



## Traditional Medicine Practice in Contemporary Uganda

**T**raditional medicine practice involves a complex combination of activities, order of knowledge, beliefs and customs to generate the desired effects for the diagnosis, prevention or elimination of imbalances in physical, psychological or social well-being.

Traditional medicine practice is based on the indigenous knowledge of a given people, a given community, and their experiences in the context of the local culture and environment — it is dynamic and changes with time depending on the prevailing situation.

Traditional medicine practitioners (TMP) comprise herbalists, bonesetters, psychic healers, traditional birth attendants, faith healers, diviners, and spiritualists who use indigenous knowledge for developing materials and procedures.

### The health service situation

The relative ratio of traditional practitioners and university-trained doctors in relation to the whole population in Uganda is revealing as is true for many parts of the African continent.

In Uganda, there is at least one traditional healer for nearly 290 people compared to one Western-trained medical practitioner for every 10,000 people in the urban areas and 50,000 people in the rural areas respectively. The majority of the population in Uganda have greater access to traditional than to western health care. Traditional healers are an integral part of the local culture and are appreciated as key and sustainable sources of care and knowledge on disease and illness. About 80 percent of the population of Uganda rely on traditional medicine because western-trained medical personnel are limited or not really accepted by the community, and tradi-

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tional healers are easily consulted, living in the same community (Bannerman, et al. 1993).

The country imports most of its drugs from abroad and often experiences serious shortages. That points to the demand for TMPs for medicinal plants and the fact that the majority of the people, rural and urban alike, depend largely on herbal medicines for treating a variety of diseases (Esegu, J.F.O. 2002). This reliance is mainly due to the high cost of conventional medicine and inaccessibility of modern health care facilities in most areas.

### Economical advantage of traditional medicine

The lack of foreign exchange and the high cost of western manufactured drugs make modern health care inaccessible to the majority of the population. This consequently requires the conservation, domestication and growing of medicinal plants.

Propagation techniques are needed in some cases as propagation will lead to the conservation of rare medicinal plants

and ensures that the wealth of the products remains in the country through using local knowledge, skills and materials. The health system thus becomes less dependent on external sources such as multinational companies. Developing conservation and propagation strategies of the currently-known medicinal plants is based on the communities' local knowledge of the environment, and shared experiences of institutions like the Entebbe Botanical Gardens, of the National Agriculture Research Organisation, and the National Chemotherapeutics Research Laboratory.

### Governmental efforts in promoting traditional medicine

*The Uganda Law Reform Commission* is developing a law for the recognition, the protection and practice of traditional medicine (Kakooza, J.M.N. 2002). This enables national institutions and international organizations to promote and integrate herbal medicine into their development plans.

*The National Agriculture Research Organisation* is integrating the modernization and commercialization of indigenous knowledge for wider economic and social benefits in areas such as food, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, aromatics and handicrafts.

*The Ministry of Health Strategy and Policy* has recognized traditional medicine and it is developing regulations for integrating it into the primary health care system.

*The Ugandan National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST)* is implementing a project on indigenous knowledge and institutional development.

*The National Chemotherapeutics Research Laboratory* is the main research laboratory appointed by the government and is internationally funded — it has done the following:

- Mass screening of herbal remedies;
- Toxicological testing;
- Formulation and preserving herbal medicine; and
- Standardization of products.

### Non-governmental organizations promoting traditional medicine

*Prometra Uganda*, an affiliate of Prometra International, is an Association for the Promotion of Traditional Medicine and

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Letters, comments, and requests for publications should be addressed to:

Editor: IK Notes  
 Knowledge and Learning Center  
 Africa Region, World Bank  
 1818 H Street, N.W., Room J5-055  
 Washington, D.C. 20433  
 E-mail: pmohan@worldbank.org

is promoting traditional medical knowledge and practices for improved health through mutual co-operation amongst health systems. The headquarters of Prometra Uganda is in Kawempe -Kampala, the capital city of Uganda. The symbol of the organisation is a clay pot with holes and these holes are to be symbolically filled through collaborative effort of other professions. The summarized objectives of Prometra Uganda are:

- To generate and disseminate knowledge on traditional medicine so as to increase its utilization.
- To strengthen and advocate for the use of traditional medicines across the entire rural and urban population.
- To identify and fight against harmful traditional health care practices through educational programs, establishment of cultural centers and centralized treating areas.
- To strengthen collaboration between traditional and other health practitioners so as to increase information sharing on traditional medicine.
- To initiate, encourage and support community programs on the sustainable utilization of the environment, conservation and preservation of all species of medicinal value.

*THETA —Traditional and Modern Health Practitioners Together against Aids* and other diseases, is a Ugandan organization where traditional and modern health practitioners (THs) are working together. Its activities include:

- Training THs as community counselors and educators on sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV/AIDS), as well as training for other organizations targeting THs country-wide.
- Training THs in basic HIV/AIDS patient care and supporting their efforts to provide quality health care.
- Exchanging information through a Resource Centre created in 1995 for research documentation and dissemination of information on traditional medicine and AIDS.
- Hosting a library, publishing a newsletter, organizing a monthly speaker bureau and carrying out advocacy for traditional healing systems.
- Comprehensive training of traditional healers as trainees in THETA district outreach.
- Herbal medicine processing and packaging as well as the maintenance of a herbal garden.

*IIACM — the International Institute of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* carries out the following activities:

- Managing over 10,000 different medicinal plants from Uganda and abroad on the institute's farm.
- Improving formulation of herbal medicine.
- Medicine processing and packaging.
- Teaching various local and foreign traditional healing methods, including Chinese Herbal Medicine, Indian Herbal Medicine, Acupuncture, Music Therapy and Yoga.

*MAKO Herbalist Association*, whose activities include:

- Training herbal medicine users on the basis of clinical diagnosis and supporting their efforts to provide quality patient handling and care.
- Generating information through documentation and research about herbal medicine and making information available to and co-operating with researchers.
- Complementing the activities of traditional birth attendants by using skill and knowledge in areas such as traditional family planning methods.
- Bridging the gap between elders with indigenous knowledge and the young herbalists for better knowledge regarding herbs, i.e., transfer of knowledge.
- Interacting with partners who have an interest in promoting herbal medicines.
- Continuously identifying indigenous plants with medicinal value in order to benefit patients.
- Emphasizing the need for medicinal plant / tree cultivation among the public.

Various other institutions are also involved in promoting and integrating Traditional Medicine into the health care system : religious organizations, private companies, media, and individuals. However, there is no systematic national program.

### **Future research**

Increased urbanization and change in societies make it necessary to modernize and develop traditional medicine and practice to meet demand in the context of changes in habits, cultural values, the environment, and economic conditions. This will require a new legal framework to prevent the ex-

exploitation of indigenous knowledge and resources. The picture that emerges is that overall, Uganda has a supportive environment for promoting traditional medicine.

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*This report was written by Anke Weisheit, freelance consultant, based on a study visit to the Traditional Healers Associations and Projects in Uganda 2002 in co-operation with Male Moses, IK Consultant. This study was supported jointly by the World Bank and the MAKO Herbalist Association. For more information Contact: Anke Weisheit, Springstiller Str. 41, D-98547 Viernau, Germany; e-mail: [ankeweisheit@web.de](mailto:ankeweisheit@web.de), website: <http://www.herbplant.org>, or Male Moses, Director, MAKO Herbalist Association, P.O. Box 8022, Kampala, Uganda, e-mail: [makoherbal@yahoo.com](mailto:makoherbal@yahoo.com)*