



JAMU

THE ANCIENT
INDONESIAN ART
OF HERBAL HEALING

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Susan-Jane Beers

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JAMU

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Contents

PREFACE ... 6

An Introduction to Jamu

CHAPTER 1 ... 12

Indonesian Healing through the Ages

CHAPTER 2 ... 24

Jamu in Daily Life

CHAPTER 3 ... 56

The Raw Ingredients of Jamu

CHAPTER 4 ... 96

Massage: The Power of Touch

CHAPTER 5 ... 118

Healers, Collectors and Gendong

CHAPTER 6 ... 140

Beauty from Within

CHAPTER 7 ... 156

The Industry

CHAPTER 8 ... 168

The Way Ahead

APPENDIX ... 178

Simple Remedies to Try at Home ... 180

Reputable Jamu Producers in Indonesia ... 182

Plant Glossary ... 185

Bibliography ... 188

Preface. An Introduction to Jamu

Indonesian jamu—part of an integrated system of inner and outer health and beauty, encompassing powders, pills, ointments, lotions, massage and ancient folklore—is unknown to most Westerners. How, when, where, and why were these treatments developed? And, what is so special about them?

To understand jamu, you must know a little about the extraordinary country where it originated. Indonesia's 17,000 islands are home to over 200 million people who speak approximately 600 different languages. The national motto, 'Unity in Diversity', is certainly appropriate in an archipelago where each region still retains its individual customs and character.

In today's world, young Indonesians no longer have the time for old traditions, such as making fabric by hand, playing in a *gamelan* orchestra (a traditional Indonesian orchestral group) or preparing herbal medicines. These were all part of a relaxed, holistic way of life that allowed for any number of variations throughout the archipelago. Now modern Indonesians must come to terms with a fiercely competitive, high-tech environment where survival lies in joining the fast-paced global economy in which we live.

At first glance, it seems that jamu is a casualty of this modern world. Making jamu in the home has certainly declined, but in its place, the herbal medicine and cosmetics industry is expanding and is now producing some exciting ranges of safe, hygienically

Left:

Drinking jamu every day is how Indonesians ensure they receive the necessary intake of essential vitamins and minerals to keep themselves healthy. It is their equivalent of what is termed primary health care in the West.

prepared, health and beauty treatments. The industry was slow in developing, because there was, for many years, a reluctance to share secrets. However, attitudes are changing because rapid industrialization has led, somewhat paradoxically, to an increased demand for traditional medicine.

In former times, mothers handed down the secrets of these healing recipes to their daughters. Those who were skilled at preparing jamu were consulted by their neighbours; and demand eventually resulted in small family businesses. These were the forerunners of cottage industries, which in turn have become today's conglomerates. Now, production has moved away from the home into well-equipped modern factories and it has become relatively easy to buy what Westerners might perceive as mysterious lotions, pills and concoctions in mainstream retail outlets. Also, for the first time, these herbal remedies are available outside Indonesia.

This book gives an all-round introduction to Indonesia's herbal medicines, treatments and cosmetics. All concoctions are simple, practical, exotic and rarely expensive. The ancient Javanese art of health and beauty is a combination of inner and outer beauty with an holistic approach. Although modern medicine and beauty experts seem to have just discovered this idea, the Javanese have practised it for centuries. Herbal preparations and massage continue to thrive because Indonesians know they work.

In the pages of this book you will learn about the closed world of the ancient Javanese *kraton* (palace) where Indonesian jamu was perfected. You can meet the healers and jamu makers whose skills have been passed from generation to generation and learn

about their cures. But if you are looking for a precise, scientific account of inner and outer beauty, you will not find it here, as no such thing exists, for reasons that will become clear. Advice is offered on where to find these age-old remedies, and the Appendix provides formulæ that can be safely made at home. The information here is for people who wish to find out more about Indonesian health and beauty, draw their own conclusions and even try jamu for themselves.

My personal experiences whilst living and researching herbal medicine in Indonesia changed my attitude from one of scepticism to the belief that, if correctly chosen and sensibly used, jamu is effective. This shift in attitude was the result of a chain reaction. Walking round Indonesia's towns and cities means braving heat, humidity, reckless drivers, exhaust fumes and persistent street sellers. These factors, coupled with the virtual lack of pavements, actively discourage any form of normal exercise. As a result of my inactivity, the weighing scales and waistline soon indicated drastic action was required. I opted for aerobics in an air-conditioned gym. However, at the age of 42, my body could not cope with the new regime. Initial stiffness gave way to crippling pain in the knee joints. I then faced three options: stop taking painkillers and exercise with pain; keep on loading my system with drugs; or give up aerobics and become fat. The painkillers won and I kept on exercising.

Then, one day, a visit to the hairdresser changed everything. As my hair was being styled, I noticed a herbal medicine clinic in a corner of the salon. After explaining my problem to the salesgirl, she referred me to the clinic doctor. As it turned out, the doctor was a professor of pharmacy as well as an expert on

Indonesian traditional herbal medicine. My amazement was compounded when the clinic phoned just two days later to say the medicine was ready. I received two small bottles of tiny pills, and was warned not to expect instant results as the medication worked on the principle of 'slow but sure'.

Having dutifully swallowed ten tiny pills for two mornings in succession, I carried on with my daily exercise class, and, astonishingly, by the third day I was out of pain. I simply could not believe it and dismissed this apparent miracle as sheer fluke. It was all the more remarkable as I had decided to err on the side of caution and had only taken one-third of the recommended daily dose. Sceptically, I continued with the same self-prescribed dose and waited for the pain to return. It didn't. Six months later, I was still pain free.

Impressed and by now intrigued, I was keen to learn more about jamu and tried to buy a book on the subject. I could not find one in English, however, and those written in Indonesian seemed to contain only recipes. Wanting to find out more, I took a trip to Central Java where I met jamu maker, Ibu Sri. During my visit she led me into her dark kitchen where she did most of her work. She explained her methods, then said: "You must try my jamu."

Inwardly I hesitated, for the kitchen walls were lined with filthy black woks, or so I thought, until Ibu Sri pulled one off its hook and turned it over to reveal a gleaming interior. Why on earth did she clean only the inside, I wondered, puzzled, until she explained: "Of course we allow layers of charcoal to build up on the outside of pans so they retain heat." I nodded sagely and kept quiet. When my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, I

realized that the whole area, though primitive, was a model of hygiene. Ibu Sri interrupted my musings by offering my companion a tumbler full of khaki-coloured liquid. He downed it in a single gulp, sighed with relish and complimented Ibu Sri on her brew.

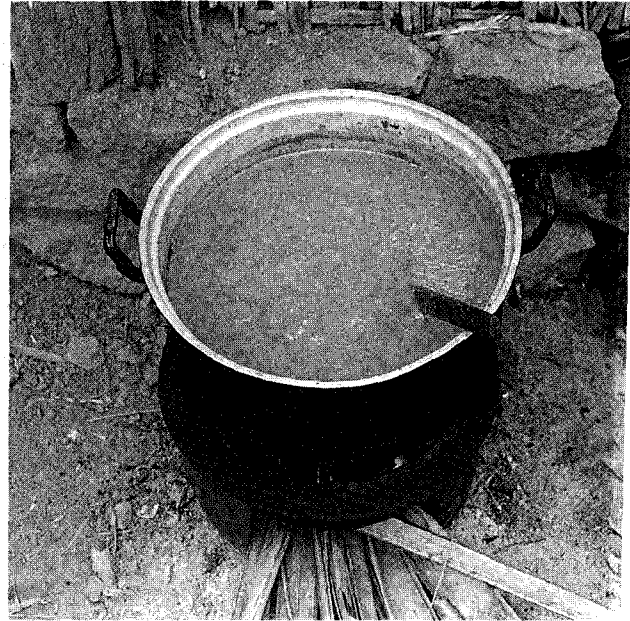
Then it was my turn. First I sampled Beras Kencur, which was spicy and delicious. But when Ibu Sri began to stir a green mixture in the wok and scoop ladles of it into a glass, I became anxious. I knew for sure things were bad when a miniature glass of sweet liquid was set down alongside it. (A sugared drink is the antidote served when the jamu is particularly bitter.)

“The Pegal Linu,” Ibu Sri announced with aplomb, oblivious to my distress (‘pegal’ means stiff; ‘linu’ is rheumatic; therefore ‘pegal linu’ translates as ‘stiffness caused by rheumatism’ and is prescribed to alleviate aches and pains.)

Taking a deep breath, I consumed the potion, which made the worst Western cough mixture seem like nectar. The sugared water alleviated the aftertaste only marginally.

By midnight, however, I still had not experienced the anticipated backlash. At 5 am the next morning, I awoke expecting to feel like death, but—to my astonishment—I had never felt better. This was extraordinary—I had actually acquired a new energy; in fact I had never felt more alive and jamu had been the only variation from my normal diet.

From that moment, I was hooked. I began researching the subject in earnest, in the hope that others would benefit from my experience and discover what—if anything—this ancient Indonesian health system could do for them. The result, many years later, is this book.



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Central Javanese Ibu Sri was the first person whose home-made jamu the author tested. Here a pot of Kunir Asem is being prepared in her back yard.

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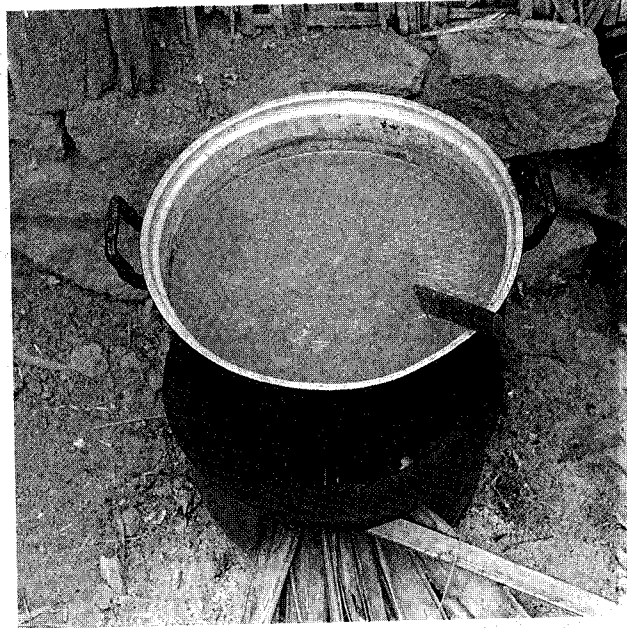
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