

Traditional Hellenic Medicine in Siatista, Greece

By Rachel Thomas

Abstract:

This preliminary study explores the role of traditional medicine in the mountain village of Siatista, Kozani. In a context of diminishing cultural sustainability, we are working with these guiding questions: Which members of the village are preserving folk medicine? Which practices are most likely to be passed on to future generations? Which educational mechanisms are available? What are the potential public health applications of sustaining Traditional Hellenic Medicine?

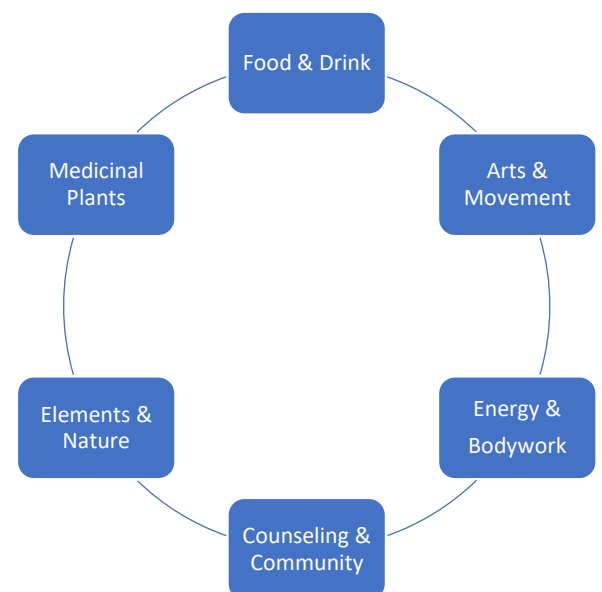
Introduction:

Folk medicine has always been an important survival mechanism in rural Greece and it still continues to contribute to the wellness of the population. This branch of Traditional Hellenic Medicine is practiced in the home. Only in extreme situations will the help of a midwife, herbalist or other specialist be needed. Elder family members have been responsible for passing wellness tools on to the next generations. These may include preventative or therapeutic practices, most of which rely on locally available resources. Using a holistic model, this study has identified a variety of components of Traditional Hellenic Medicine in the case study of the village of Siatista.

The factors which influence the survival of folk medicine practices include access to allopathic doctors, changing belief systems and a lack of local employment leading to the migration of younger people to urban areas. Cultural practices relating to cooking, dancing and religion appear to be more prevalent than herbalism, element therapies and divination counseling. Educational opportunities within the village include informal sharing between community members, traditional music and dance classes and a botanical museum. There does not appear to be a wellness center, traditional medicine school or botanical shop. At least one shop in the village, as well as a few ambulant vendors, make herbal medicines available to those who know what to ask for.

Methodology:

The author has developed a research method to analyze traditional medicine systems. This holistic and inclusive modality allows the inclusion of all cultural practices which influence wellness, diagnosis, prevention and treatment of physical and mental illness. The



model is represented in a circle form because of the crossovers between categories.

This preliminary study of Siatista as a case study for the rural experience of Traditional Hellenic Medicine included informal conversations, personal accounts, and observation over several visits. The objective was the creation of an outline for a formal and comprehensive study.

Preliminary Findings (this list is not exhaustive):

1. Medicinal Plants

- a. Common Teas – plants such as Mountain Tea, Mint, and Chamomile are available in home gardens, nearby fields and supermarkets, with the basic knowledge of sedative, digestive, immune-supportive and health-promoting properties
- b. Common Spices – plants such as Oregano, Bay Leaf, Thyme, Cinnamon, and Garlic are available in home gardens, nearby fields and supermarkets. Usage may be based on flavor more than knowledge of digestive, immune-supportive and health-promoting properties
- c. Specialized Medicines – plants which are used for specific health issues, whose properties and dosages must be recommend by an expert, books or online sources. They may be available locally as other plants or purchased in a specialty shop as a tea, extract, syrup or unguent.
- d. St. John's Wort Infused Oil (σπαθολαδο) – flowers are harvested in early to mid-summer and placed in olive oil or a blend of oils, placed in the sun for a week or two, strained and bottled for internal and external use. The production of this oil appears to be limited to the elderly, and the use of the oil may also be decreasing in younger people.

2. Food & Drink

- a. Prevention – foods which are considered to improve health such as wild greens (χόρτα), salad, garlic spread (σκορδαλιά) and olive oil
- b. Therapeutic – foods with a strong medicinal action may be used, with or without knowledge of therapeutic potential. This includes seaweeds, mushrooms, okra, purslane, beets, bone broth, spoon sweets (του κουταλιού) etc.
- c. Alcoholic – usage of wine and other spirits as medicine may be more historical and anecdotal, including for their sedative, digestive, immune-supportive and health-promoting properties
- d. Honey – the medicinal use of honey still exists and honey is produced locally

3. Arts & Movement

- a. Music – traditional music is taught at the local music school and can be found at festivals and social events
- b. Circle Dance – participation in traditional dancing, which builds community, decreases feelings of isolation and provides considerable cardiac exercise

- c. Walks – the cultural tradition of going for walks appears to exist as an important health tool, especially for the elderly of the village
 - d. Herding & Harvesting – changes in agricultural and food acquisition practices have resulted in a decrease in movement and exposure to nature
4. Elements & Nature
- a. Gardens – home gardens are prevalent and contribute to eco-psychological health as well as increasing accessibility to medicinal plants
 - b. “Forest Bathing” – outings to the nearby forests promote mental and physical health
 - c. Prevention – behaviors to promote harmony with the natural elements, especially wind (πεύμα), may be decreasing in younger generations.
 - d. Cupping (βεντούζα) – this practice of lymphatic cleansing through element manipulation appears to be rapidly decreasing in practice
5. Energy & Bodywork
- a. Belly Rub – used with or without alcohol for digestive upset
 - b. Ancestor Honoring Rituals – grief is processed through prayer, grave tending & visiting the bones of lost loved ones
6. Community & Counseling
- a. Church Festivals – regular events throughout the year provide opportunities for community building and the sharing of cultural practices
 - b. Coffee Adivination (καφεμαντεία)

Conclusion:

This preliminary study of Traditional Hellenic Medicine folk practices in rural Greece demonstrates a need for further study and cultural conservation programs. It is crucial to ascertain which ancestral traditions are contributing to the health of Greek people and encourage their survival actively.

Folk technologies and cultural activities may be more prevalent in rural versus urban areas, however the ancestral medicine of Greece survives in some form or another in all Hellenic people. The following guidelines can be used in villages, cities or diaspora communities:

1. Identify existing wellness tools and folk medicine practices
2. Promote scientific and academic research partnerships
3. Create opportunities for inter-generational wisdom sharing
4. Formalize cultural conservation and educational programs
5. Create opportunities to integrate traditional practices into allopathic medicine

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