Fecund Earth: Health and History Traditions in Armenia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the ways in which Armenia's history and geography have shaped attitudes towards health and wellness, with an emphasis on the use of herbal therapies. The ancient literature of Armenia points to a particular affinity towards plant medicine, which continues to be a prevalent mode of healing to this day. This research outlines the most well-known herbal therapies today and investigates how these traditions of healing are closely woven into the Armenian identity.

Key Words: Armenia, herbal therapies, plant medicine, the Armenian Genocide, the Armenian highlands, geography, the humours, national pride.

Armenia is a mountainous landlocked nation located in the Southern Caucuses region bound by Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Iran. Approximately the size of Maryland (11,490 square miles), Armenia contains seven different geographical ecoregions, including swamps, alpine meadows, semi-deserts, dry and wet steppes, and forests with drastically varying elevations (390 meters at the Debed River and 4,090 meters at its peak on Mount Aragats). These altitudes house a diversity of climates from dry subtropical to the tundras and each is complete with its own endemic flora. The native vegetation is a source of immense pride for many Armenians. I know this because I am Armenian and my trips back to the homeland feature large, elaborate meals of in-season produce, meats, fish and beyond question, lavash, a traditional Armenian flatbread that is simultaneously an auxiliary utensil used to wrap up food. Before you've digested your first bite, someone has already refilled your plate with another serving of food, a smile and a "You'll never taste [insert in-season produce here] like this anywhere in the world. This only grows in Armenia." And so you eat it and of course it ends in a Gastronomic crisis. You experience an explosion of taste where each stratum of organic metabolite is at once ambiguously recognizable and harmoniously blended together by some delightful osmosis, as nature intended.

My inquiries have led me to some very unusual but intellectually and visually fascinating places. By the end of my trip, it became clear that healing with plant medicines is endemic to the Armenian character, which is defined almost unanimously by a strong sense of patriotism, along with unparalleled hospitality and a distinct sort of ingenuity. These traits, as one would expect, are tightly interwoven with Armenia's past.

The history of Armenia is a complex one, marked by waves of nomadic invasions, political unrest, and internal corruption. During the 18th century, Western Armenia was under the control of the Ottoman Empire, and Eastern Armenia was annexed to Russia. In 1915, the Ottomans led a program of extermination of the Armenian people within its province. Although massacres had begun well before then, the Young Turks, the political party in power at the time, carried out deliberate executions and mass killings of Armenians. By 1923, 80% of Ottoman Armenians had been killed and Western historic Armenia was absorbed into modern-day Turkey. The traumas of these genocidal crimes continue to be a defining trauma for Armenians, so long as the Turkish government continues to deny their war crimes. One and a half million Armenians lost their lives between 1915 and 1923 and half a million fled the country to avoid persecution, laying the foundation for the Armenian diaspora which today totals 8 million people worldwide.

The country's troubles did not end there. Eastern Armenia officially came under Soviet rule in 1922 until its independence in 1991. And although this time was characterized by economic and infrastructure development, Armenia lost more lives to the Soviet Union's repressive tactics. In an effort to silence any form of nationalism, Stalin ordered the execution and deportation of tens of thousands of Armenian politicians, artists, intellectuals, scientists, and other affiliated persons during The Great Purge. Then in 1988, a 6.8 magnitude earthquake hit the northern region of Armenia killing some 50,000 people and leaving many more homeless. Roadways, railways, buildings and other structures

were severely damaged and poor disaster contingency planning rendered any relief effort ineffectual. Damages from the earthquake are still very apparent today. Following that, the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in 1991 ushered in an era of food and energy shortages and a broken health care system aggravated by corrupt politicians. The Nagorno-Karabakh War between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Artsakh, the de facto independent state within the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan but historically and culturally Armenian, exacerbated many issues during those years. Azeri's blocked an integral gas pipeline into Armenia, cutting off 90% of Armenia's natural gas supply and with no functioning thermal or nuclear power stations of their own, energy resources were limited. The tension between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Artsakh continues to linger with attacks on both sides. The last outbreak of which was the Four Day War in 2016 ending in a ceasefire on April 5th.

At the heart of all the devastation is a sense of honor for what has survived everything that has been lost. The Armenian civilization is thought to have coalesced in 4th century CE from various Indo-European inhabitants of the Caucasus Mountains, Anatolia and Mesopotamia. The ancient medical practices of these societies eventually came to form the infrastructure for medical traditions that would come later in Armenia. Psycho-spiritual practices and beliefs in divinatory medicine among pagan societies were extremely common. Interestingly, certain endemic species, like black cumin (Nigella sativa), white bryony (Bryonia alba), campion (Lychnis L.) and oriental sycamore (Platanus orientales), were worshipped by cults for their curative properties, evidencing an early sensibility for phytotherapy - the medical use of plants and plant extracts for medicinal purposes. The regional flora and their therapies were well-known to the scholars of antiquity, the likes of Dioscorides, Pliny the Elder, Tacitus and Xenophon, who wrote about many coveted healing plants and minerals in the Armenian highlands. In 301 AD, Armenia was the first country to adopt Christianity as its state religion and as pagan temples were destroyed, monasteries and churches with hospitals in close proximity were erected in their place. Today, there are over 4,000 churches in Armenia and 93% of the population belongs to the Armenian Apostolic Church.

The cultural Hellenization of Armenia began in the early Middle Ages, during a time when scholars were eagerly studying and translating Greco-Roman, Islamic and Vedic texts, with a particular affinity towards Galen in the early Middle Ages. Ancient scholars like Eznik Koghbatsi, Mkhitar Heratsi and Amirdovlat Amasiatsi were all luminaries of Armenian medicine in their time. The text, *Useless for the Ignorant* by Amasiatsi was considered to be the holy grail of Armenian medical knowledge. Many of the pharmacopeias and manuscripts have been lost to wars throughout the years, but what has survived is preserved today at The Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts, or better known as The Matenadaran. Located in the country's capital Yerevan, the research institute and museum houses medieval manuscripts on theology, philosophy, natural and medical sciences. Scholars such as Stella Vardanian and Armen Sahakian take on the task of translating these manuscripts into vernacular Armenian, Russian and English. Mr. Sahakian has unearthed some ancient, long-forgotten recipes and has altered them accordingly to create elixirs using native plants. Common ingredients include hawthorne, mountain thyme, ziziphora, mugwort, white bryony, elderberry, calamus root (Acorus calamus), cubeb or tailed

The Matenadaran

pepper (Piper Cubeba) and bilberry. The ingredients in these elixirs are sourced from mountainsides all over Armenia and are harvested in tune with the lunar calendar accompanied by prayers and rites per instructions from manuscripts.

Outside of plant therapies, ancient and modern Armenian scholars alike have a wealth of information regarding the use of other forms of therapeutic organic and inorganic matter. For example, mineral remedies occupy a large portion of Armenian healing traditions. The red earth clay Armenian bole was indicated as an anti-inflammatory and anti-allergenic, and the precious Armenian stone (Lapis armenus) was prescribed to persons who had recently undergone a traumatic experience. Fermented animal organs were used to shrink tumors and straighten broken bones. The Armenian cochineal or Vordan Karmir, a scale insect traditionally used as a crimson dyestuff, has a long history of medicinal applications as well. Scholars of antiquity point to its value as a febrifuge, antiseptic and contraceptive as well as its anti-aging properties. Today, Mr. Sahakian blends the essential oils from the cochineal into his elixirs and cosmetic products.

Scholars are not the only people participating in Armenia's heritage of plant knowledge. Every household contains an index of cotton pouches neatly labeled, in which various dried herbs are stored. Family matriarchs tend to be the stewards of these household staples, but ask most Armenians and they

will confidently explain its intended application. Naturally, there are overlaps. Oregano for stomach complaints, helichrysum for gallstones and bile-duct obstructions, Hawthorne for insomnia, plantain for throat complaints, St. John's Wort for melancholy, strawberry leaves as an analgesic, raspberry leaves as a diaphoretic, evening primrose as a relaxant, golden marguerite as an antispasmodic and mint for everything under the sun.

But the queen of them all is mountain thyme, or urtz, which grows so abundantly there that it even has a mountain named after it: urtz ler (Urtz Mountain). Closer to a mint variety than to the culinary sort found in grocery stores, urtz is used for a large spectrum of illnesses, from respiratory infections to digestive disorders and as a general immuno-modulator. But when you ask an Armenian what urtz is good for, they will boast of the herb's warming qualities. A peculiar feature of Armenian attitudes towards physical illness is that the root lies within body temperature. If one gets sick, it is, indubitably, because one felt too cold at some point within the past day. My impression of this mentality is that it is something of a vestige left by ancient Armenian traditions. Likely originating from Vedic texts, the concept of the four elements creating the material world and transfusing within the human body was of great interest to Armenian scholars. Eznik Koghbatsi, living in the 1st century AD, defined these elements within the body as hot, dry, cold and moist and optimal wellness was a harmonious balance of these states. Modern day Armenians have inherited quite a similar outlook on health.

The following twelve plants are commonly used medicine within the Armenian traditional healing lexicon. Note that common names of plants often vary in differing regions. More or less, common names included reflect the herbal language of Yerevan:

White Bryony
Bryonia alba

COMMON NAME: Loshtak, odzy khaghog (snake's grape)

The root of this plant is used traditionally in acute phases of illness. Though a toxic plant, white bryony has been employed in healing since, at least, pagan times, when it enjoyed the status of religious worship. In traditional Armenian medicine, loshtak is used seemingly for many human health conditions: fevers, viral infections, asthma, pleurisy, peritonitis, gastritis, migraines, rheumatism, neuralgia, hypertension, sciatica, radiation therapy and so many more. Clinical trials carried out on 57 athletes at the Center of Sport Medicine and Heath in Armenia demonstrated the efficacy of white bryony in increasing endurance and working capacity. These studies point to Loshtak's potential adaptogenic, immunomodulating and tonic properties (Panossian, Gabrielian, & Wagner, 1997).

Felty germander
Teucrium polium

COMMON NAMES: Maryamakhot

A popular choice for a relaxing herbal tea, maryamakhot is commonly sold by roadside vendors, selling regional teas, fruits and sweets. Medicinally, the plant is recommended as a remedy for acid reflux and high stomach acidity. Topically, a poultice of the flower heads is an emollient, anti-bacterial and anti-inflammatory. It is also indicated for certain gynecological health issues. Studies on maryamakhot are lacking; however, analysis of the terpenoids and flavonoids testify to the plant's therapeutic antioxidant, anticancer, antiinflammatory, hypoglycemic, hepatoprotective, hypolipidemic, antibacterial and antifungal properties (Bahramikia & Yazdanparast, 2011). Animal clinical trials have shown the potential benefit of maryamakhot in the management and prevention of menopause-related neurodegenerative memory loss (Simonyan & Chavushyan, 2016).

St. John's Wort
Hypericum perforatum

COMMON NAMES: Stohun, sasun, arevy kyurik (sister of the sun), muki aghik (mouse intestines)

Along with mint, thyme and oregano, St. John's Wort completes the holy quartet of household herbs in Armenia. Its mood-elevating properties are well-known and studies have indicated St. John's Wort collected in Armenia contain remarkably high levels of hyperforin, a metabolite responsible for the plant's anti-depressive properties (Kirakosyan, Gibson & Sirvent, 2004). It is indicated for constipation, irregular menstruation and as a heart tonic. The essential oil of the plant is used in the treatment for tinnitus, hearing loss, ear inflammation and also as a topical application for eczema and other skin irritations.

Armenian thyme
Thymus armeniacus

COMMON NAME: Urtz

The tea is drunk in the event of an illness or not, but in any case, it is a routine remedy in the treatment of colds, sinus and respiratory infections, fevers, coughs, insomnia, nausea, headaches, so on and so forth. In 2012, the lignan, sevanol, was identified in urtz, which demonstrated profound analgesic and anti-inflammatory properties (Dubinnyi, Osmakov, Koshelev, Kozlov, Andreev, Zakaryan & et al, 2012).

Everlasting flowers
Helichrysum armenium

COMMON NAME: Antaram

Sold simultaneously as ornamental flowers and herbal tea, Antaram is indicated for gallbladder and liver complications, particularly in cases of obstructed or weakened bile production. It is often used in the treatment of gallstones. Combined with honey, antaram can be used as a powerful vulnerary. Pharmacological studies on Helichrysum armenium are almost nonexistent, with a few exceptions of the plant's chemical compositions, its antimicrobial and antioxidant properties (Süzgeç-Selçuk & Birteksöz, 2011).

Linden Tree
Tilia cordata, Tilia L.

COMMON NAME: Loreni stradzev

The dried leaves and flowers of this tree are commonly used as a diuretic and anti-inflammatory for the urinary tract. Topically it is indicated for musculoskeletal conditions. A compress and/or poultice serves as an effective analgesic for rheumatism. The leaves are high in iron and recommended for persons suffering from anemia. Traditional use of the plant also points to its value as an effective diaphoretic. A tincture made from the leaves is a strong antibacterial. Clinical studies have supported the anxiolytic properties of the tree (Negri, Santi & Tabach, 2013), although the plant does not appear to be used for this purpose by the general population.

Cowslip
Primula veris

COMMON NAME: Gnarbuk, ginarp

This relative of Evening Primrose is expressly used for all categories of respiratory illness. It is prescribed as an expectorant, to settle a stubborn cough, and to clear the bronchial passages. Additionally, some vendors swear by its mood-enhancing powers. Cowslip is one ingredient of five in a proprietary formula indicated for sinusitis and bronchitis by The European Medicines Committee on Herbal Medicinal Products. Primula veris has not been well studied in humans; however, there may be some evidence that it may be an effective dose-dependent anticonvulsant (Başbülbül, Özmen, Biyik & Şen, 2008).

Horsetail
Equisetum arvense

COMMON NAME: Dzia hert

The dried grass is indicated for dissolving kidney and bladder stones. Horsetail contains silicic acid, making it particularly useful for connective tissue in the lungs and urinary tract. It is often found in formulas used to treat chronic and acute calculi. Horsetail's pharmacological actions have been well researched, including its antidiabetic, diuretic, antinociceptive, immunodulatory, (inducing, enhancing or suppressing an immune response), vulnerary, analgesic, sedative and anticonvulsant properties (Al-Snafi, 2017).

Burnet
Sanguisorba officinalis

COMMON NAMES: Aryunkhmik deghatu (Blood pharmacy)

Traditionally the root of burnet is used as a powerful astringent and emollient, both internally and externally. An effective styptic, a topical preparation of the root is excellent for wounds, insect bites, burns, rashes and other heat-related skin conditions. Internally, it is taken as an anti-diarrheal, to lower blood pressure, to regulate menstruation and as a uterine stimulant. There is limited literature on the therapeutic compounds of Sanguisorba officinalis, excluding those on its anti-inflammatory and anti-bacterial properties (Ginovyan, Petrosyan & Trchounian, 2017).

Sea buckthorn
Hippophae rhamnoides

COMMON NAME: Chetchkhani uhough

The sea buckthorn tree grows fairly rampantly throughout Armenia and is a commonly stocked item in grocery stores as processed food, such as juice, canned goods and marmalades. Meanwhile, its essential oil is available in every pharmacy, along with other staples like calendula and geranium oil. Topically, the oil is a popular choice for healing wounds, scars, eczema and psoriasis, and moisturizing dry skin. Internally, the oil is taken to soothe mucous membranes, with a particular affinity for the stomach and esophagus. It is useful for mouth sores and stomach ulcers. Sea buckthorn's therapeutic properties as cytoprotective, anti-stress, immunomodulatory, hepatoprotective, radioprotective, anti-atherogenic, anti-tumor, anti-microbial and tissue regenerator have been well-established within the ethnopharmacological community at large (Suryakumar & Gupta, 2011).

Hops
Humulus lupulus

COMMON NAME: Gayluk

Gayluk is an easy-to-source medicine, commonly sold at food bazaars as a dried tea. In Armenian folk practices, the hops plant is employed as an analgesic, diuretic and anti-diarrheal. A decoction made from the strobules is said to cure hair loss and dandruff. Today, Armenian doctors recommend hops for its estrogenic properties, using it to alleviate menopausal symptoms.

Ziziphora
Ziziphora clinopodioides

COMMON NAME: Urts'adaghdz nurp

A member of the Lamiaceae family, ziziphora grows on rocky slopes, sandy steppes and national forests. Similar to urtz in aroma, the essential oil of ziziphora has a well-deserved reputation as a potent anti-fungal (Mahboubi & Mahdizadeh, 2018) and antibacterial (Mohammadhosseini, 2017). It is also popular addition to soaps, lotions, and cosmetics for its pleasant scent and skin regenerating properties. Ziziphora shows great promise within the essential oil industry in Armenia; however, in traditional practice, an infusion is the preferred mode of application. The dried herb is taken as a cardio tonic, sedative, carminative and is indicated for morning sickness. Studies on ziziphora are lacking in regards to its pharmacological applications.

Armenian essential herbs are easy to source not only from indoor markets but also from outdoor vendors at mountainside monasteries, temples and ruins, of which there are innumerable in Armenia. The vendors tend to be older women who collect plants in and around historical sites. In more urban areas, a shuka, or an indoor food market, stocked with gourmet goods, like dried fruit and nuts, pickles, cheeses and meats will have all the herbal tea basics. And if you live in a village, chances are, you have access to land - either your garden, your neighbor's garden, or simply the vegetation of your natural environment. I often marveled at the familiarity and ease with which Armenians gather fruits, seeds, leaves and nuts from near-by greenery, whether it was acorns from oak trees that line the streets of Yerevan, fig leaves from someone else's property, or apricots from a grove of fruit trees in the forest. Armenians reciprocate the favor to the land by eating her fruits and spitting out the seeds every which way, thereby propagating more greenery.

Herbs are not the only source of natural healing, however. Pomegranates, a symbol tightly

Hills of Armenia

enmeshed with Armenian culture and history, can be used as an effective oral and gastrointestinal antibiotic and analgesic. Just dry the rinds and steep in boiling water. Homemade vodka distilled from Armenian fruits, like hon (cornelian cherry), tut (mulberry) and tziran (apricot) can be used as an internal cleanse-all. Stories of spry centenarians taking a daily shot of oghi at the crack of dawn, are commonplace and it is not unusual for a medical professional to recommend drinking vodka to detoxify the body. For diarrhea, drinking mineral water mixed with matsun, an Armenian yogurt rich in microflora, will do the trick. And I would be remiss not to mention aveluk. This native wild sorrel is a staple of traditional Armenian cuisine. Aveluk is harvested during the spring, braided and thoroughly dried to be cooked into stews, soups and salads. The taste of the dried herb is quite unique, marked by a bitter earthiness, similar to steamed dandelion greens but more redolent of a mossy forest floor. The astringency of its taste marks its medicinal applications. Steeping the braids in boiling water for two days and preparing a poultice acts as an effective vulnerary. The tea of the same preparation can be used to tighten a loose stomach.

There is no question healthcare in the U.S. needs a facelift. Simple things like getting a regular check-up or buying antibiotics can be insurmountable for those without health insurance. The whole operation is built to be costly, bureaucratic and often times, demoralizing for people within a certain social stratum. So much to my delight, I discovered in Armenia a system much more supportive and easy to navigate than I had imagined. Of course, there are problems. Soviet healthcare offered a free, comprehensive program and after its collapse, coupled with socioeconomic and political strains on the country, the system became inefficient, outdated and underfunded. And although healthcare reforms are on the rise, out-of-pocket payments are the main source of funding for healthcare, limiting access to low-income households in a society already deeply wounded by its rigid social stratifications. And so while I delighted at the ease with which I could obtain medications for an upset stomach or a bladder infection, medical care for more serious health complications, diseases like diabetes, kidney failure, cancer, HIV/AIDS, STIs, drug addictions and so on, are far more troublesome for many.

In Armenia, the first point of contact when one gets sick, after, of course, one has exhausted all forms of self-treatment with teas, preserves, honey and vodka, is the pharmacist. It was unclear to me whether this order to operation is out of financial necessity or just a common sense strategy. Why go to the doctor when the pharmacist can answer all your questions, recommend and sell you medicine all within ten minutes? Certain medicines like narcotics cannot be sold without an official prescription. But let's say you were having trouble sleeping, a pharmacist might recommend a pharmaceutical-grade standardized extract of passionflower, valerian and hops or a tablet made from Hawthorne flowers, poppies and magnesium oxide. Essential oils and teas are also part of a pharmacist's reservoir of treatments. And if you would prefer, you can request a plant-based treatment option as oppose to a synthesized one.

It is, perhaps, not a surprise that some larger Armenian pharmaceutical companies are manufacturing plant-based pharmaceuticals and dietary supplements. With 3,000 years of medicinal arts under its belt and a rich landscape that bears the life of therapeutic plants, Armenia is very proud of her resources. Preserving and applying its rich medicinal traditions, knowing off the cuff about growing, gathering and preparing herbal medicines -- these are forms of cultural knowledge that keep Armenia connected and grounded to her past, to her ancestors and to her earth.

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Naneh Israelyan is an artist, herbalist and researcher living in New York City. She received her BA in Sculpture from Bennington College and her postgrad education in the field of Plant Sciences from the New York Botanical Garden and Brooklyn Botanic Garden. With a work background in ethnobotanical research and horticulture, she cultivates a fruitful medicinal garden on her fire escape and uses her harvest to craft medicinal teas and tinctures. Her passion in herbal medicine lies in empowering individuals to regain autonomy over their own health by educating and counseling them through the benefits of plant therapies. Her written work explores the social and ethical implications of practicing and distributing plant medicines to the public. You can find her writings on her herbal medicine blog and store Pioneerflora.com.

Born in Armenia, Naneh is currently involved in a research project of collecting and documenting the use of plant medicines from her native country. This research, she hopes, will lay the foundation for introducing Armenian traditional medicines to the global community.