

Traditional Medicine in the Gambia

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Introduction

The practice of traditional medicine is an important aspect of Gambian life and culture. It has existed in the country since before the arrival of western medicine and even the Islamic religion. Although there have been some additions to the methods of traditional healers of The Gambia since the coming of Islam, many of the values and concepts remain as they were when traditional medicine began. Modern medicine, that is the diagnosis and treatment of patients using scientific study and clinical trials, is the predominant form of healthcare for citizens of the United States while in The Gambia, seeking medical attention from traditional healers still remains to be a popular means of treatment. The popularity of traditional medicine continues to climb in the country, which in some ways can be attributed to the president, Alhagi Dr. Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh, who claims to be working to acquire cures of devastating diseases using traditional medicine.

Initially, I was interested in following the topic of traditional medicine mostly because I found the idea of using plants as medicine intriguing. The use of medicinal plants is also an attractive subject with the current increasing appeal of herbal remedies and medicines in the United States. Keeping this fact in mind, I wanted to investigate the role herbal remedies played in a culture much different from that of the United States. Being a chemistry student without much prior knowledge about traditional medicine in The Gambia, I was under the impression that I might find many herbalists eager to reveal all of the herbs they used, what sicknesses the herbs treated, and what chemical compounds made these herbs. Upon learning more, I recognized that this was not always going to be the case. My purposes for research evolved into much more modest goals: to establish an understanding of the traditional form of healthcare in The Gambia, the measures being taken to integrate traditional medicine into the modern healthcare system, and the reasons for the effectiveness of herbal medicines.

As well as being a way in which people attempt to remain healthy, traditional medicine is also a large piece of the culture that represents The Gambia. Traditional medicine remains within the culture by way of the practitioners from one generation passing the knowledge to members of the next generation. In this way, the title of traditional healer can remain within a family for many generations. The continuation of the knowledge of a traditional healer being put into practice is dependent upon the traditional healer himself. By taking a close look at the work of traditional healers in many areas of The Gambia, I was able to come into contact with a part of the country's culture.

As much as being sick in a foreign country can be an inconvenience as well as depressing, my experience with food poisoning turned out to give me a good idea of the other spectrum of medicine in The Gambia. For me, laying on a bed hooked up to an intravenous drip was comforting because I knew that I would soon be hydrated and on my way to recovery. However, a patient who I had viewed in the Cherno Baba Association of Traditional Healers Clinic in Berending would most likely disagree. Part of how I view the effectiveness of medicine is due to the society in which I grew up. The same can be said of a Gambian who seeks treatment from traditional healers instead of traveling to the hospital. Modern medicine often treats the symptoms of an illness while traditional medicine treats illness through an understanding of what is believed to be the cause of it.

As mentioned before, the arrival Islam has brought a spiritual aspect to the practice of traditional medicine in The Gambia. Even outside of my field work, I viewed the work of traditional healers or marabouts in the *jujus* tied around the necks, ankles, wrists, and waists of people of all ages. In many of the marabouts' "offices" that I entered, I observed prayer mats, one or more copies of the Holy Koran, prayer beads, and wall hangings adorning verses from the Holy Koran. It soon became clear to me that traditional medicine was not merely someone gathering a variety of herbs and brewing medicines for ailing patients.

Traditional healers with many years of experience generally receive a great deal of respect and legitimacy from the inhabitants of the villages in which they practice. However, the work of healers that is praised by many Gambian citizens is not given the same recognition by the institutions of modern medicine in The Gambia. Over the years, some conflict has arisen between the country's healthcare system and traditional healers. I came to comprehend this conflict further once I began to visit traditional healers while simultaneously receiving information from my peers about their research into modern healthcare in The Gambia. It is of great importance that these two ends of the spectrum find a way to be integrated so that modern and traditional medicine can coexist within the country. Despite the differences that exist between a healer who has attended medical school and one who has learned from an elder, both share the same goal to bring good health to the country.

Methods

I used three main methods to conduct my research on traditional medicine in the Gambia. Through participant observation at the workplace, interviews and consultation of written sources, I was able to collect information on various aspects of my topic. The participants for my studies included seven traditional healers from five different villages as well as the manager for the National Traditional Medicine Program. I met six out of seven of the traditional healers within their workplace. For most of my research, my materials consisted of a small notebook for writing detailed notes and a camera to document those that I interviewed and the medicinal herbs presented to me, but I also took advantage of the availability of a tape recorder for one of my more extensive interviews. All of the interviews I had with traditional

healers (except my session with Alhassan Abubakar who spoke English) were conducted in a language other than English, making it very important that I always had someone to translate my questions and the healer's answers

My preliminary research consisted of speaking with a few Gambians with whom I was well-acquainted about my desire to study traditional medicine. From their responses I gathered that traditional medicine is a very well-known practice in the country, and that it would be a feasible project because healers are accessible to non-Gambians. These conversations helped me gather some relevant background information and brought me to the understanding that traditional medicine is a combination of cultural knowledge and practices that have medical value. In this sense, it became clear to me that in order to begin my interviews with traditional healers it would be necessary for me to first and foremost extend my greetings with both words and even kola nuts as is customary for anyone seeking assistance from someone else. For me, this meant that in order to establish a relationship with traditional healers so that I could learn about their work I had to be aware of cultural etiquette and make an attempt to build some trust first.

I conducted my first interviews with two marabouts in Medina village, Niimi district, in the North Bank Region of The Gambia. Prior to these visits, I had read over some of the interviews another St. Mary's student working with the same topic had written so that I could generate a list of appropriate questions to ask. In my meeting with Mular Bari, a marabout as well as the *alkalo* of Medina, I gathered a lot of information without even asking many questions. The interview was in the Mandinka language and translated by Awa Ceesay, who knew this marabout very well already. In addition to translating Bari's answers to my questions, she added her own personal knowledge and interpretations based upon her experiences with this domain of Gambian culture. The second marabout of the village (who also spoke Mandinka) was somewhat secretive about her methods of diagnosis, making this interview a little more difficult for me to get the information I wanted. This encouraged me to formulate questions that would present to me the information she was willing to give.

From these two interviews, I developed a general structure for my future interviews and questions. I gathered that each meeting would start off with a greeting between the healer, my interpreter, and me so that the healer might understand my motives for research. I first inquired about how he or she learned to become a healer, his methods of treatment and diagnosis, the illnesses he treats, common illnesses he sees among his patients, his opinion or beliefs on why someone becomes sick, and the reasons his treatment is effective. Once I had acquired answers to these questions, I usually proceeded to ask about his relationship with the modern healthcare system and whether he was involved with any Association of Traditional Healers. I frequently concluded my interview by asking about the specific names and uses of some medicinal herbs. More often than not, this last matter did not render a straightforward answer because many marabouts did not know the names of the plants they used. My response was to instead ask where the healer finds these

medicinal herbs. Every interview varied but this general structure remained about the same throughout.

I conducted two interviews with Bubakar Sillah, the manager of the National Traditional Medicine Program, during which I was able to collect information on both The Traditional Healer's Association and the current issues related to traditional medicine in The Gambia. He also gave me some written materials to use including a book on traditional medicines in The Gambia that had been written in the 1970s by a Peace Corps volunteer. Our first meeting occurred early in my research and before I had spoken with any traditional healers. The result of this interview consisted mostly of answers to my questions on the background of Gambian traditional medicine and the Traditional Healer's Association. When we met for a second interview, I had already met with a handful of traditional healers, and so used the questions that had surfaced during these past interviews.

Although interviewing was my primary method of research, participant observation was an integral part of gaining an understanding of the work of traditional healers. With some healers, our meetings took place while they worked on treatments using excerpts from the Holy Koran for their patients. This is something I may not have learned about if I had not observed it. Witnessing two healers with actual patients allowed me to grasp how each different healer diagnosed the illness of the person and decided on the right form of treatment. Not only was I able to view traditional healing in action, I also experienced it firsthand. From both Amadou Njie, president of the Cherno Baba Association of Traditional Healers Clinic in Berending, and Ida Njie, a marabout from Medina, I received traditional treatment for my own minor physical ailments. My visits to the clinic in Berending were probably the most beneficial for gaining knowledge about traditional healers and medicine through participant observation. I viewed the Amadou Njie treating patients and was shown and educated about the uses of many of the medicinal plants the association kept stocked within the clinic. My observation of medicinal plants with the traditional healers Amadou Njie, Alhassan Abubakar and Karamo Sanyang taught me a lot about the variation among healers in how they identify and store the herbs they cultivate and use for treatments. These sessions also presented the types and sources of medicinal plants that I could investigate further in my research.

The last method I used to gather information was consulting written sources. I received two sources from the very generous Bubakar Sillah, one concerning medicinal plants and their uses in The Gambia and the other laying out future plans for integrating traditional medicine into the modern healthcare system. In addition to these local sources, I also documented materials from the archives of The Gambia and the library of the Medical Research Council. Upon returning home, I continued some of my research on traditional medicine using journal articles retrieved on the internet.

Conclusion and Discussion of Prospects

Traditional medicine is a valuable part of Gambian culture that I feel needs more attention in order to achieve preservation. It has also changed a great deal with time and probably has more in common with the modern healthcare system than people believe. There is a great possibility for traditional and modern medicine to move in the same direction as it has in countries like China and India. The government and State for Department of Health have given some initial support to the creation of associations of traditional healers, but have somewhat failed in continuing to provide money and education for traditional healers. If they are not educated on serious diseases such as AIDS and tuberculosis or given more medical supplies, doctors will continue to encounter conflicts with patients being treated with traditional methods for too serious of an illness. In other words, both realms of medicine must have a hand in this integration project in order for it to be successful.

In my experiences with traditional healers, whether they were using strictly herbs or involving excerpts from the Holy Koran to treat their patients, I have learned that Gambians seeking medical attention from traditional medicine really do find relief from their illnesses. As long as traditional healers continue to exist in the country, I believe people will continue to seek their assistance. The amount of spirituality involved in the practices of some healers first came as a shock to me because I had no previous knowledge of that aspect of traditional medicine. Further investigation has allowed me to understand a cultural custom outside of this previous knowledge. I've also been able to comprehend the strength of some aspects of traditional medicine that modern medicine cannot even compete with. For this reason alone, I believe modern and traditional medicine together could ensure better health to many Gambians.

In the future, I would like to conduct further research for this project by looking at a few of the plants that were specified to me as having medicinal uses (such as the neem tree) in order to determine why, scientifically, these plants serve as effective treatments. Professor Bill Roberts was able to purchase an herbal medicine that Momodou Conateh claims can cure up to seventy seven diseases. There are possibilities for studying this medicine in the laboratory at St. Mary's College of Maryland to find out what exactly composes it. In knowing the chemical makeup of the herbal medicine, I might be able to link some of its components to biological activities.

The issue of the possible extinction of medicinal plant species is one that also exists outside of The Gambia. In conducting further research on medicinal plants on my own, I would like to investigate how these extinctions are being perpetuated as well as prevented in The Gambia and other countries. This topic is an important universal issue, especially because the practice of traditional medicine cannot continue without the availability of medicinal herbs. Though my focus is on traditional medicine within The Gambia for this paper, understanding this topic on

a global scale is something I believe to be imperative, particularly if I find myself studying traditional medicine for my senior thesis (St. Mary's Project).

It is hard to say at the moment when I will be able to go back to The Gambia (or anywhere in Africa), but the experiences that I had through my project and outside of it have convinced me that traveling there again is on my list of things to do. Living in The Gambia for a short period of time allowed me to become familiar with a culture much different from my own. My expectations for my project were completely shattered, but I could not be happier with the knowledge that I have gained through studying traditional medicine. Although traditional healers are often secretive about their methods, those that I met were more than enthusiastic about sharing with me as much information as they could. In doing this research I came to many conclusions, the most important one being that the country in which I live could take a hint or two from the friendly demeanor of Gambians.

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