



Resourceful Remedies

Herbal medicines in indigenous villages of Northern Thailand

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Pi = respectful title translated to “older sibling” in Thai
Pati = “uncle” in Karen

The Karen or *Ba-ken-yaw* people are indigenous to the mountains of the Mae Hong Son province, the region of Thailand closest to the Myanmar border at 1000 meters above sea level. The Karens migrated from India and Myanmar, and like other ethnolinguistic groups in that region, they have unique cultural traditions that tie them to their environment. Thai government-led conservation efforts aim to remove small indigenous populations from their native land, stating that people like the Karens diminish natural resources. Unbeknownst to most conservationists, preserving forest ecosystems is woven into Karen culture. This begins when a baby is born, and their soul is believed to be connected to a particular tree in the surrounding forest. The placenta is stored in a specially prepared bamboo container, and the plant fibers are used to attach the container to the child’s “birth tree.” The new generation is taught to protect the forest and the guardian spirits who live in the sacred trees; in turn, the spirits are believed to watch over the village. This protection comes in many forms, but the most habitual is through the medicinal qualities derived from plants. Because herbal medicine and many other practices rely on natural resources from the forest, access to

government-protected land is critical for the livelihood of Karen communities.

Data about medicinal herbs were collected during hikes on traditional footpaths through the mountains that stretch over 40 miles southeast of the small city of Mae Hong Son. These paths run between six different villages: Huay Nam Mae Sakut, Pakolo, Huay Nam Mae Hong Son, Nam Hoo, Huay Hee, and Huay Tong Khaw. Researchers conducted small group interviews, which were translated by field instructors from the Karen language to Thai or English. More data was collected during an herbal medicine presentation led by Pati Prasadu, the herbal doctor of Huay Tong Khaw. Patients in Thai hospitals are given the choice between Western and herbal treatments, so this research only evaluates herbal medicine in rural villages.

In traditional Karen communities, the *samun-prai*, or natural doctor, is a man from the older generation. Venturing into the forest is dangerous, time-consuming, and requires a strong knowledge about medicinal herbs. Typically, Karen men have more time to go into the forest, as women’s traditional roles are in the home.

When asked about herbal medicine in each village, the community members point to one individual — the doctor — who knows most about the herbs and shares their wisdom with the village. The farther from the city the individual is, the more respect and authority they hold in the community. In Huay Nam Mae Sakut, a mere 15-minute drive from Mae Hong Son, Pi Fern, age 27, related that there is a 76-year-old natural doctor living in the center of the village. He treats only ailments “on the outside,” using teas and compresses; whereas, anyone with an internal ailment goes to the hospital for treatment. The second village’s headman reports that his father, age 68, is the natural doctor, still in good enough health to collect herbs from the forest. Moving through the four subsequent villages, the responses were mostly the same; many community members reported that they were not experts, but they said that they knew one — commonly their father — or at least understood how to treat ailments with local herbs.

The sixth and most remote village in this survey, Huay Tong Khaw, has the strongest herbal medicine system due to its weaker connection to the city. Pati Prasadu, the samun-prai, was proud to share his knowledge with students. “I’m not a doctor, but I came to share about herbal medicine because the older generation knows all about it and wants to let you ask questions,” he began, and introduced his apprentice and nephew, Pi Jowa. Pi Jowa, age 22, is the grandson of a bone-healing shaman, and he returned to Huay Tong Khaw to study herbal medicine after attending school in the city. He is the ideal candidate because of the following belief: either the oldest or youngest community member should collect herbs, ensuring their potency. In village communities, older men still hold most of the knowledge about herbal medicine, but it is increasingly common for them to teach both young men and women. Pi Jowa represents the new generation of traditional healers, and he was eager to explain some examples.

Thai medicine comes from the roots, leaves, and bark of local plants. In some cases, these are the only available resources. Since Karen communities are resourceful, many herbs have more than one function for treating illness.

Blah-ko, or turmeric, is a reddish budding root identified by yellow-green, grasslike leaves near rivers; it is used to facilitate postpartum discharge in new mothers. The yellow interior of the root is boiled for tea and can be applied in combination with other herbs as a healing compress for external wounds. In men’s healthcare, turmeric must be combined in an odd number of herbs for the best results. Ancestral superstitions divide men’s and

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women’s healthcare, suggesting that a treatment intended for one gender will not work or may even cause harm to the other. The boiled turmeric flower is also added to chillies and fish sauce in an everyday condiment known as musato or naam priik (spicy water). Jo-lo-di-duh, the hollow green stalk of a different river-adjacent plant, is another multi-purpose herb in Karen culture. The unaltered stalk is used to blow air onto the top of a baby’s skull where the plates have not yet fused. Karen parents use this practice to alleviate runny noses in infants and children. The stalk and leaves can also be boiled into tea for body and muscle aches. Pati Prasadu reports

that jo-lo-di-duh is easy to find in the green forest, and parents collect the stalks when needed for their family, often harvesting them before sunrise.

Without any storage system, finding the right herb for a medical emergency is a serious task. Luckily, experts like Pati Prasadu are well-equipped to share their knowledge with the rest of their community.

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Unlike Western medicine, herbal treatments would not be complete without the spiritual element. The use of a shaman or spiritual healer is common in Karen communities, and “magic words,” or good wishes from a healer, are the final step in the most serious cases. Subsequently, Pati Prasadu warns that magic words gone wrong are believed to bounce back to the shaman and take their sanity. In Huay Nam Mae Sakut, the doctor blows sacred water over an injury to aid in recovery. In Huay Tong Khaw, the practice of healing revolves around the idea that if a family member is sick, someone else can call in the forest for their soul to return, and the forest spirits will respond. While Karens align with a multitude of organized religions, Buddhist ideals are the most related to their spiritual healing practices. Offerings to the souls of past family members and the all-powerful forest spirits are common, and it is believed that respect for the forest is critical for successful herbal treatments. Not everyone subscribes to magic words, but in medical emergencies, most families turn to the village shaman out of desperation.

Animism and strong family bonds are as important as herbs in the healing process. Bad spirits are believed to cause mental and chronic physical illness, and the traditional Karen skirt plays a role in treating such ailments. Married Karen women make their own red or purple skirts with local materials, which they wear every day. Using this skirt, mothers can smother bad spirits that are believed to cause sickness for their children. In multiple villages, women report using this symbolic skirt to protect younger members of their families from harm.

Studying Karen traditions like herbal medicine is important because these small communities are often misunderstood by authorities trying to protect the natural environment. The older Karen generations trust their descendants and visiting students to share traditional wisdom, and although their explanations may differ, Karen people do understand the importance of preserving natural resources. Collecting the same herbs, wearing the same clothing, and raising their children in accordance with ancestral customs allows them to connect with the forest. Birth trees are the perfect example; they are the Karen way of teaching children to protect nature because they are inextricably connected to it. ●●●