



Living Traditions and Local Knowledge: Indigenous Medical Practices Among the Ao Nagas

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Abstract:

This research explores the indigenous medicinal knowledge of the Ao Naga community in Nagaland, focusing on the identification of key medicinal plants, their methods of preparation, dosage, and the associated healing practices. The study employs qualitative methods including interviews and questionnaires to collect primary data from traditional healers and local elders, while also incorporating secondary data from literature and online sources. Findings reveal that while modern medicine is preferred for major illnesses, indigenous remedies remain essential for minor ailments and are widely used as first-aid measures. Various plants are employed to treat conditions ranging from allergies and wounds to diabetes and gastric issues. The research highlights the cultural and medicinal significance of traditional healing knowledge, emphasizing the need for its preservation and documentation. The study concludes with recommendations to raise awareness, promote education, and encourage the sustainable use of indigenous medicinal plants.

Keywords: Traditional usages, indigenous medicinal plants, traditional medicine makers, Ao Tribal Naga, Mokokchung

Introduction

Indigenous knowledge systems form an essential part of the cultural identity and traditional practices of many tribal communities across the world. Among these, ethnomedicine knowledge of medicinal plants and healing practices passed down orally through generations holds a vital role in ensuring the health and wellbeing of indigenous populations. In the context of Nagaland, a state rich in biodiversity and cultural heritage, traditional medicine continues to thrive alongside modern healthcare systems. The Ao Nagas, one of the major Naga tribes residing primarily in Mokokchung district, possess a wealth of ethnomedicinal knowledge rooted in their deep connection with nature and traditional beliefs.

For generations, the Ao Nagas have relied on their natural environment for treating a wide array of illnesses using medicinal plants found in forests, fields, and even within their vicinity. These remedies are not merely utilitarian but are also embedded within their cultural, spiritual, and social practices. Traditional medicine is typically the first line of treatment for minor ailments such as cuts, allergies, stomach problems, and insect bites. Elders and traditional healers, often referred to by roles such as Kopiraz (local medicine men) or Gaon Bora (village headmen), serve as custodians of this oral knowledge, ensuring its continued relevance and application within the community.

However, with the increasing influence of modern medicine, urbanization, and deforestation, such knowledge is at risk of fading. Younger generations often lack interest or access to the traditional practices of their forebears. Simultaneously, many indigenous plants face the threat of extinction due to unsustainable environmental practices and lack of conservation efforts.

This study seeks to explore and document the major indigenous medicinal plants used by the Ao Naga community. It aims to identify the types of plants, their methods of preparation, dosages, and the beliefs and practices surrounding their use. The research employs both primary and secondary data, using qualitative tools such as interviews and questionnaires to gather insights from traditional practitioners, elders, and local users of indigenous medicine.

By bridging traditional knowledge with academic research, this study hopes to underscore the importance of preserving indigenous medicinal practices not just as cultural heritage, but also as a valuable alternative or complement to modern healthcare. The ultimate objective is to promote awareness, preservation, and informed utilization of these natural remedies for the benefit of present and future generations.

Objectives of the study

1. To identify the indigenous medicinal plants used by Ao Nagas and its methods of preparation and dosages.
2. To study the beliefs and practices of indigenous medicines in treating illness among Ao Nagas.

Methodology

The Study looks at the indigenous usages of medicinal plants, their effectiveness, beliefs and practices of indigenous medicines in treating illness involving qualitative analysis. Tools like Questionnaires and interview were used to collect data from the general respondents and local medicine practitioners. The research is based on both primary and secondary source. The secondary data is collected from articles and websites related to medicinal plants and its effectiveness. Simple random sampling was used for the general respondents whereas purposive sampling was used to collect the information on Indigenous medicines.

Review of literature

N.S Jamir (1997) studied the “Traditional knowledge of medicinal plants used by Ao Naga tribes of Mokokchung district, Nagaland (India).” Where local medicine men (Kopiraz), Gaon Bora, village elders etc from various sections of Mokokchung district were consulted for sources with regard to the uses of medicinal plants. Department of Botany, Lumami, Nagaland, flora’s, literature were used to identify the Medicinal Plants that had been collected. The result showed that 38 plants were not exhaustive. The author stressed upon the urgent need for conservation and protection of this plants before they completely get extinct due to deforestation, shifting cultivation and many other Socio – economic activities.

T.T. Jamir et .al., (1999) studied the “ Folklore Medicinal Plants of Nagaland, India.” Where 43 informants and two local healers are from Kohima, wokha and Mokokchung district were used as a sample for study. Findings showed that 36 plant species were used to relieve ailments and are used in different dosages. The researcher advised preserving flora’s that may otherwise be destroyed owing to deforestation and adjacent areas since therapies based on medicinal plants are a significant element of social life and culture in Nagaland.

Adani (2012) investigated on the folk medicine of Mao Naga in Manipur where the elders in the village as well as healers from Maos of Manipur were chosen as a 3 sample for study. Findings showed that variety of 39 families of plants, 57 general and also various 61 species of plants. The author emphasized the essential need for managing and conserving these priceless medicinal plants and its usages in long term as well as in research so that its components might be harvested to meet future demands for healthy medical products.

Petevino & Singh (2013) examined the “Ethno medicinal herbs used by the Angami people of Nagaland, India” where household survey and field investigations were taken from Khonoma people. Findings showed that 64 herbaceous plants were employed to treat diseases. The author emphasized the importance of educating the villagers so that they can continue to reap the health benefits of these therapeutic herbs and sustainably use them.

Pramod Medhi et.al., (2013) in their study the collected samples from 54 elders from five different villages: Changki, Chuchuyimpang, Mokokchung, Khensa and ungma village were used as a sample for study. 102 kinds of wild plants that are edible, plant parts, and fruits were found, along with one species of edible wild fungus, according to the findings. The uthor also recommended that proper documentation of locally used plants and identification of potential species be done in an organized manner in order to preserve and manage the knowledge base and resource.

Bhuyan et.al (2014) examined the “ Indigenous use of medicinal plants by four Major Tribes of Nagaland, North East, India .” where 50 informants from 20 villages were interviewed for the study from four tribes of Ao, Lotha, Angami and Sema. The results demonstrated that 257 species of ethnomedicinal plants belonging to 85 groups were being utilised for a variety of medical conditions. The author emphasized the rapid erosion of traditional plants and the need for planting and protecting plants with the help of as many locals as possible.

N.N Zhasa et.al (2015) studied identified the types of medicinal plants where local medicine men/local healers from 20 villages of 9 district’s of Nagaland served as a study’s sample. Results showed that 142 families comprised 241 species of plants that are utilised medicinally.

Premkumar (2015) studied the “Indigenous healing practices and ethnomedicinal plants used against jaundice by some Naga tribes in Nagaland, India.” Where 35 healers from Kohima – dwelling Angami, Lotha, Sumi and Zeliang tribes. Findings showed that each tribes share atleast 6 species that are similar. The most striking parallels were found between Angami and Zeliang, as well as Angami and Lotha.

Meyanungsang et.al (2015) studied on the Traditional healers and elders from the village of Chungtia where they were employed as a sample for the study through open group discussion and semistructured interview. Findings revealed that 135 plant species from 69 families and 123 generic were used for medicinal and domestic reasons, whereas Chungtia community usages were found to be compatible with other communities.

Alino & Kimiyekato (2018) studied the “Ethnomedicinal plants of Sumi Nagas in zunheboto District Northeast, India.” where 40 informants from Zunheboto District- Askhomi, Khrimtomi, Rotomi and Philimi were used as a sample of study. Findings revealed that 50 ethno medicinal uses were discovered and documented. The importance of traditional knowledge of 2 medicinal procedures was fully understood by Sumi’s. The author emphasized the urgent necessity to conserve and record these important resources in order to sustainably maximize their usage in the Nagas native health care system.

Nelia & Limasenla (2020) on their study’s sample included 42 local respondents, local medicine practitioner, elders from the village, women and hunters from Phek District. The findings found that the Chakhesang tribe used 68 different plant species to treat a variety of ailments. Despite the availability of plant resources, deforestation and other development activities have reduced their numbers. The author stressed the importance of forest management, conservation, and protection.

Kitila et.al (2021) studied the “Indigenous Knowledge of Ao Naga Tribe on some Folk Medicinal Plants used in Health Management” where local practitioners, village headman and elders from Ao – Naga Tribe of Nagaland served as a sample for the study. Findings showed that there were 41 plants that were traditionally utilized for healing illness, belonging to 38 general and 29 families. The author emphasized how health tradition was slowly dying out as a result of development projects, deforestation and other factors. Additionally, the author recommended phytochemical and pharmaceutical investigation to improve the use of plant resources.

Asangla et. al (2022) investigated about the traditional knowledge of different of medicinal plants used by Zeliang Nagas where local medicine men or folk healers, village elders, spiritual leaders and other locals from the villages near Itanki National Park in the Peren district were chosen as a sample for the study. Findings showed that there are 48 species of plants belonging to 34 families. The author emphasised that this comprehensive information could vanish in just a few generations, emphasising the significance of discovering and maintaining all such societies' traditional wisdom.

Nohochem & Tsipila (2022) investigated on the medicinal plants of Sangtam Nagas where indigenous herbalists, vegetable dealers and elders from Longkhim chare region of Tuensang district were used as a sample of study. Findings showed that different 49 species of 33 plant families were used for pain alleviation and treatment of different ailments. The author emphasized the critical necessity to conserve and record such important materials to maximize their usage in indigenous health care system.

1. All of the respondents visited hospitals/ clinics during major illnesses and didn't depend much on indigenous medicines for treating major illnesses. When it comes in maintaining the health of the community, they are of the view that modern substances are proven to be more effective than traditional ones. However, Using their own knowledge of medicinal plants is done by most of them as it acts as a first aid measure in many minor illnesses whereas few don't use their own knowledge of indigenous medicines because it's effectiveness is low as compared to other medicines.
 2. The roles of indigenous medicine practitioners have changed because of the modern education and equipments traditional healers have started to formulate new medicines which help people to avoid spending huge amount of money by going to expensive hospital whereas the least have stated that it didn't change because some people still prefer traditional ways of healing which is perhaps temporary diagnosis.
7. Findings on the various methods of preparation of the medicine (Interview). *Ao and English terms are used.*
- *Sungshe/* cinnamon: The root and bark are boiled together and used in bathing.
 - *Korishidong/* peach: The Leaves and bark are crushed and applied in Allergies.
 - *Aong Nangpera/* Tulsi : the leaves are crushed and applied in different types of allergies, insect bites. The seed is used on cuts and wounds.
 - *Alu Lahsung /* Chinese Scallion: The entire plant is crushed and used to treat toxicity from insect bites such as bee, spider, and leach.
 - *Sanglem /* Great Plantain : The leaves are crushed and applied to wounds, while the seed is boiled and drank to help with bladder function and digestion.
 - *Asatong /*Naga Neem: The leaves and roots are boiled and drunk for stomach pain and gas.
 - *Khori/* Golden eye grass: The roots and bark are boiled and consumed for Gastritis and jaundice. The roots and bark are steeped in water for an hour, and the sticky residue from the roots and bark is applied to eyes that are irritated, red, or painful.
 - *Tongden Matsü/* Round leaf star creeper: The leaves are boiled and consumed for bladder and kidney stone.
 - *Iritong/* castor oil plant: The leaves are warmed and tied on swelling, boil and rheumatic joints and the seeds are crushed and used in leprosy and skin inflammation.

- *Orüma/* East- Indian glorybower: To purify blood, the leaves and roots are boiled and eaten.
- *Ao term unknown/Aloevera*: The gel inside the outer layer is eaten raw for gastric and intestinal problems.
- *Tabolu/* Papaya: The leaves are boiled and eaten for diabetes, while the fruit is eaten for gastrointestinal issues.
- *Lozü/* Gooseberry: Leaves and bark are soaked in water and consumed for bladder and kidney.
- *Yimpangnaro/Shoe flower*: The flower is mashed and the juice is extracted and consumed for Gastritis.
- *Motsü/* Sugarcane: The root is boiled and drunk for intestine, jaundice, gallbladder, sore throat and it also purifies blood.
- *Tayakla naro/* touch me not plant: The root is boiled and drunk for Intestine, cough, loose motion, piles, kidney, gallbladder stone and skin diseases.
- *Titi /* Mango: The bark's gum is used to treat toothaches, and the dried and ground leaves are combined with powdered sugar and water to treat diabetes..
- *Entsülashi/passion fruit*: The leaves are dehydrated and ground into a powder, which is then combined with water and ingested to treat diabetes, high blood pressure, and insomnia..
- *Dunia/* Long coriander: The leaves are eaten raw for purifying blood and for removing Tapeworm.
- *Ao term unknown /* Peppermint: Boiling the leaves and drinking them relieves colds and coughs. Crushed leaves are administered to the nose and chest..
- *Masurentong /* Begonia: The leaves and branches are boiled and consumed to reduce extra fats in the body.
- *Mangu tong /* Banana plant: The water is extracted from the banana tree and drunk during loose motion
- *Longkok/* Red nightshade: The seeds and roots are dried and grinded and then applied during toothache.
- *Charkona/* Star fruit: The fruit and root are drunk after being soaked in water to treat high blood pressure, kidney, and bladder health.
- *Süngya/* Agar tree: The whole plant is boiled, consumed and is even used in massage for stroke patients.
- *Endivoksak, ashing/Spiral ginger*: Boiling the root and drinking it helps to rid the bladder of tapeworms.

- *Charem / Pomegranate*: During cholera, the leaves and seeds are boiled and consumed. It is good for the heart, the bark is boiled and consumed for tapeworm, good for eyes, Gastritis, and it even purifies blood. The root is grinded and is used as a mosquito repellent.
- *Knokna/ fish mint plant*: The leaves juice is extracted and consumed during Cholera and also crushed and applied in Allergies. The root is boiled and consumed for the bladder.
- *Mong Mong/ Japanese prickly ash*: The seeds are grinded and consumed for heart and chest problems and are even applied during toothache.
- *Shing/ Africa dream herb*: The seed is grinded and applied at hair scalp and rashes .It also acts as an antibacterial shampoo.
- *Enzi/onnü/velvet plant*: The leaves are eaten raw for digestion and to purify blood.

8. Findings on dosages prescribed by the Indigenous medicine practitioners from Interview. *Ao and English terms are used.*

- *Aong Nangpera/ Basil*: Half cup of its juice extract to be consumed during cough and cold.
- *Orüma/ East Indian glory bower*: 1 litre of its juice extract to be consumed for two days morning and evening after food.
- *Lozü / Gooseberry*: one cup of its juice extract to be consumed before food for healthy bladder and kidney.
- *Yimpangnaro/Shoe flower*: Half cup of its juice extract to be consumed before food for gastric.
- *Titi /Mango*: To be consumed after food for Diabetes.
- *Entsülashi/passion fruit*: To be consumed each morning and evening for high pressure, diabetes and the dry leaves is mixed with water for 5 to 10 minutes and drank before bedtime to have a sound sleep.
- *Dunia/ Long coriander*: (Eaten raw) one leaf with food.
- *Charkona/ Star fruit*: To be consumed after food for bladder, kidney and blood pressure problems.
- *Charem /Pomegranate*: 2 teaspoons of its juice extract to be consumed Cholera and the bark is boiled and drank 1 cup for gastric, eyes, tapeworm and for purifying blood.
- *Knokna/ Fishmint plant*: Eaten raw with food and 2 teaspoonful juice is extracted from the leaves and consumed during Cholera. The root is boiled and consumed for a healthy bladder.
- *Mamazü/ Papaya*: Fruit is eaten 1 time in a day for gastritis and 1 cup of its juice extract to be consumed for diabetes once in a day and twice a day when the diabetic level is high

9. For medicinal purposes it is found that the plant parts which are mostly used by medicine practitioners are the leaves. Along with the leaves, the entire plant—root, stem, bark, fruit, seeds, flower, and branch—is also utilised. The primary uses of the plant are in the treatment of illnesses and as first aid.

10. Many diseases are treated with the medicinal plants they use such as Allergies, stomach pain, purify blood, Gastric, Intestinal problems, diabetes, Redness, pain and irritation in eyes, Tapeworm, cold, sinus, reduces fats, loose motion, high pressure, toothache, stroke, digestion, dandruff, Insect bites, cough, piles, Jaundice, gallbladder, sore throat, kidney stone, boils, rheumatic joints, leprosy, skin inflammation, Cholera and typhoid.

Recommendations

1. Usages of indigenous medicinal plants must be encouraged among people as it act not only as first aid measures but treat various diseases.
2. Many people do not have sufficient knowledge about indigenous medicinal plants which are even found near their surroundings or locality so it is important to let them know about the importance and preserve the treasure (medicinal plants) not only for now but for future generations.
3. The main benefit of using medicinal herbs is that they are thought to be safe because they have few or no negative effects. We should encourage one another to use medicinal plants as it is known to be an important potential source of curative measures.
4. Seminars should be held to sensitize people to know more about the importance of medicinal plants. Training should be given to people so that in the coming days they can practice the usages of medicinal plants and so that they can be more aware that these plants are important to be preserved as they are going to play an important role in the medical field .
5. Expansion of markets for medicinal plants will be helpful for local Medicine Practitioners as it would be helpful for them to generate income.

Suggestions for further research

Following suggestions are made for further study

1. The study is limited only to Ao Nagas. Hence, similar study may be taken up for other tribes as well.
2. The study is limited only to 50 General Respondents so a similar study may be taken up in a larger population.
3. A critical study can be done on the beliefs, practices and effectiveness of indigenous medicines.

4. The research is limited only to limited medicinal plants. Hence, more indigenous medicinal plants can be explored and studied.
5. A comparative study between the Ao Nagas and other neighboring tribes like Sümi and Lotha may be done.

Conclusion

This study has brought to light the significant role played by indigenous medicinal plants and healing practices among the Ao Nagas of Nagaland. Through detailed fieldwork, interviews with elders and traditional healers, and secondary literature, the research identified a wide range of plants used in the treatment of both common and chronic ailments. These plants—often found in the local environment—are utilized in various forms such as decoctions, infusions, crushed extracts, or raw consumption, and are applied in treating ailments like allergies, gastric problems, diabetes, insect bites, wounds, respiratory issues, and more.

One of the key findings of this study is that, while modern medical facilities are preferred for serious or life-threatening illnesses, indigenous remedies remain deeply rooted in community practices for first aid and minor health issues. The knowledge surrounding these remedies is not merely functional but is intricately tied to the cultural identity and ecological wisdom of the Ao people. Furthermore, the study highlights how traditional healers are gradually adapting their practices by combining ancestral knowledge with newer understandings, sometimes formulating new remedies that are both accessible and effective.

Despite the ongoing relevance of these practices, the research also reveals challenges that threaten their survival. These include the loss of biodiversity due to deforestation and unsustainable land use, diminishing interest among the younger generation, and a lack of proper documentation and preservation of traditional knowledge. If left unaddressed, these factors could lead to the irreversible loss of valuable ethnomedicinal heritage.

The conclusions drawn from this study stress the urgent need for action. There is a pressing requirement to preserve this traditional knowledge through proper documentation, educational outreach, and scientific validation. Government and community led initiatives must prioritize the conservation of both medicinal plants and the wisdom associated with them. Integrating this knowledge into primary healthcare models especially in rural and tribal settings—could offer cost-effective, sustainable, and culturally appropriate health solutions.

In conclusion, indigenous medicinal practices among the Ao Nagas are more than a relic of the past they are a living system of health and healing that continues to serve communities today. Preserving this knowledge is not only vital for cultural continuity but also holds potential for contributing to broader medical and ecological solutions in the future.

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