

## **Medicinal Plants used by Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines**

### ***A Fülöp-szigetek őslakosai által használt gyógynövények***

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**Abstract:** Aetas are ancient indigenous people in the Philippines. They are considered as one of the earliest inhabitants in the Philippines, theorized to be related to the aboriginal peoples in Australia. Living in the island for tens of thousands of years, they bore witness to the ebb and flow of the landscape and the ecosystem. Throughout these changes, the Aetas are proud to have their own way of life distinct from other ethnic groups that populate the Philippines. Having lived in the plains, mountains, lakes, and coasts of Pampang, the landscape has shaped the Aeta's identity. Aetas base their lifestyle closely from their surrounding natural environment for survival and recreation. Aetas are believed to originally live by hunting and gathering. Through the years, they have developed agriculture, cultivating plants for different purposes. One of such purposes is medicine. For a long time, plant medicine is a common and accepted method for treating illnesses in the Philippines. This research delves into the topic of medicinal plants, how it helps Aetas sustain their lifestyle, and hopefully pass this knowledge for future generations.

**Keywords:** *Philippines; indigenous people; aetas; agriculture; plant medicine*

**Összefoglalás:** Az aeták ősi őslakosok a Fülöp-szigeteken. A Fülöp-szigetek egyik legkorábbi lakosának tartják őket, akik az elmélet szerint az ausztráliai őslakosokkal rokonok. Több tízezer éve a szigeten élve tanúi voltak a táj és az ökoszisztéma apály- és dagályának. E változások során az aeták büszkék arra, hogy saját életmódjukat különböztetik meg a Fülöp-szigeteken élő többi etnikai csoporttól. Mivel Pampang síkságain, hegyeiben, tavain és partjain éltek, a táj formálta az Aeta identitását. Az Aeták életmódjukat szorosan a környező természeti környezetből építik a túlélés és a kikapcsolódás érdekében. Úgy gondolják, hogy az aeták eredetileg vadászatból és gyűjtésből élnek. Az évek során fejlesztették a mezőgazdaságot, különféle célú növényeket termesztenek. Az egyik ilyen cél az orvostudomány. A Fülöp-szigeteken a növényi gyógyászat régóta általános és elfogadott módszer a betegségek kezelésére. Ez a kutatás a gyógynövények témájával foglalkozik, hogyan segíti az Aetákat életmódjuk fenntartásában, és remélhetőleg továbbadja ezt a tudást a következő generációknak.

**Kulcsszavak:** *Fülöp-szigetek; őslakosok; aetas; mezőgazdaság; növénygyógyászat*

## 1. Introduction

Aetas are one of the many indigenous peoples residing in the Philippines. In 2010, there were an estimated 50,000 recorded Aeta people living in the Philippines. Aetas are physically characterized by their dark skin, curly hair, and short stature. (See Figure 1) Aetas originally have a nomadic lifestyle. Aetas are organized into villages, led by a tribal chieftain. They move around depending on the availability of food. They survive by hunting animals with bow and arrow. They hunt for wild pigs, deer, monkeys and lizards. They hunt with their dogs and they also catch fish in the river and coast. They have simple traditional clothing. They weave, craft accessories, make body modifications and use herbal medicine. They have their own religion. They believe in a creator God and also spirits of nature.



**Figure 1.** Aeta family in Luzon, Philippines (Source: Egon von Eickstedt, 1938) (Dresden Museum of Ethnology State Art Collections)



**Figure 2.** Landscape in Pampanga province (Source: Ungvari Attila, 2023)



**Figure 3.** Location of Pampanga province in the Philippines (Source: Eugene Alvin Villar, 2003)

This research shall identify which plants are commonly accepted by Aetas to possess healing qualities. It will include both plants that are exclusive to the Philippines and those that grow in other regions. I will collect information on which plants are used for medicine, what diseases they treat, which part of the plant is used, how the medicine is prepared from the plant, how the medicine is used, and how often the medicine is used. This paper shall explore the Aeta community's relationship with their environment, more specifically with the medicinal plants. It shall delve deeper into the importance of the plants for the Aetas. This shall in turn, help find new opportunities for health, medicine and livelihood.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This research collected data from several sources. I distributed a questionnaire to Aetas living in Pampanga. (See Figure 4) The informants were made aware that the research is for academic purpose. They consented and participated voluntarily. The gathered data was cross examined with data from previous researches.

Questionnaire about Medicinal Plants
1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. Have you or your family used plant medicine?
4. Which plants are used as medicine? Which part?
5. Which disease does it treat?
6. How do you prepare the treatment? What is the procedure for treatment?
7. Was it effective in treating diseases?
8. Did you get side effects from the treatment?
9. Do you recommend using these plant medicine for healing?
10. How do you grow these plants?

Figure 4. This questionnaire was given for the participants to answer

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Participant Data

There were 27 informants who participated in the study. Among the participants of the study, 8 are male and 19 are female. The biggest age group in the research belonged to 40 – 50 years old while three were younger than 20. (See Figures 5 and 6) All of them were familiar with the use of plant medicine or have used it with themselves or in their household. All of them attest to the efficacy of using plant medicine and they use plants as primary treatment for illnesses.

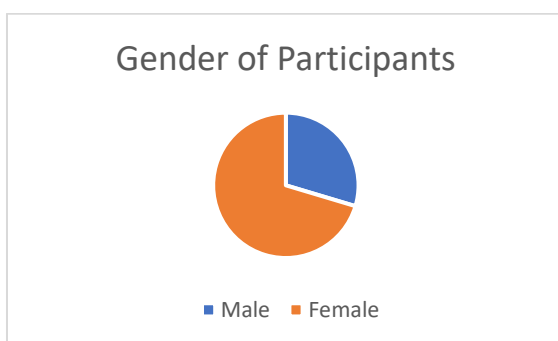


Figure 5. Gender of the participants

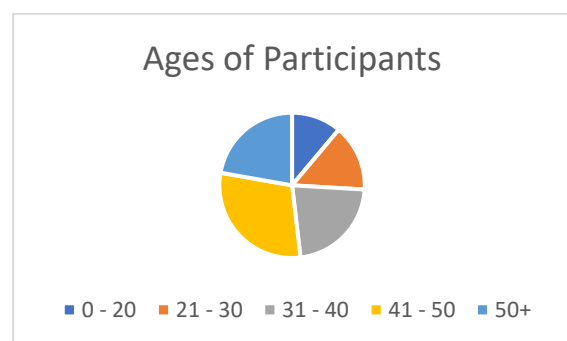










Figure 6. Ages of the participants

### 3.2 Aetas and Medicinal Plants

Medicinal plants have always been relevant in healthcare in the Philippines. Elder Aetas have extensive knowledge about plant medicines. However, there is a risk that this knowledge may not be passed down to the next generation (Datiles, Heinrich, 2013). The following table contains an incomprehensive list of plants in the Philippines believed to have healing properties:

**Table 1. Plants used as medicine with information on how they are used**

Plant	Part	Disease/Condition Treated	Preparation	Administration Mode and Frequency
 <p><b>Bawang (Garlic)</b> <i>Allium sativum</i></p>	Fruit	Canker sores	As is	Apply on affected part as needed
		Dog bites	Slice and juice	Rub on affected part every day
		Ear ache	Collect the resin	Apply on affected area as needed
		Tooth ache	Remove skin, triturate or as is	Apply on affected area as needed
		Tinea versicolor or white spots	Triturate or as is	Rub on affected part every day
 <p><b>Aloe vera</b> <i>Aloe vera</i></p>	Leaves	Alopecia	Cut in half and juice	Rub on affected part as needed
	Leaves	Dandruff	Cut in half and juice	Rub on affected area as needed
	Leaves	Dandruff	Cut in half	Rub on affected area and leave for one hour once a day
	Stem	Burns	Shred	Apply on affected area as needed
	Leaves	Hair volume	Cut in half and juice	Rub on affected area as needed
	Stem	Hair volume	Shred	Rub on affected area and leave for one hour once a day
 <p><b>Kasuy (Cashew)</b> <i>Anacardium occidentale</i></p>	Bark	Diabetes	Cut into pieces, decoction	Drink liberally
	Fruit	Diabetes	As is	Eat as often as needed
	Bark	Tooth ache	Decoction in saline water	Gargle as often as needed
 <p><b>Guyabano</b> <i>Annona muricata</i></p>	Fruit	Diabetes	As is	Eat every day
	Leaves	High blood pressure	Decoction	Drink liberally
	Leaves	Stomach ache	Decoction in saline water	Drink as often as needed
	Leaves	Urinary tract infection (UTI)	Decoction	Drink liberally
	Leaves	Vertigo	Roast and decoction	Rub on affected part once
 <p><b>Damong maria (Mugwort)</b> <i>Artemisia vulgaris</i></p>	Leaves	Colds	Triturate, strain the juice	Drink 3x a day
	Leaves	Cough	Roast, strain the juice or decoction	Drink 3x a day
	Leaves	Gastritis	Triturate or Roast or Decoction	Drink 3x a day
	Leaves	Stomach ache	Decoction or juice	Rub on affected part 3x a day
	Leaves	Cough	Decoction	Drink 4x a day, as needed
 <p><b>Sambong</b> <i>Blumea balasmifera</i></p>	Leaves	Diarrhea	Roast or Decoction	Drink until well
	Leaves	Phlegm	Roast	Drink 3 x a day (not more than 1 week)
	Leaves	Head ache	Roast or Decoction	Drink 3 x a day (not more than 1 week)
	Leaves	Stomach ache	Decoction or wrap on banana leaves with salt and heat with flame	Rub on the body as needed
	Leaves	Ulcer	Decoction	Drink
	Leaves	Chest pains	Roast, add coconut oil	Apply on affected part as needed
 <p><b>Kataka-taka</b> <i>Bryophyllum pinnatum</i></p>	Leaves	Ear infection	Roast, add coconut oil	Place on affected area morning and evening
	Leaves	Eye ache	Triturate, collect juice	Place on affected area 4x a day
	Leaves	Speck in the eye	Triturate, collect juice	Place on affected area 3x a day
	Leaves	Tooth ache	Triturate, add salt or Decoction	Apply on affected part or Drink as needed
	Leaves	Boils	Add gin, set up like ventosa	Apply on affected part once
 <p><b>Sili (Pepper)</b> <i>Capsicum annuum</i></p>	Seeds	Tooth ache	Place seeds in cotton	Apply on affected part as needed
	Leaves	Wounds	Heat in flame, juice	Apply on affected part once
	Fruit	Wounds	Cook chilli pepper with coconut oil	Rub on affected area morning and evening
	Leaves	Wounds	Heat in flame, juice	Apply on affected part once

**Table 1. Plants used as medicine with information on how they are used (Continued)**

Plant	Part	Disease/Condition Treated	Preparation	Administration Mode and Frequency
 <b>Papaya</b> <i>Carica papaya</i>	Fruit	Constipation/ Dyspepsia	As is	Eat liberally
	Roots	Tooth ache	Triturate	Apply on affected part until well
 <b>Calamansi</b> <i>Citrus japonica</i>	Fruit	Dandruff	Juice or slice	Use as shampoo Every bath time
	Fruit	Athlete' foot	Juice or boil in saline water	Rub on affected part as needed
	Fruit	Caterpillar venom	Juice	Apply on affected part as needed
	Fruit	Colds	Decoction	Drink once a day (for 3 days)
	Leaves	Colds	Decoction, mix with bath water	Bathe as needed
	Fruit	Cough	Juice or roast	Drink liberally
	Leaves	Cough	Roast, scrape the skin, mix juice with honey	Rub on affected part Once a day
 <b>Buko (Coconut)</b> <i>Cocos nucifera</i>	Fruit	Sore eyes	Slice	Instill on affected area 2x a day
	Juice	Alopecia	Scrape the meat, juice	Use as shampoo before bath
	Juice	Anuria	As is	Drink as needed
	Roots	Anuria	Triturate, juice	Drink 3x a day (for 8 days)
	Oil	Burns	Roast	Rub on affected part 2x a day (for 3 days)
	Oil	Burns	Warm up, apply in guava leaves	Rub on affected part morning and evening
	Juice	Diabetes	As is	Drink in the morning
	Fruit	Kidney problems	As is	Drink in the morning
	Juice	Kidney problems	As is	Drink in the morning
	Fruit	Scabies	Boil until oil comes out	Rub on affected part once a day
 <b>Luya (Ginger)</b> <i>Curcuma longa</i>	Fruit	Tinea cruris	Boil until oil comes out	Rub on affected part once a day
	Husk	Tooth ache	Roast, put in a covered plate. Collect the moisture or Roast the husk, pulverize, put powder in cotton	Apply on affected part as needed
	Juice	Urinary tract infection (UTI)	As is	Drink as needed
	Fruit	Flatulence	Triturate or scrape, soak in lukewarm water, strain	Drink 2x a day (for 1 week)
	Fruit	Head ache	As is	Apply on affected part, bind with clean cloth. Change when dry until well
	Fruit	Numbness	Decoction	Drink or rub on affected part 3 x a day
	Fruit	Rheumatism	Soak in coconut oil	Rub on affected part morning and evening
 <b>Tanglad (Lemongrass)</b> <i>Cymbopogon citratus</i>	Fruit	Stomach ache	Decoction	Drink 4 x a day
	Fruit	Vomiting	scrape, soak in luke warm water, strain	Drink once a day (for 1 week)
	Leaves	Alopecia	Triturate, soak in water for 15 minutes	Use as shampoo every day
	Leaves	Alopecia	Decoction	Bathe once
	Leaves	Head ache	Decoction or triturate and express with clean cloth or soak in water for 15 minutes	Bathe every day
	Roots	High blood pressure	Decoction, triturate	Drink until well
 <b>Gugo (Black Cumin)</b> <i>Entada phaseoloides</i>	Leaves	Post partum	Decoction	Bathe once
	Roots	Sore throat	Decoction	Drink 3x a day
	Whole	Alopecia	Juice	Use as shampoo once a day
	Whole	Dandruff	Triturate	Use as shampoo once a day
	Leaves	Lice	Decoction	Bathe once a day
 <b>Kakawati (Madre de Cacao)</b>	Roots	Damaged hair	Triturate	Use as shampoo 2x a day
	Resin	Athlete's foot	Scrape the middle part of leaf with bottle	Apply on affected part until well
	Leaves	Body pains	Collect the resin	Apply on affected part as needed
	Leaves	Fever	Pass thru flame, add coconut oil	Apply on affected part as needed
	Leaves	Headache	Pass thru flame, add coconut oil	Apply on affected part as needed
	Leaves	Itchiness	Pass thru flame, add coconut oil	Bathe up to 2x a day
	Leaves	Scabies	Decoction	Bathe up to 2x a day
Leaves	Strain	Decoction	Apply on affected part as needed	

### 3.3. Aetas' Agriculture

Aetas historically collected food and medicine by foraging plants that were already existing in the surroundings. When they became more settled, they developed a method called “kaingin gasak” known in other countries as swidden farming wherein they slash and burn trees. Then, they use the ashes for fertilizer. They used the fertilizer to grow crops. However, this practice has been found to not be sustainable. As the Aetas adapted to the environment, they learned about agriculture practices. They planted mainly root crops, sweet potatoes, bananas, and vegetables. They also planted the herbs and medicinal plants. They start to plant in May when it starts to rain. After four to five months, the harvesting season comes. They used ancient medicinal plants for spiritual purposes.

## 4. Conclusions

Aetas are indigenous people in the Philippines. Like any group of people, the Aetas have existed through the changing of times. They have adapted their lifestyle with the environment that they consider their home. Using plants for medicine has been a tradition passed down through many generations. This tradition is at risk of being forgotten, but the practical knowledge is important and should be preserved for generations to come. Knowledge of plant medicine goes beyond the therapeutic benefits; rather it is tied to the heritage of the indigenous people who live with this tradition. Just as medicines save us from illnesses and preserve our lives, indigenous people deserve recognition and preservation.

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