LITERATURE REVIEW

Bahamian Bush Medicine: Fact or Folklore?

Edith Gibson
The College of The Bahamas[1]

ABSTRACT

The practice of bush medicine in The Bahamas is shrouded in mystery. This literature review is not an attempt to verify or disclaim the beliefs as to the authenticity of the healing powers of native plants but rather to give a brief informative overview of the rich cultural heritage of the Bahamian people. The sources used in this review include statements from local inhabitants whose belief systems are so deeply entrenched that they are confident that their very survival and that of their ancestors hinged on the medicinal powers of bush medicine. Included is historical evidence explaining why bush medicine became an integral part of Bahamian culture as well as scientific evidence of its effectiveness and curative properties.

INTRODUCTION

The terms *natural cures* and *alternative medicine* have been incorporated into the vocabulary of contemporary Bahamians. The two terms are synonymous with bush medicine, a local Bahamian term describing the administration and application of native herbs and plants for medicinal purposes. In other words, bush medicine is the Bahamian practice of plant-based medicine. Natural, organic extracts from medicinal plants are used; these extracts have been shown to effectively treat a wide range of ailments. Of the 265,000 identified plant species worldwide, only 1% have been tested for medical purposes, and of those, 25% have been made into medicine, so it is reasonable to expect bush medicine to be effective in at least some cases (McCormack, Maier, & Wallens, 2011, p. xxviii).

The traditional use of native plants as medicine is the foremost method of treatment for various ailments among older Bahamians. The preparation and administration of bush medicine greatly differs from college-taught allopathic medicine. In recent years, the general public seems to have collectively realized that herbal home remedies offer a possible alternative for treating various ills. The renewed interest in plant-based medicine in today's society has brought to the forefront the question of whether the medicinal and curative properties of bush medicines are based on facts or merely on local folklore.

As the cost of modern medicine continues to rise, making it less affordable for the average person, more people will understandably turn to the traditional practice of plant-based medicine. In addition to being costly, many pharmaceutical drugs have severe (and sometimes irreversible) side effects, a problem that has not commonly been associated with plant-based

[1] Edith Gibson, Senior Library Assistant, Northern Campus Library, The College of The Bahamas, P.O. Box N-4912, Nassau, Bahamas.
E-mail: edith.gibson@cob.edu.bs

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medicine. Micozzi (2011) reported that there are 30.1 deaths per 100 million people annually due to prescription or antidepressant drugs. Further published reports noted that severe side effects and toxic reactions to herbal medicine were rare (Micozzi, 2011, p. 327).

The popularity of herbal medicine has steadily increased since 1990 (Micozzi, 2011, p. 32). This resurgence in the preference for plant-based medicine has led to a variety of studies on herbal remedies, alternative medicines, and natural cures, including the uniquely historical and cultural aspects of Bahamian bush medicine. These studies refute or verify the authenticity of this form of medicine or seek further evidence of its effectiveness (Setzer, Newby, Moriarity, & Setzer, 2015; Setzer, Schmidt, Noletto, & Vogler, 2006.

Craton and Saunders (1998) reported that in the 1880s, members of the clergy referred to the practice of bush medicine as "mumbo-jumbo" and equated its practitioners to highly superstitious near-heathens. Subsequently, in 1886, Bahamian Governor Blake charged that the high mortality rate in public hospitals was due to the native population's refusal to seek medical help until the ministrations of local bush medicine practitioners had been exhausted (Craton & Saunders, 1998). Blake referred to the practitioners as "bush doctors" or "obeah men" (Craton & Saunders, 1998, pp. 117-119).

Qualitative data are being sought to bring some clarity and scientific evidence to the curative powers of the native plants and to corroborate the testimony of the local inhabitants regarding the practical use of bush medicine (Wilmanowicz, 2010). Many have been made aware of the use of Bahamian bush medicine through Mrs. Leslie Higgs's book *Bush Medicine in the Bahamas* (1969). Though long out of print, her book has been a major reference for much of the literature written on Bahamian bush medicine. Mrs. Higgs noted that at no time during her research did she find any indication that voodoo or obeah had anything to do with the practice of Bahamian bush medicine (p. 4).

McCormack et al. (2011) noted that during their research, the 21st century natives of the Bahamian island of San Salvador seemed not to place great emphasis on the supernatural forces of obeah when practicing traditional bush medicine. However, McCormack et al. acknowledged that there appeared to be some slight remnants of past superstitions pertaining to the odd number of plants blended and combined for medicinal purposes and to the people's strong belief in ingesting garlic as protection from obeah.

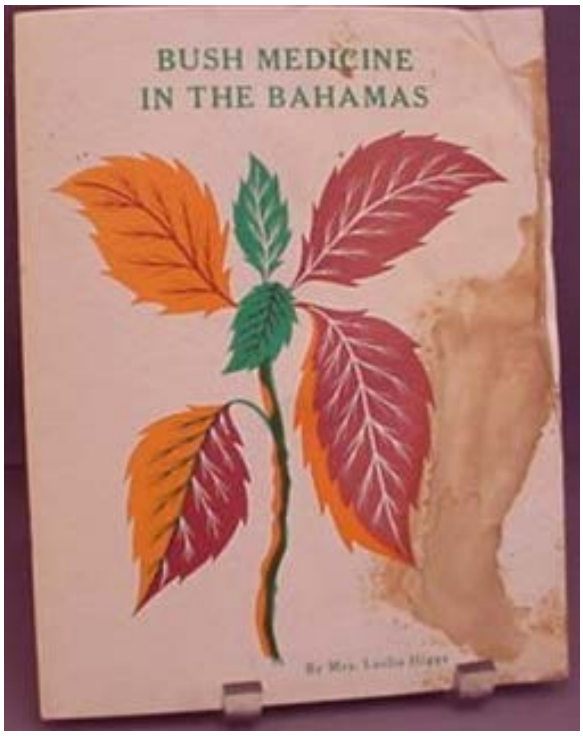
ADMINISTRATION OF BUSH MEDICINE

Bush medicine is administered in many forms and for a variety of ailments. For instance, slave bush (*Solanum verascif olium*) is made into a tea for coughs. Banana *(Musa acuminata)* leaves, heated and greased with cooking lard, are applied to the body to relieve fever. Breadfruit *(Artocarpus altilis)* leaves are slightly crushed and placed on the head to stop headaches. The milk or sap of the green papaya *(Carica papaya)* is diluted with water and consumed for indigestion (Hanna-Smith, 2005, pp. 24-34).

PURPOSE

The purpose of this literature review is to bring some measure of understanding to the rich cultural heritage of Bahamian herbal home remedies and to the important historical significance it holds for the Bahamian people. Additionally, this review will also assist in bringing new perspectives and interest to a practice that is vanishing from Bahamian culture, especially among younger Bahamians. Moreover, the review

will provide information for those who wish to explore the benefits of nontraditional medicine. Even more important is the preservation of the traditional practice of Bahamian bush medicine. An ethnobotanist concerned with the conservation of endangered species of plant life fears that the extinction of these plants means the loss of many benefits for mankind: "Each time a medicine man dies, it is as if a library burned down" (McCormack et al., 2011, p. xxviii). However, a strong word of caution is required: before using any medication, plant-based or pharmaceutical, individuals should first seek advice from a trained medical professional.



SELECTED LITERATURE

Three main works are included in this review. Higgs (1969) provided the first written documentation on the subject of Bahamian bush medicine. McCormack et al. (2011) examined the historical, ethnobotanical, and scientific significance of Bahamian bush medicine in a cross-cultural study. Wilmanowicz (2010) used an in-depth scientific approach to study Bahamian bush medicine.

HISTORY

Bush medicine is an intrinsic part of Bahamian society. Stark poverty and the remoteness of the islands made the practice of bush medicine one of the most crucial elements in the survival of the early inhabitants. The Bahamas was sparsely populated until 1783, when an influx of Americans and their slaves caused the Bahamian population to triple in five short years (Craton, 1986, p. 148). A large segment of the slave population came from the Congo and the West African coast by way of the United States; these slaves brought with them distinct cultural, political, religious, and social belief systems, as well as their practical knowledge and medicinal use of plants (McCormack et al., 2011**)**.

Craton and Saunders (1998, p. 222-223) wrote that in 1912, to service a population of 40,000 in the outer islands, there were only three qualified doctors; those who could not be treated by these doctors went to the capital of New Providence or were treated by school teachers, religious ministers, and island commissioners, who were all expected to act as medical officers if a medical emergency arose. Many others depended on local bush medicine practitioners.

In 1913, the Pharmacy Act gave unqualified pharmacists the ability to legally sell drugs in the outer islands (Craton & Saunders, 1998, p. 223). The act also allowed anyone with an educational background in any science to be granted a license to practice medicine in the Bahamas as an "unqualified practitioner." This became a common practice in the 1940s (Cottman & Blassingame 1979, p. 91).

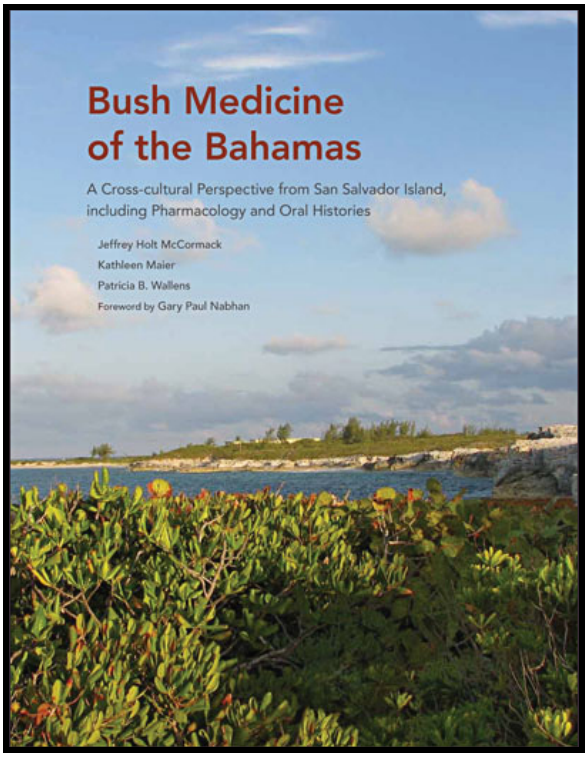
Nonetheless, a large number of the Bahamian population still remained

committed to the curative powers of bush medicine and continued the practice of using native plants to cure their ills, even after scientific medicine was introduced to the Bahamas, to the chagrin of Governor Blake and the local clergy (Craton & Saunders, 1998, p. 118). This attitude remained even when Wilmanowicz (2010) researched herbal therapy with the local population on Long Island; she recognized that most of the population believed their longevity was due to their use of bush medicine rather than modern medicine, of which many of the older generation were highly suspicious (p. 9).

The practice of bush medicine remains an important aspect of Bahamian culture. Most recently, the Cancer Association of Grand Bahama invited Denise Worrell, proprietor of Naturally Bahamian, to assist in educating its members and guests on the benefits of bush medicine, based on her personal experiences (Smith, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

In her book *Bush Medicine in the Bahamas* Higgs (1969) documented the testimonies of acquaintances and her personal experience with the use of white sage (*Lantana involucrate*). She says it stopped persistent itching on her hands and forearms (an allergic reaction to chemical fertilizer) after a local doctor's medicine failed. Higgs's book also includes a credible testimonial on the use of jelly from the aloe vera plant to relieve the pain of a burn. Higgs's book is well written, and has served as the basis for much of the subsequent literature. Higgs covers approximately 60 plants in clear, distinct, black-and-white sketches. Each image bears the common and scientific names of the plant along with a brief description of the ailment it treats. However, some photos do not include dosages or applications. The book has no index or glossary, but is easy to follow, as it is only 20 pages long. Higgs's personal experiences and testimonials lend credibility to the idea that Bahamian bush medicine is more than mere folklore. Higgs reports on research by West, Sidrak, and Street (1971) that studied the benefits of the cerasee (*Momordica charantia)* plant, which is said to slow the growth of cancer cells (p. 3). Higgs (1969) wrote of the real-life experience of an English visitor suffering from arthritis who drank cerasee each day for three weeks until the pain subsided. Higgs also covered the historical and cultural aspects of Bahamian bush medicine.

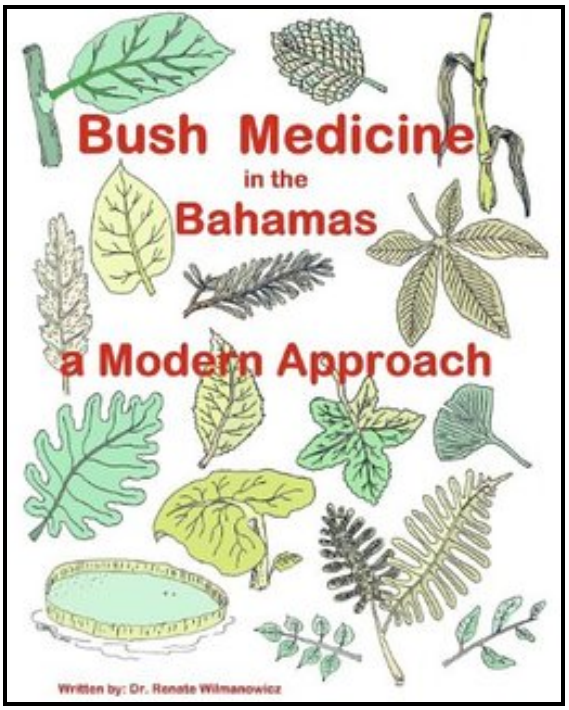


McCormack et al., (2011) provided a cross-cultural perspective on Bahamian bush medicine in a thorough report that included oral history interviews with residents of San Salvador Island. The McCormack et al. study includes 120 medicinal plants with 100 easily identifiable color photos as well as a few black-and-white photos of the people interviewed. The photo of each plant bears both the common and scientific names

of the species, and there are interviews and descriptions throughout the book. McCormack et al. detailed the administration, dosage, pharmacology, and cross-cultural use of these plants in the Bahamas and other Caribbean islands. McCormack et al. also acknowledged that extracts might vary in strength according to the methods of harvesting and preparation, the plant's age, and its condition when used. Included in the McCormack et al. work is the statement that some individuals may be sensitive to some plants. Each plant is identified by its family and habitat, and the uses of its flowers and fruits are described; tips on harvesting, administration, dosage, and combinations are also provided. The authors also showed a keen interest in renewing awareness and preservation of Bahamian bush medicine (McCormack et al., 2011).

Similar to Higgs, this book includes a number of testimonials as to the curative powers of Bahamian bush medicine. Many of the interviews are written in local dialect, giving the book authenticity and providing a native voice on the importance of an age-old tradition. McCormack et al. portrayed bush medicine as not merely a folk tale but an intricate part of Bahamian heritage. Both scientific and cultural components are evident in McCormack et al.'s documentation.

Wilmanowicz (2010) included extensive details on many plants' habitats, cultivation, usage, and effects. Furthermore, Wilmanowicz showed great interest in assembling qualitative scientific proof that there is great value in the practice of Bahamian bush medicine. Detailed color photos with both scientific and common names are provided. Unlike McCormack et al., Wilmanowicz includes the use and description of the plants on the same page as the photo. Wilmanowicz described 70 important plants. In addition to the descriptions, the book also lists the possible toxicity of some plants, what first aid steps to take if this occurs, and ways to distinguish toxic and nontoxic plants. Wilmanowicz also covered the plants' habitats and cultivation, pest problems, the use of insecticides, and other issues that might interfere with harvesting and preparation of the medicinal product. An alphabetical glossary is also included.



Wilmanowicz suggests that a school for bush medicine should be established to educate biologists, medical students, nurses, and other medical professionals in the traditional methods of bush medicine and to exchange this knowledge with other countries. Accordingly, Wilmanowicz incorporated natural plant teas and plant medication therapies into her practice in Germany, with the most notable plants being the strong back (*Bourreria ovate*), jackmadar (*Eupatorium villosum*), and yellow elder *(Tecoma stans*; 2010, p. 4). Wilmanowicz's work leans more towards the scientific, qualitative approach.

CONCLUSION

After reviewing and comparing Higgs (1969), McCormack et al. (2011), and Wilmanowicz (2010), I concluded that Bahamian bush medicine cannot be conclusively characterized as absolutely based in either fact or folklore.

Mrs. Higgs's personal experiences and testimonies provided credible evidence to support the healing properties of Bahamian bush medicine. Similarly, McCormack et al. and Wilmanowicz included testimonies regarding Bahamian bush medicine's ability to provide restoration or relief for their physical ailments.

As noted by all the authors above, further studies are needed. Most urgent is the need for further documented evidence from the elderly Bahamian population to preserve this vital aspect of the Bahamian cultural heritage.

A major drawback pointed out by the authors of the three books reviewed is that there is no set measurement for the correct dosage and usage of the plants. Although some studies by Setzer, et al., (2015) and Setzer, et al. (2006) analyze the phytopharmacological properties of some bush medicine herbs and plants, further, more extensive analyses and clinical trials are needed. Furthermore, because numerous poisonous plants on the island closely resemble the plants used in bush medicine, extensive knowledge of Bahamian plant life is required to make proper identification.

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