Jamu for the ills of modernity?

Jamu is evolving to meet modern needs

Margot L. Lyon

Writings about Javanese herbal medicines (jamu) in Indonesia often emphasise their ancient origins and their status as traditional medicine. But the world of jamu has undergone many changes, and the market in jamu today reflects the complexities of contemporary life. An examination of how jamu are currently made, distributed, marketed and used provides a window into some of these issues.

Traditionally, jamu was prepared at home. But while few people today have the time, or the skills, for the lengthy process of preparing the various ingredients, traditional-style jamu are still readily available. In the early morning hours in almost any kampung in the cities and towns of Java, women peddle jamu door to door. Carrying a deep round basket heavy with bottles of reddish-brown or golden coloured liquid tied to her back, the jamu seller walks the narrow lanes of the kampung. These itinerate jamu sellers also service offices and factories, offering a pick-me-up for tired workers. Any traditional market, too, has permanent stalls selling jamu of plastic sachets of powder to brew with hot water or mix with other drinks. Jamu is also increasingly available in the form of tablets or capsules that look like conventional medicine.

Traditionally, jamu preparations were as much used to maintain good health and proper bodily functioning as for treating specific illnesses. Today, the taking of jamu, as opposed to conventional pharmaceuticals, is still common for the many categories of ailments that don't precisely correspond to biomedical categories of sickness. These are ailments such as masuk angin, similar to a cold or flu, and pegel linu, a term which refers to joint and muscular stiffness and rheumatic-type pain. Jamu are also frequently used for women's problems such as vaginal discharge, regulating the menses, and for conditions associated with pregnancy, birth, and postnatal health.

Today at least fifty per cent of all traditional medicines sold are for the enhancement of manliness, sexual performance, and sexual health. Increasingly common also is the marketing of jamu for problems such as high cholesterol, diabetes, and high blood pressure, as well as for conditions such as acne. Customers wanting to lose weight, enlarge their busts and so on, also turn to jamu.

The business of Jamu

The number of smaller businesses involved in the manufacture of jamu exploded in the late 1980s and through the 1990s. By 1998, nearly seven hundred firms making traditional medicines were registered with the Department of Health. Seventy nine of these were classed as industries proper, the remainder as small (often home) industries. This number does not include the many tiny household enterprises that operate without formal approval.

However, the commercial production of jamu is dominated by a few large companies. These firms generally began as family businesses but over time expanded into modern industries manufacturing jamu for both domestic and export markets. The earliest companies were Jamu Cap Jago founded in 1918 and Jamu Cap Potret Nyonya Meneer founded in 1919. Other main players in the jamu business have been Sido Muncul (1951), Air Mancur (1963), and more recent firms such as Mustika Ratu (1975), Sari Ayu (1979), as well as Deltom and Borobudur.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the big jamu brands were still widely advertised at markets and fairs by teams of travelling salesmen. By the early 1980s, when the network of local distributors and agents was already well developed and the main brands were well known, the marketing strategies of the four biggest firms shifted to kiosks. Tens of thousands of kiosks were opened throughout Java and jamu companies ran training courses for their agents and sellers. The brand kiosks still exist, many in somewhat changed form, but many more kiosks of different sorts have opened over the last few years in both urban and rural areas. Kiosk owners often function as ‘consultant pharmacists’ giving advice on what jamu to take for specified ailments or needs. Local healers may write ‘prescriptions’ suggesting what jamu should be purchased at a brand kiosk.

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various sorts that can be combined on the spot by the vendor depending on the client’s needs.

However, the majority of jamu sold today come in packaged form (jamu bungkus). These are most often in the form of small, brightly-coloured foil or plastic sachets of powder to brew with a cold or flu, and pegel linu, a term which refers to joint and muscular stiffness and rheumatic-type pain. Jamu are also frequently used for women’s problems such as vaginal discharge, regulating the menses, and for conditions associated with pregnancy, birth, and postnatal health.
Expanded markets

Jamu sales of all types have increased greatly since the beginning of the economic crisis in 1997. The primary reason for this is the high percentage of imported raw materials.

Part of this market expansion is demand, but the distribution and sale of packaged jamu has also provided income opportunities for many people. This has led to an ever-expanding marketing chain for packaged jamu in rural and urban communities. Packaged jamu has moved into the supermarkets, pharmacies, beauty salons, and department stores, as well as the hundreds of thousands of small shops that sell tea, sugar or cigarettes. They are also available in a myriad of food stalls and small restaurants.

Some big jamu firms have moved toward products aimed at the middle class and wealthy, especially in the areas of natural skin care and cosmetics. More expensive brands are heavily promoted at special counters in exclusive shops or salons and upmarket jamu bars have joined Starbucks cafes opening in malls across the country. Middle and lower-priced brands are often marketed from temporary kiosks set up in market complexes or malls. Small, permanent shops also abound within shopping plazas or districts adjacent to bus terminals or other busy places. Even the old jamu gendong seller now usually carries packets of a selection of ready-made jamu. And, women providing mixed jamu from their stalls in the markets, also have available a range of jamu bungkus.

Customer beware

Consumers of packaged jamu need to be both informed and cautious. They should buy from a reliable manufacturer and take note of warnings issued by government and non-governmental bodies.

New categories of ailments, new categories of need

There are other factors involved in the growing popularity of jamu. The profound economic crisis and growing political and social disorder, and the stresses these factors bring about in peoples’ everyday lives, has engendered a growing concern with health, stamina and wellbeing. In the context of these changing conditions, new demands for different sorts of medicines and tonics have emerged. The growth in demand for jamu has been accompanied by increased use of pharmaceuticals such as anti-depressants and anti-anxiety drugs, and an increase in prevalence of alcohol and illicit drug use.

Some of the most popular jamu today are those that meet the new demand for renewed energy, stamina, and alertness. Most of these energy drinks, tonics and supplements are manufactured by large drug or food manufacturers. Although they are considered jamu, they are not jamu proper, because they are not primarily herbal.

Best-selling bottled tonics like ‘Kratingdaeng’, ‘Fit-Up’, and ‘Hemaviton’ contain ingredients such as vitamin B, caffeine, and other substances associated with quick energy. One of the most successful energy drinks is ‘Extra-Joss’, manufactured by the firm Bintang Toedjoe. Though not a herbal preparation (except that it contains some ginseng), like some jamu it comes in the form of a small sachet of instant powder, and costs much less than the bottled energy drinks. Another product made by Bintang Toedjoe is a jamu for male potency, ‘Irex’. Extra-Joss and Irex, both already extremely popular, achieved even greater prominence when they were the featured advertised products during Indonesian TV broadcasts of World Cup Soccer. The images used to promote these and other energy drinks were ones of strength and manliness.

The promotion of many qualities has always been an important function of jamu. Consequently, the category of energy drinks overlaps with the traditional category of obat kuat (literally medicine to make one strong, powerful). Obat kuat include medicines for enhancing male potency and aphrodisiacs, an increasing number of which are marketed as jamu in markets.

Obat kuat is primarily produced by small local manufacturers or imported from China. Few are actually purely herbal preparations; many contain testosterone or other steroids, and are marketed as the equivalent of Viagra at a fraction of the cost.

These new products, including new types of traditional medicines, sell a chemical sense of ‘power’. For their users, energy drinks and other stimulants create a sense of enhanced physical resources. Whatever their actual ingredients, they offer a sense of ready energy, of potential action, in the face of the daily grind of poorly-paid work or continuing poverty. But this strength is an illusion. It merely masks the effects of poor life conditions — lack of sleep, inadequate food intake, poor nutrition, pollution, chronic disease and parasites.

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