



Guide to Working with Traditional Healers

Learning from Traditional Healers

The spiritual and medicinal healing arts of the traditional societies in Kenya are an ancient cultural mixture that has adapted to societal and environmental changes, as well as centuries of interactions with other cultures. Traditional healing provides remedies for illness such as fever, diarrhea, toothaches, sore throats, sinus problems, intestinal worms, respiratory problems, earaches, skin conditions, menstrual problems, infertility, broken bones, wounds, burns, etc.

Treatments usually involve a mixture of ritual and herbal remedies using locally available ingredients such as tree bark, sap, leaves, roots, plant stems, flowers, minerals, and various animal products. These healing practices not only provide remedies for common ailments but also demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the environment and concern for the conservation and sustainable use of medicinal plants.

Traditional healing is still a functioning healthcare system in many areas due to the high cost of Western medicine coupled with the distance to biomedical healthcare facilities. However, as Africa moves toward the stream of global modernization, the art of traditional healing suffers from the global emphasis on Western culture and the disinterest of younger generations in traditional knowledge and practices. The great store of indigenous knowledge held by traditional healers is in danger of extinction with this current generation.

Throughout history, traditional healers were highly respected community experts and leaders. Their techniques have evolved over centuries of trial and error, and have been refined through generations of family apprenticeship. Unfortunately, the traditional practices are no longer being passed down through society and a whole volume of cultural heritage is in danger of being lost forever. This chance to study and document the cultural and traditional knowledge of these last experts is an irretrievable opportunity to preserve the knowledge and experience of a culture struggling to preserve its healing traditions.

As the success of nutraceutical and botanical medicine companies grow, their acknowledgement of and responsibility toward the contributions of thousands of years of traditional medicine has become even more apparent. Locally grown herbs have stood the test of time and have proven their contemporary usefulness beyond the village. We are beginning to see the importance of documenting the healers who have been doing trials from the beginning, and who have amassed invaluable research throughout their culture's history. The loss of centuries of research of botanical remedies is immeasurable. Agricultural communities, given the opportunity to share their knowledge, may perhaps grow these medicines as a crop that leads them out of economic depression and opportunities for international humanitarianism and a platform for botanical research in the field may be created.

Traditional Healer Documentation Project

This research will be compiled and used as the basis for ensuring the survival and transmission of vanishing indigenous knowledge. The resulting information gathered will be utilized to increase sustainability through economic development based on indigenous medicines from the region. Anyone who benefits from marketing, distributing or selling medicinal plants will be required to work in conjunction with Village Volunteers to avoid over-harvesting, exploitation of cultural knowledge, and to insure equitable profit sharing with the village communities.

Outcomes

- Documentation of supplements, botanical medicine and homeopathy utilized with HIV+ children
- Provide a guide to traditional medicine for the region
- Document case reports from traditional healers
- Opportunity to develop products that provides ongoing agricultural economic sustainability

Ethnographic Fieldwork

In order to properly conduct ethnographic fieldwork as well as providing information on qualitative as opposed to quantitative analysis, it would be important to delve deeper by contacting medical anthropologists, consulting with professors and researching in libraries at universities to gain a more thorough understanding of the correct way to gather and record information.

Volunteers traveling to work in Kenya will sit with the traditional healers and audio tape their conversations about herbs. Make sure that there is an interpreter available. The volunteer will photograph and take herb clippings for accurate identification. After herb samples are placed in small Ziploc bags, they can be taken to the museum in Nairobi to identify plants using Swahili, Luo, English, and Latin names. Prior research can be reviewed and compared to current clinical use including documented dosages and indication/preparations.

About the Author: Brian P. Mangum, MS

Brian P. Mangum is Village Volunteers' medical anthropologist and can assist you directly at bucherwurm@ureach.com

After receiving his MS in Medical Anthropology from Idaho State University, Brian became an adjunct faculty member in the Department of Anthropology, where he focused his teaching and research on international healthcare and sustainable development.

During this time, Brian developed a post-baccalaureate certificate program in medical anthropology that includes a significant international healthcare experience in the Caribbean Basin, where Brian currently resides as the core international faculty for this program, while also conducting fieldwork for his joint MPH/PhD in Public Health Epidemiology. In addition to this, Brian is also pursuing his MD from the Medical University of the Americas, with plans to pursue post-graduate training in family and preventive medicine. Using his varied background in medical anthropology, public health, and medicine, Brian hopes to develop integrated healthcare systems in the developing world, and currently works with Village Volunteers as an ethnography consultant to preserve and record the cultures of Village Volunteers Consortium members. Some of the projects include documenting the lives of parents who are HIV+, working with traditional healers, and helping to capture language that is being lost. Brian is married to Tami Mangum, who is also pursuing her PhD in Public Health, and has two young boys.

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