
”My customers put trust in me”: Gender roles, traditional medicine, and healing processes in Indonesia

Szuter Carolyn*^{†1} and Torri Maria Costanza*

¹University of New Brunswick (UNB) – Canada

Résumé

Jamu, a Javanese traditional medicinal drink consisting of local plant ingredients, is produced and consumed by local people to treat a variety of diseases (including diabetes, cold, and stomach ache), including women’s reproductive health. Jamu is mainly prepared and sold by local women, called jamu sellers (jamu gendong), and it is widely consumed both in the rural and urban areas of Java.

This presentation is based on an ethnographic study conducted in the city of Yogyakarta, Indonesia, with a group of 92 jamu sellers. The presentation analyzes how jamu sellers perceive their role in the healing process of customers. Data shows that according to jamu sellers, the healing process depends on the active ingredients of the drink itself and the capacity of the jamu seller to select and mix them. Moreover, interviews emphasized how the reputation of the jamu seller plays a central role in determining the perceived efficacy of jamu by the customers. In order to establish a good reputation, jamu sellers recognize that they must appear physically healthy, and beautiful, and behave in a certain way. Good physical health and beauty is attributed to a good jamu recipe – those producers who appear healthy must be doing something right with their jamu! In terms of behaviour, culturally, jamu sellers are expected to be kind and generous and provide jamu to anyone who needs it, regardless of the financial compensation they receive; many sellers report the sentiment that ”only God can decide each person’s fortune” and that they need to be generous and compassionate with the customers.

By adopting a feminist outlook, this presentation aims to explore how the concept of efficacy of traditional medicine is socially constructed and inscribed into the existing gender roles of Javanese society, which places particular importance on specific physical and behavioural traits of women.

*Intervenant

[†]Auteur correspondant: carolynrund@gmail.com