

Full Length Research Paper

Botswana faith leaders' attitudes towards the use of indigenous medicinal herbs

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A phenomenological study involving leaders of different faith groups revealed different opinions about the use of indigenous medicinal plants to treat human ailments. Some churches seem to have incorporated cultural beliefs into their doctrines and so were more receptive to the idea of using traditional medicines. However, a number of them still query the quality, usefulness and safety of traditional medicines because scientific nomenclature and quantities of the active ingredients in the plants were not known. The Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church indicated their involvement in research that helped make decisions on the use of herbs. The only group of churches that denied the use and value of herbal plants was the Independent African Churches (OIACH). The majority of faith leaders acknowledged the existence and use of herbal plants by the society and have encouraged their followers to use traditional medicine. It is believed that church leaders were at a position to influence the use or rejection of herbal plants. In conclusion, there were a variety of opinions about the use of herbal medicines and such opinions were dependent on the doctrines of various churches.

Key words: Medicinal plants, human ailments, faith leaders, religious organizations, churches.

INTRODUCTION

People around the world are diverse in the way they perceive medicinal plants usage to heal human ailments, but there seemed to be a pattern of consistency in the way religions shape the understanding of people they interact and worship with, particularly in their churches. Understanding the perceptions of religions people from different parts of the world is important since their beliefs and understandings could influence the use of traditional medicine (Kutuzova, 2010). The influence of the modern religion like Christianity has made some people in traditional societies to turn away from the use of medicinal plants (Kiringe, 2005). Several people's ways of life have been influenced by the doctrines of christianity at the time of the missionaries (Elujoba et al.,

2005; Bekele, 2007). According to Saganuwan et al. (2010), medicinal plants have been in use for as long as man existed, to heal human diseases. In Morocco for example, as indicated by Bellakhdar (1989), attitudes of people have changed towards the use of medicinal plants thus motivating research in social behavior which saw the need for traditional medicines. This implies that people have faith on medicinal plants to heal diseases. As indicated by Jamieson (2011), what determines the level of faith in people depends on the kind of attitude people adopt about the phenomena. Faith is having trust while an attitude is the feelings about something.

Faith is not only related to religion but a consequence of scientific investigations, geographic observations, and

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evolutionary evidence. Several scholars (Ghanzanfar and AL-Sabahi 1993; Faruqi, 2006) have scientific studies on how medicinal plants have developed and continued to be used in the history of human kind.

From the Christian point of view, faith is a belief accepted or not accepted by the society, the conduct carried out and surrendered to mental acceptance, trust and/or the kind of doctrine which people accept (ref). Faith leaders draw their teachings from parables made from reference books such as the Bible and the Koran. The medicinal trees and fruits they talk about during preaching have been mentioned in these books. For example, in the book of Genesis chapter 1: verses 29 to 30, it is stated that "God said... I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat..., and to every beast of the earth. I have given every green herb for meat..." In the Holy Koran, medicinal plants have been identified for healing human ailments.

In the African context, herbal plants have been in use since the origin of human kind (Elujoba et al., 2005). Majority of the African communities have benefited from the use of herbs for medicinal purposes for centuries. Unfortunately, the development of African herbal medicines has been lagging behind due to colonialism, lack of patriotism, westernization, Islam, Christianity and lack of political will of many governments. Boaduo (2011) advanced that it is high time the African medicinal plants are made available for isolation of their phytochemical components and their medicinal uses.

In Botswana, majority of the people are religious as evidenced by the different spiritual organizations (Amanze, 2004). Different religious denominations in Botswana have different background and so originated locally, while others originated from foreign countries. According to one pastor interviewed who previously served as president of the Botswana Council of Churches (BCC), religious organizations in Botswana were categorized into; mainline churches (MC), Organizations of African independent churches (OAIC), Evangelical Fellowship of Botswana (EFB), Seventh Day Adventist church (SDAC), the Zion Christian churches (ZCC) and the Moslem association of Botswana (MAB). Pastors and leaders of these religious organizations become significant segments of the society since they preach and teach about healing ailments through faith. Thus religions; Muslim or Christianity play an important role in the society as it obligates the importance of health and cohesiveness of societies (Paul, 2005). Each of these organizations was interviewed and responses were as follows;

The Organization of African Independent Churches (OAIC): This group indicated that they believe in God and the ancestors, they preach the healing ministries that people were helped to heal ailments through the use of

vinegar, salt, candles, and "sewacho" a simple wood ash. Examples of these churches include St. John, Saint Paul church, Spiritual Healing Church (SHC₁), and the Lamb followers. The interviewees said that their doctrine was based on healing ministries, implying healing of the mind, spirit and emotions.

The mainline churches (MC): This Included the Roman Catholic, United Congregation Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA₁) (Trinity), the Anglican Church (AC₁), and the Methodist, the Lutheran churches and others. The priests indicated that they have some dissimilarity, but all believed in "Apostolic Creed" which denotes the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Members believe that the herbal medicines they drink or take were strengthened by God to heal. The pastor interviewed, gave an example with "makwati a mohawa" barks of a *mohawa* tree found in Molepolole in the Kweneng district, which members believe the herbs heal blood pressure because of the power of God. The Pastor however lamented that even though these churches currently do not preach about the usage and value of herbal plants, both the congregation and the priests whose background may differ were aware of the medicinal plants' healing values. The challenge in these churches may be that; (1) currently there were no strategies to talk about herbs in church, and (2) there was no language to describe such plants in churches. It is also obvious that the congregation or members of the church have knowledge about herbal plants and their potential to cure diseases but churches do not teach about that.

Evangelical Fellowship of Botswana: This category of churches were seen to be "charismatic churches" that perceive the use of plants as evil. However, the Pastor indicated that there were two sub-groups; (i) the African headed churches comprising Assemblies of God, the Apostolic Faith Mission Church, Bible life etc and (ii) the European oriented evangelical churches led by European leaders and beliefs for worshiping styles. The later sub group of churches would not use the herb such as "*Kgomodimetsing*" herbal plant to control flu while the African evangelical fellowship churches would utilize or include the *Mosukujane Lippia Javanica* and *Lippia Scaberrima* "wild tea" for tea and flu cure.

THE STUDY

This paper reports the findings of a qualitative study which was designed to explore the opinions of leaders of faith from different religious denominations in Botswana about the use of traditional herbal medicinal plants for healing ailments. In both the old and the new testaments of the Holy Bible, plants have been mentioned for different uses. For example, in the book of Ezekiel 47:12 it is stated that along the banks of the river, different kinds of trees will grow to provide food, and their leaves

used for healing people's diseases. Furthermore, in the book of Isaiah chapter 38 verse 21, 'Isaiah told the king to put a paste made of figs on his boil and he would get well'. However, despite these teachings, there were still people in some religion today who are sceptical or do not believe in using traditional medicinal plants for curing their ailments.

Statement of the problem

Cases have been reported in Botswana whereby some sick people failed to use medicines even in times of human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) outbreak. The situation becomes worse when a person refused to use both the traditional and modern medicine. The trend that can be observed is that those people who belong to some religious groups display a confusing situation when some use medicinal plants and others do not believe in them, and yet they all use the Bible or preaching of their pastors to defend their stance. This creates a gap in the understanding of the use of medicinal plants to heal human ailments. Thus, knowledge about healing ministries provided by spiritual or faith leaders is becoming crucial in the era of the 21st century (Kiewit, 2007).

In social sciences, research focusing on spiritual or faith leaders' opinions on the use of indigenous medicinal plants is long overdue as there were few studies focused in this interesting area. While it is valuable to understand spiritual and faith leaders opinions regarding the use of indigenous medical plants in healing ailments, it was also important to interpret opinions and the ways they describe the use and values of herbal medicinal plants. Thus, the main goal of this study was not only to survey the opinions of church leaders (attitudes and feelings) about using indigenous medicinal plants to heal ailments but also underscored the importance of a study. According to Hassan (2004), the understanding of the usage of indigenous medicinal plants is a way to encourage the society to deepen and widen up schools of thoughts about medicinal plants on contemporary human ailments.

On the whole, the application of natural herbal plants in treating diseases can be influenced by people's believes, educational backgrounds, exposure, and ethical issues (Larijani and Zahedi, 2006; Zahedi et al., 2007). Likewise, several factors which have been found to be theoretically and empirically related to religious goals also influence the opinions about traditional herbal plant usage in treating diseases. Some of these include people's socio-economic characteristics, cultural backgrounds and religious convictions. People were still unsure of whether faith leaders positively view or not about the use of indigenous medicinal plants. Most of the existing studies on medical plants were related to Islamic religion but very few on Christianity.

Larijani and Zahedi (2006) reported the use of modern

techniques for phytochemical analysis. Such studies provide relationship between Islamic religion and medicinal plants. Hence there was need to identify the relationship between Christianity and the use of herbal medicine with a view to confirming the established Christian doctrines on the use of medicinal herbs so that Botswana Christians who may be languishing in chronic illnesses such as HIV/AIDs, tuberculosis, asthma etc. can have alternative to orthodox medicine.

Research questions

The main research question for this was: 'To what extent do faith leaders prohibit or encourage the use of traditional medicinal plants in their churches? The primary questions included the following; Do faith leaders view medicinal herbal plants positively? Do church leaders value traditional herbal medicinal plants in healing body ailments? Do churches incorporate cultural beliefs into their doctrines to the extent of using traditional herbs for medicines? What are the opinions of spiritual/faith leaders of different religious denominations about the use of traditional herbal medicines for healing ailments?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

A phenomenological qualitative framework was applied to guide the study in exploring opinions of leaders of faith organizations from different religious denominations about the use and values of traditional herbal medicines for healing ailments. Ten (10) churches located in Gaborone were randomly selected from a list provided at the beginning of the book for Botswana Council of Churches (BCC). The researchers telephoned the churches requesting for permission to interview their leaders. All churches approached responded positively by giving the name (s) of the person to be interviewed. Nine of the ten leaders interviewed were men and one was a lady Bishop of a church. The criteria for participant selection included willingness of the individual and the church to participate, willingness to reveal information on their beliefs about medicinal plants, and the distance of the person interviewed from the researchers' institution. Participants volunteered the information data required for the study.

Data collecting techniques

The study used an open-ended interview guide to carry out the interviews. The face-to-face interviews were conducted by the principal researchers. Follow-up telephone interviews were also conducted to audit information previously gathered. Responses provided their opinions, views, judgement and biblical interpretations about the use of medicinal herbal plants by congregational members. The face to face interviews required repeating the questions to check on consistence of feelings, beliefs and attitudes of respondents. Data were in the form of narrative statements recorded by the researcher.

Data analysis

To analyze data, the inductive process of organizing the data into categories was used, followed by identifying patterns among the categories. Data were assessed for “relationships, salience, meanings, and explanations” (Peters, 2003). Responses to each question were read through repeatedly to gather the meaning, differences and similarities.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The results were presented in a narrative form based on themes that emerged from the data collected using open ended questions as a guide to the interviews. The following themes were generated; demographic characteristics, nature of work, perceptions about the use of traditional herbal plants, composition and quality, knowledge of medicinal plants, perceived uses, value and effectiveness of herbs to heal, incorporating culture and their spiritual doctrine, and social culture. Results were as presented below:

Demographic characteristics and background

Researchers inquired about the position, age and qualifications of the respondents. Majority (90%) of the respondents interviewed were male pastors or bishops aged between 40 and 80 years old. They were mostly trained in the field of theology and had more than 20 years experienced as members of their church denominations. At least 70% had bachelors' degree in theology, 20% bachelors degree in other fields and 10 % had secondary school education.

Nature of work

In as far as the nature of their services was concerned, research revealed that many of these pastors were preaching and conducting pastoral care to everyone including non-church members in the community. One of them from a Roman Catholic Church, for example, stated that fundamentally, his work was “integral healing” of people. The priest further stated that “*my church has a mission to all- spiritual, material development and salvation of all people.*”

The priest also stated that the church has the mandate of building clinics, hospice, and home-based care centres. The pastor from the Catholic Church did not differ substantially from the Seventh Day Adventist Church (SDA) pastor who stated that their church has initiated the idea of medical work related to human health as far back as 1922 when they built hospitals and initiated programs for nursing in Kanye. The SDA organization has also conducted research and wrote books on herbal plants.

The respondent from Spiritual Healing Church (SHC)

believes in healing people through a prayer, word and water.

Perceptions about the use of traditional medicinal herbal plants

Those who support

Respondents from Mainline churches together with those from SV and OAIC churches stated that they recognized the use of medicinal herbal plants in healing human diseases of different types. These respondents further stated that as long as the herbal medicines were used without being associated with evil spirits of “*sangoma*” (diviners) there was nothing wrong with herbal plants. Some even went further to state that the use of medicinal herbal plants should not be perceived as a sin. The respondents felt that medicinal herbs were naturally endowed by God with healing powers. Thus, it could not be a sin for a Christian to administer or use them.

Respondent from the mainline churches further stated that African traditional doctors use some medicinal plants to heal ailments among people in our societies. According to the priest, some doctors just alike Christians do “fast and pray as they apply the plant herbs, roots, leaves and barks.” to heal their patients. The priest from one of the main line churches also mentioned that, in South Africa, “Some traditional doctors are members of the Catholic *Dingaka* Christian Association in the Archie bishop of Pretoria”. This means acceptance of the traditional medicinal herbal healers by the Christian society.

According to Mainline churches (MC), the idea of using traditional herbal medicinal plants in their church were being considered for incorporation into their biblical doctrine. The priest stated that their church recognizes the importance of traditional medicinal plants to heal diseases as they were mentioned in the bible. The OAICH respondent admitted that traditional herbal plants were as useful and important in healing ailments in our society just like orthodox medicines. Similar views were held by the EFB elder interviewed in this study who indicated that there was nothing wrong with the use of medicinal plants as long as people gather them for themselves and utilize them. Their concern was on the process or procedures of determining which herbs to use and for what through “*ditaola*” described as “throwing bone” at a traditional doctor. The use of *ditaola* or throwing bones as it is popularly known was not viewed positively by the elder.

To further support the use of medicinal plants, some respondent from the spiritual healing churches (SHC) stated that “*motho o dirilwe ka letsopa (mmu) le moyo* (spirit). The argument posed was that, God made plants and blessed them to heal human ailments only if people believed their consecration. The respondent SHC further stated that Christians or non Christians do experience ailments and death thus; flesh is healed by “*digwere tsa*

Table 1. Identified traditional herbal medicinal plants.

Indigenous name of plant herb	Scientific name	Uses
Monepenepe	<i>Cassia abbreviatta</i>	Blood cleansing, headache, diarrhoea, skin diseases, constipation
Mosukujane	<i>Lippia javanica</i> and <i>Lippia scaberrima</i>	Bronchial troubles, coughs, colds
Sengaparile	<i>Harpagophytum procumbens</i> D C	Gastro-intestinal challenges, arteriosclerosis, diabetes, hepatitis, neuralgia
Lengana	<i>Artemisia afra</i>	Coughs, asthma, chills, lack of appetite, menstruation period pains, and gastric derangements

setso" (indigenous plants/roots) and the spirit by the word of God. The priest further stated that christians do consult established scientists (orthodox doctors); similarly they should consult traditional plant users. This was so because some medicines they get from the hospitals are made from traditional medicinal plants, for example, *Sengaparile*, (*Harpagophytum Procumbens D C*), (devils claw) tablets found in pharmacy served as a good example.

Those who oppose

While many pastors supported the use of medicinal plants, there were others who did not agree to their use. For example, the Spiritual/faith leaders from African Independent Churches denoted as AICH stated that the power was in the prayer they bestow on the water used for healing diseases. They did not encourage or preach for their use but would rather preach for water usage to heal diseases.

Concern over the use of traditional medicinal plants

Both those who agreed to the use and those who opposed raised some concerns or fear about the use of traditional medicinal plants as cited below:

Composition and quantity

However, the concern according to the respondent, OAICH priest was on the concentration of the active ingredients found in the quantity given to patients which is not recorded. The respondent felt that the challenge in the use of traditional herbal medicines is that they were likely to "harm human cells and the body immune system" if quantities are not known. Giving example with the herb called "*monepenepe*" (*Cassia abbreviatta*), the priest stated that it was popularly used among the people of Botswana to boost blood cells and cure some pains. The danger according to the Priest was that the herb could also cause harm to the human cell system because of lack of records on concentration on active ingredients. The EFB respondent raised a concern on the process used by traditional healers to determine what to give to patients, and how to get the medicines.

Knowledge of medicinal plants used to heal ailments

Majority of the elders, pastors and bishops interviewed identified different herbal plants which were said to be used for healing human diseases. Table 1 shows different herbal plants identified by priest for healing. Respondents (100%) admitted

that these medicinal herbal plants have been used from generation to generation to heal human ailments. The respondent from SHC₁ believed that generally, people had different gifts and were free to use any type of herb they wished as they found fit.

Perceived uses, values and effectiveness of traditional herbal plants

Respondents were asked to state the extent to which traditional herbal medicinal plants were effective in healing diseases. The ratings in Table 1 and Figure 1 showed that in the four herbs popularly mentioned in this study, 80% respondents rated *monepenepe* (*Cassia abbreviatta*) as effective, 60% rated Mosukujane (*Lippia Javanica* and *Lippia Scaberrima*) as moderately effective, 60% viewed Sengaparile (*Harpagophytum procumbens* DC) very effective, and an equal (40%) number of respondents viewed *lengala* herbs (*Artemisia afra*) effective and moderate in healing human coughs and gastric derangements.

One Pastor agreed that the effectiveness of most herbal products had not been scientifically proven and therefore they advice that education could help improve this. The SHC respondents stressed that traditional herbal medicinal plants were useful in preventing, curing and protecting

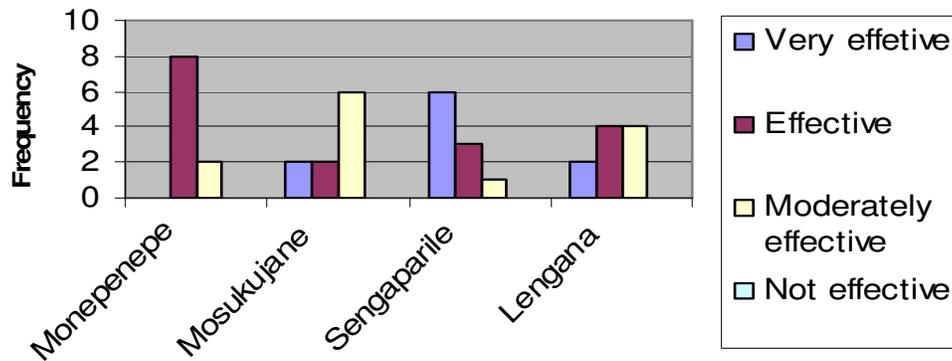


Figure 1. Church leaders perceived effectiveness of some herbal plants.

human body from diseases of different kinds. For example, the respondent mentioned herbal plants such as *Sengaparile* (*H. procumbens* DC) as one medicinal plant used to treat arthritis health conditions, cleansing blood, and high blood pressure. According to the respondents, the SCH does not prevent people from using herbal plants and they strongly believe that people must get healed from using herbs. Asked whether the traditional herbal plants were useful or not useful, the results showed that church leaders believed that herbal plants were useful (70%) in healing ailments. The 30% respondents neither agreed nor disagreed since they pointed out their concerns in relation to use of herbal plants.

Incorporating culture into their spiritual doctrine

Asked whether the church believed in incorporating the societal culture in the doctrine, many pastors affirmed. The SHC₁ respondent, for example, stated that “yes, the church believes in incorporating the societal culture into our church doctrine. As a church, we come from the society and we should be culturally inclined”. The SCH respondent further stated that “although our church is prophetic, it promotes culture like the Jews and the Israelites mentioned in the Bible that God chose as a symbolic nation to use” in promoting Christianity. The respondent stated that they believed in using orthodox medicines and the church members too had the same belief. The respondent further explained that ‘If they do not use herbal medicinal plants and medicines from the hospital, they lay hands on the sick people (prayers) and blessing water through prayers turns into medicine of all ailments (water)’. Thus, this respondent’s preference was using the water.

CONCLUSIONS

The critical findings of this study are as indicated below:

Attitude towards use of medicinal plants

The study revealed mixed feelings with regard to the use of herbal plants. While the majority of pastors (70%) had a positive attitude towards the use of medicinal plants, few opposed. Those who agreed to their use were mainly from the mainline churches like the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran churches, United Congregational Churches of Southern Africa. Their attitude was spiritually guided as they mentioned/quoted verses in the Bible pertaining to the use of herbal plants usage. Those who opposed the use of medicinal plants were mainly the African Independence Churches (OAICH) whose belief was in the holy water and also using the Bible to support their stance. The African Independence Churches are also supported by EFB who resented the use of herbal plants and considered them evil. Generally, more than half of the pastors saw nothing wrong with the use of the medicinal plants.

Caution in use

Although more than half of the (70%) of pastors interviewed recommended the use of traditional medicinal plants, they did so with some caution. Church leaders were varied in the opinions about utilization and effectiveness of traditional herbal medicines. Some churches which seem to have incorporated cultural beliefs into their doctrines were more receptive to the idea of using traditional herbs for medicines. However, a number of them still query the unrecorded nature of traditional medicines where usually scientific nomenclature and quantities of the active ingredients in the plants were neither known nor recorded.

Cultural influence

Culturally, pastors, church elders and bishops interviewed came from a background where families were using or relied on traditional medicines, especially the use

of orthodox medicines. This culture influenced the way they perceived the use of medicinal plants.

Majority of the spiritual leaders interviewed indicated that they grew up with the background of using herbal medicinal plants. Their parents used herbs to heal different diseases. Thus, they admitted having some knowledge of some herbal medicinal plants used by elderly and traditional doctors to heal certain ailments in the society. Those spiritual leaders who did not agree to use herbal plants raised a concern that traditional herbal medicines are likely to “harm human cells and the body immune system” because their quantities were not measured and recorded when used. They did not deny the fact that they had used them before as children, through their parents. The dilemma is in the procedures “*ditaola*” or “*throwing bones*” as used to determine what medicine to give to the patient for what purpose or which disease.

Based on the fact that majority of the respondents (70%) believe in the use of traditional medicinal herbs, and further to the fact that those pastors who discourage their use still have followers who use them behind their back, it is suggested that those pastors who do not agree should rethink their positions in the light of cultural background or the context from which their followers come from and are influenced. Secondly, those pastors who support the use of herbal plants are encouraged to continue preaching about the use of traditional plants and encourage their followers with caution, and/or partnership of churches with suppliers of traditional medicinal plants and/or encourage the use of medicinal plants that have already been researched on and packaged to avoid overdose or wrong use. It is also recommended that further research can be done with the followers to get their views on the use of traditional medicinal plants.

Thus, it was concluded that depending on the doctrine of the church denomination, a variety of opinions about traditional herbal medicines exist within the local religious communities. Therefore, it was recommended that scientists studying traditional herbal medicines should collaborate with traditional healers to generate and record empirical knowledge about traditional medicines and medicinal plants and also conduct a research, targeting church members of different church denominations, and correlate their views with their demographic characteristics.

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