In pictures: Tanzania's traditional healers
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Many people in Tanzania - and across Africa - consult traditional healers for everything from curing illness to good-luck charms. Government regulations and Western medicine may have changed some of their activities, but from herbalists to diviners, they have adapted and remain important figures. Photographer Sasja van Vechgel met some of them. Here a healer, in his eighties, holds a horn containing medicine; he practises from a “kitala”, a specially made village hut for dispensing medicine.

Both men and women can be healers, and they vary in age. The most highly respected tend to have been apprenticed to a healer in their family. This man, in his forties, says he specialises in the treatment of paralysis. He travels with his herbal medicine from home to home to visit patients. Sometimes he uses a private hospital room to treat people. Although there is no scientific proof that such treatments work, many people prefer traditional healers. There is a widely-held belief among the Wahehe people of southern Tanzania that sickness is caused by supernatural forces.
Treatment often consists of a combination of ritual, comfort and medication. Healers say they can get guidance if they are temporarily possessed by an ancestor, which can be brought on by chanting into a calabash, rubbing bits of wood or shaking a bottle. “The bottle is the most important item for me,” says the 88-year-old healer pictured above, who says he specialises in banishing evil spirits. He consults clients at his village office or another site in the bush. “It is filled with a brown liquid. A red hibiscus flower, other adornments and an amulet are fixed to the outside. During conversation I keep on shaking it. In the liquid I can see what kind of treatment a patient needs.”

This patient has just been treated at a family-owned herbal clinic for a broken collar bone. The herbalists use bark, roots and leaves taken from parasitic plants and their hosts, make it into a paste and rub it over the affected area - in this case the patient’s torso. They also sometimes use Western medicines such as paracetamol for pain control and X-rays to diagnose breaks.
Among traditional healers there are varying opinions about the emergence of HIV/AIDS, with some believing it has always existed. “In Kihehe, we used to call it ‘lugandaganda’; it means to lose weight. There are also signs in your face. You have many rashes and your skin gets wrinkles,” says the healer above, who treats HIV patients in his village. Not all healers claim to be able to treat HIV – and some refer patients with HIV symptoms to a clinic for an AIDS test or when their treatment is not working. Their focus is mainly on increasing patients’ appetites, thus helping them gain weight.

Healers’ fees vary. They are often cheaper than going to a clinic, which can be far away and sometimes short-staffed, and buying prescribed medication. Treatment for minor ailments, such as headaches or dizziness, could cost between $3 (£2) and $6, a complicated fracture could be $12. Some healers supplement their income by working on small plots of land and selling their produce. The healer who specialises in weight loss and HIV used to run a cafe, but he said the ancestors did not agree with him having a job on the side, so he moved back to his home village to continue his practice.
“Most of those who come to me have already been to hospital,” says the young healer above. “They have not managed to get a solution for their problems. Injections and medicine that were applied have not shown any effect, it only soothes, but it does not treat. If I treat them successfully they tell their friends. I do not have any advertising,” he says.

Other people prefer traditional healers to doctors as they feel there are some things that cannot be treated in hospital - they want extra protection for body and mind. Here, the wife of a traditional healer shows an old coin that she wears to protect her body against evil. The minerals and copper in the coin are supposed to have special powers. A “mlagusi” is the term for a healer who specialises in removing curses or witchcraft. The term “witchdoctor” is controversial with anthropologists but is quite widely used by healers and patients. Some say they are doctors who cure the curses cast by witches and wizards.
Some traditional healers sell other good-luck charms, usually made from animal parts like lion, impala horn, pangolin scales or chameleon. Often they also possess special objects like shells, bells, coins or horns, which have a specific significance. Here a healer holds a stick he inherited from his forefathers. The healers say using items from the past - while burning incense and wearing special clothes - pleases the ancestors and establishes a way to make divining easier.

In northern Tanzania, some healers have said that charms, especially those to make people wealthy, are more powerful if they contain body parts from people with albinism, which has led to a criminal trade in body parts. The southern highlander healers say they never suggest this. However, there are reports that the killing of a relative on the orders of a healer can bring riches. For the Wahehe it is a taboo topic, but one man told us his wife was killed by his son at the bequest of “a wizard in order to become rich”. Here a child wears a waistband, sold for about $1, which is supposed to protect against “dege dege”, the fever associated with severe malaria.
There are charms for most things - from good luck for those playing in a football competition to protection for a trader wanting to guard a market stall against witchcraft. Many people use such charms alongside their Christian or Muslim practices, though their introduction has changed some traditions such as mourning customs. (Gallery by Sasja van Vechgel, with thanks to anthropologist G Fischer and her field notes. Those pictured did not want their names used.)