

# Traditional Healing Practices in Fiji

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Traditional Healing Practices in Fiji means the therapies using ceremonies; plant-, animal-, or mineral-based medicines; energy therapies (also called biofield therapies). They are based on the belief that there are energy fields that flow through and around your body. When energy is flowing freely through your body, you have good emotional, physical and spiritual health. When you are ill, the energy flow is blocked

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## 1. Introduction

According to the First Nations Health Authority <sup>[1]</sup> and Shah <sup>[2]</sup>, traditional healing practices (THPs) include the practice of seeking cure for ailments from traditional healers as an integral part of Fijian traditional society. THPs also include health practices, approaches, knowledge, and beliefs incorporating indigenous or Aboriginal healing and wellness while using ceremonies; plant-, animal-, or mineral-based medicines; energy therapies (Energy therapies are also called biofield therapies. They are based on the belief that there are energy fields that flow through and around your body. When energy is flowing freely through your body, you have good emotional, physical and spiritual health. When you are ill, the energy flow is blocked Canadian Cancer Society <sup>[3]</sup>. The same author(s) describe the most common types of energy therapy are: Reiki has the most spiritual focus of all of the energy therapies. Reiki practitioners believe that channelling spiritual energy through their hands can help in healing. Therapeutic touch practitioners move their hands just above the body to find the blockages, remove the harmful energy and replace it with their own healthy energy.); and physical/hands-on techniques (p. 1).

In contrast, Western medicine typically uses conventional therapies to help prevent and treat diseases. These include lifestyle changes, counselling, medication, physical therapy, and surgery. Complementary medicine uses different methods to promote health (Expert Home Care <sup>[4]</sup>). This study proposed the development of a comprehensive community-based healing framework (categories of practice) from an indigenous *iTaukei* perspective of the community. The underlying issue is that *iTaukei* people (as with many other indigenous people in the world), especially those who live in villages (or rural areas), view their world distinctively; they have a different way of life, different ways of knowing their surroundings, and unique ways of interacting with nature. These relationships should be understood within the structure of the local health authority system and by social work service providers before any intervention and therapeutic approaches to healing can be planned and implemented.

Fiji Islands has historically been subjected to monumental change. In more recent times, however, this change has been occurring at an unprecedented rate due to the impacts of modernism, technology, urban expansion, needs for improving education and employment opportunities, industrialization, and social and political turmoil. More importantly, the *iTaukei* people of the community are faced with progressive, spiritual, and ecological acculturation amidst the ever-present impacts of climate change and the occurrence of natural disasters. The *iTaukei* landscapes of tradition are being affected in both positive and negative ways because of a number of exogenous and endogenous factors (social and cultural pressures to “modernize”, climate change and natural disasters (Cyclone Winston, 20 February 2016, as one of the most destructive Category 5 cyclones to ever hit Fiji in recent times), urbanization, loss of traditional ecological knowledge, migration of younger people to cities). One of the main challenges is the increase in population and the higher pressure in all of its political, social, economic, cultural, and specifically health structures, which are essentially interwoven with the determinant of health among Fijians. What is not clear (yet) is how these changes will affect the *iTaukei* people over time. What is clear are the currently increasing demands for Western healthcare services and their associated costs. The question is, how can traditional healing practices (THPs) in contemporary Fiji minimize these demands and related adversities?

Giving respectful space to THPs advocates for the survival of ancestral knowledge and traditions and values *iTaukei* traditional treatments. Orcherton <sup>[5]</sup> emphasizes that THPs have always been used by Upper

Ba *iTaukei* villagers, not only because they are less expensive for villagers, but also because these practices are effective, efficacious, and, according to the *iTaukei* people, proven to work over time. In addition, Tomlinson [6] describes how “sacred soil” becomes both an intelligible and palpable reality and should be considered a creative force of friction between *Lotu* and *Vanua* in indigenous Fijian social life and traditional healing practices, generally. THPs in Fiji are necessary, first, to alleviate the burden of health demands especially in remote villages, and second, to offer adequate and effective mental and spiritual healing. THPs are holistic and all-encompassing and require specialized ways of knowing (much like a modern physician or “doctor” in the Western or European sense)

## **2. Understanding Traditional Healing Practices and the Categories of Practices from Fijian *iTaukei*’s Perspectives**

The findings presented bring valuable information regarding the use of medical systems in *iTaukei* villages. The use of the medical systems depends on how the *iTaukei* perceive the causes of various illnesses.

The results of the study concur with those found by author (2010), citing author (and subreferenced in author, 2001). In this study, author found that the Hispanic attribution of illness is believed to be caused by imbalance in the body (this imbalance refers to the disease of hot and cold) of the affected person. These imbalances are experienced through physical malfunction of organs in the body similar to what is described by the *iTaukei* people in the villages; illness happens when the body does not function well and when there are imbalances of heat and cold in the body system. There is also mention of illnesses caused by supernatural agents and diseases caused by envy or illness with emotional origins. Regarding cultural–spiritual illnesses, however, the healing methods are only negotiated within the *iTaukei* people in the villages. Cultural practices need a traditional space for their cultural continuity and survival, and it is within this unique context of customary beliefs and practices that *iTaukei* healing elements reside. Authors (2016) emphasize the role of culture as health and illness are “culturally conditioned” (p. 86). For partners, people’s illness means disharmony and imbalance of the “living body with its surrounding” (p. 86), and they see that the “landscape is animated, as having soul” (p. 86). Authors (2004, reported in author, 2010) found that Vietnamese–American children and adults’ illnesses were attributed to biological and supernatural agents. Authors (1994) reported how individuals from culturally diverse groups related the causation of their illness to upsetting emotions (envy and jealousy). This is similar to the *iTaukei*’s responses that some illnesses are caused by wrong food choices and other illnesses have supernatural connotations (*mate ni Vanua*, witchcraft, and curse) attributed in general to breaking ancestral *iTaukei* protocols that “only the *iTaukei* knows”. Author (2008) explains how the Māori (indigenous peoples of New Zealand) are affected by “high rates in diabetes, respiratory infections, chronic heart disease, poverty, oppression, housing, eco-health, environmental health” (para. 9), and their healing (just as author pointed out) is embedded in their language, values, customs, and surrounding environment. This essentially highlights the importance of their TEK and the recognition of indigenous health and healing in integrated measures towards self-governance.

In response to RQ1, the study concludes that Western and traditional medical systems need to be complementary, amalgamating/integrating the efforts of healthcare authorities, primary healthcare workers (including CHWs), and healers/elders in rural Fijian settings. This brings to light the importance of considering the *iTaukei*’s perceptions and the need for more culturally safe assessments, interventions, and therapeutic approaches towards healing, especially in villages. The categories of practices are an outcome of how health perceptions play an important role in the lives of the *iTaukei*.

Partners were/are placed between two worlds: traditionalism and modernism. Unfortunately, the local health authority has not provided partners with a cultural safe space to negotiate these two realities: tradition and modernity. This results in the progressive disempowerment of community-based resilience and disengagement of the *iTaukei* people. This also coincidentally results in gradual sociocultural erosion and the loss of identity, along with traditional ways of knowing and healing practices. In many cases, modern Western science mission statements, visions, policies, and procedures take priority and are acknowledged and officially recognized and enforced.

These comparisons underscore the importance of the *iTaukei* belief systems that are necessary to be understood in order to support awareness of how to culturally proceed in villages. In addition, understanding and being empathetic towards how the *iTaukei* perceive and define health and illness is meaningful, in order to support them in addressing their health challenges/barriers. These personal health-driven perceptions were/are intertwined with villagers’ decision on *what (to do)*, *why (for what reason)*, and *how (to do it)*. There is a real need for more culturally safe assessments, interventions, and therapeutic approaches when helping *iTaukei* (especially those living in villages). Therefore, all these procedures should be responsibly planned, taking into consideration the *iTaukei* customs and traditions.

Raising awareness of how healthcare professionals have to proceed is done basically by respecting and taking into consideration villagers' values and beliefs, practices, and knowledge without condemning, ostracizing, or judging them. The local health authority pressures villagers to seek medical help from health centers or nursing stations in villages. This call, however, does not take into consideration the fact that there are prominent geographical barriers, such as location and lack of transportation, which are some of the major impediments of outreach programs in villages. Villages (for example) that are found quite a distance or are isolated from all the other villages have a different approach to healing.

### 3. Conclusions

Traditional and Western medical systems must be complementary and integrate the efforts of health authorities, primary care providers, and healers in rural Fiji settings. Categories of practices were developed in response to how health perceptions have contributed to the lives of the *iTaukei*, and THPs' survival is dependent on the way the *iTaukei* view their culture and beliefs in contemporary times. As part of their ancestral knowledge, THPs are also associated with ancestral lineages, coming from families of traditional Fijian healers. Such healers are well known for having healing gifts and wisdom (*yalomatua*), which are a direct result of their ancestral spiritual knowledge. Likewise, the study concludes that there is a positive correlation between the importance and longevity of traditional health practitioners in the Upper Ba villages of *iTaukei*, and that different choices between Western and traditional medicine influence the longevity of THPs in these villages. In Fijian Upper Ba communities, family members are getting together to talk and decide what to do for their health; because of this, the traditional patriarchal roles within villages are changing. In essence, families in these communities are taking an active role in their healthcare decisions.

From a broader perspective, these new social patterns influence how individuals access health services and the decisions they must make in all other areas of their lives. This, in turn, affects their ability to maintain their health and well-being.

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