



# The Tradition of Healing in the Caribbean: A look into Traditional, Folk, and Alternative Medicine

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# Introduction

- The Caribbean is a multicultural region with diverse ethnic roots: indigenous peoples, African, European, Indians, Chinese and Portuguese (*Sense of Identity Within American Culture / Analysis of Identity in the Caribbean Diaspora*, n.d.)
- Traditional medicine practice within the region utilise herbs such as gully root, cassia alata and Spanish needle to treat prostatic dis-ease, liver-related ailments and urinary tract infections respectively (Leonce,2022)
- The folk practices of Voodoo, Juju, or Obeah involved the harnessing of supernatural forces and spirits for individual purposes (Geraldo, 2000)
- The implementation of mind-body techniques, biological based practices and energy therapies are also widely practiced forms of alternative medicine within the region (Millstine, 2023)



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# Traditional Medicine (Bush Medicine)

Vijicic and Cohall (2021) quoted studies stating that the Caribbean region is ranked 6 of 25 in 'global biodiversity hotspots' due to its wide array of plant species. The botanicals utilized within the Caribbean have been traced to West Africa. These include the *Ricinus communis* L. (Castor bean plant) and the *Citrus aurantiifolia* (Christm.) swingle (limes).

Traditional (bush) medicine is used in several ways, leaves are steeped in hot water for teas, herbs are soaked in alcohol to make potent extractions, pounded in the mortar and pestle to form poultices etc. (Leonce, 2022)



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# Traditional Medicine – Uses of medicinal plants, herbs and other remedies

*Azadirachta indica* (neem) which grows abundantly in the tropical region including Africa and India is highly effective in treating skin disorders and gum disease (Leonce, 2022).

The *Peperoma pelucida* (shine bush) is highly valued as a herb for promoting longevity among the elderly population in Dominica and other Eastern Caribbean countries.

*Allium schoenoprasum* (chives) a commonly used household herb and research indicates they possess anticancer, anti inflammatory and, anti hypertensive properties.

# Folk Medicine

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Practices of folk medicine and traditional medicine often overlap as they both employ the extensive usage of botanicals. However, folk medicine, refers to a blend of traditional healing customs and convictions that incorporate the use of herbal remedies, strong spiritual practices, and manual therapies or exercises, aimed at diagnosing, treating, or preventing an illness or ailment (“Folk Medicine and Traditional Healing,” 2018).

Amidst the cruelty of the transatlantic slave trade, numerous enslaved Africans transported their spiritual and religious customs to the Caribbean (*Afro-Caribbean*, n.d.). These include Santeria, Voodoo Obeah, Pukumina, Rastafari and Shango to name a few.



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# Folk Medicine - Uses

Historically, the obeah man was seen as a respected leader who had the power to compel his followers to rebel and resist conditions such as slavery (Geraldo, 2000). Obeah practices were a consistent feature in the First Maroon War (1728) and Tacky's Rebellion (1760) in Jamaica and credited by both blacks and whites for their success (Adams, 2021)

The Haitian Revolution indicates that voodoo was the vehicle that inspired unity amongst the enslaved Africans to victoriously fight against the enslavers (Kamerling-Brown, 2016).

Voodoo love spells are designed to achieve various objectives such as reuniting ex-partners or former lovers, mending a broken relationship or inducing romantic feelings (Miller, 2023). Folk medicine now functions as a belief system that is practiced in secret and with much mysticism as a means to invoke spiritual well-being and healing (*Afro-Caribbean*, n.d.)



# Alternative Medicine

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Alternative medicine is usually used as an umbrella term referencing all formats of medicine art from convention/allopathic medicine. For the purpose of this presentation, alternative medicine focuses on various treatment techniques like acupuncture and Tai chi, to herbal medicines, reiki, and chiropractic manipulation geared towards realigning the energy fields to stimulate healing (Kisling, 2022). Cultural influences as well as the global trend for safe, natural, and effective medicine have contributed to the increased usage of alternative medicine.



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# Alternative Medicine – Uses

Alternative medicine exists in five categories (Millstine, 2023b)

- Whole medical systems eg traditional Chinese medicine, Ayurveda, homeopathy
- Mind-body medicine eg hypnotherapy, relaxation, biofeedback
- Biologically based practices eg botanical medicine (inclusive of natural products), chelation therapy, food therapies (diet therapies)
- Manipulative and body-based practices eg massage, chiropractic, cupping, moxibustion
- Energy medicine eg acupuncture, magnets, therapeutic touch

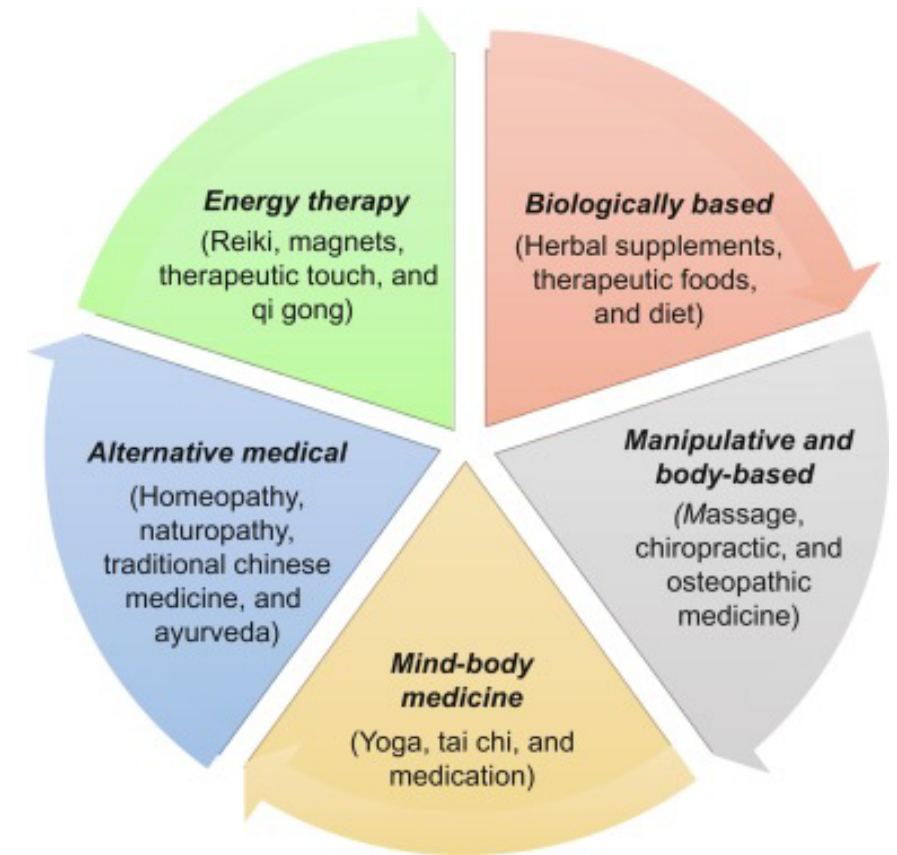


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# Importance of traditional, folk, and alternative medicine



The WHO references the Declaration of Alma-Ata which stresses that good health is more than just the absence of illness or weakness, and includes a person's overall physical, mental, and social well-being (*Declaration of Alma-Ata*, n.d.)

Traditional medicine, folk medicine and alternative medicine are therefore representative of a multifaceted process that involves the various interconnected factors such as the relationship with the environment, acknowledgement of spiritual and ancestral connections, and the promotion of social, mental, physical, and emotional well-being for both the individual and the community. They generally recognise causes of ill health as being an imbalance within the physical self, the spiritual self and/or as a result of sorcery (Oliver 2013)

# Challenges in Traditional Healing in the Caribbean

Traditional Healing within the Caribbean has faced and continue to face several challenges although there is measured growth in its popularity. These include

- Negative and biased perceptions and attitudes – some laws in some Caribbean countries still criminalize folk medicine
- Preservation and conservation of information – lack of infrastructural support
- Threats of modernization – loss of indigenous knowledge as younger generation become more immerse in a world of culture diffusion
- Not being recognized as an authentic form of healing/medicine
- Inadequate support to carry out scientific research unique to the region
- Inadequate policy and legislation to support traditional healing practices – hampers the development of the field
- Higher risk of complications in some modalities of treatment eg acupuncture
- Necessity for a level of standardization in the use of botanicals as variations can affect the potency hence the efficiency

# Opportunities in Traditional Healing Methods in the Caribbean



Integrating both traditional healing and allopathic healthcare systems (medical pluralism) broadens the accessibility and enhances the results of community-based healthcare systems.

Its benefits include

- Optimized use of domestic resources
- Creation of conditions necessary to nurture a whole new industry resulting in economic growth
- Enhanced self-sufficiency within the region
- Shared resources resulting in less expenditure as the systems do run parallel (eg beneficial referral policies between the two systems)
- Improved training within both systems in consideration of the benefits of the other ultimately benefits the patients

# Conclusion

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Traditional healing plays an important role in the Caribbean region, as it is deeply rooted in the culture and beliefs of the people. Integrating traditional healing practices with the current allopathic medicine systems can lead to improved earth care outcomes along with the associated economic benefits within the region. This approach can expand the reach of healthcare providing patients with a wider range of treatment options. Additionally, it can address issues such as mistrust of allopathic medicine and more national support when chosen as the mode of treatment. By combining the strengths of traditional healing with conventional medicine, healthcare providers can better serve their patients and promote overall health and well-being within the region.

Traditional medicine reinforces the identity of the region and instills a sense of confidence in our history and culture as it resonates with the very essence of our being.





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