

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Kenyan Herbalist

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P.O. Box 21262  
Nairobi, Kenya

Mr. R. H. Nolte  
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535 Fifth Avenue  
New York, 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Kenya, as do most developing nations, faces the problem of a shortage of medical practitioners. This lack of manpower has caused difficulties in the implementation of the Government's health programs. However, in its official estimation of some 12,000 health specialists operating in Kenya, the Government has not taken into account a large, unknown number of traditional medical men - the bush doctors, herbalists, or witchdoctors. These practitioners, while not officially recognized, provide medical services to a large segment of the population. Western scientists in Kenya as well as many of the local officials are now taking an active interest in the herbal remedies being used by some of these medical traditionists.

As one of its more active pursuits in 1971, the Kenya African National Union, the official political party of Kenya, has been working toward providing better health care for the "wananchi". At a recent meeting of Parliament, questions regarding the efficacy of present health programs have been raised. Responding to these inquiries, health officials have pointed out that the operating budget for the Ministry of Health, although showing a gain of 40% over the past five years, has only increased from £1 million to £1.4 million. They further explained, using latest reports from the Ministry of Health, that in spite of this low budget there are presently over 12,000 Government recognized health care specialists. Included in this number are medical practitioners, dentists, pharmacologists, nurses, and midwives. The health group also informed these legislators of the decrease during the past two years in infant mortality and other health problems such as communicable diseases and kwashiorkor. Projections were also offered as to what could be done if the operating budget were brought into line with present international standards. After much debate it was the consensus of the legislative body that the present numbers of health personnel were inadequate to meet the needs of Kenya's growing population and every effort should be made to increase the number of health workers proportionately over the next five years.

During the course of debate several members of Parliament raised questions about medical care personnel not recognized by the government - bush doctors, herbalists, and witchdoctors. They noted that some of these "health workers," although not registered by the government, have patient case loads much larger than those of many "licensed" practitioners. In defense of its progressive medical program in Kenya, the health delegation urged these law makers to join in their campaign to rid the country of much of the archaic medicine being practised by untrained people. The health officials emphasized that these people (bush doctors and witchdoctors especially) frequently not only cause further damage to sick people but also prevent them from seeking proper medical attention.

As a result of these parliamentary discussions I became interested in the role of the herbalist in Kenya and subsequently visited several of the more well-known practitioners.

My first encounter was with Mr. Samuel Katiku Maingi, a well known Kamba herbalist who lives in Machakos District some 37 miles south of Nairobi. It was only after being thoroughly questioned (why I didn't visit a modern doctor as other Americans do) that I was accompanied to Maingi's office by a Kamba friend. Mr. Maingi's office is located in the center of town behind a very popular bar-restaurant. After making our way through an early gathering at the bar and shouting "hodi" three times (the Swahili equivalent of "anyone home?") we were greeted by an aide of Mr. Maingi and escorted into his office. The office, although small compared to western standards, was clean, well lighted, and nicely arranged. Most surprising was the presence of a private telephone—a mark of distinction for persons living outside the Nairobi area. Five minutes after we were seated, a well-dressed man wearing a Muslim cap came in and was introduced as the doctor. Mr. Maingi speaks little English but is fluent in Kiswahili, Kikuyu, and his native tongue, Kikamba. I was able to get through the opening greetings and casual conversation but eventually had to rely on my friend to act as interpreter. During the beginning of our conversation Mr. Maingi was polite but cautious. He questioned me repeatedly as to why I wanted to see him and what was the purpose of my stay in Kenya. Finally, after a long exchange, he became convinced that I could do him no harm and proceeded to answer questions candidly.

Mr. Maingi, 45 years of age, has not always practised herbalism. Prior to his present occupation he owned a bar from which he earned a good living. However on a night in 1967 things changed. He dreamed that there was a certain root which he must find in order to cure a heart condition which at that time was plaguing his daughter whose repeated trips to various modern doctors had been in vain. He found the root the next day, prepared it and began giving it to his daughter. Within a month's time she had recovered. A new career had begun for Mr. Maingi.

Before we could go into details of herbalism, patients began gathering and because of the public nature of the office we were forced to conclude our conversation. Before leaving, however, I told Mr. Maingi that there were scientists at the University of Nairobi who were interested in herbal medicine, and who would like to visit him, which pleased him very much.

My next visit to Mr. Maingi's was made with two bio-chemists and two pharmacologists from the University School of Veterinary Science and the Kenyatta Teaching Hospital. As we arrived at the Rocket Bar and Restaurant, Mr. Maingi himself was there to greet us. After settling in his office, Mr. Maingi began telling us about some of his successes. But first, in order to assure us that he was speaking the truth, he asked his assistant to pull out some files which were filled with letters from former patients. Each letter was a testimony extolling his curative powers. Although the return addresses on the letters indicated that most of his patients were from the East African Community there were also letters from as far away as France and Germany. Along with expressions of gratitude, these letters contained final payments. Patients pay half the cost of treatment on their first visit to his office and the remainder when they feel cured. Fees range from 20 shillings for simple cases to over 1100 shillings for cases such as angina pectoris.

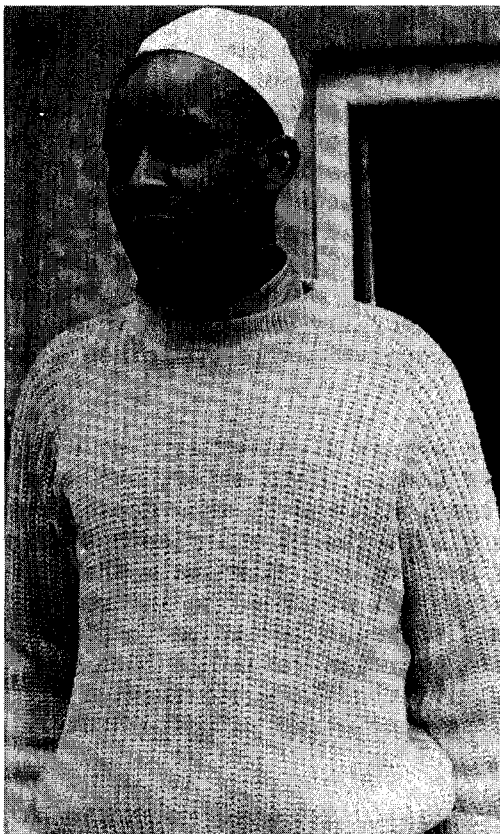
Mr. Maingi answered most of the questions posed to him by the group with much ease but frequently needed explanation of some of the scientific terminology. His knowledge of the body and how it responds to certain chemical agents was impressive. He explained that it is seldom that he uses just one plant in a medicament but combines several plants in order to get the desired effect. He now has a working knowledge of about 900 - 1,000 different combinations. Asked how he knew which plants had medicinal qualities he replied that plants or trees which tend to look odd amidst others are generally curative agents. Poisonous plants are very seldom a worry because of the dilutive qualities of plants which are generally mixed with them. The boiling process which usually begins the preparations of medicines also reduces toxicity.

Mr. Maingi recalled two cases which he enjoys discussing. One case involved a chief from the Western Province of Kenya. This chief, who complained of chest pains, had visited several hospitals and as many doctors over the past two years but without success. As a last resort - a response which Mr. Maingi acknowledges as being typical of most of his patients - the chief wrote to him describing his symptoms. After Maingi studied the information for a week, the chief was asked to visit his office. He wanted to give the chief explicit instructions on the use of the medicine which had been prepared. Within six months after the first visit, the chief had resumed his normal activity. Mr. Maingi's popularity rose considerably in the Western Province.

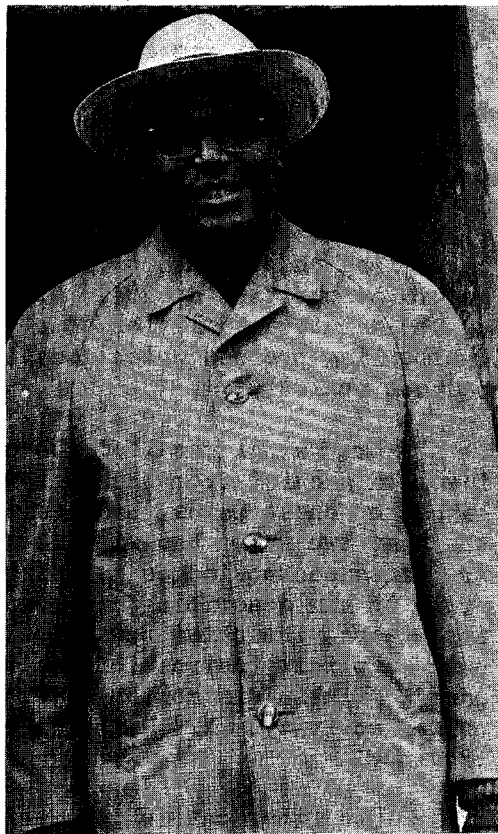
The other case which was animatedly described involved an emotionally disturbed youngster. Again, as a last resort, the child was brought to him for treatment. Although he had never attempted such a case Mr. Maingi thought he would give it a try. After a few days of experimenting with different combinations of herbs he emerged with what he hoped would be the answer. Surprising to all, including himself, the mixture proved to be effective without any further alterations. After it had been given for a period of three weeks everyone noticed a marked change in the behavior of the youngster. "The results in this case did not come about solely from the medicine," said Maingi, "but also from the many counselling sessions I held with the lad during the three weeks. It was very time consuming".

In addition to practicing medicine Mr. Maingi is a car enthusiast. For the past several years he has been one of the few Africans to participate in the world famous East African Safari. When asked how he could afford to participate in such a rich man's contest, he just shrugged his shoulders and said, "business is awfully good." Although he has never placed he looks forward each year to the challenge which the drive presents. He also manages to spend considerable time with this family. He has two wives and 12 children.

We were given a tour of Machakos by Mr. Maingi and introduced to some of his fellow herbalists. Sammy Mutuva Kisaa specializes in the curing of kisonono (gonorrhea) and ugonjwa wa kifafa (epileptic seizures). In addition he treats conditions such as loss of appetite, backache, stomachache, nose-bleeding, and the spell of witchcraft. Mr. Kisaa took time from the 12 patients waiting to see him to greet us and to answer our questions. He, like Mr. Maingi, was outgoing, congenial, and open in his responses to questions.



Samuel Katiku Maingi



Sammy Mutuva Kisaa

MACHAKOS DISTRICT  
HERBALISTS



Daniel Muthuka Mustoki

Daniel Muthuka Mustoki is the 14th person within his family to practice herbalism. He boasts that his father, who must be at least eighty years of age, is still practicing. Mr. Mustoki, who includes a small dose of mysticism along with his medicine, is noted in the area for his work with infertility. Each week he treats up to 14 women who have problems conceiving. "As you well know," he said, "having children is very important to the African woman. If she can't produce, her position is lowered considerably." Mr. Mustoki said that it is rare that he cannot cope with medical problems. "However," he followed, "I never guarantee my medicine to anyone."

Impressed by what they saw in Machakos, my scientist friends decided that they would like to test some of these herbs in the laboratory. Mr. Maingi agreed to submit any of his medicines they desired. A date was established and after a tasty meal of goat, prepared by the Rocket Restaurant, we returned to Nairobi. After meeting Mr. Maingi I became more interested in locating other herbalists and finding out how they operate.

Mr. Okello-Omudho, who lives in Mombasa was recommended to me by a physician who had practiced in the same town. He assured me that I would have no difficulty finding Omudho --- everyone knows Abdul. "Just ask for the herbalist with the down-town office", he said. Sure enough, upon our arrival in Mombasa we had only to make one inquiry before being shown to a large municipal office building. Checking the outside building directory we found amongst the names of doctors, dentists, and surgeons, Okello-Omudho, Qualified Herbalist. Omudho's office was unusually comfortable and like doctor's offices all over the world possessed magazines which were at least five months old. After a short wait Omudho appeared. His long white coat and his horn-rimmed glasses made him look like the stereo-typical western physician. Because of his busy schedule however, we were asked to come back the following day.

The next day, the doctor drove with us into the rural areas to look for plants. It was also an opportunity to ask Omudho some questions about his work. Abdul is a seventh generation herbalist. He began practicing in 1967 after serving as a medical specialist in the Kenyan Army. He also worked as a medic with the Kenya Police for a number of years. Although he belongs to the Luo tribe, his patients come from all sectors of the population. During his earlier years of practice he was urged by the people of Mombasa to settle on the coast and begin a permanent practice. Omudho, 45 years old, has seven sons. Although some of them are interested in practicing medicine like their father, according to Luo tradition, only the eldest has the rightful accession to his position. Custom also dictates that the son can take over only after the death of the father.

Abdul feels that he is constantly improving upon the techniques of herbalism as practiced in the days of his grandfather. He said that most of the medicine which had been given in the past had been proven effective through trial and error on the patient. Medicine which was passed on from father to son was committed to memory which subsequently made each succeeding generation dependent upon the previous for accurate information. He feels his involvement with animal experimentation as well as precise documentation gives more scientific credibility to his practice. It is his hope that eventually the Kenyan Government will grant official sanction to practitioners such as himself. He pointed out that recognition is given to Tanzanian herbalists by their Government.

As we travelled out to the countryside Abdul pointed out several species of plants which he has found to have high medicinal value. It is possible he said, for one tree or plant to be used for any number of conditions. For certain cases of arthritis, as an example, he uses a certain herb as a bathing substance. In other conditions this same herb is taken internally. Some of the more prominent plants we saw included:

- Owuch Rabuor - used in leprosy cases
- Oohok - removes poison in the system
- Buar - effective in polio cases
- Opol - Cooked with honey and taken four times a day, it will cure asthma
- Kuogo - relieves dysentery
- Apath - used for heart conditions such as angina pectoris
- Root of the banana tree - helps low blood pressure
- Ngor - a treatment for gonorrhea
- Jok - used for impotency in the male...must be mixed with fat and millet
- Arema - a first aid to stop bleeding.

Abdul treats up to 30 patients per day. While returning home, I was told of one of his more memorable cases involving a "mad-man". One day, two huge askaris (policemen) with a prisoner handcuffed to them, came into his office and asked if he had anything available which would "calm this chap." At that moment the young man looked quite sane. However, as the two officers began taking the cuffs off, at Abdul's insistence, the lad began screaming and jumping. "Was I frightened", chuckled Abdul. After seeing the terrible mental anguish of this young man, however, Abdul decided he would like to work with him. The police were asked to leave the boy in his custody for three days at which time he would decide either to continue treatment or to return his patient to their custody. At the end of two weeks and after many doses of medicine, Abdul said that the boy gained enough control so that he could be united with his family for short periods of time. Eventually he was released totally.

Other special cases mentioned by Abdul involved appendicitis, elephantiasis and hernia. He generally takes only those cases which are chronic. Other cases are referred to private doctors or to the hospital. Although he tries to limit his practice to adults, he will occasionally treat a child who has asthma problems. Unlike many modern doctors Abdul makes house calls. This has become a necessary part of his practice because of the Muslim women who don't come out of the house during daylight hours.

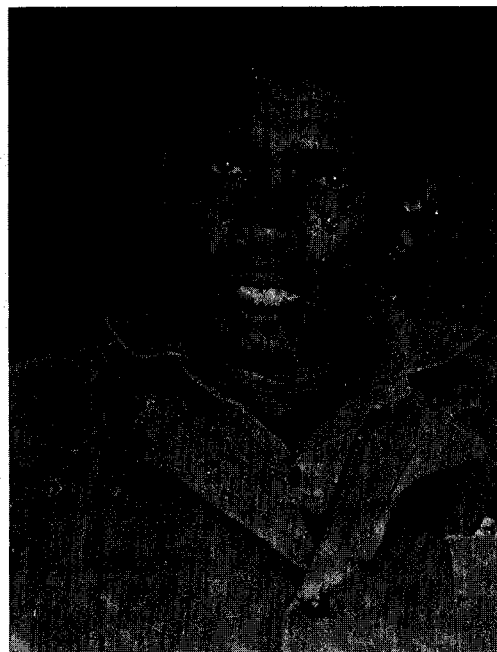
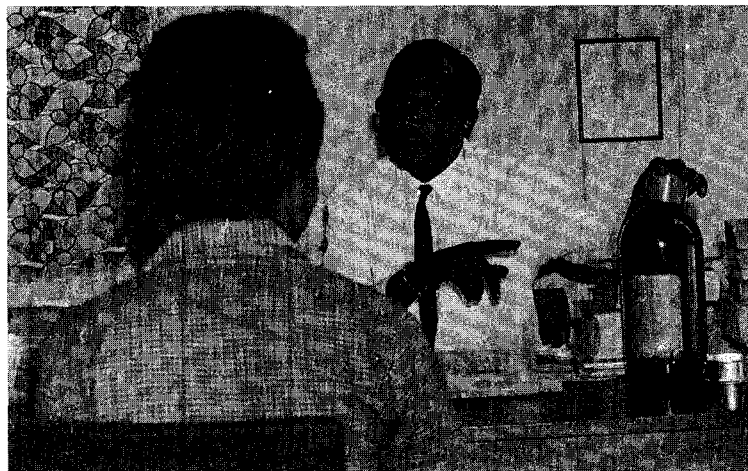
Abdul impressed upon me before we parted that he does not believe in witchcraft. He also stressed that a good herbalist can be as effective as a modern doctor and in some cases even more so. The herbalist is more effective, he explained, because of his ability to relate to the life-style of the people and because he generally speaks the same language. As for payment he, like other herbalist, is still willing to be paid in produce such as maize, chickens and goats. Very often he does not charge at all.

My most memorable interview took place approximately 20 miles north of Nairobi in a little district called Kikuyu. In an obscure part of town I met Bwana Barnabas Kiriua a 58 year old herbalist who learned the trade from his Masai mother. As with Mr. Maingi, Bwana Kiriua questioned me repeatedly before he would reveal anything about himself or his practice. Once he was convinced of my sincerity, however, he overwhelmed me with information.





Abdul Okello-Omadho



Barnabas Kiriu



Barnabas has been practicing herbalism for over 21 years. He showed me roots that he had picked up as early as 1941 while serving in the Armed Forces in Abyssinia. He decided to practice herbalism full-time when he was released from the Army. While establishing his practice, he was forced to work in a local store as a stock clerk. He needed this job, he said, because of a pact which he had made with the people of his area. He promised them that before he would charge anything for his service he must cure at least 500 people. Within a short period of time, 6 months, he had made his quota. He then began charging 5 shillings (70 cents) per visit. Even now he reported, he does not charge much over this original fee. He is a very religious man and feels that since God gave him this ability to serve his people it would be sacrilegious to have them stay away because of their inability to pay. As a well established herbalist, he sees up to 400 people each week during the busy months of June and July. With such a heavy work schedule it is surprising that Barnabas can find time to entertain his four wives and 21 children.

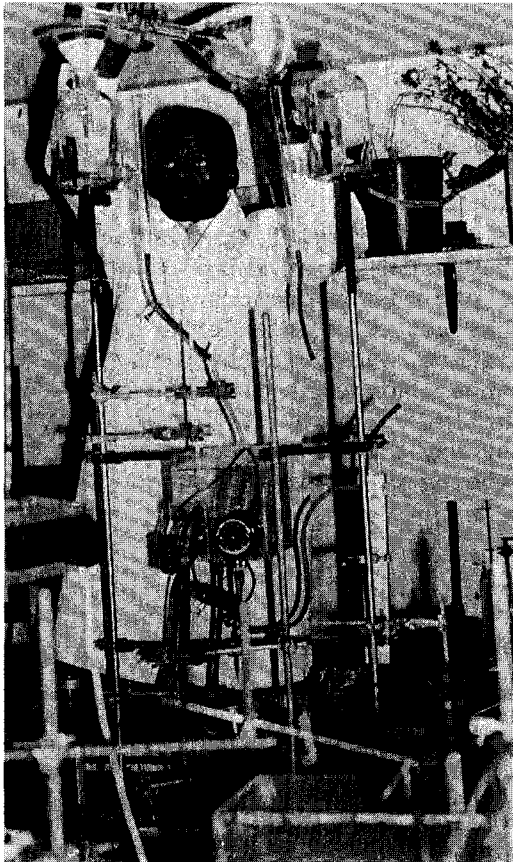
Barnabas claims a working knowledge of at least 800 types of herbal medicines -- most of which have been passed on to him by his Masai relatives. He feels that the Masai are the only tribal group of East Africa who have full grasp of herbal medicines. All other tribes are newcomers and have much to learn. He has the greatest respect for modern doctors, although in his opinion they spend too much time on theory. "But they have their style and I have mine", he concluded. Although he considers himself somewhat of a kidney specialist Barnabas handles a variety of cases including miscarriages, whooping cough, malaria, diarrhea, liver ailments, and arthritis. He is looking forward to some day taking time to write a book on his knowledge of herbs.

Each phase of my work with the herbalists has been enlightening, but it has been especially rewarding to watch the budding alliance between them and the University scientists. The herbalists with their assistants have made at least three trips to the University laboratories to have their medicines analyzed. I was fortunate enough to be present on the first visit which was filled with much excitement. The scientists, who had been skeptical, were obviously pleased when the herbalists showed up with their medicines while the herbalists, who were very apprehensive about the tests, were visibly awed by the apparatus which had been prepared just for them.

The most impressive-looking of the experiments was the Langendorf Heart Preparation. Its purpose is to show any fluctuations in the heart upon stimulation. It was set up purposely to test one of Mr. Maingi's preparations. Sure enough, as his medicines were applied to a prepared heart of a rabbit, the calibrator showed noticeable movements indicating effectiveness. Everyone present including some janitors who had been eyeing the proceedings began applauding and shaking hands. If there was any apprehension on the part of the herbalists regarding the outcome of western testing of their medicines, it soon subsided.

Not wanting to dampen the spirits at this first meeting, my scientist friends later told me that the influence of the drug on the heart, although showing some response, could have been attributable to many factors including the high concentration that they injected into the heart. The test simply indicated that it will be worthwhile pursuing this particular substance for further analysis. Before one can say that the herb is a safe medicine, studies will have to be initiated to ascertain its side effects, the effect of long-term usage, the effect on other organs of the body, and the duration of its medicinal qualities. The scientists noted that it would take months of concentrated effort in order to analyze just one mixture. I have been assured by the University people that they will definitely continue to work with the herbalists. They feel that one never knows when a discovery which might change





Lagendorf Heart Prep.



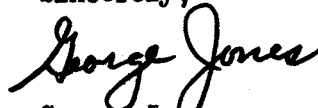
Right: Anxious moments



the pattern of human suffering might unfold -- the case of digitalis was used as an example.

Irrespective of the potential scientific discoveries, I think the exposure of the true herbalists and what they represent is an important discovery for the different "publics". Many of our modern doctors can benefit from the social techniques of these people. They not only engender a high degree of trust and camaraderie among their patients, which is certainly an important aspect of the doctor-patient phenomenon, but the herbalists also show much concern in the affairs of their community. I doubt if I will visit a herbalist the next time I get sick, but I must say I have gained more appreciation of their contribution to the well-being of their fellow countrymen.

Sincerely,

  
George Jones

Received in New York on October 22, 1971.