

Research Proposal

1. Research Topic

How do people living in Tahiti and Huahine use the oral traditional medical knowledge and why?

2. Background and Justification

The world, in particular the developed nations, have undergone a lot of progress in many realms of information, medical being one of them. Many societies have flourished in the last three to four centuries. But this has, at times, been at the expense of some of the ancient societies like the ones in Tahiti and Huahine, and their indigenous knowledge, many of which have come close to the brink of extinction. These ancient societies have been in existence for over a millennia in their indigenous locations, and have as a result developed knowledge systems that has allowed them to live symbiotically with their environment for this long stretch of time (Clark, 1994).

But, their knowledge systems and, their entire cultures by extension, had been thought to be unrefined, primitive and inferior by the ones (the Western world) who invaded and eventually took ownership of their lands, mostly because the indigenous cultures didn't fit the Western definition of being modern and developed (Clark, 1994). In addition, to assert authority and rule, it was seen imperative by the Western invaders to impose their own knowledge systems on the indigenous population, and to showcase these as being superior to the knowledge systems of the indigenous population. In doing so, many of the indigenous knowledge systems were suppressed forcefully, and many others almost went out of existence or usage due to the induced feeling of inferiority and shame, which has continued to this day, albeit less aggressively.

As a result, the vast amount of information pertaining to sustainably coexisting with the environment is in the danger of extinction. These chunks of information have been refined across millennia, and could therefore arguably be much distilled, and possibly not be available in any of the modern information systems. Further, the identity of these indigenous populations, which is rooted in this information, also gets dangerously threatened (Kihwelo, 2005). It is therefore important to respectfully restore and revive these indigenous knowledge systems as much as possible so as to reestablish the pride and true identity of the natives, and upon permission from them, use the wisdom therein for their wellbeing, as well as the rest of the world, with due credit to them.

Traditional medical knowledge is an extremely important aspect of the knowledge contained in the oral traditions of Tahiti and Huahine as it deals with the survival and

longevity of the population there, which are of paramount importance in the sustenance of any community. Further, this knowledge has contributed to the successful survival of the indigenous population for over a millennia before the invasion, which substantiates its merit considerably.

Hence, researching the usage of oral traditional medical knowledge by the people living in Tahiti and Huahine, and their reasons behind in doing so, would be instrumental in understanding the nature and intricacies of this information, and would help in addressing the aforementioned concerns regarding indigenous information.

3. Research Questions and Expected Findings

1. Among which demographics is the traditional medical knowledge being used/ not being used, and why / why not?
 - i. **Hypothesis:** Most of the people living in Tahiti with a comparatively higher standard of living would be the ones who use the traditional medicines the least.
 - ii. **Justification:**
 - a. First, most of the people living in Tahiti have been educated through the French education system, and hence are more familiar with the French aspect of things rather than the Traditional Tahitian ones. In addition, benefits provided by the French government to the patients (like sick leave, reimbursement, etc.) utilizing the French medical system would make them favor the French medicines more and the traditional medicines less (as both type of medicines can heal).
 - b. Second, the data from three of the interviews substantiates this (Mama Doe, Personal Communication, 25th February, 2014) (A. LePendu, Personal Communication, 10th January, 2014 to 9th March, 2014)(A. LePendu, Personal Communication, 10th January, 2014 to 9th March, 2014).

2. In which location is the Traditional medical system being actively used?
 - i. **Hypothesis:** Most of the people who utilize traditional medicines extensively would be the people who are living in “rural” environments – especially where French influence isn’t strong, like Huahine, and in very remote parts of Tahiti.
 - ii. **Justification:** the data from two of the interviews substantiates this (Mama Doe, Personal Communication, 25th February, 2014) (A. LePendu, Personal Communication, 10th January, 2014 to 9th March, 2014).

3. What are the different types of ailments / conditions that are being treated/prevented by the use of this knowledge, and why?
 - i. **Hypothesis:** The main ailments that might be being treated or prevented by the use of Traditional medicines are the ones that have been indigenous to Tahiti and Huahine.
 - ii. **Justification:** The traditional medical system was developed to protect against or combat from those diseases or inconsistencies in the body that used to happen to the indigenous people before the invasion of foreigners, who brought a new set of diseases with them which the indigenous population had no immunity or cure against, and which had eventually resulted in massive deaths of the indigenous population. Thus, the traditional medicines would be more apt for the indigenous diseases, and hence would be used against the same.

4. Research Methodologies

1. Methods

- i. The initial step would be literature review on relevant topics and collecting basic background information like geographic spread, urban-rural split, the government, and other pertinent things. Armed with this information, the researcher will be able to make educated modification that could be required in the research, and would also come across as knowledgeable and interested (Phillips, 1998).
- ii. To ensure in-depth information retrieval and to maintain good relations with the local population, involvement in their community and proving genuine interest are of paramount importance. This would require staying and getting involved in activities with different communities in Tahiti and Huahine for extended periods of time (1 to 6 weeks), and to prove your positive intent (Phillips, 1998).
- iii. Next target or respondent groups will be formed so that the data that would be gathered from them would be easy to classify and analyze (Phillips, 1998). These groups would be based on demographic measures and behavior so that the data being collected from comparatively “developed” and “developing” parts of Tahiti and Huahine can be normalized and analyzed accurately. The best way to connect with these potential interviewees would be to ask them about this during community involvement activities. The contacts made here will soon provide other contacts for data collection, who will be interviewed later.
- iv. The primary method of data collection will be mostly through interviews with people, the informality of which will be tailored to the interviewee’s

demographics information, their current environment and their preference.

This will help in determining the peoples' perceptions of traditional medicine across all the pertinent occupations, while the chief demographic measures (mentioned below) will help in providing a "user-centered" perspective on these medicines.

- a. The main demographic indicators would be:
 - a. Old demographic (equal to or greater than 60 years)
 - b. Middle aged demographic (between 30(included) to 60 years)
 - c. Young demographic (from 16 to 30 years)
 - d. Location : Tahiti or Huahine
- b. The main occupations that would be considered would be:
 - a. Priests or Tahuas (Spiritual healers)
 - b. Traditional Medical healers
 - c. Specialists in the field of Traditional medicines
 - d. French medical doctors
 - e. Educators/ teachers
 - f. People who work in health administration and social security
- c. Different people from the community.

5. Data Analysis Approach

Aside from the initial data that would be collected during literature review (which would be quantitative), the data collected during the research process from then on (through interviews) will be qualitative in nature.

6. Early Insights

The maternal and neo- natal health are not a very big issue in Tahiti, and most of the medical requirements of the people (especially concerning new born babies) are met through the French medical system in the form of vaccinations and required medications and tonics. Moreover, this (maternal and neo-natal health) was too narrow an area of focus and the broader aspect of traditional medicines needed to be understood first with respect to its effect in the lives of the people of Tahiti and Huahine, which is what the research question morphed into eventually.

Pertaining to this, the Traditional medicines are mainly preventive in nature, though they can also be used to cure diseases in which case, the medicine works directly on the cause of the disease (virus, bacteria, etc.) rather than only addressing the symptoms first (J.H. Bouit, Personal Communication, 25th February, 2014). The medicines

are generally administered by two types of people: the Healers, and the Tahua (priest). The former deals mainly with typical diseases that are caused by usual reasons, while the later deals with curses/ "ghost" diseases which could be caused due to ancestral displeasure, ill will from someone, etc. Also, the former ones are generally only good for those diseases which are native to the islands, and not the foreign ones that were brought to the island at the time of invasion, and from the foreigners who have come since then.

On the other hand, the ghost diseases are usually identified when there is no logical explanation for someone to contract a particular disease and yet they do, or if a disease doesn't abate even though the required medical treatment (Traditional or French) for the disease is being given. Aside from this, the Tahua also performs various ceremonial activities like conducting religious activities, circumcision (seen as a rite of passage), casting protective spells on an individual, family or locality, or blessing people in general. In addition, the medicines that are prepared depend on the patient's body type, diet, habits, and the disease they are suffering from. In terms of social order, Tahuas are much greater than Healers, and are also in smaller numbers compared to them (Healers).

Besides this, there is a significant percentage of population that relies on the French medical system. French medical system is mostly free for all the people of Tahiti, and has a deep reach in the various regions of Tahiti by virtue of various clinics that are scattered throughout the island. Also, upon falling ill and consulting French medical doctors, any expense that may be incurred by the patient is generally reimbursed by the government, along with benefits like sick leave, which are not available to those who may solely use the traditional medicines for curing their illness.

During the interviews in which the aforementioned data was collected, it was also observed that the information that the people (interviewees) share depended on the level of trust they had on the researchers, which was gauged by the interviewee by the researcher's interest and quality of involvement in their community. In addition to this, it significantly helped in gaining deeper information when the interviews were conducted in English (when both the parties were comfortable in it) as it allowed greater understanding of the subject and higher maneuverability with the questions.

Finally, revival of traditional medical knowledge is a definite possibility as there is still considerable interest among many people about this knowledge. Also, some of the interviewees in the field of medicine stated that the traditional medicines in combination with the French medicines, where applicable yield the best results. These, along with the strong efforts being put by people (specialists, healers, and educators) in the field of traditional medicines to teach their successors (their kids, other family members, students, etc.), and the feeling of its considerable importance that seems to be present among many people in Tahiti and Huahine could be powerful factors in revival of this knowledge.

7. Challenges and Considerations

1. Challenges

i. In getting access to people

- a. Had very little prior notice of who I would be meeting where. So had almost no time for preparation for the interview. Hence, should know who is where and what their area of expertise is, instead of asking them that during the interview.
- b. Language barrier – and the loss in information and flexibility in questioning.
- c. For better quality of information, some level of cultural involvement and integration is important prior to interviews – which takes time.
- d. Most people have different occupations that they attend to during the day, so scheduling an interview with them may get problematic if the researcher isn't in contact (and in good standing) with a local.
- e. Though the local people are welcoming and amiable, they may not have the time to go to extra lengths of involving the researchers into their culture and activities unless the researchers have an known and important brand (like UW), and are in contact with eminent people (like A-Dre Lependu) who have contacts and influence in the different localities of research. Further, the entire process of cultural integration becomes swifter as well.

ii. Time periods – ideal time

- a. For concentrated fieldwork, 5-6 months should be enough.

2. Considerations

- i. Understand the background framework first, then decide on a direction and make educated assumptions to plan out the research phase. In addition, never proceed to the intervention phase unless the research has been adequately done. Also, every research project doesn't need to end up eventually into an intervention project.
- ii. People and the language they use to communicate fluently plays a very important role when doing fieldwork research in terms of interviews. The researcher shall be able to understand better and ask much more pertinent questions to the people if they can talk in the same language with high fluency.
- iii. Though having a competent translator is incredibly helpful, getting to deeper questions is at times too time consuming, and there is often a lot of information loss and lack of clarity in the process.

- iv. For better quality of information, some level of cultural involvement and integration is important prior to interviews – which would require time, patience, and cultural adjustment and acceptance on the researcher’s part.
- v. Though the different activities like interviewing, surveys, etc. are very important and required research processes, the way in which they need to be carried out needs to be tailored depending on the audience. For instance, you are likely to get deeper information on an informal meeting over dinner rather than on a formal interview.
- vi. Have a team with 5-7 members. This is extremely helpful in seeing the various aspects of information that is being obtained, and in accurately deciding the future steps that need to be taken. Also, conflicting opinions about the assumptions being made as part of the entire process would help in making the end result as accurate as possible.
- vii. If the researchers are not fluent in French, Tahitian, and English, they should ensure that they have access to translators who are proficient in these languages along with theirs. Even if the researchers are fluent, having access to a person who is familiar with both the local and the researcher’s society’s norms and nuances could be beneficial in understanding the local society.
- viii. In addition, amount of data collected and work done increases by a factor of the number of team mates. Also, it is easier to stay motivated and determined when working in groups than working alone.

The aforementioned insights, challenges and considerations have become apparent based on my fieldwork and research that I carried out with my translators and the interviewees.

- (M. Tang, Personal Communication, 20th January, 2014 to 9th March, 2014)
- (A. LePendu, Personal Communication, 10th January, 2014 to 9th March, 2014)
- (A. LePendu, Personal Communication, 10th January, 2014 to 9th March, 2014)
- (F. Kataleya, Personal Communication, 17th January, 2014)
- (Tameava, Personal Communication, 23rd January, 2014)
- (Lady Hinano, Personal Communication, 4th February, 2014)
- (Tangaroa, Personal Communication, 7th February, 2014)
- (Serge Dunis, Personal Communication, 11th February, 2014)
- (Head Priest at Maroto Valley, Personal Communication, 15th February, 2014)
- (Mama Doe, Personal Communication, 25th February, 2014)
- (Pito, Personal Communication, 28th February, 2014)

3. Assumptions:

- i. The research question that was chosen initially was too specific. It was based on a prior experience in similar arena (in rural Uttar Pradesh, India) without performing any literature review in the Traditional medicine area of French Polynesia. This assumption was eventually proven wrong, and the research question was changed to the current one.
- ii. It is assumed that the Traditional medical knowledge and the system employed to contain and transmit it is consistent across Tahiti and Huahine.
- iii. It is assumed that a single person team for this proposal would be enough. This was a disadvantage as even though time was spent with research professionals and field experts, the time required to be put in for bouncing ideas of each other (team mates) and evaluating the next course of action by considering multiple opinions is critical.
- iv. It is assumed that the amount of information loss due to language barrier wouldn't be significant enough to derail the project or push the researcher in the wrong direction indefinitely. Also, it is assumed that the translator is competent and is portraying all information as accurately as possible, even though it might be of a sensitive or uncomfortable nature to them.

8. Areas for future research

Areas of future research could build upon this research and may lead into a specific direction pertaining to certain types of medicines targeted towards specific diseases, infirmities, or some specific bodily problems.

Research could also be carried on how can the knowledge in different medical systems in the French Polynesian environment be applied to yield optimal benefits to the people living there (and elsewhere in the world, by their permission and with due credit) without posing a threat to their cultural identity and loss of their traditions.

9. References/ Works Cited

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3. Cox, P. A. (1991). Polynesian herbal medicine. *Islands, plants, and Polynesians: an introduction to Polynesian ethnobotany*.
4. Phillips, S. (1998). An insider's guide to conducting effective research on developing countries. *CORPORATE RESEARCHERS CONFERENCE*. Article ID: 19981107