Landa Jocano’s *Folk Medicine in a Philippine Municipality: An Analysis of the System of Folk Healing in Bay, Laguna and Its Complications for the Study of Modern Medicine* (Manila: National Museum 1973) and Mercedes Planta’s masteral thesis, “Traditional Medicine and Pharmacopoeia in Colonial Philippines, 16th to 19th Centuries,” submitted to the University of the Philippines Diliman in 1999.