

## 2. Traditional medicine

For people who live in rural areas, traditional healers often provide the only available medical care. Other times, communities may feel unwanted by government or private health care facilities and may use traditional healers, who give them treatments that are more in line with their cultural practices and beliefs. For these reasons, traditional medicine can be an important way to reach some communities with messages about health. As one CHAPS recipient said, “The traditional healer, a person equipped with knowledge, skill, and insight that reaches deep into the core of one’s psychosocial and spiritual being, is able to nurture a kind of hope that modern medicine does not yet offer.”

Because there are many untrained traditional healers who give sick individuals false treatments, some communities still do not trust traditional medicine. Education about the role of traditional healers can improve the image of traditional healers. The following CHAPS projects found ways to use the tradition of herbal and traditional healing to create more discussions about health in their communities.

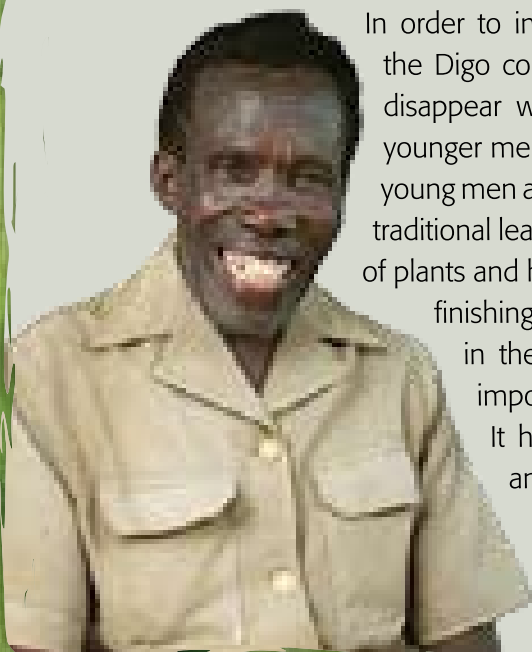


## Preserving tradition in the Kaya Forest

The ancient Kaya Forest on the coast of Kenya is home to the Digo community. It once held a large number of rare plants that could be used for medicinal and cultural practices. In addition, the Digo used to use the forest for prayers and traditional ceremonies. A growing need for land for farming, wood for construction projects, and space for tourist areas has led to the slow destruction of the Kaya Forest.

The Kaya Kinondo Self Help Group, an association of over 40 male and female traditional healers, is working to save the forest and the Digo cultural identity. By working with the Coastal Forest Conservation Unit of the National Museums of Kenya, Kaya Kinondo is promoting conservation of the Kaya Forest. The group's members have many areas of expertise, including midwifery, traditional medicine, and herbalism. These members are increasing knowledge about traditional healing in the Digo community and increasing access to traditional medicine for community members.

Kaya Kinondo met to discuss the activities that would help them meet these goals. After receiving a CHAPS grant, the group's first project was to establish a traditional healing center, where community members could seek out traditional remedies to improve their physical or mental well-being. This center had a variety of herbal medicines that patients often need. Because this center was meant to make some money for the group, herbal treatments were offered to community members at affordable costs.



In order to improve understanding about traditional healing in the Digo community, and to ensure that this practice did not disappear with time, the Kaya Kinondo group trained three younger members of the community in traditional healing. Two young men and a young midwife followed Mzee Abdullah, a local traditional leader, for almost a year, learning the types and names of plants and how to prepare and use traditional treatments. After finishing the training, the three used traditional medicine in their local community. One student said, "It is very important to keep the tradition of herbal medicine alive. It has been passed from one generation to another and that tradition must continue."

Some of the most important activities of the Kaya Kinondo group were the group herbal farm and tree nursery projects, where traditional herbs and plants could be grown. The community was involved in these projects and supported Kaya Kinondo by identifying plants and trees, as well as by helping to plant them. One group member said, "Community members are becoming very interested... they are planning and implementing many of the activities on their own.... We are seeing immediate results." Almost three hundred different plants and trees were grown in the group farm and the tree nursery. Trees helped rebuild the Kaya Forest and plants provided treatments that could be used in the traditional healing center. During these projects, Kaya Kinondo educated community members about how to grow different types of plants and about traditional healing practices.

Kaya Kinondo also collected information about their Digo cultural practices to preserve the culture and help others learn more about this small community. Once again, village elders served an important role in this CHAPS project. These elders provided stories about the history of the Digo, their cultural practices, and even the role of traditional medicine within the community. Once the collection of information was finished, this information was made available at schools, places of worship, and cultural awareness forums.

According to cultural anthropologist and CHAPS advisor Kimani Njogu, the culture of Kaya Forest and the Digo people "is the epitome of our people's history, it is a representation of where we came from." He went on to say that Kaya Forest is "a space that is uncontaminated by Western influences—a space that is historically, culturally, botanically, and environmentally significant."

The Kaya Kinondo Self Help Group still works together with the National Museums of Kenya to rebuild the Kaya Forest and promote understanding of Digo cultural heritage. The group now even works with other traditional healers to share the lessons they have learned and hear about the experiences of other communities.



## Strengthening traditional healers in Embu

In a different region of Kenya, the Embu Traditional Medicine Practitioners' Association also worked to conserve and promote traditional medicine. Colonization, urbanization, and a growing demand for Western medicine led to a gradual decline in the use

of herbal medicine in the region. In addition, because many unqualified healers were operating in the area and, in some cases, giving ineffective or even harmful treatments to patients, the association members felt that they needed to strengthen the image of traditional medicine, as well as educate the community about the role of traditional medicine in the health care system. "We know for sure that our traditional medicines and therapies work and



we need to let other people know so that they can appreciate and use them," said Mzee Njiru Ngana, a village elder and herbal medicine man.

Just as in the Kaya Forest, the Embu traditional healers built a traditional healing clinic. The clinic was welcomed by the surrounding community. The leader of the project, Ndwiga Mark M'Kiini, felt that "there has been a great appreciation and admiration to our establishing an herbal clinic." The establishment of this clinic meant that more people could be given traditional healing and herbal treatments. Association members worked hard to make the clinic a success by sharing the responsibilities of treating patients and managing the clinic. Also, two youth worked in the clinic to learn the practice of traditional medicine from experienced healers. These young students studied the different types of plants and trees, learned how to identify common illnesses, and practiced administering treatments. Two additional clinics were opened by members of the association.

The association also created an area to grow herbal plants, which is used by the clinic. Just like Kaya Kinondo, the sale of these plants helped members of the Embu Traditional Medicine Practitioners' Association by both giving them materials for their practice and by providing a small income to the clinic.



The Embu association also created a network with other associations of traditional healers. This network now provides an opportunity for healers to share their experiences during meetings and to learn from each other through workshops. At these workshops, methods to grow, preserve, and consume medicinal plants are taught. Additionally, the Embu healers worked with staff from the Department of Forestry, the Department of Culture, and the Ministry of Health so that they learned more about traditional healing. This improved ideas about and respect for traditional medicine.

As in Kaya, there was a great deal of support from the Kenyan government for the Embu Traditional Medicine Practitioners' Association. The government praised the role of traditional medicine in the health care system and gave some small financial support. The district forest office, the District Commissioner, and the Provincial Director of Culture all gave the group advice and support. This help from the government changed the opinions of people who associate the practice with witchcraft.



## Building herbalists' capacity in South Africa

In South Africa, as in Kenya, traditional healers often have a large influence in their communities. Many people use traditional remedies for their physical and mental well-being before visiting more modern health care centers. Because there are so many cases of HIV and AIDS in South Africa and because traditional medicine is so

popular, traditional healers are able to give important information about HIV prevention to patients. They can also send patients to clinics and hospitals for HIV and AIDS related treatment. For these reasons, there is a great need for traditional healers who are trained about HIV and AIDS prevention, care, and treatment.



This issue is being addressed by the AIDS Foundation of South Africa. The AIDS Foundation is a non-governmental agency which provides donor

funds and technical support to community-based organizations. With a CHAPS grant, this foundation was able to provide money to the Organization of African Herbalists (OAH) in Free State, South Africa. OAH, which works in a small, rural town, manages an education and training program for traditional healers. Unlike Kaya Kinondo and the Embu Traditional Medicine Practitioners' Association, OAH focuses on training and educating traditional healers about HIV and AIDS issues.

OAH has been working to promote HIV and AIDS awareness in its community. Traditional healers from the local area, however, did not feel that they had enough information about HIV and AIDS to give correct advice to their patients. Because community members often see traditional healers before seeking treatments at clinics or hospitals, the healers felt that they could better serve their community if they knew more about HIV and AIDS. With CHAPS funding, OAH was able to set up trainings with local traditional healers about HIV and AIDS. These trainings taught healers how to understand the symptoms of HIV and AIDS, to refer patients they could not manage to clinics or hospitals, and to communicate HIV and AIDS issues to the local department of health.

OAH also worked to promote partnerships between traditional healers themselves and between healers and local government departments. Project staff noticed a change in the partnership and sharing among traditional healers: "There is an increased level of collaboration amongst healers themselves as they hold regular meetings to share and learn from each other. There is willingness from the healers to work as a united force, unlike in the past where they saw each other as rivals."

Just like the Embu Traditional Medicine Practitioners' Association, traditional healers attending OAH-sponsored trainings took the lessons they learned and brought them to other healers in the area. By holding regular meetings, where they discuss treatment issues, as well as trainings for new healers, they benefit from the knowledge and experience of their peers. This partnership led to the identification of a problem in the local area: a lack of resources for orphans. Healers felt that they needed to find a way to respond to the growing challenge of children who were orphaned by HIV and AIDS and decided to add information about AIDS orphans to their trainings. Because healers in this area now work together, they are better able to identify community-wide issues that need attention and work together to find solutions to these issues.



### Reflection questions ?

Now that you have read the stories behind some CHAPS projects dealing with traditional medicine, think about how they are similar to situations within your own community. It may be helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- What role does traditional medicine play in your community? Have you or a family member ever visited a traditional healer?
- Some say that with the introduction of modern medicine, traditional medicine is no longer necessary. Do you feel that this is true? Why or why not?
- In South Africa, OAH played an important role in reaching communities with HIV and AIDS information. What illness or health issue in your community would traditional healers be able to address better than clinics or hospitals?