

African herbs and healers

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In this article the author describes some characteristics of African traditional health systems, and some aspects of their link with Western health care.

Many Africans believe that life forces are manifest in everything. This spirit or power is the essence of every living creature, natural event or inanimate object. These life forces all have their own personalities and cosmic place. Therefore, the preservation or restoration of health is impossible without them.

Traditionally, Africans use herbal and animal products as medicines, intoxicants and poisons in their struggle for survival and in their quests for religious experiences. A healer's power is not determined by the number of medicinal plants he or she knows, but by the ability to apply an understanding of the intricate relation between the patient and the world around him or her. Unlike a doctor trained in Western biomedicine, the traditional African healer looks for the cause of the patient's misfortune in the relation between the patient and his social, natural and spiritual environment.

Diviners and healers

Divination and healing are often practised by the same person, who has the power to deal with the spiritual realm. It is not surprising then that diviners are generally listed as the most important traditional African healers. They look for disturbing events in the past, which can cause misfortune if left untreated.

Many healers are specialised in one or more biomedical aspects, such as herbalism, midwifery or surgery. There has been a tendency in Western medical journals to play down such expertise by focusing on the risks of traditional African medicines. Though there is a genuine cause for concern, it is unfair to pass judgement on African healing simply on the basis of its worst results.

Herbalism

Common ailments, such as headaches or coughs, are considered to be diseases with natural causes. Their symptoms are treated at the household level, without resorting to magical practices. For other illnesses, or when a common ailment persists, recourse is sought to divination in combination with herbalism.

African herbal medicines are applied to every part of the body in every con-

ceivable way. There are oral forms, enemas, fumes to be inhaled, vaginal preparations, fluids administered into the urinal tract, preparations for the skin, and various lotions and drops for the eye, ear and nose.

Links with Western medicine

Traditional healers are the principal professionals in health care services for the large majority of Africans, particularly in the rural areas. Surveys have consistently shown that most traditional healers are willing to learn more about Western medicine and to co-operate to some extent with their biomedical counterparts. They presume that this may increase their prestige, recognition and income.

With the exception of traditional birth attendants, however, well-functioning programmes of collaboration between western and traditional health systems have been relatively scarce in Africa. No pilot project has ever reached the stage, where it could be implemented at the level of a national health system. One of the reasons appears to be opposition from the biomedical establishment.

Moreover traditional healers often do not want to be incorporated into the Western oriented primary health care system as community health workers. They fear that this would look as if they accepted the superiority of Western medicine, alienating themselves from their traditional roots. Their clients might feel that the healer has lost control over the total healing process.

Since different paradigms of health and illness stand in the way of real amalgamation, Western biomedicine and African traditional medicine may remain apart as two parallel systems.

Chemical and herbal medicines

More than half of the Western drugs currently available are either directly or indirectly based on natural substances. In African societies herbal medicines are even

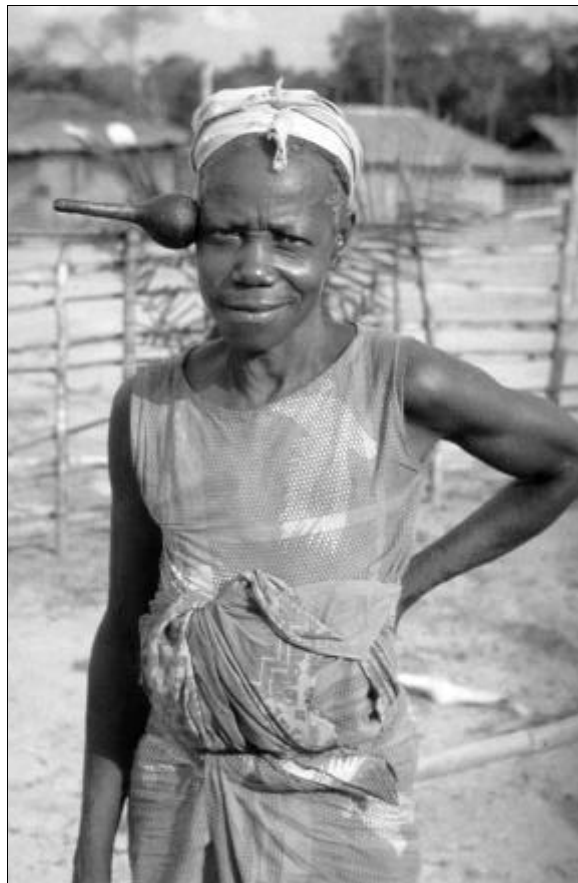


Photo: P. de Smet

more important, an essential part of traditional healing. Moreover, herbs can also play a significant role in the Western medicine practised in Africa. Herbal medicines are readily accepted and widely used, and are much cheaper than Western synthetic pharmaceuticals.

Intellectual property rights

Ethnopharmacology is a form of Western science that can bring to light which traditional plants are effective and safe for incorporation into the formal health care system.

In this process Western drug developers must respect the intellectual property rights of the indigenous users of herbal medicines. They must provide adequate compensation for the sharing of that knowledge, as established in the Convention on Biological Diversity.

If irreplaceable genetic resources are lost, traditional medicines and indigenous knowledge will also disappear. To prevent this from happening, prompt action is required at every possible level: local initiatives, support from NGO's, scientific research and active governmental support for international agreements to protect intellectual property rights.

References

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