



ITM INDIGENOUS TERRITORIAL MANAGEMENT

▶ **T A C A N A INDIGENOUS PEOPLE**

▶ **L E C O INDIGENOUS PEOPLE**

TRADITIONAL MEDICINE OF AMAZON INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

**SOCIOCULTURAL
VALUE**

Health care and cultural traditions

Amazonian indigenous people have specialized knowledge of a variety of medicinal plants. They use leaves, roots, barks, flowers, seeds, resins, and oils – and combinations of these parts – to prepare infusions, syrups, plasters and powders that they use to heal different physical ailments. Throughout their history, they've had plant specialists and healers (called "tata hanana" by the Tacana and "mitami" by the Leco). For these peoples, health and healing were closely linked to the spiritual world and their connection with nature. The Tacana believed in spirits call "edutzis," charged with ensuring the health of their people.

Although many of these traditions have lost strength over time, the Tacana and Leco have maintained ancestral knowledge linked to traditional medicine and integrated that knowledge into the cultural activity of their communities. Healing rituals are still practiced by the tata hanana, who possess a special power transmitted by the spirits. The Tacana and Leco communities use between 80 and 150 species of plants for medicinal purposes, including uña de gato, sangre de grado (*Croton* cf. *lechleri*), motacú (*Attalea princeps*) and copaibo (*Copaifera* sp.). Amazon indigenous peoples know the medicinal properties of plants (and some animals), attend childbirth, treat children, and have experience in identifying common diseases.

Traditional medicine continues to be an alternative to Western medicine and facilitates greater access to medical care, especially in places where health centers are scarce. Its practice incorporates elements of the natural environment while strengthening a community's cultural identity and its connection with the territory.

It is important to mention that indigenous peoples developed knowledge about the healing properties of plants that are used in the treatment of parasitic diseases, such as evanta for leishmaniasis and quina quina for malaria. The curative capacity of quina quina derives from its tree bark, when extracted. The bark is highly appreciated for containing alkaloids that, in addition to their antimalarial qualities, contain antioxidants that prevent cell degeneration, promote digestive cleansing, and act as an antibiotic that strengthens the immune system. The evanta is a plant that contains alkaloids in its leaves, roots, and barks, that is an effective treatment of leishmaniasis (ulcers on the skin and mucous membranes produced by a parasite that is transmitted by sand flies). Indigenous communities use it as a poultice for ulcers and drink infusions from barks until the wound closes.

The richness of the traditional medicine of the Tacana people

The Tacana's cultural health system requires regular maintenance. The wealth of ethnobotanical knowledge includes the collection of 150 species of plants and the preparation of natural medicines for different physical ailments (eliminating intestinal worms, treating diarrhea and ulcers, stopping hemorrhages, treating wounds and viper stings, among others). It requires great experience about the forms, combinations, cooking times, and administrations of these natural health remedies. This knowledge is transmitted across the generations in each family. While adults prepare the medicines, children begin learning by helping to collect plants.

The household gardens and backyards are privileged spaces from which plants are obtained for the preparation of the medicines. The Tacana communities use the forest for harvesting resins, leaves, barks, roots, fruits, and seeds of different trees, palms, vines and herbs for medicinal purposes, as well as for food.

Tacana traditional medicine also considers other types of spiritual ailments that are only attended by healers, or tata hanana, considered to be good beings. Through special rituals, these healers free their patients from "bewitchings" and help improve interpersonal relationships.

The strengthening of Tacana traditional medicine through the revaluation of knowledge and the dissemination of practices related to the use of medicinal plants is an objective of the territorial management plan. The management of Tacana gardens is fundamental to conserve plant diversity for medicinal purposes.

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Benefits of traditional medicine for the health of the Leco of Apolo people

In the Leco of Apolo people, traditional medicine has an ancestral use transmitted and preserved by elders and women for future generations. Approximately 80 species of plants are used for medicinal purposes. Among the most important are quina quina, guava (*Myrciaria cauliflora*) and copaibo. The use of medicinal plants varies between communities. For example, you will find uña de gato and motacú in Irimo; cresta de gallo and wira wira (*Achyrocline satureioides*) in Ilipana Yuyo; and sangre de grado and copaibo oil in Sarayoj.

The study on the use, diversity and importance of the traditional medicine of the Leco indigenous people, was identified as a need by the Life Plan of the Leco Apolo People (2010), within the health component. One of its objectives is to rescue and highlight traditional knowledge as a means to strengthen territorial management and help preserve intangible heritage. The study provided information on communities' knowledge of the benefits of plants to cure some ailments and the places where

they are found such as their gardens, fields, and of course the forest. This made it possible to collect more than 50 homemade recipes for various common ailments such as diarrhea, colds, fevers, infections, wounds, dislocations, and viper stings – along with other more serious diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis.

Community suggestions for preserving this ancestral knowledge and promoting its use include the creation of local health centers where home remedies can be developed and school gardens where medicinal plants can be grown. In addition, communities mentioned the need to recognize traditional doctors.

Within the framework of spatial planning, protection zones are increasingly drawing on the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples of where medicinal plant species are found as part of the management of their territory.

Guiomar Mesa/WCS



MEDICINAL PLANTS

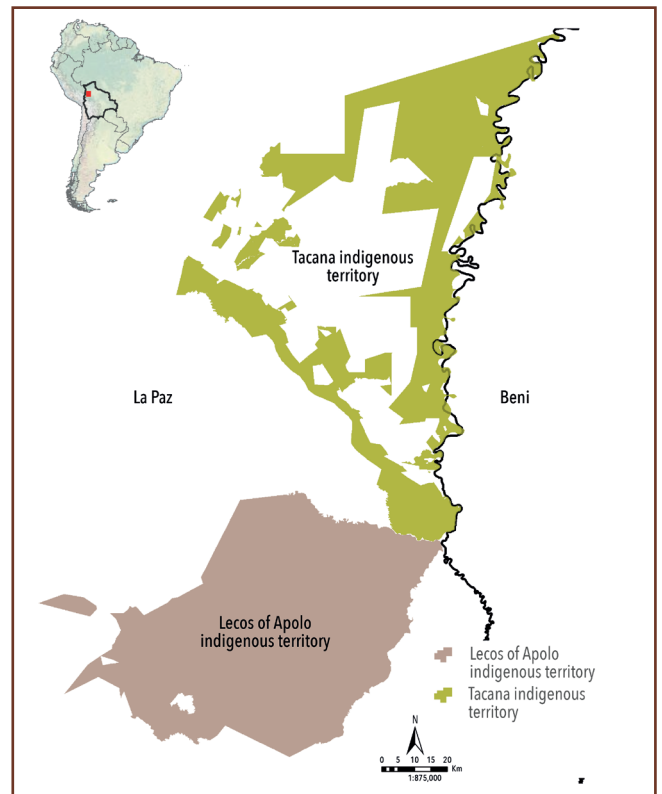
TRADITIONAL MEDICINE AS PRACTICED BY THE TACANA AND LECO OF APOLO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES MAINTAINS HEALTH IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

Traditional medicine is part of the cultural legacy of the Tacana and Leco indigenous peoples. It integrates knowledge about the healing qualities of plants and their link with the protective spirits of health. This knowledge has been transmitted through the generations. The natural diversity of their territories facilitates access to a variety of plants with important medicinal properties. The use of medicinal plants is widespread and several of these plants have achieved recognition in modern pharmaceutical practices, such as quina quina (*Cinchona calisaya*), uña de gato (*Uncaria tomentosa* and *U. guianensis*) or evanta (*Angostura longiflora*). Thus, forest conservation and the valuation of indigenous knowledge helps guarantee human health care.

Importance of traditional medicine for Indigenous Peoples

- Draws upon a diversity of plants (about 150 species) to treat different ailments
- Preserves ancestral knowledge about the use of plants to cure diseases – an important cultural heritage
- Provides critical medicinal alternative when most of communities do not have health centers
- Highlights importance of indigenous territories as home to plants like quina quina, uña de gato, or evanta, which are used for the preparation of medicines of worldwide importance
- Contributes to the strengthening of cultural identity and territorial management through the integral use of the forest based on its conservation
- Underscores key role of gardens, where a variety of plants are cultivated for medicinal purposes.

The Tacana and Leco of Apolo indigenous peoples in northern La Paz



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