



P.O. Box 144345 Austin, TX 78714-4345 • 512.926.4900 • Fax: 512.926.2345 • www.herbalgram.org

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Christina Chase, MS, RD
Heather S Oliff, PhD
Michelle Schuman Sanger

Jill Hoppe
Diane Graves, MPH, RD

Mariann Garner-Wizard
Densie Webb, PhD

Editor Mark Blumenthal
Funding/Administration Wayne Silverman, PhD

Managing Editor Jan Veenstra
Production George Solis/Kathleen Coyne

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RE: **Passing on Traditional Medical Knowledge**

Lee R, Balick MJ. Ethnomedicine: Ancient Wisdom for Contemporary Healing. *Alternative Therapies*. May/June 2001; 7 (3):28-30.

Lee and Balick, a physician and ethnobotanist, respectively, are currently leading a multidisciplinary field project studying the relationship between people and plants in Micronesia. Their commentary examines a few reasons why such research is of value.

Pointing to the desirability of cultural self-sustenance, they tell of a native healer, Marie David, who, while proud of the fact that her nieces and nephews had become Western-trained hospital health assistants, lamented that she had no one to whom to pass on her knowledge of traditional medicine. On these remote Pacific islands, field ships which ply an irregular inter-island trade bring medical supplies. During one epidemic of dysentery, antibiotics and packaged electrolytes were unavailable because a ship was delayed. Many people suffered, yet Marie David knew that a plant growing near the healthcare facility was known traditionally as a remedy for diarrhea. This woman has since died, never having trained a successor.

Traditional medical knowledge is a potential treasure house for pharmaceutical medicine. Collections of plants used traditionally for healing more often show potential for drug development than do random collections of plants. Pharmaceutical research is only possible when plants can be positively identified, and Lee and Balick describe their process of vouchersing, by which collected specimens may be indefinitely preserved.

We may learn to benefit from the processes as much as the plants of traditional cultures. The authors describe a ritual of reconciliation employing kava (*Piper methysticum*) in which pharmaceutical effects of the plant seem insufficient to elicit the deep responses of participants. It may be that the setting, including music and a ritual dialogue led by highly respected elders, has as much to do with outcomes as the chemical compounds in the plant, or that they potentiate a stronger biochemical response than would be experienced otherwise. For integrative physicians, Lee and Balick see the challenge of developing modern rituals that can similarly enhance the power of mind-body interactions.

The article, while adding little that is new to ethnobotanical knowledge, is a thoughtful examination of its potential. Most striking is the rather laid-back, relaxed narrative style — testimony in and of itself to the benefits of living on "island time".

¾ Mariann Garner-Wizard

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