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The Revival of the Burundian "Traditional" Medicine: Between Ancestral Heritage and Entrepreneurship

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Abstract

In Burundi, 90% of the population use traditional medicine (TM) as an alternative to modern medicine (MM). This practice is currently growing significantly, with a clear rise in demand for its products and services. So far, no research has been done to explore this renewed interest or its causes. This article examines the revival of this traditional medical system, which demonstrates entrepreneurial traits. Data were gathered through ethnographic methods, including semi-structured interviews with 30 traditional healers, 10 TM product users, and 5 health system staff, as well as participant and non-participant observation. The results show that TM is an ancient practice in Burundi, and its use is linked to internal factors. The resurgence of Burundian TM also follows years of underground activity, after the country's contact with modernity. The practice of TM contributes to improving the health and socio-economic well-being of the population and should be regulated to ensure its safety and efficacy.

Keywords: medicinal plants, traditional medicine, traditional healers, entrepreneurship, Burundi

1. Introduction

Traditional medicine (TM) currently holds a prominent place in public health debates. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines TM as "the body of knowledge, skills, and practices based on theories, beliefs, and experiences specific to different cultures, used to maintain health, as well as to prevent, diagnose, improve, or treat physical or mental illnesses" (OMS, 2000). Numerous studies confirm that TM has existed since early human history and is used in many countries worldwide, though levels of use vary (Casagrande et al., 2023; Cholewka et al., 2020; Guo et al., 2020; Hafez et al., 2022; Kang et al., 2022; Koudokpon et al., 2017; Kpabi et al., 2020; Li et al., 2024; Ouoba et al., 2023; Rafidisaona, 2022; Tcheunteu, 2023). Many people view this practice as a cultural heritage passed down from ancestors (Palabaş Uzun & Koca, 2020) and often protect it carefully, especially among indigenous communities (Wang et al., 2021). Therefore, in Africa, as well as other continents, populations use TM products, with plant-based remedies being the most common (Charwi et al., 2023; Fonmboh et al., 2020; Geuye, 2019: p. 5; Sanogo, 2006).

Globally, statistics show that the use of traditional medicine (TM) ranges from 20% to 70% of the population in various developed countries. However, this trend is even more significant in

Africa, where studies indicate that up to 80% of the population depends on TM as their primary healthcare resource (Camara et al., 2022; Etame-Loe et al., 2018; Guo et al., 2020; Ngezahayo et al., 2015; Sanogo, 2006). As a result, many countries have integrated TM services into their national health systems, with health insurance providers covering these services. For instance, in Japan, expenses for TM products are reimbursed by the national health insurance, and 84% of doctors utilize local TM services (OMS, 2013). Similarly, in China, 90% of general hospitals have dedicated TM departments, and both outpatient and inpatient services are included in the national health insurance system (OMS, 2013). These findings demonstrate that TM is a deeply rooted practice across cultures worldwide, with knowledge of medicinal plants, among other resources, passed down through generations as a cultural tradition and carefully preserved over time (Wang et al., 2021). Additionally, research from various regions shows that medicinal plants and their extracts dominate traditional medicine markets (Tchinang, 2020).

In Burundi, approximately 90% of the population uses TM (Havyarimana, 2020). Research has focused mainly on the pharmacological study of medicinal plants used in TM, showing their effectiveness against various ailments, from infectious diseases—especially respiratory illnesses—to skin diseases, diarrhea, malaria, tuberculosis, and other conditions, including the fight against antibiotic resistance (Ahishakiye et al., 2022; Havyarimana et al., 2023; Ngezahayo et al., 2015, 2016). There are no studies on the development of TM practices in Burundi, let alone on current usage trends, except for a recent study on the trade in medicinal plants in Bujumbura (Ndereyimana, 2021). This article aims to evaluate the current state of TM practice in Burundi, analyze its interaction with Western civilization, and explore its modern evolution within the country. A qualitative approach using ethnographic methods helps us understand the reasons behind the resurgence of this healing practice and the new image it is developing.

2. Methodological Approach

2.1. Data Collection Technique

A qualitative methodology was employed to collect, analyze, and interpret the research findings. In conjunction with a review of pertinent literature, primary data were collected through ethnographic methods over a 6-month fieldwork period, spanning from November 2023 to April 2024. The fieldwork data were predominantly gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and both participant and non-participant observations. Study participants were selected using the snowball sampling technique (Noy, 2008). During participant observation, the researchers immersed themselves in the lives of traditional healers, maintaining ongoing contact with some of them through multiple subsequent meetings following the intensive fieldwork phase. The discussions encompassed traditional medicine practices and services, and interactions with patients seeking treatment were also documented.

2.2. Population and Study Area

To diversify perspectives and opinions on traditional medicine (TM) in Burundi, we conducted this research with 30 traditional healers, 10 users of TM products, and 5 agents from the national health system. These surveys were carried out in the communes of Bururi (Burunga Province, southern Burundi), Ntahangwa (Bujumbura Province, western Burundi), Gitega (Gitega Province, central Burundi), and Ngozi (Butanyerera Province, northern Burundi). The selection of Bujumbura, Gitega, and Ngozi communes was based on the presence of large

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markets for TM products, which serve as outlets for medicinal plants and products from all regions of the country. The commune of Bururi was chosen because it hosts the Buta MT Centre, which is transforming the MT sector in Burundi through improved products and services, delivered through modern management practices similar to those of a modern healthcare dispensary.

2.3. Data Analysis Technique and Tools

The data were processed manually. After transcribing interviews and organizing field notes, a thematic content analysis was conducted to understand the development of Traditional Medicine (TM) in Burundi. The findings were examined through Julian Stewart's (1955) theory of cultural ecology, which emphasizes how human societies adapt to their environment. This theory supports environmental determinism, based on the idea that humans are influenced by their immediate environment in all aspects of life. Naturopathy, as a part of TM, aligns with this theory, suggesting that the natural environment influences human habits and practices based on geographical differences (Li et al., 2024) and cultural patterns that nurture healthcare pluralism (Coulibaly et al., 2008; Patel et al., 2023).

Photos were taken alternately with a Samsung Galaxy A Tablet and a Tecno Camon 19 Android phone. References were managed using the Mendeley citation tool, and language errors were checked with Grammarly. The field research results were analyzed within this theoretical framework. Although all participants verbally agreed to reveal their identities and photographs only for this study, pseudonyms are used, except for Father Leopold Mvukiye, who is widely known through media appearances as the founder and manager of the Buta Traditional Medicine Centre for many years.

3. Study Results

After data collection and analysis, we present the main results in the following sections. First, we outline the current state of an ancestral therapeutic practice in Burundi; second, we examine the clash between TM and modernity in the country; and finally, we explore a new entrepreneurial trend in contemporary Burundian TM.

3.1. Overview of Traditional Medicine in Burundi

All study participants reported beginning to use traditional remedies in early childhood. Even today, in nearly every household, whether rural or urban, mothers grow medicinal plants, especially those used to treat childhood illnesses (Inno, personal interview, April 2024). Plants like ikizirankurwe (Kalanchoe crenata) and ingagari (Aloe sp.) are common in households across both urban and rural areas.

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Figure 1: Kalanchoe crenata (ikizirankurwe, at the bottom of the photo) and Aloe sp. (ingagari, at the top left of the photo); medicinal plants often used for childhood illnesses and planted in the inner courtyard of a house in Bujumbura; photo taken by Aminadab Havyarimana, in 2023.

The participants' testimonies support the Barundi belief that using medicinal plants helps preserve, restore, and maintain good health or alleviate suffering related to illness. Some plants, such as those grown in households, are well known and used by most people, while others need the help of herbalists (abasoromyi). The same goes for how these remedies are prepared and used. Even children who play and hurt themselves or have nosebleeds can collect icanda (Bidens pilosa) leaves, squeeze them, and put the juice on the wound, or use the plant to stop bleeding and help healing.

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Figure 2: Medicinal plant market in Kinama, north of Bujumbura; photo taken by Aminadab Havyarimana in 2023.

A comprehensive list of commonly used medicinal plants was gathered from the study participants' reports. These plants originated from various traditional healers, with some obtained from distant or different regions of the country, especially thanks to abasoromyi. Herbalists and traditional healers frequently travel between regions, promoting the trade of fresh medicinal plants nationwide.

The traditional herbal remedies available on the Burundian market come in various types; they may be made from fresh plants or processed products, prepared through different methods, and administered to patients in various ways. Burundian traditional healers, according to their specialties, can treat infectious and non-infectious diseases, such as infections, hypertension, diabetes, hepatitis, sexual impotence, and even marital infertility (Mvukiye, personal interview, April 2024).

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Figure 3: Traditional remedies sold at the Kinama market; photo taken by Aminadab Havyarimana in 2023.

Traditional healing in Burundi is primarily seen as a calling or family tradition, passed down from ancestors, rather than just a profession. Most traditional healers say they are compelled to serve life and humanity, either by their parents or by spirits (Mvukiye, personal interview, December 2023). As a result, some practitioners—such as family members, acquaintances, or close neighbors—don't even ask for payment for their care. Some of these healers treat every patient until they improve, leaving it up to the patient to offer a voluntary gesture of gratitude. When unable to provide free services, some traditional healers offer very affordable rates to ensure everyone can access their care. To further increase accessibility, some healers treat patients on credit, allowing payment in kind (Gilly, personal interview, December 2023).

3.2. Clashes between Traditional Medicine and Modernity in Burundi

There have been clashes between Burundian Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and Western civilization, which promotes biomedicine and modern healthcare. Persecution, evident through public denigration and bans within the Church during and after colonization, forced practitioners to stop practicing openly. Those caught practicing TCM could be imprisoned and face disapproval from some Christian churches, as elderly traditional healers have reported having been victims of repression coordinated by the State and the Church (Jeff, personal interview, December 2023).

Since the 2000s, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has begun to reemerge, a trend that has gained momentum with the early initiatives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which has even gone so far as to offer its members educational programs on using plants for therapeutic purposes (Jeff, personal interview, December 2023). The same trend is seen among Catholics, where monks and nuns oversee official units dedicated to producing traditional remedies, some of which are more advanced than others. Examples include the Buta Traditional Medicine Centre, established and operated by a diocesan priest in Bururi (southern Burundi), and the TM

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Centre run by the Bene Thereza Sisters, located next to the Saint-Michel health center in the heart of Bujumbura.



Figure 4: Iconic traditional medicine center in Bururi; photo taken by Aminadab Havyarimana in 2025.

One fact that catches everyone's attention when observing traditional healers and where they sell traditional remedies—such as shops and markets—is the frequent display of religious objects like rosaries, medals, and the Holy Bible. A revival is underway in the study area; Traditional Medicine (TM) is no longer limited to the most remote rural areas but is rapidly expanding into the country's urban centers and cities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the WHO representative in Burundi believed that traditional healers should be more visible by fully embracing their role in fighting the pandemic. In December 2023, the Burundian Ministry of Public Health adopted a five-year strategic action plan aimed at promoting TM across the country.

3.3. Marketing of Plants and Traditional Remedies: A Growing Phenomenon

In the study area, traditional healers continue to provide healthcare in shops located in urban neighborhoods, at market stalls, or in patients' homes, and are increasingly offering improved products and services. An entrepreneurial trend is emerging at all levels of this practice, from herbalists to owners of traditional medicine pharmacies. Traditional healers produce improved traditional medicines, sell them in markets, supply a growing number of pharmacies in the country's cities and urban centers, and sometimes even export them abroad (Mvukiye, personal interview, December 2023). Some practitioners buy and resell fresh medicinal plants or processed products. Others buy and resell improved traditional medicines, produced using innovative mechanisms that modernize traditional remedies through more modern preparation, packaging, and preservation methods.

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Figure 5: Some improved traditional remedies sold in traditional medicine shops in Bujumbura; photo taken by Aminadab Havyarimana in 2023.

A traditional healer with a university degree in geography describes a sector where business is thriving more than many might think: "I am currently a civil servant, but even if I am promoted to a more prestigious position in the future, I will never leave the profession of traditional healer" (Erico, personal interview, May 2024). Other traditional healers, especially in Bujumbura, say they support their entire families with income from this activity, and some can easily start other businesses on the side using earnings from traditional medicine. The marketing of Burundian traditional medicine products now attracts people from all walks of life: graduates, illiterate people, and young and old.

4. Discussion

It is worth noting that the results above show that traditional medicine (TM) is a very old practice, considered a key part of Burundian culture and a healing tradition. These same results also indicate that, despite years of challenges related to the country and modernization, the practice is experiencing a resurgence as a growing business. In the upcoming sections, we compare these findings with the current knowledge on TM worldwide and how it has evolved in different settings.

4.1. Traditional Medicine in Burundi: An Established Tradition that Can Be Explained

Burundians have long possessed a deep understanding of the properties of medicinal plants and have passed this knowledge down through generations, a cultural heritage that peoples around the world have carefully preserved for centuries (Wang et al., 2021). A long list of commonly

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used medicinal plants highlights the richness of Burundi's floral heritage and the diversity of traditional knowledge in treating health-threatening ailments. This supports the findings of previous studies, which have identified over 4,798 plant species, including at least 672 medicinal plants used in Burundi, notably algal flora, microflora, and vascular flora (OBPE, 2018). Using plants available in Burundi, the ground reality confirms the global trend that attributes the dominance of traditional medicinal product markets to plants (Tchinang, 2020) and underscores that the plants used are often harvested from the local environment (Li et al., 2024).

As an effective alternative, most Burundians are turning to Traditional Medicine (TM), especially those with limited access to conventional healthcare, as observed elsewhere in the world (Geck et al., 2020). They are finding traditional remedies suitable for many patients' needs, and their effectiveness against specific illnesses has already been demonstrated (Ndaye et al., 2023). In the Burundian context, studies by local researchers have demonstrated the effectiveness of medicinal plants used in TM for treating various conditions, including respiratory illnesses, skin diseases, diarrhea, malaria, tuberculosis, and more. This also includes efforts to control antibiotic resistance (Ahishakiye et al., 2022; Havyarimana et al., 2023; Ngezahayo et al., 2015, 2016).

Research from other contexts shows that plants such as ikizirankurwe (Kalanchoe crenata) and ingagari (Aloe sp.) are widely recognized for their use in treating different illnesses, including childhood diseases, respiratory conditions, wounds, burns, skin issues, and intestinal disorders like worms (Assandi et al., 2024; Kumar Biswas et al., 2021; Machinski et al., 2024; Nalimu et al., 2021). Similar studies elsewhere confirm the effectiveness of traditional remedies used by local populations (Quinn et al., 2020). According to the WHO, traditional remedies play a vital role in improving health and well-being, preventing disease, and managing chronic diseases within primary healthcare (OMS, 2021).

4.2. Contemporary Burundian Traditional Medicine: The Revival of a Therapeutic Practice

In Burundi, however, TM remained secretive for decades, influenced by contact with modernity, especially the arrival of European civilization and the spread of Christianity, as was the case in several African countries (Ndjitoyap Ndam, 2021). The need for Christian traditional healers to show effects of a religious nature suggests a way to persuade those who still doubt the religious convictions of these healers, as well as to foster some (re)conciliation between the two belief systems coexisting within the same socio-cultural environment. This situation aligns with findings from other research conducted elsewhere, indicating that European civilization considered TM backward, primitive, and even occult (Ndjeko et al., 2021).

Furthermore, after the publication of the presidential decree regulating TM and traditional healing in November 2014 (MSP, 2023), there has been a "triumphant" return of Burundian TM, supported by a legal framework favorable to its growth. This revival is not limited to Burundi but has also sparked renewed interest in other parts of the world (Dejouhanet & Pinton, 2023; Seoudi, 2020; Tcheunteu, 2023). Today, the regulation of traditional TM in Burundi has the backing of the WHO, a support that has been strengthened by the fact that TM has often been combined with MM during the pandemic, even in other countries, with promising results (Haoud & Mellali, 2021; Kuete Sezine et al., 2021; Tchinang, 2020).

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4.3. Entrepreneurial Rise in Burundian Traditional Medicine

The results of our study also show that, beneath an entrepreneurial appearance, the sale of medicinal plants and traditional remedies is common across all urban centers in the study area. In a global context where interest in herbal medicine is growing rapidly and expected to continue rising (Antonin, 2022), medicinal plants offer commercial opportunities in Morocco, where herbalists continue to sell traditional plant-based remedies (Baali et al., 2020; Louati & Jaoudi, 2022). A study by (Ndereyimana, 2021) in Bujumbura indicates that the trade in medicinal plants generates significant income. Similar findings were observed in other countries, such as Turkey, where Palabaş Uzun and Koca (2020) reported that many residents have made selling fresh medicinal plants a source of income.

To meet the demands of the ever-changing market (Appadurai, 2018), Burundian traditional healers are also adopting entrepreneurial practices by offering enhanced traditional remedies. This modernization has economic benefits, as Li and colleagues note (2024), as also evidenced by testimonials showing a growing number of users from diverse backgrounds, with many orders coming from abroad (Mvukiye, personal interview, December 2023). The healers themselves confirm that, in addition to improving public health, traditional medicine (TM) also has tangible socio-economic impacts, affecting both users and practitioners. Moreover, the entrepreneurial trend in TM is also evident in Burkina Faso, where innovation is accelerating this practice (Yameogo, 2020). Similar interest is seen in other countries, such as Cameroon, where university graduates are engaging in MT and, through various slogans, promising to provide care for different types of ailments (Tcheunteu, 2023).

5. Conclusion

This research explored three aspects of the evolution of traditional Burundian medicine. The results show that traditional medicine (TM) is an ancient practice that has gone through periods of popularity and decline and has experienced significant changes in recent times. TM is so deeply embedded in Burundian culture that it has become a tradition shaped by the physical and social environment. Despite contact with Western civilization and modern influences, Burundian TM has demonstrated remarkable resilience. The national health policy increasingly recognizes TM as a vital partner to conventional medicine (CM) within the country's healthcare system. The revival of Burundian TM appears to be taking on an entrepreneurial aspect, with a growing value chain involving herbalists, vendors of improved traditional remedies in pharmacies, and sellers of traditional remedies in local markets. Like all market products and services, it is crucial for the government to ensure quality control of traditional remedies to safeguard consumers.

Although this study significantly contributes to the existing knowledge on the qualitative dimension, it may have certain limitations that could be addressed through further research using different methods and larger sample sizes, since it was solely based on qualitative data. Future socio-economic studies could investigate the socioeconomic impacts and entrepreneurial opportunities associated with traditional medicine in Burundi, adopting a mixed-methods approach. Furthermore, additional research is needed to understand how the entrepreneurial trend might affect the quality of traditional remedies and services as demand increases. Therefore, research questions such as "To what extent does entrepreneurship in TM in Burundi impact the socioeconomic well-being of traditional healers and users of products and services?" or "What are the effects of the entrepreneurship trend in TM in Burundi on the

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quality of products and services?" could provide valuable insights to enhance understanding and inform policymaking for community well-being.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this paper.

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